

TWO a
New
York
Boss
novel

WEEKS

NOTICE

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHITNEY G.

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[And stay tuned for the next New York Boss story! | My next release is Forget You, Ethan.](#)

[Author's Confession + Thank You.](#)

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SERIES & STANDALONES:



STEAMY COFFEE READS Collection

Naughty Boss
Dirty Doctor
Cocky Client
Filthy Lawyer



REASONABLE DOUBT SERIES

Reasonable Doubt #1
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FALLING FOR MR. STATHAM Series

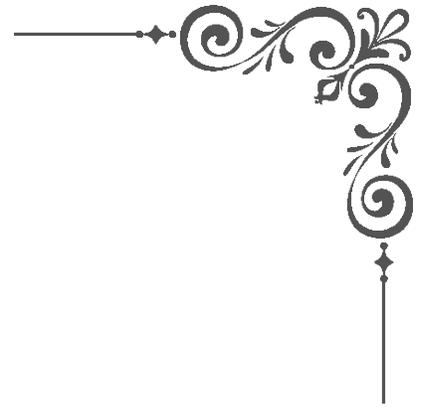
Resisting the Boss
Loving the Boss



THE ONE WEEK SERIES

On a Tuesday
On a Wednesday
On a Thursday
On a Friday
On a Saturday
On a Sunday
On a Monday
Sincerely, Carter
Forget You, Ethan
Turbulence
Over Us, Over You
Two Weeks' Notice
The Layover

*For my readers.
Thank you for bringing me back to where I belong.
Love & F.L.Y.,
Whitney G.*



Tara



“WINNERS NEVER QUIT, and quitters never win ...”

If I had a dollar for every time my mother said those words to me, I would be sipping wine on my own private island off the Amalfi Coast at this very moment.

When I cried about hating ballet, she squished my feet into those ugly pink flats and made me go to practice anyway. When I told her that I wanted to change my major from Business to “something more creative,” she threatened to stop paying my tuition. And when I told her that I was seconds away from telling my first real boss to go fuck himself, she would only sigh and give me her tried and true words of advice.

She insisted that all my late-night emails were “wasteful whining,” that my screams of hatred were “misplaced admiration,” and that all the times he made me work over a hundred hours in a single week were “much-needed character building.”

After two long years of working for him, I’ve finally accepted that none of those things are true.

Preston Parker is an asshole boss. That is it. End of discussion.

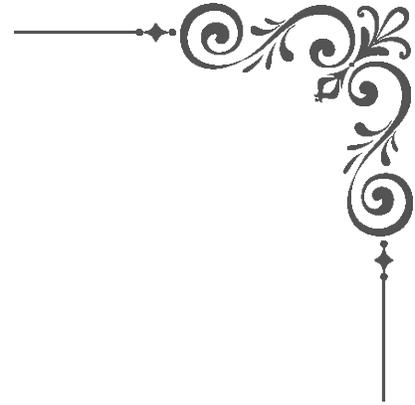
My mother can call me a “quitter” all she wants, but she’ll never know what it’s like to work for a man like him. A man whose ego is bigger than all of New York and Vegas combined.

Yes, he can make any woman wet by uttering a single syllable from his perfectly molded mouth. Yes, his deep emerald and grey eyes are downright breathtaking, and the way he’s able to make any suit look like it was made explicitly *for* him, never ceases to amaze me.

But I’ve had more than enough.

I can’t take working for him anymore, and I’m finally drafting the two weeks’ notice I should’ve drafted the very first month we worked together. (No, the very first *week* we worked together.)

I’m getting ahead of myself, though. I can’t start this story from the bitter end or the miserable middle. I need to start it from the very unfortunate beginning ...



ONE

Preston

The “very unfortunate” beginning ...



THE BEST PART OF MY day was always four forty-five in the morning. It was the rare moment when New York City was calm and quiet, when I could take a ride through the streets and admire all the buildings that were lucky enough to bear my last name.

There was the Parker & Rose Collection that owned space on every block of downtown, The Grand Alaskan that hosted top-tier guests in unparalleled privacy, and my favorite hotel of them all. The one that had ousted The Waldorf Astoria from its top spot in luxury hotels for the tenth year in a row: The Grand Rose on Fifth Avenue.

It was my hundredth hotel, my twentieth in this city. It was the very reason why I knew that New York was mine, and it always would be. Every luxury hotel in Manhattan wanted my touch, and the newest listings from Hilton and Marriott were poor imitations. I’d invented the modern twist on the luxury brand. Everyone else was simply borrowing it.

“Your daily papers, sir.” My driver handed them to me as he opened the back door of the town car. “Interesting headlines today.”

“I doubt it.”

I unfolded the stack as he pulled onto the street, groaning as I looked over the bold and black words.



MISTER NEW YORK—RUMOR Report

Preston Parker of Parker Hotels (our very own *Mister New York* for the eighth year in a row) was caught leaving his penthouse with model Yara Westinghouse. This was days after being seen with Marsha Avery and weeks after being seen with Hanna Bergstrom.

Our reporter stopped him outside of his condo to ask if any of the flings were serious, and he responded with a “Get the fuck off my property.”

As always, we doubt the man will ever settle down with one woman, but he does make our annual October cover look stunning.



RUTHLESS CEO, PRESTON Parker, Buys Sonoma Hotel Chain, Fires Top Management

Arrogant and ruthless hotel mogul, Preston Parker, has made his most heartless move yet. Once again, he courted a hotel chain for months—pretending as if there would be a genuine brand merger, but he has (not so shockingly) fired all of the current employees. The Parker Hotel International Press team has revealed that the Sonoma Hotels will soon be luxury hotels.



MISTER NEW YORK, Preston Parker, Fathers a Secret Child

A mystery woman who claims to have had a one night stand with Preston Parker is insisting that her two-week-old daughter is his. She’s seeking five hundred thousand a month in child support and is insisting that he pay her hospital bills.



WHAT THE FUCK?

I tossed the last paper to the side and focused on the other two, shaking my head at every unverified word. The utter laziness in the headlines was beginning to irk me to my core.

Reporters these days were willing to write anything to sell their papers, and they had yet to send me a check for all the copies I sold for them.

In the past, I was beyond ruthless—gutting hotels for the sake of making sure they never competed with my own and buying properties to make sure no one else would, but those days were long gone. Being at the top of my industry for over a decade meant I didn’t have to be as merciless, and it also meant I didn’t have much to celebrate.

The endless parties on my yachts, the over the top parties on my rooftops had lost their appeal over the years, and the only reason I continued to be seen with

supermodels was to distract the media from whatever business deal I was sealing behind the scenes.

If they cared to look a bit closer, they'd see that everything in my life was now a permanent stage of déjà vu, so much so, that I could predict all the conversations I had with people and nothing surprised me anymore. I kept to myself, never made friends, and kept tabs on all my enemies.

Since my relationship with my family was nonexistent, I buried myself in work and expected everyone around me to do the same. If I was capable of working a minimum of one hundred hours a week, they were capable as well. If I didn't need to sleep, they didn't need to either.

When I finally arrived at my headquarters, I took a second to admire the silver and grey "P" that was engraved in the center of the marble lobby. I waited to see if my executive assistant would meet me with the required morning reports and my favorite coffee, but three minutes passed, and nothing came.

Of course...

Annoyed, I took the elevator up to my office and was immediately greeted by the floor's lead receptionist, Cynthia.

"Good morning, Mr. Parker!" She was always too perky for the morning hours. "How are you today?"

"The same as I was yesterday. Do I have any calls waiting?"

She didn't answer. She just smiled and stared at me, batting her big brown eyes every few seconds.

"Do I have any calls waiting?" I repeated. "Any new files to sign off for morning delivery?"

She still didn't answer.

"Is there any particular reason why you're staring at me like that instead of answering my questions?"

"I'll reply to your questions when you reply to mine." She lowered her voice. "I texted your personal phone last night. Why didn't you answer?"

"Because I blocked your number three weeks ago."

"I was trying to send you a picture that I took on my vacation," she said. "I wasn't wearing anything but a bikini bottom."

"I'm expecting a call from the Rush Estate this morning." I refused to continue this conversation. "Can you make sure it gets routed to my second line so I can record it, please?"

"The picture made me look like a supermodel," she said. "I know you used to date supermodels, right? According to all those Rumor Reports anyway."

"I'm also expecting a file delivery from the new Berkley team. You have my permission to sign for it."

“I think it’s time you date a woman who actually eats her French fries instead of a girl who just poses with them on social media, you know?” She swayed her hips and smiled. “I also think you should give someone close to you a chance for a change.”

I gave her a blank stare. We went through this shit every other day. If she wasn’t blatantly flirting with me, she was attempting (and failing) to make me jealous by pretending to talk to numerous men on the phone.

“The call from Rush better be on my line when it’s time,” I said. “And you’re lucky that your work is beyond reproach, Cynthia. Otherwise, I’d be forced to—”

“Punish me?” She smiled. “Can you tell me how you would do it?”

Jesus Christ. I walked away and shut the door to my office. She was the youngest receptionist in my company, and she was also the best. If she had a business degree or any law experience, I might’ve given her a try at being my executive assistant.

Then again, with her flirting becoming more reckless and blatant by the day, keeping her at a distance was probably best for the long term.

I took a seat at my desk and realized that there was no Colombian coffee waiting for me. No written notes about the meetings I needed to attend. No emails about why. In other words, my assistant was bullshitting, *again*.

Sighing, I opened my email to ask when I could expect my coffee and notes to arrive, but an email from my chief attorney appeared onscreen.



SUBJECT: YOUR NEWEST Assistant Is in My Office (Again)

Preston,
Please get here. Now.
George Tanner
Chief Attorney, Parker International



THIS EMAIL FROM GEORGE came like clockwork every other Friday, and the only thing that changed was which “new assistant” he was referring to. I’d gone through so many, that I called them all Taylor since they never seemed to last long enough for me to learn their real names.

I walked to his office and spotted my latest Taylor sitting on the couch. Dressed in a baggy blue suit that belonged in the nearest trash can, his eyes were red and puffy, and he looked as if he hadn’t slept in days.

“Tell Mr. Parker what you just told me,” George said, handing him a Kleenex. “Go on.”

The latest Taylor looked up at me and let out a long breath. “Mr. Parker, I am overworked and overwhelmed with everything I’m required to do for you, sir. I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, and I feel like this job is consuming my life.”

“You just started working here two weeks ago.”

“Let him finish, Preston,” George warned, then muttered under his breath, “We don’t need any trouble with Human Resources, do we?”

“I’m just—” Taylor sniffled. “I’m just trying so damn hard to make you happy and it’s never enough. My phone rings constantly, my email inbox is never under five hundred messages, and I don’t think you know my real name.”

I didn’t make a move to act like I did.

He wiped his face on his sleeve. “My girlfriend has to come home and listen to me cry about this job every night.”

“You *still* have a girlfriend after crying every night?”

George shot me a pointed look, and I crossed my arms.

“I appreciate the opportunity you’ve given me, but even with the high salary you offer, it’s not enough for me anymore.” He sniffled. “I am formally quitting as of today.”

“Most employees usually do this in writing via two weeks’ notice,” I said. “I don’t see why I needed to come up here and listen to your tears.”

“What Mr. Parker *means* to say is that he accepts your resignation.” George shook his head at me. “And because we want to make sure we’re on good footing for his next assistant, was there anything he ever did that made you uncomfortable? Anything we can improve on for next time?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Last week, he made me update his personal cell phone.”

“Oh, *the horror*.” I looked at my watch.

“It was horrible, sir. The things that were said in some of those old messages, messages from so many different women ... They’ve scarred me.”

“What exactly did these messages say?” George asked.

“Too much.” Taylor looked away from me. “My pussy misses you. How come you don’t come by and pound me with your cock anymore? You have the biggest cock I’ve ever swallowed—Can I swallow it again? I don’t think I’ve ever been fucked the way—”

“Okay, enough.” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Thank you very much for all your work here at Parker International, Taylor. I’m sure you’ll be missed by no one.”

“My name is Jim. That’s exactly why I’m quitting.”

“You’re quitting because you’re incompetent.” I pulled out my phone and sent my standard *Another One Bites the Dust* email to HR. “You can pick up your exit packet and your final check in the basement.”

He leaned forward and gave George a hug—a hug that went on for several seconds longer than necessary, and then he headed to the door.

As soon as the door shut, George let out a breath. “Well, there goes my thinking that a Harvard man would be able to accomplish what so many of your previous let-downs couldn’t. Do you know that you’re the only CEO in the luxury hotel industry who can’t consistently say who your go-to EA is?”

“I only know that I’m the most successful CEO in the luxury hotel industry.” I walked over to the windows. “That’s all that matters at this point.”

“Whatever,” he said, clearing his throat, “before I even begin to address that never-ending issue, we need to discuss your latest amenity change.” He paced the room. “I don’t understand why you’ve decided to give away free gourmet breakfasts at some of your hotels. It’s not like you’re running a Hampton Inn.”

“The Hampton Inn doesn’t serve *gourmet* breakfast.”

“You know what I mean, Preston. Luxury hotels are branded luxury because of the fact that the guests pay for everything. The more stars and profit for us, the less free things for them.”

“It’s just an experiment,” I said. “It also seems to be working. Revenue is up by ten percent.”

“Well, hopefully, that’ll last longer than your next assistant.” He tossed me a bright blue folder.

“What’s this?”

“This is your newest executive assistant’s resume and intent letter,” he said. “I took the liberty of picking out the next one, and I can guarantee that she’ll last longer than a few months.”

I flipped through the paperwork and immediately knew she wouldn’t last longer than a week. She was just like every assistant he’d recommended to me before. Ivy-league educated, years of experience in hotel management, utterly destined to fail. Even her personal statement of why she wanted to work for me rang a familiar bell of imminent failure.

I truly believe that I can help make Preston Parker be the best CEO he can be by becoming the best executive assistant he’s ever hired.

I’d never mentioned it to George, but I found it quite ironic that I rose through the ranks of the hotel industry before getting my business degrees; that the first hotels I took over were achieved out of my hunger and desperation for success, not anything else.

Why haven’t we ever taken a chance on someone like that?

“As you can see, she graduated from Yale at the top of her class.” George smiled as he spoke, saying the same words he’d said hundreds of times before. “Not only has she worked in the hotel industry for over ten years, she’s spent significant time with the marketing and branding departments at the Hilton, Marriott, and Starwood brands. I think you should pick her brain for inside tips on the competition.”

“I’ve been number one for ten years. I don’t have any competition.”

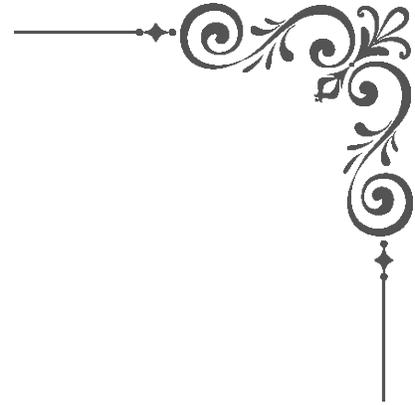
“You will if you don’t start getting any backup help.” He groaned. “At some point, you have to accept that you need one hell of an EA to help you keep this company running. Someone who can not only help you here, but someone who can go in your place to meetings whenever you finally decide to take a break, or God forbid, take a vacation like a normal person.”

“Fine.” I shut the folder and handed it to him. “Give me a few weeks to pick out my next one, and if she doesn’t work out, I’ll go with your choice.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “I need to sit in on all the interviews, though.”

“Why? Don’t you trust me to pick her?”

“Now that I know you have women texting your phone about their pussies, and you’re hell bent on your next assistant being a ‘she’? *Absolutely not.*”



TWO

Preston

——
A few weeks later
——

PLEASE DON'T BE ANOTHER disappointment ...

“Can you tell me a little bit about your previous experience at Toys ‘R’ Us, Miss Jackson?” I asked the redhead sitting across from me. “Your resume says you used to work in their senior sales department.”

“Well, yes.” She smiled. “I um, did a lot of accounting and unit shipping.”

I tapped my fingers against the desk. So far, she seemed impressive, but something about her was off. She blushed every time her eyes met mine—*typical*, but any time we asked her a question, she looked down at her palm as if she’d written a cheat sheet.

Who the hell needs a cheat sheet for an interview?

“I’m sorry that the company was ultimately forced to close its doors in the end,” George said. “What do you think you can bring from your experience in the toy world to the hotel world?”

“A lot. I have tons of experience with making sure that customers are satisfied, ensuring monthly sales goals are met, and providing top quality service.”

George nodded, looking somewhat pleased. “Did you ever work on any projects with my good friend Tim Lause?”

“Who?”

“Tim Lause,” he repeated. “The chief of senior sales. If you worked in senior sales, you would’ve worked on at least a few projects with him. Correct?”

“Oh, yeah. Right. Totally. Lots of projects with Mr. Lause.”

“Can you tell us what kind?” I asked. “As in, with some actual details?”

“Oh, um ...” Her cheeks turned red, and she looked down at her palm again.

“I ... My ...”

“We’re very impressed that you know all your vowel sounds, Miss Jackson,” I said. “I’m more interested in the details of your previous projects.”

She didn’t speak.

“Do I need to repeat my question?” I asked. “Do you not understand what previous projects mean?”

“Okay, look.” Her eyes went wide as she sat up. “I only put Toys ‘R’ Us down because they went bankrupt and I figured there’d be no way for you to call anyone and ask for a reference. I usually use other out of business companies for my most current job, and I guess I should’ve just stuck with those for this time. Damn it.”

“So, you’ve never worked at Toys ‘R’ Us?” George asked.

“I used to shop there all the time.”

“Do you really have a law degree from Yale?”

“No, but I went to one of their summer programs when I was a senior in high school.” She looked between us. “I had a perfect GPA. And before you ask, I didn’t lie about being good at customer service. Ask my manager at Starbucks. No one makes a pumpkin spice latte quite like me.”

“Okay.” I shut her folder. “You can go now.”

“Can I expect a call for a second interview?”

We gave her a blank stare.

“So, is that like a no?”

“It’s like a *hell no*.” I pointed to the door. “Out. Now.”

She huffed and grabbed her bag, slamming my door on the way out.

“If you even *think* about giving her a second interview ...” George said.

“I’m thinking about giving her a bill for wasting my time.”

As I was scratching her name off the list, a financial executive, Linda, stepped into my office.

“Sorry to bother you without an appointment, Mr. Parker,” she said. “But I just finished recalculating the profit and loss reports from The Grand Rose Hotel.”

“And?”

“It looks like those recent losses can’t be traced to anything particular, and they’re pretty minor. It’s only fifty-five hundred dollars a month.” She walked over and handed me a sheet with her notes.

I clenched my jaw. No loss was “pretty minor” in my company, and I always needed to know where every dime was going.

“Is it safe to assume that someone is stealing from me?” I asked.

“Quite the contrary, sir. The Grand Rose’s managers are certain that the losses have to be due to a guest. Actually, they say they’re due to a non-guest.”

George and I exchanged glances, and I knew without a doubt that someone on my staff was lying *and* stealing from me. I’d thought that by personally ruining the careers of the last few people who dared to steal, that I would never have to worry about this again, but someone was about to get a harsh reminder about how ruthless I could be.

“Tell them I’ll be there next week so they can kindly explain how a non-guest can steal thousands of dollars from me without ever checking in,” I said, my blood boiling. “Tell them I want everything printed out, and if every single penny isn’t accounted for, I’ll fire them all and make sure they never work in this city again. I’ll fire you as well if I find out you’re covering for them. Is there anything else you need to tell me?”

“No.” She swallowed and headed to the door. “That was it, sir.”

I ran the numbers through my head and tapped my fingers against the desk.

Fifty-five hundred a month at one property times twelve months of the year is a little over sixty thousand. If they manage to repeat this at four other properties, they’ll walk away with over a quarter million. Who the hell would even attempt to do this shit without thinking they’ll get caught?

“I have an idea, Preston.” George interrupted my thoughts. “Well, outside of the fact that you just threatened to fire her, why haven’t you ever asked Linda to be your executive assistant?”

“I have, and she turned it down. She said I already drive her to drink, and her husband doesn’t want her working too closely with me.”

“Well, what about Cynthia?”

“Cynthia is only twenty years old.” *She also wants to fuck me.*

“Well, maybe she could grow into the position. You were only twenty years old when you bought your first hotel, and look at how you turned that dump of a property around. Look at how much you’ve accomplished in the nineteen years since. Maybe Cynthia is the next Preston Parker in the making.”

“I can guarantee that she’s not.”

“You’re not willing to give her a chance?”

“I don’t even want to *think* about giving her a chance.”

“Well, I think it’s a pretty good idea.”

“Let me show you why it’s not.” I dialed her extension. “Cynthia, can you come into my office for a minute, please?”

“Gladly, Mr. Parker.”

Within seconds, she stepped into my office. Her cheeks were flushed pink, and her skirt was definitely inches higher than it was earlier.

“Oh.” She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw George. “I thought you were calling me in here so we could be *alone*.” She cleared her throat. “How may I help you this afternoon, Mr. Parker?”

“As you know, I’m currently searching for a new executive assistant. I was wondering if you’d be interested in being my interim EA if the next interviews don’t work out.”

“Oh, of course.” She bit her bottom lip, blushing even more. “If I became your EA, does that mean I’ll be your go-to person for like everything? Like, we’ll probably spend a lot more time together?”

“Yes.”

“Like private meetings and overnight business trips? *Alone*?”

“Yes.”

“Will we share a hotel room whenever we’re away?”

“Not at all. Typically, my executive assistant gets a separate room for travel.”

“Well, I wouldn’t dare trouble you with a separate room. I would love to save you the money, and nothing about our relationship would have to be typical.”

She moved closer, her eyes widening with each step. “At least, not at first. I would ease you into things, let you take things slow, but I have to be honest and admit that I like everything the rough and hard way. If we really got along well, after a few months of being your EA, we should discuss—”

“Okay, *enough*.” George didn’t let her finish. “Thank you for your time, Cynthia. We’ll let you know if the last interviews don’t pan out.”

“I really hope they don’t.” She licked her lips like a starving animal, then she smiled at me before leaving the room.

When she shut the door, George looked at me. “She’s making direct sexual advances, and you haven’t fired her yet? Why?”

“Because she does excellent work. She’s also one of the few people on my team who doesn’t break into tears whenever I ask for multiple things at once.”

“Noted.” He opened his laptop and set it on the edge of my desk. “Before we get down to today’s business, I’ve been meaning to ask you something. Are you going home to see your family this holiday season? I know you usually don’t, but I’m working on the executive calendar and would like to know.”

“I don’t have a family,” I said, my voice terse. “We’ve discussed this before.”

No matter how close I was with George, discussions about my family (or lack thereof) were off-limits. I never talked about them with anyone and I didn’t

see that changing anytime soon.

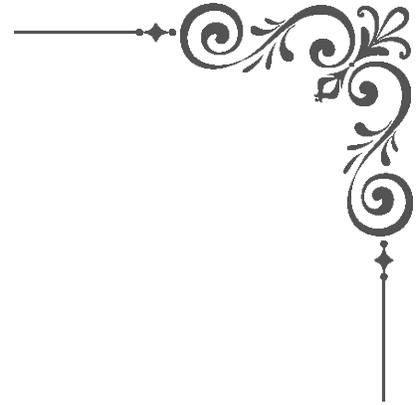
“I know how you feel about this topic, I just—” He dropped the subject when he noticed the look on my face. “Okay then, onto my latest research.” He showed me his latest findings and stuck to the things I preferred to discuss, and after four hours of walking through the legal ramifications of my latest deal, he left my office.

Still restless and needing to fill my time with work, I asked Linda to email me the final Grand Rose numbers so I could see them for myself. The moment I finished recalculating the deficit, I knew something wasn't adding up.

The losses all took place on the same three days of the week, and for whatever reason, they all took place in the morning. I picked up the schedule for the cash pick-ups and saw that they all corresponded to those dates.

Seething, I asked Human Resources to prepare pink slips for the eight managers and told George to have the legal team prepare for a lawsuit.

I picked up my phone and called the hotel directly. “This is Preston Parker, your owner. I'll be there to fire whoever's been stealing from me tomorrow.”



THREE

Tara



I WAS OFFICIALLY CONVINCED that there was nothing worse than being young, broke, and jobless in New York City.

Nothing.

With exactly fifteen dollars and forty-eight cents in my bank account, every day was a struggle to make it to the next, and I knew that if I didn't get a job soon, I would be homeless.

My business degrees might as well have been printed on toilet paper for the shit they'd brought me thus far. I was just like every other girl who moved here after law school with high hopes and dreams, realizing that my dream apartment in Manhattan was going to have to be a shared studio in Brooklyn, and that my dream job of working at a Fortune 500 Company was going to have to be freelancing ghostwritten stories like *Knocked Up by My Baby Father's Cousin—The Dom* for a couple of hundred bucks.

Even though I managed to snag four to five interviews a week, I hardly ever received callbacks. Only cold, emailed rejections.

Over the past six months, I'd applied for over three hundred jobs, and every night, between tears and a half-eaten bowl of Ramen noodles, I googled, "Is it possible to sue your university if you don't land a job after graduation?"

I was almost tempted to go back home to Pittsburgh, but my heart wouldn't let me. I'd worked too hard to give up now, and I knew someone would hire me eventually.

"*Quitters never win, and winners never quit, Tara. You're definitely going to get this job today.*" I muttered to myself as I pulled my hair into a side ponytail. I looked myself over in the mirror one last time, making sure the navy-blue dress

was wrinkle-free, and then I grabbed my bag and opened the window to the fire escape.

When I was outside, I pulled a handful of condom packages from my bag and lined them on the bottom of the sill, gently wedging them between the glass so I could re-open the window later. My roommate and I were seven days late with our rent, and we needed access to our things just in case our landlord decided to kick us out.

“Are you in there, Tara?” A gruff voice knocked on our door as I climbed down the fire escape. “Is that you snoring, Ava? Where is my goddamn money?”

I didn’t answer. I kept climbing down the rails, running toward the subway station the second my feet hit the pavement. I made it down the station’s steps and jumped the turnstile, making it just in time to catch the C train to Manhattan.

Grabbing onto a handrail, I shut my eyes as the train lurched forward. I took a deep breath and went over the lines I’d been rehearsing for the past couple hours.

I want to work at Russ Stock Exchange because I believe that I’ll be a great asset to your company. I’ve done my research, created a presentation on how I believe we can compete with the other firms, and if you give me a chance, I can promise you won’t regret it. Please just give me a chance ...

“You are now arriving in Manhattan,” the train’s system said, making me return to reality.

When the doors opened, I rushed off and headed up to the crowded streets, heading straight for my next ride. The Grayline Tour Bus.

Slipping a pair of shades over my eyes, I pulled an old ticket from my pocket and showed it to the driver.

“Welcome aboard, Miss,” he said. “Enjoy your tour.”

“Thank you.”

I took a seat near the back and nervously tapped my foot, hoping no one would walk by and double-check the timestamp on my ticket. Several tourists stepped aboard, filling the seats around me, and I let out a breath.

“Welcome to the Big Apple, everyone!” The tour guide stood in the middle of the aisle as the bus moved onto the street. “Today’s half-day tour will take us through Times Square, Broadway, and to the Hudson River. We’ll stop at quite a few landmarks along the way, but before I can begin to entertain you with terrible jokes and inform you of our city’s great history, I need to scan each of your fare tickets. Go ahead and pull those out for me.”

Shit.

I turned around in my seat, hoping he would walk past me. Then I looked up at the greying skies, wondering if the universe would finally throw me a break

and magically make a real ticket appear in my hand. That, or just let the bus go for five more blocks so I could be closer to my job interview.

“Ma’am?” The tour guide stepped in front of me, killing all my hopes.

“Ma’am, do you have a ticket for this tour?”

I nodded.

“Well, can I see it so I can scan it?”

“Oh, I lost it at the last stop. Sorry.”

“We haven’t made any stops yet.”

“Are you sure?”

“Let me see your ticket.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Now.”

“Okay, look. I don’t have one, but—”

“Stop the bus!” he yelled. “We’ve got a goddamn bum onboard!”

“What? I’m not a bum.” My cheeks flushed red. “I just can’t afford a cab right now, so I’m using your bus. When I get a job, I’m going to pay you back for all the rides I’ve stolen, I promise.”

“You’ve stolen more than one ride from us?”

“It’s about to rain,” I said, pleading. “Can you please just let me ride to the first stop? I have a really important interview, and I don’t want to look bad.”

“Not my problem.” He pointed to the door. “Just how many rides have you taken without paying?”

The bus came to a jerky stop, and I stood up and pushed my way past him before answering that question.

Stepping onto the sidewalk, I looked over my shoulder as the guide directed all of the tourists to look down at me.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if you look to your right, you’ll see a perfect example of New York’s worst scum,” he said into the mic. “I truly hope that this is the closest you’ll get to seeing a real-life bum in this city. Quick! Everyone check and make sure you still have your wallets before we pull off.”

They roared with laughter, and I felt tears pricking my eyes.

Refusing to let them fall, I started my long trek down Fifth Avenue. I rehearsed my interview speech repeatedly, convincing myself that today really was the day that I was landing the job of my dreams.

When I reached the right building, I realized I had half an hour to spare before my interview. My stomach was growling intensely, and although I promised I would never steal food again, my hunger won out.

I walked to the corner and stood in front of the stunning gold entrance of The Grand Rose Hotel.

“Good morning, Miss.” The two doormen smiled in unison as they opened the doors and let me inside the most luxurious hotel in all of Manhattan.

As always, I stood in the lobby in utter awe for several minutes, taking it all in.

Sparkling white chandeliers hung from the towering ceilings, a massive rose-shaped water fountain stood at the center, and the letter “P” was engraved in gold in the center of the grey marble floor.

The front desk agents were dressed in tailored blue and grey suits as usual, and it took all of five seconds for me to overhear them saying their hotel’s mantra.

“We don’t just sell hotel rooms. We sell a lifestyle.”

From my random and illegal “stays” here, I’d discovered that there were six restaurants, four spas, and a massive pool and lounge on the roof. Yet, the best part of this hotel was what had been saving my life for the past few months—the free breakfast bar.

Unlike the Hampton Inns that I frequented from time to time, this was *gourmet* breakfast. Chocolate drizzled strawberries with truffle butter bagels, custom floured pancakes with hand-crafted omelets, and a staff that didn’t ask too many questions. (If they ever did, I kept a “lost” hotel key in my back pocket to make sure I could pull off being a guest at any moment necessary.)

The light sound of thunder roaring outside made me realize I needed to hurry up and get out of here.

Stay calm and stay focused ...

My mouth watering, I made my way to the bar and looked over my shoulder at the front desk, making sure no one was watching. When I was convinced all was clear, I picked up a plate and loaded it with fresh cut strawberries and croissants. I smeared a bagel with cinnamon truffle spread and began making a cup of coffee. Before I could walk down the hall and slip out of the side entrance like I always did, an older man in a grey suit stepped in front of me.

“Excuse me, Miss,” he said. “Are you a guest at this hotel?”

Ugh. Caught twice in one day?

“What?” I stalled, looking around for another exit, just in case he tried to block my path. “I’m offended that you would even ask me that.”

“You still haven’t answered *that*.” He crossed his arms. “Are you a guest at this hotel?”

“Yes. Yes, of course, I am a guest here.”

“Okay, great.” He pulled a small device from his pocket. “Well, would you mind telling me your room number?”

“Um.” I felt my cheeks reddening, felt my fingers sweating as I held onto my breakfast plate. “Why?”

“Reasons.” He tapped his screen. “We seem to be having a recent, severe loss issue when it comes to a *certain stranger* walking in and stealing from our free breakfast bar, so we want to make sure that everyone is a guest here.”

“Is it really stealing if the breakfast bar is free?” I asked. “I mean, how can you even measure something like that on a day to day basis?”

“Okay.” He put his device away. “I’m calling security.”

The second the word “security” fell from his lips, I dropped my plate and headed toward the doors. Panicking, I pushed my way through the real guests and their designer luggage, but before I could taste fresh air, I collided face-first into another suit.

My body hit the floor with a loud thud, and I felt instant pain in my hands from failing to brace the fall. I stood up quickly—grabbing my bag and my phone.

I made a move for the doors again, but the suit I’d collided with stood in front of me—blocking me. Then he took my goddamn breath away.

Oh. My. GOD.

“I think you’re leaving something.” He picked up two of my condom packs and smiled. “I’m sure you’ll need these for *whoever* you’re running to. Don’t you think?”

Speechless, I snatched them away and stuffed them into my bag. Then I stood still, transfixed by the man’s stunning green and grey eyes. With his perfectly chiseled jawline and jet-black hair that I was tempted to run my fingers through, he was utter perfection.

As I stared, his lips curved into a slow, sexy smile—making him look like he’d stepped right off the front cover of *GQ* magazine.

I didn’t have to second guess that the tie he was wearing was a custom label and cost more than I would ever make in a week. His three-piece black suit gave away the fact that he was hiding well-toned muscles underneath, and I immediately recognized the silver, diamond plated watch he was wearing. I’d seen it twice in my life. Once, on the wrist of a Fortune 500 CEO during an interview, and once again on my Pinterest board called “Things I’ll Never Be Able to Afford.”

The suit was eyeing me just as intently as I was eyeing him, and I couldn’t snap out of it if I tried. I felt my nipples hardening beneath my dress, and I was certain that my panties were wet.

Before I could force myself to come to my senses and remember that I needed to be running and not staring, the grey-suited man from earlier rushed over.

“Mr. Parker!” He stepped between us, out of breath. “We weren’t expecting you until ten o’clock, sir. We’re still prepping our reports.”

“I’m sure you are,” he said, still staring at me. “I wanted to be here the second you finished so I can make sure to fire whoever’s really responsible for all those unexplainable losses.”

“Well, you’re looking at the number one cause of all those losses right now, sir.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “The young lady in front of you has been stealing our gourmet breakfast and coffee here for over two months now. She comes in three to four times a week—sometimes more than once a day, pretending to be a guest and she leaves before we can approach her. We’re pretty certain that she has a lost room key she keeps, and that she uses the side entrance from time to time. She waits for a guest to come in and shows her fake key so she can slip in right after them.”

The suit tilted his head to the side, looking slightly amused, but his smile didn’t stay.

“Are you aware that stealing is a *crime*?” he asked, glaring at me. “That the total you’ve stolen from me now amounts to more than petty theft?”

I nodded. My voice was locked in my throat, and I couldn’t answer fast enough.

“I have the cops on line one, and the security team is on its way down, sir. I’d be glad to give my witness statement regarding this future felon who almost cost us our jobs.”

“Call them off,” the suit said. “Now.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” he said, looking at me. “I think we can talk about this like adults, don’t you think, Miss—” He paused. “What is your name?”

“Ashley Smith.”

“Your *real* name,” he said, knowing damn well I was lying. “The one you use when you’re not getting caught stealing. If you don’t want to give it to me, I can have you give it to the authorities.”

“Tara.” I relented. “Tara Lauren.”

“Miss Lauren, I’m Preston Parker,” he said. “I would say it’s a pleasure to meet you, but I don’t appreciate people stealing from my hotels.”

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. “I take it that you’re like, the manager?”

“No, I’m like, *the owner*.” The way he said those words turned me on for some reason. “Let’s talk.” He gestured for me to follow him and led me past the disgruntled grey suit.

He glanced at the food I’d dropped on the floor and made his way to the breakfast bar. He picked up a plate and loaded it with fresh strawberries and

croissants. Then he spread truffle butter on a gluten-free bagel before handing the plate to me.

He kept his eyes on me as we walked to the elevators—looking me up and down with every step, and I honestly wasn't sure if he was leading me on to have me arrested in private.

I avoided his heated gaze as we went up, thankful that there were other guests between us. When we reached the thirtieth floor, the remaining guests stepped off and he held a key against the pad. Then he pressed the button labeled *The Preston Suite*.

The doors glided open seconds later, revealing a glittering gold floor that was even more stunning than the one downstairs.

“Good morning, Mr. Parker,” a woman behind the desk said. “Good to see you here today.”

“Good morning.” He spoke without looking in her direction, and everyone else on the floor scattered in different directions.

Why do they look so terrified?

“In here, Miss Lauren.” He opened the door to an office that was more than ten times the size of my apartment. As I stepped inside, the lights came on and the window shades slid up, revealing a dreamy and picturesque view of the city.

I bit my tongue to prevent myself from waxing poetic about it, to prevent myself from saying how lucky he must feel.

From up here, the falling rain didn't seem so dreary. From here, New York still looked as magical as I once thought it was.

“Have a seat,” he said, pulling out a chair for me. He waited for me to sit down before moving behind his desk. Then he leaned back in his chair and stared at me with those stunning green eyes, making me even wetter against my will.

“So, Miss Lauren.” He tapped his fingers against the wood. “Is there any particular reason why you've been stealing from me?”

“Maybe.”

“Can you kindly tell me what that ‘maybe’ reason is?”

“I need to be assured that you're not secretly taping this in hopes of turning me into the authorities right after I confess.”

“If I wanted to call the authorities, I would've never invited you up to my office, Miss Lauren.” He kept his eyes on mine. “I would've called the precinct across the street, and you would've never made it past the corner.”

“Oh, right.” I cleared my throat, and he immediately picked up the pitcher of water on his desk, pouring me a glass.

“Now, where were we?” He waited until I took a few sips. “Oh, yes. You were about to stop stalling and answer my question about why you’ve been stealing from my hotel.”

“I didn’t think I was stealing from you personally,” I said. “I’m just struggling to make it right now, and your hotel happens to be close to where all my latest interviews are. I was planning to pay you back once I got a job.” I pulled out my phone and clicked on my calendar, showing him the screen. “The red x marks are every time I ate breakfast here. I was going to multiply that by fifteen dollars and—”

“The cost of gourmet breakfast for non-guests in my hotels is *eighty-five dollars*.” He interrupted me.

Silence.

“Um, well ...” I blinked. “I’m probably still going to have to multiply the red x marks by fifteen dollars and send the manager—well, you, an apology-note with a check.”

“What are the blue x marks for?”

The times I’ve stolen the gourmet lunch from here. “Days I finish my workouts.”

“You have the word ‘workout’ already typed in some of these date boxes already.”

“Must be a glitch.” I moved my phone away from him. “I’m serious about paying you back, though. I have a third interview with a company today, and I’m certain I’m going to get it. I feel really confident about that.”

“What company are you interviewing for?” he asked.

“The Russ Stock Exchange.” I gasped as I looked at my phone again. It was now two minutes past my interview time.

“Something wrong, Miss Lauren?”

“Yeah...I’m missing my interview right now. Do you think you could call and tell them why I’m late?”

He gave me a blank stare.

“Right. Well, I um—” I swallowed. “Thank you for not calling the cops on me. I need to go.”

“We’re not done talking.” His voice was firm. “What exactly is your interview for?”

“Was,” I said, doubting they’d give me a chance now. “It was supposed to be for the CEO’s executive assistant.”

He raised his eyebrow. “You have a business degree?”

“Yes, and a law degree as well. Not that they mean anything.”

“Where was your last job?”

“I’m still looking for my first one.”

He stared at me long and hard, not saying a word and I wasn’t sure if he was going to say anything else. And now, for the first time since I’d moved to New York City, I was ready to break down and cry.

“Well, thank you very much for um, hearing me out about this,” I said, standing. “I appreciate it.”

“You should.” He leaned back in his chair. “Can I expect that I won’t see you stealing food from any of my hotels again?”

“Not unless you also own The Grand Alaskan on Fifth Avenue.”

“I do own The Grand Alaskan on Fifth Avenue.”

“Oh.” *Shit.* “Do you also own The Loft on Wall Street?”

“Yes.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “You’re not familiar with all the hotels in my portfolio?”

“No, but I’ll look up all the alternate names for the Marriott and Hilton hotels tonight, and I promise to avoid them accordingly.”

“This is a Parker Hotel, Miss Lauren.” He looked offended. “There are twenty in this city alone, and we bring in more revenue than all the Marriott and Hilton hotels combined.”

“Oh ...”

“Yes,” he said. “*Oh.*”

“Well, in that case, will it really bother you if I *don’t* pay you back then? What if I just send you a proper apology without the check?”

He looked as if he was holding back a laugh, but he pressed his lips into a line instead. “Only if you agree to make this the last day you steal from any of my hotels. Next time, I’ll have you locked up personally.”

“I agree to stop.”

“Good. You can also keep your apology note, seeing as though I don’t think you’re really sorry about anything.”

“I’m sorry I was caught.”

That slow, sexy smile spread across his face again, and I felt my heart begin to race.

I couldn’t stop staring at this man if I tried, and I knew right then and there that his face was going to be featured in all of my fantasies for a very long time.

“Mr. Parker?” A voice came over the intercom, shattering our stare-fest.

“Yes?” he answered.

“Mr. Tanner wants to know how much longer your breakfast meeting is going to be.”

“I’ll be finished in five minutes.” He stood to his feet.

“It was nice meeting you,” I said, extending my hand.

“Likewise, Miss Lauren. I’ve never met a criminal this up close and personal before.” He shook my hand, and I immediately felt warm tingles running up and down my spine.

When he finally let my hand go, he opened the door and gestured for me to step out. Employees scattered once again, as if their lives depended on it.

“What specialty did you study in business school?” he asked, walking me to the elevator.

“I had three,” I said. “Accounting & Taxes, Public Relations, and Project Development.”

“How impressive.”

“Clearly not impressive enough for most companies in this city.” I stepped onto the elevator, expecting him to go back to his office, but he stepped on with me. He hit ‘H’ instead of lobby and stepped closer to me.

“I’m currently hiring here,” he said. “And while I don’t normally consider thieves as hire-worthy, something tells me that I should make an exception in your case.”

“Well, thank you ...” I couldn’t think straight with him this close to me. “Do you mind me asking how much your housekeepers make an hour?”

“This wouldn’t be for housekeeping, Miss Lauren.” He closed the gap between us. “I need an executive assistant—someone who can work under me with ease, and handle the length of the work involved.”

“You mean the *depth* of the work involved?”

“That as well,” he said. “I prefer someone with hotel experience, but seeing as though most of the people I’ve hired in the past tend to quit early, I think it’s time I go in a different direction.”

“Why exactly did your few last assistants quit?” I asked, curious.

“I guess they didn’t have the stamina to keep up with me.” He smiled.

The elevator stalled on level G before slowly descending again, and I tried not to focus on the way the word ‘stamina’ rolled off his lips.

“Nonetheless, if you actually do have law and business degrees, I’d be more than willing to hire you as my next executive assistant.”

“Without an interview?”

“We just completed the interview.”

The elevator doors sprung open on ‘H’, revealing another luxurious space. All-white walls, shimmering chandeliers, and sleek grey furniture.

Mr. Parker remained on the cart, and motioned for me to step off.

Obliging, I looked back at him—still utterly confused.

“So, should I fill out an online application and wait for you to verify that I do have those degrees?”

“No, Human Resources will do that for me in a few minutes.” He pointed down the hall. “If that checks out, you’re hired.”

“*What?*” I felt my eyes widening.

“I didn’t stutter. Human Resources is to the left. You can tell them that you’re here for position EA-122 and they’ll handle the rest.”

“Thank you, but—”

“*But?*” He crossed his arms.

“Yes, I have a few things to ask. I need to know everything that the job entails.”

“That’s why you’re seconds away from talking to Human Resources,” he said. “I don’t know the job description by heart, Miss Lauren.”

“I meant that I have a few questions for *you*.”

“Allow me to assume,” he said. “Answer number one, no. Your breakfast is not included. Answer number two, the salary is three hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year.”

My jaw dropped. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. Apparently, I’m a rather intense boss and I tend to stress people out whenever they’re working for me.”

“Are you saying the word ‘stress’ or ‘stretch’?”

“Whichever you prefer.” He smiled.

“Miss? Miss?” A voice down the hall forced me to look away from him.

“Miss, if you’re not here for employee business at Preston International, you need to leave this floor immediately. Are you here for that?”

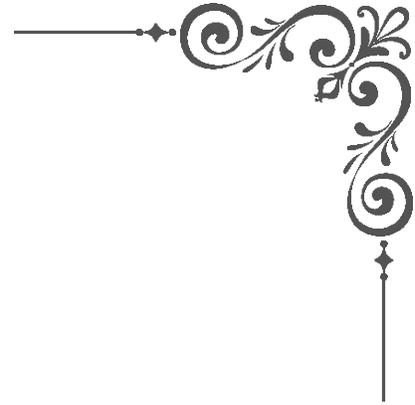
I turned my attention to Preston and he raised his eyebrow.

“Are you?” he asked, letting the elevator doors shut before I could answer.

“Miss? Miss?”

I pinched myself to make sure I wasn’t dreaming, that I really was seconds away from landing the job of my dreams.

“I’m here for a job,” I said to the woman. “Preston Parker’s executive assistant.”



FOUR

Preston



HOURS LATER, I STARED outside my restaurant's windows and watched Tara let up a black and gold umbrella under my hotel's awning. Looking slightly confused, she walked against the flow of traffic and held her bag close. I watched until she disappeared into the crowd, noticing that every man who caught sight of her did a slow double take.

I immediately sent my Human Resources director an email.



SUBJECT: MY EXECUTIVE Assistant Position

Walsh,

Did the applicant I sent downstairs this morning have the necessary qualifications?

Preston Parker

CEO & Owner of Parker International

His response was instant.



SUBJECT: RE: MY EXECUTIVE Assistant Position

Mr. Parker,

I'm happy to let you know that Tara Lauren is more than qualified for your executive assistant position. I personally think she's your best hire to date.

I'm including her "short-list" below and will be happy to answer any further questions regarding her employment which will start next Monday, pending my question below.

*Tara Lauren's Shortlist:
B.A. from Princeton University
MBA from Princeton University
J.D. from Harvard University*

*Miss Lauren has also studied various trades abroad in France, Australia, &
Japan.*

She speaks three languages (Spanish, French, & German)

She asked if she could have a nine hundred dollar advance to pay her rent. Should I approve this amount? (Also, I hate to accuse her, but I'm pretty sure she stole my umbrella ...)

Best,
Walsh Jones
Human Resources Director, Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: RE: MY Executive Assistant Position

Walsh,
Approve nine thousand. (I'll make sure she gives it back when she starts.)
Preston Parker
CEO & Owner of Parker International



I SET MY PHONE DOWN, amused. Then I wondered where the hell she was staying in this city for nine hundred a month.

I couldn't stop replaying the way she looked in my office, the way her soft words slipped from her sexy, pink lips. With one look at her coffee colored hair that fell past her breasts, her almond brown eyes that were a bit too trusting, and the way her navy-blue dress clung to her curves, I knew I *shouldn't* have hired her.

I'd never been this attracted to a woman after a first encounter in my life, and I knew having her close to me again was going to be a problem.

"Sorry, I'm late." George sat across from me and handed me a folder. "We have the first interview with a former resort director in thirty minutes, and the second interview with the legal advisor from Broadway right after that. Your international schedule for meetings starts in three weeks, so how do you want to play this?"

"I canceled those interviews an hour ago."

"What?" He sat up in his chair. "Why?"

"Because I just hired my next executive assistant."

“Without my input?”

“I went with my gut,” I said. “I was quite impressed with her creative means of survival.”

“Your gut, and her creative means of survival?” He looked like his head was about to explode. “Is this some type of joke, Preston?”

“Not at all.” I picked up my coffee and took a long sip, mentally rewinding thoughts of Tara walking into my office.

“What does she look like, Preston?”

She’s sexy as fuck. “I’m not sure how you expect me to answer that question, George. Does she look like she graduated from an Ivy-league school? I’m not sure how someone can ‘look’ like that, but she did indeed graduate from Princeton. She has a law and a business degree as well. She also speaks three of the same languages that I do.”

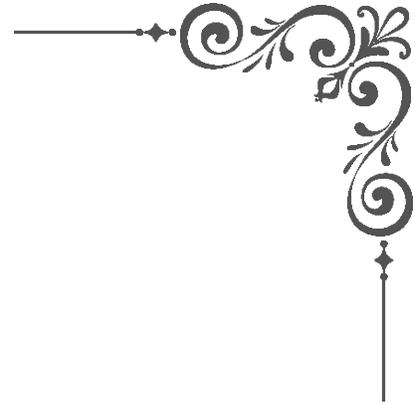
“What does she *look like*, Preston?” He glared at me. “As your top lawyer, I need to know what type of hire this was. One with your dick or one with your brain.”

It was both. “It was the latter, of course.”

“I’m sure.” He snatched away my folder. “Since we already know how this is going to end, do me a favor and have Cynthia schedule those other interviews for three weeks from now so we can make sure that someone in the administration is on the international meeting trips with you.”

“You think the woman I hired is only going to last three weeks?”

“From the ‘I’m definitely attracted to her’ look on your face, I wouldn’t bet on her lasting longer than two.”



FIVE

Tara



I TOOK MY TIME GETTING back to Brooklyn in the rain, my mind spinning in a million different directions. I'd spoken to the HR team for over an hour, insisting that this must all be a dream, but when they gave me an official employee number and handed me the entry badge to my new office, I finally accepted that it wasn't.

I signed every contract within seconds of them placing it in front of me, calculating the salary again and again. The executive assistant position at The Russ Stock Exchange was for one hundred and fifty thousand a year, and the others I'd interviewed for were between seventy and eighty thousand a year.

Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year? After taxes, that's still over twenty thousand dollars a month. A month!

When I made it back to my apartment, I decided to walk through the front entrance. As suspected, my landlord changed the locks while I was away, so I slid a condom packet between the loose lock frame and used my bobby pin to jiggle it open.

"Hey there, roomie!" My roommate Ava rolled across our oversized bean bags, setting aside her glossy gossip magazine. "How are you today?"

"Great! I've got good news!" I shut the door and stuffed a towel under the gap. "Guess what it is?"

"I'll guess, but you have to listen to *my* good news first. I've got two amazing things!"

"I'm listening."

"Okay." She sat up. "You know how I've been stealing toilet paper from my job for our apartment?"

“Yeah ...”

“Well, the manager just switched from the terrible sandpaper brand to the two-ply soft kind, so we are about to be wiping our asses with some grade-A sheets from now on.” She smiled proudly. “I already nabbed six rolls and put them in the closet, so let me know when you notice the difference.”

“Will do.” I laughed. “What’s the other thing?”

“I paid our rent this afternoon, but that asshole had already changed the locks, so he says he’ll get us a new key if we pay the next month on time.”

“He’s not going to get us a key to the current lock at all?”

“No.” She shook her head. “He says we seem to do just fine getting in and out without the right keys. He did ask me if he could borrow a few packs of condoms, though.”

We both laughed, and I plopped onto our couch.

“Anyway, you look like you’re about to burst with your good news.” She stood to her feet. “Let me try to guess some smaller things before you explode with it, though.”

“Go ahead.”

“Guess one. Did you finally break up with your boyfriend, whom I hate with every fiber of my being because he’s not good enough for you?”

“No ...”

“Doesn’t hurt to ask.” She smiled. “Guess two. Did you figure out the new password to our neighbor’s wifi?”

“Actually, yeah, I did.” I nodded. “It’s *Stop stealing my shit, you thieving ass bitches.*”

“Are there any spaces in that, or is that all one word?”

“It’s all one word.”

“Let me try it.” She picked up her phone and tapped the screen a few times. “Perfect! It works! Now, what’s your real good news?”

“I got my first career job today!” The words fell out my mouth faster than ever. “Like, an actual salaried job with benefits, relocation expenses, and paid vacation time. And on my way home, the HR director sent me an email saying that they’re going to give me a nine thousand dollar advance against my next check!”

“What?” She jumped up and down. “Really?”

“Yes!” I wiped a few tears from my eyes. “I was hired on the spot, and my salary is so ridiculous, that I still can’t believe it.”

“Is it eighty thousand a year?”

“No, higher.”

“One hundred and twenty?”

“Even higher.”

“Um ...” She looked stunned. “One hundred and fifty?”

“Three hundred and fifty!”

We both screamed at the same time, and without any prompting, we did what we always did whenever there was a rare cause to celebrate. She took out a bottle of cheap champagne, and I took out our freezer’s most prized possession: Dean & DeLuca cookie dough.

“Give me the play by play,” she said, uncorking the bottle. “Did The Russ Stock Exchange make you think they weren’t going to hire you before they brought out the contract? Was there clapping once you signed it?”

“This isn’t for The Russ Stock Exchange. That’s a story for a different day.” I waited until she’d poured both glasses, until she’d raised hers for a celebratory sip. “You are now looking at the new personal assistant—No, wait. The *executive* assistant to Preston Parker, the CEO of Preston Hotels.”

“*What?*” She spat out her champagne. “What did you just say?”

“I’m the new executive assistant to Preston Parker at Preston Hotels. Or is it Parker Hotels?”

“It’s definitely Parker Hotels.” She set her glass down and didn’t look so thrilled anymore. She looked terrified.

“You’re not happy for me now?” I asked. “I know the title isn’t exactly legal advisor, but being his executive assistant covers a full realm of responsibilities and they require a business or law degree. They even said that if I do a good job, I can move to his legal department within three years.”

“Look.” She shook her head and let out a breath. “As your best friend, I’m beyond happy that you finally got a job, but I don’t think we should be celebrating this one.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re about to work for Preston Parker. *Preston. Parker.*”

I gave her a blank stare.

“You had no idea who he was before today, did you?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Is he more than a CEO?”

She sighed and walked over to her extensive magazine collection, tossing me five copies of *Mister New York* and three copies of *Page Six*.

His beautiful face was plastered on each cover—making me realize he was even sexier in person, but the headlines on *Page Six* were far from flattering.

Mister New York wins big again, but one of his former assistants tell all. Mister New York tramples his competition, leaves another assistant in the dust. Mister New York makes every new assistant sign an NDA after leaving latest one stranded in Paris.

“So, he’s a celebrity?” I asked.

“No, he’s a mogul. A filthy rich and completely arrogant mogul.” She flopped onto the bean bags. “If you would ever join me in reading the gossip rags here and there, you would’ve run like hell the second he offered you that job.”

“Even when he offered three hundred and fifty thousand a year?”

“Who says you’ll last a year?” She pointed to the magazines. “Read them. Now.”

I flipped through the pages of the first magazine, feeling my chest tighten with each printed word, feeling my heart race with uncertainty.

“He’s a ruthless asshole. Coldhearted boss. Worst boss I’ve ever worked for. The only good thing about him is the view, until he opens his mouth.”

I flipped through an issue from a couple of years ago where he was giving his “final interview” and I thought for sure it would cast him in a better light, but I felt my jaw unhinging as I read the first few lines of the transcript.



INTERVIEWER: How does it feel to be a top-five finalist for the *Mister New York* award again, Mr. Parker?

Mr. Parker: I feel like I should *always* be in the top two, and I should never be number two.

Interviewer: Well, Reeve Henderson of NYB is also having one hell of a year, sir.

Mr. Parker: Reeve Henderson is a multimillionaire. I’m a billionaire.

Interviewer: Well, at this stage in your career, surely you know money doesn’t buy everything.

Mr. Parker: When you finally get some, you’ll see that it actually does.

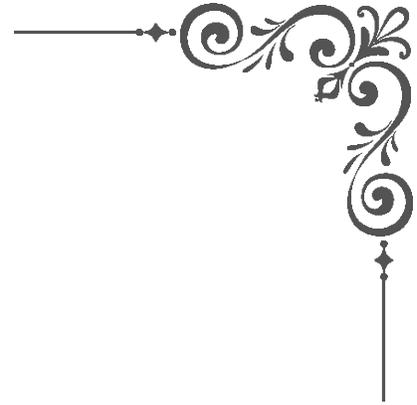


I TOSSED THAT ISSUE across the room and opened another, then another. Then I realized that I’d just signed on to work with the cockiest asshole in all of New York City, that I’d sealed my fate with a man who once told a male interviewer, “I hope your fucking is better than your ‘in-depth’ interview questions. If not, I would highly consider working on improving the former, as the latter is completely hopeless.”

What the hell have I gotten myself into?



TWO MONTHS LATER ...



SIX

Tara

“The miserable middle”



PLEASE DON'T SOUND yet. Please don't sound yet...

Mornings like today made me wish I had access to a time machine so I could go back and slap the hell out of myself for making whatever decisions led up to this very moment. It was only three o'clock, but the skies were releasing a relentless rain over the city, and I was forcing myself to “enjoy” the only time of the day that I ever got to myself.

I was sprawled across my bean bags, my feet wrapped in pain-relief ice packs from running around New York in designer stilettos. A thermometer protruded from my lips—showing a traitorous “normal” temperature, and I was watching the alarm clock like a hawk. Waiting for the second hand to land on five so I could toss back my next set of stress medication and deal with my “dream job” for another day.

Over the past couple of months, I'd taken a crash course in the world of hotels, and it was far more complicated than I ever thought. Every day brought a new round of crisis meetings, a new goal of “Parker level excellence” to meet, and for guests who were paying a minimum of five hundred dollars a night to stay in any of Preston's properties, disappointment wasn't an option.

To ensure perfection, Preston stopped at nothing to make it right. He was utterly ruthless, and everyone knew that he'd fire you in a heartbeat. In my short time working for him, he'd never taken a day off, never mentioned needing a break, or traveled away to spend time with his family. In fact, rumor had it that he didn't have a family at all.

He was a machine, and I was certain he never slept. (He was also an asshole, and I was *more* than certain that I wouldn't be his employee for too much longer.)

Ding. Ding. Ding!

The stress medicine reminder on my phone sounded, and I washed the pills down with water.

Scrolling through my texts, I sent my boyfriend Michael a quick message.

Me: Hey. I'm up thinking about you before work. Hope you'll still be able to help me look for a new apartment this weekend?

He answered me right away.

Michael: Oh, you're still alive? LOL Sure, babe. If your boss lets you have a life outside of your job this weekend, I'll be there. Are you coming to my Happy Hour tonight?

Me: I'll try, but I can't promise since my boss is hosting a shareholders meeting. Raincheck just in case?

Michael: Always. I'll email you something during your workday to make you forget all about him. (Looking forward to finally getting you alone again once you get off probation [raindrop emoji] [eggplant emoji] [raindrop emoji].)

I sent him kiss emojis in return and smiled. We hadn't spent more than a few hours together since I started this job, and although a part of me was upset about that, another part of me—one I couldn't explain—was perfectly fine with the new strain.

When I checked the time again, I felt my smile slowly slipping away.

And in three, two, one ...

My phone buzzed in my hand, and my inbox came to life for the sixty-first day of my new career.

Subject: Mr. Parker's Breakfast Order: Please Confirm Before Pickup

Subject: Meeting Request for Mr. Parker

Subject: Notes for Sarasota Meeting

Subject: Schedule Change—Jones Opening Moved to Monday

Subject: Cancellation Confirmation Needed: Private Flight to Rome Next Wed?

Subject: Mister New York Interview Request

I groaned and got off the bean bags, taking a quick shower and slipping into my favorite nude dress and a pair of red-soled heels.

"You know what I'm not going to miss about us living in this apartment?"

Ava sat up from her air mattress in the corner.

"What?"

“The fact that I can hear your every move, even when I’m sleeping.” She laughed. “Why do you insist on getting up so early every day? You don’t have to be at work until eight o’clock.”

“Because, Miss Lauren,” I said, mocking Preston’s voice, “the people who I’m not directly depending on don’t have to be at work until eight. My right-hand needs to be up as early as I am, and she always needs to beat me there to set an example. *Or else.*”

“Has he ever explained the ‘or else’ part?” she asked. “Because if it’s hot punishment sex, I think you should consider being late every day.”

I laughed. “I hope to never find out. I’ve officially decided that I’m only working for him for six months so I can have enough in the bank to stay steady until I find something less hectic.”

“You sure about that?”

“One hundred percent.” I grabbed my briefcase and hit the lights before walking out of our door.

When I made it outside, a town car was waiting for me as usual, and a driver was holding the back door open.

“Good morning, Taylor,” he said.

“It’s *Tara*. Like, I’ve told you and everyone in this company my name, and you all are still calling me Taylor. Is it that much harder to say or something?”

He didn’t answer me. He just held the door open and smiled.

I slid onto the backseat, answering five emails before we made it to the end of the block.

“Can you verbally confirm all the stops for this morning, Taylor?” the driver asked.

“Yes.” I didn’t bother correcting him this time. “We need to stop at Aldman’s for a pickup, Tom Ford for his suits, the pier to ensure his newest yacht was repositioned properly, Dean & DeLuca for his breakfast, and we’ll grab his coffee last.”

He nodded and passed me a small basket of chocolate before turning up his music and heading toward Aldman’s.

When we were halfway there, Preston’s name—*My Asshole Boss*, flashed across my screen. I debated whether I should answer it, whether I should figure out the “or else” part after all.

I gave in before it could go to voicemail.

“Good morning, Mr. Parker,” I answered, fake cheer in my voice. “How may I help you?”

“I’m calling to make sure that you’ll be arriving to work on time this morning since you were six minutes late yesterday.”

“I was only two minutes late.”

“You were still *late*,” he said, his voice deep. “Late enough that I wasn’t the only one who noticed. Seeing as though you’re my top aide, I can’t afford to have anyone thinking that you’re getting special privileges from me—that you’re getting on top of me, when it’s clear that your position is *under* me. I also don’t want you thinking that you’ll ever be able to come as you please without my permission, especially whenever the two of us begin to work on the Von Strum deal behind closed doors. Clear?”

I said nothing. I wasn’t sure why this man’s voice was capable of making me wet in a matter of seconds, why even in his moments of pure assholery, his words were constructed in a way that always made me think of sex.

“Are you there, Miss Lauren?” he asked. “Am I talking to myself?”

“No, Mr. Parker. I heard you loud and clear.”

“Good. Now, besides the fact that you’ll need to come on my time and not yours from now on, I’d like to make a change to my coffee order for today.”

“Are you planning to finally get it yourself?”

“Excuse me?” His voice was terse. “What did you just say?”

I coughed. “Nothing. There was something in my throat.”

“Hmmm,” he said. “I would prefer caramel cream from the Sweet Seasons Cafe today. And make sure my coffee is exactly one hundred and fifty-five degrees.”

Seriously? I rolled my eyes. “Noted. Is there anything else, sir?”

“Doesn’t sound like it.” He hung up in my face.

“Ughhhhh!”

“Something wrong, Taylor?” The driver looked at me through the rearview mirror. “Do I need to pull over?”

“No, keep dragging me toward hell, please.” I brushed off Preston’s rudeness and made it through my first few errands.

“I know why you’re calling, Mrs. Vaughn and I’m sorry,” I answered my phone the second it buzzed. “I’m not sure why his stylist is having problems dropping his suits off on time these days, but I’ll look into it as soon as I can.” I waited for her to say a few words and then I answered the incoming call from his personal trainer. Then his lawyer. Then his pilot. Then his goddamn yacht cleaner. (Why this man needed *eight* yachts, I’d never know.)

“It’s seven thirty-five, Miss Lauren,” the driver said. “Are we still stopping at the Sweet Seasons Café?”

“No. We’re stopping at McDonald’s.”

He nodded and pulled over at the McDonald’s right up the street.

I opened my purse and pulled out an empty cup I'd stolen from Sweet Seasons Café. I'd made this a part of my routine for the past week and a half since that shop was five blocks out of the way and completely ridiculous.

For fifteen dollars *an ounce*, the baristas brewed Colombian specialty beans, and they made each cup one by one. They refused to take online orders, and even though Preston had been a loyal customer for years, they refused to have his coffee waiting and ready in advance. They claimed that the "experience" of getting the coffee made fresh was what justified their price, and they didn't want to dilute their brand.

They also asked their customers what temperature they wanted their coffee served—as if someone could honestly tell the difference between one hundred forty and one hundred fifty degrees.

It all tastes the same ...

"I'll have a large regular coffee, please," I said, taking my place at the McDonald's counter. "Can I have that with caramel, and can I have it in this cup?"

"Of course."

With ten minutes to spare, I made it to his office and set up his desk the way he liked it.

Coffee on the right, folder full of printed articles and reports on the left, current hardback book in the center.

I made sure his "short-list"—a comprehensive summary of every email he needed to address and his current schedule for the day, was written neatly. I even added a few notes and suggestions of my own.

"The boss has entered the building, people!" Someone in the hallway shouted. "He's in the lobby!"

I knocked his folder onto the floor.

Shit.

Quickly picking everything up, I tried my best to place the files as they were. As I was slipping the financial reports back into place, I noticed an old picture of Preston standing with another Preston in a black cap and gown.

Behind that picture was another one with a double dose of Preston. This time they were wearing blue jeans and standing in front of a billboard in Times Square. Everything about the men was identical, down to their stunning green eyes with flecks of grey.

He has a twin?

"The boss is now on the elevator!" Someone else shouted.

With seconds to spare, I made it to my office and slipped into a pair of flats under my desk.

Moments later, Preston stepped off the elevator wearing a dark grey Tom Ford suit that put every man who'd ever worn a suit to shame. His silver cufflinks shone against the bright hallway lights, and his receptionist's cheeks turned bright pink at the very sight of him.

He walked by my open door, said "Miss Lauren," and nothing more.

He shut his door, and I waited for his usual email to make sure I was in the clear.

My email pinged minutes later.



SUBJECT: MY SHORT LIST.

Miss Lauren,

I've read this morning's edition, but it took me longer than necessary because you misspelled "variety," "residuals," and "inconsequential." You also wrote your own notes (which I didn't ask for) and gave me your opinion on certain meetings—which I don't need.

I thought your profile said that you have a minor in English?

I'm tempted to call and ask Princeton if they have a return policy.

Preston Parker

CEO Parker International



BITING MY TONGUE, I pulled up my file titled "New Jobs to Apply to" and filled out two applications for nearby law firms before tackling more messages in my inbox. As I was declining an interview for *Mister New York*, Preston stepped into my office.

"Miss Lauren," he said, his expression unreadable. "Can I speak to you in my office for a minute?"

"You're actually *asking* and not demanding?" The words rushed out of my mouth before I could think them through.

"Now, Miss Lauren." He motioned for me to get up.

I followed him into his office, and he shut the door behind us. He waited for me to take a seat in front of his desk, and then he leaned back in his chair.

He stared at me for several seconds, looking as intense as he did in my fantasies last night, and then he began to speak.

"I used to pride myself on hiring good people, Miss Lauren," he said.

"People I could trust not to steal or betray me. Now, given how our relationship started, I can't honestly say that I thought you'd never steal from me again, but I was hoping that I'd never face your betrayal."

WHAT? “Mr. Parker, I can assure you that I haven’t betrayed you in any way. I’m very open and honest about every meeting I’ve taken, and I’ve been nothing but honest since day one.”

He held up his hand, silencing me. Then, as if he hadn’t heard a word I said, he continued. “Given the fact that you’ve lasted longer than my last ten assistants—”

“*Twenty.*” I corrected him.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve lasted longer than your last *twenty* assistants.”

A slow smile spread across his face and he picked up his coffee, taking a long sip.

“Okay,” he said. “My last *twenty* assistants. Given the fact that you’ve lasted longer than those, I thought that maybe we could begin a solid foundation of trust, that maybe this was a sign that you were ready to start working with me on more serious matters. However, for the past week and a half, it’s come to my attention that you’ve been betraying me every single morning.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “I don’t appreciate traitors in my company, Miss Lauren, and I tend to fire them on the spot within seconds of me finding out about their betrayal—no matter how trivial the offense is.”

Silence.

My face paled. I had no idea what the hell he was talking about, and terrible boss or not, I couldn’t afford to lose this job right now.

“I told you that I wanted Colombian Coffee from the Sweet Seasons Café on Park Avenue,” he said, finally. “Is that not what I asked you for?”

What the fuck? “Yes.”

“Interesting. Well, what’s unique about Sweet Seasons Café is that they place a solid chocolate drop at the bottom of every cup.” He picked up his cup of coffee and poured it into an empty glass. “And it always sticks to the bottom when you’re finished drinking it.” He turned the empty cup toward me, and I swallowed.

“No other coffee shop in this city does that, Miss Lauren. It’s kind of a trademark, a subtle wink to their loyal customers who are willing to spend fifteen dollars per ounce. It’s how I know when I’m drinking their blend or when my new assistant is filling up one of their cups with bullshit.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“As you can see,” he said, not letting me finish my sentence, “Miss Lauren, if I can’t trust you to get me the right cup of coffee, I’m going to have a hard time trusting you with much else.” He set the cup down, and a smirk crossed his

lips. “Nonetheless, I’m a man of second chances, so I will give you exactly thirty minutes to get the correct coffee that I asked you for.”

“Okay.” I stood up, but he held up his hand—motioning for me to stay put.

“There’s one last thing, *Miss Lauren*,” he said, making me hate the way he said my name. The way he was able to turn me on despite his rudeness. “I’m not sure if you’ve thoroughly read your employee handbook, but tech support is required to flag and report all emails that are sent and received from any domains that belong to my competitors.” He paused. “Well, the domains that belong to people who *think* they’re my competitors. Are you familiar with the email address michael.elliott@marriott.com?”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s my boyfriend’s email address. He’s an intern at Marriott, and it’s only a temporary job for him. He’s not some type of corporate spy.”

“Hmmm,” he said, looking me up and down. “Well, now that I know he’s not attempting to get any insider secrets from you, I’ll consider having tech support turn off the alert. That said, allow me to give you and your boyfriend some advice.” He picked up a sheet of paper and walked closer to me, making my heart race faster with every step. “I think you should watch what you send on my company server, because certain emails are *far* from appropriate.”

“I’ve only called you an ‘impossible asshole’ once in my emails.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” He glared at me, and then he looked at the paper. “*Subject: Let me make it better. (Yes, I’m Talking About Fucking.)*”

I gasped, hoping like hell a sinkhole would open up in the floor and swallow me right now.

“Then there’s a huge problem with the message itself,” Preston continued reading, smiling as he did it. “Tara, babe, don’t worry about your *terrible-ass boss*. I’m more than willing to help you de-stress whenever you get a break. I want to plug your vagina with my cock and lick it all over for as long as it takes to make you forget about your job. Just say the word. Are you feeling kind of—” He paused, raising his eyebrow. “Water emoji. Water emoji. Water emoji.”

My cheeks were on fire.

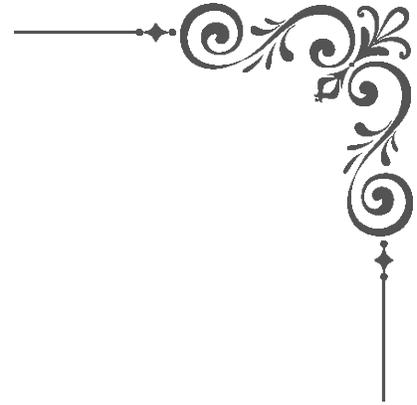
Preston set the paper down and closed the gap between us—looking directly into my eyes. “Inappropriate work email aside,” he said, “you need to tell your boyfriend to work on his vocabulary. If he’s really so concerned about helping you de-stress whenever you’re free from your *terrible-ass boss*, then he should just say, I want you to sit on my face so I can eat your pussy until you come in my mouth, until the only thing you’re able to think about is how good my tongue feels when it’s sucking on your dripping wet clit. And the next time you get a break, you should invite me into your office so I can bend you over the desk and

let your pussy feel just how hard my cock gets whenever I'm thinking about you."

He stepped back, still keeping his eyes on mine. "Then maybe, if he said those things, he wouldn't have to *ask* if you were wet. He'd know, and perhaps, since he's clearly corny as fuck, he'd say umbrella emoji, umbrella emoji, umbrella emoji ..."

My panties were wetter than they'd ever been.

"Now," he said, snapping back into asshole mode. "Go get me the right coffee."



SIX (B)

Tara



LATER THAT EVENING, at six o'clock to be exact, I paced in front of my office windows, waiting on Preston's suits to arrive. Today marked the fourth time in a week that they were late, and no matter how nice I tried to say, "Please be on time next week, " his stylist never made it to the office a second before seven.

I pulled my phone from my drawer and sent Michael a text message.

Me: Definite raincheck on Happy Hour since he's making everyone work late and I'm still waiting on suits. Also, I may need a raincheck for apartment hunting, too. (I have to fly to Cali for a meeting with him.) Can you help me next weekend instead?

Michael: Of course, babe.

I started to ask him how his day was, but Cynthia stepped into my office and slammed the door shut.

"May I help you with something, Cynthia?"

"I want you to know that Mr. Parker was going to pick me to be his executive assistant before you." She crossed her arms. "He said I was more than qualified, and he was looking forward to taking me on all of his business trips."

"Would you like me to ask him if you can still go on those trips?" *I'll happily let you take my place ...*

"No, I would like you to know that I am rooting for you to fail." She looked dead ass serious. "You've lasted two months, which is pretty impressive when it comes to his assistants, but this streak won't last. It won't last at all."

"Do your eyes normally bulge out of your skull like that?" I asked, terrified of the way she looked right now. "You may want to get that checked out."

“My eyeballs are just fine, and they can see that you’re a three and a half-monther at best, *Taylor*. I’ve started a new employee pool with a bet on how long you’ll last and no one has you getting past month three.” Her eyes bulged out even further. “We don’t usually invite the Taylors to join us on things like this, but for you, I’m willing to make an exception. You want three, four, five, or six more weeks? Most people are betting on four. And a few risk takers—not me, are putting their money on six.”

Before I could tell her to get the hell out of my office, Preston opened the door and stepped inside.

“Miss Lauren, why aren’t my—” He paused, looking at Cynthia, then at me. “Why aren’t my evening short list and coffee on my desk?”

“I don’t know.” I forced a smile. “I definitely put them there half an hour ago.”

“You couldn’t have,” Cynthia said. “They weren’t on his desk when I delivered his memos minutes ago. Maybe you’re *imagining* that you did it.”

This bitch. “You’re right, Cynthia. Maybe I’m just imagining that I delivered his short list and coffee.”

“Well, I’m not paying you to play make believe, Miss Lauren,” Preston slowly looked me up and down, turning me on against my will. “I would like the shortlist on my desk within the next half hour, and I would like my suits to stop being late every week. No other assistant has had these delivery issues as much as you.” He left the room.

Cynthia headed to my door right after him, coughing. “Three months max.”

I quickly rewrote the short list and made sure I placed it in Preston’s hand before leaving his office. I wasn’t completely sure, but I thought I felt him staring at my ass as I walked out.

I overheard Cynthia laughing as I returned to my office, and an idea suddenly hit me. Cynthia and the stylist were best friends. I’d seen them laughing over lunch on several occasions, and they always glared at me whenever I walked by.

No wonder his suits are always late. They're trying to sabotage me.

Livid, I pulled up my job description and called George to make sure I was interpreting the “chief of staff” clause correctly. When he assured me that I was, I took the elevator to the lobby and waited for her to arrive with this week's wardrobe.

“Good evening, Miss Lauren.” She smiled at me as she rolled the rack inside at exactly seven o’clock. “I was telling the driver that it’s been great to finally have a consistent EA around here. I was also telling him how it’s unfortunate all

the designers and tailors are so late these days, you know? Must be a red-carpet season.”

“Save it,” I said. “Save all of your bullshit for someone who will believe it.”

“What?” Her eyes went wide.

“Don’t play dumb.” I rested my hand on the rack. “Do you know that as Mr. Parker’s executive assistant, that I have the power to hire and fire his auxiliary staff without asking for his input? That *you* are a part of that auxiliary staff?”

“No.” Her face went white. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“Well, now you know. Nonetheless, since I'm not petty like you, and I'm not allowed to fire your best friend upstairs, I'm going to do you a favor.” I glared at her. “I'm going to give you another chance. From here on out, you’re going to deliver his suits in the morning, not the evening. You're going to allow me to look them over and approve them so we can see him in something other than Tom Ford all the time since you strike me as the type of person who probably has a payoff with a clerk at that store.”

She looked away from me, confirming my theory.

“I thought so. As of today, you're going to be the best stylist and runner he's ever had because you're not going to make his executive assistant, who is *levels* above you, look bad anymore. Are we clear?”

She nodded.

“I need you to say it.”

“I won't make you look bad anymore.”

“Thank you.” I reorganized the suits on the racks, moving the ones I liked best to the front. “I heard about the employee betting pool, so how much longer do you think I’ll last?”

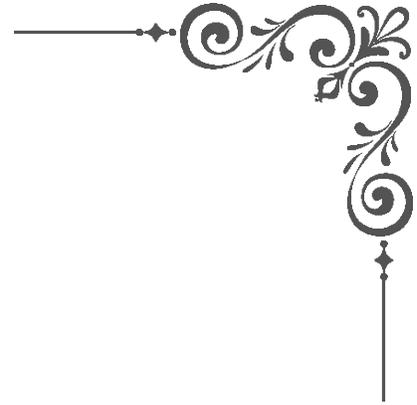
She looked down and shook her head. “I'd rather not say.”

“Why not?” I asked. “If you're bold enough to attempt to sabotage me, you can at least tell me how long you think I’ll last here.”

“One more month. Three months tops.”



SIX MONTHS LATER ...



SEVEN

Preston



HIRING TARA LAUREN is officially the worst thing I've ever done.

“Hiring Tara Lauren is officially the best thing you've ever done, Preston.” George passed me a binder. “At least, she was, and I really appreciated her while she lasted.”

“Um hmmm.” I flipped through a report and pretended to read.

I hadn't been able to get my daily work completed up to my standards since Tara started working for me. Everything about her was a distraction, and I'd lost count of how many times I'd envisioned her bent over my desk with her ass up, begging me to fuck her deeper.

The hardest working executive assistant I'd ever hired, she was good at her job, and with each passing day, she became even better. Despite her lack of hotel experience, she'd caught up in no time. As opposed to my other assistants who simply waited for me to tell them what to do, she was always ten steps ahead of me. She studied all the tiers of my hotel brand to the letter, and she could recite the mantras and amenities better than some of the people who'd been working for me for years. She was even changing the culture for my top staff—firing and hiring people who she thought would help me best.

Still, there were three things about her that drove me absolutely insane. One, she had a smart-ass mouth, and unfortunately, the sarcasm that dripped from her seductive lips only made me want her more. Two, she couldn't whisper worth a damn. At least she *acted* like she couldn't whenever she was muttering about how much she hated me under her breath. How much she thought I was an “asshole.” Three, she had a tendency to refrain from wearing panties under some of her dresses, and I couldn't help but notice every time. On those days, I insisted

she come into my office every half hour for small tasks so I could get a front seat view.

“Her hiring came at a pretty good time, too.” George’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “Her performance gives me hope that we’ll be able to really nail someone who’ll last nine months or even a year next time. She really was good.”

“I’m sorry, *what?*” I looked up at him. “Why are you saying that she ‘was’ a good hire? As in past tense?”

“Because I just got a call from The Greenwich Firm—you know, the place where most of your previous executive assistants end up going. He asked me if I could give her a good reference before she came in for a final interview today.”

“And what did you say?” I clenched my jaw, livid that she’d gone on a job interview behind my back.

“Well, I told him I’d have to call him back since I was heading up here with you, but I’m pretty certain that it’ll be a great reference. Unless I’m missing something?”

“You are missing something,” I said. “Miss Lauren has a non-compete clause in her contract.” *In addition to some other clauses I’ve added...*

“So? Your other assistants did, too. It was never a problem when they wanted to leave.”

“Well, it is now, so don’t give her a reference. Ever. If they ask you why you can’t give one, have them call me.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” I said. “I think it’s time that we start implementing all the terms in our employee contracts. We need to set the tone and make sure people aren’t using this as some type of launching pad for another job from now on.”

He shut his folder. “Do you want me to tell her that she’s wasting her time by going on all these interviews, then?”

“How many has she had?”

“At least five that I know of, so far.”

What the fuck? “Five, George?”

He shrugged. “I get what you’re saying about the new enforcement, but maybe she didn’t read the fine print of her contract.”

“The non-compete clause isn’t in the fine print,” I said. “It’s on the second page in bold black ink, along with a lot of other basic terms. I’m sure she read it.”

“Her interview is at three o’clock, Preston.” He looked at his watch. “It wouldn’t kill you to tell her that she doesn’t need to go across town for it.”

“She never told *me* she had an interview, so actually it would kill me.”

He rolled his eyes and stood up. “Thank you for reminding me how petty you can be.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“I’ll be back in an hour with the Von Strum files,” he said. “It’ll take us all night to go over them, so I’m going to get some lunch.”

He left the room, and I immediately sent Tara an email.



SUBJECT: NEW MEETING Today

Miss Lauren,

I will be going over the Von Strum files with George at three o’clock today. This is the most important deal I’m about to pursue, and you’re *required* to help.

Preston Parker

CEO & Owner of Parker International

Her response didn’t come back immediately like normal.

I refreshed my inbox seconds later. No answer.

I waited a full five minutes and scrolled down to her name in my phone.

Before I could hit call, she walked into my office wearing an olive colored dress that perfectly hugged her curves with a pair of nude colored heels that made me envision her wrapping her legs around my waist.

She’s definitely not wearing panties today ...

“I’m finished with everything on today’s short list,” she said, placing a folder on my desk. “I’ve added some things I think you should say during our first meeting with the Von Strum family. Two of those words are *thank you*. I’m also preparing to set up your upcoming travel notices to your closest friends and family, but I can’t seem to find a list.”

“That’s because I don’t have any family members to update.”

“No one?”

“*No one.*”

“Okay, then ...” She looked as if she wanted to say something more, but she held back. “I also finished reading over the proposed amenities list for the new Harrison Hotel and gave you my thoughts. Is there anything else you need me to do before I take a late lunch?”

“I sent you an email.”

“I didn’t open it.”

“Now would be a good time to do so, *Miss Lauren.*”

“I think later would be better, *Mr. Parker,*” she said, mocking me. “Is there anything else, except that, that you need me to do?”

“I would like some more coffee.”

“I’ve already sent someone out for that.”

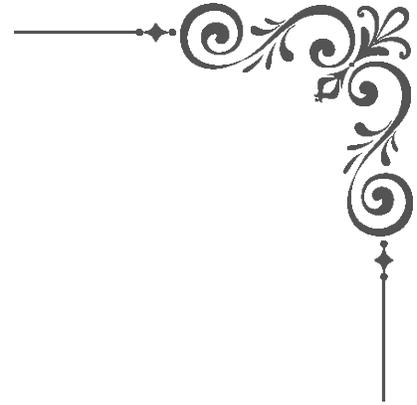
“I would like my schedule updated to reflect all of next week’s meetings with Sonoma. I want it color coded.”

“I did that this morning. Anything else you’d like?”

I would like you to cancel that goddamn interview.

“No.” I tapped my fingers against the desk, thinking of all the ways I was going to handle this shit over the next few weeks. “Have a great *late lunch*.”

She smiled and headed to the door. “I will.”



EIGHT

Tara

A few days later...



“MISS? MISS, YOUR COFFEE is ready.” The Sweet Seasons barista made me look up from my phone.

“Thank you.” I grabbed it and took a sip. Then I shook my head and gave it back. “This is one hundred and twenty degrees at best. I need it to be one hundred and fifty-five. Oh, and I can barely taste the caramel in that, can you add a bit more?”

“I’ll remake it right away,” she said. “Are you still buying the coffee for everyone who is currently in the store like you’ve done all month?”

“*Absolutely.*” I handed her Preston’s credit card. I waited until she remade his cup, and then I ordered a fresh cup of my own before getting back into my town car.

I was shocked to have an empty errand list this morning, and I was arriving to work an entire hour early so I could nap at my desk. I wasn’t sure why I ever thought that this job would get any easier to handle, why I thought I would ever get used to this man’s demands, but I was clearly wrong.

Last night, Preston called me at midnight to nitpick my report for over an hour, and although I was pissed at his intrusion on my personal time, I’d shamelessly held my vibrator against my clit the entire time he spoke. Even though I was currently using him as a muse for sex every night (since he’d ruined my social life), that was the only positive thing I could say about him. Well, that, and the meaner he was, the more jobs I applied to during my breaks.

Why haven't I gotten a single job offer from any of my final interviews yet? It's not adding up ...

"We're here, Miss Lauren," the driver said, opening the back door for me. "Do you need me to do anything for you?"

"Can you take this coffee up to Mr. Parker's office, please?" I handed it to him. "Set it on the glass warming tray we bought him yesterday. Make sure it's set at his favorite temperature."

"Of course." He laughed.

I made it upstairs to my floor and stopped dead in my tracks.

"Michael?" I spotted my boyfriend sitting behind Cynthia's desk. "Michael, is that you?"

"Long time, no see huh?"

"Not exactly. I called you the other night."

"At three in the morning, Tara." He shook his head. "Have you not noticed our new relationship pattern over the past few months, or are you okay with how it's going?"

"I have noticed."

"Oh, really?" He crossed his arms. "So, why don't you find it strange that I have to come to your job extra early, just to catch a glimpse of you?"

I wasn't sure what to say. "I'm sorry."

He didn't respond to that. He just looked me up and down—admiring my fitted black and grey dress, then he looked around the lobby.

"I stopped by your new apartment before coming here. It's one hell of an upgrade from where you were before, you know?" He smiled. "What's the monthly rent on that place? Five thousand?"

"Nine thousand, but I'm only paying four. I get a huge discount because of my boss."

"Yeah well, speaking of your boss, can we—"

My cell phone sounded, and as if I was on alert, I answered the call before he could finish his sentence.

"This is Tara Lauren of Parker International speaking," I said.

"Miss Lauren, this is Daniella. We have Mr. Parker's suits ready for a nine o'clock pickup as you requested. As you know, I'm only coming in that early for this reason, so will your representative be on time?"

"Yes, she will be."

"She better be." She ended the call, and before I could put my phone away, it rang again.

"This is Tara Lauren of Parker International speaking," I answered.

“Miss Lauren, this is Raymond Oliver with Buvette. I apologize for calling you so early, but I saw that you recently changed Mr. Parker’s breakfast order. I wanted to make sure that it was correct before asking the chef to make it.”

“It’s correct,” I said. “One almond croissant with butter, two crepes, and whatever egg dish was featured in *GQ* last week. He wants to try it, but don’t overdo it on the pepper. His doctor doesn’t want him to have too much of that.”

“As you wish, Miss Lauren. I’ll have it to his office soon.”

I ended the call and stared at the screen, waiting for the next call that always came in like clockwork.

The second the time changed, Preston’s town car driver called my phone.

“Good morning, Simon.”

“Good morning, Miss Lauren,” he said. “I’m calling to let you know I’ll be arriving at Mr. Parker’s door in five minutes, as he wants to arrive to work early today. Is there any urgent news I need to report?”

“Not at this time, Simon. Thank you for calling.” I ended the call and returned my attention to Michael. He was pacing the floor, letting out long sighs every few seconds.

“I’m really sorry about that,” I said. “What were you saying?”

“I was saying that I don’t think this is going to work out.” His words were cut and dry. “I can’t take this shit anymore.”

“*What?* What are you talking about?”

“We haven’t fucked since you got this job, Tara. Every time we sit down to dinner or something as simple as lunch, your boss—or someone connected to your goddamn boss calls and you drop everything and start running.”

“I do not drop everything and start running,” I said. “I’m just trying to make the most of this opportunity and save up as much money as I can. You know I don’t plan to work for him forever.”

“You said you were quitting last month when you worked one hundred and twenty hours in a single week. And let’s not forget about five days ago when he called you at two in the morning to read him a damn email, as if he was blind and couldn’t read it himself.”

That was the first time I used my vibrator against his voice ...

“You also claimed that you were done last week when he made you stay at work until three in the morning, asking you to rewrite the same report twenty times.”

“Look. I know my boss can be difficult.”

“No, your boss is not *difficult*, Tara. He’s an asshole. I know it, you know it, everyone in fucking New York knows it.”

“Okay, fine. He’s an asshole. I think you’re being unfair about this, though. It’s not like I haven’t been trying to get another job. No one has called me back despite all the interviews, so it doesn’t make sense to quit until I have something else set up.”

“With your salary, I think you have more than enough money in the bank to find something within the next three months, Tara.” He looked into my eyes. “I don’t mean to be blunt or give you an ultimatum, but I have no choice. It’s your boss or me.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” he said, stepping closer. “Your boss or me. Choose.”

Before I could give him an answer, my phone sounded with Preston’s signature ringtone.

“Can you hold that thought for one second?” I asked, stepping into my office to take the call privately. “Hello?”

“Is there any reason why the Dawson files weren’t delivered to my condo this morning?” Preston asked, his voice deep.

“It’s because there were too many typos, so I asked them to redo it. You’ll have it this afternoon.”

“What about your notes on the Anderson presentation?”

“I printed it last night, and it’s with Simon. I figured you’d want to read them on your way to work since you have eight newspaper articles to get through.”

“Hmmm.” He hung up in my face, as usual, without saying anything else.

If there was anything that infuriated me about him the most, it was the fact that he never said thank you, never even implied that he was grateful for my work.

My phone vibrated with an email from him seconds later.



SUBJECT: YOUR ANDERSON Presentation Notes

Hopefully, this version of your notes will have the proper spelling of “annuities.” Otherwise, I’ll need you to redo it, preferably with spellcheck. (You do know that all the computers in my company have this feature, correct?)

Preston Parker

CEO & Owner of Parker International



UGH!

I tossed my phone across the room and returned to the lobby to finish talking to Michael, but he was long gone. The only thing that remained was a post-it

note he'd left on top of Cynthia's desk.

*We're over.
Go fuck your boss.
—Michael*

Several hours later, I sent Michael another string of text messages—asking if we could talk things out or at least be friends, but he didn't respond. I decided to message him on Facebook, but when I logged in, I noticed that he'd changed his relationship status. It wasn't to "single," though. He was now in a relationship with someone else.

What?

I waited for my heart to ache, but it didn't. The only emotions I felt were anger with a slight side of relief.

Checking the time, I decided to skip today's mandatory executive meeting and go for a post-breakup drink with Ava instead. I made my way to the elevator and hit the down button.

When the doors opened, I saw Mr. Parker and one of his financial advisors talking. Stepping onto the car, I hit the G button.

"I believe you're mistaken, Miss Lauren," Preston said, "This afternoon's meeting is on the T level."

"I'm well aware of where it is, Mr. Parker." I turned to face him and shrugged. "I don't feel like going."

"It's not *optional*."

"In that case, I'll have someone set a tape recorder in my chair. Better yet, since *you* feel like going there, can you do it for me?"

He clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes at me.

"Um, I think I forgot something ..." His advisor hit a random floor button and rushed off once the doors opened.

The second they shut, Preston hit the emergency stop button the elevator jolted to a sudden and jerky stop. Then he stepped closer to me. "Do I need to help you understand your job description, Miss Lauren?"

"Yes." I glared at him. "Please help me find the clause where it says I have to put up with the boss's assholery twenty-four seven."

"I believe that falls under clause five."

I rolled my eyes and tried to push the S button so the elevator could move again, but he blocked me.

"I haven't received any flagged emails from your boyfriend lately," he said. "Is it because he's spending some much-needed time working on his vocabulary?"

"No, it's because he *dumped me*. He thought I was spending way too much time with my overly demanding boss."

"Oh?" He closed the gap between us, locking his green eyes on mine. "Well, in that case, your overly demanding boss is quite sorry for your loss."

"No, he isn't."

“He definitely isn’t,” he said, smirking. “He is, however, quite upset that his assistant thinks she can talk to him any type of way in front of his executive staff.”

“Maybe if he stopped treating her any type of way, she’d consider changing.”

“I don’t appreciate my employees making me look bad.”

“You do most of that yourself.”

“Don’t interrupt me.” He hissed. “I wasn’t done talking.”

“You never are.”

Silence.

He stared at me for several seconds—looking as if he was torn between firing or fucking me. And before I could manage a half-hearted apology, his lips crashed against mine, and he pushed me against the button panel.

His tongue slid against mine, demanding me to let him lead and I willingly submitted to his tempo.

Holding back a moan, I wrapped my arms around his neck as he kissed me even harder.

“Wrap your leg around my waist,” he whispered harshly. “Now.”

I couldn’t. I was too lost in the feel of his mouth against mine. Too stunned by how long and deep he was stretching our kiss. I shut my eyes instead, feeling the buttons from the panel press into my back.

Softly biting my bottom lip, he pushed my dress up and slipped a hand between my thighs. He stalled when his hands found the lace trim of my panties, and he let out a low laugh before yanking them off in one pull.

He swirled his thumb against my soaking wet clit, and my eyes fluttered open.

“Ahhh ...” A moan escaped my lips, and my nails dug into his skin. My clit began to throb with pleasure.

Still kissing me deeply, he slid his fingers deep inside of me, making me moan even louder.

“So goddamn wet.” He groaned, pushing his fingers in and out of me in a slow, sensuous rhythm that made my knees weak.

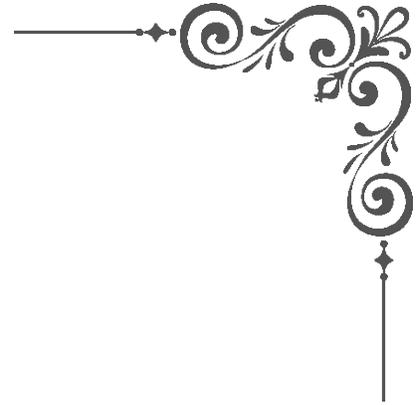
“Tell me you haven’t thought about fucking me since you started here ...” he whispered against my lips.

“I haven’t.” I lied and arched my back, feeling the elevator move again. As if he didn’t care, he continued kissing and controlling me, owning my body in a way I’d never felt before.

The elevator came to a sudden stop, and we immediately tore away from one another.

I pulled my dress down, and he stuffed my panties into his pocket before the doors opened on the meeting floor.

“Like I was saying,” he said, stepping off first. “This meeting isn’t optional.”



NINE

Preston



I NEED TO FIGURE OUT a better way to handle this ...

After getting a taste of Tara's mouth in the elevator and feeling how tight her pussy felt against my fingers, I knew that wouldn't be enough. We needed to take things further, and we needed to do it soon, since thoughts of her were infiltrating every moment of my day.

Her breathy moans were all I could think about during yesterday's meeting, and last night, all I'd done was envision her on all fours, taking every inch of my cock until she begged me to let her come.

Shaking away those thoughts, I looked at today's short list and read through her handwritten notes. I sipped my coffee and highlighted the parts I needed more details about, and as I was sending her an email, she stepped into my office, looking stunning as usual.

"Yes, Miss Lauren?"

"The Von Strums just called," she said. "They would like you to know that due to your ruthlessness, you are the last person on earth that they want to sell their hotel chain to."

"Seeing as though I'm the last person who's interested in buying it, you can tell them that I find their logic quite accurate."

A slight smile crossed her lips, but she didn't let it stay. She tapped her phone's screen a few times and looked at me again. "George won't be able to attend your expansion meeting in London next month."

"What about Wilder?"

"He's getting married to his third cousin, twice removed." She stepped closer and swiped the extra pepper packets from my breakfast plate. Then she motioned

for me to switch my tie. “I sent him a gift on your behalf.”

“I’m not the type of man who would send another man a gift. I’d send a bottle of champagne at most.”

“I did send champagne.”

“Did you pick a good year?”

“I picked a *great* year.”

“1996?”

“1995.” She set a folder on my desk. “Here’s the free breakfast report from the budget hotel chains that you claim you don’t want to read.”

“I don’t.” I took it from her. “Which budget chain is number one this month?”

“The W Hotels, *again*.”

“Interesting.” I shook away a memory from my past before it could play. “Anything else?”

“Yes, I would like to discuss what happened in the elevator yesterday.”

“What about it?”

“I was faking it.”

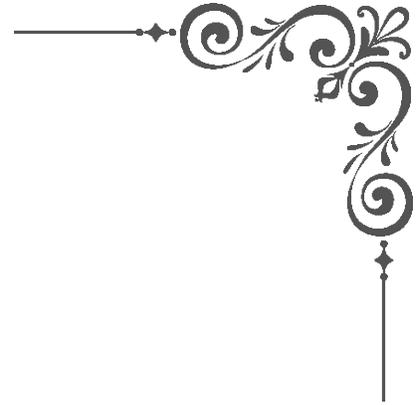
“*Come again?*” I leaned forward.

“I want you to know that I was thinking about someone else the entire time.” She shrugged. “And I’d like for us to keep our relationship—or lack thereof, one hundred percent professional so I can keep my personal life separate.”

I blinked, completely stunned by her bullshit. “Just so I’m hearing this correctly,” I said, looking right into her eyes, “your mind was elsewhere while my fingers were deep in your pussy yesterday?”

“Yes, Mr. Parker.” She was lying like hell. “Would you like me to do anything else for you this afternoon?”

“Yes, Miss Lauren.” I leaned back in my chair, seething. “There’s *plenty* I’d like you to do this afternoon ...”



TEN

Tara



“I WOULD ASK HOW YOUR day was, but I can see the answer written all over your face.” Ava signaled for the bartender later that night. “Can my friend have a few shots of your hardest vodka?”

“Thank you.” I shook my head, silently cursing myself for lying to Preston about faking it in the elevator. For even bringing it up in the first place, all while knowing he was petty as hell and would retaliate by asking me to do a lot of “emergency” work.

I knew he didn’t really need twenty copies of the same report every hour, nor did he need me to reconstruct his in-office wardrobe closet. He definitely didn’t need his desk files re-organized, but since I’d done it, I’d found a hidden panel with more pictures of him and his twin brother. There were a few time stamped letters between them, but the most recent one was from more than ten years ago.

I was going to confront him about it, but that was before he insisted that I stay an extra four hours and help him with a speech that he wasn’t due to give for another six months. It was also before he asked me to help him pick out the perfect set of cufflinks from his collection of over five hundred pairs.

As angry as he made me, as much as I wanted to thrash his neck with a pen during certain meetings, I couldn’t deny the effect he had on my body whenever we were in the same room. Hell, whenever we were on the phone.

From the way he looked at me when we were alone—like he was undressing me layer by layer, to the way he said my name, I was always aroused. I couldn’t even begin to explain the effect his sexy smile had on me, but I didn’t think I could ever bring myself to cross the line.

“Earth to Tara. Earth to Tara!” Ava set two shots in front of me, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Dare I ask what you’re thinking about?”

“Quitting.”

“That’s a given.” She laughed. “What else are you thinking about?”

“How my boss is forcing me to fly to London with him at the end of this month.”

“Really? Wow, that sounds amazing!” She cleared her throat. “I mean, Oh no! Not London! How dare he take you there on his private luxury jet!”

“I’m serious, Ava.” I tossed back both shots. “He takes up all my time. I haven’t had sex since I started this job because I don’t have time to sleep, let alone meet anyone.”

“Oh, please! That’s not an excuse for not having sex. You don’t need to meet anyone these days for that.”

“Huh?”

“Just use Tinder.” She pulled out her phone. “Download and swipe right when you find someone you like. Make sure they’re close by—like ten miles or less, and then offer to grab a drink the same day. It’s like having access to unlimited booty calls, and it’s perfect for people like you who have unrelenting jobs.”

“You use this?”

“Of course.” She picked up my phone and downloaded the app for me. “From now on, you can run a few errands for your boss, get laid, and get right back to work. No problem.”

“Even if the guy I want to fuck *is* my boss?”

“*What?* What did you just say?”

“I said, I’d like to try Tinder tonight. Right now.”



HALF AN HOUR LATER, I was sitting across the table from a Wall Street guy—in utter awe of how technology had completely changed the dating game. Well, the sex game anyway.

“So, what is it that you do again?” he asked. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

“I’m the executive assistant to a CEO.”

“Ah.” He smiled. “And you’ve been at that for half a year?”

I nodded.

“I take it that you must love your job, then?”

“No, I love the money. I have a terrible-ass boss who thinks he owns every hour of my day, but I’m quitting soon,” I said, not wanting to spend too much time on that conversation. This guy was no Preston—at all, but he was attractive

enough, and I needed to release all the arousal Preston made me feel into some actual sex.

My vibrator collection was far too used to me using Preston Parker's face for late-night inspiration, and I wanted to give them a much-deserved break.

"Tell me you haven't thought about fucking me since you started here ..."

"What is it that you do?" I asked.

"I'm a junior intern at Wells Fargo." He leaned forward, smiling. "I hate my job, too, so I'll be switching soon. You want to get out of here?"

"Absolutely."

As I stood up, I felt my phone buzzing in my pocket. An email from Preston.

Subject: Emergency. I Need Your Help

At midnight? I was tempted to open it, but I didn't. I knew it wasn't a real emergency, so I decided to deal with it after the sex.

Minutes later, when we made it to the sidewalk, my phone buzzed once more. Preston.

Subject: I know you saw my last email...

I turned off my phone and looked at the guy, not even remembering his name. "My place or yours?"

"I live eight blocks away."

"I'm only two," I said, leading the way.

He filled our short trek with small talk, but I was only halfway paying attention. The only thing I could think about was Preston's lips on mine, the feel of his hands drifting between my thighs.

"I'm really looking forward to this," Stranger Guy said, running his fingers through my hair as I scanned my keycard at the front entrance.

"Me, too." I smiled and pushed the door open, walking him over to the elevator bank.

We stepped inside, and I hit the button for my floor. I thought he would start kissing me as soon as the doors closed, but he didn't. He only smiled, and with every floor we passed, images of Preston controlling my mouth and slipping his fingers deep inside of me crossed my mind.

"Your mind was elsewhere while my fingers were deep in your pussy yesterday?"

When the car stopped, I took off my jacket and led him down the hall. "You want some wine before we get started? I have some chilled Moscato or some—" I sucked in a breath when I saw the man who'd been ruining my life and my fantasies leaning against my wall in one of his impeccable grey suits.

What the hell is he doing here?

Smirking, Preston moved away from the wall and walked over to me. “You know, I think I need to write someone else down as my emergency contact if you’re going to blow me off for—” He looked at Stranger Guy and rolled his eyes. “Whatever this is.”

“You said you were single,” Stranger Guy said. “I don’t do ex-boyfriend drama.”

“She is single,” Preston said. “Very much so.”

“Then who are you?”

“I’m her terrible-ass boss who thinks he owns every hour of her day.” He smiled. “Surely, she’s mentioned me?”

“She has. In those exact words, actually.”

“Hmmm,” Preston said, ignoring the fact that I was glaring at him. “Well, we have a work emergency situation that we need to discuss privately.”

“Oh, sure.” Stranger Guy shrugged. “Well, hit me up some other night then, Tara?” He leaned forward to kiss my cheek, but Preston pulled me away from him.

Stranger Guy blinked in confusion, trying to kiss my cheek again, but Preston pulled me away from him once more.

“Okay, then,” he said. “Goodnight, Tara, and her boss.”

“*Goodnight*,” we said in unison, making him look even more confused as he rushed back to the elevator.

The second he was out of sight, I pushed Preston away. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I was concerned for your well-being.” He smiled. “I sent two emails, three texts, and I called. You didn’t answer.”

“Because I was ignoring you!”

“Were you about to fuck him?”

“That’s none of your business.” I hissed, damn near hyperventilating. “My life after-hours is none of your business. And I—” I sneezed as the scent of my neighbor’s garlic dinner wafted through the hallway. “I don’t need you constantly calling and emailing me.” I sneezed again.

He pulled a handkerchief from his suit pocket and handed it to me.

“Thanks.” I snatched it from him and let out a breath. “What’s the emergency?”

“It’s quite a huge one.” He pulled a pair of cufflinks from his pocket. “I was hoping you could tell me if you thought these were shiny enough for my photoshoot with *GQ* this weekend, or if you thought I should have them polished before then.”

OH. MY. FUCKING. GOD! “Are you being serious right now?”

“Yes.” He smirked. “They need to look good in all the pictures. Don’t you think?”

“You just made me miss out on sex for *this*?”

“No, I made you miss out on a disappointment,” he said, stepping closer. “I wouldn’t want you to fuck someone while thinking about *someone else* the entire time. Besides—” He lowered his voice and whispered into my ear, “He strikes me as an intern, and we both know that’s not your type.”

He moved back and looked me over, pinning me to the spot with his heated gaze. “I’m not sure if I’ve ever told you, Miss Lauren, but I don’t appreciate being ignored.”

“Noted,” I said, hating that my panties were soaking wet. “I’m not sure if I’ve ever told you that I hate you—”

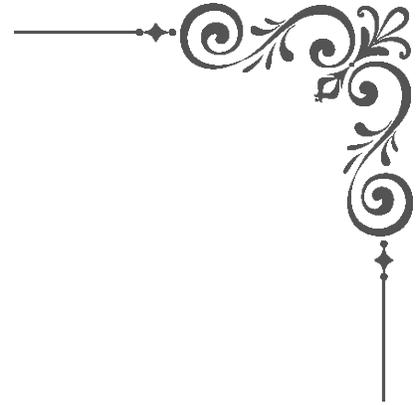
“You say it every day.” He smiled and started to walk away. Then he stopped and looked over his shoulder. “I’ll take my coffee with you on all fours tomorrow morning.”

“What did you just say?”

“You heard me.”



TWO FULL YEARS LATER ...



ELEVEN

Tara



SUBJECT: YOUR BIRTHDAY Party (Sorry I Won't Be There)

Hey Mariah!

I'm so sorry that I won't be able to attend your birthday party this weekend. I know it's the big 3-0, and me and Ava promised that we would both be there in Vegas with you, but I won't be able to make it.

I have to go with my boss to Belgium for a business trip.

Please send pictures!

Tara Lauren,

Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,

CEO of Parker International



SUBJECT: YOUR WEDDING (Can't Make It)

Hey Britney!

I know you traveled all the way to New York last month with your tailor to get me fitted for a bridesmaid dress, but I won't be able to be in your wedding next month.

Three people have quit at my office, and my boss is taking me to Spain for an emergency strategy meeting for a new hotel he's building there.

Please send pictures!

Tara Lauren,

Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,

CEO of Parker International



SUBJECT: YOUR GRADUATION Tomorrow (I'm SO Sorry!)

Hey Greg!

Thank you so much for inviting me to your graduation! I know that we've been friends since we were seven and you've done nothing but talk about getting your Ph.D. since we were in high school, so congratulations on finally reaching that milestone!

Unfortunately, I won't be able to make it, as I'm still in Seattle with my boss and we're getting slammed with new marketing work for a campaign. (If you get another Ph.D., I'll definitely be at that graduation...)

Please send pictures!

Tara Lauren,
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International



SUBJECT: YOUR BABY Shower (Can I Still Be the Godmother?)

Hey there, Elise!

Thank you so much for picking me to be the godmother of Baby Chase! I'm so excited for him to arrive this fall!

I know your baby shower is in four weeks, but I'm letting you know that I won't be able to make it. My boss has just booked three back-to-back international tours. (I'm sending tons of diapers and onesies, though!)

Tara Lauren,
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International



SUBJECT: WINNERS NEVER Quit (Excuse My Language)

Just curious, Mom...

Does your trademark phrase apply when someone is working for an asshole boss who is singlehandedly ruining her social life? Yes or no?

Tara Lauren,
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: WINNERS Never Quit (Excuse My Language)

Did you mean to send this to me instead of your mother?

Preston Parker,

CEO & Owner of Parker International



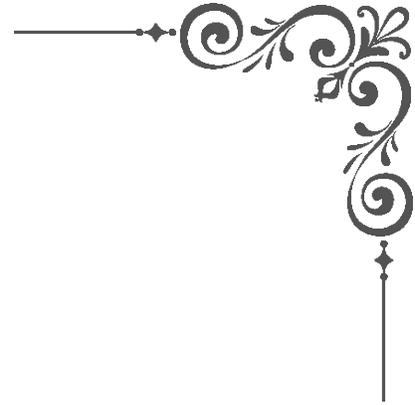
SUBJECT: RE: RE: WINNERS Never Quit (Excuse My Language)

YES.

Tara Lauren,

Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,

CEO of Parker International



TWELVE

Preston

Puerto Vallarta, Mexico



THERE HAD TO BE A WORD in the dictionary that was far stronger than “torture.” A word that perfectly captured how it felt to have the world at my fingertips, with the ability to get whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, except the one thing I wanted most. The one thing that was always right next to me, all day, every day.

Except when she’s purposely “running late” ...

Looking outside the windows of The Coast Bar, I watched rain pelt the white sands of the beach, wondering just how late Tara was going to be to our private lunch today. Annoyed, I picked up my phone to see if she’d sent me an email, and noticed an unread message.



SUBJECT: DON’T FORGET About Us

Dear Mr. Parker,

I want you to know that I still have plenty of space for you in my heart, just like I know you still have space for me in yours. I know there’s a certain someone who has become an obstacle for us lately with her changes in office protocol. (How dare she take away my walk-in privileges?!), but I’m still here for you *whenever* you need me.

I miss you, and I know you miss me.

Cynthia Avery

Executive Receptionist,

Parker International

PS—I sent you a new picture last night. Is my number still blocked? (You’ll be highly upset with yourself if you missed this one—**wink wink**)

Jesus Christ ...

I deleted her email and set down my phone. The last thing I wanted to do during an overseas business trip was deal with anyone back in New York. And while I’d never admit it, I loved that Tara had instituted new policies, so I hardly ever saw Cynthia or any of my auxiliary staff unless I specifically wanted to. She even moved all of the receptionists and secretaries to the floor below us, leaving the executive floor specifically for C-level executives.

She’d been more upset with me than usual lately, and she was giving me her twisted version of the silent treatment.

Ever since that night in her condo’s hallway over a year ago, she’d wedged some distance between us. She avoided being alone with me on elevators—getting off on the next floor the moment I stepped onto the car. She insisted on having interns on the floor with us whenever I asked her to stay late, and she answered every one of my late-night phone calls with an “I want you to know I’m recording every single word of this conversation for Human Resources, Mr. Parker.”

Unfortunately, none of those things quelled the tension between us. They only made it worse.

With every day that passed and every minute we spent together, my attraction to her became more unbearable. Everything from the shape of her mouth, to the curve of her hips was enough to make my cock hard whenever she entered a room, and I’d given up on trying to stop it.

Despite the fact that I’d never been so sexually frustrated in my life and my cold showers were now at a record four a day, I considered Tara to be the closest thing I had to a real friend. My *first* real friend. And on a professional level, I honestly felt like she was more like a partner in my company than an executive assistant.

“Mr. Parker?” A waiter stepped in front of me with a notepad. “Would you like me to get you an appetizer while you wait for your companion or would you like to order?”

I looked outside the window again, finding the beach completely empty. “I’ll go ahead and order.”

“Marvelous. What will you have this afternoon?”

“For myself, I’ll have the chef’s special with your best red wine.”

He nodded. “Excellent choice, sir. And your companion?”

“She’ll want to try your scallops, but ask the chef not to use any butter,” I said. “She’ll also want a small grilled chicken salad with balsamic vinaigrette and extra tomatoes. Also, for her allergies sake, could you make sure to leave out the garlic and chives?”

“As you wish, sir.” He was still scribbling. “Do you know what she’d like to drink?”

“Vodka.” I smiled. “Your strongest. Pour it in a wine glass with a strawberry garnish so no one else knows.”

“I’ll have that right out, sir.” He walked away, and I picked up my phone.

I scrolled to Tara’s name, hesitating to call her, because I already knew what she was going to say.

“Yes, I’m still recording every single word you say, and for the record, this business trip was totally last minute, so I’ll get to all the meetings when I feel like it. Right now, I don’t feel like it.”

I smiled at the thought, and just as I was pressing call, she walked into the restaurant wearing a stunning black and grey dress with towering red stilettos. She put away her umbrella at the door and shook hands with the manager.

As always, her raspy, sexy laugh drew looks from everyone who heard it, and the second she stepped onto the dining room floor, every man in her radius stopped and stared.

Shivering, she made her way to our table and I stood up, taking off my blazer and wrapping it around her shoulders.

I waited for her to sit down before returning to my seat. “Are you still giving me the silent treatment?”

“Depends. Are you going to apologize for insisting that I attend this private lunch and the executive meeting right after, when I specifically asked you if I could have today off?”

“I’m not sure it’s ever appropriate for a boss to apologize to his employee for asking her to do her job.”

“Figures.” She slipped her arms into my jacket and scowled, looking sexier than ever. “When will the executives be here?”

“They won’t be here at all. I pushed the meeting to tonight when I realized how late you were going to be.”

“How thoughtful of you. Next time I’ll make you wait for two hours instead of one.”

“We both know you’ll never do that.”

“Because I love my job so much?”

“Because you’re a workaholic just like I am,” I said. “You hate being idle in the daytime.”

“I hate working for *you* in the daytime.”

“Miss?” The waiter returned to the table before I could respond to that. “Is there anything else you’d like to add to your order?”

“Add?” She looked at me and rolled her eyes. “Can I please place my own order? I highly doubt my dining companion ordered anything I like, and I would hate to waste the chef’s time by sending it back.”

“Of course, Miss.” He pulled out his pad as she opened a menu. “What would you like to have this afternoon?”

“Hmmm.” She paused. “I want to try your scallops, but can you tell the chef not to use any butter with those? I’d also like to have the small grilled chicken salad with balsamic vinaigrette and extra tomatoes.”

He stopped writing, looking at me in confusion as Tara continued to talk.

“I have allergies,” she said. “So, can you ask the chef to leave the garlic and chives out of the salad?”

“As you wish.” The waiter nodded. “What would you like to drink with your meal?”

“Your strongest brand of vodka, please. But please pour it into a wine glass with a strawberry garnish, so no one else will know what it is.”

“I’ll be right back with that, Miss.” He stepped away from the table, and she glared at me.

“That’s exactly why I prefer to order my own food,” she said. “I’m very picky.”

“I had no idea. Anyway, would you like to finally act like an adult and help me with the meeting preparation? Where do you think we should start?”

She didn’t answer. She just pulled out her phone and tapped the screen.

Seconds later, my phone buzzed with an email.



SUBJECT: YOUR SUIT & Tie.

I’ve told you repeatedly that whenever you wear a navy-blue suit and tie, you come off far more condescending than you actually are. (Which is actually quite shocking.) You need to wear a grey suit and a pinstripe tie to tonight’s meeting.

Tara Lauren,
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International

“You’re sitting right across from me and you’d rather send emails than talk?” I asked.

My phone buzzed again.

SUBJECT: YOUR RHETORICAL Question.

YES.

Tara Lauren,
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International

SUBJECT: RE: YOUR RHETORICAL Question

I don't recall asking if you would finally let me fuck you, but if your answer to *that* "rhetorical question" is still the same ...

Preston Parker,
CEO & Owner of Parker International

"Okay, fine." She set her phone down as soon as she read my message. "We can go through all the meeting preparations after we eat."

"I thought so."

The waiter set down our food and drinks minutes later, and she immediately moved the pepper shaker away from my side of the table. I moved the bread basket away from hers.

"In the meantime," she said, "You need a date to the *Mister New York* awards gala at the end of next month. Would you like me to find you a plus-one?"

"I would like for you stop bullshitting and go with me."

"I've told you on numerous occasions that it's not appropriate for me to attend social events as your date. You're my boss."

"I've told you that doesn't matter and no one will dare to say a goddamn thing since I own the company."

"So, no plus one at all." She shrugged. "I'll make the RSVP for one. You should also know that *The New York Times* is going to print a fairly decent article with very unflattering headline about you next week."

"What's the headline?"

"*Soulless Hotelier Will Participate in DocuSeries.*"

I picked up my fork. "Do you think I'm soulless?"

"Yes."

"Is that my worst quality?"

"No," she said. "You're also quite evasive."

"How so?"

"Because I know for sure that you have a twin brother that you refuse to acknowledge for some reason," she said. "You don't acknowledge him in your

interviews or in any of your biographies. You don't even mention your parents, so it's going to be very interesting to see you in a documentary when you're never open about anything. Unless ... Are you planning to finally talk about your family?"

I held my fork in mid-air, clenching my jaw as I processed her words. "I'm afraid I don't have a family, *Miss Lauren*. I've told you that several times."

"I figured." She stuffed a bite of scallop into her mouth. "Anything else random you'd like to ask, then?"

"Are you dating someone new?"

"What?" She coughed.

"*Are you dating someone new?*" I repeated, trying to mask my envy.

"When do you honestly think I would have the time to date someone, Preston?"

"Perhaps during all the time we've been here, when you've spent your nights in my hotel's private lounge, whispering on the phone for hours instead of being in your room."

"Why were you stopping by my room in the middle of the night?"

"That's not the point," I said. "You weren't there. Is he another intern?"

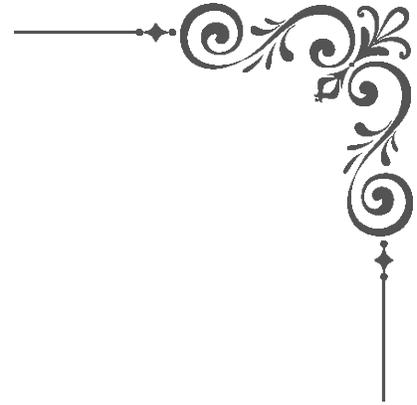
"No." She crossed her arms. "It's not a 'he' at all. It's my mother."

"Your mother is in Japan, and she hates talking on the phone."

"She does, but she's in the middle of another 'finding herself' exercise and she's required to talk to me for two hours about all of her hopes and dreams to better her 'aura' and personal spirits." She took a long sip of vodka. "She's also convinced herself that she needs to help me get rid of my negative aura, so we always end up talking for longer."

"Is she still telling you that winners never quit?"

"Every damn day ..."



THIRTEEN

Tara



BELGIUM, SWITZERLAND, China, London, France, Australia, Egypt, The Dominican Republic, Canada, Mexico ...

I flipped through the pages of my passport as Preston's private plane flew through the skies. Each sheet was stained with recent stamps from countries I hardly remembered seeing, each one a stark reminder of how drastic my life had changed within two years.

I rented an exclusive condo on Park Avenue that offered weekly rooftop dinners with the best chefs in the city and early access passes to Broadway shows. My wardrobe was full of designer clothes that I once dreamed of wearing, and I no longer had to steal anything to survive. (Well, I still took advantage of the free breakfast here or there.)

My salary was now double what it was when I started, and I'd earned multiple bonuses. Despite all those things, I still felt miserable as hell.

"Would you like a snack, Miss Lauren?" A flight attendant stepped in front of me. "Your favorite gluten-free trail mix, perhaps?"

I nodded. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome." She poured it into a glass bowl and handed me a bottle of water. Then she adjusted the pillow behind my head and whispered, "Mr. Parker wants to know if you would like to stop anywhere else before we land in New York."

"No, I just want to go home."

"Very well, Miss." She walked away, and I picked up my phone to send Ava an email.



SUBJECT: TRIP FROM Hell (Kind of)

I'm currently on the plane with Preston, so I can't call you, but I can't wait to get home and tell you all the shit he put me through this week. He gave me ONE off day, Ava. ONE! (And I don't even think it counts because he still called me at 2 a.m. for no reason. NO DAMN REASON!

Tara Lauren,
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International

SHE EMAILED ME RIGHT back.

SUBJECT: RE: TRIP FROM Hell (Kind of)

Wait. You're emailing me from a private plane after spending a week at the #1 Parker Hotel in the world, and you want to come home and *complain* about your life????

Ava Sanders
Bestie to Tara Lauren of Parker International
Currently Living My Best Life

SUBJECT: RE: TRIP FROM Hell (Kind of)

I'm honestly starting to feel like I don't have much of a "life" of my own at all...

Tara Lauren,
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International

SHAKING MY HEAD, I set my phone down and stared out the window until the familiar skyline of New York City came into view.

We landed amidst a slight rainfall, but before I could take my first breath of familiar city air, I overheard Preston talking to the pilot.

"We need to go to Paris," he said. "Now. Tell Heath to refuel the plane and then get us there ASAP."

"Yes, sir."

I unbuckled my seatbelt and moved to the front of the cabin. "Did I just hear you say that we're about to go to Paris?"

“Yes.” He looked completely unfazed by this, as if there was no need for him to ask me if this was okay. “There’s been an incident with the senior management at my hotel. We’ll need to be there for a week.”

“Can I at least go home first and get new clothes?”

“I’ll buy you whatever you need there.” He handed me a black card and I noticed my name was now printed under his as an authorized user.

“I just worked with you for two weeks straight in Mexico.”

“And now you’ll work with me for a week straight in France.”

“With all due respect,” I said, feeling an oncoming headache. “I need a break.”

“Then feel free to go to sleep.” He pointed to his private suite in the back. “It’s a nine-hour flight.”

“What if I have plans in New York this week?”

“Do you?”

I groaned and bit my lip. Of course, I didn’t. His plans *were* my plans. His life was my life, and I couldn’t even separate the two anymore.

“I thought so,” he said. “This week will give you more time to work on your mock presentation since you’ll soon be attending meetings on my behalf.”

The plane began to move forward, preparing for take-off and I made my way to the back. I started to slam the door, but Preston caught it and glared at me.

“Is there a problem, Miss Lauren?”

“*You*. You are my fucking problem.”

He had the audacity to smile, the audacity to step closer to me. “If you’re still this upset with me, I can think of a way we can fix it once and for all.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already thought of how I’m going to fix this once and for all the second we get home.”

He raised his eyebrow—looking confused, and before he could say a word, his town car driver stepped into the room.

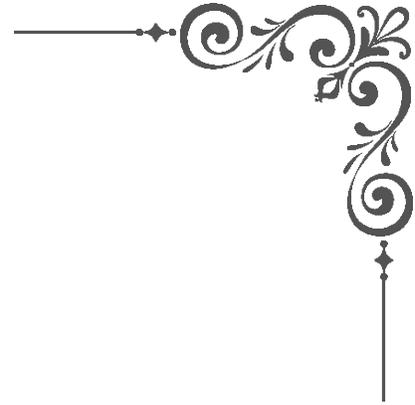
“Mr. Parker, the general manager of your Lexington Hotel is on the phone for you. He says it’s urgent.”

Preston sighed and looked at me. “Hold that thought.”

“*I won’t.*”

He left the room, and I promised myself that no matter what, the second we returned to New York, I was finally going to do what I should’ve done months ago.

I’m done with his ass ...



FOURTEEN

Tara

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I would like to thank you so much for being my asshole boss for the past two years. I truly appreciate all the shit you've put me through—especially all the late-night phone calls, never-ending meetings, unrelenting trips at the very last minute, and unnecessary tirades about the grammatical errors in my emails. (By the way, I never—*ever*, pointed out the fact you constantly used dangling participles or split infinitives in your sentences, but that's a story for another day.)

As of this moment, I'm officially done working with your condescending ass and I bet you'll wish you'll find someone **HALF** as good as me for your next assistant. (Yes, I'm aware my previous sentence is grammatically incorrect. Deal with it.)

GOODBYE.

Tara Lauren



THIS LETTER DOESN'T look like any of the templates.

Rereading the article on “How to Quit Your Job the Right Way,” I deleted my words and took a deep breath. Pouring myself a fourth glass of wine, I tried to think like a true professional and typed a second draft.



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I am writing this letter to formally announce my resignation from Parker International (and the arrogant, condescending CEO) effective two weeks from

today.

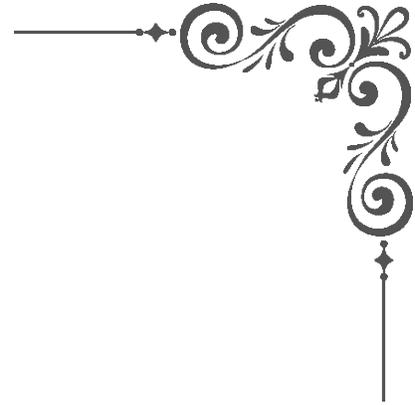
This was a VERY EASY decision to make, as the past two years have been utterly miserable. I wish his next executive assistant all the luck in the world (she'll need it) and if my boss should need me to do anything over the next two weeks, kindly tell him that he can do it [his] goddamn self ...

Sincerely (Not Really),

Tara Lauren



I STOPPED AND STARTED again, drinking glass after glass of wine, until the letter sounded completely professional. Until there wasn't a hint of malice or annoyance in my words. And when I was one hundred percent sure that it was perfect, I printed it on bright white vintage paper (He hated regular copy paper when it came to important letters), signed it in black ink, and braced myself to hand it in first thing Monday.



FIFTEEN

Tara



“TWO LARGE COLOMBIAN coffees with four flavor drops at exactly one hundred and fifty-five degrees?” The barista at Sweet Seasons called out my order Monday morning. “For a Miss Lauren?”

“That’s me,” I said, taking the drinks and heading to the town car. As I sat back in the seat, I shut my eyes and went over the words I’d committed to memory over the weekend, making sure they sounded as clear and concise as they did on paper.



DEAR PRESTON PARKER,

I would like to formally thank you for hiring me as your most recent executive assistant. I appreciate all I’ve learned while working at your company, and I’ve gained a new respect for the hard work that goes into making a hotel a home away from home for its guests. I also appreciate the fact that you’ve awarded me multiple bonuses for my work on the marketing campaigns, and that you took my advice on the Keiserman deal. I also appreciate the fact that you awarded me the Golden Room Key—the top employee award at Parker International after helping you finally land discussions with Von Strum.

All of those things said, this letter serves as my Two Weeks’ Notice.

As of August 3rd, I will no longer be an employee of Parker International and will no longer serve in any capacity as your executive assistant.

I wish you all the best in your search for another one, and I will do my best to help spearhead the process. I promise to give you my best work until my last day.

Thank you again for all of the opportunities, and I truly hope you'll be able to offer me a great reference in return for the excellent work I've done for you over the years.

Sincerely,

Tara Rose Lauren



I TOOK A DEEP BREATH and sighed. *It's perfect, Tara. Don't back down. Don't back down.*

When I made it to his office, he was already sitting behind his desk, and the new intern was unwrapping his breakfast.

“Good morning, Miss Lauren,” he said, smiling. “Was there a problem with your phone this weekend?”

Other than the fact that I temporarily blocked your number? “Maybe.” I shrugged. “I think I heard some people were *fed up* with the service they've been getting, so maybe they decided to cut it off.”

“I hadn't heard that.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Was there also a problem with your email address this weekend? I sent you a few emails.”

“Thirty is not a few.”

“So, you did receive them?”

“Yes.”

“Do you plan on answering them?”

“Yes, Mr. Parker.” I realized the intern was struggling to uncap a bottle of orange juice, so I took it and opened it for him. “I'll answer those emails when I get a chance.”

“When you get a chance ...” He repeated my words as if he was unsure what they meant. He looked as if he was about to say something rude as hell, but his phone rang and he answered it.

I immediately knew it was George by his tone, so as he redirected his attention to his desktop, I pulled my two weeks' notice from my purse and placed it under his bagels.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I left his office and locked the door to my own. I dropped my purse to the floor and looked around my office for what I hoped would be one of the last times.

I wonder if I should take all the bookshelves with me when I leave.

I took my time walking around my office, appreciating all the space I never truly had the time to use. From the chaise lounges and the flat screen television that hung in the far corner, to the private en-suite that housed a small bed for napping (Ha!) and a luxury Jacuzzi. I couldn't help but shake my head at the first

days when they were installed. When I thought I would actually get a chance to use them.

By the time I finally forced myself to sit at my desk and do some work, it was ten o'clock and a new email from Preston was at the top of my inbox.



SUBJECT: YOUR TWO WEEKS' Notice

I don't think so.
Preston Parker
CEO, Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: YOUR TWO Weeks' Notice

It's not really up for debate.
Tara Lauren
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: RE: YOUR Two Weeks' Notice

Then it's up for legal litigation and serious financial (and professional) consequences. Surely after working here for two years and knowing what my legal team is capable of, you don't want to put yourself through that.

Preston Parker
CEO, Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: RE: RE: Your Two Weeks' Notice

Are you threatening to sue me in order to prevent me from quitting?
Seriously?

Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: RE: RE: Re: Your Two Weeks' Notice

Quite the contrary, Miss Lauren. I highly suggest you read the fine print at the bottom of the contract that you signed upon your hiring. Also, read the secondary fine print regarding the acceptance of the bonus offers you've been awarded over the past two years.

When you're finished, please ask another intern to bring me the correct breakfast. (You know I hate American style omelets.)

Preston Parker

CEO, Parker International

[TaraLaurenemploymentcontract.pdf]

[conditionsofemployment.pdf]

[conditionsofbonusacceptance.pdf]



I ROLLED MY EYES AND sent the documents to my printer. I read them with a red pen in hand, underlining a few questionable clauses about travel and employee discounts, but there was nothing glaring about quitting.

The only thing remotely close was a non-compete clause regarding the “attempt to seek out other employment while still employed by Parker International without first notifying [the boss],” but I’d long given up getting another job while still working for him. After eight straight final interviews and eight straight rejections, I no longer had the time for false hopes in my life.

I reread the contracts one last time, sending them to Ava to see if she could catch something I couldn’t, but all she said in response was, “What the hell is he talking about? There’s NOTHING here! FUCK. HIM. (Not in the literal or sexual way. Like, in the mean, forget about him type of way.)”

I shook my head and sent Parker an email.



SUBJECT: THE FINE PRINT

I’ve read the contract several times over. There is no fine print regarding me leaving ...

Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: THE FINE Print

Come to my office, and I’ll show you that there definitely is.

Preston Parker
CEO, Parker International



I GRABBED ALL MY PRINTED papers and walked to his office, leaving the door wide open.

Dropping the sheets on his desk, I crossed my arms. “I don’t see any rules about me quitting anywhere.”

“It’s on the last page.”

I reached over him, inhaling the intoxicating scent of his cologne, and flipped to the last page. There was only one paragraph at the top and my signature at the very bottom of the page.

“You’re referring to the clause about me agreeing to all of the above rules?” I asked. “The above rules that make no mention of penalties for quitting?”

“No,” he said, smirking. “I’m referring to the five paragraphs right above your signature.”

My stare was as blank as the middle of this page was.

“Okay, look,” I said. “I’m not sure what type of mind game you’re trying to pull right now, but I’ve given you my two weeks’ notice, and I’m going to submit it to Human Resources once you comply with clause six and give me all the vacation time I’ve earned in dollars. I also want a written reference from you that I can take with me to any job interview I get in the future.”

He laughed and opened his drawer, pulling out a grey highlighter. “I don’t play mind games, Miss Lauren, and the next time you sign a contract, I’m sure you’ll take a long look at it first.”

He began pressing his highlighter against the blank section on the page, and words in fucking *white ink* began to appear. He took his time highlighting all five paragraphs, keeping that smack-able smirk on his face, and then he handed the paper to me.

“There,” he said. “Like I was saying, I highly advise you to read the fine print.”

My eyes caught sight of the words “indefinite employment term,” and I damn near screamed. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me about this before?”

“You never asked.”

I felt my blood boiling, felt my hand being seconds away from giving him the slap he deserved.

“Careful,” he said. “We both know that whenever you’re angry, you tend to say things you don’t mean.”

“I fucking hate you.” I seethed. “Truly fucking hate you.”

He smiled, completely unfazed.

“This can’t count ...” I still couldn’t believe this. “You printed the most damaging terms in unreadable, white ink.”

“And?” he said. “Legally speaking, that doesn’t excuse you from reading them, and as someone with a law degree, surely your professors taught you to be wary of too much white space in a contract for the sake of hidden clauses.”

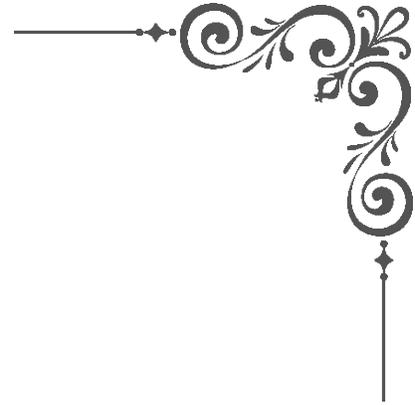
“So, you’re admitting that you purposely hid it?”

“I’m admitting that you should’ve read it.” He smiled. “Would you like to go over the Von Strum files now that you’re officially my partner on the project? This looks like it’ll be your most promising effort yet.”

I stood still, glaring at him.

“Then again,” he said, sounding somewhat sincere, even though I knew he wasn’t, “something tells me you need a break, so you’re free to go home and we can pick up tomorrow.”

I didn’t say a word in response. I stormed right out of his office, straight to the elevator, and went the hell home.



FIFTEEN (B)

Tara



“THERE IS NO WAY YOU can call yourself a lawyer after signing something like this.” Ava paced our floor as she read the highlighted sections of my contract later that afternoon. “Not to make you feel even worse, but I don’t know if I’d hire you if I got into trouble anymore.”

“He printed it in white ink, Ava. *White Fucking Ink!*” I picked up a pillow and screamed into it for the umpteenth time.

Ava ignored me and continued to read. “The employee is indebted to her employer for the full term of the contract which is a minimum of seven (7) years unless he/she should perish. The employee agrees that he/she will not submit a two weeks’ notice or any other notification regarding a self-requested termination without advance written approval from the employer. The previous clause is null and void if the employee is submitting the aforementioned notice within the final (seventh) year of employment.”

I tossed a glass across the room and uncorked my third bottle of wine for the night. I couldn’t imagine working for Preston for one more year, let alone seven.

“The employee agrees to discuss any issues with her employer as she is a C-level executive/employee and upon completing the first one hundred twenty days of employment (120 days) is no longer under the sole jurisdiction of the Human Resources Department.”

“Okay, stop. Can you help me fake my death?” I asked. “I think I can live on the run for a while.”

“No thanks.” She shook her head. “It says that for every bonus you’ve accepted, that adds an additional year to your contract. How many have you earned?”

At least twenty. “Oh god!” I brought a pillow up to my face again, screaming even louder. “Why is this happening to me?”

“It also says that if he dies, you’re out of your contract immediately, so you can always go the poison or allergy route. Is he allergic to anything?”

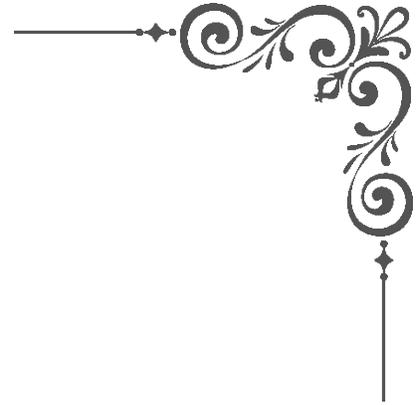
“Every level of human decency.”

She laughed. “Well, maybe try talking to him. You never know. He may just let you out of your contract just because you’ve been a great employee. I mean, outside of trying to get him to fire you, what other choice do you have?”

“Wait, what did you just say about getting fired?”

“The only other way you can get out of this thing is if he fires you for lackluster work and poor performance.”

I smiled. “I can definitely do that.”



SIXTEEN

Preston



I FELT BETRAYED AS hell.

For two goddamn years, I'd worked alongside this woman and I never thought I would see the day when she had the audacity to turn in a two weeks' notice. She was now my highest paid employee by far and her recent benefits were so over the top and beyond the scope of what any Fortune 500 CEO offered, that George made me submit to a quarterly psychiatric exam to make sure I knew "what the hell she was being offered access to."

I knew we had our heated arguments from time to time—that a lot of it was the result of pent-up tension she failed to acknowledge, but I refused to believe that I was as terrible a boss as she often made me out to be.

I also refused to believe that she couldn't see how much I'd given up for her. I hadn't fucked another woman since we met because no other woman compared. I spent more time with her than with the women I used to date, and I could honestly say that she knew me better than anyone else. I was pretty certain I knew her better than anyone else, too.

"Um, Preston?" George waved his hand in front of my face. "Preston?"

"Yes?"

"Are we going to talk about some business today, or are you going to continue mumbling to yourself?"

"We can talk about business. Go ahead."

"Great!" He cleared his throat. "So, as you know, Parker International wants to get into budget hotels for some strange reason that the CEO won't divulge, but he wants to start with the Von Strum chain."

“You don’t have to talk about me in the third person,” I said. “I’m right here.”

“Miss Lauren has always insisted that I talk to you in the third person when we’re about to pursue something new. It’s actually helped previously.”

“I don’t want to hear shit about *Miss Lauren* today.” I seethed. “Are we clear?”

He blinked, setting his paper down. “Please tell me you didn’t fire her. Please.”

I wouldn’t dare. “No, I’m just upset about something she’s done recently.”

“Oh!” He shrugged. “Well, I heard about how she berated our marketing team in Seattle, but that’s nothing to hold against her. She saved you a lot of money and tons of bad press. Now anyway, back to the Von Strum chain. It’s a three-star hotel chain that caters to families, road trip travelers, budget-conscious consumers, and—”

“Do you think I have a soul, George?” I interrupted him.

“Okay, that’s it. I think it’s time that I schedule you for another psychiatric evaluation.” He looked at his watch. “It’s been about three months since the last one, so would you like me to ask if the doctor can see you this evening?”

“Answer the question,” I said. “Do you think I’m soulless?”

“Depends. Is this conversation off the record?”

“Yes.”

“Well, with all due respect, Preston, I honestly think you’re an utter asshole.”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

“I thought we were off the record,” he said. “You are hands-down the most ruthless CEO I’ve ever worked for, and there have been plenty of times when I’ve thought you lacked a soul. Hell, I think the fact that you don’t have any family or friends in your life has worked to your benefit, but it’s also been a huge detriment in how you handle things sometimes.”

“Do you think I’m evasive?”

“You’re beyond evasive.” He laughed. “I’ve been working for you for eight years and I still have no idea who you are.” He laughed even harder and stood to his feet. “I’m going to get an energy drink, and when I get back, you’re going to be the all-business Mr. Parker that I admire. I’m not sure how to handle this other version of you.” He patted my shoulder as he left the room, and my mind immediately reverted to thoughts of Tara and that damn two weeks’ notice.

I thought about asking her how I could be less “soulless” or less “evasive,” if that would be enough to get her to be more comfortable staying. If I could tell her that I was willing to do whatever it took to get her to be okay with remaining here at Parker International.

Maybe we can talk this out like adults.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Parker.” Tara walked into my office, smiling. “Here’s your lunch.”

“The interns are responsible for bringing me lunch these days. You know that.”

“Oh, I know,” she said, setting down the tray. “But since today is such a great day, I wanted to *personally* handle it for you. I hope you enjoy everything, especially the mashed potatoes.”

“Why the fuck are they green?”

“They don’t look that green to me.”

“They’re the same color as the salad.”

“Maybe the chef put something in them, then.” She shrugged. “Here is the report on The W Hotels that you asked for earlier. I highlighted all the important parts, just as you asked.”

I looked down and saw that she’d highlighted “the” in every sentence.

“I’ve sent your cufflink and watch collection to a new jeweler to get them polished, but they seem to have lost a few of them.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “They’re willing to give you a free twenty-dollar cleaning credit if they don’t find them by the end of the day. I mean, the shop’s name is Best Pawn Deals & Cheap Jewelry Cleaning, so I think they’ll do just as good a job with your valuables as the guys at Audemars Piguet or Phillippe Patek.”

“I swear to God, if every single one of my watches and cufflinks isn’t accounted for by the end of the day—”

“You’ll fire me?” She smiled. “*Really?*”

“I’ll definitely—” I paused, suddenly seeing where she was going with this. “I’ll have to consider all of my options if that is the case, Miss Lauren.”

If you think I’m going to fire you over some shit I can afford a hundred times over, you have another think coming ...

“Good to know.” She picked up a fork and placed it right into the green mashed potatoes. “Is there anything else I can do for you today, Mr. Parker?”

I tapped my fingers atop my desk, temporarily distracted by her bright pink lips and form-fitting beige dress. “That’s all for now, Miss Lauren.”

“I’ll be patiently awaiting your next request.” She gave me a slow smile, one of the rare flavors I couldn’t quite read, and then she left the room.

The second the door shut, I picked up my phone and called Cynthia.

“Yes, Mr. Parker?”

“Can you kindly have one of the interns bring me some lunch? Preferably something without green mashed potatoes?”

“Um.”

“Um? By um do you mean ‘yes and right away’?”

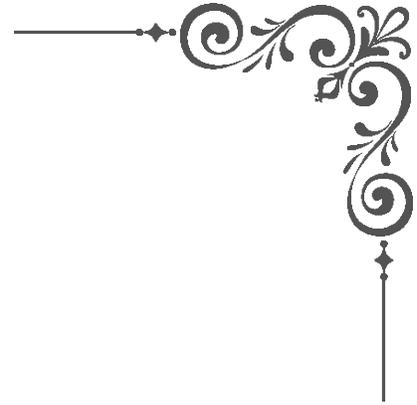
“No, sir. I meant that won’t be possible. Miss Lauren let all the interns have today and the rest of the week off. She said you wanted it that way so you could focus all of your energy on the Von Strum stuff.”

WHAT? “Oh, I see.” I felt my blood beginning to boil. “Well, when you get a chance, can you please pick up a new order for me from the cafe that I like?”

“Um, well.” She cleared her throat. “She let me off for two weeks, sir. I’m heading home to New Jersey right now. I guess I forgot to unlink my cell phone from my desk phone.”

I ended the call.

Okay, Miss Lauren. Two can play this goddamn game ...



SEVENTEEN

Tara



I SLEPT IN FOR THE first time in two years.

Rolling over in bed, I looked at the clock and saw that it was only nine o'clock. I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and noticed that my text inbox was full and my unread emails totaled three hundred and seven. Out of habit, I was tempted to start answering them all, to call my town car driver and ask that he immediately rush me to work so I could salvage the rest of the day, but I turned off my phone instead.

If Preston didn't fire me over five "lost" Audemars Piguet watches, then he would definitely fire me for not showing up to one of his most important strategy meetings of the year. I set my alarm for noon and rolled back over, falling asleep.



LATER THAT AFTERNOON, I took a walk through Central Park before calling my driver and asking him to pick me up at a florist stand.

"Is everything alright, Miss Lauren?" He jumped out of the car and opened the back door for me. "Everyone at the office thought something had happened to you and I couldn't reach you on your cell phone."

"Everything's perfectly fine. I just decided to take the day off."

"The day off?" He looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language. "Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

"Absolutely." I laughed and slipped onto the backseat. "I'm sure."

As he drove, I turned on my phone and saw that my email inbox was now over five hundred messages, and the first page of messages were all from Preston.

Subject: You're an hour late.

Subject: The Von Strum prep meeting is today.

Subject: Why am I still missing five watches?

Subject: Now, you're two hours late ...

Shrugging, I turned it off again.

“Can we stop at Sweet Seasons for coffee first?” I asked.

“Of course.” His eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. “Good thinking, Miss Lauren. Mr. Parker is always more understanding when he has some coffee in his hand.”

This coffee isn't for him, it's for me.

I used Preston's black card at the shop, treating every customer inside to a free cup on his behalf, and then I bought ten of their eighty-dollar gift bags for no reason.

When I arrived at the office, the main receptionist stood up from her desk.

“Miss Lauren?”

“Yes?”

She walked over to me, her eyes wide. “Miss Lauren, are you aware that you're wearing sweatpants and a tank top? You know how Mr. Parker is about the dress code here. Would you like me to call your contact at Nordstrom's and see if she can rush over a suit?”

“No, that's okay. I'm sure Mr. Parker won't mind me looking like this today.”

She swallowed and stepped back, looking as if she was the one wearing sweats instead of me.

I gave her one last smile and walked over to the elevator bank, noticing the silent stares of everyone in the lobby. I held back a laugh and hit the button for the top floor.

Stepping off the car seconds later, I swiped my card against the access panel and made my way to my side of the floor.

“Good morning, George.” I spotted him sitting in the hallway. “Is it going well so far?”

“*Good morning*, Miss Lauren?” He looked at his watch. “It's four o'clock in the afternoon.”

“Oh, I didn't notice. Well, I hope you got a lot of work done today, then.”

“I probably would've gotten a lot more done if you were here.” He looked at my outfit and shook his head. “Mr. Parker wants to see you. I suggest you change clothes first.”

“No, thanks.” I smiled and headed to Preston's office.

When I stepped inside, I saw that he was standing by his windows—wearing the dark grey suit and silver chromed tie I loved him in the most. He was running his hands through his freshly cut hair, and for a split second, I almost forgot why I hated him so much.

“George said you wanted to see me?” I asked, and he immediately turned around—instantly turning me on the second his eyes met mine. “I’m so sorry that I’m four hours late to today’s meeting.” I rushed the words out before he could respond. “Did I miss anything important?”

“Not at all, Miss Lauren.” He eyed my outfit and stepped closer to me, and that smirk I was all too familiar with crossed his lips. “When I realized you weren’t going to arrive at your usual time, I told everyone we’ll start whenever you get here.”

“Then maybe I shouldn’t have shown up at all.”

“Maybe.” He closed the gap between us. “But like I’ve told you previously, you’re incapable of being idle in the daytime.”

“That’s probably the only thing you know about me.”

“I also know that you’ve never been fucked properly,” he said. “But that’s a story for a different day.” He kept his eyes on mine and pulled his phone out of his pocket, holding it up to his ear. “Mrs. Vaughn, Miss Lauren has finally decided to arrive, and she’s wearing exactly what I expected. So, can you kindly come upstairs with the wardrobe I ordered this morning so she can pick something more appropriate to wear for our rescheduled meeting?”

I felt my jaw unhinging and bit my lip to keep my mouth shut.

“I appreciate your assistance in this matter, Miss Vaughn.” He ended the call and returned the phone to his pocket. “You can take as much time as you need getting ready, Miss Lauren. Thanks to you, no B-level or C-level employee is allowed to leave this building until this meeting is finished, so it’s up to you whether people get to go home and enjoy the rest of their day, or whether they get to be a part of some game you’re attempting to play with your far-more skilled boss.”

Son of a bitch ...

I stood there, glaring at him—hating that my nipples were hardening under my tank top.

“Would you like some help getting dressed?” he asked, looking down and noticing my body’s reaction to him. He gently tugged the strap of my tank top. “I’m not opposed to helping you take this off at all.”

Shamefully wet, I stepped back and stormed out of the room.

He’d won this round, hands down. But I would definitely win the next.



THE NEXT MORNING, I leaned back in my office chair—hitting ignore on my phone each time Preston called me.

After ten straight rejections, he walked into my office and narrowed his eyes at me.

“May I help you with something, *Preston*?”

“*Preston*?” He raised his eyebrow.

“Oh, that’s right. Am I supposed to call you ‘Mr. Parker’ if we’re in the office?”

“I would prefer that since no other executive employees are allowed to do otherwise.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll try to remember that for next time, *Preston*.” I shrugged. “How may I help you this morning?”

“It’s the goddamn afternoon.”

“Is it?” I smiled and turned around in my chair, looking up at the clock. “It is two o’clock, isn’t it? Wow, time is really flying these days.”

“*Miss Lauren ...*”

“Yes?” I spun around to face him again. “You were saying you needed me to do something?”

“For starters, since you’ve given the interns unauthorized time off and you were beyond late again, you can go to Sweet Seasons and get me some afternoon coffee.”

“I don’t think so. You don’t need Sweet Seasons coffee anymore,” I said, standing up and walking over to my beverage cabinet. “I have something even better and faster for you.” I rolled out the mini Keurig I never got the chance to use, and I could literally feel him losing his shit as I plugged it into the wall.

“This takes like two minutes to heat up, and the coffee is usually ready seconds after that,” I said, opening a package of cheap Colombian-lite coffee pods. “And I know how particular you are about the chocolate drop that Sweet Seasons places at the bottom of every cup, so ...” I unwrapped a Hershey’s kiss and dropped it into a paper cup. “*There.*”

I placed the cup on the brewing plate and hit start. “Now, that you’re seconds away from enjoying some ‘just like’ Colombian coffee, what else do you need me to do for you?”

The vein in his neck swelled, but he kept his expression stoic. “*After* you go to Sweet Seasons and get me the coffee I prefer, the next thing you’re going to do—”

“I haven’t agreed to the first thing.”

“I know damn well that you’re going to do so.” He glared at me. “The next thing you’re going to do is bring me the report on the top ten budget hotels that you’ve been working on for the past four months so we can go over the calculations.”

“I stopped working on that a while ago,” I said. “But I’d be happy to send you the ten percent that I completed. I’m sure you can complete the other ninety percent on your own. You are the CEO of this company after all. It wouldn’t kill you to get your hands dirty for a few days.”

He sucked in a slow breath, looking as if he was about to give me the “You’re fucking fired” I rightfully deserved, but he didn’t. Instead, he stepped back and smiled.

I waited for him to get the last word, to hit me with one of his final lines, but it never came.

“Enjoy the rest of your day, Miss Lauren,” he said. “It was good to get your insight on these matters.” He left my office without another word, without looking back and smirking. Nothing.

Confused, I rushed over to my desk and flipped through my “Ways to Make Him Fire Me” notes. The coffee was the most egregious thing on the list, and not completing my work was a close second.

This wasn’t his typical behavior, and I wasn’t quite sure how to make my next move at all.

I waited two hours before printing out my report (I really did work hard on it), but I wasn’t going out to get his coffee. I made my way to his office and found him sitting behind his desk, sipping from a Sweet Seasons cup.

He looked up as soon as I was halfway across his floor. “I was just about to call and give you the good news, Miss Lauren.”

“Am I finally being fired?”

“I said good news, not things that will never happen.” He took another sip from his cup. “I just got off the phone with the CEO of Sweet Seasons. I was telling her how much I enjoy their coffee, and how a certain employee of mine has somehow purchased over *six figures* of it over the past two years.”

“You can afford it ...”

“Yes, I can definitely afford it. Can’t I?” He smiled. “So, that’s why I’ve just talked them into their first licensing deal, and they’re going to build their first office café here in my building.”

I shook my head.

“They were so impressed with the amount I offered,” he said, continuing, “that they’re going to operate a mini stand for a few hours a day starting tomorrow until the official store construction is complete.” He narrowed his eyes

at me. “So, that way, you can simply go downstairs to get my coffee when I ask for it, and I won’t have to deal with you blaming your lateness on coffee runs and traffic anymore.”

I bit my lip to prevent myself from screaming and considered walking out of his office.

“Anyway,” he said, taking another dramatic sip of that damn coffee. “May I help you with something?”

“Unfortunately. Here’s my report that you wanted.” I held it out for him, but he didn’t make a move to take it.

“I already have your report.” He smiled, picking up a stack of sheets. “It doesn’t look like you stopped working on this at all. In fact, you seem to have updated it as recently as last night. I’m quite impressed with some of the changes. It’s even color-coded the way I like.”

“How did you get my report, Mr. Parker?”

“*Mr. Parker?*” He looked me up and down. “I’m back to being your boss now?”

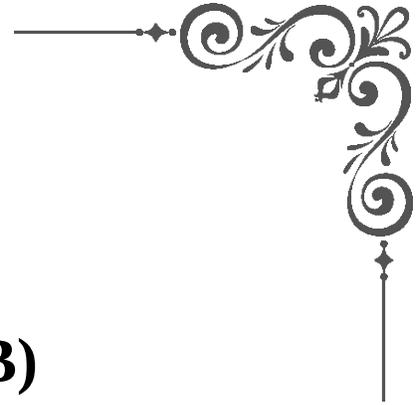
“How did you get my damn report?”

“You left it on your cloud, on the company server that I own, so I logged in.”

“You called the tech department to hack into my account?” I crossed my arms. “And you honestly wonder why I want to quit?”

“No, I was *planning* to call the tech department to hack into your account, but I guessed your password right on my first attempt.” He smirked. “I personally thought you would come up with something far more creative than *FuckMyBoss*, but if that’s a fantasy you’d like me to finally help you fulfill, I’m more than happy to bend you over my desk right now.”

I ignored the wetness between my thighs and walked away, slamming his door on my way out.



SEVENTEEN (B)

Tara

Two weeks later



THIS ASSHOLE REALLY isn't going to fire me or let me out of this contract.

I slumped in my office chair, shaking my head at my completed list of ways to get Preston to fire me. No matter what I attempted to do, he wouldn't allow himself to get too angry, and he was always ten steps ahead of me in the end. He also had the audacity to look sexier than sin with each passing day, and although I wanted to deny it, the sexual tension between us was now so thick and palpable, that I was sure that everyone in the office could feel it.

To make matters worse, now that Sweet Seasons was operating in the basement, every employee I ran into couldn't help but stop and tell me how "thankful" they were for me suggesting the idea to Mr. Parker. I wanted to correct them, to say to them it was a twisted play on his behalf, but part of the licensing agreement called for every cup to have the words *Courtesy of Tara Lauren, EA to Preston Parker* printed on its side. There was no point in attempting to explain it to anyone.

I picked up my notes for my mock presentation and groaned. A part of me wanted to skip it and go home, but another part of me actually wanted to help him close the deal he'd been chasing since we met.

I'll get there when I feel like it...

I looked at my employee contract for the umpteenth time, rereading all the lines I'd missed over the years, hoping for some type of loophole.

"There are no loopholes." The deep sound of Preston's voice made me look up. "If you're going to do most of the talking in our London meeting this

weekend, I would suggest heading upstairs for your mock presentation.”

I looked down at my contract again, finishing a paragraph before standing to my feet. “You know, if I was a CEO and I had an employee who hated me, I would just let her go.”

“Miss Lauren, if I did that I wouldn’t have any employees left.”

“You’re not going to ask me why I want to quit after all this time? You’re not interested in my reasoning?”

“You *can’t* quit, so your reasoning is irrelevant.”

“You’ve never said the words ‘thank you’ to me once.” I stepped closer to him. “Not one goddamn time.”

“Neither have you.”

“What?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “You think I should be thanking you? For what?”

“For not pressing charges against you for all the breakfasts you stole, for neglecting to file credit fraud for all the free coffee you’ve covered for people at Sweet Seasons behind my back.” He narrowed his eyes at me, too. “For hiring you when you had no real hotel experience. I had a file cabinet full of qualified applicants.”

“That you’d probably already ran through because you’re an asshole boss.”

“I’m not done listing all the things I’ve done for you.”

“You honestly think there’s more?”

“You have the highest salary, the most benefits—”

“The most headaches, the worst insomnia, the highest stress level.” I gritted my teeth. “So, yes, you’re right. Thank you. Thank you so much.” I rolled my eyes and walked away from him, ignoring his calls for me to come back. I headed straight for the conference room, ready to get this mock presentation over with so I could at least enjoy tonight in my own bed before being confined to yet another unwanted business trip with him.

I took my place at the front of the full twenty-person boardroom table, waiting for Preston to arrive, ignoring the fact that his face was red.

I was more than prepared for his rude behavior since mock presentations were always brutal. No one spoke except the presenter and him, and his feedback was often beyond harsh.

“Good morning, everyone.” I started speaking the second he sat down. “My name is Tara Lauren, and I’m very happy to be here. I’m the executive assistant to Mr. Parker and the lead project manager for these potential negotiations.”

“I think you should just lead with being the project manager.” Preston interrupted me, his glare glacial. “Seeing as though you’re not actually happy to be here, and you just told me that you’re not happy as my executive assistant.”

“With all due respect Mr. Parker, that’s not what I said.”

“That’s what you *wrote*.”

I clenched my fists at my sides and cleared my throat.

Don’t let him get to you. Don’t let him get to you.

“Good morning, everyone.” I gave a fake smile. “My name is Tara Lauren, and I’m the project manager for these potential negotiations. I’m honored to be here.”

“If you were honored, then you wouldn’t be trying to leave,” Preston mumbled under his breath.

“I would like to start my presentation by telling you, Mr. Von Strum and company, why you should consider selling your company to us.” I clicked a remote, and the screen behind me lit up with my Power-Point presentation. “Even though our brands are different, I feel as though we’ve come up with a great solution to handling the blend.” I changed the slide. “So, first, I’d like to discuss our differences.”

“We’re already well aware of *our differences*, Miss Lauren.” Preston leaned back in his chair. “How about you start with your solutions to finally fixing them?”

“I’m not sure our differences can ever be fixed.”

“Excuse me?”

I took a long sip of my water. “My apologies.” I clicked to the next slide. “I’d like to start with the employee integration.”

“No, start with the financial integration.”

I resisted the urge to scream and clicked through to that part of the presentation. “Financial Integration. We’ve put together a team of accountants from an independent firm to oversee our plans, and once that’s complete—”

“It’s already complete, Miss Lauren.” He looked angrier than I’d ever seen him before. “Which is why you’re giving this presentation. Although at the rate you’re going, we may need to hire an actress to play your part.”

“I think that’s more than fine, as long as we can hire someone who knows how to shut the fuck up to play yours.”

A collective gasp filled the room, and someone dropped a glass to the floor, shattering it against a sudden silence.

Preston blinked, then he leaned forward in his chair. “What did you say to me, Miss Lauren?” His voice was terse.

I said nothing. I was in utter disbelief that I’d said those words aloud. In front of everyone.

“I need everyone except for Miss Lauren to leave the room.” He glared at me. “*Now*.”

Everyone made a beeline for the exit doors, forcing papers and glasses to wobble in their wake.

I stood rooted to my spot, feeling the weight of Preston's gaze as he rose to his feet. He strode over to the door and locked it, and then he slowly stepped closer to me.

"What did you say to me?" He took the papers from my hand and set them on the table. "I need you to repeat it."

I swallowed. "I don't recall stuttering."

He raised his eyebrow. "For your sake, it would be much better if you did."

"Seeing as though I can't quit and you clearly won't fire me, I don't see how." I stepped back, and he stepped forward, and within seconds I was up against the wall. "I think the only thing you're upset about is me being rude to you in front of your executive team."

"I'm upset about a lot of things," he said, clenching his jaw. "And I'm not going to tolerate them anymore."

"Then accept my two weeks' notice."

"Miss Lauren," he said, speaking slowly and ignoring my comment. "I'm going to give you one last chance to redo this presentation today, and when I do —"

"I'll say the same thing, in the same way, if you interrupt me again."

"I *am* going to interrupt you again, especially if you come off like the ungrateful assistant I haven't been more than generous with for two years. An ungrateful assistant who hates her job so much, yet she keeps showing up every day."

"She's legally bound to do so."

"She's not *personally* bound to do so."

Before I could get another word out, his lips crashed into mine, and my arms went around his neck. He slid his hands around my thighs and lifted me up, carrying me to the conference table. My ass hit the cold surface when he set me down, and he kept his lips attached to mine.

Our kiss was wild and frantic, passionate and reckless. As his hand slid up my dress, I slowly unfastened his tie. I tried to unbutton his shirt next, but he pushed me down against the table, so my back was pressed against the glass, so he was standing between my legs.

Bending down over me to claim my mouth again, his tongue danced circles against mine. He slid his hands over my stomach, letting his fingers wander down to my panties.

"I prefer when you don't wear these." He ripped them off and slipped two fingers inside of me.

“Ahhh...” I moaned as he pushed them deeper, slowly toying with my pleasure by testing how far they could go.

“You fucking hate me?” he whispered.

“Yes...” My voice was hoarse. “Yes.”

“You sure about that?”

“One hundred percent.”

He pulled his fingers out of me and bit my bottom lip. Hard.

Glaring at me, he slid his hands against my sides and spread my legs, pinning down my thighs to the table. “I want you to tell me how much you hate me after I’m done eating your pussy.” He buried his face against my pussy and flicked his tongue against my clit.

My hips bucked against his mouth as he darted his tongue faster, and I couldn’t hold back my moans if I tried.

I grabbed his hair, gripping the strands in utter shock and pleasure. I cried out for him to slow down, but his tongue only moved faster. Sucking my clit into his mouth, he twirled his tongue in a steady, sensuous rhythm that made my toes curl.

Groaning, he kissed my pussy like he kissed my mouth, dominating every move and devouring my lips without restraint.

“Ohhh. Oh, God...” My back arched off the glass, and my pussy throbbed against his mouth. “Please...Slow...Slow down.”

He refused. Instead, he slipped two of his fingers inside of me again—pushing me closer to the edge with two separate rhythms.

My clit swelled against his lips, and I tried to fight the tremors that were building inside of me, but it was no use. As he continued his kisses, the tremors tripled in force, and I couldn’t hold back anymore.

I screamed loudly as orgasm after orgasm wracked through my body.
“*Shit...*”

I thought that he would stop—give me a chance to recover, but he lifted my right leg and tossed it over his shoulder. Then he bent low once more, devouring me all over again.

A soft knock came to the door as I was mid-bliss, but Preston continued sucking on my clit, shushing me in between breaths.

The knock came harder the next time, accompanied with a deep, “It’s important, Mr. Parker.”

“Give me one second.” He tore his mouth away from my clit, glaring at me like before. Stepping back, he helped me off the table and readjusted my dress and smoothed my hair before addressing himself.

Looking me over one last time, he walked to the door and opened it.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Mr. Parker, you have an emergency call. I’ve told them to hold on twice, but they say it can’t wait.”

“I’ll be right there.” He shut the door again and walked over to me, pushing a few stray hairs into place.

“We need to finish this,” he said, trailing his finger against my chest. “Stay here.”

I waited an entire hour, and he never came back. He only sent me an email.



SUBJECT: LONDON TRIP.

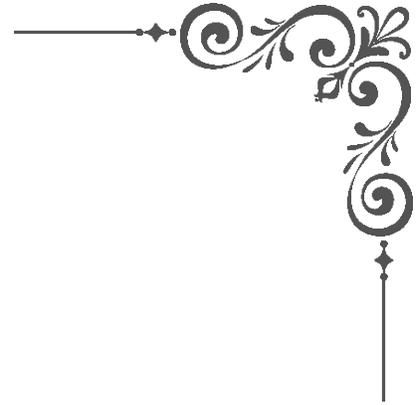
Miss Lauren,

Something unfortunate has come up, so you’ll need to go on the trip without me.

Your presentation was stellar. (The one between your legs, that is. The one about this next business deal still needs work.)

Preston Parker,

CEO & Owner, Parker International



EIGHTEEN

Preston



I RUSHED TO MY OFFICE and damn near turned around once I saw who was sitting in front of my desk. It was Mr. and Mrs. Von Strum, who, true to form, instead of staying in London to meet me, had to play games and meet me here first.

I knew this shit wasn't an emergency.

I contemplated calling Tara in here for this. She was far better at dealing with people's mind games and keeping a straight face. Then again, the quicker I got this over with, the quicker I could return to her in the boardroom.

"Good afternoon." I held back a groan as I took a seat behind my desk.

"What's the emergency?"

"We wanted to let you know that regardless of the London meeting we have lined up for this weekend, we're still not sold on this deal," Mr. Von Strum said.

"Do they not have telephones in London?" I asked. "You could've called."

"We prefer the personal approach," he said. "We're just not sure that you're the right guy to hand our brand over to."

"And why is that?"

"Because you're a heartless asshole." His wife hissed. "If we cracked your chest open right now, I'm sure we'd find a wallet instead of a heart."

"Do you think the wallet would be an Armani or a Gucci?"

She narrowed her eyes at me, and her husband clasped her hand. "We just want to make sure that you won't turn our brand into an extended chain of your gaudy, overpriced resorts."

"I'll be turning your cheap, family brand into a five-star luxury resort with budget-friendly amenities. There's nothing gaudy or overpriced about any of my

hotels.”

“You charge twelve dollars for a bottle of water in the guest rooms.”

“Because we fly it in from Fuji.” I clenched my jaw. “That shit isn’t free.”

“Yes, well—” Mr. Von Strum took off his reading glasses. “I’ve never noticed a true difference in the taste. All bottled waters have always tasted the same to me. Nonetheless, if we ever do get to the final deal table with you, we want you. to keep all of our employees, and we want them to keep their benefit packages. We also want—”

I tuned him out. Two years of chasing this man and I was still in the same place I was on day one. And his intrusion had forced me to the same position I was on day one with Tara as well.

By the time I returned to listening to the conversation and quietly waging war against him for interrupting my session with Tara, he was quoting some personal philosophy.

“What are you trying to say, Mr. Von Strum?” I wanted to get back downstairs as soon as possible. “Get to the point.”

“I would like more time to consider your offer and entertain other buyers. We’ll see if any of our family members want to take a chance on running things.”

“Fair enough,” I said, standing and extending my hand. “This so-called emergency meeting is over.”

“Thank God for that.” His wife scoffed, rejected my hand. “For the record, I would much rather prefer to talk to Miss Lauren from here on out.”

“Her answers will be the same as mine.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Mr. Von Strum said, shunning my handshake as well. “She’s far more human than you’ll ever be. “Pardon my language, but I’m sure your parents aren’t too proud of the asshole you’ve become.”

“My parents are dead, but I’m sure they’re still looking down right now, feeling quite proud of the asshole I became.”

He gave me a slight look of sympathy, looking as if he wanted to apologize, but his wife pulled him out of the room.

“George,” I said, looking at him. “That meeting was the textbook definition of ‘not an emergency.’ You could’ve handled that on your own.”

“They showed up seconds after I called you,” he said, heading to the door. “The emergency is on line one. The person says it’s a family matter.”

Confused, I waited until he shut the door and picked up the phone. “This is Preston Parker. This better be important.”

“It is, sir,” a deep voice said. “But I have to tell you, this is a call I hate to make.”

“Yet here we are.”

“There was an accident earlier this morning on the Triborough Bridge, sir. Your brother, Weston Parker, has passed away.”

Silence.

I wasn't quite sure what to say. I pulled out my cell phone and typed “Triborough Bridge morning car accident” into the browser, and a full page of articles popped up. I couldn't bring myself to click on any of them.

“His fiancée passed away in the accident as well, sir,” he said. “Do you by chance have contact information for her?”

I didn't even know he had a fiancée. “No.”

“Well, I know you two were probably close—”

“We weren't.” I cut him off. “We weren't close at all.”

“Oh. Um well, your brother was very meticulous about keeping an updated will, and as his estate representative, I need you to meet me down at the Rosy-Gan Bar & Café down the street from your headquarters. He left you something significant.”

I ended the call without saying anything at all. I stood still and numb, unsure of how to feel.

My brother and I hadn't spoken in over a decade, and even when we were on speaking terms, it was only for the sake of our parents. The only thing we shared in common was our identical looks, as we'd honestly never gotten along in life. The “They're twins! They'll grow out of it and become best friends,” never happened and all we had to show for our relationship were our old staged pictures at milestone events.

I looked at them now and then, wanting to reach out, but I could never bring myself to do it. His name never crossed my call log either.

We'd failed to establish a connection during our early college years, and when our parents passed away shortly after graduation, we only called each other on holidays. After a while, we stopped calling each other altogether.

I never admitted it, but I still kept up with him through the press and all the budget hotel chain magazines, but that was it.

Feeling conflicted, I sent Tara a quick email and headed down to the Rosy-Gan Bar & Café.



I MADE IT TO THE CAFÉ minutes later, making my way straight toward a man in a grey suit.

“I'm Preston Parker,” I said. “Are you the guy who called me on the phone?”

“Yes, I’m Mr. Harris.” He extended his hand, but I didn’t take it. “Have a seat, Mr. Parker.”

I didn’t move.

“Okay, then,” he said, unclipping his keyboard. “I have a few things I need you to sign before I can hand over the things your brother left you.”

“Shouldn’t we be discussing his funeral?”

“No, your brother was very adamant about not wanting a funeral in his will, sir.” He handed me a standard acceptance contract, and I skimmed the short paragraph before signing my name.

“In the days to come, someone from my office will contact you regarding his remains—which he asked to be cremated, among other legal things, since you’re the next of kin. We’ll have to sift through all his business dealings and other contracts for quite a while before the other things are completely concrete. Speaking of which, they have a specialty brew here called Concrete. Want to try it?”

I gave him a blank stare.

“Right.” He cleared his throat and pulled a sheet from a manila envelope.

“I’ll just read his words to you, give you the things, and let you go.”

“The sooner, the better.”

“Should anything ever happen to me, this note is for the last living member of my immediate family. My asshole brother.”

I smiled. I had the same line printed in my will for him.

“Preston, I want you to know that I’ve always understood why you shut me out after mom and dad passed away. You’ve never been good when it comes to expressing your emotions or handling grief, and I don’t think you’ve ever valued family or friends. You were never able to put those first...I know we’ve always been complete opposites since the day we were born, but I’ve always loved you, and I’ve always rooted for your success.”

“Is that the end?” I asked. “He left me his thoughts?”

“No.” He shook his head and continued reading. “I leave you a letter of personal words I wish I would’ve said sooner and my Violet.” He pulled out a fluffy pink and brown keychain that was engraved with the words “My Violet.”

“This is his greatest possession?” I asked, taking the keychain from him. “I’ll be sure to keep it in my best safe. Then again, is there anyone else he wanted me to share this with?”

“It would’ve been his fiancée, sir.” He looked down. “She doesn’t have any living family members.”

I held back a sigh. My brother was always far pettier than I was, but this was low. Even for him.

“I appreciate you making me come down here for a keychain.” I looked at my watch, feeling an unfamiliar ache in my chest. “You’ve wasted my time.” I started to walk away, but he jumped in front of me.

“Not so fast, Mr. Parker. Violet is not a keychain.”

“Then why did you give it to me?”

He sighed and held up the signed acceptance contract. “Didn’t you read the fine print?”

“Always.” I looked at it again. “I agree to handle all affairs that are required, accept any gifts and heirlooms, and as next of kin, I agree to care for any heirs that the Weston Parker Estate, herein named The W Estate, leaves behind.” I shrugged. “My brother didn’t have any kids.”

His eyes widened. “You weren’t close *at all*, huh?”

Before I could tell him to get the hell out of my way, another man in a grey suit walked into the café holding the hand of a teddy-bear-hugging toddler.

I looked at my keychain and realized it was a replica of that bear. That the other charm on the keychain was a picture of the little girl who was walking toward me.

What the fuck? My entire world felt like it stopped. *My brother has a daughter?*

A fiancée was one thing to keep to himself, but a goddamn daughter?

Throbbing pains shot through my chest, and I was hoping this was all a bad dream.

The little girl looked around, slightly confused, but then her eyes met mine. She stared at me, and I stared right back.

The more I looked at her, the more I noticed that our eyes were the same. Emerald green with flecks of light grey.

“Come on, Violet.” The other suit walked her a bit closer, and then he pointed at me. “Do you know who this man is?”

She nodded. “He’s my daddy’s twin. My Uncle Preston.”

I blinked, beyond stunned that she knew who I was. Then again, I wasn’t sure how I felt about the “Uncle” part.

“Do you know where your Uncle Preston lives?”

She looked up at me, then at her teddy bear. “He lives in my bear.”

“No, he lives here in New York. Just like you and your dad.”

I felt a surge of guilt. I didn’t even know he moved to New York, I thought he still lived in California.

“You’re going to live with him for a while, okay?” The suit was still talking. “Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

She nodded, and I shook my head.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I don’t know the first thing about caring for a kid.”

“Then you’re about to learn.” Mr. Harris patted my shoulder.

“Surely there’s more to this than dropping her off with a stranger at a bar. Where’s Child Services?”

“You’re the next of kin, Mr. Parker.” He lowered his voice. “You’re the only living family member she has left. She has no idea what’s happened to her parents, and we figured that family should be the one to tell her.”

“What?” The guilt in my chest quickly turned into a familiar hurt and pain I knew all too well.

“My people will call your people in the coming days with more information about your brother’s business affairs and all the things he left for Violet,” he said, ignoring my question and moving on. “Is your primary point of contact your executive assistant? A Miss Tara Lauren?”

“Yes.”

“Would you mind pulling out your phone and giving me her number and home address?”

“She has three phone numbers and two main addresses,” I said, reciting them all by heart. “If It’s ever a true emergency, and you can’t reach her, try her best friend Ava Sanders at 555-1703.”

“Oh, wow.” He smiled as if he hadn’t just turned my world upside down. “I don’t even know my girlfriend’s number by heart. It’s impressive that you know all your employees’ info like that.”

“I don’t know shit about kids.” I stared at Violet. “I meant that.”

“Is my Daddy coming?” Violet asked. “Mommy said he would get me ice cream if I was good today.”

The three of us just looked at her. No one dared to answer.

“We’ll be in touch, Mr. Parker.” Mr. Harris patted my back again and handed me a huge file that read Violet Rose Parker. “Unfortunately, I have to address someone else from another estate right now, but I am very sorry for your loss.”

The other suit gave me a look of sympathy, and then they both walked out of the bar—leaving me with the toddler.

Keeping my eyes on her, I signaled for a waiter.

“Yes, sir?” He stepped next to me.

“I need a scotch, a double. Now.”

“Sir, we can’t serve you anything until you remove your baby from the premises.”

“What baby?”

He pointed at Violet.

“You’re reading too much into this.” I sighed. “Violet, how old are you?”

“Three and a half!” she said proudly.

“She’s three and a half,” I said. “She’s not a baby.”

“Sir, you can’t bring a baby into a bar.”

“I didn’t bring her in here at all.”

“Rules are rules, sir.” He held up his hands in surrender and walked away.

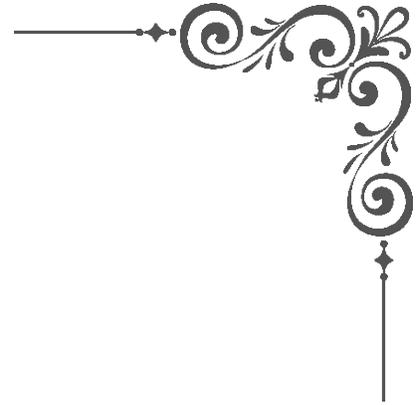
Violet whispered to her teddy bear, then she stepped closer to me. “Me and Bear are hungry. Can we have some pizza?”

I said nothing, completely stunned by today’s turn of events.

I’d gone from nearly sleeping with Tara in the boardroom, to losing Von Strum’s trust, to becoming an uncle within the same hour.

“I’m really hungry, Uncle Preston.” Violet tugged at my pants. “And I have to pee-pee.”

Jesus Christ.



NINETEEN

Tara



I ROLLED OVER IN THE bed on Preston's private plane, unable to sleep. All I could think about was the way he'd brought me to multiple orgasms with his mouth days earlier. The way I wanted him to come back to the room and finish things as he promised.

Then again, I knew the moment he emailed me about going to London without him, that something was horribly wrong. He never missed an international meeting, and he'd never gone a day without contacting me, so four was quite the record.

A part of me wanted to reach out and ask if he was okay, but I'd been burned too many times by asking about his personal life. Hell, I was still slightly upset about some of the words he'd hurled my way before the skill of his tongue made me forget.

I couldn't wrap my head around him saying that he did so many things for me. With the exception of work bonuses and a discount on my condo, I didn't see it.

Sitting up, I opened my laptop and read over the email I was supposed to send to him Saturday. Amazing mouth or not, I still wanted to quit, and I wasn't going to stop trying. I read it over one last time and hit send as the plane began its descent.



SUBJECT: MY CONTRACT

Mr. Parker,

I hope all is well.

I understand that I failed to read the “fine print” of my employment contract, but I would still like to leave your company. I’ve given you two of my best years, and I feel that the least you can do is compromise and let me go.

I would like to discuss this at your earliest convenience.

Tara Lauren

Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International



HE RESPONDED WITHIN seconds.



SUBJECT: RE: MY CONTRACT

Miss Lauren,

All is not well.

Yes, you did fail to read the fine print of your employment contract, and legally speaking, I’m under no obligation to compromise.

That said, I have an emergency situation, and I need your help.

If you do agree to help me with this (and a few other things), I’ll let you out of your contract.

Meet me at my condo when you land.

Preston Parker,
CEO & Owner, Parker International



I READ HIS EMAIL A few times in shock that he was willing to let me go. I turned my phone off and on and reread it again just to make sure my eyes weren’t playing a trick on me.



I WASTED NO TIME TELLING the town car driver to rush me to his condo when I got off the plane. I took the elevator up to his floor, bracing myself for what I hoped would be a real emergency.

Knowing him, it’s probably not.

I knocked five times, waiting for an answer. I knocked again, and he opened the door wearing dark jeans and a black shirt that hugged his muscles in all the right places. He eyed my short beige and grey dress and his lips curved into a sexy smile.

“You told me you lost that dress months ago,” he said.

“No, I said I wouldn’t be wearing it again because all you did was stare at me when I wore it.”

He was still staring. “Come in.”

“Before I come in, there’s something I need to say.”

“I’m listening.”

“I just want you to know that what happened with me in the conference room can’t happen again.”

“Excuse me?” He raised his eyebrow.

“You know what I’m talking about,” I said, lowering my voice. “That can’t happen again, and I won’t let it.”

“Are you referring to all the mistakes you made during your mock presentation, or the fact that you were screaming “Don’t stop” while I was devouring your pussy?” He looked me up and down. “I need you to be a little more specific about what ‘that’ is...”

“Both. Both are that.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” He smiled. “You’re saying you didn’t enjoy coming in my mouth?”

I blushed. “That’s not the point.”

“Answer my question.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Did you not enjoy coming in my mouth? Were three orgasms not enough?”

I didn’t say anything.

“I would’ve preferred if we were in my office so I could spread you over my desk and prevent you from moving so much, but since you’re not interested in any more of that...” His voice trailed off with a smirk, and he opened the door a bit wider, inviting me in.

He led me into his dining room, and I noticed a huge purple stain on his favorite white Italian couch.

Please don’t tell me you wanted me over here to research ways to clean your custom couch.

Pouring me a glass of wine, he sat across from me at the table. He didn’t say anything, though. He just stared at me, turning me on with each second that passed.

“Was this really an emergency?” I asked. “Or are you trying to get me to have sex with you in exchange for getting out of my contract?”

“We both know that I don’t have to bring you to my condo to attempt that, Tara.” His smile slowly faded as he cleared his throat. “It is an emergency.”

“Someone new and special has come into my life,” he said, finally. “It was sudden and unexpected, but I already have feelings for her. Feelings I can’t explain, but I care about her immensely. I want our new relationship to work

since this is going to be a long-term commitment for me, but I'll need help adjusting her to my lifestyle."

A pang of jealousy hit me right in my chest. I picked up my wine and gulped the entire glass.

"I need you to help me plan a few things for us, in addition to finding your replacement at Parker International. Then, since you're so hell-bent on leaving, I'll let you go in six weeks.

"I'm not planning your wedding. Ever."

"What?" He looked confused.

"I'm not planning your engagement party either." I couldn't stop talking. "And if you think for one minute that I won't tell this new instant fiancée that your mouth was all over me a few days ago and that you were talking about doing it again in your hallway, you're sadly mistaken. *Sadly mistaken.*"

He looked at me like I'd lost my mind. Then that smack-able grin that I half loved, half hated crossed his face. I almost raised my hand to knock it away.

"I was referring to my niece," he said.

What? "Oh." My cheeks began to burn. "I didn't know you had a niece."

"I didn't either." He paused, looking vulnerable for the very first time. "My brother passed away and left her in my care." He looked away from me, and I noticed the stack of books on the edge of his table: *Raising a Child, How to Handle a Toddler, Daughters and Single Dads, Juggling Career & Family.*

As if on cue, a beautiful brown-haired toddler strutted into the room, half-eaten lollipop in hand. "Uncle Preston, can I have another one?"

As she stepped closer, I noticed her eyes were the same beautiful hue as his. She was also sporting red and blue sugar all over her mouth.

He unwrapped a new lollipop, and she smiled, looking at me. "I had an accident on the couch today," she said.

That explains the couch stain.

Out of habit, I pulled out my phone and handled it. Returning my attention to her, I motioned for her to come closer. What's your name?

"Violet." She paused. "Violet Rose Parker."

"That's a beautiful name."

"Thank you! What's your name?"

"Tara." I paused just like she did. "Tara Rose Lauren."

"I like my name better than your name."

"Me too." I laughed, and she spun around and asked Preston to open *another* lollipop.

As he agreed and she walked away with two new ones, I let out a breath. "How many of those has she had today?"

“I don't know. Maybe twenty.”

“Maybe twenty? Are you out of your mind?”

“No, but I haven't finished reading my copy of *What to Expect When You're Not Expecting a Toddler*. Care to share your notes?”

I rolled my eyes and walked to his kitchen, opening his refrigerator. Every rack was stuffed with bottled water, desserts, and wines. Nothing for a toddler. I stepped into one of his colossal guest rooms, noticing it was still as empty as it was when I first started working for him.

“You should make this guest room her bedroom,” I said, returning to the dining room. “That would be a good start to help with her new life.”

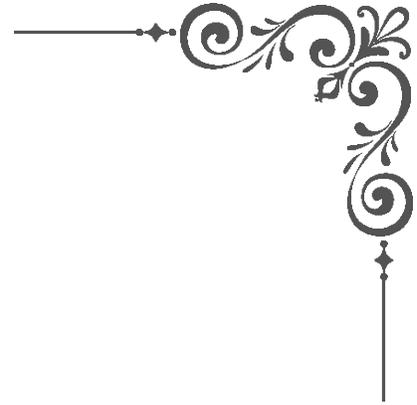
Before I could ask him when he planned on going grocery shopping, I heard the tell-tale sound of heaving. Then vomiting.

“I don't feel good.” Violet wobbled into the room, looking up at Preston. “My tummy hurts.”

I sighed. “Can you get your driver and her car seat, please?”

“Driver's on his way,” he said, tapping his phone. “What car seat?”

Violet vomited again before I could answer him.



TWENTY

Preston



TWO HOURS LATER, I set Violet's brand-new car seat next to my dresser. I made a mental note to use the fluffy key my brother left me to retrieve some things from his place later.

Violet lay under the sheets on my bed, taking small sips of ginger ale as tears fell down her face. As if her teddy bear was sick as well, she held the straw to his lips every few minutes.

Tara wiped away the tears with Kleenex, shaking her head at me. "You left out all the other things you let her eat over the past few days."

"I didn't think there was anything wrong with pizza."

"There isn't," she said. "But she can't eat that multiple days in a row with lollipops for breakfast, no matter how many times she asks you for it."

The Bear asked for it.

"Noted." I watched as she took Violet's temperature and made her eat the last spoonful of chicken noodle soup. She saved the grape medicine for last, and although Violet insisted that she wasn't sleepy, she was knocked out within minutes.

I dimmed the lights and motioned for Tara to follow me into the living room. She sat on my couch and opened my laptop, typing the password.

"When are you going to tell her about her parents?" she asked.

"Sometime this week." I was still debating on what approach I wanted to take. "A better place" never worked for me, "in heaven" just meant she'd spend countless hours asking questions about where that was, and "they were killed" was unnecessarily cruel.

“You need to get her a temporary nanny in the meantime,” Tara said. “I’ll get some recommendations and have them watch her in your private bedroom suite during work hours until you hire someone permanent who can watch her here. You also need to have a designer come in asap and get her bedroom designed. She needs to have a space of her own and get accustomed to living with you.” She continued listing all the things Violet will need, and by the time she was finished laying everything out, it was a little after midnight.

“Do you need anything else tonight?” she asked.

“I need you to be my date to the *Mister New York* gala this weekend.”

“No. I still don’t think that’s—”

“Appropriate?” I rolled my eyes. “That word went out the window in the conference room, and I highly doubt anyone will think anything about you being my date. If you haven’t noticed, you’re with me all the time.”

“Fine,” she said. “So, all I have to do is help you with Violet for six weeks, find my replacement, and go to the gala with you this weekend to be released from my contract. Is there any fine print?”

“There isn’t any print at all.” I extended my hand. “This is a genuine, verbal offer, and I promise to be honest with you about everything until the deal is done.”

“I’ll do the same.” She shook my hand and stood up, heading for my private elevator.

I followed her and pressed the down button. “Thank you.”

“*What?*” She looked as if she’d just seen a ghost. “What did you just say to me?”

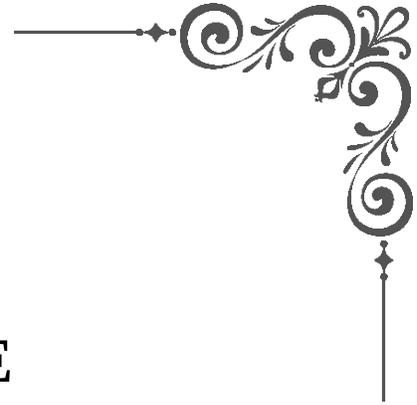
“I said thank you. Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you’ve never said that to me. Ever.”

Silence.

“Well, I mean it.” I watched her step onto the car. “Thank you very much, for everything.”

“You’re welcome.”



TWENTY-ONE

Tara

That weekend



I BIT MY TONGUE FOR the umpteenth time tonight. I didn't know why I thought that Preston having a child in his life would soften him in the slightest, but I was now convinced he would always be an asshole. Even after getting him the best nanny in the city, hiring the best bedroom designer, and ensuring that someone in every field would be able to assist him with all of Violet's needs, he was still the same.

We'd barely spoken since he picked me up for the gala, and he made it a point to introduce me to everyone as "my quitting assistant who won't be here too much longer." There wasn't any humor in his voice when he said it, and if the person thought it was a joke, he followed with, "Good help is so tough to find these days..."

I felt foolish for spending half a day getting ready for this event, for hoping he would at least offer a goddamn compliment.

I'd spent over two thousand dollars on a custom pink and grey dress that fell just past my thighs, and a pair of brand-new, sparkling silver stilettos from Christian Louboutin. My makeup was done to perfection, and my hair was pinned up in curls with custom glittering pins.

Hurt, I pulled out my phone and sent a quick text to Ava.

Me: Fuck everything I said earlier about this man "maybe" having a softer side. He's done nothing but treat me like shit tonight, and I can't wait until my six weeks are up.

Ava: Don't let him treat you like that for another second, then. Get the hell out of there. I'll call you when I land in France tomorrow.

"It's nice to see you at one of these things *with* someone for a change, Preston." The CEO of Marriott stepped in front of me as I was putting my phone away. "Nice to finally meet you in person, Miss Lauren. I've heard great things."

"Have you heard that she's quitting?" Preston asked.

"I haven't." The Marriott CEO smiled and pulled out his business card.

"Since he mentioned it, I'd love for you to consider us."

"Well, as long as the person I'm reporting to isn't an asshole, I'll consider it."

His eyes widened, and I turned away, heading for the exit.

Preston was at my side seconds later, matching me step for step. "This gala isn't over yet, Tara."

I didn't respond. I kept walking.

"Tara—"

"It's *Miss Lauren* for you, forever." I turned around to face him. "It's bad enough that I've wasted two years of my life working under you while you treated me like shit, but I'm not letting you ruin my last six weeks. I'm done expecting anything else from you, and I'm done with you tonight. Done." I stormed away with him on my heels.

I made it to the lobby, and he grabbed my elbow from behind, pulling me into the closest bathroom.

"We had a deal that you would attend this with me." He hissed. "That means you leave when *I* leave. It also means—"

"Fuck you." I glared at him, cutting him off. "Did you not hear what I just said out there? I am done with you. I'll help Violet for the next six weeks because she'll be in your unfortunate care, but I'm only doing the minimum for everything else." I seethed. "I hate you."

He let go of my elbow. "You hate me?"

"I didn't stutter." I tried to move past him, but he gripped my hips, keeping me in place.

A woman stepped into the bathroom and approached the sink. She caught sight of us in the mirror and quickly left.

Preston walked over to the door and locked it. Then he walked toward me, making me step back until my ass was pressed against the towel rack.

He looked down at my dress and pressed his forehead against mine. "I know why you're upset with me, Tara."

"I told you not to call me that anymore."

“You wanted me to tell you how fucking sexy you look tonight?” He trailed his finger against my collarbone, setting my nerves on fire. “How I would’ve preferred that we stayed at your place so we could finish what we started in the boardroom instead of coming here?”

“No.”

“Yes.” He brushed his lips against mine. “I knew you wouldn’t go for that—even though you know damn well you want to. I’m sure you still have no idea how hard it is to deal with wanting a certain someone for over two years.”

“I’ve wanted a certain someone to treat me right for over two years.” I hissed. “Trust me, you have no idea how hard it is to deal with that.”

“For the record, he’s never hated you.”

“Too bad I’ll never be able to say the same.”

“I thought we said we were going to be honest with each other during these last few weeks?”

“I am honest.”

His hand slipped between my legs, and he slid his hand against my pussy. “This doesn’t feel like you hate me at all.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. It’s beyond hate at this point.”

He narrowed his eyes at me and bit my bottom lip. “Prove it.”

He pressed his lips against mine and my lie lasted all of two seconds, as I couldn’t help but give in. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I moaned as he slid his hands up the back of my dress.

Kissing me recklessly, his eyes remained locked on mine, and he didn’t give me a chance to direct the tempo at all. He controlled my tongue with his, squeezing my ass each time I attempted to lead.

Tearing his mouth away from mine, he stepped back. “Turn around.” He gripped my waist and spun me around so I was facing the full-length mirror, so our reflections were right in front of me.

Staring at me through the glass, he slowly unzipped the back of my dress—letting it fall to the floor in a pool of silk. He unclasped my bra and pushed it down my shoulder, letting it fall just as slowly. He slipped his hand through the lace band of my panties and ripped them off, placing them in his pocket.

With only my stilettos on, I stood stark naked in front of the mirror, watching him plant hard and rough kisses against my collarbone. Feeling him bite my skin each time I made a sound.

“Bend over and grab the counter,” he whispered, biting the back of my neck.

Swallowing, I leaned forward and gripped the cold marble.

I glanced down at the floor, but he threaded his fingers through my hair, gently pulling my head up so I was facing the mirror again.

“I want you to keep your eyes on us,” he said, using his other hand to unbuckle his belt. “So you can see how much you’ve always hated me.”

“I always will.”

He smirked and let my hair go, taking a condom from his pocket before letting his pants fall to the floor. Splaying his hand against my back, he wedged his knee between my thighs to spread my legs a bit more.

With his eyes on mine in the mirror, he took his time putting on the condom—slowly rolling it over his huge length. When he was finished, he gripped my hips and placed his cock against my soaking wet slit. Rubbing it against me, he teased me for several seconds before slowly filling me inch by inch.

He held me steady, and I did my best to keep a straight face in the mirror. I tried to resist giving him any satisfaction of knowing how good he felt inside of me.

I bit my lip to hold back my moans, hating that I knew he could see right through me. That the years of sexual tension between us were finally falling away in a rough, passionate standoff.

“Ah...” I couldn’t help but cry out when he was completely inside of me. “Oh my god...”

Without warning, he pulled out of me and thrust back in—damn near knocking me over with the force. I gripped the marble harder and became even more turned on, and I watched the reflection of him pounding into me repeatedly.

The sound of our skin slapping echoed off the walls, and my stilettos scraped the floor each time he re-entered me.

Letting go of my hips, he caressed my breasts and gently twisted my nipples.

“Fuck, Preston...” I murmured, watching him own my body with two different tempos.

He suddenly lifted my left hand from the counter and placed it against my pussy.

“Touch your clit for me,” he whispered, moving his left hand to my hair—to pull it hard. “Now.”

I slid my hand lower, circling my clit with two fingers.

“Is this how you want to be treated by the person you hate?” He hissed, glaring at me in the mirror. His expression was a mix of anger, lust, and something else I couldn’t quite make out.

“Is this what you wanted?” he asked, his voice a bit harsher.

I didn’t get a chance to answer. All I could do was moan as he fucked me harder and harder.

“Tell me.” He growled, pulling me back by my hair until my head was tilted up and my pussy was throbbing against his cock. “Do you still hate me?”

I couldn't get anything to fall from my lips but moans.

“Miss Lauren,” he said, mocking my voice from earlier. “Do you still hate me?”

“I'm—I'm about to come,” was all I could manage.

His thrusts came even harder, served with slaps against my ass, and I felt my legs buckling beneath me. I gripped the counter with both hands and tried to hold back, but I felt the orgasm overpower me.

Screaming his name, I shut my eyes as wave after wave of pleasure wracked its way through my body. I felt him steadying me, felt him thrusting inside of me a few more times as he found his release and harshly said my name.

Our gazes met in the mirror, and we remained entwined for several minutes. Dripping in sweat, we both looked freshly fucked, and I knew there was no way we could return to the gala without arousing suspicion.

Without saying a word, he pulled up his pants. Then he picked up my bra and took his time slipping it over my breasts. Clasping it, he pressed a kiss against my back before helping me into my dress.

“Here,” he said, taking off his jacket and placing it over my shoulders.

He buckled his belt and looked at me. “You never answered my question.”

“You asked me more than one.”

He smoothed my hair. “You know which one I'm talking about, Tara.”

“No, I don't hate you, Preston...As much.”

“Hmmm.” He pressed his hand against the small of my back and walked me to the door.

When he unlocked it, I realized there was a long line of women waiting. Feeling my cheeks reddening, I looked down.

Preston let out a low laugh and led me toward the exit doors.

“Mr. Parker! Mr. Parker!” A blonde reporter stepped in front of us. I'm a reporter from *Page Six*. I was wondering if you could give us a quote about your place in the latest top five nominations for this year's Mister New York.”

“I've told you all repeatedly how I feel about your top five.”

“If I tell you that you're in the top two will you give me a quote?”

“I'll give you that once I'm number one.”

“Well, can you tell us who your date is tonight, then? She looks familiar to me, but maybe give us a little insight into your relationship status?”

He led me past her and outside to his waiting town car. Letting me in first, he slid in next to me.

“To my condo, Simon,” he said, looking at me. “And I need you to roll up the partition, please.”

“Yes, sir.” The partition slowly rolled up to the ceiling, and Simon turned up the volume on his music at the front.

We made it two blocks before his lips latched onto mine and his hands ran through my hair.

Unbuckling his belt, he took out a condom. Then he whispered, “I want you to ride my cock all the way home.”

I leaned over his lap instead, taking his cock into my mouth—catching him completely off guard.

Slowly bobbing my head up and down, I gripped his base and listened as he groaned in pleasure.

“Fuck...” He ran his hands through my hair. “Tara.”

I briefly twirled my tongue around his tip, then I took him deeper, all the way down my throat. His cock hardened even more in my mouth, but I didn’t slow down.

His breathing became heavier the longer I pleased him, and I felt his legs tensing under me.

“If you don’t want to taste me, or let me come in your mouth,” he said, whispering. “You need to move.”

I didn’t. I took his length all the way down my throat again, gripping his knees as he came in my mouth. I swallowed every drop.

He slowly pulled me up and looked into my eyes. Looking beyond impressed, he gave me a look that let me know we were just getting started for the night.

When we arrived at his building, we stepped onto his private elevator and kissed each other as if we were trying to make up for lost time. There was a tinge of regret in his eyes, and I wondered if he could see that I felt the same.

Stumbling onto his floor, he unlocked the door, and the lights immediately came on.

“Oh, thank God!” A female voice broke us out of our spell. “You’re back early.”

We stepped away from each other and watched as Violet’s nanny jumped up from the couch.

Fuming, she put on her shoes and stuffed toys and books into her bag. Violet was sitting by the window wearing headphones, looking beyond upset.

“Something wrong, Miss Julie?” Preston asked. Then he muttered to me. “This is going to take some getting used to.”

“Yeah. Your daughter—”

“She’s my niece.”

“Whatever.” She shrugged. “Your niece is a hellion. A gifted hellion, but a hellion nonetheless.” She walked over and handed him a check. “I won’t be cashing the check for next week. These past few days have been more than enough. Goodbye and good luck.”

She left without another word, and I slid Preston’s jacket off my shoulders. I started to tell him goodnight as well, but something told me to stay.

He walked over to Violet, and her face lit up immediately.

“I don’t like Julie, Uncle Preston.” She took off her headphones. “I want my Daddy.”

Preston sighed and extended his hand. “Can we talk about your dad in your bedroom?”

“Okay!” She grabbed her teddy bear and clasped his hand. She looked over at me and smiled. “Hey, Tara.”

“Hey, Violet.” I looked at Preston. “I’ll um, I’ll just—”

“Stay,” he said, briefly pinning me to my spot with his gaze. He motioned for me to follow him and Violet to her new bedroom.

I took a seat in the corner, where the designer had stacked an impressive display of teddy bears and matching bean bags. I watched Preston struggle to help Violet into her preferred pajamas and held back a laugh.

“Bear wants some apple juice before bed,” she said.

“Why would your teddy bear need some apple juice?” he asked.

“Because he’s thirsty.”

He gave her a blank stare and looked over at me for help.

“I’ll get it.” I walked to the kitchen, stepping over the remaining toys and books that were strewn across the floor. When I returned with the juice box, Violet held the straw up to her teddy bear’s lips for five seconds before drinking all of it herself.

“How very clever.” Preston smiled and tucked her under the covers. Then he held her hand in his. “Violet, your parents are...They were in a car accident.”

“A car accident,” she repeated.

“Yes, an unfortunate car accident,” he said, pausing. “And they died.”

She blinked. “Like my grandma and grandpa?”

He stilled, and I could tell he was shocked that she’d said those words. “Sort of like that. Yes.”

“Are they coming back?”

“No, Violet,” he said. “They’re not.”

She looked confused. “Are they in the clouds with grandma and grandpa?”

He hesitated to answer. “Yes.”

“Oh...” She was silent for several seconds, looking between Preston and her bear. “Can you read me and Bear the rainbow story again?”

“Of course.” He turned on the pink and yellow night-lights, and then he picked up the book on the nightstand. He read it to her twice, and halfway through her third requested encore, she drifted to sleep.

Standing up, he kissed her forehead and hit the lights. Then he grabbed my hand and pulled me into the living room.

“I didn’t understand that my dad was gone until I was six,” I said. “You did a good job for the first explanation.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I take it she’ll need to stay in my office until I find a new nanny?”

“I’ll schedule some more interviews, but in the meantime, I think you should ask Cynthia. She could watch her in your private bedroom suite across the hall that you hardly ever use. You can still check on her every hour that way, and if she ever needs you, you won’t have to rush all the way home.”

“By ‘Cynthia,’ are you referring to the same Cynthia who wants to sleep with me?” He rolled his eyes. “I don’t think so.”

“She’s the only person on the executive staff who has a degree in Child Development. She also loves kids.”

He looked unconvinced.

“Would it help if I told you that she has a boyfriend now?”

“Very much so.”

“Well, she does.” I laughed and stepped back “Anyway, about what happened tonight...”

“What about it?” He stepped forward, and I stepped back again. He moved forward and gripped my waist before I could step away once more.

“Yes, it was inappropriate,” he said. “And yes, it’s going to happen again.” He whispered against my lips. “There’s only one reason why it’s not happening right now.”

“Uncle Preston?” Violet’s soft voice made us look down, made him let me go.

“Yes, Violet?”

“Bear is scared.” She grabbed his hand. “He wants to sleep in your bed.”

“Is that so?”

She nodded, holding Bear close to her chest with her other hand.

“Okay.” He picked her up and held her against his side. “Can we walk Tara to the elevator first?”

“Yeah.” She smiled and leaned against his chest.

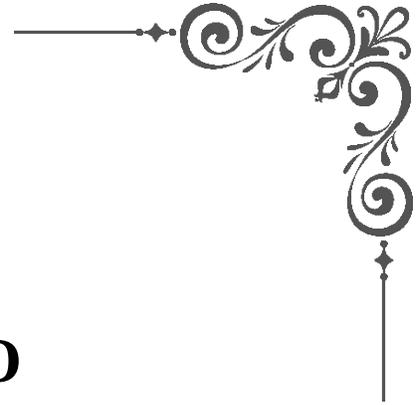
He walked me to the private elevator and kissed my forehead before hitting the down button.

“I’m thinking about sleeping in Monday,” I said, stepping onto the car. “I wonder if my boss will understand.”

“He won’t.”

“I’ll see him at noon.”

“He’ll see you at seven.”



TWENTY-TWO

Preston



ON MONDAY MORNING, Cynthia walked into my private bedroom suite with a box of coloring books.

“I can’t thank you enough for giving me a chance to do something new here, Mr. Parker,” she said. “I still can’t believe Miss Lauren recommended me to you. I thought she hated me.”

“Why would she hate you?”

“She never told you what I—” She cleared her throat, not finishing that sentence. “I have no idea.” She set down the box, and I adjusted Violet’s blanket as she slept.

“I’ll be in my office if you need me,” I said. “I’m still going to check on her every hour or so until I trust you, or until we find a permanent nanny. Clear?”

“Clear.” She lowered her voice. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep up the ruse that she’s your niece and not your secret love child. Her eyes give the whole thing away.”

I shook my head, not bothering to respond to that. I watched Violet sleep for a few minutes before walking to my office.

When I arrived, I saw that my Colombian coffee was waiting for me, my short list and schedule were in perfect order, and I knew right then and there that my next assistant would never be as good as Tara.

Nowhere near as memorable either.

An intern walked into my office with a plate of breakfast, her arms trembling with every step she took.

“Is there anything else I can get for you this morning?” She set down the tray.

“Why are you shaking?”

“It’s my first day, sir,” she said. “I’ve heard that you’re Satan reincarnated and that working for you is like hell on earth, so I want to ensure that I’m making a good impression.”

I blinked.

“I’ve also heard that you fire people on the spot, and I really need to keep this job.”

“You can leave my office now.”

“Okay, wait.” Her face turned red. “The truth is, I dropped your pepper bagel, but it was only on the floor for five seconds. I picked it right back up and wiped it off with my shirt.”

“*What?*”

She stepped back, damn near hyperventilating, and left.

Before I could even begin to process what the hell she’d done to my bagel, Tara walked into my office, wobbling slightly in her heels. My cock immediately hardened.

“Good morning, Mr. Parker.”

“*Tara.*”

She blushed. “Mr. Parker, I have two nanny interviews scheduled for this afternoon and an interview with my potential replacement this morning.” She walked over to my desk and picked up the pepper bagel, tossing it into the trash and replacing it with a plain one. “You need to take a call with the branding department at two, a Skype meeting with George from his China tour at four...”

I stared at her lips as she spoke, only halfway paying attention to what she was saying.

“You also need to make sure that you’ve signed off on my recommendation letter to the companies I’ll be applying to in the coming days.”

“I didn’t write your recommendation letter yet.”

“And since I don’t trust you to do it any time soon, I wrote it myself.” She smiled. “I emailed it to you, and all you have to do is sign it.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You promised.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “Yes, you did, and I expect your signature in my inbox within the next hour.”

“I’ll send it in two.”

“Do you need anything else from me?”

“Your mouth would be nice.”

“I’m not having sex with you at work.”

“The walls are soundproof.” I tapped my fingers against the desk. “You know that because you had them re-enforced.”

“I did that so I wouldn’t have to hear you calling me from your office anymore.”

“Is that a ‘no’ to your mouth?”

“It’s an, I’ll see you this afternoon.”



TWENTY-THREE

Tara



I SIPPED MY COFFEE and winced as I leaned back in my chair. Every muscle in my body was sore from the weekend, and I was struggling to focus on my work. I was also struggling to process the glimpses of Preston's softer side, everything from the way he redressed me after sex at the gala, to the way he talked to Violet was making me wonder if we could pursue something together once I left his company.

It's just the sex talking, Tara. He's still an ass. Don't fall for it.

As I was flipping through a stack of resumes for his next assistant, he sent me his signature on the recommendation letter. Smiling, I started to tell him, 'Thank you,' but he sent me another email right after.



SUBJECT: YOUR REPLACEMENT

How far are you into this search? (Is this current interview some type of joke?)

Preston Parker,
CEO & Owner of Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: YOUR REPLACEMENT

I have ten more applicants to screen and sixty new resumes to read today. (Not at all. She's a Harvard grad with B-level experience. Why?)

Tara Lauren,
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,

CEO & Owner of Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: RE: YOUR Replacement

If the resumes you're reviewing aren't half as impressive as yours, don't bother screening them. (She just asked me why I don't want to be more like the "much better" Hilton Hotels. Please get her the hell out of my office. Now.)

Preston Parker,
CEO & Owner of Parker International



I LAUGHED AND PUT ON my heels before walking to his office.

"I think you could truly benefit from doing a few things the Hilton way." The woman was still talking. "I mean they have an app where guests can make reservations from their phones, and their logo makes you feel right at home. If I was your EA—and I should be, I'd make those two things my top goals."

Preston glared at her and tapped his fingers against the desk, the vein in his neck swelling with every word she said.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," I said, making her turn around. "Mr. Parker, there's something urgent you need to attend to, so you'll have to cut this interview with Miss Proby short."

"I totally understand." She stood up and extended her hand to Preston.

He stared at it.

I cleared my throat and motioned for him to shake her hand.

"We'll be in touch," he said, his voice terse.

"I hope so!" She grabbed her purse and walked past me, shutting the door on her way out.

"Do we not have an app for guests to make hotel reservations at my properties?" He looked at me.

"We do. And before you ask, yes, your logo is better than Hilton's."

"I'm well aware of that." He smiled. "I wasn't going to ask."

"Of course, you weren't..."

"Is there any way I could pay you more to stay here and work for me? I can promise not to stress you out as much."

"Never."

"Even with more stock options?" He stood up and walked over to me. "More benefits?"

"I already have the most benefits and some very generous stock options."

"One more year wouldn't kill you."

“I really think it would.”

He let out a low laugh and closed the gap between us, leaning in to kiss me.

“We can’t.” I pushed him away and stepped back, pulling out my phone.

“You have a two-hour meeting with—” I glanced at his schedule. “TLM in a few minutes. Did you add this? I didn’t approve any meetings with Thompson Lane Marketing today. Why are they scheduled to meet with you multiple times this week?”

“Because TLM isn’t Thompson Lane Marketing,” he said, walking past me and locking the door. “I just figured *Tara Lauren’s Mouth* would’ve been too inappropriate for my executive assistant to approve.”

I laughed, and his lips met mine in a kiss.

“I need you to handle all of my upcoming international meetings on your own.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “I’ve started getting Violet’s personal things shipped to my place, but I’ve yet to find her passport. I don’t feel comfortable leaving her here alone while I travel.”

“I thought you said you didn’t know anything about kids?”

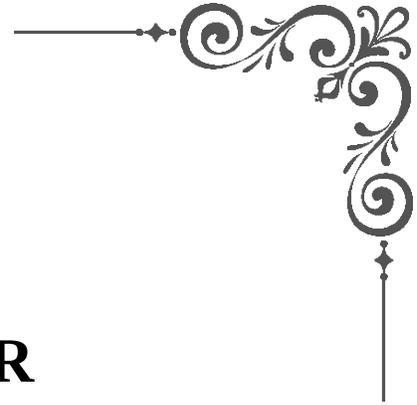
“I know they don’t like to be left alone.” He trailed his finger against my lips. “Do I need to send any interns on the trip with you?”

I shook my head. “Just my driver.”

“Does your boss treat you somewhat better now?”

“No.” I smiled. “He’s just very good at sex.”

He laughed and pushed me against the wall. “Cancel the rest of my day...”



TWENTY-FOUR

Preston



A FEW NIGHTS LATER, I woke up in pain—feeling massive heart palpitations in my chest. No matter how many doses of anxiety medication I took, they came harder each night, and they always brought along memories of my brother. They were always the same. Images of Weston and I fighting in our childhood backyard. Us fighting on the school bus. Us fighting about anything and everything.

Sighing, I rolled over and found myself face to face with a set of purple button eyes.

What the...

I sat up and saw Violet sleeping on the other side of my bed. This was the fifth night in a row that she'd snuck into my bed in the middle of the night, and I was still getting used to it. Kissing her forehead, I pulled a blanket over her and made my way into the kitchen.

Opening the refrigerator, I shook my head at all the juice boxes, fruit, and mini snack meals that were there for Violet. Thanks to Tara, she now had her own nutritionist who premade weekly meals and ensured that my refrigerator and freezer were always “eighty percent toddler and twenty percent adult.”

I grabbed an apple juice box and a bag of animal crackers, carrying them over to my couch. I opened my laptop and looked for some work I could focus on for the next few hours, but for the first time in forever, the last thing I wanted to do was work.

Shutting it down, I pulled out my phone. I scrolled down to Tara's name and stared at it. Then I hit call.

It rang once. It rang twice. And before I could hang up and tell her that the call was a mistake, she answered in her familiar, breathy voice.

“Hello?” she said. “Hello?”

“Hello, Tara.”

“Are you calling me about the Grand Rose’s grand staircase remodel? I can get you those numbers in two minutes.”

“Not at all.”

“Oh, then this is this about my travel itinerary? I’m waiting on the Von Strums to approve two of the final meeting spaces, but I have everything set to go for the Scotland and Amsterdam sessions.”

“I’m not calling you about that either.”

“Oh...Then what’s this about?”

I sighed. “I can’t sleep.”

“I didn’t know you were capable of sleeping.”

“Contrary to the rumors at the office, I sleep at least five hours a night.”

“I’ve heard you’re supposed to get eight.”

“I’ve heard that as well,” I said. “But never from anyone successful.”

She laughed. “That’s exactly why everyone thinks you’re an awful boss.”

“Do you still think that?”

“Absolutely. You’re the worst boss I’ve ever had.”

“I’m the only boss you’ve ever had.”

“Still doesn’t change what I said.” Her laughter came over the line again, and I realized that over the past two years, we’d never talked on the phone without work being the main topic of conversation.

“Were you thinking about your brother?” she asked.

I didn’t answer.

“I’m sorry for asking.”

“Don’t be,” I said. “I *was* thinking about him.” I paused. “I was thinking that it’s my fault we weren’t close, but I’m honestly not sure how I could’ve fixed it. I also wish I could’ve met Violet under different circumstances.”

She remained silent, listening.

“I’m just not good at emotional shit, and all he wanted to talk about was his feelings when our parents died. As if talking about the way he felt would bring them back.”

“How did they die?” she asked softly. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“They were murdered. Shot dead in their home over an empty safe.” I clenched my jaw at the memory of receiving the phone call, of the officer saying, “these things happen all the time” right after. As if he’d just given me

speeding ticket. “Weston and I were never the same after that. We always handled things differently, and grief was no different.”

“Did your brother happen to own The W Hotels, the budget hotel chain that you stalk all the time?”

“He did.” I smiled. “He went into budget hotels, and I went into luxury. He saw something in the long term that I didn’t, and I’ve been trying to make up for that ever since.”

“No wonder you’re trying to break into that industry with the Von Strums, then,” she said. “I’m pretty sure your brother was obsessed with your chain, too.”

“Who wouldn’t be? I’m always number one.”

We laughed, and I turned the volume up so I could hear her a bit better.

“Were you up doing work?” I asked.

“Yes, sure.”

“The words ‘yes, sure’ always mean you’re lying to me, Tara.”

“Okay, well just yes. Yes.”

“What were you doing?”

“Tell me more about what it feels like to be number one year after year.” She changed the subject. “I don’t think I’ve heard you brag about yourself as much lately.”

“What were you doing, Tara?” I repeated. “Stop bullshitting me.”

“I was doing what I usually do whenever it’s late at night, and I’m thinking about my boss.”

“I’m not playing the guessing game with you.”

“I was masturbating with my vibrator, okay?” She scoffed. “Is that okay with you?”

I held back a laugh. “It’s more than okay.” I stood up and walked to my liquor cabinet, pouring myself two shots of whiskey. “What was your fantasy for tonight?”

“It’s the usual.” Her voice was soft. “Nothing special.”

“Tell me.”

“Now?”

“Right now.”

She remained silent, and I tossed back the first drink.

“What’s the usual, Tara?”

She cleared her throat, still not saying anything, and I was certain I heard the light buzzing of her vibrator in the background.

“Do I need to repeat the question?”

“No...It usually starts with us arguing and then we end up having sex on your desk.”

“I need you to describe it better than that,” I said. “Am I bending you over the desk or fucking you on top of it?”

She sucked in a breath. “On top of it.”

“You know that doesn’t have to remain a fantasy, right?”

“Right...” Her vibrator sounded a little bit louder.

“We’ll have to make a few changes, though.” I tossed back the second shot.

“Changes like what?”

“Well, first I’ll need you to sit on my face for at least an hour so I can taste everything I love about your pussy again, so I can make sure you’ll follow the rest of my instructions for the remainder of the day.”

Her breathing became slightly heavier over the line.

“After that, I’ll bend you over my chair and fill you with my cock until you’re on the verge of coming for me. And when I’m sure you’re close to the edge—when I’m sure your pussy is seconds away from an orgasm, I’ll flip you over and fuck you on top of the desk until you beg me to let you come.” I paused. “Only if that’s what you want...”

Her breaths sounded even louder than before, and I could hear her softly murmuring.

“Is that what you want?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. We’ll do it the second you get back from Europe.”

“Um hmmm...” She let out a soft moan. “Okay.”

I waited until her breathing became normal again. “I think we should talk on the phone without work more often.” I smiled.

“I would like that.”

“I also think that you shouldn’t come to work for the rest of this week.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” I said. “Your trip starts in two days, and if I see you this morning, I won’t let you out of my office.”

“You don’t want me to come in and at least show you my mock presentations?”

“You’ve never needed to practice those,” I said. “Yours were always perfect.”

“Thanks for finally letting me know that once I’m quitting.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I didn’t say thank you.”

“You were about to.”

She laughed. “So, since I’m off today, does that mean you won’t send me any emails?”

“Absolutely not. It just means you don’t have to answer them as fast.”

“Noted. Well, I’m going to take a shower. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Talk to you later.” I ended the call and sat on my couch. For some strange reason, I was tempted to call her right back, to find something random to discuss for a few more hours.

As I was contemplating it, her name crossed my screen via text message.

Tara: Are you still planning to start your day at 4:30 a.m.?

Me: Yes.

Tara: Mind if I call you while you’re riding around looking at all your hotels? [water emoji] [water emoji] [water emoji]

Me: Not at all. [umbrella emoji] [umbrella emoji] [umbrella emoji]

I laughed and set my phone down.

As I was setting aside my shot glasses, I heard the sound of pattering feet in my hallway.

Dragging a blanket and clutching her teddy bear, she climbed right next to me on the couch. She picked up my juice box and shook it—frowning once she realized it was empty.

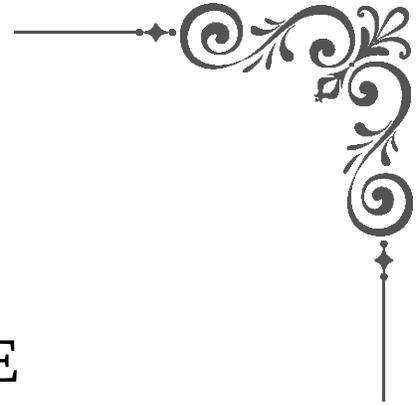
“These are me and Bear’s juices.” She narrowed her little eyes at me. “Not yours.”

I smiled, holding back a laugh. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

She lay down on the cushions and placed Bear next to me. Then she told me to go to sleep, too.

“Goodnight, Uncle Preston,” she said.

“Goodnight, Violet.”



TWENTY-FIVE

Tara



“CAN YOU HEAR ME?” AVA’S voice crackled over our Skype connection. “Hello? Hello?”

“I can hear you.” I plugged in my headphones and looked outside the plane’s windows.

“You never called me back after the gala,” she said, her face appearing on my laptop screen. “What did your boss say when you left him there alone? And please tell me you haven’t shown up to work this week at all.”

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “We kind of um—”

“You kind of um, *what?*”

“We had sex in the bathroom, and then again in his car, and we’ve had sex in his office a few times since.” I paused. “Are you judging me?”

“No, I’m grabbing the popcorn.” She laughed. “I haven’t been laid in a while, so I need you to back up and give me every explicit detail. After you give me all that, then I’ll judge you.”

I smiled and slid under my blanket, replaying every moment me and Preston shared over the past few days—even the new late-night phone calls that were devoid of any work. I felt myself blushing with every word, secretly looking forward to seeing him again at the end of my trip.

“Wow.” Ava fanned herself. “I think I need to go and change my panties when I get off the phone.”

I laughed.

“Feel free to enjoy all the sex with him you want, but do me one favor,” she said, looking right at me. “Don’t let the sex distract you from the fact that he’s still a terrible boss, made you agree to a six-week quitting term instead of two,

and honestly still thinks that he's done as much for you as you have for him over the past two years."

"I won't forget."

"And don't you dare get attached to his little girl either."

"She's his niece."

"You know what I mean." She shook her head. "I know how you are when it comes to sexy single guys with kids."

"I'm not getting attached to Violet." I rolled over and put away the teddy bear clothes I'd purchased in Scotland. "Trust me. How's Fashion Week in Paris?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" She gushed about designers and runway shows for over an hour, and just as she was about to tell me about how awful her new boss was, he called her phone.

"It's my boss." She rolled her eyes. "Gotta go."

"Talk to you later." I closed my laptop and moved to the plane's living room—running my finger against the intricately carved "P" in all the wood furnishings. I picked up my notes for the next meeting and plopped onto the couch.

"Good evening, Miss Lauren." A flight attendant I'd never traveled with before walked into the cabin. "Would you like dinner this evening?"

"Yes. Can I have some of the gluten-free pasta and the coastal salad? If not, can I see the updated gluten-free menu for today?"

"The what?"

"The gluten-free menu," I said. "If it's still the same as it was last time, I'll just have the regular course dinner."

She looked at me in confusion. "Um. I'll have to see what we have."

Seconds later, she returned with a plain salad and a bowl of sliced apples. "I'm sorry, Miss Lauren. We don't have any of what you mentioned onboard. My coworker says we've never had that on any of our flights, but this is our first time flying with Parker International, so I'll make sure we have it next time."

"Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent," she said. "We do have a basket of chocolate with your name on it, but Mr. Parker's note says to give it to you in a few days." She smiled and walked away, leaving me confused.

Before I could follow her and show her exactly where the menus and the gluten-free dinners were, my town car driver stepped in front of me.

"Did you eat all the gluten-free meals, Will?" I smiled. "You could've at least shared them with me."

“Not at all, Miss Lauren,” he said, looking slightly terrified. “It’s my fault they’re not onboard today, and I’m sorry.”

“How is it your fault? It’s probably just a catering mix-up.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Mr. Parker always orders food from Other Words Catering Kitchen before any flight you take. My job is to pick it up an hour before takeoff and load it, but since we were running behind schedule, I didn’t have time to make the handoff with the caterer.”

I stilled. There were only five Other Words Catering Kitchen locations in the country, and none of them were anywhere near New York.”

“He has it flown in from the West Coast?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Every time?”

“Every single time.” He nodded, and I leaned back.

“Please don’t tell him about my mistake,” he said. “He’d be very upset if he knew.”

“I won’t.” I rubbed my forehead, completely stunned.

“I did make sure that all of the top shop owners are aware that you’ll be in town, just like Mr. Parker always does, and they’ll shut down the store for you the second you arrive.”

“I never knew Mr. Parker called beforehand.” I shook my head. It never crossed my mind that the stores were almost always empty when I shopped abroad.

I’m not done listing all the things I’ve done for you.

Preston’s words from our argument played in my mind, and I cleared my throat. “Can I ask you something, Will?”

“Of course.”

“Why does Mr. Parker always give his executive employees those random chocolate baskets? I’m not complaining, but is that a catering thing as well?”

“He doesn’t give all of his executive employees anything.” He smiled. “He only does that for you.”

“As a peace offering?”

“No,” he said, tilting his head to the side. Then as if he was embarrassed to say the words, he lowered his voice. “I remember him telling me that it helps with your stress during a certain um...time of the month.”

My jaw dropped, and I paled. I’d always been far too stressed in general to notice the timing, thinking that the monthly chocolate was another standard “amenity treat” for C-level executives, since the chocolates were hardly ever the same.

“Will?” I looked at him.

“Yes?”

“Can you tell me some of the other little things Mr. Parker does for his executive assistants?”

“Besides firing them or making them quit?” He laughed. “I have no idea.”

“No, I mean, what are the things he usually gives to the person in this position? Like, private transportation to business meetings and work, but what else?”

He raised his eyebrow. “Mr. Parker usually flew his EA via first class on a commercial flight since he never knew if they would quit in the middle of the trip.” He shrugged. “You’re the first to fly on his private plane. And you know, now that I think about it, his EAs never received their own office, let alone a corner one. They usually got a bigger desk in a room they shared with the senior interns. Oh, and it took years of me working for him before he started giving me any perks.” He laughed.

“So, it’s safe to assume that my monthly condo discount and passes to Broadway shows and such isn’t the norm?”

“Not at all, Miss Lauren.” He pulled out his phone and handed it to me, showing me an email from Preston. One that was dated over a year ago. “You never saw this, by the way. Let me know when you’re done reading it. It may take a while.” He winked at me and walked away.



SUBJECT: MISS TARA Lauren (Please Confirm You’ve Read This)

Dear Support Staff,

I’m sending you this message since you all have daily, direct, or consistent access to my latest assistant, Tara Lauren.

As you know, as of now, she’s lasted longer than any executive assistant I’ve ever had, and I’d like to keep it that way for as long as possible.

Her job is stressful enough, so I’m including a list of all the things that need to be done on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis to ensure that she never gets stressed about anything else...

I need every single one of these tasks to be followed to the letter. *Or else.*

I’m attaching the list.

Preston Parker,

CEO & Owner of Parker International



I OPENED THE FILE AND noticed that it was eight pages long. It included everything from the way I liked my breakfast and lunch, to the best hours to

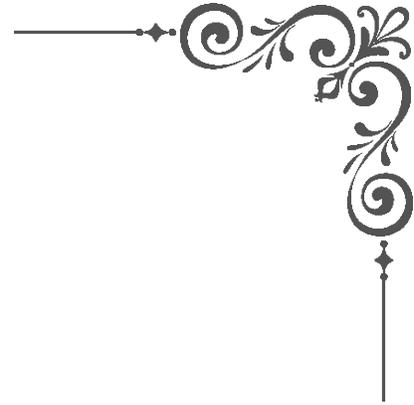
handle my dry cleaning and repair my heels, to making sure if I ever uttered the words, “I need to buy that,” that they bought it and kept it on hand just in case I mentioned it again. It also revealed that there was a concierge in my condo who was personally assigned to me. That all the times he told me I looked stressed and insisted that I attend “a complimentary group dinner on the roof with the city’s next hot chef,” it was never really for the group. It was always just for me.

By the time I reached the end of the list, Will reappeared.

“Did that answer your question, Miss Lauren?”

“Yes.” I nodded, my mind completely blown.

“Great. Would you like to see the updated lists he sent to us when you reached the one and two- year marks, or no?”



TWENTY-SIX

Preston



SUBJECT: TODAY'S MEETING with the London Reps + My Replacement (Interviews?)

Just letting you know that today's round of meetings went well. (You're welcome)

I'm attaching my notes for you to review.

Any luck with the interviews so far today?

Tara Lauren

Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,

CEO of Parker International

[londonmeetingnotes.pdf]



SUBJECT: RE: TODAY'S meeting with the London Reps + My Replacement (Interviews?)

So, I've heard. (Thank you) I would prefer that you attach a picture.

Preston Parker

CEO & Owner of Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: RE: TODAY'S meeting with the London Reps + My Replacement (Interviews?)

If you want a picture, I need you to be a little more specific... [smile]

Tara Lauren

Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,

CEO of Parker International



BEFORE I COULD TELL her exactly what I wanted, George walked into my office.

“Alright,” he said. “We’ve got an interview with a former NYU director in an hour, a pre-background interview check for another person who claims he worked at Toys R’ Us, and—” He stopped talking once he spotted Violet playing on my floor.

She looked up from her coloring book and smiled at him. “Do you want to play?”

He stepped back. “Preston, what is that?”

“It looks like a child, George. A *she*.”

“You know what I mean.” He blinked. “Please don’t say that you need me to handle a paternity lawsuit, because from the looks of things, she’s definitely yours and you’ll definitely lose.”

I smiled. “She’s my niece, George. I’ll tell you about it over lunch.”

His expression shifted from panicked to sympathetic. “Does she call you Uncle Preston?”

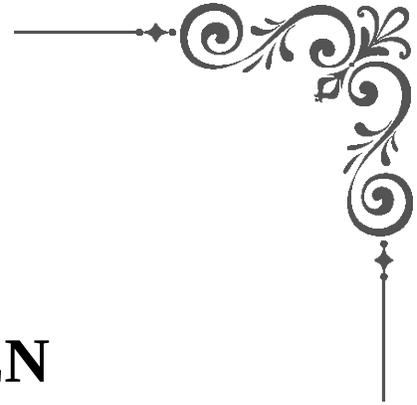
“Yes,” she answered for me. “He lives in my bear.”

I gave him an “I have no idea what she’s talking about” look, and glanced at Bear who was currently sitting on my desk and “eating” her carrots.

“We can reschedule the interviews,” George said, sitting on the floor next to Violet. “They’re not that important.”

“I’m pretty sure they are. I only have a little under a month to replace Tara.”

“Well, that’s the great thing about hiring an assistant like Miss Lauren.” He picked up a crayon. “She did her job so efficiently that you have a pretty decent cushion to find the right person. Besides, family comes first, and if you want to earn back your soul, it’s about time you learned that.”



TWENTY-SEVEN

Tara



“WELCOME HOME, MISS Lauren.” The flight attendant smiled when we returned to New York late at night. She handed me the leftovers of my chocolate basket, and a greeter carried my bags to a waiting town car.

Will slipped behind the wheel, and his eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. “Good to be back home again. Am I taking you to your primary condo tonight, Miss Lauren?”

“Where else would I be going at this hour?”

“Nowhere.” He smiled. “I was just asking.”

He pulled onto the road, and I waited a few minutes to contact Preston. I didn’t want to believe it, but I’d missed him during my trip. Even though we’d talked every night and he’d sent me messages that made me wet, I still wished he was there with me.

I really do want to see him tonight...

I made it ten minutes before I gave in and saw that he’d already sent me a message.

Preston: Have you landed yet?”

Me: Yes.

Preston: When do you plan to debrief me on all the meetings personally? I’ve read your notes, but I’m missing the projections.

Me: I can do it tonight if you need me to.

Preston: I do. I’m at my condo. Take the interior elevator.

“Will, can you take me to Mr. Parker’s Manhattan residence instead?”

“Of course, Miss Lauren.”

Half an hour later, I carried my files and a few bags up Preston's private elevator.

The second the doors glided open, my heart sped up at the sight of him standing in the kitchen in a white T-shirt and jeans. He was smiling at Violet, handing her a bag of popcorn.

"Hey, Tara!" She rushed over to me, spilling popcorn with every step. "You want to watch *Frozen* with us?"

"Sure." I set my files on the couch and looked at Preston.

"I thought watching it twice in a row would be enough," he said. "It's the only movie she wants to watch."

I looked around his living room, stunned at how messy it was. Violet's toys were everywhere, and there was a half-cooked batch of cookie dough on the coffee table. His work table was even messy, and I had to blink a few times to make sure that what I was seeing was real. The Preston I knew would've called the cleaning service the second too many papers cluttered his desk.

Violet spotted the teddy bear logo on my shopping bag and tugged at it as if she knew it was for her.

"I bought something for you while I was gone." I pulled it off my wrist and handed it to her.

Setting down her popcorn, she tore through the tissue paper and squealed as she pulled out the first set of clothes. "New pajamas for Bear!"

She walked over to Bear without opening the rest, quickly redressing him in his new blue and pink clothes.

"Thank you." Preston walked over and kissed me long and hard, gently rubbing his hands up and down my back. He didn't let me go until I was utterly breathless, and he squeezed my ass before pulling away.

"You don't own any TVs in your condo," I whispered to Preston. "Where are you watching it?"

"I had to add a new addition a few days ago when I realized how much I was going to need one." He slipped his hand around my waist, letting Violet lead the way through the halls and to his balcony.

The second we stepped outside, my jaw dropped. In place of the lavish leather furniture that was once there, he'd installed four rows of custom theater-style seats with plenty of additional leather couches to spare. The glass railing that surrounded his balcony was now reinforced with yellow child-proof bars, and the screen ahead of me looked as if he'd lifted it from a theater and dropped it right onto his property.

"You know," I said. "A normal person would've just bought a TV."

"That's exactly why I didn't do that."

“How much did this cost?”

“Less than what I paid for Sweet Seasons at my headquarters.”

“Six figures?”

“Seven.”

I held back a laugh. “What happens when it rains?”

“A construction crew is building retractable cases for the TV and furniture tomorrow,” he said. “I’m also having one built indoors for the days when she doesn’t want to come out here.” He looked as if his logic was perfectly practical. “I was going to ask you for your advice, but I didn’t want to distract you from your meetings. Is this too much?”

“Coming from you?” I smiled. “No, not at all.”

Violet plopped onto a seat in the front row and looked back at us. “Hit play, Uncle Preston!”

He laughed and pulled the remote from his pocket. Then he led me to the second row.

I rested my head on his chest as the movie played, and he ran his fingers through my hair.

“Do you want to go over my notes after this goes off?” I whispered.

“No.” He kissed me. “We can do that tomorrow.”

“Shhhh!” Violet turned around and looked at us. “Bear can’t hear the movie when you’re talking. You have to be quiet.”

We laughed, and she shushed us again.

The second she turned around, Preston pulled me into his lap and “quietly” kissed my lips for the rest of the film.



IN THE MORNING, I SHOWERED in his master suite, while he had one of my suits delivered to his front door.

We shared his town car on the way to his headquarters—each of us addressing our emails and phone calls as Violet slept in her car seat.

With only a couple of weeks left on our deal, I tried to remind myself that this was only temporary and that when it came time to resign from Parker International, we’d be strangers all over again.

“Stop thinking like that.” He leaned over and kissed me as if he’d read my mind, erasing every single one of my thoughts.

Damn.

We went our separate ways when we made it to his floor, and I told him I’d debrief him on my trip at noon.

Unfortunately, noon already felt like never since it was my day to sit through more replacement interviews, and I didn't think I was going to find the one today.

I took a deep breath and smiled at the third interviewee who sat across from me. "Can you tell me why you want to work for Parker International?"

"Well, this is actually my second interview for this position, so I'm hoping I'll make a much better impression this time around." She looked at her palm.

"Um...Okay, then. Well, I know you're currently finishing up a law degree, but it says here you used to work sales at the corporate flagship for Borders Bookstore before they ceased operations. Can you tell me a little about your previous position?"

"It was a *really* great job. It's so sad that they closed, you know?"

"Yes, but can you give me a few details about what you used to do there?"

"Um, yeah. Wait one second." She brought her palm up to her face. "I think this is where I messed up last time. Hold on." She began reading the words on her hands loud enough for me to hear them. "Say something about sales and units. Don't bring up names or specifics, so they can't ask that many specific questions. See other palm for my resume. Don't look at palms too much." She put her left palm down, and then she looked at her right one.

I pinched my arm to make sure this was really happening.

"Okay, so." She cleared her throat. "I would love to discuss my previous employment if, and only if, I'm granted a chance for a second interview. At this point and time, my resume speaks for itself."

I stared at her, tempted to say what Preston would say if he were sitting next to me.

Get the hell out of my office. Now.

"I'll be in touch," I said, standing and offering my hand.

"Oh my god, really?" She smiled. "I knew I'd get to the second round this time!" She shook my hand and walked out of my office.

The second the door shut, I crossed her name off the list. With half an hour to spare until noon, I decided to check on another applicant, but I spotted a regretful terms email.



SUBJECT: THANK YOU for Letting Us Know (AveryCon)

Miss Lauren,

Thank you for sending such a thoughtful letter to our job offer. We regret we won't be working with you for the next stage of your career, but we sincerely wish you the best.

Max Reynolds,
CEO of AveryCon



WHAT THE HELL?

I never sent them a rejection letter. I started to tell them that they must be mistaken, but another regretful terms email landed in my inbox, this time from the firm I interviewed for last week. It took me all of five seconds to check my sent box to realize what'd happened.

Ugh! Preston.

I stormed out of my office and into his, but he wasn't at his desk. His laptop was open, and his coffee was still steaming in its cup.

"Preston?" I called.

No answer.

Confused, I walked to his private bedroom suite down the hall and saw him sleeping on the bed with Violet softly snoring as she lay against his chest.

I wanted to thrash him, but I figured it was unfair to do so if he was sleeping, so I hit the lights. I walked over and pulled a blanket over them, and before I could walk away, Preston grabbed my wrist.

Opening his eyes, he stared at me for a while, and then he slowly stood up.

"Thank you for the long lunch break," Cynthia said, stepping into the room. She looked at our entwined hands and tilted her head to the side.

Preston made no move to let my hand go, he kissed Violet's forehead and whispered to Cynthia that we were about to discuss something important.

"Don't call me unless it's an emergency," he said.

He led me out of the suit and to his office, locking the door behind us.

"I'm pissed at you right now," I said.

"What's new?" His lips met mine within seconds, and my arms went around his neck. Slipping his hands around my waist, he cupped my ass and lifted me against him, carrying me over to his desk.

"Wait," I said, pulling back from him. "Why did you hack into my email account to send rejection letters?"

"For the umpteenth time, hacking implies that I didn't guess your password." He smiled, trailing his finger against my lips. "Although I do like your new password, *SexwithmyBoss*, much better than your old one."

"You said you had no problems with me quitting."

"I've *never* said that."

"You know what I mean...Why would you send a rejection letter to AveryCon without telling me?"

“The CEO of AveryCon is about to be indicted on serious fraud charges. You don’t need a sinking ship on your resume after working for the best.”

“What about The H Company? Is Mr. Horford about to be indicted on fraud charges too?”

“No.” He smiled. “I just don’t like him.”

“Oh my god...” I tried to push him away, but he held me still.

“He has a reputation, Tara.”

“So do you.”

“Before you, I’ve never slept with an employee, and I’ve never fired someone because she wouldn’t agree to sleep with me either.”

I said nothing.

I didn’t send rejections to any of the others.” He looked genuine. “Just those two.”

“You promise?”

“Promise.” He kissed my forehead and rubbed his hand against my thighs, rendering me speechless in seconds. Sliding his hands between my legs, he smiled when he realized there were no panties to rip off me.

Bending low, he slowly pushed my skirt up and pressed kisses against my skin. Then he stepped back and took a seat in his chair. Lowering it, so it was below the height of his desk, he kept his eyes on mine.

“Sit on my face,” he said.

“Here?”

“Yes.” He looked into my eyes. “Here.”

He didn’t give me a chance to second guess anything. He gripped my hips and pulled me forward.

“Grab the bookshelf.”

I obliged, gripping the wood, and positioning myself over him. Without another word, he cupped my ass and held me still as he buried his face in my pussy.

I moaned as his tongue toyed with my lips. “Oh, fuck...”

He slowly sucked my clit in and out of his mouth—forcing me to scrape my nails against the bookshelf’s wood.

Shutting my eyes, I tossed my head back as he kept up his reckless rhythm. I couldn’t focus on anything but the pressure building between my thighs, the feel of his mouth controlling my pleasure.

“Wait...Slow down...” I felt my pussy throbbing against his mouth.

“Preston...”

He groaned and slapped my ass, not taking my direction at all.

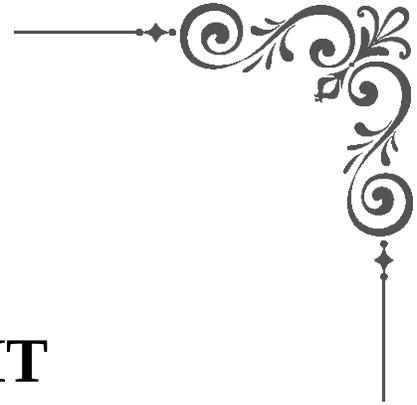
“Oh...Oh...” I arched my back and tried to hold on just a little longer, but it was no use.

My orgasm came fast and hard, and I gripped onto the bookshelf as my body convulsed like never before.

Gently caressing my sides, he waited until I stopped shaking to help me down. Smiling, he set me on his desk—pressing his hands against my trembling legs.

“Can we go back to your bedroom suite and lay down for a minute?”

“Of course not.” He smirked. “Now, we’re going to handle the fantasy you told me about on the phone.”



TWENTY-EIGHT

Preston



SEX WITH TARA WAS INCESSANT and out of control. It was also a new part of my daily routine and my new favorite part of the day. Each time was more fulfilling than the last, and although it felt like we were making up for the past two years, a part of me wished we could go back and start over.

“Are you okay?” I smoothed her hair as she leaned against me in my master bathroom. Her leg was wrapped around my waist, and her ass was pressed against my sink.

“Yes, but I have to go this time,” she said, blushing. “I need to nail this interview tomorrow, and I need to prepare for at least two hours.”

“This is your sixth interview for an EA position. I thought you wanted to work for yourself.”

“I do,” she said. “But I have to start somewhere. Somewhere that’s not where you are.”

“Hmmm.” I kissed her lips and slowly slid out of her, tossing the condom into the trash. “I could help you prepare for tomorrow if you like.”

“That’s what we were supposed to be doing.”

“You can spend the night here, then.”

“I tried that yesterday, and we ended up having sex in your laundry room, Preston.”

“What’s your point?”

She laughed and kissed me, motioning for me to pick up her dress. “I’ll come back later if I finish.”

“If?”

“Yes, if. I.e., if Preston doesn’t send me a bunch of filthy text messages to distract me from my work.”

“I won’t start sending them until four hours from now.”

“Thank you.”

I clasped her hand walked her to the elevator, giving her one last kiss to remind her to come back. Then I checked on Violet one last time before taking a seat in my office.

Not wanting to face any work tonight, I picked up my brother’s letter, but I put it down. I pulled out the manila envelope of Violet’s documents instead and spread them across my desk.

I flipped through her passport and noticed she had four full pages of stamps. France, Britain, Thailand, Australia, Mexico, Japan, and multiple stamps from the Dominican Republic.

I didn’t know Weston traveled so much.

I read through her hospital records, saving her birthdate in my calendar. I flipped through a miniature photo book, ignoring the pain in my chest as I came face to face with Weston helping her onto a horse. Him carrying her on his shoulders. Him kissing a pretty brunette as Violet smiled in the background.

As I was opening my liquor cabinet, I heard the sound of doors opening and closing. The sound of things falling onto my floor.

Standing up, I headed to the hallway and froze. Violet stood crying in front of my second guest room with Bear in tow.

“Violet?” I bent down to her level. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t find my mommy and daddy.” Tears fell down her face. “Can you help me?”

I pulled her close as she cried harder. “It’s okay, Violet. It’s okay.” I picked her up and carried her to my room.

Hitting the lights, I pulled back the covers and tucked her next to her teddy bear.

“I’m sorry, Violet,” I whispered, wiping the last of her tears away. “I’ll try my best to take care of you, okay?”

“I know because you live in my bear.” She gave me a soft smile.

“What do you mean by that, Violet?” I thought she would have stopped saying that strange phrase by now, but she still said it at least once a day. “Why do you think I live in your bear?”

“I can show you.” She sat up and grabbed Bear, flipping him over and unzipping his back. She pulled out a small blue booklet that read, *Violet’s Family: People Who Love Me*, and flipped it open.

On the first page, there was a beautiful picture of my mother and father standing in front of our old home.

“This is Grandma Rose.” She pointed at my mother and smiled. “I have a rose in my name, too.” She pointed to my father. “And this is Grandpa P. They’re in the clouds now.”

She flipped through a few more pages of my parents until she reached a picture of my brother and his fiancée. “This is my Mommy and Daddy. They’re in the clouds now, too.”

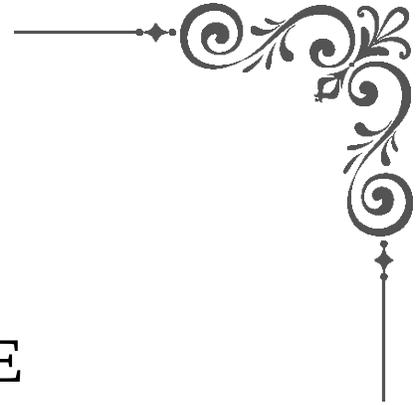
She flipped to the very last pages of the book where there were two pictures of me, images from my *Mister New York* covers. “This is my Uncle Preston—you. See? You live in my bear.” She looked at me. “Are you crying?”

“No.”

“Your eyes are watery.”

“They’re not watery, and I’m not crying.”

“You look like you’re crying.” She hugged me. “It’s okay, Uncle Preston. They’re in the clouds now.”



TWENTY-NINE

Tara

“the bitter end”



“AREN’T YOU HAPPY YOU didn’t quit your job, hon?” My mother smiled when I met her at the airport a couple of weeks later. “Tell me I was right all along.”

“What? You were dead wrong. I just told you I quit, and my last day is next Friday.”

“Well, you’ll regret it eventually, Tara. Nothing good in life ever comes to those who quit.”

I shook my head and signaled for the town car. The only thing I regretted was inviting her to New York for an entire weekend. Since Preston was flying Violet to Disney World for her birthday and Ava was starting yet another new job this weekend, I thought I would personally show her the one city she had yet to cross off her bucket-list.

I knew I should’ve waited another couple of months.

“Good afternoon, Miss Lauren.” Will stepped out of the car and opened the back door for us. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Lauren.”

My mother smiled and moved onto the backseat first. “Do you have an itinerary planned for us, Tara?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t start until tomorrow. I have some things being moved out of my office today, and I need to be at my condo for at least two hours.”

She stared at me for a few seconds. “Was your boss that bad, hon? Are you sure you’re not just imagining things?”

“She’s not just imagining things,” Will said, smiling at me through the rearview mirror. “Trust me.”

I mouthed “Thank you,” to him, and he winked at me.

“Well, I guess so,” my mother said, seeming to accept things finally.

I started to change the subject, to ask her if there was anything in particular she wanted to eat tonight, but my mother quickly reminded me that she didn’t accept shit when it came to quitting.

“Look at Bill Gates!” She faced me. “He never quit.”

“He dropped out of college.”

“Steve Jobs never quit.”

“He dropped out of college, too.”

“Well, Ellen DeGeneres—”

“She lasted one semester of college.”

“Well, those are only three examples.” She pulled out her phone. “Let me find some people for you to admire so you can rethink your decision.”

I looked out the window and held back a sigh.

By the time we made it to my condo, my mother had read me the biographies of over eighty “business people” who didn’t quit, and I didn’t have the energy to tell her that A) None of those people were currently alive and B) Half of them were fictional characters from bestselling books.

The doorman smiled at us as he let us inside, and she finally put her game to rest. I checked my mailbox and noticed it was stuffed with beautiful, bright postcards from employees at Parker International.



DEAR MISS LAUREN,

Please don't leave us with him.

Thanks.



DEAR MISS LAUREN,

Can I come with you? (Like, just me.) I don't think my job is safe if you're not around.

Thanks



DEAR MISS LAUREN,

Your boss is more than willing to keep you onboard here.

At least, that's what I've heard.

-Preston Parker



I LAUGHED AND READ the rest of them, noticing that for every one card that was from an intern, there were five more from Preston. As touched as I was by the gesture, and as much as I enjoyed spending more time with him, I knew we were better off working separately.

I just hoped he felt the same way I did about keeping our personal lives entwined.

“Wow.” My mother twirled around the lobby. “How much does this place cost a month? Actually, no. Don’t tell me. I don’t even want to know.”

I laughed and hit the up button for the elevator. “It’s expensive, but my boss covers most of it.”

“Will he be covering it for a little while longer after you’re gone?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t asked.” I knew that even if he didn’t, I had more than enough in my bank account to cover things for quite a while.

As we stepped onto the car, my mother leaned forward and gave me a hug—catching me completely off guard. “Your father would be very proud of you if he could see you now, you know?”

“Even after I quit something?”

“Absolutely.” She smiled. “Your father was the biggest quitter I knew. Why do you think I pushed you so hard to be the opposite?”

I laughed and let go as the elevator stopped on my floor. When the doors glided open, I showed her to the spa room that was on the left, and when we walked to the doors that led to my front door, Preston moved away from the wall and smiled at me.

“You didn’t tell me you had a boyfriend.” My mother playfully fanned herself. “Who is this?”

“I’m Preston Parker,” he said, extending his hand. “I apologize for all the things you’ve had to hear about me over the past two years, and it’s finally nice to meet you, Mrs. Lauren.”

“What?” My mother’s eyes widened as she shook his hand. “Tara, this is your boss?”

“The terrible boss that she hates.” He smiled, correcting her.

She stood utterly speechless, still shaking his hand, still staring at him.

I waited for her to let his hand go, but it started to feel like that wasn’t going to happen any time soon. “Mom?” I cleared my throat. “*Mom.*”

“Oh, sorry.” She finally let go, but she still stared at him.

Preston laughed and pulled me into a hug. “How did your mom get to New York?”

“By plane, of course.”

He raised his eyebrow. “She took a commercial flight?”

I nodded.

“Why?”

“Because that’s how us regular people get around.”

Laughing, he let me go. “You could’ve used one of my planes.”

“I still don’t think you need four.”

“That’s why I have five.” He smiled. “She’s more than welcome to take a private plane on her way back.”

“Am I allowed to use one when I start my new job?”

“Only if you’re flying somewhere to see me.” He looked as if he was tempted to push me against the wall and kiss me, but he thankfully restrained himself in front of my mother.

“Tara, this is your boss?” My mother repeated. “I thought you said you hated everything about him.”

“I do.” I looked at him. “I thought you were going to Disney World.”

“We were until a certain someone started crying because she wanted Tara to come,” he said. “No, excuse me. *Bear* wanted Tara to come. They’re waiting in the car with Simon.”

I smiled. “Well, I’d love to come, but can we leave another day? I’m waiting on some things to be delivered from the office, and my mom wants to see New York.”

“I’m open to going to Disney World,” my mother said. “Today. With him. Whenever.”

I held back a laugh, and Preston clasped my hand.

“I’ll ask Will to stand guard for the delivery of your things,” he said. “Do you need to grab anything from inside first?”

“I can’t believe you’re asking me if I want to pack *before* I go on a trip.”

“It’s a yes or no question, Tara.”

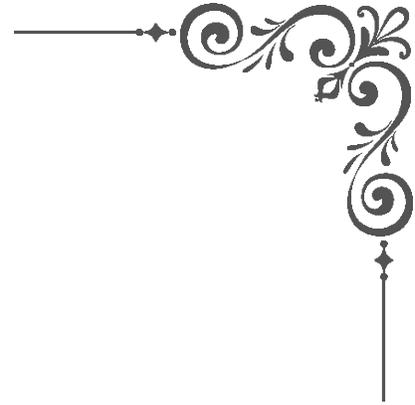
“No,” I said. Then in German, I added, “I remember my boss saying that he’ll buy me whatever I need when we get there. I wonder if that offer still stands.”

“You’re lucky your mother is standing here right now,” he responded, in perfect German. Then, in English, “Good. We can go now. Unless Mrs. Lauren needs to get something from your condo or get a tour of it first?”

“I can see the inside of her condo when we get back.” She started walking toward the elevator, and we laughed as we followed her.

When we stepped onto the car, he took a call on his phone, and my mother nudged me in my shoulder.

“I take back what I said about quitting,” she whispered. “With a boss that looks like that—especially one who is clearly into you, you should never, ever quit. Is it too late to ask to have your job back?”



THIRTY

Preston



I STARED AT TARA AS she slept next to Violet, as the plane taxied down the runway. She was holding Bear in one hand and a bag of Mickey Mouse lollipops in the other. Unlike me, she had no problems limiting Violet's daily sweets, and I was beyond glad that she came along on the trip.

Her last day of work was this coming Friday, and although I wasn't one hundred percent sold on her successor, I was officially sold on us. The moment after her farewell party ended, I was determined to ask her if the two of us could continue whatever the hell had been happening over the past several weeks.

I had no interest in dating anyone else, and I knew, without a doubt, that the feelings I had for Tara went deeper than sex.

"Is it too late for her to get her job back?" Her mother stepped into the cabin. "You can tell me, and I'll find a way to get her to change her mind."

"She made the right decision." I looked over at Tara again. "It was time for her to go in a different direction."

"You think she has chief attorney potential?"

"No," I said, honestly. "I think she has CEO potential. Anything else would be a waste."

She smiled and picked up a bowl of apples. "You know, she's a pretty light sleeper, and she hates grand declarations." Her mom looked at me as if she could read my mind. "Tell her how you feel now. I mean, I would if I were you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I smiled. "We're just friends, and she's my former employee."

"I've spent the past three days with you two, and this is the only time when you aren't touching." She gave me a knowing look and headed back to the rear

suite. “You’re far more than friends.”

When the door shut, I contemplated waking her up and asking her to join me in the front suite, but my phone buzzed on the table. An email from George.



SUBJECT: TARA LAUREN’S Recommendation

Preston,
Please don’t tell me you gave Tara the recommendation for her next job.
George Tanner
Chief Attorney, Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: TARA LAUREN’S Recommendation

Of course, I did. I was more than happy to do so. I even wrote the latest recommendation letter myself.

Preston Parker,
CEO & Owner of Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: RE: TARA Lauren’s Recommendation

Now is not a good time to joke with me, Preston. I’m serious. Dead ass, I’m-not-smiling serious.

George Tanner
Chief Attorney, Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: RE: RE: Tara Lauren’s Recommendation

As am I. (You could’ve used quotes instead of those two hyphens, by the way)



PRESTON PARKER,
CEO & Owner of Parker International

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Tara Lauren's Recommendation

So, you personally recommended her to be the interim general counsel? That's nice. Very sweet. The only problem is the goddamn company she'll be doing that with.

Please see attached.

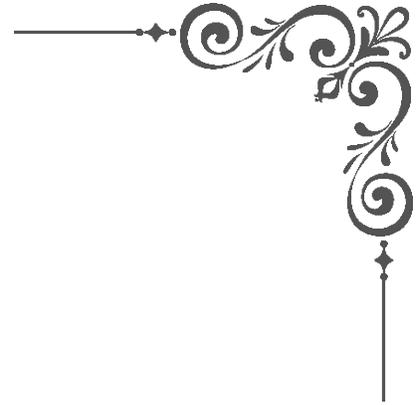
George Tanner

Chief Attorney, Parker International



I OPENED THE ATTACHMENT and lost my shit.

What the fuck?



THIRTY-ONE

Tara



“CHEERS TO THE BEST executive assistant in Parker International history!” Cynthia raised a glass of champagne. “Tara Lauren!”

Everyone in the room cheered and knocked back their drinks, and I gave them my best smile. So far, there’d been farewell songs, a group poem called “Please Don’t Leave Us, Tara,” and a dramatic dance of some kind called “No, Really. Please Don’t Leave Us, Tara.”

For some reason, Preston wasn’t here, and ever since we’d returned from Disney World, he’d been on edge. As if he was upset about something.

Probably because the Von Strums haven’t signed the contract yet.

“Thank you all so much for this party,” I said, standing on top of a chair. “It really means a lot to me. Although I have to leave, I’ll do my best to stop by for some Sweet Seasons Coffee to chat with you whenever I can.” I paused. “Well, some of you.”

Everyone laughed.

“Make sure that you give my successor, Taylor, all of the support he needs.”

“What’s his real name?” Cynthia asked.

“Taylor.”

Everyone in the room laughed, except Taylor and me, so I shrugged and stepped down.

I pulled out my phone and sent Preston an email.



SUBJECT: MY FAREWELL Party.

You’re missing it.

Tara Lauren
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International

**Please forward all requests to his new assistant Taylor Milton via
taylormilton@parkerhotels.com*



SUBJECT: RE: MY FAREWELL Party.

I'm aware.
Preston Parker
CEO & Owner of Parker International



SUBJECT: RE: RE: MY Farewell Party.

Is something wrong? You can tell me. (You've been off all week)
Tara Lauren
Executive Assistant to Preston Parker,
CEO of Parker International
**Please forward all requests to his new assistant Taylor Milton via
taylormilton@parkerhotels.com*



HE NEVER RESPONDED, and by the time the third cake was eaten and the final song played, my coworkers were filing out of the room.

I waited until only a few people were left and headed toward his office.

"Wait a second." Cynthia stepped in front of me. "I want to apologize for the way I treated you when you first got here. You didn't deserve that."

I smiled. "I accept your apology."

"I also wanted to say thank you for recommending me as Violet's interim nanny. Now that I'm engaged, it's been a godsend to have a less stressful job here." Her cheeks turned red like they usually did when she was about to ask me for something. "I wanted to know if you could ask Mr. Parker if I could be her full-time nanny since he's been interviewing like three people a day and still hasn't found one."

"Why can't you ask him yourself?"

She looked at me as if I'd grown two heads. "You're kidding, right?"

I shrugged. "I'm sure he'll consider it. You've done a great job so far."

"Mr. Parker doesn't consider anything—even the ties he wears, without asking you first," she said. "Every time I tell him there's someone on the line

with a proposal, he asks me if you've read it first. None of the no-people ever go through."

"Violet is a different matter, Cynthia."

"No." She shook her head. "She isn't. And you know that whether you still work here or not, that he'll ask you to give your opinion on his final choice anyway."

He did mention that a few weeks ago. "Okay, I'll let him know that he should consider, but Violet has the final decision."

"Thank you," she said. "One last thing, Miss Lauren. Did I ever tell you that Mr. Parker found out about our betting pool?"

"No. Did he make you cancel it?"

"Not at all." She smiled. "He joined in."

Figures. "Good to know. Why are you telling me this?"

"Because he won." She smiled as she headed to the door. "He said you'd last at least two years." She wished me luck one last time before leaving the room.

I stopped by my desk and picked up a file box for Preston before walking to his office.

To my surprise, he wasn't on his phone, and he wasn't in the middle of a meeting. He was just sitting at his desk, glaring at nothing at all.

"Hey." I stepped inside and shut the door. "What's wrong?"

He didn't answer. He looked me up and down as always, letting a smile cross his lips, but he didn't let it stay.

"What's going on, Miss Lauren?" he asked.

"Well, I have everything you need for your final meeting with Mr. Von Strum." I set my box on his desk and pulled out a package of pens. "Make sure you take these when you go and not one of your over the top priced pens as you know he hates displays of wealth. Also, make sure that you take him somewhere affordable for dinner."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Yes." I pulled out a color-coded binder that read, *The Do It Your Goddamn Self List*. "I made this for you. I've taught Taylor quite a bit over the past few weeks, but I know it's going to take him some time to truly get the hang of things, so whenever you feel like you need a second opinion or want something simple done, flip through here before you fire him, okay?"

He took it from me, but he didn't say anything.

"I've placed additional copies in your desk and other places in the office you frequent," I said, smiling. "Oh, and I want you to know that even though the first two years were hard for me, the last six weeks were amazing. I hope we can still see each other as much even though we'll be working separately, you know?"

“No, I don’t know,” he said. “I wish I could say I felt the same about you, but I don’t. And after you walk out of my office today, I don’t want to see you again.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I don’t want to expose Violet to your traitorous behavior.”

“Is this some type of walk down memory lane thing?” I smiled. “There’s definitely a chocolate drop in your coffee, and I’ve told Taylor countless times how particular you are about getting it at the right temperature.”

“This is not about a chocolate drop,” he said, his voice terse. “This is about you fucking betraying me on every level possible.”

“Preston, what are you talking about?”

“You told me your top two choices for your next job were LimeCorps and Tate-Hills. You said that after working at either of those for a year, that you were going to work for yourself. You didn’t say shit about Marriott.”

I sighed. I was saving this conversation for tonight over dinner.

“Do you have any idea how messed up this is?” he said, glaring at me.

“It’s only a one-year interim position,” I said. “Their offer was the best out of the three, and I was definitely going to tell you.”

“When? On your first fucking day?”

“Preston...”

“Of all the places in this city to choose to go to after working for me, surely you can see that this as a conflict of interest personally *and* professionally.” He was talking so loudly that I couldn’t get a word in. “You’ve just quit the number one luxury hotel brand to work at the number two luxury hotel brand. You were my right hand, my confidant, my *everything*.” He slammed his fist on the table. “What do you think that board of directors is thinking about their competition right now after hiring you?”

“You’ve always said they’re not your competition.”

“They’re *not*.” He stood to his feet. “To me, anyway. I am to them. Don’t you think they’ll ask you questions about everything you’ve learned here over the past two years?”

“I’m acting as a general counsel. I won’t be involved with the CEO’s day to day decisions, and I’m only there to get some additional experience in running a company. *A different* company,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm. “And if you must know, I happen to like working in the hotel industry.”

“Then you can stay here and do that shit.” He hissed. “I told you I’d give you anything you wanted to stay. *Anything*.”

“With all due respect, I need to learn all the different layers of the industry, and I need to learn from another type of leadership. I can’t work under you

anymore, in any capacity. I didn't think that—"

"You didn't think at all." He cut me off. "If you'd told me you were even considering applying there, I would've told you that the CEO is a liar and whatever he promised you won't happen. I would've also told you that there's no way I'm going to continue dating you and sleeping with you at night, while you're talking to him every damn day."

"I really wish you would give me a chance to explain," I said, narrowing my eyes at him. "This isn't what you think it is, and I've done my due diligence to make sure that there isn't a conflict of interest."

"It was a conflict of interest the moment you took an interview with them and didn't tell me," he said, clenching his jaw. "Get the hell out of my office. Now."

"Excuse me?"

"*Get the hell out of my office,*" he repeated the words, harsher this time. "Surely you have an office at Marriott where you can waste your breath and talk about all the things you didn't think about. I've heard enough."

"Preston—"

"I never got the chance to call security on you the day we met." He picked up his phone. "Would you like me to finally make up for that?"

"I *dare* you." I was seconds away from losing it. "If you'd stop talking so damn much for once and finally listen to someone other than yourself, you'd see that we're saying the same thing. I do want to work for myself."

"But not before you work for Marriott, right? That's why you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't tell you, because I knew how you would react."

"So, you knew *this* was coming?" He pressed a button his phone, still glaring at me. "I need someone to remove Miss Lauren from my property. Now. And while we're at it, she's officially persona non grata at all my hotels. Make sure the staff who work the breakfast bars are well aware of this fact just in case she shows up there again."

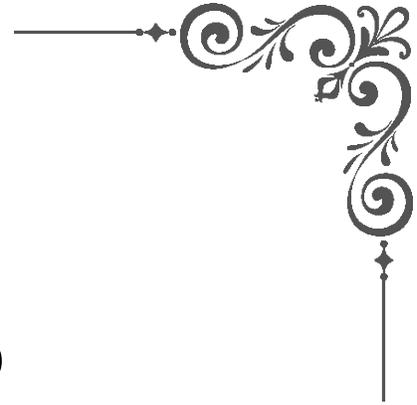
I shook my head. "Thank you for showing me that you're exactly who I thought you were when I first started here. Thank you for also showing me that the past six weeks meant nothing to you."

"The door is behind you. You don't need to talk in order to walk out of it."

"I can guarantee that I'll never talk to you again."

"Then why are your lips still moving?"

I knocked the box off his desk and stormed out of his office. I took the elevator down to the lobby, not bothering to get one last look at my corner office.



THIRTY-TWO

Tara



SUBJECT: STARTING DAY & An Amendment

Mr. Greywood,

If possible, I'd like to start my new position as your general counsel this week instead of next week.

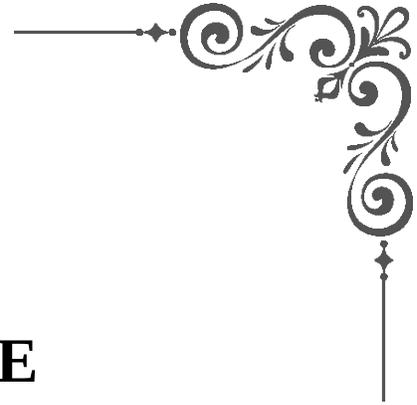
Thank you,

Tara Lauren

Marriott International



ONE WEEK LATER...



THIRTY-THREE

Preston



THE MID-SCALE RESTAURANT I was currently sitting in reminded me why I tended to avoid places like this as much as possible. The waiters were all high school students who were far more interested in talking to each other than taking my order, the kitchen was damn near out of everything I wanted to eat, and the manager was definitely on the phone with *Page Six* from the wicked gleam in her eye and the way she kept waving at me from across the room.

We need to get this shit over with.

I waited until after the “dessert” of packaged ice cream sandwiches was served and set the signing papers on the table.

“Will Miss Lauren be joining us for this momentous occasion?” Mr. Von Strum smiled at me from across the table. “I was hoping to see her one last time.”

“Miss Lauren is an official traitor to Parker Hotels International, and she will not be present at any meetings moving forward.”

“What?”

George kicked me under the table. “What he meant to say was that Miss Lauren is unable to make it tonight, but she wanted to let you know that she’s happy we could finally settle on great terms.”

“Well, is there any way I could call her?” he asked. “I just want to thank her.”

“For what?” I said. “Leaving? Going off to be with the enemy?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of getting me to see what all your company is going to do with my chain, Mr. Parker. She was great to work with, you know?”

“No, I don’t know. I found her quite average.”

“Preston, enough.” George tossed his napkin onto the table. “Mr. Von Strum, can you excuse us for one minute, please?” He stood up and glared at me, motioning for me to follow him onto the restaurant’s balcony.

He demanded that all the wait staff leave us alone, and the second they were gone, he crossed his arms. “Are you out of your mind, Preston? You’ve been chasing this deal for too damn long to lose it over your anger for Miss Lauren.”

“Can you believe she went there?”

“Preston, we’ve talked about this all week. All. Week.”

“Have we?” I shook my head. “You’re the one who told me she was going to Marriott.”

“I honestly regret that,” he said, sighing. “Look. I didn’t have all the facts. I just assumed that she was going to be an executive assistant again and that she would be used as a way for them to get insider tips on what we do at Parker International.”

“Isn’t that what she’s doing there?”

“She’s the acting general counsel, but only until their real general counsel comes back from an extended leave.”

“It’s the same shit.”

“I’m your general counsel, and I can tell you that it isn’t.” He paused. “Besides, she came to me a few days ago to amend her employment contract with them, so even if they did try to get her to say anything, she can’t legally.”

“There’s no way they agreed to that shit.” I was still hurt as hell. “What hotel CEO in their right mind would hire her and not ask her anything about working for me?”

“I’m sure a ton of them would.” He shrugged, then he smiled. “But she added some fascinating fine print that will prevent her from answering anything. Some of the same fine print that someone else used behind my back.”

“She used white ink?”

“Not only did she use white ink at the end of her contract, but she also added little notes throughout the first part of the contract in white ink as well.”

I held back a smile. I was still pissed.

“Now, if you don’t mind,” he said. “I need you to go in there and not think about Miss Lauren for all of five minutes so we can seal this deal.”

“Not thinking about her won’t be a problem.”

“That’s why you’ve been checking on her via the concierge at her condo all week, right?”

I said nothing.

“Five minutes, Preston.” He pointed to the doors. “That’s it.”

We returned to the table, and Mr. Von Strum was standing to his feet.

“We’re so sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Von Strum,” George said, panicked. “Are you no longer interested in signing the deal with us?”

“Not even close.” He smiled and pointed to the papers, his signature freshly inked on each one. “I just want to get the hell out of here, as I refuse to believe that Mr. Parker takes his business guests to a place where the waiters have yet to realize that they’ve only served us dessert and nothing else.”

“You’re correct.” I smiled and placed his papers into my briefcase. “I thought you liked cheap, dive-bar food.”

“I do, but I never said I didn’t appreciate an expensive meal on someone else’s dime.” He laughed. “Show me where you’d dine on a night like this, Mr. Parker.”

“Fair enough.” I shook his hand and led him and George to the gum-stained elevator.

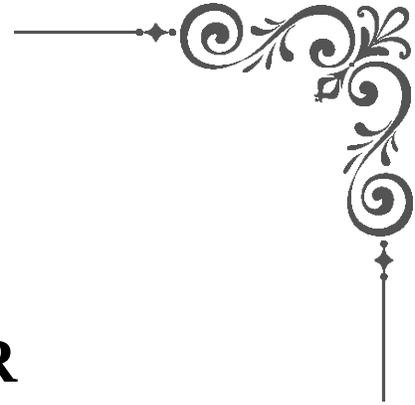
“Would you like me to drive?” he asked. “I’m sure your chauffeur is going to have a hell of a time getting down here in the traffic.”

“There’s no need to drive.” I pulled out my phone. “I took my helicopter here.”

He shook his head. “You have nothing else better to do with your money, do you?”

“Would it make you feel better if I told you I have a niece who doesn’t give a damn about it and only wants to play with fifty cent cardboard boxes and teddy bears?”

He laughed and patted my shoulder. “Only a little.”



THIRTY-FOUR

Tara

I WALKED THROUGH THE doors at Marriott International for another day, shutting my office door behind me. Heartbroken and angry, I was still so wired into Preston's life, that I was still having my new town car driver taking me to Sweet Seasons every morning, and some of Preston's old contacts were still calling my phone and telling me things I no longer cared about.

Since I wasn't petty like he was, I forwarded all those calls to his new assistant, and even sent Cynthia text messages about little things I happened to remember from time to time. Then again, since I'd learned a thing or two from his petty playbook, I blocked all his phone numbers and deleted them. (Yes, even though I knew them all by heart.)

Ugh. Fuck him.

I pulled up my new CEO's schedule for the day and pulled out my notepad so I could take some notes.

Brunch meeting regarding property contracts, afternoon Skype session about legal fees with the Voight Company, and an inventory session with the interns.

I refreshed the schedule again, knowing that this couldn't be right. Yet, no matter how many times I refreshed it, those three meetings were the only things that appeared. I looked at the schedule for the entire week and saw that there were only two to three events per day.

That's it?

I picked up my desk phone and called his secretary.

"Good morning, Miss Lauren!" she answered on the first ring. "Is everything going okay during your first week?"

"It's been more than okay so far."

"Well, great! How may I help you?"

“I was looking over the schedule for Mr. Greywood, and there are only two to three things a day. Is there a private calendar I’m missing?”

“No, that’s right. Mr. Greywood likes to keep his days simple and stress-free.”

“Well, since most of these meetings are already handled, do you have any idea what his current general counsel would do? I don’t want to contact him about this just yet since I’m trying to be a great interim, you know?”

“If I were you, I would just enjoy the lush job, Miss Lauren,” she said, sounding genuine. “Mr. Greywood doesn’t trust women, and he hired you and me to make himself look good on the outside. His true general counsel is a guy named Bob who he trusts with his life. But that job is so hectic that no woman would be able to handle it. Trust me.” She laughed. “Treat yourself to one of our spas downstairs, answer a few emails, and check on things every hour or so. Then take a breath and smile because you officially have the best job in all of New York.”

“Right...”

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, but thank you and the rest of the staff for the sweets basket.”

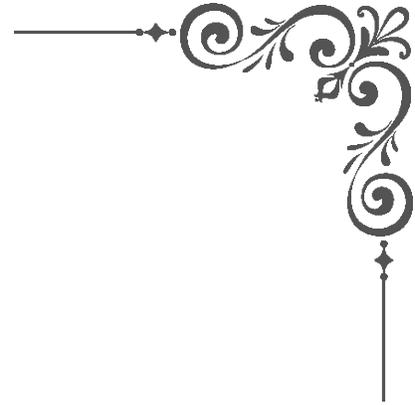
“We didn’t send you that sweets basket,” she said. “That came from Preston Parker.” She ended the call, and I stared at the basket—tempted to toss it into the trash.

The last thing I needed right now was any memories of him. I stood up and left my office, hitting the lights.

I’d rather take her up on that spa offer.



TWO WEEKS LATER



THIRTY-FIVE

Tara



SUBJECT: How's your job at the #2 hotel chain?

Subject: I need to talk to you about the last time you were in my office.

Subject: I've called you fifty times this week.

Subject: Did you block my number?

Subject: I know you see these damn emails, Tara...



I DELETED THE LATEST page of Preston's emails and headed downstairs to the tech department.

"Good morning, Miss Lauren." The director smiled at me. "How can I help you?"

"I'd like you to flag and block an email address from sending things to my inbox from here on out," I said. "For some reason, my blocker isn't working."

"Of course, Miss. What's the email address?"

"PrestonCEOParker@ParkerHotels.com."

"Oh." He sighed. "I'll see what I can do."

"You'll see what you can do? All you have to do is place it on the block list just like all the other addresses you have blocked."

"Well, it's slightly more complicated than that. It takes a lot of technical skill, and sometimes certain addresses slip through anyway."

I gave him a blank stare.

"The internet is a crazy place, you know? It's super crazy."

"How much is Mr. Parker paying you to keep him off my block list?"

“What?” His cheeks reddened, a dead giveaway. “Nothing. I wouldn’t dare take his money for something as simple as this. I mean—”

“How much?”

“Two thousand a week.”

“I’ll double it.”

“He said you’d say that if you found out,” he whispered.

“And?”

“He said that I was supposed to call him when that happened.”

“You’re not going to call him,” I said. “Because if you do, I’ll have you fired for fraternizing with the competition.”

“*Competition?* Marriott is nowhere near the same league as the Parker Hotels, Miss Lauren. The Parker Hotels are like so way ahead that it’s almost laughable.”

“That’s not what your employee handbook says.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “You will *not* call him. I don’t care what he offered you. Clear?”

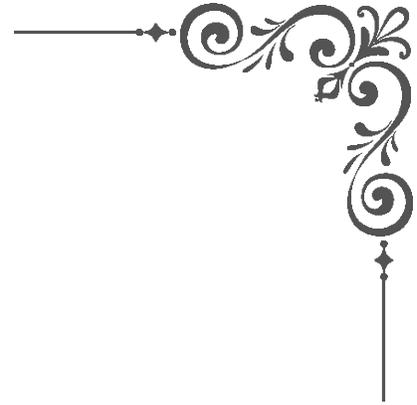
He nodded. “Clear.”

“Good.” I started to walk out of his office, but he called my name, making me look over my shoulder. “Yes?”

“Um. He offered me a bonus if I could make you finally open one of the baskets he’s sent.” He walked over to our main storage room and opened it, revealing all the huge gift baskets that arrived three times a day like clockwork. “So, would it kill you to open one and let me get a picture for him? I mean, it’s just a picture, and you’d be helping the less fortunate, right?”

I shook my head and walked away.

Jesus, Preston.



THIRTY-SIX

Preston



I WASN'T USED TO TARA not talking to me.

I wasn't used to not seeing or hearing from her for this long and I'd yet to admit it, but the shit hurt like hell. It especially stung more each time I had to call for my new executive assistant who was nowhere near as good as she was, or anytime Violet asked if she was coming over.

She was ignoring all of my emails and text messages, and if I knew her like I thought I did, she was probably placing all of my gifts in a closet somewhere.

Sighing, I picked up my desk phone and called Taylor.

"Yes, Mr. Parker?" he answered on the first ring.

"You forgot to bring me my short-list this morning."

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Be right there." He ended the call and walked into my office a few seconds later.

He was a decent assistant, although he struggled to understand the art of sarcasm and he couldn't get my coffee right to save his life. I'd given up on asking him to get it, and had even used Tara's *Do It Your Goddamn Self* list to complete certain aspects of his job.

"Are you going to start giving me some of your updates, Taylor?" I asked. "Now would be a good time."

"Right. Well, I have everything set for your meeting this Friday." He tapped his lip. "I also have your schedule finalized for your conference in Florida next month. Also, Violet's birthday party planner said she'd be calling you soon."

"I already threw Violet a birthday party this year. It was a trip to Disney World."

“Yeah, but—” He crossed his arms. “You said that Violet was adjusting to New York at a rapid rate with her new friends and at the rate she was going, she’d want a party at Grand Central Station. I figured you’d want to start planning for that now, right?”

“That was sarcasm, Taylor.”

“It didn’t sound like sarcasm. It sounded like you were serious.”

“That’s the entire point of sarcasm.” I rolled my eyes. “I’m taking her to Disney World next year for her party. In fact, her birthday parties will be there until she turns nine.”

“You can afford to rent out a section of Grand Central Station for a night, though. I think she’d much prefer that, don’t you think?”

“Get the hell out of my office, Taylor.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

I gave him a blank stare and held back a sigh. “Thank you for your work today. You can go home early if you need to.”

“Can I say something before I leave, sir?”

“Go ahead.”

“Well, don’t take this personally, but I can’t help who I am, and I’d appreciate it if you accepted that I’m not Tara. I’ll never be Tara, either.”

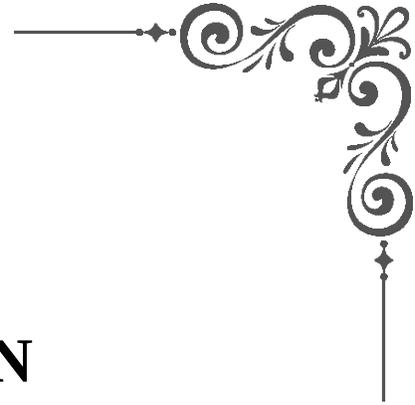
I raised my eyebrow.

“Today is the first time you’ve called me by my name, and you expect me to know all of the things she does. It’s only been a few weeks, so could you please give me a chance as an individual without all the expectations and things you had with her? That’s all I’m asking.”

He placed a folder on my desk, not giving me a chance to answer. “I’ll see you tomorrow, sir.”



THREE WEEKS LATER...



THIRTY-SEVEN

Tara



I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD see the day when I would miss working for Preston, but this morning was making me wonder if I should've stayed a little while longer. My calendar was empty, my task list was complete, and most of the staff was attending a training session that would keep them busy for the rest of the day.

Leaning back in my chair, I stared at the mountain of delivered gifts that was sitting in my corner. I had yet to touch any of them, and I wanted to make it to the four-week mark before I even looked at one of the attached cards, but with another blank afternoon, I was tempted to cave.

Before I could open the closest package, an email from my CEO popped onto the screen.



SUBJECT: IDEAS NEEDED

Hey everyone,

Just letting you know that I'm in need of some hosting ideas for a conference I want to hold for some executive friends this month. This would be for the first session regarding the Autumn Promotional Campaign we're running next year, so please let me know if you have any.

Please don't share this email with anyone who is not a B-level or C-level employee.

Mark Greywood

CEO of Marriott International



I IMMEDIATELY PULLED out the folder of ideas I was working on last week and made my way to his office. Knocking, I cleared my throat as I stepped into the room.

“Well, hello there, Miss Lauren.” He smiled at me as I walked inside, smoothing his greying hair. “How are you today?”

“I’m great. I was wondering if I could talk with you for a minute.”

“Of course, of course.” He gestured for me to have a seat and handed me a basket of bread. “Try a few of these mini-rolls first. They’re amazing.”

I hesitated.

“No worries, Miss Lauren,” he said. “They’re gluten-free.”

“Thank you.” I smiled and tried one. Then another, and another.

“Amazing, right?” He laughed. “I can’t get enough of these damn things. The chef who made these is out of this world, and he’ll be cooking for the B and C-level executives in a private party tomorrow before he starts his residency at our downtown hotel.”

Why didn’t I get an invite to that? “That sounds great. I wanted to show you some ideas for the conference you’re hosting for the executives. Since it will be a fall-themed campaign, you should make sure that everything about their trip from start to finish will fit that theme to heighten the brainstorming sessions.” I opened my folder. “If you’ll give me five minutes—”

“I didn’t know I included you on that email.” He interrupted me. “I don’t need any ideas from you, Miss Lauren. I’m sure they’re amazing, but this is a man’s job as you know.”

“No, I don’t know. What do you mean?”

“I mean, all I hired you to do was be the interim.” He smiled. “So, be the interim. Do the few small things in the morning from my short-list, handle your inbox, and rest your pretty little head while the guys run everything else.”

“I contributed to all the marketing campaigns at Parker International,” I said. “It wasn’t even in my job description, and some of my ideas were better than the damn Marketing Director’s.”

“Like I’ll believe that.” He tilted his head to the side, giving me his patronizing smile. “The Preston Parker I know wouldn’t dare let a woman have any input on anything except how short he likes her skirt.”

“He’s not like that at all.” I paused. “A good idea was a good idea, no matter who it came from.”

“Nice try, Miss Lauren.” He winked at me. “But I’m pretty sure I know Mr. Parker far better than you do. He’s been at this for over a decade just like I have, and the only reason he’s number one is because he’s slightly more ruthless than

we are, but it's also because we always have the right thinkers in the room. The guys."

"Okay, look." I wasn't going to put up with this for a full year. "I would appreciate it if you would just listen to what I have to say before making any—" I sneezed. "Sorry. As I was saying—" I sneezed again.

He bit into another mini-roll. "Something wrong, Miss Lauren?"

"Was there any garlic in those?"

"Oh, yeah. Tons." He smiled. "The beauty of how the chef makes them is that you don't even taste it until it's paired with the wine, but it's there." He smiled. "Brilliant, huh?"

"I need to go home." I felt my throat itching and knew it was only going to get worse from there. "Now."

"Well, do you want me to get you a cab?" he asked. "I'm suspending the town car service starting tomorrow anyway. Sorry that I didn't include you on that email either."

"A cab would be fine."

He picked up his desk phone and handed it to me. "You don't expect me to actually call it for you, do you?"



LATER THAT NIGHT, I groaned as I held my phone's camera up to my face. My lips were swollen, and my eyes were red and puffy.

"Here you go, bestie." Ava placed a cold towel on my forehead. "If it makes you feel any better, my new job sucks. Like, I can't even put into words how much I hate it."

"I think I hate my new job, too," I said. "Why is it so hard to find a good one?"

"Like I would know." She laughed. "Anyway, your boyfriend stopped by the concierge desk today. Again."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Well, I ran into him on my way out, and he practically begged me to talk to him."

"Preston Parker doesn't beg for anything."

"He was definitely begging." She fluffed the pillow behind my head. "I told him you got sick at work. Like, actually sick. Not as in a ruse to get him to go away."

She stepped away for a few seconds and returned with a silver tray of food. "He told me to contact Other Noodles and they flew this in while you were

sleeping. Can you believe that?” She uncovered the tray, revealing chicken soup and gourmet crackers. There was also hot tea, ginger ale, and a note.



FEEL BETTER (AND PLEASE answer one of my calls),

Preston

PS—Yes, the noodles are gluten-free.

PSS—I still wish that you were working for me, but I do appreciate the “Do it Your Goddamn Self” list.



“I’M NOT EATING HIS apology food.”

“Yes, you are.” She handed me a spoon. “He also sent medicine, and Violet sent you a crayon drawing. Don’t ask me what it’s supposed to be, because I honestly can’t tell.”

I laughed and slowly sat up, sipping the soup. “After he talked to me the way he did in his office, would you give him a second chance?”

“Let’s see. What would I do if my former billionaire-boss got super mad at me for going to another hotel company and put me out of his office? If this is the same billionaire who cares about me, gives me good cock, and wants to be with me while calling me every day and even sending gifts to my best friend just to get small updates about my life?” She tapped her chin. “No, I wouldn’t give him a second chance. I’d find another billionaire. They’re like a dime a dozen, you know?”

“Wait a minute. You’ve been giving him updates on me in exchange for gifts?”

“Of course not.” She covered the Cartier watch on her wrist. “What type of friend do you think I am?”

I picked up a pillow and tossed it at her. “A terrible one.”

“Give it some time and decide for yourself,” she said. “As lovesick as he’s acting, I’m sure he’ll wait as long as it takes.”

“He’s not lovesick, Ava. He’s just used to having me around to help him make decisions.”

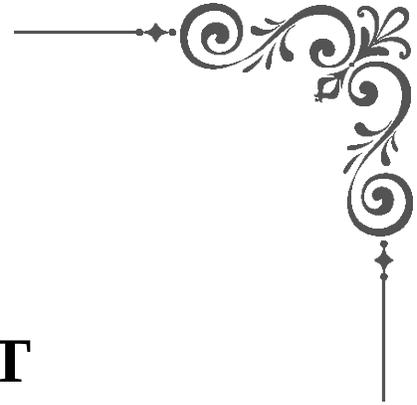
“No, I’m pretty sure he cares about you just as much as you care about him.” She leaned against the doorframe. “You know, I believe that you hated him the first year or so, but after that, I’m not so sure. You kept showing up to work when you knew you had enough money in the bank, and you could’ve easily walked away.”

“For the umpteenth time, I was legally bound to do so.”

“You weren’t personally bound to do so.” She shrugged. “You could’ve stayed at home and never shown up. What would he have done?”

“Get out of my room.”

“That’s what I thought.”



THIRTY-EIGHT

Preston



I SET DOWN MY PHONE as my tenth call of the day went straight to Tara's voicemail. I'd never called a woman this much and received nothing in return, and with her knowing all my ways to get to her, I wasn't sure what I could do next. I couldn't deny that my days were far less exciting without her, and in her absence, I spent way less time in my office.

Feeling a slight tug at my pants, I looked down and saw Violet toying with her new sports cup.

"Can you help me, Uncle Preston?" she asked.

I took it from her hands and adjusted the straw. "Here you go."

"Thank you!" She smiled and let Bear have a sip. Then she looked up at me again. "I miss Tara."

"Me, too."

"Can she come play with us?"

"Let's see." I picked up my phone and called her friend Ava. I was done being patient.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Ava," I said. "It's Preston."

"I know that. You just called me two hours ago—without a gift offer might I add, so I don't have any new information for you."

I laughed. "I'm not going another day without seeing her. Where is she?"

"She doesn't work for you anymore."

"I'm well aware of that."

"She also doesn't love you anymore."

"I wasn't aware she loved me to begin with."

“Well...” She gasped. “She didn’t. She hated you.”

“Please tell me where she is, Ava.”

“You’re not going to offer me a gift first?”

“The gift will be her not talking about me every night.”

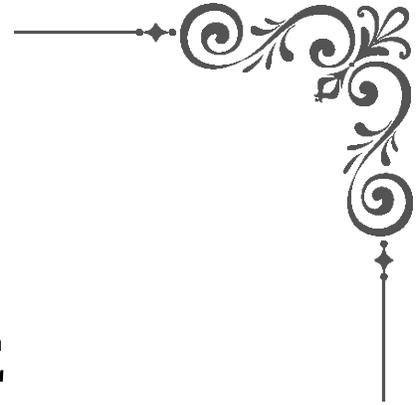
“She doesn’t talk about you every night.” She paused. “Okay, no I would definitely like that. She’s at the 21 Roof Bar on Park Avenue. It’s a work event.”

“Thank you very much.”

“By the way, if you ever talk to her the way you did in your office again, I will get all my fashion friends and we will one star the hell out of all your hotels,” she said. “I will also hire someone to make sure that the next chocolate drop at the bottom of your Sweet Seasons coffee isn’t chocolate at all if you catch my drift.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“I’m *promising* you,” she said. “Now, get off my phone and go talk to the person you want to talk to.”



THIRTY-NINE

Tara



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN,

Thank you for the opportunity to work for your misogynistic brand. I've truly appreciated being treated like a second class—



“MISS LAUREN?” MY BOSS walked toward me, and I put away the first draft of my next two weeks’ notice. “Miss Lauren, I want to introduce you to Mr. Kline. This is the man who put on this event at a moment’s notice. Isn’t it grand?”

“It’s something.” I bit my tongue to prevent myself from saying this event was basic as hell. The food was overcooked, the theme (Old Hollywood) was nonexistent, and most of the decorations were outdated. The “star” of the event was an Elvis impersonator, and I was finally accepting that Preston would always be the best hotelier this city had ever seen.

“Mr. Kline has been working with me for a full decade now,” he said. “He’s someone you can learn a lot from since you’re so eager to do work all the time.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Lauren.” Mr. Kline extended his hand as my boss walked away. “How long have you been working at Marriott?”

“Too long already.”

“What’s that?”

“A little over three weeks.”

“Ah,” he said, still shaking my hand, slowly caressing the back of it with his thumb. “Well, if you ever want to learn a few things from someone with some

experience, I'm always available. Mr. Greywood has told me that you're quite ambitious."

I damn near vomited as I jerked my hand away. "If you think that I'm willing to fuck you to get a leg up in this industry, you're sadly mistaken," I said. "I've already worked with the best brand in the business, and I'm just here to take notes and see why businesses like yours never catch up."

"Excuse me?"

"I thought it would take me a year, but it's only taken three weeks."

"Well, then." He narrowed his eyes at me. "I can see exactly why Preston Parker let you go. You don't know your place. Typical of women in this industry anyway."

I rolled my eyes.

"Don't be surprised if Mr. Greywood has a long talk with you Monday."

"Don't be surprised if I no longer work there Monday."

Unable to come up with something else to say, he cleared his throat and walked away.

I pulled up my two weeks' notice again, redrafting it from the very beginning. I was three paragraphs into my thoughts when I felt a familiar set of hands wrap around my waist. All of a sudden, I remembered those hands owning me in front of a mirror, holding me against a desk, and pinning me against a glass table.

"I'm really starting to think that you do hate me," Preston whispered, setting every nerve in my body on fire in seconds. "How else can you explain making me come to some sad shit like this just to catch a glimpse of you?"

He spun me around, and my words stalled on my lips as I looked him over. Dressed in the immaculate grey suit and sparkling cufflinks he was wearing on the first day we met, he was making every woman on the roof stare in his direction.

His green eyes were rendering me speechless all over again, and my heart was racing a mile a minute.

"I hope you're not here to say that you're sorry," I said. "You're wasting your time because I don't forgive you."

He raised his eyebrow, not saying anything.

"I don't appreciate the way you talked to me in your office the last we spoke or the way you tossed me out like it was nothing," I said. "I also don't appreciate the fact that you can't go one day—like one day, without texting and calling me nonstop like I'm still your assistant."

"I texted and called you far more when you were my assistant."

“That’s not the point. You’ve said everything in those hundreds of messages and emails except the two words I highly doubt you’ll ever say. So, as sexy as you are, and as much as I do miss feeling you inside of me and hanging out with Violet—”

“I’m sorry.” He interrupted me, tightening his grip on my waist. “I’m sorry, Tara.”

“For not giving me a chance to tell you my side of the story?”

“For not telling you how much I cared about you sooner.” He looked into my eyes. “I should’ve said it a long time ago.”

“Weeks ago?”

“Years ago,” he said. “The first two months you worked for me.”

“You had a hell of a way of showing it.”

“Come back, and I’ll do it better.”

“You have Taylor now.”

“I have my fifth Taylor now.” He smiled and held me even closer. “I’ll do whatever it takes to get you back. I just want you back.”

“Are you not sorry for kicking me out of your office as well?”

“I am,” he said, looking genuine. “And I’m even sorrier for the past few weeks since a certain someone has done the one thing that always gets to me. The one thing I more than deserved.”

“Hating you?”

“Ignoring me.” He smiled. “I can’t take it anymore.”

“Well, I’ve moved on to someone else, so you may want to let go of me before he gets back.”

“I’m not even going to entertain that line of conversation,” he said, smirking. “It’s one thing to downgrade your job, but you wouldn’t dare downgrade me.”

“It’s not a downgrade just because he doesn’t have a billion dollars.”

“It’s a downgrade because he doesn’t exist.” He rubbed his hands against my back. “I’m not leaving until you tell me that we can pick up where we left off.”

“And if I say that we can’t?”

“You’d be lying, but I’d just show up at your job Monday and ask you again.”

“I won’t be there Monday,” I said, smiling. “I’ve learned all that I’m going to learn there, and I’m going to pre-date my two weeks’ notice.”

He looked stunned. “Does that mean you’re coming back?”

“Hell no,” I said, feeling his lips brush against mine. “I’ll never work for you again.”

“I’m a much better boss now.”

“No, the hell you’re not.” I laughed. “I only took this job so I could learn how to be in a different role, so when I have my own company, I’ll have a good understanding of what each C-level executive does. It wasn’t personal, Preston.”

“I know that now,” he said. “What do I have to do to get you back?”

“You can start by kissing me,” I said. “I’ll have to create a short-list and put it on your desk for the rest.”

His lips immediately met mine, and my back hit the roof’s railing as he slipped his tongue between my lips, as he took his time exploring every inch of my mouth. He caressed my sides as he kissed me harder, and I completely forgot that we were in public.

For several minutes, it was just us, and it was like we were in his office all over again.

When he finally tore away from me, I was struggling to catch my breath, and everyone on the roof was staring at us.

Completely unfazed by the attention, Preston smiled and clasped my hand. “I think we need to finish this elsewhere,” he said, leading me right through a crowd of open-mouthed Marriott executives. “We should also compromise on the idea of you working for me again.”

“I just told you that I’d never work for you again.”

“Did you hear the word compromise?”

“Did you hear the word never?”

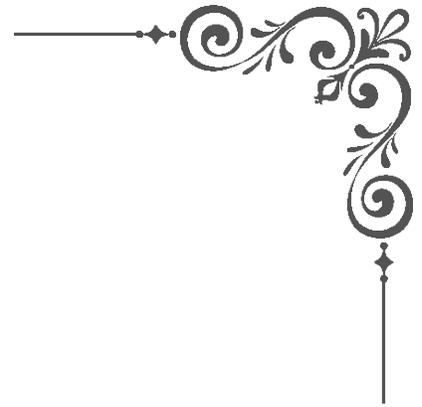
He laughed and trailed a finger against my lips as we stepped onto the elevator. “I think you’ll like this deal. In fact, I’m currently in the middle of drawing up the contract, and I think the terms are beyond fair.”

“Is there any fine print?”

“Of course,” he said, kissing me. “There always will be.”



—The End—



Tara

One Year Later... At Disney World



“ARE YOU FINISHED WITH this, Violet?” Preston held out a Mickey Mouse lollipop.

“Yep!” She nodded and rushed away, returning to the Mad Tea Cups ride for the umpteenth time. “Come watch me!”

Thanks to Preston, the entire park was exclusively ours for the day, and Violet was enjoying her birthday with five of her newest friends. Although she was now fully adjusted to living with us in his over the top condo, she still woke up from time to time asking about her parents, and we made sure to hold her every time.

I watched Preston snap pictures of her spinning around in a pink cup, and felt my phone buzzing in my pocket.

“Yes, Nicole?” I answered.

“Um. Hi, Miss Lauren.” My newest executive assistant said. “I mean, Parker? Is your last name Parker yet?”

“It won’t be until the fall, Nicole.” I smiled. “Is something wrong?”

“No, I was just calling to let you know that the Day deal is officially done and your senior attorney has finalized all of the paperwork,” she said. “Would you like me to email it to you from your account or mine?”

“You can do mine.”

“Okay, great! This is the last call during your vacation, I swear!” She ended the call and my phone buzzed with an email.



SUBJECT: THE DAY DEAL (Messaged through your main business account)

Everything is attached—

Tara Lauren

CEO of Von Strum Hotels,

Division of Parker International



“I THOUGHT WE SAID NO work on vacation,” Preston said, walking over to me.

“We did, but you’ve answered ten calls already today.”

“Those ten calls are about interviews for my latest Taylor.” He smiled.

“That’s not work.”

“What number are you on since I’ve been gone now? Twenty-five?”

“Twenty-seven.” He kissed my lips. “I’d love to make it twenty-eight forever if a certain someone is getting tired of being a CEO.”

“Never.” I laughed, looking over at Violet again. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Did you ever read your brother’s letter?”

“I did.”

“Are you ever going to tell me what he said?”

“I will in the fall.” He smiled. “But I will say that it looks like we’re going to have three hoteliers in this family.”

“What do you mean?”

“He left The W Hotels to Violet,” he said. “The entire chain is hers, but something tells me we should wait until she’s long past four and a half to let her know.”

“So, you’ll eventually have three number one hotel chains in separate divisions?”

“No.” He kissed me again. “We will.”



—THE END, AGAIN—



**If you enjoyed this office romance,
be sure to read:**

Naughty Boss
Thirty Day Boyfriend
Reasonable Doubt: Full Series



**And stay tuned for the next New
York Boss story!**

**My next release is Forget You,
Ethan.**



Author's Confession + Thank You.

DEAR READER,

Seven short years ago, in 2011 to be exact, I was living my worst life. I was broke (like \$2.15 in my bank account broke) and stubbornly living in Pittsburgh, trying to make a way for myself instead of admitting defeat and going back home. I had to resort to “stealing” in a way that the heroine did in this book. My hotels of choice weren't Preston Brands with a super sexy hotel CEO, though. They were the SpringHill Suites in Bakery Square, the Hampton Inn, and occasionally The Homewood Suites.

Whenever I think about those days, I break down and cry because the mere memory of sitting in my car and eating stolen food is one I wish I could forget.

I also wish I could bring myself to forget all the rejections I received from employers, that each one didn't sting like it was super personal, but alas, those memories are still as vivid as ever. I can also say that on those awful days, the writing was what always kept me going...

I can't tell you how grateful I am that you took a chance on my book, and whether you hated it or loved it, I'm honored you took the time to read it.

I know I'm not the most “professional” author in the world, but thank you for making me a lucky one.

If you met me through Mid Life Love, thank you.

If you met me through the Jilted Bride Series, thank you.

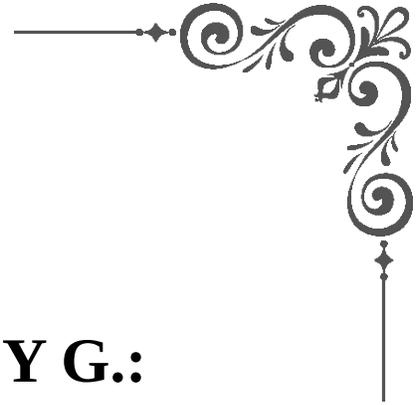
If you met me through Reasonable Doubt, thank you.

Sincerely, Carter, On a Tuesday, Thirty Day Boyfriend, Naughty Boss (& the Steamy Coffee Reads Collection), Turbulence, Over Us/Over You, Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU.

F.L.Y. (Effin Love You),

Whitney G.

.



ALSO BY WHITNEY G.:

SERIES & STANDALONES:



STEAMY COFFEE READS Collection

Naughty Boss
Dirty Doctor
Cocky Client
Filthy Lawyer



REASONABLE DOUBT SERIES

Reasonable Doubt #1
Reasonable Doubt #2
Reasonable Doubt #3



FALLING FOR MR. STATHAM Series

Resisting the Boss
Loving the Boss



THE ONE WEEK SERIES

On a Tuesday
On a Wednesday
On a Thursday
On a Friday
On a Saturday
On a Sunday

On a Monday
Sincerely, Carter
Forget You, Ethan
Turbulence
Over Us, Over You
Two Weeks' Notice
The Layover