



# Fake Lemons Love and Luxury

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** My dream is falling apart, and my best friend's dad protects my life.

He is older, stoic, completely off limits and the last person I ever imagined depending on.

I founded my dream company, a Lemon inspired, luxury skincare brand—from the ashes. For years, it's been very successful until a small beauty creator accuses me of stealing her idea. A vindictive A-List actress fans the flames behind the scenes. My perfect world begins to crash. Now faking a relationship with my off limits bodyguard to save my company is the only solution.

We have our past, and now I'm forced to come close to him again. As tension brews in the press, and the launch of Lemon's new product nears, the line between fake and real begins to blur. Now, with my business, reputation and future at stake will I be able to follow the voice of my heart?

**Total Pages (Source):** 79

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WREN

“Did Lemon LLC Steal Its Sparkle?” Talia reads, tossing the magazine on my table. “This is beyond ridiculous!”

The headline glares at me in a glossy, accusatory font. It’s the latest issue of Spotlight magazine, and what they’ve decided to put on the spotlight today is a lie from a so-called indie skincare creator. A lie that everyone else seems to believe now.

My hands clench the paper so tightly that my knuckles turn white. I read a tabloid this morning with the headline “Wren Sinclair? Or Wren Sinc-Liar?!” but even that didn’t bother me as much as this.

“I can’t believe Spotlight would publish this trash. I’m going to speak to the editor-in-chief.”

Not too long ago, Spotlight magazine heralded me as America’s Skin Queen, but today, they’re dragging me like I’m a scam artist who steals from small creators. Of course, my PR manager is pissed about this.

Talia paces, clenching her shoulder-length brown hair as she swears under her breath. I’ve known Talia for a decade and I’ve never seen her wound up like this. She’s been my PR manager since my breakout as an actress and likes to joke that she doesn’t work much since I don’t get into scandals and live a very quiet life. I almost chuckle now, thinking perhaps the universe has sent this mess our way thanks to her jokes.

“They’re a publication after all. This is trending news, of course, they would cover it,” I say, my stomach turning with each word.

“They’re supposed to be a reputable magazine, not highlighting gossip as reputable news.”

I read the article, though I already know what's in there.

Camille Ross is a name I’d never heard until two weeks ago. This Camille is a self-proclaimed indie beauty guru with a blog and a grudge. She claims I stole her idea. Not only the idea of fruit-based skincare but also our latest lemon glow serum—including the tagline for the serum: “When life gives you lemons... glow.”

I used to laugh at stories like this. But I haven't been laughing for the past week since her story went viral. My phone buzzes with notifications. I reach out to retrieve my phone from my bag. Talia takes my bag from me.

“Enough, please. Don’t read any more of those nasty comments.”

“It could be an important email.”

My phone buzzes even more. Talia whips it from the bag and glances at the screen. She grimaces.

“No. It’s not an important email. You’ve been tagged in the Spotlight article. It’s going viral. My goodness.”

She shrugs out of her tailored black suit and plops into the seat opposite me, looking drained.

“Let me see.”

Talia sighs, handing me the phone. The post has gained thousands of likes since it was posted with five thousand quotetweets discussing it. I scroll to the comment section. My stomach clenches. It's a landfill of hate.

One of the accounts with the most likes slams: "Of course, she stole the idea off a struggling indie beauty creator. So sick of these capitalist losers."

A stan account called WrenSinclairUpdates comments, "I'm so disappointed. I can't believe she hasn't addressed this yet :(("

User Yumix\_x says, "Wren has always been fake. Knew it since her days on Crest. No wonder her cast mates HATED her and ran her off the show."

I scoff. This couldn't be more of a lie. Everyone knows I left Crest after I became pregnant with my son, Eli. It was huge news back then when I left the show with the public and media spinning tales to make sense of it. At first, the narrative was that the show couldn't afford me anymore, even though the show revolved around my character, Rhea Crest. Later, the story snowballed into more sensational territories about a feud between me and some co-stars.

I was eventually forced to reveal that I was pregnant and taking a step back from acting. The irony is that I revealed the news in a *Spotlight* editorial.

"Wow, she's just as terrible a person as Rhea in Crest omg. Freda was always the better Crest anyway."

"Cancel Lemon LLC! #WrenSinclairIsOverParty"

I don't even realize I'm holding my breath until my secretary, Lily, walks in.

"Wren?"

I look up.

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:52 am*

She's holding our latest PR box like it's ticking. Her face is pale, her lips pressed tight.

"What now?"

She sets it on my desk and steps back like it might explode.

Talia sucks her teeth. "Don't tell me that's another of those hate packages disguised as our PR boxes? Why would you bring that here?"

"It was sent under one of our brand ambassadors' names. I thought it was being returned."

I pull back the flap and the smell hits first. Something sharp, something sour. Rotten lemons. The stench punches me in the face. The rind is covered with black mold and one of the rotten lemons is leaking. Talia's hand flies to her nose, a pinched expression on her face.

A typed note sits on the top: "Your Lemon Glow Serum gave me acne. Retire!"

My stomach flips. I shove the box away.

"Don't bring this to my desk again. Ever."

"I'm so sorry." Lily's gaze fell to her shoes, hands clenched in her lap.

I nod, dismissing her with a wave of hand. My throat is tight and I find it hard to

peak.

“We have to respond to these claims, Wren,” Talia says, pressing a handkerchief to her nose as Lily leaves with the rotten package. “I’ve been on calls since 6 AM. The media’s trying to get your response about her claims. I told them the claims are false and damaging. But this thing’s a wildfire. I didn’t want to tell you but Camille is set to appear on the Morning Show tomorrow.”

I swallow, standing up now to pace. “She’s on a roll, for sure.”

“They promise to show her so-called receipts on the show.”

“Her what?”

“I received news that she’ll be showing exclusive screenshots she hasn’t made public yet. Blog posts from six years ago. She claims she pitched the concept to a boutique lab and somehow you got wind of it.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Talia exhales hard. “It doesn’t matter. People believe her.”

“I built this brand from scratch.”

“I know.” She looks me in the eye. “But the internet doesn’t care. We’ve got the Morning Show running the story. That’s how bad it’s gotten. My hunch smells foul play and my hunch is never wrong. This seems like a coordinated attack.”

I tuck a distracting lock of dark hair behind my ear. “How? Who would want to attack me?”

“Your skincare brand’s the number one in the country. You went from being an actress to owning the most beloved skincare brand. If you think that wouldn't have attracted some envy, then you're naive.”

I sigh. Talia is right, of course. When I launched Lemon LLC, I was met with positive responses but I didn't miss the snide remarks from skincare industry executives and colleagues who think an actress should stay in her lane and leave skincare to professionals. I paid them no mind and it paid off. Lemon LLC is a success.

“I can't think of anyone.”

“Oh, I can think of a few. Camille Ross has to be backed by someone with influence,” Talia opens her laptop, and a notification chimes as she does. “She’s doing these big interviews, Wren. Press. Podcasts. She’s being painted as the underdog. And people? They love an underdog.”

I bit my lips hard. “And where is legal in all of this? Peter should be here.”

“They’re drafting a cease and desist, but the court of public opinion is faster than paperwork.”

Raj Kapoor, Lemon LLC’s chief innovation officer, appears like he’s been summoned by stress. He’s a person of calm and collected disposition but today, his hair looks like he’s pulled it five times. His eyes are wild and his Lemon Skin-Aqua shirt is buttoned up wrong.

“We have to postpone the launch.”

My stomach drops. I shake my head.

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“Not happening.”

“Wren.”

“Raj, we’ve been preparing for this for months. We’ve teased this product already. There’s no way we’re postponing it now.”

He walks in fully, waving his tablet. “The investors are watching how we handle this scandal like hawks. If we launch with this storm hanging over us?—”

“All the more reason to launch. If we postpone, then it’s a clear message that we’re affected by the drama. We must present a strong front. We go on with all activities as scheduled. All.”

“If the investors pull out, we’ll be launching into nothing.”

“We have investors meeting coming up soon to discuss Phase 2 of the skin diagnostic app. We’ll know their thoughts then.”

Raj opens his mouth to argue then stops short, shoving his thick-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose instead.

Another knock. I take a breath and square my shoulders, steeling myself for more bad news. A head full of wavy auburn curls pokes in and my shoulders relax.

My best friend, Jen, rushes to my side like a hurricane in Lululemon, her gym bag in one hand and her phone in the other. I almost sigh with relief at her presence. Only

Jen could waltz into one's office on her way from the gym with her hair in a messy bun yet somehow look like a supermodel while at it.

Raj shifts, a flush shading his cheeks. "Hi, Jen."

"Hi, Raj. Hi, Talia." She turns to me, her perfectly shaped brows knotted into a frown. "Wren, what's happening? Please tell me you're not being called a fraud all over the internet."

"It's true."

"Camille's post is trending on Twitter. She's making viral TikToks calling herself 'the original lemon girl.' People are stitching it like it's gospel."

I laugh, but it's not funny.

"We were just laughing over how nonsensical this was last week. How did it spiral into something so big? Why's the media platforming that woman?"

I press my palms into my eyes. "I'm as clueless as you are."

"The vitriol online is insane."

"And in real life," Talia adds. "She's been receiving the most disgusting and disturbing hate mail. You need security at this point."

I sit on the couch and Jen settles beside me.

"I agree. People are nuts. Lily told me about the lemons. That's a threat. You need protection."

“It’s fan mail compared to the emails I’ve been getting.”

Talia scrolls her laptop. “I’m looking into some security services. What do you think about this one? It’s a security?—”

“What? I’m not hiring bodyguards. I’m good.”

“It’s not up for debate. You’re being harassed and it’s not just online anymore.”

“Even so?—”

Talia folds her arms. “Jen’s right. We’ve received three threatening emails this morning alone... One mentioned your son.”

My blood runs cold. My head snaps up.

“What?”

“They didn’t use his name. Just ‘your kid.’ But it’s enough.”

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A pit forms in my stomach. “This is insane.”

Jen’s lips pressed into a white slash. “I’ll smack anyone who brings my godson into this. That’s crossing a line. What’s wrong with people?”

“You need protection, not just to protect yourself but for Eric as well.”

Jen leans in, taking my hand in hers. “Let me call my dad.”

“Sean?”

“He’s retired and runs his security firm now. Langston Protection Services. He’s the best. He’s... safe.”

I open my mouth to tell her that Sean Langston is a lot of things but safe isn't one. Why? I can’t say out loud and so I clamp my mouth shut.

“I’ll call you,” she says, patting my hand.

I don't say yes. But I don't say no, either.

My pulse races as she places the call. My intuition tells me that my tribulations have only begun. I’m standing at the edge of a cliff of fire, and even if I don't fall in, I’ll get scorched either way.

SEAN

I cross my arms, watching the two newest recruits fumble through what should be a basic restraint technique.

“You call that a proper takedown? My eighty-year-old aunt could break that hold.”

The larger recruit—Jones, according to his application—blushes beneath his crew cut. “Sorry, sir.”

“Don't apologize. Do it right.” I step onto the training mat, demonstrating the proper stance. “Solid base. Controlled momentum. Clear communication with your partner. This is precision work, not a bar fight.”

The quality of applicants has gone downhill of late. After twenty-three years in security, I've developed a sixth sense for who has what it takes. These two don't, but Marcus insisted we need more bodies for the Lopez contract next month.

This job used to be my adrenaline. Now it's a schedule. Contracts, drills, background checks. The work still matters, but I pick and choose now. No chaos. No mess. No clients who don't listen.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I don't check my phone during training sessions, but when it's Jen calling, I make an exception. The recruits won't mind a five-minute break from me barking orders at them anyway.

I step off the mat where the recruits are practicing takedown techniques.

“Take five. Then I want to see that sequence again, and this time like professionals.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket as I step off the mat. Jen's face lights up my screen. I

move to the corner of the training facility.

“Hello.”

“Dad! Thank goodness you answered.” Jen's voice carries that familiar edge of panic that precedes some minor crisis like a broken heel or a fuse that needs changing. “I need you to do something for me.”

I exhale and wipe my hands on my pants.

“Is this about your latest heartbreak or your hairstylist ghosting you again?”

“It’s not about me. It’s about Wren.”

That name stops me.

“Wren?” My mind conjures an image of a woman with flowing dark hair and expressive hands, telling stories in my living room that had Jen in stitches. The two friends met during Jen’s brief stint at acting school and she used to spend weekends at our house, with big brown eyes and bigger dreams.

“Yes, Wren Sinclair. My best friend? Dad, she's in trouble,” Jen says. “And I don’t mean someone said something mean on Instagram. It’s serious.”

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I turn away from the training floor completely, something in Jen's voice pulling my full attention.

“Marcus, take over for ten.”

My second-in-command nods, barking instructions at the recruits while I step into my office. My office is a glass box overlooking the training floor. Privacy without isolation. Just how I like it.

“What kind of trouble?” I ask as I settle behind my desk.

“She's getting threats. Like, scary ones. Someone sent rotting lemons to her office with a nasty note. And the media is crucifying her over some bogus plagiarism claim. Haven't you seen the headlines? Her face has been splashed across every gossip site for days.”

“Sorry, I don't keep up with celebrity gossip.”

And I don't keep up with Wren Sinclair. Not after that night...

Jen sighs into the phone. I can hear her pacing now. “Dad. This is serious.”

“I'm sorry about that. But what does this have to do with me?”

“Dad, she needs protection. Real protection, not just some rent-a-cop. I told her you're the best.”

I lean against the desk, staring at the framed photo of Jen and her mom. The one from the beach. The last vacation before the accident. I rub my temple.

“Jen, I don’t mix personal and professional. You know this.”

“Dad, please. She's scared, even if she won't admit it out loud. Wren doesn’t ask for help.”

“She’s still like that?”

“Worse. But she’ll listen to you.”

“I haven’t seen her in what... seven years?”

“You kissed her forehead once, Dad. She still remembers.”

I rub the back of my neck.

“I didn’t kiss her forehead.”

“You almost did. I was there.”

“She was just a kid and I did it to console her after a tough audition.”

“She’s thirty-four.”

I sigh.

“And she has Eric to worry about. He’s six. Paparazzi keep hanging around her.”

The mention of a child shifts something in me.

“She can hire one of my guys. I'll send Marcus. He's excellent.”

“No. She needs you. Dad, please, I wouldn't ask if?—”

“Fine,” I cut her off, knowing I'll regret this. “I'll meet with her. Just a consultation.”

Jen squeals into the phone. “You're a good man, Sean Langston.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

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“She's expecting you at the Lemon LLC headquarters at two. I'm texting you the address now. I already told her you'd help.”

“Of course you did.”

I hang up and stand there for a moment, staring at nothing. Wren Sinclair. It's been years. The memory of that night surfaces despite pushing it away ever since and pretending like it never happened. Wren in my kitchen late one night after driving Jen home from a party. The way she looked at me across the counter while I made them both coffee to sober up. The almost-moment when she leaned in, smelling like strawberries and freedom, before Jen stumbled back in from the bathroom.

I shake my head. Ancient history. Water under the bridge. She was overwhelmed by the attention from the hit TV show she starred in. And me? I was a lonely widower who had no business noticing how her eyes caught the light. I left for a job that took me away from home for the longest time.

The next thing I heard, she was getting married. It was a relief to hear that because I could finally stop wondering if her cherry lips would be as soft as it looked. But I also had feelings I couldn't put into words about my daughter's best friend. Even though she was thirteen years younger than me. She sent me an invite, but I made sure I was out of the country on some job.

I walk out of the office, leaning against the doorway, watching my team train. I've built this company to handle corporate security and executive protection. I don't do celebrity babysitting anymore. And I don't take cases with personal connections.

But that almost-moment keeps playing like a film reel on the screen of my mind.

“Everything okay?” Marcus approaches.

“Yeah.” I shrug, pocketing my phone. “Just Jen being Jen.”

“The incompetent twins need at least another week before they're field-ready.”

“They need more than a week.” I sigh, watching as Jones attempts the takedown again and trips over his own feet. “Cut them loose if they don't improve by Friday. We can't afford mistakes.”

“Will do.” Marcus follows my gaze. “You heading out?”

“Got a consultation at two. Potential new client.”

“Anyone interesting?”

I hesitate. “Lemon LLC. Jen's friend's in some PR nightmare.”

Marcus raises an eyebrow. “Wren Sinclair? She's been all over the news.”

“You know her?”

“Know of her. My wife loves her. Tries to get me to use one of those tropical face masks.” He gives me a searching look. “Thought you didn't do celebrities anymore.”

“I don't. Just assessing the situation as a favor to Jen.”

Marcus grins. “Last referral from Jen was that reality TV star who thought her houseplants were bugged.”

“Don't remind me.” I grab my jacket from the office. “I'll be back later. Try not to let them injure each other.”

The drive to Lemon LLC's headquarters gives me time to review what I know about Wren Sinclair. Which isn't much beyond what Jen's told me and what I've seen in passing on magazine covers. Foster kid turned actress turned entrepreneur. Created a skincare empire after leaving Hollywood. Now being accused of stealing her concept.

And somewhere in between, she got married, had a son. I clench the steering wheel. Did I hear news about her getting divorced? I realize I know nothing about her personal life. Jen must've mentioned but I didn't pay much attention.

The Lemon LLC building comes into view. It's a sleek and modern structure with a subtle lemon motif in the architecture and a large billboard displaying their products.

A small crowd of photographers loiters across the street, cameras ready. I park my Bronco in the underground garage and take the private elevator up, scanning for security weaknesses out of habit. The lobby system is decent but outdated. Three cameras, a single guard. I could think of a dozen ways to bypass it all.

The receptionist directs me to the executive floor. Existing imagery of the products and Lemon LLC campaigns were added throughout the office. Everything about the space speaks of careful curation—clean lines, cozy textures, warm lighting, subtle citrus scent in the air. It's impressive. Professional.

“Mr. Langston?” A polished blonde woman with a tablet approaches. “I'm Lily, Ms. Sinclair's assistant. She's expecting you.”

I follow her through a series of corridors, noting security cameras, access points, vulnerable areas. Out of habit, I count steps between exits, identify chokepoints. The place wasn't designed with security in mind.

“Ms. Sinclair, Mr. Langston is here.”

Lily leads me into a corner office and then closes the door behind her.

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And there she is.

Wren is standing behind a white desk, phone pressed to her ear. The years have been kind to Wren Sinclair. More than kind. I shove a hand into my pocket.

For a moment, I see double. The twenty-something girl with dyed red hair and nervous energy superimposed over this polished CEO in her tailored blazer and dark hair falling in soft waves past her shoulders.

But Wren isn't the wide-eyed girl I remember. This Wren commands the space. She holds up one finger in a "just a minute" gesture.

My gaze darts over the office. The centerpiece of her office is its long shelving unit on which Lemon LLC's assortment of products is displayed alongside PR boxes they've created over the years and inspirational books. There's a lighted vanity which I recognize from some of Jen's photos with two full-size mirrors. I never realized it was Wren's office all this while.

"Just like I told Raj, I think we should move forward with the launch as scheduled. This will blow over." Her voice is firm and controlled. "I'll call you back."

She hangs up and at last looks at me.

Our eyes lock and something shifts in the room. The air feels thicker all of a sudden. There's recognition there. And something else I can't name.

"Sean." Her voice is lower than I remember, more confident. She steps around the

desk, offering her hand. Professional. Cool and Distant. “Thank you for coming.”

I catch a hint of her perfume—something citrus and vanilla, unsurprisingly. Her hand is small in mine, but her grip is firm.

“Wren.” The name feels strange on my tongue after so long. “Jen mentioned you're having some security issues.”

A flicker of emotion crosses her face. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“Jen did.”

“I’m not some damsel in distress.”

“I know.”

“But I’m also not stupid. And Eric...” She sighs. “He doesn’t need to be around this.”

The name hits me. Her kid. I glance at the framed picture on her desk. A little boy with curls and a dimple. Wren’s smile on a smaller face.

“Cute smile on him.”

She beams.

“Yeah.”

For a second, neither of us moves. Then she clears her throat, gesturing to a sitting area.

“Can I get you anything? Water? Coffee?”

“I’m fine.” I take a seat, noticing the way her shoulders tense as she sits across from me. She’s exhausted. I can see it in the tiny lines around her eyes, in the careful way she holds herself together.

“So. Tell me what’s happening.” I keep my tone neutral like this is any other client, any other job.

“Someone’s trying to destroy everything I’ve built.” The bluntness in her voice surprises me. “It started with claims that I stole my business concept. Then came the online harassment. Now, I’m getting packages at my office. I fear it’s a matter of time till someone gets my home address and that thought’s unsettling.”

She slides a folder across the table. I flip through the folder containing printouts of threatening messages, photos of the “gifts” left at her door. My jaw tightens.

“And your current security?”

“Building security, a home alarm system.” She brushes hair from her face, a gesture I remember from years ago. “But the paparazzi are getting bolder.”

I sit up straighter. “Your building needs parameter control to begin with. There’s press everywhere.”

She nods.

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“I’ll need to assess your home, your day-to-day routine, your son’s school. If there’s an actual threat, we need to identify it.”

“And if there’s not?”

“Then you’ll have peace of mind.”

Something protective stirs in me as I study her, something I haven’t felt in years. I push it down. This is a job, I remind myself. Just another job.

She looks at me with those honey-brown eyes, asking, “So, can you help us?” I know this couldn’t be any more different.

“Yes,” I say, against my better judgment. “I can help.”

And the relief in her smile hits me like a punch to the gut. Somehow, it feels like a foretelling of how the next few months will be.

3

WREN

I’ve forgotten how tall Sean Langston is.

My eyes linger on the strain of his shirt against his forearms as he leans forward, examining the sample serums on the area table.

He's broader than I remember. My younger self would never have believed he could be even hotter.

I try not to stare at him for fear of him catching my eyes and reading my lewd thoughts when I should be more bothered about the PR nightmare I'm entrenched in.

But Sean Langston has always been very attractive to me. I remember telling Jen once during a drunken night years ago, that her dad was the most handsome man I'd ever seen.

It remains true even now. The years have passed, for sure, and the salt-and-pepper buzz cut he sports only enhances his sharp jawline. His blue eyes are intense with the experience and mysteries of a man who has seen the goodness and darkness of life.

He's wearing black. A long-sleeved shirt rolled up to the elbows, dark jeans, boots that make a heavy sound every time he moves. He looks like he belongs in a gritty action film, not sitting in my office, examining lemon-scented candles and sample serums.

Jen warned me. "Don't let the gruff thing fool you," she said. "He's got a soft heart buried somewhere under all that muscle."

I don't see soft. I see sharp. Controlled. Alert. And altogether too handsome.

Our eyes meet. His stare remains unreadable. I have the feeling he's analyzing me, trying to figure out if I'm still familiar or changed beyond recognition.

I stand, needing space from his direct gaze. "Are you ready for the tour?"

He nods. No smile. Just that unreadable stare.

I walk ahead, heels clicking on polished concrete floors. The office hums with motion. Employees glance as we pass, the curiosity in their eyes unhidden.

“This is our main floor. Marketing to the left, product dev to the right.”

He glances around, eyes scanning everything. Not saying much.

We stop in front of a glass wall that overlooks our R&D lab. Raj is inside, bent over a beaker, scribbling something in a notebook. His lab coat is open, shirt wrinkled, thick glasses sliding down his nose. Classic Raj.

“Raj,” I say, tapping the glass.

Raj looks up with a frown. He walks out into the hallway seconds later.

“Is this Jen’s dad?”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Jen’s dad. Security consultant,” Sean says before I can answer.

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Raj beams, stretching out a hand. “Great to meet you, sir. I’ve been curious about her incredible father.”

Sean pauses, eyeing Raj like a suspicious father would. I almost laugh.

Raj takes no notice, continuing with enthusiasm. “I’m Raj Kapoor, chief innovation officer here at Lemon LLC.”

“Sean will help us assess the situation and see what can I do about security.”

“Thank goodness. Maybe you can figure out how Camille Ross keeps leaking internal stuff.”

“She doesn’t,” I say.

Raj gives me a look. “Then how does she know we’re working on getting funding for our next phase project? It isn’t even public info yet.”

I stiffen. Sean watches me.

“Anyone could’ve guessed we’re working on something. We’re always working on something,” I say. “Don’t worry, Raj. We’re handling it. Internally.”

“I bet.” He smiles at Sean once again. “Well, I’d better get back to the lab. See you around, Mr. Langston.”

Raj turns and disappears into the lab.

“Very peculiar man.”

I chuckle. “He’s the smartest man I know. He’s just quite... dramatic.”

Sean says nothing. We continue the tour.

“The security team can use this conference room.” I gesture toward the glass-walled space, forcing my voice to sound normal. “It’s private but central.”

“I’d prefer to do the initial assessment on my own.” His voice is a low rumble. “Fewer people involved at this stage.”

“Fine by me.” I brush past him, ignoring the flutter in my stomach. “Let me show you around.”

Despite the chaos of the past week, pride swells in my chest as we walk through Lemon LLC headquarters. The space is what I envisioned when I was sketching ideas on napkins three years ago. Modern white walls with pops of vibrant yellow and green, sunlight streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows, shelves displaying our signature products in their minimalist packaging.

“We converted this old warehouse space three years ago. We kept the bones. Gutted the insides.” I run my fingertips along a concrete pillar. “I wanted something that felt authentic but luxurious.”

His gaze meets mine. “You’ve built something impressive. Not many people transition from acting to business to become such a global success as you’ve done with Lemon.”

“Hollywood wasn’t the dream I thought it would be.” I shrug, leading him toward the product development wing. “This is.”

“You’ve had quite a journey.”

“So have you. I think we can both agree life’s been interesting.” I pause outside the private wing doors. “Not always easy, but never boring.”

“What’s in there?”

“This is where the real work happens,” I say. “Product trials, influencer strategy, ad campaigns.”

Sean's expression shifts. “Raj mentioned the accuser is aware of some inside information. Why aren’t you considering that?”

The subtle reminder of why he's here sends a chill through me. We walk to my office.

“It’s because she hasn’t mentioned anything out of the ordinary about our plans. It’s easy to guess that a skincare company is working on new products. Again, we’re always working on new products. It’s just annoying that she’s on this relentless victim hunt and the public’s eating it up. It’s starting to affect my employees and I might do something drastic if I receive another set of rotten lemons.”

Sean's expression hardens. “Any idea who might have it out for you?”

“Half the internet?” I attempt a laugh but it comes out hollow. “It’s the typical thing the general public do. Build up a woman to watch her fall. That’s peak entertainment to them.”

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A knock at the door interrupts us, and Talia strides in radiating crisis-management energy in her power suit.

“Security breach in the building already?” She extends her hand to Sean. “Talia Monroe. PR Director and occasional firefighter.”

“Sean Langston.” He shakes her hand firmly.

A small smile tugs at Talia’s mouth as she throws me a glance. “Well, that was quick. Thank you for coming around. Will you be joining Ms. Sinclair's security detail permanently?”

“That's yet to be determined.”

After she leaves, Sean continues his assessment, walking the perimeter of the building while I try to focus on work. The normality of spreadsheets and emails feels surreal against the backdrop of threats and scandals. When he returns, his expression is grimmer than before.

“So, what’s the verdict?”

“Your security is inadequate.” He stands at my office window, looking down at the street. “Single-point entry system that's three years outdated. No proper screening for deliveries. Blind spots in your camera coverage.”

I shake my head. “We're a skincare company, not the Pentagon. This building wasn’t for war.”

“It is now.”

His tone slices clean through my composure.

“Look,” I start, “I didn’t ask for this level of attention. I created a brand. Not a scandal.”

He steps closer. Not threatening. Just close enough for his presence to settle in my bones.

“You’re a high-profile target. It doesn't matter if you meant to be.”

My jaw tightens.

“What do you suggest?”

“I’ll have a team upgrade your systems tomorrow. In the meantime, I’d recommend enhanced protocols for all staff, security escorts for any off-site meetings, and—” he hesitates “—consideration for temporary relocation of you and Eric.”

“Relocation? This is just a PR crisis. We’re not in witness protection.”

“When threats reach your home, it’s no longer just PR.” His voice remains calm but firm. “The goal is prevention.”

Having someone else make decisions about my safety feels like surrendering control. This is something I’ve fought hard never to do again. I’ve lived all these years on my terms. I make my own decisions.

“I appreciate your concern, but I can handle?—”

“This isn't about what you can handle.” Sean cuts me off, his eyes intense. “It's about what you shouldn't have to.”

Something in his tone silences my objections. For a brief moment, I'm reminded of what it feels like to have someone else shoulder the weight.

Sean collects his notes and heads for the door. “I'll submit a full assessment tonight. We'll implement changes starting tomorrow.”

“That's it?”

He pauses, hand on the doorknob. “One more thing, Wren.” His expression is solemn. “Based on what I'm seeing, this is going to get worse before it gets better. Be prepared.”

The door closes with a soft click behind him, leaving me alone with his warning echoing in my mind.

Worse? I sink back into my chair, staring at the pile of threats on my desk. How much worse could it get at this point?

My phone buzzes with a notification. It's an email from an unknown sender. The subject line makes my blood run cold: “We know where your son goes to school, Lemons.”

SEAN

The conference room at Montclair Protection Services feels like a war room today. I've gathered my best people—my investigation team that handles the sensitive cases requiring more than muscle. The morning light streams through the windows, casting long shadows across the polished oak table where three of my most trusted team members wait.

“What do we have on Camille Ross?” I drop her name like a grenade into the silent room.

Cal, our cyber specialist, clicks his laptop. His fingers move across the keyboard with practiced efficiency, the blue light from his screen reflecting off his glasses.

“On the surface? Twenty-seven, beauty blogger turned skincare influencer. Around twenty thousand followers before this drama. Now? Pushing three hundred thousand and climbing.”

“The general public loves a good scandal, huh,” I mutter, leaning against the edge of the table.

“That's just the beginning.” Cal turns his screen toward me. The graph on display shows a near-vertical line of growth. “Lookat these analytics. Her engagement spiked almost overnight. That doesn't happen organically, not like this.”

“Bots?”

“Some. But there's more.” He pulls up another screen showing a timeline of posts and shares. “Her posts attacking Lemon LLC were amplified by several high-profile accounts within minutes of posting. Almost like...”

“Almost like they were waiting for it,” I finish. I feel a familiar tension in my shoulders. The kind I get when something doesn't add up on a protection detail.

Camille's online footprint spreads out in front of me like a roadmap to nowhere. I scroll through a series of posts. I grunt. They're too clean, too fast, too well-targeted for a small influencer without any backing.

Dani, my head of investigations, leans forward. Her dark hair is pulled back in a severe ponytail, matching her no-nonsense attitude. “We checked her background. Until two months ago, she was struggling. Missed rent twice. Then suddenly, new apartment, upgraded equipment, designer clothes.”

“Payoff?”

“We can't prove it yet, but yeah, looks that way.” She slides a folder across the table. “To everyone else, she went viral off one accusation. The public reaction, influencer reposts, and press traction are given. But here, credit card statements show purchases she couldn't afford before. Someone's financing her newfound lifestyle.”

I rub my clean-shaven jaw. “Keep digging. Something doesn't add up.”

Marcus speaks up from the corner where he's been observing. “What about the timing of the attacks? Is there a pattern?”

“Great question.” Cal's voice drops as he pulls up a new window on his laptop. “There's the curious question of the timing of her social posts. They're coordinated with major media outlets within minutes. Someone's feeding her information about

when stories are dropping.”

“Or she's feeding them.” I stand up, pacing the length of the conference room. The city skyline stretches out beyond the windows, but my focus is on the case. “Or someone else is coordinating both.”

The room goes quiet as they watch me process. I've been in this business long enough to recognize a hit job. This isn't random internet drama. This is calculated.

“What about the package deliveries?” I ask, stopping my pacing. “Any leads on who sent them?”

Dani shakes her head. “One thing to keep in mind is that these hate mails aren't out of nature during a hate train. Celebrities often get disturbing things delivered to them.”

“True. But based on how coordinated the media attacks are, this could also be orchestrated. Perhaps part crazies, part coordinated attack. They may be hoping this will blow over without proper investigation to prove that this might be a planned scheme.”

“I agree with Sean,” Marcus says. “The deliveries are paid in cash, different courier services each time. Whoever's doing this knows how to cover their tracks. And that suggests professional involvement. Not just an angry influencer with a grudge.”

I give a slow nod. “My thoughts as well. This is too coordinated, too precise.”

“What's your connection to Ms. Sinclair anyway?” Cal asks, his curiosity getting the better of him. “Jen mentioned you've known her for years.”

“Keep this quiet,” I say, ignoring his question. “I don't want anyone knowing what we've found until we're sure. Keep digging into Camille's finances, her connections,

and her social circle. Find the link.”

“What about Ms. Sinclair?” Dani asks, closing her folder. “Will you be handling her security? Any of our top agents could do that. Nate is an excellent option.”

“I’ll handle Wren.” The familiar way her name slips out catches me off guard. “Ms. Sinclair,” I correct myself, ignoring the knowing look Dani and Cal exchange.

“Dig deeper into her connections. Find out who she met within the last three months.”

“On it, boss.” Cal closes his laptop with a snap.

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“And pull her travel records,” I add. “Credit card statements, hotel bookings. I want to know if she ever crossed paths with Wren—Ms. Sinclair—before this mess started.”

“You think they have history?” Marcus asks.

“I think nothing’s coincidental in cases like this.”

The meeting breaks up, my team filing out with their assignments. I remain behind, staring at the photos of Camille Ross pinned to our evidence board. I’ve watched her tearful videos claiming victimhood but I don’t buy it. Not for a second. It’s insane to me how everyone else can’t see through the faux tears.

I gulp down my cup of coffee which have now turned lukewarm. But public opinion is fickle and whatever is trending is truth to most people. If this is an orchestrated attack, whoever the person leading is must be well-versed in stirring the public.

My phone buzzes with a text from Jen:How's it going? Wren okay?

I reply:Working on it. She's safe.

What I don't tell my daughter is how my professional detachment is slipping by the hour. How watching Wren maintain her composure through the vitriol stirs something in me I thought long buried.

It'spast nine when I get back home. I head straight to my home office. The house is quiet after driving Wren home that evening to assess her place and meet her son. The

contrast between the two homes is stark. Hers is filled with toys, colorful artwork, and the constant background noise of life being lived. Mine is a large and quiet bachelor's den. Functional, not lived in.

I pour myself two fingers of bourbon and open my laptop. The amber liquid gives a pleasurable burn as I settle into the familiar routine of late-night analysis.

The secured folder contains every threatening message Wren has received. They're organized by date, each one cataloged with its method of delivery and any forensic evidence my team could gather. Some are standard internet vitriol, the kind any public figure receives. Others are more sinister.

I scroll through them again, looking for something I missed. Social media hate, angry emails, the occasional disturbing letter. But there's a pattern in the escalation. The timing. The specificity.

One message catches my eye again: "You can't hide behind your fancy creams forever. I know where you sleep."

It arrived the day after an exclusive home tour was published in a design magazine. The photo they ran showed her bedroom window. Not a coincidence.

I pull up the magazine spread on my second monitor. Wren standing in her bedroom, sunlight streaming through the distinctive bay window. The same window is visible from the street. A security nightmare that I've already addressed with additional monitoring.

My phone buzzes.

Cal: Found something. Camille Ross had dinner at Jerkins three months ago. Guess who else was there that night?

I wait, taking another sip of bourbon. The ice clinks against the glass in the silence of my empty house.

Marlowe Skye. Famous actress. Private room. No photos, but confirmed by staff.

Another text with a link to an interview of Marlowe Skye.

Search Marlowe Skye and Wren Sinclair. They were once co-stars and she launched her skincare line, Nova Grey, not too long ago. It hasn't been well to match its enormous investment.

Marlowe Skye. I look her up. A glamorous and stunning A-list actress. Wren's former co-star from her acting days. I scroll the internet, consuming news about the actress. She's no stranger to drama at all. From being embroiled in scandals on set to accepting an award half-drunk, her power couple relationship with a famous actor crumbling two years ago, to the actor getting married to another actress.

Marlowe Skye's public persona is chaotic. I scroll through the news of her new acting project directed by acclaimed director, Peeta Eduardo, and the new product launch of her beauty line. It seems to be in line with her revamped public image to be classy yet ambitious. I click on an article where the writer talks about the new product, which has been gaining buzz in light of the disappointing reveals concerning Lemon LLC. The new Nova Grey light-weight miracle face cream is described as the saving grace of the company, which hasn't performed as well as expected.

A piece clicks into place. The orchestrated media attacks. The inside information. The timed leaks.

I pull up Marlowe's social media profiles. Her last interview was two months ago before the scandal broke where she addressed consumer's comments on her product. On the surface, it appears like a normal interview but there is a recent repost of the

article. A part where she addressed the subject of truth and accountability in the beauty industry.

No direct mentions of Wren or Lemon LLC, of course. Too smart for that. But I don't miss that the timing of her vague posts about "integrity" align with the attacks on Wren.

I lean into my chair, taking a long swallow of bourbon, letting it burn down my throat. My job is to keep clients safe. But this? This is different. Personal vendettas played out in the public eye, targeting not just Wren's business but her reputation, and her peace of mind.

I pull up Wren's file again, studying her face in the profile photo. The confident smile in this photo against the tired smile she wears of late. The vulnerability she's trying so hard to hide. During my initial assessment, I saw beyond the polished CEO exterior. I saw a woman fighting to protect what she's built from nothing.

What's Marlowe's angle? Professional jealousy? A business rivalry? Something more personal from their Hollywood days?

I make a note to have Marcus dig deeper into their shared history. There's always something. Perhaps an old slight, a role stolen, a man caught between them. All feuds spring from somewhere.

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My phone rings, startling me. Wren's name flashes on the screen. It's almost 1 AM. Much too late for a routine call.

“Sean?” Her voice is small, tight with fear. “I got another package. On my doorstep. In my home.”

My body tenses, adrenaline washing away the bourbon's relaxing effects. “Don't touch it,” I say with controlled calm. “Where's Eric?”

“Asleep. It must've been there after you left. Saw it on my doorstep when I took out the trash.”

I glance at the time and frown. Why is she taking out trash at this hour? Then it hits me. She can't sleep either. The stress is eating at her just as it is me.

“What does it look like?”

I'm already grabbing my keys, tucking my gun into its holster at my lower back.

“A small box, gift-wrapped.” There's a slight waver in her phone. “There's a card with my name on it.”

“I'm on my way. Don't touch it, don't move it. Stay inside, doors locked.”

“I know basic protocol, Sean.” A hint of her usual strength returns to her voice. “This isn't my first hate mail.”

“But it's escalating.” I'm already out the door, phone to my ear as I stride toward my SUV. “And now they're delivering at night.”

“I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Stay on the line with me.”

“I need to check on Eric.”

“Go ahead, but come right back.” I slide into the driver's seat, starting the engine. “Keep talking to me, Wren.”

I hear her soft footsteps, the gentle creak of a door opening. Her whispered reassurance that Eric is sound asleep. Her measured breathing as she returns to her living room, watching the front door as if it might burst open at any moment.

“Still there?” I ask as I navigate the empty streets.

“Still here.” She pauses. “I feel stupid now, calling you in the middle of the night.”

“Don't.” My voice comes out rougher than intended. “Never hesitate. That's what I'm here for.”

“To rush to my rescue at 1 AM?”

“If that's what it takes.”

“Thank you,” she says in a whisper so soft that I almost miss it.

“Almost there,” I respond, not trusting myself with anything more personal.

## WREN

I adjust my blazer for the fifth time, inhaling as I make my way to the conference room. My emotions are stretched taut since discovering the package at midnight. It worries me that the threats have reached my home. Now, my home isn't safe and neither is my son. How can I protect a multi-million company when I can't even protect my home?

I feel even more pathetic running to call Sean. Maybe it was fear that made me call him or it was my loneliness and fatigue. Either way, it was weak and pathetic. I clench my fists at my sides.

The package from the previous night contained nothing but my name on it. Bizarre. Sean had insisted on staying until daybreak. I find it even more uncomfortable that it was only when he arrived that I was able to catch some sleep. I don't want to think too much about what that meant. If it meant anything at all.

I reach the conference room and my pulse races, my thoughts shifting to the reality of my shaky empire. Behind these doors sit five investors. Men and women who control millions of potential development dollars that could either accelerate or sink Lemon LLC's next phase.

"You've got this." I whisper the same words I used to tell myself before stepping onto set.

The room falls silent as I enter. Ten pairs of eyes follow me to the front of the room. Suits, pens, coffee cups untouched. I spot Richard Barnes, our earliest angel investor, his poker face in place. Next to him sits Eliza Chen, venture capitalist extraordinaire, who once called me "the most strategic former actress" she'd ever met. Now, her smile is tight, uncertain.

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Talia, Raj, Ava Douglass—the chief marketing officer of Lemon LLC—Simone Brooks—head of product development—and Henry Cho, head of finance, are also gathered on the long marble table.

“Thank you all for coming.” My voice doesn't waver. Years of script readings and auditions trained me well for moments like this. Even though, inside, I'm shaking.

“I know there have been concerns about our new serum launch in the midst of this drama. But be rest assured that the launch will happen as scheduled.”

One of the investors, a savvy and blunt woman called Siobhan Yutes, crosses her arm. “That's bold. But the timing with everything going on, I don't know if it's smart.”

“I agree with Mrs. Yutes. I'm concerned that the noise will bury the product. The noise around Lemon right now is pretty loud.”

I smile. Controlled. Shoulders straight, chin high.

“Please, be rest assured that this is under control and by launch date, this false narrative wouldn't even cross anyone's mind. Before then, it's pertinent that Lemon LLC maintains a united and coordinated front. We're unbothered by noise from hungry influencers who are asking to be sued to penury. Because it's just that—noise.”

The investors shift in their seats, and I smile again.

I click to the first slide of my presentation. Our logo of a bright, stylized lemon appears on screen.

“Lemon LLC has always been about transformation. Taking something tart and creating something beautiful.” I click to the next slide. “Today I’m sharing our next evolution: the Lemon Diagnostics App.”

For twenty minutes, I outline our vision: an AI-driven skin analysis app that creates personalized skincare regimens using our products. I showcase mock-ups, preliminary coding, and market research. The same passion that built this company from nothing flows through me.

“Think about it. Product scanning, tailored routines, live sessions with dermatologists. This is innovation in the palm of your hand.”

No one speaks. The room hums with silence.

“Questions?” I ask at the end, setting down my presentation remote.

Richard leans forward. “Impressive technology, Wren. But I’m still concerned about timing. This scandal?—”

“Is baseless and will blow over.” I meet his gaze steadily. “As I earlier explained, the?—”

“The numbers suggest otherwise.” Eliza taps her tablet. “Your social engagement is down twenty percent, and retailers are getting nervous. Have you seen the videos of customers throwing away their products in favour of the new Nova Grey formula?”

I feel my jaw tighten. “Short-term fluctuations in a growing market.”

“We've worked in beauty long enough to know how fickle consumers can be.” This from Louis Laurent, newer money but old fashion industry connections. “One day you're the darling, next day you're toxic. And right now, Lemon's a very toxic brand to support.”

“I'm not some flash-in-the-pan influencer brand.” My voice hardens despite my efforts. “Lemon LLC has five years of consistent growth and innovation.”

“And a founder who's being called a thief on every social platform right now.” Louis raises an eyebrow. “You're being accused of stealing the idea of this company from a small creator who has been struggling to pay her bills while you lounge in luxury and profit from her creative endeavour. I'm sure you're very aware of how this narrative appears in public.”

Richard sighs. “I believe in you, Wren. But I'm pulling back until this resolves. Too much uncertainty.”

My stomach drops, but I maintain my expression. “I understand your position.”

He stands. Just like that. The others shift in their chairs.

“The rest of us aren't pulling out,” Eliza clarifies. “But we need to see this situation contained before increasing our investment.”

I nod, closing my laptop with steady hands even as my insides crumble. “I appreciate your candor.”

“So basically, they're fair-weather friends.” Raj paces the conference room, his hands gesticulating. “One hint of scandal and they scatter.”

“Not scattered. Just... hesitating.” I massage my temples.

Talia bites into an apple like she's imagining it's someone's face. "I'll say it. This is insane. Expected but still insane."

Henry examines his notes from the meeting. "Richard pulling out is concerning. He's usually our canary in the coal mine."

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“We don't need him.” Raj stops pacing. “The app development will be a success. He knows this.”

“He knows that but even he recognizes that public trust matters. If we launch the new serum in this state, I can't even begin to imagine the backlash.” Talia shakes her head. “Wren, we need to win back the public. That’s the way we can scale through this. They need to know the truth.”

“They will. Sean’s investigating.”

The room falls silent for a moment.

“We need the marketing budget Richard’s investment would have covered. Henry and Ava, please provide it as soon as possible.” I stand, walking to the window overlooking the city. “And the confidence his backing signals to others.”

Ava nods, typing into her tablet. “On it.”

“We pivot.” Talia's voice is firm. “Focus on retention of existing customers. Double down on loyalty.”

“While watching our growth projections tank?” Simone’s voice cracks.

“While weathering the storm.” I turn back to face them. “This will pass.”

“Will it?” Ava sets her tablet down. “Every day this continues, we lose ground. The launch is in six weeks.”

“I know our timeline.” My voice is curt from controlled anger.

The room falls silent. I never lose my cool—not in board meetings, not with investors, not ever. I close my eyes, gathering myself.

“I’m sorry. That was?—”

My phone vibrates on the desk. Eric’s school flashes on the screen. Unexpected calls from his school never mean anything good.

“Ms. Sinclair? This is Principal Martinez from Westlake Academy.”

“Is Eric okay?” My heart pounds.

“He’s fine, but... there’s been an incident. Someone delivered a package to the front office for Eric. It contained...”

I close my eyes, my fear transforming into fury.

“Let me guess. Lemons?”

“Well yes, rotting lemons and a note. Security has it now, but I think you should come.”

The room spins and I clench the desk to retain control. “I’ll be right there.”

I end the call, my hand shaking.

“Wren?” Talia steps toward me.

“They sent something to Eric’s school.” My voice sounds distant to my own ears.

“Lemons. They targeted my son.”

Raj's face drains of color, letting out a string of expletives. “Holy?—”

“Call Sean.” Talia grabs my purse, handing it to me. “Now.”

I dial his number, fighting panic. He answers on the first ring.

“I'm already in the lobby.” His voice is steady, grounding. “Jen called me.”

Of course she did. Jen's on the emergency contact list for Eric.

“They sent something to his school, Sean.” The professional mask slips and I fight hot tears that sprang to my eyes. “My baby...”

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“I’ll have you there in ten minutes. Meet me out front.”

I grab my things, barely registering my team’s assurances about handling things here. The elevator ride feels endless. When the doors open to the lobby, Sean is already waiting. A figure solid, imposing and ready.

“My car’s out front.” He guides me with a hand at my lower back. “Security’s been notified. They’re keeping Eric in the office.”

“How did they know where he goes to school? How did they—” My voice breaks.

Sean’s eyes meet mine, blue and intense. “That’s what I’m going to find out.”

Outside, cameras flash as we emerge. Paparazzi crowd the entrance, shouting questions.

“Wren! Are you losing investors?”

“Is it true you stole the idea?”

“What do you have to say about Camille Ross’s accusations?”

Sean pulls me closer, shielding me as we push through to his SUV. Once inside, he guns the engine, leaving the vultures behind.

“Breathe, Wren.” His hand covers mine. “Eric is safe. I won’t let anything happen to either of you.”

I nod, throat tight with unshed tears. My phone chimes with a text notification. Unknown number.

A good mother would protect her son better. Tick tock, lemon drop.

I show Sean the screen, my hand trembling.

His jaw tightens, eyes darkening as he reads. “Pack your bags when we get Eric. You're both staying at my place now. Your place’s trailed with paparazzi after the news of the investors’ meeting got out. This isn't a request.”

For the first time in my adult life, I don't argue about being told what to do. Because as the school comes into view, one thought overrides everything else: whoever is behind this has just made their biggest mistake.

They came after my son.

And there is nothing in this world I won't do to protect him.

6

SEAN

The sun sets as I lead Wren and Eric through my front door. I live in the quieter part of L.A. High up, away from all the flashing lights and long lenses. Gated, discreet, cameras hidden in the trees. The kind of place built for men who have reasons to disappear.

My house hasn't felt this alive in years. The boy clutches his dinosaur backpack to his chest, his other hand clutching his mother's hand, unaware of the chaos of the day. My heart warms at the beauty and simplicity of childhood.

His brown eyes widen as he takes in the unfamiliar surroundings. Eric points to the mounted screen on the wall.

“You have a big TV. Like us.”

“Perfect for dinosaur documentaries.” I set his small suitcase down. “Your mom says you're an expert.”

He beams. “I know all the names. Even the hard ones.”

“I bet you do.” I ruffle his hair without thinking. The gesture comes naturally, surprising me. I haven't done that in years since Jen got into middle school and decided it was cringe and she was too cool for that.

Eric, on the other hand, smiles harder, running to sit on the large sofa.

Wren stands in the entryway, shoulders tight with tension. She's still shaken from the incident.

“Let me show you the guest rooms.” I grab their bags. “Eric, you're upstairs next to your mom.”

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“Do you have nightlights?” Eric whispers, falling into step beside me.

I smile. “You’re scared of the dark?”

The boy grows sullen as if ashamed. “Sometimes.”

“Should I let you in on a secret?”

He glances up to meet my gaze.

“When I was your age, I always slept in my mother’s bed.”

His face brightens. “What? You don’t look like you’d have been scared.”

“Oh, I was. I didn’t even have the confidence to sleep alone like you. You’re much braver than I was. Even your aunt Jen was also scared of the dark.”

“Really?”

“Yes. She thought the moon was hiding under her bed after following her home. She didn’t like the moon for a long time. She called it ‘The Stalker.’”

Eric bursts into laughter, dimples peeking.

“One day, when she was scared, we decided to both search under her bed for the moon and chase it out of our house. Maybe even call the police to arrest it if it refuses to leave.”

Eric's eyes widens, enthralled by the story. "So what happened? Did you find it?"

I shake with a dramatic sigh. "We looked everywhere in her room for it but we couldn't find it. Then, I took your aunt Jen outside and there the moon was, sitting regal in the sky. That was when Jen realized that the moon doesn't follow her and that her fear was all in her mind."

Eric laughs for a whole minute. Wren smiles beside him, her face alight as she watches her son laugh. My heart skips.

"Maybe there's nothing under my bed too," Eric says. "Just like Aunt Jen thought the moon was under her bed but it wasn't."

"I agree, but we'll get you your night lights." I make a mental note. "Home Depot is still open."

Wren shakes her head. "You don't have to. I'll get it for him tomorrow."

"It's no problem. Security first, right? Comfort, second. Both matter."

The guest room is sparse with a bed, wardrobe and a vanity table. I realize too late how impersonal it must seem.

"It's perfect." Wren sets her purse down. "Thank you for this."

"It's temporary." I clear my throat. "Until my team deals with the threat."

She nods but doesn't meet my eyes. I show them Eric's room next door with its adjoining bathroom.

"Can I put my dinosaurs here?" Eric asks, already laying out a collection of plastic

figures on the dresser.

“Anywhere you want, buddy.” I check the window locks. “This place is your fortress now.”

Wren watches us from the doorway, her expression unreadable. I wonder if she's regretting agreeing to come here. It was less an invitation and more an order after what happened at Eric's school.

“I should call Talia and update her.” She turns away, phone already in hand.

“I ordered dinner.” I follow her into the hallway. “Nothing fancy, just Italian from Salvatore's.”

“Eric loves Italian.”

“I know.” The words slip out before I can stop them.

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Her eyebrow raises. “You do?”

“Jen mentioned it.” I shrug, covering the awkward moment. “She's stopping by with wine, by the way. Thought you could use a friend tonight.”

Relief softens her features. “That sounds perfect.”

I head downstairs to check the security monitors I've set up. The cameras show nothing unusual outside. Nothing but the quiet suburban street where I've lived alone for the past five years.

The doorbell rings at 6:30. Delivery, right on time. I give the driver a generous tip and carry the food to the kitchen.

“Dinner's here.” I call upstairs, unpacking containers of pasta, salad, and breadsticks.

Eric appears first, racing down with the energy only six-year-olds possess. “Is it spaghetti? I love spaghetti!”

I grab plates from the cabinet.

“I guess you're in luck then.”

Wren follows several minutes later, her business clothes exchanged for leggings and an oversized sweater. Her hair falls loose around her shoulders, and without her usual makeup, she looks softer. More vulnerable.

“Hmm... that smells amazing. Right, Eric?”

He nods. “Thank God you're here, mom. Now, we can eat.”

Wren and I laugh at the same time. Our gaze hold over the boy's head.

“Mr. Langston! The pasta, please?”

I can't help my smile as I ruffle the boy's hair. “Alright. Pasta coming.”

Wren smiles too. It's the first time I've seen her shoulders drop since this whole thing started.

She helps Eric into a chair. “Looks like Eric and I are both starving. I didn't realize how hungry I was.”

“Stress does that.” I divide the pasta onto plates. “You only realize you've forgotten to eat many hours later.”

She smiles, accepting the plate I hand her. “You sound like you know from experience.”

“Occupational hazard.” I pour water and a cup of chilled orange juice for everyone. “It's kinda hard to remember meals when you're scanning for threats.”

Eric looks up, tomato sauce already smeared on his chin. “Are you a superhero?”

The question catches me off guard. “No, buddy. Just a regular guy who notices things.”

“Like a detective?” His eyes widen.

“Something like that.” I smile despite myself.

The doorbell rings again.

I stand, checking the security feed on my phone. “That should be Aunt Jen.”

I open the door to a whirlwind of energy and perfume. Jen carries the kind of energy that feels like a sugar rush in human form.

“Hi dad! Hi everyone! I brought reinforcements!” Jen holds up two bottles of wine and a shopping bag. “And something for my favorite godson.”

She sweeps past me, setting everything down to scoop Eric into a hug.

“Aunt Jen!” Eric squeezes her neck. “I’m staying at Mr. Langston’s house. It’s like a fortress!”

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“Is it now?” She raises an eyebrow at me over his head.

I shrug, uncomfortable with her scrutiny. Jen knows me too well. She knows I never bring clients home. Ever.

But this is her friend, right? This is different.

“Wine?” I grab a corkscrew, needing something to do with my hands.

“God, yes.” Wren accepts the glass I pour. “Today has been...”

“A complete disaster?” Jen supplies, sitting beside her. “This is why we’re grateful that wine brings calm. Or at least it delays the breakdown until morning.”

Wren giggles. Jen settles into the seat next to pull, serving herself a plate.

“What happened at the investors’ meeting?”

Wren sighs. “Richard pulled out. The others are waiting to see if I canhandle the adversity.”

“Cowards.” Jen scoffs. “Hey, guess what I brought you?”

She pulls a small night light shaped like a dinosaur from her bag. Eric's eyes light up.

“It's a T-Rex! And it glows!”

“For your room here.” Jen winks at him. “A fortress needs proper lighting.”

My Jen, always a lifesaver.

I catch her eye with a slight nod. She smiles.

Eric is soon seated in front of the TV, singing along to the theme song of some cartoon.

“I wanted to come down to the school but I was out of town. How did it go? Did you find who sent it, Dad?”

“Not yet. I've increased security, moved them here, and my team is investigating who breached the school's visitor protocols.” I keep my voice measured. “The package and note have been secured for evidence.”

As the evening progresses, Wren relaxes. The wine helps, but I know Jen's presence helps even more. Her easy chatter about celebrity gossip and fashion disasters provides a bubble of normalcy in the chaos.

I observe from the periphery, taking mental notes. The protective glances she casts toward Eric every few minutes. The slight tremble in her hand when her phone chimes with a notification.

“You're staring.” Jen murmurs, appearing beside me at the kitchen counter where I'm loading the dishwasher.

“I'm assessing,” I correct her.

“Right.” She smirks. “That's why you haven't taken your eyes off her all night.”

“She's my client.”

“Alright, dad.” Jen pats my arm. “I'm going to take Eric upstairs to set up his awesome new nightlight.”

After Eric has been put to bed, we gather in the living room enjoying the rest of the wine.

“Is it weird I kind of like it here?” Wren takes another sip of wine. “Feels like I can breathe.”

“Because there's no press camped on the sidewalk,” Jen mutters. “Or paparazzi screaming questions like ‘did you steal a lemon from a blogger in 2019?’”

Wren snorts.

Jen gets a text and rolls her eyes.

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“Alright, gotta bounce. My shoot tomorrow is at seven. Which is a sin, by the way.”

She hugs Wren.

“You’re safe here. Don’t fight it.”

Then she’s gone, leaving the two of us in a silence that hums.

“More wine?” I offer, already reaching for the bottle.

“I shouldn’t.” She sighs, holding out her glass anyway. “But it’s been that kind of day.”

“You handled it well.”

She let out a mirthless laugh. “Did I? I broke down when the school called. I was terrified.”

“That’s not weakness, Wren. That’s being a parent.”

Our fingers brush as I hand her the glass. The brief contact sends an unexpected current through me. I pull back too fast, wine sloshing over the rim. I curse myself in my mind.

“Sorry.” I grab a towel. “I’m not usually this clumsy.”

“It’s been that kind of day for you too, hasn’t it?” Her voice softens.

I look up, meeting her gaze. The kitchen light catches the gold flecks in her brown eyes. For a moment, we stare at each other, not saying a word.

“I don't bring clients to where I live.” The confession tumbles out. “Ever.”

She tilts her head. “Why us, then?”

Before I can answer, a crash from upstairs breaks the moment. We both freeze, instincts on high alert.

“Oops!” Eric's voice calls down. “The dinosaur fell! But he's okay!”

The tension dissolves into unexpected laughter. Wren's shoulders shake as she presses a hand to her mouth.

“Goodness, I thought he was sleeping. I should go check on the catastrophe upstairs.” She stands, her fingers squeezing my forearm for a brief moment. “Thank you, Sean. For everything today.”

I watch her climb the stairs, feeling unsettled. This arrangement is temporary. Necessary. Professional.

So why does it already feel like they belong here?

And why, for the first time in years, does my empty house feel like a home?

7

WREN

I hum the melody to I Heard It Through The Grapevine by Marvin Gaye, drumming my

fingers on the kitchen counter, waiting for the coffee to brew. Eric's in the living room, sprawled on his stomach with crayons scattered around him as he colors in his dinosaur book. Sean's place feels different in the morning light. More lived-in somehow with lots of natural warm light, despite its sleek design.

“Do you want more cereal, honey?” I call out.

“No thank you, Mom. I'm coloring a T-Rex.”

The coffee machine sputters its final drops, and I pour myself a cup, inhaling the rich aroma. Our first weekend at Sean's place has been comfortable so far. Eric adjusted faster than I expected, arranging his dinosaur collection on every available surface in the other guest bedroom. He's bonding well with Sean too. Perhaps a little too well.

The front door clicks open. The smell of eucalyptus hits me before he even walks into the room. I glance up from the kitchen counter and—God.

I freeze mid-sip.

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Sean walks in, gym bag slung over his shoulder. And he's... shirtless. My brain short-circuits.

His torso is sculpted with the kind of definition that belongs in fitness magazines. A light sheen of sweat makes his tan skin glow in the morning light. Ink peeking from under his collarbone. A trail of dark hair disappears beneath the waistband of his shorts.

I forget how to function as a human being, wanting to tear my eyes away before he catches me ogling. But I stay rooted to the spot.

Sean wipes sweat from his neck with a towel like he hasn't just walked in looking like every woman's gym fantasy. The man has the audacity to look like that before coffee.

I drop a spoon.

"Morning," he says casually, dropping his bag by the door. "Didn't expect you guys to be up so early on a Saturday."

"We, um—" My voice comes out squeaky.

How embarrassing, Wren.

I clear my throat, managing to tear my gaze from him. "Eric's an early riser. Always has been."

“Hi!” Eric abandons his coloring and runs over. “Look what I drew, Uncle Sean.”

Sean crouches down to examine the paper Eric thrusts at him, and I'm grateful for the distraction. I need to get myself together. It's just a chest. A very nice broad chest, butstill.

“That's some dinosaur, buddy. Is that a volcano behind it?”

“Yeah! T-Rex lived when there were volcanoes everywhere!”

“Is that right?” Sean ruffles Eric's hair.

I take another sip of coffee, willing my face to cool down. When I look up, Sean's watching me with his brows pulled together.

“Everything okay? You look a little flushed.”

“Oh, I’m fine! Very fine and cool. The coffee’s just hot.” I wave my mug without thinking and some coffee sloshes over the rim. “Oh, shoot!”

“Here.” He grabs a paper towel and hands it to me. He's standing so close now I can smell his post-workout scent. An intoxicating mix of clean sweat and something woody. There’s a tiny scar near his shoulder I never noticed before.

I dab at the spill with devoted attention.

“Thanks.”

“Did it spill on you?”

“Oh, not at all. It’s cool. Chill.”

“Um. So, I wanted to let you know I'll be out today.” He leans against the counter, combing his fingers through his messy hair. “My company's handling an exclusive event, and I need to supervise.”

“Right. Of course. Secure all the things.”

I look around for something to busy my hands with now that I've finished dabbing. I can't bear to look at him for long, else he'll be able to tell just how attractive I find him.

My eyes latch on a lemon. Perfect. Because my life revolves around them. I grab it, studying the lemon with interest.

“You'll be alright here with Eric?”

“Of course.” I nod too fast. “We'll be fine. Great. I might make cookies with Eric. Or watch a movie. Or both. Whatever. We're good. You go do you!”

Why am I rambling? Get it together, Wren.

Sean takes a step closer, and my mouth goes dry. Four feet between us. Three. Two. I feel the shift in the air like a magnet pulling me in. He towers over me, his presence filling every inch of space between us. His eyes dip. Lips. My lips.

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My breath catches as his gaze lingers there. My lungs forget their job. The moment stretches, elastic and charged.

Is he going to...?

My heart hammers against my ribs. One step closer and I'd be done for. One step and I'm sure I'd do something stupid like kiss him first.

My eyes flutter shut.

"Mind if I have some?"

I blink my eyes to see him reaching past me for the coffee pot instead.

Heat creeps up my neck in an instant.

"Go ahead," I squeak.

He pours himself a cup, takes a long drink, then sets the mug down. "I'm going to shower. I'll see you later tonight."

And just like that, he walks away, leaving me gripping the counter for support.

When I hear the bathroom door close, I let out an exhale. A deep long exhale like I've been underwater.

I slap a hand to my forehead. How embarrassing. What was that? Did I imagine the

tension between us, the way his eyes held mine?

Somehow, it reminds me of that night many years ago. The almost-kiss moment that haunts me on certain nights. I sometimes imagine how that would've changed my life.

Ugh!

I press my palms to my cheeks, feeling the heat there. Get a grip, Wren. He's your best friend's father. Your temporary landlord. Your protector from the online chaos swirling around you. Nothing more. Focus.

But my thundering heart doesn't seem convinced.

Jen shows up at noon with a tote bag and a bottle of wine. I texted her after being unable to stop thinking of my embarrassing moment and lucky for me, she was in town.

Eric jumps her with a full hug and she spins him until they're both laughing on the living room rug.

"What're we doing today, Aunt Jen?"

"Today, we're baking Lemon cookies."

"Yay!" Eric squirms, running around the living room.

We both shake our heads at him, smiling.

"I thought you'd still be on the Iridescent set."

“I finished as soon as possible to avoid the mess on that set.”

“Wait, what?”

Jen clicks her tongue, tossing wine on the counter. “It’s a whole mess. You know Rida Collins is now the chief editor?”

I reach for a bag of flour, pouring some into a bowl.

“Yeah, I saw the news. Great woman. We’ve worked a couple of times together.”

“News is that Adrienne has been seeing Liam Collins.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

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“The set was so tense yesterday. I think Rida found out awhile and has been trying to work through it in private but fuckassTMZbroke the news that morning with pictures.”

“TMZis going to hell.”

We start mixing ingredients. For once, I can't be more relieved to be lost in other people's gossip and not think about my own life for a moment.

“You can say that again. Adrienne's shots were retaken like twenty times and Rida was there through it all.”

“There's no way. What a mess.”

“Mess is right.” Jen shakes her head. “I was stunned. Not surprised but still very much surprised all the same. I can't explain it.”

“Geez. I understand what you mean perfectly.” I shake my head. “That's so disappointing.”

“You could see Rida was trying her best to be professional through it all. Liam never deserved her. I just don't know why anyone would do that to someone they claim to love.”

“It baffles me too.”

“I even think this is taking some attention away from your scandal.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Really? I haven't been online much.”

“Well, Rida and Liam are very beloved in the fashion industry and Adrienne’s a top model so this is like the scandal of the year.”

“Gosh. I feel bad for Rida.”

Jen grabs a lemon and starts zesting it. “I do too but I think she’ll take him back though.”

“Why would she do that? He cheated and disrespected her.”

“They’re a brand. A very powerful one too, and Rida’s pregnant. I think they’ll prefer to work through their issues.”

“Damn. Men like that will end up cheating again. But in the end, it’s her choice to make.”

“Right. I wish her the best. Liam and Adrienne can go to hell. Very dark-spirited individuals.”

I chuckle. “I agree.”

“Anyway, how’re you adjusting here?”

“Eric’s loving it here. I think this is like a vacation for him.”

“And what about you? Adjusting okay to living with my dad?” Jen wiggles her eyebrows.

I flick flour at her. “Stop that. It's been normal. Sean’s being a fortress and so kind to

us.”

Jen snorts. “You know, in all seriousness, I'm glad you're here. With everything happening online...”

I grimace, thinking about the threats and nasty comments still flooding my business pages despite my attempts to lock everything down. “Yeah. I'm trying not to think about it.”

“Don’t worry. The public will soon get bored and the vitriol will pass soon. Have you tried reaching out to the woman?”

“Who? Camille Ross?”

Jen nods. “Maybe you should try talking to her?”

“Legal advised against this. We’re considering a lawsuit against her.”

“As you should. This is such reputational damage.” Jen's expression darkens. “Those photos, the messages... they’re disgusting and serious.”

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“I know. And I'm so grateful to your dad for letting us stay here.” I stir the batter with more force than necessary. “I don't know what we would've done otherwise.”

“He’s always had a soft spot for you.”

I let out a nervous laugh. “Yeah, because I'm best friends with his beloved daughter.”

She smiles, saying nothing else about that. I’m glad she doesn't.

We focus on making the cookies, the conversation shifting to simple topics. Eli helps too, stealing cookie dough when he thinks we aren't looking.

An hour later, the kitchen smells like sugar, zest, and yumminess. Jen perches on a stool, licking frosting off her finger.

“How are things with Derek? Better now?” I ask through a mouthful of soft buttery lemon cookies.

Jen groans. “I don’t know. He’s still being the way the new Derek is. I don’t get it. I haven’t seen him in a week even though we live in the same city. Imagine that? He’s the busiest man in the world now, and I’m the jobless one who’s seeking his attention.”

“He isn’t around this weekend?”

“Out of the country on some vague business travel. I just don’t get it. He doesn’t talk to me anymore. He makes me feel like I'm doing too much of late.” She pours herself

a cup of tea, her eyes turning sad.

“Like I’m always complaining of something he isn’t doing right. Mind you, this is all because he keeps me at arm’s length. It’s like there’s a chasm between us now that I can’t get past. And I do want to get past it.”

I listen as she continues listing all the issues in her relationship, nodding at the right moments.

When she pauses for breath, I offer, “Maybe you two need to sit down and figure out what’s important to both of you. Talk about what’s wrong and what you need from each other without it feeling like an accusation or a demand. Sometimes these little fights are about bigger things.”

Even as I say it, I feel like a fraud. What do I know about making relationships work? I haven’t given dating a chance since Eric’s father and I got divorced a year after he was born. Since then, it’s been all work and motherhood, with no time for romance.

“That’s... good advice,” Jen says, looking surprised.

“Don’t sound so shocked.” I laugh. “Though I don’t know why you’re asking me. I haven’t been in a relationship in years.”

“Maybe that’s why. You have perspective.” She points her cookie at me. “But it’s ridiculous that you’re single. You’re gorgeous, smart, and make the best lemon cookies in the state.”

“You know why. I don’t have much time or interest in dating. Between Eric and the business...”

“Excuses, excuses.” Jen waves, feigning a yawn. “You say this every time.”

I roll my eyes with a smile. “Well, because it’s true?”

“Wren, be serious. Listen,” she leans closer and I know she’s about to try for the umpteenth time to interest me in some man. “I know this guy, real sweet, works in finance?—”

“Pass.”

“You didn't even let me finish.”

“Because I know you, Jen and you’ve tried this a billion times. How do you always know some guy anyway?”

“Welcome to Hollywood, duh.”

I laugh. “Please.”

“But Wren, you’re too stunning to be alone. I know a lot of guys that are interested in you.”

“They’re always interested until it's time to put effort in when it matters. Don’t share my contact with them.”

“Of course. But you have to find a man before I take matters into my hands.”

“You wouldn't dare.”

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“Oh, keep trying me.”

I chuckle.

“On a serious note though, I can’t imagine jumping into the chaos of dating with all I have going on right now.”

“Fine, but the offer stands.” She grins mischievously. “Unless there's someone else you've got your eye on?”

An image of Sean, shirtless in the kitchen this morning, flashes through my mind. I turn away to hide my expression, busying myself with pouring another cup of tea.

“No one,” I lie. “I think we made too many cookies.”

“One day,” Jen says, stuffing a cookie into her mouth, “you’re gonna fall so hard you won’t even see it coming.”

I roll my eyes again. “If I fall for anyone again, I might just end up breaking my limbs.”

8

SEAN

The second Cal pings my phone, I know it’s big.

I am in my Lemon LLC office, spread out across the desk. Screens glowing in the dark. Security footage. Messages. A whole web of filth aimed at Wren.

I tap the call.

“Talk.”

Cal breathes out. “We got something. The@everybodyhatelemonsaccount.”

“The troll account led somewhere?”

“Indeed. And it’s not a troll account.”

A particular hate account called everybodyhateslemons caught my attention during our investigations. Whoever was behind seems to have had it out for Wren and Lemon LLC for about a year now posting hate content, and reviews and going on about how much they hate her and her company. The level of consistency and hatred caught my attention even though it was a small account and most of their content goes unnoticed. But I couldn't help but notice they were always in Camille Ross's comments and every media hating on Wren. I told Cal and Danito investigate the account in case it was not a regular social media troll like some of our trails.

“Tell me about it.”

“The first few threats are not from random kids or chronically-online stans. We traced them back.”

I sit up straighter. “Where? To Nova Grey?”

“Bingo. Specifically, to a cluster of burner accounts created on their office network. Whoever did this wasn't exactly covering their tracks like a pro.”

I stare at the map on my screen of the IP address match. Nova Grey. Marlowe Skye's company.

"What a—" I cut myself off. "Marlowe Skye's behind this."

"Looks that way. I've packaged everything into a report for you. Just sent it."

"Thanks, Cal."

I end the call and open the report. Cal's thorough—timestamps, screenshots, access logs. It's all here. Marlowe Skye has been orchestrating this campaign against Wren from the beginning.

The vindictiveness of it makes my blood boil. I've seen a lot in my security career, but using your resources to destroy someone's reputation like this? That's a special kind of cruelty.

I check my watch again. 11:25 AM. She's in a meeting. This needs to wait until her meeting is over, but I can't sit still. I've watched her struggle under the weight of these attacks for weeks. Seen her fighting to stay strong for her son, and for her company. She deserves to know the truth.

My mind drifts to the night before, how she fell asleep against my shoulder while we watched a movie with Eric. How right it felt having them both there. How complicated everything is becoming.

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Focus, Langston.

I print the key findings from Cal's report and add them to my own. An hour later, I grab my jacket and head to her office.

Wren is in the office when I find her, studying some papers. She looks up when I walk in.

“Bad news?”

“Depends how you look at it,” I say. “We found something.”

Immediately, she arranges for Talia and the core team to meet in the conference room. This isn't something I want to explain multiple times.

“Sean's found something,” Wren announces as we enter.

Talia nods. “About time we get some good news.”

Raj adjusts his glasses. “Please tell me it's something we can use.”

I set my laptop down, connecting it to the projector. “It's something you can use.”

The door opens and Wren's assistant, Lily walks in with a tray of coffee. “Sorry for intruding. Thought everyone could use a cup of coffee in these tense days.”

Wren smiles at her. “Thank you, Lily. You're a savior. I'm too nervous for whatever

Sean has to say.”

I watch Lily as she sets the tray down. She glances at the projector and meets my eyes. She smiles. I don’t. I wait until she leaves before I begin.

“Let’s begin,” I say, bringing up the first slide—a web of connections centered around a familiar face. “Marlowe Skye is behind the attacks on Wren and Lemon LLC.”

The room falls silent.

“What?” Talia is the first to recover. “Marlowe? Are you sure?”

"Completely." I click through to the evidence. "My team traced the IP addresses from the most vicious threats. They originate from Nova Grey's networks—Marlowe's company.”

Wren's face goes pale. "Marlowe? I—I don't understand."

“Do any of you recognize this username,everybodyhateslemons?”

Bailey, the head of content and socials, perks up. “Yes. It’s a Wren hate account. We don’t pay them any mind.”

“Well, that account was traced to be from Nova Grey.”

“What?”

“There's more. Cal, my cybersecurity specialist, found evidence that it might have been Marlowe's team who amplified Camille's accusations. They might’ve paid for promoted posts, and coordinated with gossip sites to keep the story alive.”

“That nasty woman.” Talia slams her hand on the table. “I knew something felt orchestrated about how fast this spread.”

Raj shakes his head in disbelief. “But why would Marlowe target us?”

I look to Wren. She's gone still, her fingers pressed against her lips.

“I think Wren might know.”

All eyes turn to her. She takes a deep breath.

“Marlowe approached me about two years ago. She wanted a collaboration line.”

“You never told us about this,” Talia says.

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“Because I shut it down immediately. Marlowe's products cut corners. Heavy on marketing, light on quality. Everything I've fought against.” Wren stands, pacing now. “She didn't take the rejection well. Said I'd regret not aligning with someone of my 'caliber.’”

“Looks like this is her version of payback.”

“But working with Camille?” Raj asks. “That seems like a stretch.”

I click to the next slide. “Not when you see this.”

The images show Marlowe and Camille first meeting at Jerkins and another meeting in what appears to be Marlowe's backyard. They're huddled close, looking at something on a laptop.

“Where did you get this?” Wren's voice is that of disbelief.

“I have contacts at various media outlets. Called in some favors. One of them had been documenting celebrity comings and goings. Found these in their archives.”

I click through several more photos showing the two women together on multiple occasions.

“The timeline matches,” I explain. “These meetings began days after Camille went public with her accusations. Perhaps Marlowe came across the first post she made which didn't go viral and decided to take her under her wing.”

Ava shakes her head. "This is so sick."

Talia's already typing on her phone. "This changes everything. We can go on the offensive now."

"I want to confront her." Wren's voice is steel now, her moment of shock passed. "I want to look her in the eye when I ask her why."

"I advise against that," I say. "At least not yet."

"Sean's right," Talia interjects. "This warrants a strategic release, through proper channels."

"No." Wren stands again, her posture rigid. "She's tearing down everything I built. Letting trolls send hateful packages to my son's school. Marlowe didn't have the courage to attack me directly. She hid behind Camille, behind anonymous trolls. I won't do the same. I'm confronting her."

I recognize that expression. It's the same one Eric gets when he's made up his mind about finishing a drawing before going to bed. Stubborn determination runs in the family.

"Then I'm coming with you," I say.

"Sean—"

"Non-negotiable, Wren. If you're doing this, I'm your shadow."

Our eyes lock in silent battle. Then, she nods.

"Fine."

Marlowe Skye's office is what you'd expect from a woman whose brand is called Nova Grey. Everything is sleek and monochromatic. Cold. Like the woman herself.

She keeps us waiting in her reception area for approximately thirty minutes. Power play. I've seen it before with high-profile clients. I stay standing while Wren sits, my back to the wall where I can observe everything.

At last, Marlowe emerges. All polished blonde hair, startling blue eyes, and too-white teeth. She's camera-ready in a silver pantsuit that costs more than most people's monthly rent.

"Wren, darling!" Her smile doesn't reach her eyes. "What a surprise. My assistant wasn't clear on why you needed to see me so urgently."

Her eyes dart to me, a slow smile crosses her expression as she does a double-take, before settling on Wren.

"Who's the hunk?"

Wren rises, ignoring her comment. "I think you know why I'm here, Marlowe."

"Do I?" She laughs. "Well, come into my office. We can catch up, we should catch up! It's been, what, two years?"

"Yes. Since the Vanity Fair party where I rejected a collaboration with Nova Grey and you told everyone my skincare line would never last another six months."

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Marlowe's smile tightens. "Water under the bridge now, right? We were both newer to the beauty space then."

I follow them into Marlowe's massive corner office. I position myself near the door, watching.

"Let's cut to the chase," Wren says once the door closes. "I know you're behind the smear campaign against me and my company."

Marlowe's expression doesn't change, but I catch the slight tension in her shoulders.

"What are you talking about?"

"Camille Ross. The coordinated attacks. The anonymous threats." Wren pulls out her phone, showing screenshots of our evidence. "Your IP addresses, Marlowe. Your company. Your meetings with Camille."

"This is a heavy accusation you're levying against me."

"Is it a mere accusation? We have the digital trail. We have photos of you meeting with Camille multiple times before she went viral."

Marlowe walks to her desk, putting distance between them. "Anyone can doctor images these days, Wren. I expected better from you than these desperate accusations."

"Why?" Wren presses. "Because I wouldn't sell out to you? Because I built

something that stands on its merit rather than celebrity hype?"

"Don't flatter yourself. " Marlowe's facade begins to crack. "You built your brand on what was left of your celebrity hype."

"And there's nothing wrong with that. But Lemon LLC is a corporation, not Wren Sinclair. If you've got a vendetta against me, why not come forme?"

Marlowe lets out a mirthless laugh. "You're not that special, Wren Sinclair."

"Special enough that you've spent months trying to destroy me."

"If your company is so solid, why would a few criticisms hurt it?" Marlowe counters. "Seems fragile to me."

I step forward. "Cut the act, Ms. Skye. We have enough evidence to take this public."

She acknowledges me again but this time with a dismissive glance. "And you are?"

"Someone who doesn't appreciate seeing good people targeted by vindictive campaigns."

Marlowe laughs, but it sounds hollow.

"Wren, you've hired muscle now? How dramatic."

"Answer the question, Marlowe." Wren's voice is calm. "Why go to these lengths? What did I do that was so terrible?"

"You know what you did." Something ugly flashes across Marlowe's perfect features. "You've always been so self-righteous, haven't you? Little Wren Sinclair, the foster

kid made good. America's sweetheart who left Hollywood for motherhood and entrepreneurship.”

“This is about me rejecting your proposal?”

“This is about you thinking you're better than everyone else!” Marlowe snaps. “You refused a partnership that would have benefited us both.”

“I refused to compromise my brand's integrity.”

“You implied my products were inferior.”

“They are.” Wren doesn't flinch. “And instead of improving them, you decided to tear me down.”

The silence that follows is charged. I watch Marlowe, noting how her hand twitches toward her desk drawer.

“I think this conversation is over.” Marlowe regains her composure, smoothing her jacket. “I have nothing to do with whatever issues you're facing, Wren. Perhaps if your ideas weren't stolen from a small creator, you wouldn't be in this position.”

“That's rich coming from someone who built an entire career stealing other people's work.”

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“Excuse me?”

“Your first hit film? The one that put you on the map? Everyone in the industry knows you lobbied to have the original lead actress replaced. You took her role, her breakthrough.”

Marlowe's face flushes red. “Get out of my office.”

“And now you're doing the same thing with Camille. Using her, manipulating her to get what you want.”

“I said get out!”

“We're leaving,” I say, stepping between them. “But this isn't over, Ms. Skye.”

In the elevator down, Wren lets out a shaky breath.

“You okay?” I ask.

“No.” She leans against the wall. “But I needed to see her face. To know for sure.”

“And now?”

“Now we fight back.” Her eyes meet mine, fierce and determined. “She wants a war? She's got one.”

I nod, admiring her resolve. But the way Marlowe was so quick to escalate, the

personal nature of her vendetta nags at me. It feels like there's more to this story than a rejected business proposal.

As we exit the building, my phone buzzes with a text from Cal:

More on Marlowe. Found an old connection between her and someone on Wren's team. Need to talk ASAP.

I glance at Wren, who's already on the phone with Talia, strategizing their next move. I don't want to worry her with half-formed suspicions, but my gut tells me we've only scratched the surface of what's going on.

And someone close to Wren might be part of it.

9

WREN

The air is thick with tension the next afternoon as I stare down at my legal team, their faces arranged in varying expressions of concern. The table between us feels like an ocean. Legal pads, coffee cups, and printouts of hateful social media posts are scattered across the surface.

“We have two options,” Peter Wells, our head counsel says, flipping through a thick stack of papers. “We sue Camille and Marlowe for defamation. Or we wait it out.”

“Waiting is killing us,” Ava snaps, pushing her hair away from her face. Her laptop screen glows bright. “Every hour, there is a new headline. New hate posts. People believe this lie.”

I massage my temples.

“Let me get this straight. Half of you think we should sue, and the other half think we should let it blow over?”

Peter taps his pen against his legal pad. “Litigation has risks. The discovery could be messy.”

“Messy how?” My voice rises. “We have nothing to hide.”

“It's not about hiding,” Jessica chimes in. “It's about public perception. These cases drag on for months, sometimes years.”

“And in the meantime,” Peter adds, “the narrative becomes 'big company bullies small creator.' Even if we win in court, we could lose in the court of public opinion.”

I glance at the social media reports. Our mentions are a dumpster fire. Sales are slipping. Retail partners are getting nervous.

“So we just... take it? Let Marlowe and her puppet trash everything I've built?”

Silence.

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“So all of you are telling me now that even after knowing that Marlowe Skye is behind this, we still have to wait with folded arms and watch Lemon LLC continue to suffer from these accusations?”

Peter sighs. “We’re not waiting with folded arms. We’re gathering evidence. After your impromptu visit, she might want to cover her trail.”

“Isn’t that why we should make this whole truth as public as they made the lie?”

Bailey shakes her head. “It might just seem like we’re lashing out against her without proper evidence.”

Jessica nods. “Pat is right. If we’re not careful this might force the public and media to support Marlowe even more and cause further damage to Lemon.”

“I understand that everyone’s upset but this is a delicate situation. Now that we know Marlowe’s an instigator, a major part of the puzzle has been solved. We have to tread carefully lest our evidence becomes useless before we can even use them. No matter how true they are.”

I lean back in my chair. My head throbs behind my eyes.

Talia, who's been quiet, speaks up. “We should delay the launch.”

“What?” I turn to face her.

“The Lemon Luminance serum. Push it back six months. Let this blow over first.”

“No.” The word comes out sharper than I intended. “No way. Why’s this still being brought up when I’ve made my stance clear on that? I’m disappointed it’s coming from you. The answer is no.”

“The market climate?—”

“Is why we can't delay. Good lord, you said it yourself, Talia. We need a win. A big one. If this product hits the way we know it will, investors will forget all about this garbage. We can fund our next phase projects.”

“And if it flops because of bad press?” Talia's eyes are sympathetic but firm.

“It won't.” I stand up, smoothing my skirt. “The formula is brilliant. The clinical results are better than anything on the market. We stick to the plan.”

The room falls silent. No one argues after that but I can feel their doubt like a physical pressure against my skin.

I sigh, looking into and holding each of their gaze.

“I need you all to trust me and trust in our work. This is the first scandal Lemon is facing and if we crumble now, how do expect to scale through whatever tribulations we may face down the road?”

Ava nods. “We trust you, Wren. We’re all in this together. If Lemon gets through this, I don’t think there’s anything in life that could shake me.”

A smile tugs at Talia’s lips. “Now, let’s not test the universe. I know someone who said the same and is dealing with a lot of crap at the moment.”

Everyone chuckles.

After a moment, I say, “Thank you all for your input. I'll take it under advisement.”

It's my way of ending the meeting without committing to anything they've suggested. As everyone files out, Talia lingers.

“You know I'm just trying to protect the brand.”

“I know. But sometimes protection means standing your ground.”

She sighs, gathering her notes. “I'll support whatever you decide. Just... be careful, okay?”

After she leaves, I collapse back into my chair, exhaustion washing over me in waves. For the first time since this nightmare began, I allow myself to consider the possibility of failure. What if I'm wrong? What if I can't fix this? What if they're all right about postponing the new product launch? What if I fail and Lemon LLC crumbles?

My chest tightens and my eyes become blurry with tears. I blink them back. I will not cry over this. Crying is accepting the possibility of failure. I will not fail.

My phone buzzes. It's Sean, waiting downstairs.

The drive home is quiet. Rain patters against the windshield, creating a cocoon of white noise that feels peaceful after the tension of the day. Sean keeps his eyes on the road, hands steady on the wheel.

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His presence beside me feels both comforting and distant. I pick at my nails, feeling the pressure of the day build in my chest once again.

“Your meeting run late?”

“Yeah. Legal team. They're divided on how to handle the Camille/Marlowe situation.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don't know. I'm not sure anymore.” I stare out the window, taking little note of the blurring city lights as we drive past. “But I'm not delaying the launch. That much I know.”

He nods, not pushing further. It's one of the things I've come to appreciate about him. He doesn't fill silence with needless chatter. But tonight, the silence feels heavy. Oppressive.

“How're you doing, Wren?”

Those simple words. That's all it takes.

They crack something open in me.

“I'm...” My voice cracks. “I'm not okay.”

Sean glances at me but says nothing, his attention returning to the road.

“My life was mine. And now, it’s a joke. I had everything under control. Everything. I built Lemon from nothing. I worked for years to do so. Do you know how many rejected emails I received? How many investor meetings I attended? I worked my ass off. And now strangers spit on it. On me. And I can’t fix it.” I take a shuddering breath.

“I carved out this life for Eric and me, and now...” I shake my head, biting my lower lip to stop the tears from coming. “Now it's all slipping through my fingers. The accuser remains on an endless media tirade, gaining fame off my back. The hate comments keep coming. The investors are getting cold feet. And Eric asked me yesterday why we picked him up early that day and if something bad is happening to me.”

The tears come then, hot and fast.

“I can't even protect my son. I have this migraine that won't go away, Sean. I wake up with it. I go to sleep with it. And I just...” A sob escapes. “I feel so alone in this.”

Sean pulls the car over, puts it in park. He doesn’t move or say a word. Just lets me cry to my heart’s content. But his silence isn't empty, it's full of understanding. Or maybe, strength.

When the sobs subside to hiccups, he unfastens his seatbelt and turns toward me. His hand, large and warm, reaches for mine.

“You're not alone.”

Three words. So simple. So earth-shattering.

He leans across the console and pulls me into his arms. The awkward angle doesn't matter. His embrace is solid, real. I feel his heartbeat against my cheek, steady and

sure. Then his lips press against my forehead, a touch so gentle it makes me want to cry all over again.

Time stops. The rain. The scandal. The fear. The migraine. Everything fades except for the feel of Sean's arms around me and the lingering warmth where his lips touched my skin.

My heart hammers in my chest at how safe he makes me feel.

But reality crashes back when he pulls away. What just happened? Heat floods my face. I've spent weeks projecting strength, and in five minutes, I've fallen apart in front of him.

He continues driving and I turn to the window for the rest of the drive

I don't wait for him to open my door. The moment the car stops, I'm out, rushing toward the house through the rain, fumbling with the key he gave me last week.

Inside the safety of my bedroom, I lean against the closed door, pulse racing. My forehead still tingles where he kissed me. It wasn't romantic. It couldn't have been. He was being kind. That's all.

But as I hear his car door close and his footsteps approach the house, I know I'm lying to myself.

Because for the first time since this nightmare began, I feel something besides fear.

I feel alive.

And that terrifies me more than any scandal ever could.

10

SEAN

I wake before my alarm, a lifetime habit from military training that civilian life hasn't erased. The house is quiet. Through my bedroom window, the first traces of dawn paint the sky in watercolor strokes.

I push myself out of bed, trying not to think about kissing Wren's forehead some nights ago. About Wren breaking down in my car. About how she fit in my arms. About the unprofessional way, I crossed the line with that kiss. About how my gaze lingered on her lips.

This is my new routine since that little forehead kiss three nights ago. I wake up and the first thing I see is Wren's face. It's the last thing I see before my body succumbs to sleep as well. Now, I want to push it out of my mind and fill my thoughts with other things. Think of business. Of how beautiful dawn is at this time.

I yawn, making my way to the kitchen.

There, I start the coffee maker. Strong. Black. Simple. Unlike everything else in my life right now.

A miniature Superman sits on the counter. One of Eric's toys. I pick it up, turning it over in my hand, smiling despite myself. The kid's got them everywhere.

It's easy to notice the small things around their little family. The toy truck left in the

yard, half buried in the dirt. The way her day bends around Eric's bedtime. The glow from her bedroom window long after midnight.

Wren lives like someone waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I'm not good with kids anymore. That part of my life ended a long time ago. But Eric is easy. He likes dinosaurs and making slime and he thinks there's a night monster under his bed but his night light keeps it away.

I smile, watching the coffee brew, the aroma filling the kitchen.

The sound of running water tells me Wren is awake. She'll come downstairs soon, hair still damp, wearing one of those silk shirts that make her look so lovely. I hope she wears that butter yellow one that makes her look like summer itself with that fitted skirt that accentuates her figure.

I brush a hand through my hair, scoffing.

"She won't be doing that and I should stop daydreaming," I murmur to myself.

Since that night, she's been treating me with careful professionalism. Tight smiles. Quick answers. Like she's trying to build a wall brick by brick between us. I let her.

Her message is clear even without words: That was a mistake. Won't happen again.

Fine by me. I set boundaries for a reason.

So why do I keep replaying that moment in the car?

I hear her footsteps on the stairs. I pour myself a cup of coffee, savoring the aroma before drinking. Before turning to see her in a butter yellow silk shirt and that same

skirt I fancy verymuch on her. I suck in a breath, twirling my cup, trying not to notice her cleavage.

“Good morning,” she says with a small smile before walking past me. I catch a whiff of her soft vanilla scent.

I clear my throat.

“Good morning. Care for some?”

“Yes, please.”

I pour her a cup. Black with one sugar, just how she likes it.

“You’ve been up all night, haven't you?”

“I'm fine.”

“Those dark circles under your eyes say otherwise.”

She reaches for the mug, her fingers brushing mine. A tingle of electricity rushes through my finger.

“Nothing some concealer won't fix.”

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“You work too hard.”

Our eyes hold for a moment. Her cherry lips part.

Eric bounds into the kitchen then, a dinosaur backpack dragging behind him. “Mom! I can't find my T-Rex socks!”

“Check under your bed, honey. That's where all missing things go to hide.” She ruffles his hair as he zooms past.

I watch her with her son, the softness in her eyes. The gentleness. It's a stark contrast to the businesswoman the world sees. Few people get to witness this side of her.

We prepare breakfast in silence.

Eric asks as he appears again in the doorway. “But can I bring Rex to school today?”

“Honey, we talked about this. Special toys stay home where they're safe.”

“But Uncle Sean says Rex is tough.”

She sighs. Her eyes meet mine for a moment before sliding away. I smile to myself.

“Uncle Sean! Look what I found yesterday!” Eric holds up a rock shaped like a heart.

“It's for my collection.”

I crouch down to his level. “That's a good one. Where'd you find it?”

“In the yard. Near the tree.” He lowers his voice to a whisper. “I think it's magic.”

“Yeah? What kind of magic?”

“The kind that makes people happy.” He glances at his mother, then back to me.  
“Mom needs happy magic right now.”

My chest tightens. Kids see everything.

I ruffle his hair. “That’s very thoughtful of you, Eric.”

“Breakfast is ready,” Wren announces, setting plates of scrambled eggs and toast on the table. Her movements are precise and efficient. The distance between us feels wider than the kitchen.

Eric climbs into his chair, reaching for the ketchup. Wren doesn't even try to stop him anymore. Some battles aren't worth fighting.

I watch her when she's not looking. The shadows under her eyes. The tension in her shoulders. The way she checks her phone every thirty seconds.

She's built her entire life around being her son's rock. Her schedule revolves around his needs—bedtime stories, school drop-offs, weekend pancakes. But who's her rock?

That night, for just a moment, I thought maybe...

My phone rings. Jen’s face flashes on the screen.

I answer.

Jen’s voice barrels out.

“Have you seen it yet?”

I frown.

“Seen what.”

“BuzzTab news this morning?”

“You know I don't read that trash.”

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“Well, you're in it.”

“What?” I ask, puzzled.

“There are pictures. Of you and Wren. In your car some nights ago.” Her voice has that tone of half concern, half fascination. “You're holding her, dad.”

I feel a cold dread settling in my stomach now. “What?”

Wren's phone starts buzzing. She checks the screen and her face goes pale.

“Talía,” she mouths to me.

“Check your email. Now.”

I hang up and swipe open my inbox.

The headline punches me in the gut.

SECRET LOVERS? CEO WREN SINCLAIR CAUGHT CANOODLING WITH MYSTERY MAN.

Wren's voice is tight. “What pictures?” A pause. “When? How?”

Another pause. “I'll be there in twenty.”

She hangs up, her eyes wide with panic.

“Someone got photos of us. In the car. Last night.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “They're saying we're... together.”

“Damn it.” I grab my phone. Jen has sent me other gossip site links about the news. I open another.

There we are. The images are grainy, taken through the rain-streaked window of my car, but clear enough. Me holding Wren against my chest. My lips pressed to her forehead.

My jaw clenches as I read the headline: “HOLLYWOOD’S MOST PRIVATE BEAUTY QUEEN’S ROMANCE UNRAVELED: Who Is Wren Sinclair Hiding?”

My mind is racing. This is bad. Very bad.

“I’ll take Eric to school,” I say. “You get to the office.”

She nods, already moving, grabbing her bag, and her keys.

“Mom?” Eric’s voice is small. “Are you okay?”

She stops, and kneels in front of him. “I’m fine, baby. Just busy with work. Sean’s going to take you to school today, okay?”

He nods, those big brown eyes so serious.

Twenty minutes later, I’m helping Eric out of my car in front of his elementary school. His superhero backpack looks too big for his small frame.

“Uncle Sean?” He tugs on my hand.

“Yeah, buddy?”

“Is my mom in trouble? The kids at school say bad things are happening to her company.”

Christ. My heart twists for this kid. For Wren.

“Your mom's company is doing great,” I say, crouching to his eye level. “Sometimes grown-ups say mean things about each other. But your mom is smart and strong. She's just busy making a new product that's going to help a lot of people.”

He studies my face, looking for any hint of a lie. “Promise?”

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“Promise.”

He nods like he understands, and runs toward the school entrance. I watch until he's inside.

Back in my car, I slam my hand against the steering wheel. What was I thinking? I'm supposed to be protecting her, not creating more problems. I should have known the paps would catch on. I should have never let her get pulled into my orbit.

One moment of being vulnerable and now there's more fuel for the fire.

This is why I keep my distance. This is why I don't get personal. Every time I let down my guard, someone gets hurt.

The buzzing of my phone interrupts my self-flagellation. It's a text from Wren.

“Talia wants to meet at the office ASAP.”

I start the car, dreading whatever's waiting for me. Whatever it is, I'm pretty sure I'm not going to like it.

11

WREN

I grab a granola bar from my bag, twirling it in my hand as I pace.

Talia hasn't said any other thing other than she wants to see Sean and me since I arrived, her furious keystrokes the only sound between us. I lean against my desk, tapping my foot. My stomach churns with anxiety and the bitter aftertaste of the coffee I downed on my way here.

Talia is upset about our carelessness but I need her to say it. I've already beat myself up all the way here. I steel myself for whenever she speaks.

The photographs displayed on my table mock me with every glance—Sean's arms around me, his lips on my forehead, my vulnerable expression captured for the world to see. Our private moment is now public. A moment I've been trying to push out of my mind and pretend like it didn't happen. I don't even have the choice of doing that now. My stomach turns.

Unable to bear the silence anymore, I speak first.

"This is a disaster." I run my fingers through my hair, not caring that I'm ruining the sleek style I'd crafted this morning. I've seen the way Sean's eyes linger and darken the first time I wore this outfit. I don't know what possessed me to wear it again even though I'm trying to set boundaries. It feels counterproductive.

"I know it looks bad," I say. "It was careless. I should have never let my guard down. I should've set more boundaries."

A smile tugs at Talia's mouth. "Relax, Wren."

I blink.

"Relax?"

Talia shifts on the sofa in my office, manicured nails tapping against her coffee mug.

“It might not be as bad as you think. In fact, I think this might be good.”

“How could this be good?” I stop pacing to stare at her. “Haven't you seen the comments?”

“Have you?”

I shake my head vigorously. “God, no. I can't bear the nasty comments. I don't check social media anymore. I'm suffering enough.”

“Well, I have. That's why I'm saying this.”

The door opens and Sean walks in, his expression grim. My heart does a traitorous little flip at the sight of him.

“Sorry, I'm late. Had to drop Eric at school.”

“No problem.” Talia gestures to the couch opposite hers. “We were just discussing the... situation.”

Sean sits, keeping a careful distance between us. “Look, I take full responsibility. I should've been more careful.”

I sit down hard.

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“It's not your fault. I'm the one who broke down.”

Sean shifts, watching me. He says nothing.

“Actually,” Talia interrupts, swiveling her screen toward us, “this might be what we need right now.”

Paparazzi shots fill the screen. Me. Sean. The blurred shape of us in the car. Headlines splash across every corner.

“America’s Sweetheart’s New Mystery Man

Wren Sinclair Off the Market?”

“They are eating it up,” Talia says.

I frown. “I don’t understand.”

“Look at the comments.”

I swallow, forcing myself to read through them, expecting vitriol and slutshaming. Instead, I find curiosity, excitement, and even support.

“OMG, who is this silver fox??? ”

“Wren deserves happiness more than anyone . A tasteful queen I stan!”

“That protective embrace though! ”

“I’ve always wondered who Wren Sinclair is dating. I refuse to believe a gorgeous woman like her has been single for years. She’s too beloved and beautiful to be single. Haha. Good taste, Wren. Go, stunning couple. ”

“Wren Sinclair has always been the baddest woman in Hollywood! No wonder she keeps her relationships private. Girlie knows everyone would be drooling over her man.”

“Idk y’all, they look like such an IT Couple omfg! I think we’ve got the latest IT Couple in Hollywood.”

“omg, they’re so hot. hello??”

“I ship them so bad already. Who is he!!!! ”

My mouth falls open. I can’t believe what I’m reading. People like Sean and I together? I blink.

Sean pulls away with a frown. “Am I reading these comments right?”

Talia laughs. “Very fierce, right?”

“Fierce and passionate. It’s a whiplash. I can’t believe it,” I shove a hand through my hair. “I’ve avoided going on the internet for weeks now because I’m so scared of ruining what’s left of my sanity with the deranged comments. This is... unbelievable.”

“That’s the internet for you, and how fickle people are.”

“But what about the false accusations? I thought this might be the last straw.”

“People are getting bored with Camille's accusations,” Talia explains. “The plagiarism story is old news, but this—” she taps the photo. “—this is new and intriguing. Your romantic life has always fascinated people because you keep it so private.”

“Because it's private.”

“Yes.” Talia leans forward, her eyes bright with that look she gets when she's piecing together a strategy. “No one even knew you were married until the divorce filings became public record.”

I clench my jaw. “And I'd like to keep my personal life that way.”

“The thing is, Wren, the public's already in your personal life. But now, instead of speculating about whether you're a fraud, they're speculating about your love life. The narrative is shifting.”

Sean shifts in his chair, his eyes narrowing. “What are you suggesting?”

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Talia smiles.

“Lean into it. A curated romance narrative could be what we need to redirect attention away from the scandal.”

My mouth drops open. “You want us to fake a relationship?”

“I want you to control the story instead of letting it control you.”

“That's insane.” I stand up again, unable to stay still. “I can't ask Sean to do that. And I can't subject myself to even more public scrutiny.”

“The thing is,” Talia counters, “this would give you the perfect excuse to be seen together everywhere without raising suspicions about security concerns. Plus, the public loves a good romance. It humanizes you.”

“I'm already human just like them. I don't need to be humanized.”

“Everyone who's been portrayed as a villain does.”

That stings, but she's not wrong. The scandal has painted me as a corporate shark who steals from the little guy.

I shake my head.

“I can't do it. The media would be all over us. They'd dig into Sean's life. Eric would be confused. It's too complicated.”

“It's temporary,” Talia argues. “Just until the product launch. Just until we gather enough evidence to stand against Marlowe and Camille. Six weeks, max.”

“No, I can't. I've kept my private life private for a reason. I don't want to drag Sean into this circus.”

“I think this is a good idea.”

Sean's deep voice cuts through our debate. We both turn to stare at him.

“You what?” I blink, certain I've misheard.

“It's a good idea. I'll do it.” His face is calm, his tone even calmer. “If it helps take the negative attention off you and the company, I'm in.”

Talia claps her hands once, beaming as if Christmas came early.

“Perfect!”

“Wait, you can't be serious.” I look at Sean, hands on my hips. “This would put you in the spotlight. Everything you hate.”

“I hate seeing you and your son stressed even more. This is my job, Wren. Protecting you and your interests. If it helps you. If it protects Eric. Then yeah. Let's do it.”

His job. Of course. This is just another security tactic for him. Nothing personal. The realization shouldn't hurt, but it does.

“It would be for appearances,” Talia clarifies, sensing my hesitation. “A few public sightings. You know, soft launches. Coffee dates. Some strategic articles. Nothing over the top.”

“I’m in. If you agree, of course.”

They're both looking at me now, waiting for my decision. The smart move would be to say yes. To use this unexpected development to our advantage. To protect my company.

“Fine.” I let out a slow exhale. “But we set boundaries. And it ends after the product launch.”

“Sure!” Talia's already typing notes into her tablet. “I'll draft some guidelines for appearances, social media engagement, all of it.”

“And Eric?”

“We keep him out of it,” Sean says in a firm tone. “We’ll have to tell him we're spending time together because I'm helping you with work.”

It's a sensible plan. Clean. Professional. So why does my heart feel so tangled?

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“I have some calls to make.” Talia stands, a gleam in her eyes. “Can you two give me an hour to work up a strategy? In the meantime, maybe grab coffee downstairs? Start getting comfortable being seen together?”

Before I can protest, she's ushering us toward the door, the gleam in her eye making it clear she's already ten steps ahead.

In the elevator, Sean and I stand in awkward silence. I risk a glance at him.

“You don't have to do this.”

“I know.”

“It's going to be uncomfortable.”

“Maybe.”

I study his profile, searching for regret or reluctance. “Why did you agree?”

The elevator stops, doors sliding open to the lobby. He turns to me now, dark blue eyes meeting mine.

“Because you need this win, Wren. And I?—”

He stops, something shifting in his expression. The air between us changes, and thickens. His gaze drops to my lips for just a second, then back to my eyes.

My heart slams against my ribs.

Now, I'm not thinking about optics or strategy.

I'm thinking about the way he looked at me that night, his hand pressed to the small of my back, the way his body felt so solid next to mine. So safe.

I tear my gaze away.

It's not real. It's not real. He's only doing his job.

This is pretend, I remind myself. Just for show. Just until the launch.

But as we step out of the elevator together, his hand finding the small of my back with natural ease, I'm not so sure either of us is pretending anymore.

12

SEAN

I keep it professional. At least, I tell myself I do.

Our fake relationship goes public with a strategic article from *People*. High-quality pictures of us are taken. Wren and I walk inside a restaurant, hands entwined. Sunlight catching in her hair. Her fingers are small in mine. I whisper something to her about the paparazzi thinking we can't spot them. But just as I say that, they whip out their cameras and start taking pictures of us, calling out questions. Wren laughs, whispering that I jinxed it.

The moment of our laughter is pure magic. It goes viral as soon as it hits the internet. The attention is staggering. Wren and Talia have always trusted *People* magazine

when it comes to official releases, and this time is no different. The article includes a brief profile about me and my daughter being supermodel, Jen Langston, Wren's best friend.

Talia sends them the first official statement concerning our romance.

“Wren is in a healthy, happy place in her life surrounded by people who care deeply for her and enjoying the company of someone who has been a steady source of strength and support. She's grateful to have a strong support system as she continues to build Lemon LLC's future.”

Short. Sweet. Just suggestive enough to spark romance rumours but careful enough that we can deny it if we ever need to.

The media eats it up. Jen being involved in the story somehow makes it even more intriguing and interesting to the public. She gets asked by reporters at a fashion event about the news of I and Wren's dating rumors. Jen jokes, “My father and Wren are dating? Wow, who would've thought? Not me!”

Almost overnight, the story changes. Headlines shift from “Thief or Trendsetter?” to “Who's the Silver Fox in Wren Sinclair's Life?”

I become the mystery the internet wants to solve. Her social media surges with engagement. Thousands of comments. Millions of views. Her team rallies around the energy boost.

“We're trending in three categories,” Talia announces during their morning meeting, her voice light with relief. “The plagiarism accusations have dropped to page three of search results.”

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“It’s not gone yet,” Raj mutters, but even he looks less panicked than usual.

“It's progress,” Wren says.

Bailey, the content and social media head, claps her hands. “The Silver Fox hashtag has over a hundred thousand posts. Woo! I guess people love a good mystery man.”

“Especially when that man turns out to be Jen Langston’s hot father,” Ava winks.

“Wonderful,” I say. “Just what I've always wanted.”

Wren's laugh catches me off guard. It's genuine and bright, and I find myself smiling.

“You two have a fan club now, by the way.”

Everyone in the room bursts into laughter.

I turn to Talia in disbelief. “What?”

“Well yes,” Bailey says, showing us a group page. “Your ship name is Wrenan and your fandom name is WrenanHearts.”

“Aww.” Ava laughs. “How sweet. I love it.”

I smirk. “What sort of name is WrenanHearts?”

“This is hilarious but I think it’s kind of cute,” Wren says, holding back a laugh at the

look on my face.

“Right. Wrenan is kind of original. I’d have rolled my eyes if they came up with something like SeanWren or Serenators. Those are so overused.”

I shake my head at Raj’s approval. “Well, if Raj is feeling positive about it. I guess I shouldn't complain.”

The next days blur together. Going out in public with Wren. Standing close enough to feel the warmth of her skin without touching. Learning the exact smile that suggests intimacy without promising it.

Today, I'm meeting Jen for lunch. She’s been out of town since the news of our romance broke and we’ve not spoken about it much. She’s played it cool in public, sidestepping questions with vigorous media training drilled into her. I owe her an explanation before she storms Wren's office demanding answers.

“You're late,” Jen says when I slide into the booth across from her. Our favorite diner in L.A. hasn't changed in fifteen years. Same cracked leather seats. Same faded menus.

“Traffic.”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “Busy schedule being America's newest heartthrob?”

“Please don't.”

“Dad, what are you doing?” Her eyes search my face. My daughter always could see right through me.

“My job.”

“Oh? Dating your client is your job now? Interesting.”

“We're not dating.”

“Could've fooled me. And the entire internet.”

The waitress brings coffee without us asking. We've been coming here that long.

“It's a strategy,” I explain. “We didn't plan this at first like you know. We got caught in a vulnerable moment.”

“It was a forehead kiss.”

“Yes, why don't you ask the media and the general public why they made an uproar over a forehead kiss in the first place.”

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Jen smirks. “Please continue with your justifications.”

“I’m not justifying myself. I’m telling you the reason why this happened. We’re trying to redirect the media narrative. Give them something more interesting than plagiarism accusations.”

“So you two are just... what? Pretending to be in love?”

“Not in love. Just...seeing each other.”

Jen stirs sugar into her coffee. Three packets. Always three. “And how long is this charade supposed to last?”

“Just until we gather enough evidence to tackle Camille and Marlowe Grey, and her new product launch. A month, maybe two.”

“And Wren is okay with all this? This PR stunt?”

“She was reluctant at first. But this is a good plan to scale through the accusations. For now.”

Jen sighs. “Dad, Wren has been through a lot.”

“I know her history.”

“Do you? Because pretending to date someone when there are cameras and gossip and pressure... that's not simple. Not for someone who's been through what she has.

This romance thing between you two has the public hooked. It's everywhere. I keep getting asked about it. Even by Derek."

I take a sip of my coffee. Black. Bitter. I grimace but not because of the coffee. "You're still with that boy?"

"He's better behaved of late. We're working through our issues. But this conversation is not about me."

"You deserve better than that boy."

"Dad—"

"Wren and I are fine. This is just business. PR to smooth over the false accusations mess. Simple as that."

"Is it? Because I see how you look at her in those photos."

I try to laugh it off. "What are you talking about?"

"I've seen you with clients before. This isn't that look."

The waitress brings our food. I ordered the usual. Reuben sandwich. Side of fries but I have no appetite now.

"Of course, because we have to play it up for the cameras. I suppose you know how these things work."

"Maybe that's why I'm worried. Because I know how these things work. I know how messy and chaotic things could end up becoming."

“It won’t.”

She gives me a long stare.

“She's an interesting woman, for sure,” I admit.

“Dad.”

“What?”

“Be careful. With her heart and yours.”

I put down my fork. “Jen, I know what I'm doing.”

“I hope so.”

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“It's just a job.”

“If you say so.” She takes a bite of her salad. “But what happens when the job ends? Have you thought about that?”

I haven't. I don't want to.

“We'll go our separate ways. Like adults.”

“Simple as that?”

I clench my jaw. “Simple as that.”

Jen shakes her head. “I'm worried about you.”

“Don't be. I'm fine.”

“And Wren? Is she fine too?”

“Wren's a professional,” I say.

“Hmm. Alright then.”

“Now, tell me about Derek? Things are going well, you say?”

I change the subject, asking about her boyfriend to shift away from Wren. Jen lets me, but I can tell she's not convinced.

“Better. We’re working on our relationship.” Her mouth curves into a small smile. “He’s more present of late. I don’t know what changed, but it’s good to see.”

My eyes narrow at her. “Is there something more?”

She beams, picking at her fries. “Well…”

“Well?”

“I don’t know what changed, but he’s been talking about marriage a lot in the last few weeks.”

My hands pause mid-air. “Marriage?”

“He’s asking if I want to get married someday. Wonders if my father would give him something other than a hard stare when next he visits,” she says this with a pointed look. “Talking about the number of children we would like to have. I don’t want to think too much of it.”

“That sounds like a man looking to settle down. I’ll tell you that.”

She leans in, a gleam in her eyes. “You think so too, right? I was trying not to get too excited about it before he proposed, but I can’t help myself.”

I lean into my seat. “What about you? You wanna marry this Derek boy?”

She sighs, her shoulders slumping as she considers the question. “Of course, I love Derek. I mean, we’ve had our fair share of issues, but there’s no relationship without issues. Neither of us has done something as terrible and disrespectful to our relationship as cheating. I’d love to marry Derek someday.”

My chest constricts.

It's hard to believe my daughter is a grown woman and may be getting married soon. To me, she'll always be my little girl. But she's a grown woman with her own rugged defiance and ridiculous laughter that she got from her mother. No man would ever be deserving of being her husband. Even sometimes, I'm not sure I am deserving of being her father. Jen is so much smarter, kinder, and altogether a better person than I am. Every day, I wish her mother were alive to see what the tiny bundle of joy she gave birth to has grown to be, all that she's come to achieve all on her own.

"Dad, are you tearing up?" Jen presses a hand to her mouth, her mouth twitching.

I sniff, rolling my eyes. "That's not a tear. I'm marveling at this sandwich. Why does it taste extra delicious today?"

She bursts into laughter.

After lunch, I walk her to her car.

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“Just be honest with yourself, Dad. That's all I'm asking.”

“I always am.”

“Sure.” She hugs me tight. “I’ll drop by the house after my shoot next week. Take care of my best friend.”

I smirk. “Will do.”

I watch her drive away, her words echoing. Be honest with yourself.

The truth is, the more time I spend with Wren, the harder it becomes to treat this as just another job. I check my phone. Three texts from her already. She sends a link to an article about this with glowing comments from readers.

Wren: The WrenanHearts are quite passionate, wouldn't you say, Silver Fox?

Wren: Hey, so, I’m going to pick up Eric from school and will be going home from there.

Wren: Actually, we’ve decided to stop by the supermarket and pick up a few things for dinner. And Eric just said he got you something. A large Superman, like you are. :)

I smile at my screen like a teenager. I'm so screwed.

## WREN

The Belmont Hotel's grand ballroom sparkles with crystal chandeliers and the glittering jewelry of California's business elite. I smooth down my emerald silk dress, grateful for the confidence it gives me.

I'm used to events like these. Lights. Music. Photographers calling my name from velvet corners. Smiling like it doesn't hurt. But tonight, something feels different.

Everyone wants a moment with me. A picture. A conversation. A brush with the woman trying to outrun a scandal. But my eyes keep finding him.

Sean stands near the bar, talking with one of the security leads. Jacket stretched across those wide shoulders. A drink in one hand, his gaze scanning the room. Always watching. Always calculating.

He glances over. Our eyes meet.

Something springs to life in my stomach... and then a fluttering. Butterflies.

I shake it off and turn back to Gary Whitman, the CEO from Haven & Holt, who's been asking the same question five different ways.

"Sorry, Gary. We don't have any plans for a collaboration as of now," I say, smiling.

"Aww, Wren. Come on. Sleep on it and give me a call later."

"We're busy with our new product launch. With all that's happened, we have to make sure that launch is hitch-free."

"Yes, I heard you're still on track for the launch. Very brave, Wren."

Brave. That's one word for it.

"Oh, and here comes my wife, Lauren. She's been wanting to meet you."

"Wren Sinclair!" A woman with silver hair approaches, hand extended. "What a pleasure to meet you. Gary knows I'm such a huge fan of yours."

I take her hand with a warm smile. "Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Whitman."

"Listen, that Pepperberry Exfoliating Toner is the bomb! I see why you won the Women's Health Skincare Awards last year. Phenomenal work you're doing."

I beam. I could never get tired of hearing praises about Lemon LLC. This is why I made this company, and I'm proud of the work we do.

"Thank you for saying that. I'm just grateful to have such an incredible team."

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Sean materializes at my side, two champagne flutes in hand. The crisp black tuxedo makes his shoulders look even broader, his jawline sharper under the ballroom lights. He passes me a glass, our fingers brushing.

“And this is...” Lauren's eyes flicker with unabashed interest.

“Sean Langston.” I take a small sip of champagne to hide my reaction to saying his name. “My...”

“Partner,” he finishes, extending his hand. “Pleasure to meet you both.”

Gary smiles. “Good to meet you too. Perhaps you could help me convince Wren to collaborate with Haven & Holt.”

“Haven’t you seen this woman? She's stubborn as a mule.”

I roll my eyes, smiling.

Lauren grins. “Well, aren't you two just the most striking couple? It was nice meeting you two.”

After they move on, we interact with other beauty industry elites, each one more interested in my personal life than my business acumen. I skirt the personal questions, focusing on Lemon's plans while Sean stands at my side, adding thoughtful comments that show he's been paying attention to my work when he's asked.

AGlitzysreporter glides toward us, microphone in hand.

“Wren Sinclair! How do you do? And wow, you look stunning in that dress? Is that Versace?”

“Why, thank you. I’m wearing Alexander McQueen tonight. A forever fave.”

“You were always the face. But now, people want to know the man behind the mystery,” he nods toward Sean.

I laugh it off, then excuse myself before he can bring up more questions about our relationship and propose having us on a cover.

“You're pretty good at this for someone who hates social events,” I whisper when we have a moment alone.

“I don't hate all social events.” His eyes meet mine. “Just depends on the company.”

Our eyes meet then and I smile.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you overwhelmed yet?”

“Not yet. I’m used to this, even though I don't attend many events now. I've been doing these things since I was nineteen.” I toss him a smile. “But having backup tonight is nice.”

His hand finds the small of my back, guiding me through the crowd. The simple touch shouldn't affect me, but warmth spreads across my skin.

“There's Maxwell Pierce,” I whisper. “We’ve been having discussions about funding our new app project. He hasn't responded since the scandal broke, though.”

“What's our play?”

“Just follow my lead.”

Maxwell spots us approaching. “Wren. Didn't expect to see you tonight.”

“I wouldn't miss it, Maxwell. Have you met Sean Langston?”

“The man who somehow charmed our Wren?” Maxwell shakes Sean's hand, sizing him up. “Words travel fast in our circles.”

“Good things, I hope.” Sean's voice carries an easy confidence.

“Surprising things. Wren's never brought a date to these functions before.”

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Heat floods through me. “There's a first time for everything.”

Sean slips an arm around my waist. It feels... easy. Like it belongs there.

“Indeed.” Maxwell studies us. “Though I must say, your timing is interesting with everything happening at Lemon.”

“Sean’s an old friend and he's helping with crisis management.”

Maxwell chuckles. “I suppose the best innovations happen under pressure.”

“Ah Maxwell. You hit the nail on the head. I guess we could say that’s why she’s been spending more time with this broad-shouldered hunk than saving her company,” a new voice interrupts.

I turn to find Ian Geller, one of Maxwell's friends, smirking at us. My spine stiffens but my smile stays fixed.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, come on, Wren. You didn’t fight the plagiarism stuff this hard. But now—” he smirks, “Now you’re bringing the broad-shouldered hunk to galas.”

“Broad-shouldered hunk,” I repeat, deadpan.

He lifts his drink, like it’s a compliment. He turns to Sean, the corners of his lips twitching. “How's it feel dating the woman who's got the whole industry talking? I

can't relate.”

Sean's expression doesn't change, but I feel him tense beside me.

“Funny you should mention business concerns, Ian. I was just reading about that privacy lawsuit your company's facing. Three hundred million in damages, was it? Oof.”

Ian's smug expression falters. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“No? That's strange, because my sources are usually quite reliable.”

Ian's face flushes dark red.

“Perhaps you should worry less about my personal life and more about your legal team.”

“Excuse me,” he mutters, stalking away.

Sean's fingers tighten on my waist as he bends to whisper, “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

I bite back a smile.

Maxwell chuckles as he watches Ian retreat. “You haven't lost your edge, Wren.”

I smile. “Now, about what we were discussing the other day...”

Twenty minutes later, Maxwell promises to call my office next week, and I exhale as he walks away.

“That went well.” Sean's voice carries genuine admiration.

“We make a good team.”

I wink and his mouth curves into a smile.

“We do.”

An orchestra starts up, and couples drift toward the dance floor. Sean's hand finds the small of my back.

“Want to get some air?” he asks.

I nod. He guides me toward the balcony doors, his touch never leaving my back.

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The balcony overlooks a garden illuminated by strands of fairy lights. The evening carries the scent of blooming flowers. I take a deep breath, letting the tension ease from my shoulders.

“Better?” Sean asks, leaning against the stone railing.

“Much.” I smile at him. “Thank you for coming tonight. I know this isn't your idea of fun.”

He gives me a lopsided smile. “Like I said, the company isn't half bad.”

“Why, thank you.”

“I'm enjoying the night so far, really.” His eyes catch the light, turning them to liquid amber. “Watching you work a room is pretty impressive.”

“I'm just faking my way through.”

“That's not how it looks from where I'm standing.” He steps closer. “You're confident, smart, and everyone in that room knows it.”

Warmth spread through me. “Well, I've had practice.”

“And hilarious.”

“I wouldn't call myself funny.”

“That part is a little surprising to even me.”

I turn to him, hands on my hips. “Did you just call me uptight and boring? Wow, I’m offended.”

Sean throws his head back, laughing. A deep, rich and smooth sound like spiced liqueur. Butterflies flutter in my stomach as I watch him laugh, noting the way his eyes crinkle, the genuineness of his laughter. I’ve never seen him like that before. He looks... happy.

“I didn't say that. I just mean... you can be so strict and precise and ‘I-know-what-I-want-and-I-won’t-deviate-from-it’.”

I roll my eyes, chuckling. “Look who’s talking. Pot calling kettle black?”

“My job requires me to be tough.”

“I’ve never seen you smile before we started this whole thing.”

“That’s not quite right. I still have the picture from your twenty-second birthday. I remember smiling there.”

I gasp. “Oh my God. I remember that. You still have that picture?”

Sean grins.

“Somewhere in my room, I’m sure.”

“Well, that was the first time you smiled at me. And that was because Jen was making goofy faces while we took pictures.”

Sean shakes his head.

“That girl was so tipsy. I don't know how you two went out to party again.”

“The night was still young.”

“I guess the consequence was returning home with the worst hangover. Thank you for bringing her home once again.”

I laugh. “Not without her throwing up on my shoes first.”

“And we bumped into each other like five times trying to clean her up.”

Our laughter fades as our eyes hold, and I know he's thinking about that night the same way I am. The night which springs up at unbidden moments. That night that makes me wonder...

“Then you tried to kiss me,” he teases.

I tear my eyes away from him, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “I guess I was drunk.”

He let out a low chuckle.

“Hmm, right.”

“Stop it.”

“I’m doing nothing.”

“You’re teasing me about it.”

Sean smiles. He pulls me closer, his hand splayed across my back. He leans down, lips almost touching my cheek.

My heart hammers against my ribs.

“Someone’s taking pictures of us.”

My breath hitches. “Oh.”

“Is this okay? Do we look like a couple in love?”

“Very convincing.”

“I aim to please, Ms. Sinclair.”

His breath caresses my cheeks. Breathing is an impossible task.

“Are they still taking pictures?”

“No.” He steps back, taking my hand. “Let’s go back inside.”

I nod, unable to mutter a word.

Throughout the rest of the evening, I'm hyper aware of Sean's presence. The way he brushes my hair off my shoulder, his fingers grazing my skin. The deep rumble of his laugh when I say something he finds funny. How he steps forward when the crowd thickens, shielding me. The protective gesture feels so natural, I almost forget we're pretending.

“So how long have you two been together?” asks Maria Chen, a popular cosmetics founder we’re placed on the same table with.

I open my mouth, but before I can answer, Sean speaks.

“Not long enough.” His eyes find mine, something soft and warm in his gaze. “Feels like we're just getting started.”

My heart stutters. Is he still acting? Because that didn't sound rehearsed.

“Well, you make a gorgeous couple,” Maria says with a knowing smile. “It's nice to see you with someone who looks at you like that, Wren.”

When Maria speaks to the person next to her, I turn to Sean. “Like what?”

“Like what, what?” He takes a sip of his drink, his dark blue eyes never leaving mine.

“How do you look at me?”

The question hangs between us, more intimate than I expected. The bustle of the gala seems to fade into background noise.

“You want the truth?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

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Sean steps closer, close enough that I can smell his cologne. “Like I can't quite believe you're real.”

The words knock the air from my lungs. Our gazes lock, and for a moment, I forget where we are. Forget that this is supposed to be pretend.

The spell breaks when someone calls my name. I spend the next hour in a daze, making small talk while all too aware of Sean's presence beside me. His hand on my back. The way his eyes find mine across conversations. The rare, genuine smile he gives me that doesn't look like the one he wears for others. Every part of me feels alive when he's near.

We leave just after eleven. My heels hurt. My head spins. But not from wine.

The drive home is quiet, charged with a desire neither of us acknowledges. Sean's hand rests on the console between us, and I resist the urge to touch it. I try to focus on the city lights blurring past the window. But all I feel is his nearness.

The house is quiet. Eric's at Jen's and the thought makes my pulse race now that we're alone. The pretense of the evening has followed us home, blurring the lines I've tried so hard to maintain.

“Thanks for coming tonight,” I say as we step inside, kicking off my shoes. “You were... amazing.”

“Just doing my part.” He loosens his tie, and I follow the movement with my eyes.

“Everyone believed us.”

“Maybe because some parts weren't pretend.” His voice drops lower.

I look up, finding his eyes dark and intent. “Which parts?”

Sean steps closer. “The way I couldn't stop looking at you.”

My breath catches. “I noticed that.”

“Did you notice this too?” His fingers brush my cheek, feather-light. “How I wanted to touch you all night?”

“Sean...”

“Tell me to stop, Wren.”

I know what's happening. I know I should stop it. But I don't want to. I can't.

He leans in.

And I rise on my toes and press my lips to his.

The kiss starts gentle—a question, an exploration. Then something breaks between us. His arms wrap around me, lifting me against him as the kiss deepens. I thread my fingers through his hair, holding him to me.

His hands are everywhere, leaving trails of fire on my skin. He backs me against the wall, his body pressed to mine.

“Bedroom,” I manage between kisses.

Sean lifts me, my legs wrapping around his waist as we stumble toward the stairs. My dress is halfway off before we reach the bed.

“You're sure?” he asks, hovering above me.

In answer, I pull him down to me.

His lips trace a path down my neck, across my collarbone. “I've thought about this since the first day in your office.”

“Show me.”

Clothing falls away, revealing skin I've tried not to think about. His hands are everywhere, learning me, memorizing. When he lowers me to the bed, I pull him down with me, wanting his weight, his heat.

“You're so beautiful,” he murmurs against my neck.

I close my eyes, surrendering to sensation. To the feel of his hands, his mouth. The sound of my name on his lips. The way he watches me with wonder as my body responds to his touch.

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I block everything out. Tomorrow can sort itself out. Tonight, I just want to feel.

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His hands are everywhere, leaving trails of fire on my skin. He backs me against the wall, his body pressed to mine.

“Bedroom,” I manage between kisses.

Sean lifts me, my legs wrapping around his waist as we stumble toward the stairs. My dress is halfway off before we reach the bedroom.

There's nothing restrained about the way he kisses me now. It's hungry. Wild. A dam breaking after weeks of tension, all heat and friction and breathless urgency.

“I need you, Wren,” he murmurs against my skin, his voice low and husky, and heat flares between my thighs.

I gasp into his mouth as he walks me backward, bumping blindly into a wall. My hands find his jacket lapels, dragging him even closer as his lips move to my neck. He bites just enough to make me moan, and the sound drives him harder.

His erection presses against me, and my fingers thread in his hair, arching into him like I can't get close enough.

“Touch me, Sean. I need you inside me...”

That’s all it takes.

He makes a feral sound and lifts me. I wrap my legs around him, clinging to the magnetic strength of his body. We don’t make it to the bed. Not right away.

His mouth is everywhere. On my neck, my shoulder, the curve of my breast. Each kiss is scorching, each touch deliberate. I arch into him as his erection rocks against me, slow, teasing. My breath comes in short, desperate gasps as he keeps me pinned against the wall, like he needs to feel every inch of me, like letting go would undo him.

And it’s undoing me.

My body aches for him.

“Tell me what you want,” he growls, his lips pressing warm kisses to the swell of my breast.

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“You,” I gasp. “All of you.”

He carries me to the bed, then lays me down like I’m breakable... precious... unreal. But his blue eyes are anything but soft. They’re dark and ravenous.

He strips away my dress fully now in one smooth motion, and when I’m bare beneath him, his nostrils flare and his breath catches. He stares like he’s memorizing every inch.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he says, voice shaking. “How are you even real?”

My pulse is erratic, my nipples hard with each word, with the attention of his dark, lustful eyes on my body. I feel cherished and sensual and feminine and... alive.

He undresses without looking away, and when he joins me, the heat between us explodes, blazing hot. Every movement is raw, every kiss a firebrand, every inch between us consumed.

When our bodies finally meet, I cry out in half ecstasy and half relief. He fills me completely, one hand laced with mine, the other gripping my hip as he starts to move.

“S-Sean...”

My fingers dig into his back, urging him faster with my other hand against the headboard, arching into him. Then, his thrusts become fast and frantic and aching, like we’re trying to make up for every second we denied ourselves this.

The rhythm is ruthless. I meet him stroke for stroke, breath for breath, moan for moan. The pleasure is surreal and almost divine.

His name tumbles from my lips in a plea, a string of expletives. But his control frays, and so does mine.

“Sean—” I choke out again.

“I’ve got you,” he says, voice hoarse and tender and filthy with desire. “Let go. Come with me.”

I do, closing my eyes as I surrender to an indescribable sensation. To the rhythm of his erection in my wetness, to my throbbing needy center, to his mouth. The sound of my name on his lips. The way his eyes cloud with wonder as my body responds to his touch.

I block everything out. Tomorrow can sort itself out. Tonight, I just want to revel in pleasure.

14

SEAN

I wake to the sound of Wren swearing under her breath. Sunlight slices through the curtains, warming my face. Her foot gets tangled in the sheets as she stumbles toward the closet. I don’t even have time to ask what’s wrong before I hear it.

The unmistakable sound of Jen’s car pulling into the driveway.

No way.

“Jen’s here. I saw her text as I woke up.”

I bolt up. “Shit.”

Wren’s already halfway into a robe, hair a mess, eyes wild. “They’re early.”

I yank on my pants from the night before and scramble around for my shirt.

Wren grabs the brush from the dresser. “How do I look?”

“Like a woman who didn’t just have sex on every surface of this room.”

“That’s not helpful.”

I grin, grabbing the rest of my clothes. I kiss her and her eyes widen.

“Don’t look so surprised.”

“Sean!”

I slip out of her room then.

In my bathroom, I splash cold water on my face and stare at my reflection. The events of the previous night rush back to me. Like I could even forget any of what happened. The feel of Wren's body curled against mine, her breath soft and even against my chest.

I splash more water on my face. A small voice at the back of my mind protested.

What am I doing? Getting involved with a client is unprofessional enough. But Wren isn't just any client.

She's Jen's best friend.

The complication I swore to avoid when starting this charade.

I should regret it. This complicates the arrangement we negotiated. But watching her sleep this morning, her usual guard down, her features peaceful, I can't bring myself to wish it hadn't happened.

After Rachel's death, I threw myself into taking care of Jen and my demanding career. Nothing else mattered to me. Once, I'd been forced to choose between my growing career and our marriage and I'd chosen wrong too many times. By the time I realized it, she was already gone.

Since then, I've dated a few times. Nothing serious. Nothing that threatened the balance of work and my daughter. Nothing that required me to open up again.

I like my independence. My space.

But Wren...

The doorbell rings.

Wren's voice drifts from outside my bedroom door. "Sean? Are you ready? I don't know why they didn't come in."

I frown. "Almost. Maybe she isn't with her key?"

I finish dressing and emerge to find Wren looking fresh in jeans and a soft blue sweater, her hair pulled back in a casual ponytail.

"How do you look so put together?" I run a hand through my rumpled hair.

She shrugs.

"Years of rushing to set."

The doorbell rings again.

"Helloooooo?" Jen's voice carries through the house like a warning siren.

We look at each other, holding back laughter before rushing downstairs.

We reach the front door at the same time, our hands colliding on the knob. The brief contact sends an electric current up my arm.

"I got it." She pulls away.

“No, I can?—”

“It's fine, I'll just?—”

We both reach again, bumping shoulders.

“Sorry,” we say in unison.

Wren takes a deep breath and opens the door.

“Morning!” Jen breezes in with Eric trailing behind her, shopping bags in one hand and a tray of coffee in the other. “We brought breakfast pastries! And your favorite latte, Wren.”

“You're a lifesaver.” Wren hugs her son and takes the coffee, her smile too bright.

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Eric dumps his backpack by the door. “Mom, Jen took me to that trampoline park yesterday! I did a double backflip!”

“That's amazing, baby.” She ruffles his hair, shooting a grateful look at Jen.

Jen sets the pastry bag on the table. “What’s for breakfast? I’m starving.”

Wren and I speak at the same time.

“I’ll make eggs?—”

“Let me help with?—”

We both freeze.

Jen blinks. “Okay... that wasn’t weird at all.”

A loud laughter rolls out of Wren. “It’s just... gala brain. We’re still recovering.”

Jen sips her coffee, her eyes darting between us with undisguised curiosity. “It was that bad?”

“Bad? No. I mean, it was good. Very good. I mean, nottoogood. Just normal. Business normal.”

I nod, settling into a sofa.

“That’s right. We met... people,” I attempt, earning a bizarre look from Jen.

“Important people,” Wren adds.

Jen narrows her eyes. “Glad to know you met people there and not trees.”

“Wren read some man to filth last night. You should've seen his face by the time she was done,” I say, diverting her attention from our awkwardness.

“No way? Tell me about it.”

“It was that insufferable Ian Geller,” Wren says.

Jen giggles.

“That man had it coming.”

“Right? Now, I hope he leaves me alone. I can't stand him.”

“And we got some exciting news too. Maxwell Pierce is scheduling a meeting next week to discuss funding for Lemon.”

“Now, that’s wonderful news!” Jen claps her hands together. “Congratulations, Wren.”

“Sean was very helpful.” Wren smiles, busying herself with the coffee cups.

She starts talking about seating arrangements at the gala, and I chime in about lighting, which makes no sense, and then she says something about deviled eggs that weren’t at the event at all.

I smile to myself.

Jen stands with her hands on her waist, eyeing us. “Why do I feel like there's something you two aren't telling me?”

“We're just tired,” Wren says.

“Late night.”

Jen's eyebrows shoot up at my comment. “I see.”

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Wren's face colors and she bursts into a mirthless laughter. "What? No, not like that. The gala ran late and then we had to?—"

I nod. "Discuss strategy for the upcoming?—"

"Right, the strategy for dealing with?—"

"Product launch," I finish.

"The media," Wren says at the same time.

We stare at each other in horror.

Jen looks like she's watching a tennis match. "Uh-huh."

Eric, oblivious to the tension, pulls out a pastry. "Can we eat outside? It's nice today."

"Great idea!" Wren rushes to say.

By the time breakfast is on the table, Jen's looking between us like she's trying to solve a puzzle. I avoid her gaze, but my knee keeps brushing Wren's under the table. Every touch jolts something inside me.

This isn't what I planned. I was supposed to keep it simple. Professional.

But then she looks at me and smiles, and I want to kiss her again.

I hate how easy it is to fall into her.

“Want to kick the ball around now?” I ask Eric, desperate for distraction.

His face lights up. “Yeah!”

Outside in the backyard, tossing a soccer ball with Eric proves to be what I need. The simple physical activity clears my head. Eric is skilled, his movements precise and confident for a kid his age. I tell him that.

“It’s a talent, right? I play better than all my friends. Maybe I’ll grow to be a soccer player like Messi,” he says when I compliment him.

I laugh. “Messi, huh? I say you’re even better than he was at your age.”

“Mom tries to play with me sometimes, but she says sports isn’t her thing.”

I glance over at Wren, who’s watching us from a patio chair with Jen, legs tucked underneath them, sipping coffee like everything’s normal. She smiles when our eyes meet, and my chest tightens again.

I should feel bad. But I don’t.

I just want more time with her.

And that’s dangerous territory. I know it very well.

“Sean! Watch out!”

I turn just in time to see the soccer ball flying toward my face. I duck, avoiding getting hit by an inch, and stumble backward into a bush.

Eric doubles over laughing while the women try to hide their amusement.

“Dad? You okay over there?” Jen calls, suppressed laughter in her voice.

“Just wounded pride,” I answer, extracting myself from the shrub.

“You weren't even looking!” Eric giggles.

“Got distracted,” I mutter, brushing leaves from my clothes.

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Distracted by his mother. By thinking about what it would mean to pursue something real with her.

After I came to terms with the fact that the woman I loved was gone, I took jobs that promised more advancement than family time, I threw myself into raising Jen and making a name for myself. The few relationships I attempted always fizzled out when women realized I couldn't give them the commitment and emotional presence they wanted.

“Work and Jen come first,” I told my last girlfriend when she pressed for more of my time, more of my heart. She left a week later.

It's better this way. Easier. Safer.

So why can't I stop thinking about Wren?

Nothing has ever made me consider giving up the quiet life I've carved out for myself.

Until now.

The ball rolls to where the women are seated. Wren smiles, kicking the ball to me. “You two are making me feel lazy.”

“We all deserve lazy days,” says Jen.

“Play with us, Mom and Aunt Jen!” Eric pleads.

Jen leans into the patio chair. “Goodness no. I’m soaking up the sun instead. I have an impossible day tomorrow. Wren should play though.”

“I’ll embarrass myself,” she protests.

“I promise to go easy on you,” I tease.

She lifts her chin at the challenge. “Fine. But remember you asked for this.”

To my surprise, she’s not half bad. What she lacks in skill, she makes up for in enthusiasm, laughing every time she misses a shot. Jen makes fun of me and Wren every time we miss Eric’s ball.

I take this picture of us in mind. Jen on the patio chair, laughing. Wren holding her stomach as she laughs. Eric throwing a ball, his face red from excitement. Me with my hands behind, watching with a satisfied smile. It feels like the picture of a happy family.

My stomach clenches.

I can help Wren with her professional problems. That’s what I’m good at. That’s safe. Anything more risks everything.

Yet as Eric kicks the ball far past me and I turn to see Wren laughing in the sunlight, somehow, walking away feels like a bigger risk.

15

WREN

The sex was... everything. And now I can’t stop thinking about it. About him. His

hands on my skin. His mouth. The way he whispered my name.

It replays in my head like a reel I can't pause. The way his hand held the side of my face. His whisper of my name as he entered me. The way I didn't want it to end.

Which is why I've been avoiding him now. It's childish and spineless, but I don't know how else to handle the hurricane of feelings threatening my walls.

I make sure to keep things brief and polite. Professional, like our initial goal when I employed him.

But goodness, it's hard to do that. Hard to pretend not to melt under his blue gaze. Hard to pretend my body doesn't come alive whenever he's near. Heavens knows it's hard not to fall back into his arms again. My body wants that more than anything, to relive some of that passion, to satisfy the ache in me.

Yet that small rational voice says to take a step back. Against my will, it reminds me of why I employed him. It reminds me of my situation. My lustful desires have clouded my vision and now we've crossed the threshold of pretend and real.

But knowing this and taking a step back hasn't been easy considering we're living in the same house.

I almost packed up and left three times this week. I told myself I'd go back to my place with Eric but Talia said it's too soon. That people are still watching. We need to ride this wave until launch.

"The press is still sniffing around your house," she told me yesterday. "Better to lay low a while longer."

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Part of me suspects she's just enjoying the drama of the fake relationship becoming real, but I can't deny her PR instincts have been right so far. The plagiarism scandal has started to die down with Sean by my side, presenting a united front.

So I stay.

And avoid Sean like he's the edge of a cliff I keep stumbling toward.

If only I could stop remembering how it felt to have him by my side, in my bed, his skin against mine.

I don't regret our night together. I want many more nights together, and what it would be like if our relationship were real. That realization scares me because I know better.

I know Sean isn't a man given to commitments. Jen has told me about meeting women in his life and neither of them stayed long enough. I've once witnessed him end things with a woman who wanted more. It was the first woman I'd seen around him back then and I thought they were an attractive couple. But I remember the aloof look in his eyes as he told her that he liked the sex but he couldn't give her more beyond that.

I fear it might break me if he said that to me. What if sex was what he wanted and I'm the one reading into things?

I sigh, checking my appearance in the bathroom mirror one last time. Dark circles beneath my eyes betray my lack of sleep, but nothing a little concealer can't fix. The navy pantsuit projects the confidence I need to channel today.

“You can do this,” I tell my reflection. “It's just business.”

But when I step out and see Sean in the kitchen, looking hot in a simple outfit of faded blue jeans and clean white shirt while helping Eric with breakfast, just business feels like the biggest lie I've ever told myself.

“Morning,” I say, keeping my voice neutral as I pour coffee.

“Hey. Sleep okay?”

“More or less.”

Sean pats my hand. “Don't worry, the meeting will be a success.”

A thrill passes through me at his touch. For several seconds, I sit there staring at my hand, unable to move it, his brief warmth making my knees weak.

“Mommy, will you take me to school today?”

I blink, sipping the rest of my coffee.

“No, sweetie.” I ruffle his hair. “Busy with work stuff. I have an important meeting today.”

“You're always busy with work stuff,” he mumbles into his cereal.

The comment stings because it's true. But now isn't the time to unpack my mom guilt.

“Sean will take you to school, sweetheart. I'm sorry. I'll pick you up from school.” I kiss the top of his head. “Be good today. I love you.”

“Love you too, mom.”

I grab my bag and head for the door.

“I’ll see you later at the office. Drive safe,” Sean’s baritone voice flows out to me as I skip out of the house.

Today’s investor meeting starts late. Someone’s flight got delayed, and the coffee machine is broken. Classic. My palms are clammy as I wait in the conference room, staring at the screen with our Lemon LLC deck pulled up, and twirling a granola bar I won’t eat.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I begin once we’re settled. “Thank you for joining us today. Before we get to our exciting new developments, I’d like to address the recent challenges we’ve faced.”

“Regarding the social media influencer’s plagiarism accusations,” I continue, “our analyses show the negative press has decreased by sixty-three percent in the past week. Our transparency campaign has shifted the narrative.”

Murmurs. Nods.

Richard Barnes leans in. “And Camille Ross?”

“We found a potential connection of this being an orchestrated attack. We’re looking into the best way to reveal our findings and put an end to these accusations.”

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Maxwell nods, impressed. “Well played.”

No resistance.

Good.

“As for our upcoming launch,” I pull up the timeline on the screen, “we're maintaining our original schedule. The Lemon Glow Line will debut in twenty-nine days. Early testing is showing promising results and engagement rates are already trending above Q1's projections.”

I wait for protests, but none come.

Louis Laurent asks, “Production timeline still on track?”

“Yes. Our manufacturers confirmed yesterday that all units will be ready for distribution next week.”

The tension in the room eases. This is already going better than our last tense meeting that left most investors unsure due to the scandal. I signal to Raj and Simone to take over, and they stand together.

Raj taps the screen, and a new slide appears.

“While the Glow Line prepares for launch, we've been developing our next innovation as we all know.”

Simon clicks to the next slide. “We’re calling it SkinSense.”

“SkinSense uses proprietary AI algorithms to analyze facial photographs and environmental factors,” Raj explains. “Users receive personalized skincare diagnostics and product recommendations based on their unique skin profile. Think Shazam, but for your face.”

A few chuckles.

Simone jumps in. “It’ll integrate real-time facial scanning with AI-backed suggestions. We’re training the engine on a combination of dermatological data and user-submitted input, so we can offer hyper-targeted product recommendations. It’s skincare made personal.”

Eliza Chen leans forward. “And privacy?”

“We’re building it with a full zero-data policy,” Simone says. “All scans are processed locally on the user’s device unless they opt in to share.”

Raj nods. “It’s tech-forward without being invasive. That’s our edge.”

“The app will integrate with our product line, of course,” Simone adds, “but also provide value through a subscription model for advanced features.”

The technical details flow as they explain the machine learning process, market positioning, and revenue projections. I watch the investors' faces, noting the spark of interest in their eyes.

“We’ve completed initial programming,” Raj says, “and are ready to begin beta testing next month.”

“Development costs?” asks Siobhan Yutes, eyeing the financial breakdown.

“Eight-point-two million for full development and marketing launch,” Henry Cho, our head of finance, answers. “We’re proposing a fifteen percent ROI within the first eighteen months.”

“That’s ambitious,” Louis Laurent notes.

“But achievable,” Henry counters. “The market analysis shows clear demand for personalized skincare technology. SkinSense fills a gap our competitors haven’t adequately addressed.”

The questions continue for another forty minutes. They’re probing questions but not hostile. When Maxwell checks his wristwatch and says, “I think we’ve covered everything,” I allow myself to breathe.

“We’ll review the proposal and get back to you next week,” Eliza says, gathering her papers. “But I must say, this is a significant improvement from our last meeting.”

The room settles. I scan their faces. No one looks skeptical. No one looks angry. It’s the first time in months I don’t feel like I’m being watched under a microscope.

Approval glows in the air like light.

We finish strong. Talia gives me a discreet thumbs-up. I smile.

The investors file out, stopping to shake hands and exchange pleasantries. When the last one leaves, my team erupts into relieved smiles.

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“That went better than expected,” Talia whispers.

“Much better,” I agree, feeling the tension leaving my shoulders.

Raj grins. “They loved SkinSense.”

“They did. Your presentation was perfect.”

“Team effort.” He glances at Simone. “We should celebrate.”

“Drinks tonight?” Simone suggests.

“Count me in,” Talia says.

Henry raises a hand. “Yup, me too.”

“Wren, you should invite Jen too. It’s been a minute since we saw her around here.”

Talia rolls her eyes. “Just ask for her number already, Raj. How many years have you been crushing on her now?”

Raj flushes. “Who said I was?”

I chuckle. “Drink on my behalf, guys. I promised to pick Eric from work and spend the rest of the day together. And Jen is out of the state right now for a shoot.”

The team disperses after that and we return to our respective offices. Lily is on a call

at her desk when I approach.

She ends the call and smiles.

“The look on your face tells me the meeting ended on a positive note.”

“It did. Everyone is happy. Our launch is on track and so is our next project.”

“That’s amazing news!” Lily claps her hands. “So what will you do about Camille Ross now? Will you let the whole thing die on its own or?”

“We know who's behind her and we will?—”

Sean appears. “Hey.”

I force a smile. “Hey.”

“Got a minute?”

My stomach tightens. “Just one. I have calls to return.”

We slip into my office. Sean closes the door, and the space feels too small, too intimate.

“Congratulations. Talia told me the meeting went well” he says. “That was a win you needed.”

“Thanks. Your input helped.”

He settles into the chair opposite me. “So you gonna keep avoiding me?”

I don't look at him, skimming through the documents on my table without paying much attention to it. "I'm not."

"Wren."

I meet his gaze.

His dark blue eyes are steady. "Is it time yet?"

“Time?”

“To talk about what happened between us.”

I sigh, crossing my arms. “I’m not sure there’s much to say.”

“It seems like there is since again, you’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“For the past seven days?” His voice is gentle but persistent. “We live in the same house right now, and you’ve managed to never be alone with me.”

Heat rises to my face. “Fine. Yes, I’ve been avoiding you.”

“Why?”

The question hangs between us. Why indeed? Because I can’t think straight around him? Because one night has dismantled the careful boundaries of our arrangement? Because I’m terrified of what it means that I want it to happen again?

“It was a mistake.” The words roll out of me, leaving a sour taste on my tongue. “One that won’t happen again.”

His jaw tightens. His expression clouds. Is it hurt or disappointment that flashed in those eyes? I’m not sure but it smoothens as fast as it appeared.

“I see.”

“Our arrangement is professional, Sean. Getting... physical complicates things.”

“It already is complicated,” he points out.

“All the more reason not to make it worse.” I check my watch, needing an escape. “I really do have calls waiting.”

He studies me for a long moment, then nods once. “If that's what you want.”

“It is.”

He rises to his feet. “Then consider the subject closed.”

The words should bring relief. Instead, they leave me hollow.

Sean walks to the door, then pauses. “For what it's worth, Wren, I don't think it was a mistake.”

Before I can respond, he's gone.

And it takes everything in me not to call after him.

I sink deeper into my chair, feeling exhausted. The meeting's success fades against the heaviness in my chest.

I should feel better. Like I've taken back control.

But all I feel is a loud, overwhelming, and mocking emptiness.

I press my palms against my eyes. Everything is such a mess. My company is at last recovering from the scandal. My son needs stability. My fake relationship is spinning out of control. And now my heart is involved in ways I never anticipated.

The last time I gave my heart to someone, he walked away. I swore I'd never put myself in that position again, never risk Eric experiencing that kind of abandonment twice.

Sean isn't Eric's father. He isn't even my boyfriend. He's a business arrangement with benefits I never should have sampled.

So why can't I stop imagining what it would be like if it were real? If the man who looks at me like I'm something precious, who plays soccer with my son, who stands beside me when my world is crumbling, was mine?

I shake my head, squaring my shoulders.

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Whatever I'm feeling for Sean needs to be locked away. I have too much at stake to risk it all on something that was never meant to last.

Still, why does doing the right thing feel so wrong?

16

SEAN

Our conversation lingers in my mind for days. Wren says it was a mistake. Says it won't happen again.

I hear her voice on a loop for three days straight. Like a song I hate but can't stop humming.

We're both quieter around each other now, each retreating into the safety of work and routine. We keep it civil. Polished. In front of everyone, we smile on cue. She slides her hand into mine before cameras. I lean in like it's second nature. The performance is seamless now. We've had enough practice but the warmth is gone, replaced by a professional courtesy that feels worse than anger.

At home, it's quiet. Too quiet.

We move through the house like coworkers who share a break room. Polite. Predictable. No late-night talks. No lingering stares.

This morning we have a press moment outside of Lemon HQ. Just a few questions

from a lifestyle reporter doing a piece on women in tech. It isn't supposed to be personal.

Then the last question drops.

“So Wren and Sean! The people are curious. How serious is this relationship? Are wedding bells in the future?”

I feel Wren tense beside me. Without thinking, I slide my arm around her waist, a hand settling in the small of her back.

“We're taking it one day at a time.”

“Please, tell us, how did you two meet?”

“Through Jen. Then later, she hired me,” I step in.

The reporter laughs. “That’s not very romantic.”

“She had me at ‘I need your background check.’”

The reporter grins, turning her mic to Wren. “So what’s your favorite thing about him? What makes this relationship different?”

Wren looks up at me, her expression shifts. “He sees me,” she says in a soft voice, her eyes never leaving my face. “Not the actress, not the CEO. Just me. And he listens. Most people don’t. But he does.”

My chest tightens. For a moment, I forget we're pretending.

“And what about you, Sean? What drew you to Wren?”

I glance at Wren. She's staring at me, wide-eyed.

The words come easy. "Wren is a strong-willed woman. There are so many things I love about her. The way she lights up when she talks about her son. How she hums Motown songs when she thinks no one's listening. She's the kind of person to say what she wants even when it scares the hell out of her."

She looks away, her fingers digging into my arm. The reporter beams, scribbling fast.

We make it through the rest of the interview with practiced charm.

She laughs at the right times. I touch her, she touches me. The reporter eats it up.

But as soon as the cameras shut off, the air changes.

Back in my office at Lemon LLC, I shove the door closed. I open my laptop and began working, checking the security feeds. Logs. Camera angles. Reports from my team. I've done this a dozen times since the scandal broke. But I still can't shake it.

That leaked paparazzi shot of us still bothers me. They were informed. Someone had us followed. They don't get shots like that by chance.

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And then there's Camille Ross. Talking like she's known Wren for years. Leaking details she shouldn't know.

Someone is feeding her. Someone close to Wren.

I line up timestamps. Movement logs. Entry codes. Visitor reports.

Again and again, it circles back to one person.

But I can't just accuse them. Not without proof. Not if I'm wrong.

I close my eyes and lean back in the chair. No. I need more.

My phone buzzes on the desk.

hey dad. I need your help! I don't know what happened to my fuse box. It's not coming on :((

I exhale through my nose and type back fast.

Call an electrician, Jen. I'm at work.

Her response comes ten seconds later.

why call an electrician when my dad can fix it

I click my tongue, already shutting my laptop.

Be there in 30.

I grab my car keys.

Another buzz.

can I bother you to help me pick up some groceries on your way? so I can make something nice for us to eat? you're a LIFE SAVERRRRRRR. thank you, BEST DAD IN THE WORLD!!!

My mouth curls to a smirk. She still knows how to get to me. Every time.

As I head for the elevator, I pull out my phone again and shoot off a quick text to Wren.

Stepping out. I'll pick up Eric from school on my way home.

No response. Not even the typing dots.

A few weeks ago, I might've dropped by her office just to catch a glimpse of her. Say something dumb. See her smile.

Now?

Now it feels like I'm standing outside a door that's already been shut.

I swing into the parking lot behind Marketview and grab a cart. Bread. Eggs. Spinach. Kale. Chicken breasts. Jen had a list texted before I even turned off the ignition.

She's slick like that.

I shove on a face cap and move fast, keeping my head down. It's still weird being recognized by some people. I get in and out in fifteen minutes.

When I pull up outside Jen's townhome, she's waiting in the doorway barefoot, blonde hair in a messy bun and oversized hoodie hanging off one shoulder like it's the '90s again, a spitting image of her mother.

"Wow," she says, squinting. "You came."

"You begged," I remind her, grabbing the groceries from the passenger seat. "Emotionally manipulated to leave my place of work."

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She follows me inside, bouncing like she's fifteen again. "Your daughter was starving and living in darkness. Have mercy."

I smirk. "You could've ordered something or gone out to get your own groceries. And called an electrician."

I set the bags on the kitchen counter, and follow her toward the back hallway where the fuse box is.

"It went out around nine last night," she says, flipping on her phone flashlight. "I was watching that dumb new dating show and boom. Blackout."

"You slept in darkness all night? You didn't think to call an electrician?"

She frowns, squinting at the wall panel as I unscrew it. "Idid. He said he couldn't come until tomorrow. I slept at Derek's."

"I've tried to teach you how to do this. You know, it isn't that difficult."

"That's what Wren says," she smirks. "You know she's quite good with stuff like this. I was always calling her to fix the fuse box at my former apartment. One of her weird hidden talents. I'd have called her last night but she's already stretched too thin. I didn't want to add 'electrician' to her calendar."

"Yeah, she is quite busy."

"I know. Product launch and all. How's it going?"

I grunt, focusing on the wiring. “Going well.”

“That’s good to hear.”

I reconnect a loose neutral wire while Jen watches.

“So... you two good?”

I test the circuit. The hallway light flickers on. “Define good.”

“Oh?”

“She’s quiet these days.”

“Wren does that.”

I don’t respond.

She walks into the kitchen to unpack groceries while I put the tools away. The silence between us isn’t heavy, but it hangs there. Like a question that hasn’t found its shape yet.

“You look like hell, by the way. Did I mention that already?”

“Thanks,” I mutter, returning to the kitchen to help unload organic vegetables into her refrigerator. “When did you start eating kale?”

“Don't change the subject. What's going on with you and Wren?”

I shrug. “Nothing. We're maintaining appearances.”

Jen leans against the counter, arms folded. “Right.”

“It's complicated.”

“No, differential equations are complicated. This is simple. You've fallen for her.”

My stomach clenches, but I don't answer, focusing on arranging yogurt containers with unnecessary precision.

“Dad.” Jen's voice softens. “I see the shift in you. The way you talk about her now, with this careful reverence. Like she's something precious.”

I sigh, leaning against the counter.

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“I think I screwed up.”

She pauses, looking at me. “Did you say that out loud? Mark the date.”

I shake my head.

“I don’t know what we’re doing anymore.”

“You’re both scared.”

I glance at her.

She’s unpacking a loaf of sourdough, calm and casual. Like she didn’t just slice through the truth.

“I’ve known Wren a long time,” she continues. “She runs when things get real. I used to think it was because she was selfish. Now I think it’s because she’s been hurt so much she doesn’t know how to stay.”

“I’m not trying to hurt her.”

Jen looks at me. “I know. But if you’re going to love her, you have to do it all the way. No halfway. No exit plans. She’ll feel it. And she’ll leave.”

I nod, throat tight.

The hallway light comes on with a soft click behind us. The fuse box is fixed. The

power's back on.

But inside, I'm in the dark.

Hours later, I squeeze her hand as I leave. "I'll figure it out."

But as I drive to pick up Eric from school, I wonder if there's anything to figure out. Wren had made herself clear.

"Uncle Sean!" Eric bounces toward me in the school pickup line, arms flailing, his backpack crooked on one shoulder. "I made something for you!"

"Hey, buddy." My mood lightens as I see the little boy. "What have you got there?"

Eric pulls a folded paper from his pocket, his brown eyes gleaming. "It's us!"

I crouch down to examine the drawing. Three figures stand hand in hand in front of what appears to be my house: a tall man in black, a woman with long dark hair, and a small boy between them. Above them, written in crooked letters: "MY FAMILY." A big red heart over us.

Something catches in my throat.

"That's you," Eric points. "And that's Mommy. And that's me in the middle."

"This is cool, Eric," I manage. "Great drawing."

"Ms. Wilson said to draw our families," Eric explains as we walk to the car. "Jimmy drew his mom and his stepdad and his real dad and his sisters and his cat. I drew us."

In the car, Eric chatters about his day while I navigate traffic, the drawing placed on

the dashboard like a trophy.

“Do you see the dog?”

He points. A blob with ears and a tail.

“That’s Biscuit. He’s not real yet. But when we’re a real family, maybe we can get him.”

My throat tightens.

“You want us to be a real family?” I ask.

He nods. “You make my mom smile like she used to. Before the internet people were mean.”

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“I like her smile too.”

Eric is quiet for a moment. “I had a bad dream last night.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I didn't tell Mommy because I didn't want her to worry. She worries a lot.”

I glance at him in the rearview mirror. “You can tell me about it if you want.”

“There was a monster trying to get in our house,” Eric says, his voice small. “But then you came and scared it away.”

Something fierce surges in my chest. “I'd always protect you and your mom, Eric. Whether I live with you or not.”

“But it's better when you're there,” Eric insists. “Mommy laughs more. And you make the best pancakes, even better than hers, but don't tell her I said that.”

I chuckle. “Your secret's safe with me.”

As we pull into the driveway, Eric says, “I hope you stay with us forever. I like you.”

“I like you too, Eric. A lot. So whether or not I'm here, I'll always do,” I say, ruffling the boy's hair.

Inside, I help Eric with homework. There's an easy rhythm to it, so different from

when I raised Jen. Back then, I'd been no more than a kid myself, terrified of making mistakes, second-guessing every decision. With Eric, I feel more confident, more present.

When Eric runs off to watch a cartoon, I find myself studying the drawing again.

As I tuck it away, I realize Jen was right. I'm not falling for Wren.

I've already fallen, all the way.

17

WREN

Just when it feels like things are starting to settle, drama strikes again.

I adjust the lighting rig over the serum bottle, angling it until the amber glass catches the light just right. Around me, the flagship Lemon LLC studio hums with motion. Photographers calling out adjustments, assistants unboxing products, a model laughing as someone adjusts her hair. There's a quiet thrill in the air, the kind that comes when something you built is about to be seen.

"Can we get a bit more light on the serum?" I ask, squinting at the monitor. "It should glow, not glare. That's better. Perfect. Now let's try the moisturizer next to it. Let it breathe."

This process grounds me. It's comforting being surrounded by color palettes, product placement, storyboarding, and sunlight through white muslin curtains. The creative part of my brain clicks on like muscle memory, and for a moment, nothing else exists.

"Wren, can we get a few of you with the products now?" someone calls out from

behind a camera.

I nod, stepping in front of the backdrop. My stylist dabs at my cheek with a puff, fixes a strand of hair. The videographer adjusts the lens.

“Tell me about this one again?” he asks, holding up the lemon essence.

My smile is instant.

“This is our signature,” I say, fingers resting on the sleek glass bottle. “A cold-pressed essence from organic lemon peels harvested by hand. It’s designed to brighten without stripping. The formula took over a year to perfect. Our team worked on balancing natural acids with microdose actives so it works even on the most sensitive skin.”

“Beautiful,” a photographer murmurs, snapping shots as I speak.

I pick up the moisturizer next. “This one was inspired by post-facial skin. You know, that soft bounce. That glow. It’s packed with fermented botanicals, ceramides, and a snow mushroom blend for long-term hydration without heaviness. No silicones. No fragrance. Just clean, clinical-grade moisture.”

He keeps shooting, and I keep talking because I believe in this. I know every formula, every ingredient, every decision behind every label.

Lemon LLC was born in my apartment, at a time when no one thought I could make something out of myself after deciding to leave Hollywood at the peak of my career, with a baby and a divorce in tow.

Now, look.

I pivot for one last shot, holding the two products beside each other. “Together, they create a kind of glow that looks effortless,” I say. “But like everything worth having, it’s the result of care.”

The click of the shutter. The light flash.

And then?—

“Wren.”

Talia’s voice cuts through everything. I turn. She’s at the edge of the set, tablet clutched against her chest, her expression tight.

Uh-oh. What now?

A pit forms in my stomach.

“Give me a minute,” I tell the photographer, slipping out of frame and walking toward her.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, already bracing.

Talia holds out the tablet and I already know I’m not going to like what I see.

“Interview aired last evening,” she says. “It’s making rounds now.”

I blink. “What interview?”

“Marlowe Gray.”

I don’t even flinch. Not anymore.

I press play.

The video loads before I even take a full breath. An interview excerpt of Marlowe in a studio lit to make her look like some delicate, overexposed angel. She’s draped in cream silk, hair styled within an inch of its life, all ease and charm.

“I’ve always believed that ethics in the beauty industry should come first,” she says, her voice honey-smooth. “Transparency matters to consumers.”

The interviewer leans in. “Would you say that’s true across the board?”

Marlowe’s expression shifts with faux measured concern. “Unfortunately, no. Some major players don’t hold themselves to the same standards. It’s disappointing and embarrassing to see big brands stealing concepts from smaller creators.”

She lets the words hang, then smiles. That awful, gracious smile.

“And then trying to divert attention with... PR stunts. Fake relationships. Sudden charitable giving. Calculated, not genuine.”

The interviewer leans in. “Are you saying there are people in the industry using PR to cover up bad behavior? Or scandals?”

“I’m just saying... It’s interesting who wants to be seen as a hero all of a sudden. My point in whole is the beauty industry needs to hold itself to higher standards.”

I don't realize I've clenched my teeth until my jaw starts to ache.

"She didn't say your name," Talia says, "but?—"

"She didn't have to."

Talia swipes the screen again.

"Right. Camille reposted Marlowe's video on her Insta story last night."

"They're still going?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:54 am*

“Not just that. Camille also made a new video this morning.”

My stomach churns as the screen cuts to Camille sitting in her pastel-blue bedroom, sniffing, voice shaking as she talks about how her ideas were “ripped off,” how devastated she is watching a big brand profit from her originality. She mentioned again how she didn’t want to speak up but felt she had to. How silence is complicity. The same tired narrative, just glossier.

“She’s good,” I mutter.

Talia’s expression hardens. “And Marlowe reposted it.”

She taps the screen, and there it is:

Support small creators. Big brands must be held accountable. #TruthWillPrevail  
#SmallBusinessMatters

She’s not even pretending anymore.

“Of course she waited until now,” I say, my voice low. “The launch is fourteen days away.”

“And the online attacks have started again.” Talia turns the tablet to show some hashtags. #LemonLies. #FraudQueen. Tweets accusing me of stealing. Comments dragging my name through the mud. And of course, plenty of speculation about Sean. About how we’re faking this relationship to hide behind something bigger.

“This is strategic,” Talia says. “She’s coming out guns blazing this time. Publicly aligning with Camille. Timing it to derail the launch.”

I stare at the screen, at the hateful words scrolling past, and for the first time, I don’t feel that pit of helpless dread. I refuse to shut down this time.

It hurts, sure. It always will. But the part of me that used to spiral? That version of Wren feels distant now.

Instead, I hand the tablet back and adjust the collar of my blazer.

“What do you want to do?” Talia asks.

“First? I finish this shoot. These products are two years of work. Testing. Research. Countless late nights. Marlowe’s bitterness isn’t enough to take that from me.”

“And after the shoot?”

“Then we strategize,” I say, straighter now. “Schedule a sit-down with the rest of the PR and legal team. And Sean. Today.”

Talia raises a brow. “You sure?”

“She wants to rattle me. I’m not giving her what she wants.”

She studies me, like she doesn’t quite recognize who I am at this moment. Then she smiles. “Oh, Wren. We’ve been quiet long enough. We’ve gathered enough evidence to fight back.”

I glance back at the set, the soft golden lighting, the arrangement of bottles waiting to be captured.

“Yes, we’ve been quiet for too long. Hiding gives people like Marlowe power. If she wants to come for me in the open, then let her.”

I know what I’ve built. I know what it’s worth.

Let them post their hashtags. Let them accuse.

I’m not breaking.

I head back to the team, raising my voice just enough to cut through the noise.

“Let me see that hero shot again,” I say. “We’ve got to make sure the lemon essence bottle is front and center.”

It’s our signature. Our soul. I study the pictures on the screen, nodding.

“Okay,” I say, voice level. “Let’s move to the exfoliating gel. I want a clean shot. No props, just the bottle and its natural texture swatched on slate. We’re leaning into transparency with this formula, so let’s make it literal.”

I pick up the product and glance at the camera. “This one is gentle enough to use every day. Polyhydroxy acids instead of glycolic. The acting is a slower process, but less irritating. Great for redness-prone skin types. And we used hyaluronic acid from a non-GMO fermentation source. It’s vegan, cruelty-free, and fragrance-free. Like everything else we make.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:54 am*

A flash. Then another. I keep going.

My voice doesn't waver. My hands don't shake as I grip the product tube again, smile for the lens, and keep talking about formulas and texture. I speak with the clarity of someone who has nothing to prove because I don't. Not anymore.

My mind is still on the shoot when my phone rings.

"Hey. I was planning on dropping by your place later today," I say as I answer Jen's call.

There's a pause. Then a shaky inhale.

Her breath catches and she sniffs.

"Jen?" I straighten in my seat. "What happened?"

Her voice is small, so unlike the cheerful woman I know.

"I stopped by your office. Are you around?"

"Yes," I say, already rising. "I'm coming there now."

I wrap up at the studio and return to my office.

Jen is sitting on the edge of my couch, arms wrapped around herself, eyes red and swollen. My heart cracks.

“Oh, honey.”

She stands the moment she sees me and I catch her in my arms. She clings to me like she’s drowning, and I hold her tighter.

“I can’t believe this,” she whispers into my shoulder. “I feel so foolish, Wren.”

“You’re not. You’re not foolish. Talk to me. What happened?”

She pulls back enough to look at me. Her lips tremble.

“I thought he was going to propose. I’ve been thinking about it for weeks. How he’s been acting kind of different, like a brand new person. I thought... I thought it was nerves. Surprise. Like, ring-shopping nerves.”

She lets out a bitter laugh and wipes under her eyes.

“But it wasn’t that. He was hiding something. A woman sent me photos last night. Of her and Derek. Together. I confronted him, and he didn’t even deny it.”

I press a hand over my mouth, fury already lighting up my spine.

“He said... God, Wren, he said he knew he messed up, but he’s in love with me. That he bought a ring and he still wants to marry me. As if that fixes anything.”

Tears spill again, fresh and fast.

“I’m so sad,” she chokes out. “I’m so hurt. I don’t understand it. I don’t understand why he would do that to me. To us.”

I guide her back to the couch, keeping my arms around her as she sinks into me,

sobbing, and her body trembling.

“You didn’t deserve this. No one does.” I murmur. “You’re the most loyal, loving person I know. If he couldn’t see that, if he could hurt you like this then he doesn’t deserve to be in the same room as you, let alone marry you.”

She nods into my shoulder.

“I walked out. Left everything in his place, the key, the photos, the stupid half-finished takeout he ordered this morning like he hasn’t been cheating on me until the previous week. I came straight here.”

“I’m so glad you did.” I squeeze her. “You’re not alone. You have me. Always.”

She pulls away with a shaky breath, her blue eyes shining with resolve.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:54 am*

“I can’t forgive him, Wren. I won’t.”

“You don’t have to. That’s not your burden to carry.”

I feel her nod. And even though her heart is broken, I know this is one of those moments she’ll look back on and realize it was a beginning disguised as an ending.

Just like I had to.

And right now, she doesn’t need silver linings or silver rings. She just needs her best friend and I’m right here.

18

SEAN

“Start from the top,” I say, crossing the room in two strides and settling into my seat at Langston Protection Services.

Marcus, Cal and Dani are already gathered.

I’m a few minutes late because of the chaos of the leaked product photos and campaign strategy of Lemon LLC’s new products. The information and pictures got leaked the previous day and Wren is livid about it. I kept my suspicions to myself while my team worked to figure out where the leak came from.

Cal taps a key, and on the center monitor, a series of flagged access logs pop up.

“Following our suspicions, we pulled every document, calendar event, and internal email Wren’s assistant, Lily, has touched in the last ninety days. She accessed over two dozen items outside her normal scope of duties, many of them during hours she wasn’t scheduled.”

Dani steps forward next, head of investigations and sharper than anyone I’ve ever worked with. She flips through a printed report. “These aren’t accidental clicks. She opened and downloaded confidential strategy memos—some marked executive access only. And the timing lines up with every leak that’s gone public.”

She taps a page. “See this? The marketing deck for Wren’s new campaign? Leaked yesterday after Lily downloaded it. She accessed it at 11:03 p.m., off-site. And the IP? Tied to a Wi-Fi network registered to a short-term rental under a fake name.”

“Whoever owns the burner email account receiving the leaks used that same IP,” Cal adds. “We cross-referenced metadata from the attachments. The documents Lily sent came from Wren’s files with no formatting changes, no stripped metadata. It’s a direct transfer.”

Then Marcus slides a flash drive onto the desk.

“This is the kicker. Lily joined a private Slack-style group chat. Username: LemonInsider. She didn’t even try to be coy,” he clicks his tongue. “Anyway, we breached it two days ago. Messages include screenshots of Wren’s private calendar, phone pics taken inside Lemon offices. She wasn’t working alone. Marlowe Skye is in there too, under the very vague name of StarPower.”

I scroll through the timestamped exchanges, media contacts, even directives. I press a finger to my temple.

Leak this Tuesday at 8 a.m. Eastern. Make sure it gets to CelebMag first. Don’t forget

to crop out the timestamp.

“This is deliberate sabotage,” I say. “Coordinated.”

“And here,” Cal adds, pulling up a final image. “Security cam footage from a Midtown café last week. Lily and Camille Ross.”

Everything falls into place like a lock clicking shut.

I nod once. “I’ll handle the delivery.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m pulling into the Lemon LLC lot. The sun’s just starting to dip, casting long shadows across the building’s modern glass façade. I kill the engine and sit with it a beat longer than necessary.

This isn’t just another operation. This one’s personal.

I take the elevator to the top floor. Talia lets me into Wren’s office with a quick nod. Wren’s sitting on the couch, arms crossed over her chest. Both of them watch me with that mix of tension and hope I’ve come to expect in crisis situations.

“What is it?” she asks.

“I’ve been tracking the leaks,” I begin, opening my laptop. “Paparazzi showing up at the exact locations Wren’s supposed to be. Not just any location, specific ones which someone with access to her private calendar would know. Leaked details from internal emails. Slips from meetings no one outside the core team should’ve heard.”

Talia leans forward. “You think it’s a mole?”

“I know it is,” I say. “And I know who it is.”

I set the folder and flash drive on the table. “It’s Lily.”

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Wren tilts her head to a side, her eyebrows squishing together,

“Lily?” she says, opening the folder like it might bite. “That’s... impossible.”

I get it. I’ve watched Lily hover like a shadow at Wren’s side since the day I walked into this job. Scheduling, email filters, even picking up Eric from school sometimes. She’s not just an assistant, she’s woven into the fabric of Wren’s life.

“I wish I was wrong,” I tell her, softer now. “But the trail is clean. And it’s hers.”

I walk them through it. I show the access logs. The calendar downloads. The IP data that ties Lily’s login credentials to a burner email account. Every step is documented, timestamped, and undeniable.

Then I click into the group chat.

“‘LemonInsider’ is Lily,” I explain. “And ‘StarPower’ is Marlowe Skye.”

Talia arches a brow. “You’re sure?”

I nod and scroll to another screen. “Because ‘StarPower’ chats with Camille Ross in a separate thread. And here’s Marlowe coordinating with gossip blogs. Specific timing. Specific drops.”

I pull up a thread of messages that includes screenshots of Wren’s calendar. Discussions about when to release damaging information about Wren. Texts to blog editors with instructions to “stir the pot.”

And the kill shot. A photo, grainy but clear, from a restaurant security cam of Lily and Camille, seated across from each other. Several weeks ago.

Talia leans in, flipping through the printouts with a quiet string of profanity under her breath. Wren doesn't speak. Her expression's frozen like she's holding herself together by a thread.

"It's not just sloppy behavior," I tell them. "This is intentional. Deliberate. She's been feeding information to Marlowe and Camille for weeks, months maybe. The campaign leak came from her. Every leak came from her."

"I trusted her."

I stay still, letting the moment breathe.

"She's been with me since Lemon launched," she goes on, like she's remembering things in real time. "When Eric had a fever last year, she brought soup and stayed over. And we talked throughout the night. She's held my hand before pitch meetings when I thought I'd throw up."

Her voice catches. "How could she do this?"

Something sharp and protective twists in my chest. My job has led me to see betrayal a hundred ways before. From corporate espionage to political leaks and even family implosions. But this? This is different. Personal. And Wren deserves better.

"People's motives get messy," I say. "Money. Recognition. Envy. Sometimes the ones closest to us are the ones with the deepest grudges."

Talia's quiet until now, absorbing everything like a strategist banking pieces on a chessboard. She looks up, her eyes sharper than before.

“We can flip this,” she says. “This is the moment we’ve been waiting for. We can make the leak work for us.”

Wren blinks. “How?”

“We release the screenshots. The chat. The picture of Marlowe and Camille together. We don’t say a word. Just drop it into the right hands. People don’t like manufactured drama. If they see Marlowe’s been pulling the strings the whole time, the story turns.”

“Smart,” I say. “And we don’t come at them head-on. We let the public connect the dots.”

“What about Lily?” Wren asks.

Then the door opens.

Lily walks in with a bright smile holding a file and packet of coffee.

“I brought coffee! Oh and Wren, I got your favourite oat milk latte from?”

Her brows furrow at the silence.

“Is everything alright? I just wanted to drop the files and the coff?—

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“So, it was you.”

“What?”

“The calendar. The documents. All those leaks. They came from you!”

Lily pales. “Wren, what are you talking about? I don’t?—”

“Don’t lie to me,” Wren snaps, rising to her feet. “Don’t you dare. You looked me in the eye every day while you were selling pieces of my life to people who wanted to destroy me.”

“I—I didn’t sell anything! You’re wrong, I swear?—”

“We have chat logs,” I cut in. “Footage of you meeting Camille Ross. Access logs from off-site Wi-Fi linked to a burner. You sent confidential files of Wren’s calendar, strategy decks, emails. You leaked the new product photos and campaign strategy. We have the metadata. It’s irrefutable.”

Lily looks between us. Her face collapses into something wounded and defensive all at once. “You don’t understand. I was doing everything. Running her whole life. I just wanted... I wanted to prove that I could be more. I just wanted a chance?—”

Talia crosses her arms. “So you decided to burn it all down?”

Silence.

Wren's voice is cold. "You're done here."

"But Wren?—"

"I trusted you with my son." Her tone is cutting. "Leave your badge and your laptop with security. You're no longer employed here."

Talia opens the door.

Lily doesn't say anything else and backs away.

The silence afterward is thick. Wren sits slow, like her body remembers its weight all at once. I sit across from her, not touching, not speaking.

I watch her hold herself together, knowing how much strength that takes.

19

WREN

Lily's gone. Just like that.

Behind it all, I can still feel the crack left behind by her betrayal. Lily wasn't just an assistant, she was a friend. Someone who once knew every schedule of my life, who has been there during my vulnerable moments, turned out to be a foe. And she didn't just forward a few emails or steal a sample. She gave Marlowe our concept decks, pre-launch formulas, even the pitch notes for our biggest investor call. Everything that mattered.

And she smiled in my face while she did it.

Talia handled the termination with precision. I signed off on it without flinching. I didn't ask for an explanation. I didn't want one. Some betrayals don't deserve a postmortem.

The scandal is dying. Headlines have shifted. Marlowe's stunt fizzled fast after the leaked chats. Lemon LLC's inbox is filled with investor reassurances and cautious congratulations.

I meet with the comms team to finalize a press release, sign off on the media calendar, and lock in the launch date. Again.

Five days.

The launch is happening.

I should be thrilled. I've worked for this for years.

It should feel like a win.

Instead, it just feels... quiet.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:54 am*

The smell of citrus and heat fills the air as I step onto the studio floor, my heels clicking against the polished concrete. Massive reflector panels bounce sunlight across a mock lemon grove, and just beyond, the photographer's assistant calls out lighting adjustments.

The product shoot needed to be redone, though with the same clean aesthetic but tighter messaging now. The original assets were compromised, thanks to Lily's leak, so my team and I work around the clock. We reframe the brand story, emphasizing transparency, innovation, authenticity.

Talia stands beside me, arms crossed, watching our new campaign unfold in real time.

"It's stronger than the original," she says under her breath, and I know she's right.

Everything's sharper now. Clearer. The model's dress is simpler, the colors richer. There's a glass bottle in her hand—our serum in its final packaging—held up like it's some kind of salvation. And maybe it is.

Raj leans toward me. "We're leaning all the way in on transparency," he murmurs. "Organic sourcing, no filters, full ingredient traceability. People want the truth now."

Especially after everything that has happened.

I cross my arms, jaw tight. "Good."

The camera flashes.

Talia nudges me. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I lie. “Just thinking.”

We watch the hero shot get re-framed. The model laughs on cue, sun glinting off her skin as she tosses a lemon into the air. It lands in the basket beside her.

Perfect. Polished. Just like we need it to be.

We have just five days left before the launch, and this reshoot cost us three. The team is exhausted. I haven’t slept a full night since Lily was escorted out.

Talia hands me her tablet with the preliminary ad layout mocked up. I swipe through the pages—sun-washed photography, a new slogan: Clean. Real. Uncompromised.

“It’s good,” I murmur. “Real good.”

“You want to feel like you won,” she says, “but mostly you feel like someone stabbed you and walked away.”

I glance at her. “That obvious?”

Talia lifts a shoulder. “Only because I know you.”

I don’t answer. Instead, I step closer to the set, watching the model do a slow spin as the wind machine picks up the hem of her dress. For a second, I forget the bitterness. The betrayal. I just see what we’re building. What we’re fighting to protect.

But the moment the last shoot wraps, and the crew starts packing up, a sharp emptiness cuts through her.

Because Sean hasn't touched me since I pushed him away.

He's still here. Still guarding me, still watching every car that passes, still checking the perimeters each night. But he doesn't linger in the kitchen anymore. He doesn't find reasons to sit beside me on the couch. He doesn't tease me about my caffeine addiction or correct my terrible knife skills when he watches me cook.

He's careful now.

Detached.

Just the way I asked him to be.

So why does my heart ache? Why do I miss him? Why do I yearn for affection? For his attention?

"I need to go," I say all of a sudden, handing the tablet back to Talia.

"Where?"

"Home."

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The drive is short, but my mind runs in loops the whole way. Not about the shoot or the product timeline or Lily's betrayal. But about Sean. About the way he looked at me after Lily was dismissed. Like he was waiting for me to say something. Like maybe he didn't want to walk away after all.

But I let him.

I slow the car into the driveway, surprised to find the front yard occupied.

There's a lemonade stand with a bright yellow construction paper taped to the front with a misspelled sign in crayon: "Eric's Lemonaid."

Sean and Eric are crouched behind it, pouring from a plastic pitcher into two tiny cups, surrounded by wood, paint cans, and a bucket of real lemons.

I park and step out of the car, smiling despite the ache in my chest.

"Mommy!" Eric calls out, waving a paintbrush. "Look what we made!"

"Wow. It looks amazing."

"Want to try my lemonade? Sean helped me squeeze the lemons."

I walk over and take the little cup he offers. It's warm and a little too sweet.

I drink every drop.

“It’s perfect,” I say.

Eric beams again.

“We’re calling it Eric’s Lemonaid,” he announces. “With real flavors and a real sign!”

Sean stands, brushing sawdust from his jeans. “He’s got a strong entrepreneurial streak.”

“Hmm. I wonder where he gets it,” I tease, letting my eyes linger on him a moment too long.

He says nothing.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, surprising myself.

Sean hesitates before nodding. “Sure.”

That night, after Eric’s asleep and the dishes are done, we sit on the back patio. The air is cool and the stars are sharp above us, and for a few seconds, it almost feels like everything is okay.

I hand him a glass of wine. He takes it without speaking.

“Thank you,” I say. “For today. For looking out for us. For... everything.”

He watches me. Eyes unreadable.

“It kind of sounds like you’re saying goodbye,” he says.

I let out a quiet laugh. “I guess we’ll all be going back to our lives soon. I’ll return back to my home, and then you can have your house back to yourself.”

“That’s good, I guess. You deserve peace.”

“I know I don’t say this often but it’s nice having you around. You’ve helped me hold it all together when I felt like I was losing control.”

He looks at me, twirling the glass of wine in his hand.

“You never lost control. You made decisions. You trusted the wrong person. That’s not the same thing.”

“It feels the same,” I admit. “Sometimes.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:54 am*

There's a pause. He shifts in his seat, face half in shadow.

"Are we just going back to how things were, Wren?" he asks.

My chest tightens. I don't answer right away.

Sean finishes his wine, then sets the glass down on the table between us. "I hope not."

My pulses races.

Sean doesn't speak for a long time.

"I meant what I said," he says at last, voice low. "This stopped being pretend a long time ago."

I stare at him, the truth of it settling like a weight in my bones. "I don't know what to do with that," I whisper.

"You don't have to do anything." He reaches for my hand. "Just don't run."

I don't know who moves first. Maybe it's me. Maybe it's him.

But then his mouth is on mine, and everything inside me cracks wide open. The kiss is desperate, furious, almost painful in its intensity. Weeks of space, of ache, of unsaid things poured into every stroke of his tongue, every movement of his mouth against mine.

His hands are rough as they tug me closer, sliding beneath my blouse, finding bare skin. I gasp as his palm grazes the side of my breast and then moan when his mouth trails hotly down my neck, my collarbone, my shoulder.

“Sean—”

The kiss deepens and my hands clutch the front of his shirt like I’m afraid he’ll disappear. He pulls me closer, one arm sliding around my waist, the other cupping the back of my head. The patio fades away. The stars blur overhead.

His hands skim my waist, my hips, my thighs. My skirt rides up as I press against him, needy, aching, undone. My fingers tug at his shirt, slipping beneath the fabric to feel the warm, solid strength of him.

Then, all of a sudden, his heat is gone. He pulls away.

“Wren,” he breathes, shoving a hand over his face, and in the moonlight, his salt-and-pepper hair gleams like a crown.

“I don’t want space tonight,” I whisper, my fingers trembling as I reach out and between my thighs, my wetness aches with need. “Not from you.”

Something breaks in him at that.

His blue eyes cloud. “Oh, Wren...”

He lifts me, and I wrap my legs around his waist, clutching his shoulders as he carries me through the hallway. We don’t make it to a bedroom. He lowers me onto the couch, his mouth never leaving mine.

We undress each other slowly and then all at once. Lips dragging, hands exploring,

the quiet sound of breath and fabric filling the space between us. My body is still humming with grief, exhaustion, pride, and uncertainty, and he feels it all. He reads me like a language he's known forever.

When he enters me, it's with a reverence that shatters me.

I gasp his name, head falling back as he fills me deep and steady, grounding me with every slow thrust. My hands cling to his back. My legs tremble around his waist. He kisses my throat, my collarbone, and the inside of my wrist.

"I missed you," he whispers, voice breaking. "Even when you were right in front of me."

Tears sting my eyes.

I arch into him, meeting every movement, chasing that breathless pleasure. It's not just about sex. It's about being seen. Being held. Being his.

We move together.

I come apart with his name on my lips, and he follows soon after, burying his face in my neck, both of us shaking in the afterglow.

"I've missed you too." My voice is small, my fingers trailing his skin like a treasure map.

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He doesn't let me go. He wraps me in his arms like I'm something fragile, something worth protecting, and for the first time in days, I feel like I can breathe.

20

SEAN

I wake to the weight of warmth pressed into his side. Wren. She's curled into me, her head resting just over my heart, one arm draped over my ribs, her breaths slow and even. I don't move, relishing the moment. The living room is quiet, washed in early morning light filtering through the blinds.

We must've fallen asleep like this after talking for hours last night. We didn't discuss heavy subjects. Just the kind of nothing that changes everything. I asked her about her pinterest board called *If I Had a Farm*. I once saw the board on her laptop. She joked that in another life, she'd be a farmer.

I told her I've read *East of Eden* seventeen times and she teased me about it. We drifted off like that, tangled together on the couch.

I stare at Wren, at the rise and fall of her chest. This moment feels too fragile, too perfect, like it'll vanish if I shift the wrong way.

Then I hear soft footsteps. Small ones.

I turn my head just enough to see Eric coming down the stairs, that worn-out triceratops tucked under one arm. His curls are a mess. He blinks at us, bleary-eyed,

then toddles over like it's the most normal thing in the world to find me wrapped around his mom.

"Morning," he stage-whispers, loud in that way only kids manage. "Is Mommy sleeping?"

I nod and press a finger to my lips.

He nods back like a soldier receiving orders, then climbs right up into my lap and wedges himself between me and the back of the couch. No hesitation. My throat tightens as I shift just enough to make room for him. He's warm and small and solid. It hit me now. A hard, sharp and terrifying realization slam into me. I want this. I want all of it.

This quiet, intimate moment. Waking up beside Wren. Holding her son like my own.

"Can we have waffles?" Eric whispers, eyes hopeful.

I smile. "Sure, buddy. Let's let your mom sleep a little longer, yeah?"

He snuggles into my side, clutching his dinosaur like it's battle gear. Wren breathes against my chest, and just like that, I can see the whole damn picture. Mornings like this. Laughing in the kitchen. Sunday pancakes and bedtime stories and not waking up alone.

I close my eyes for a second, but I already know the truth. None of it matters unless she wants it too. And that's the part I don't have control over.

Later that morning, I meet Marcus at the gym. He's already stretching when I walk in, smirking like he's been waiting all morning to run his mouth.

“Well, well, look who it is,” he says, clapping me on the shoulder. “Our favourite Silver Fox.”

“Don’t start.”

He laughs. “You’re a regular tabloid darling now. I don’t know if the algorithm knows that you’re my boss but I get all updates about you and Wren’s relationship. I think it’s safe to say I’m a Wrenan stan. And you should know that your ‘smoldering protective gaze’ is a fan favorite.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter and start wrapping my hands.

“It’s all your fault for staring at her like that. I’ve never seen that smitten look on your face before.”

I ignore him, wrapping my hands before stepping up to the heavy bag. I throw a clean one-two. The rhythm helps, but not enough.

“No use fighting it, man. You’re in it. The people have spoken.” He watches me. “But I gotta ask... are you two still pretending? Because this picture—” he flips the phone again to a shot of Wren looking up at me like I’m really the man she loves—“doesn’t look fake to me.”

I focus on taping my wrist. “I don’t know, Marcus. I can’t tell anymore.”

“You two look at each other like that and still don’t know?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Sounds like what people say when they’re drowning but don’t want to admit it.”

I fire off another combo, harder. He steadies the bag. Marcus and I go way back—fifteen years of field ops, high-profile clients, near-death situations. He sees right through me.

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“I woke up with her kid curled into me this morning,” I say. “And all I could think was... I wanted it to be real.”

He lets out a low whistle. “Damn. That’s not complicated. That’s crystal clear.”

I grunt, hitting harder.

“I have to question it. It started as a job. And yeah, somewhere between escorting her to press events and sleeping on her couch, the lines got blurry. But she set the rules. Temporary.” I roll back my shoulders before hitting again. “And now she’s packing up. After the product launch, she and Eric are leaving my house.”

“So what now? You two just go back to work like nothing happened?”

“That’s the plan, isn’t it? Next contract. Next client.”

He holds the bag steady while I continue throwing jabs.

“You know what the worst part is?” I say, between hits. “I don’t want the next contract. I want this. Her. Eric. Mornings on the couch, waffles and cartoons. But if she doesn’t want that too... I’ll just be the guy who overstepped. The guy who mistook proximity for something more.”

Marcus grunts. “You didn’t mistake anything. I’ve seen you shut people out for years. Then she walks into your life, and all of a sudden you’re cooking breakfast and laughing. That doesn’t happen unless it’s real.”

“It’s confusing because I don’t know where I stand with her. It’s like we’re holding our breath waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Sounds messy.”

I let out a breath. “It is. But I’ve fallen for her.”

“Then tell her. Before it’s too late.”

I drag a hand over my head. “She’s still got a lot going on though the chaos is dying down. But she’s still very busy. She’s had a surreal few months. I’m being careful not to add to her burden. It’s not exactly the time for declarations.”

“There’s never a perfect time,” he says. “There’s only your time. And it’s running out.”

I stop punching. My heart’s already racing, but not from the workout. “I don’t even know what I’d say.”

“Try the truth,” he says. “Start with ‘I love you.’ End with, ‘I want more than just a job.’”

I stare at the floor for a long second. Then I nod, grabbing my water bottle. “After the launch.”

Marcus walks with me toward the locker room. “For what it’s worth, I’ve been profiling people for two decades. That woman is not pretending when she looks at you. But you’re not the only one who knows how to build a wall.”

I nod, knowing his words are more true than he knows.

We hit Roxy's Diner after our workout, sweat still drying on our backs. The place is half-empty this time of morning, all worn booths and the smell of bacon grease that has soaked into the walls over the last twenty years.

We slide into a booth in the back, away from the windows out of habit. Marcus orders a black coffee and the steak-and-eggs special. I go for the protein scramble, extra avocado, and a double espresso. It's routine. Familiar and comforting in a way the rest of my week hasn't been.

He leans back and lets out a satisfied groan. "Damn, I forgot how much I missed a post-lift breakfast. You don't get this kind of bacon in the field."

"You don't get bacon at all in the field," I mutter, tapping my fingers on the table. "Just MREs and regret."

He snorts. "Truth."

The waitress drops off our coffees, and as soon as she walks off, Marcus shifts gears.

"So," he says, "about our next job. Got a preliminary call from Wexler Industries. They're looking for discreet protection on a short-term executive retreat. Small group, high-level, minimal movement, but they want full oversight. Physical security, intel monitoring, transport logistics."

"Wexler. Oil and gas money. Private resort in Jackson Hole?"

"Yeah. You already read the file?"

"Skimmed it last night." I take a sip of coffee, setting the mug down with a dull thud. "I'm interested. It's tight, professional. No media. No drama. Corporate-level trust. We'd need a small team. Maybe Lena on surveillance and Miles on perimeter

rotation.”

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Marcus smiles, raising a brow. “You’re sure? Because a week ago, you wouldn’t stop griping about how bored you were.”

I glance out the window. “It’s not boring. It’s... different now.”

He waits.

“I built this company to handle corporate security. Executive protection, international travel, asset movement, sensitive intel. I don’t do celebs and media all up in my business, and I never take jobs with personal ties. I had rules.”

Marcus stares at me over the rim of his mug. “And Wren broke every single one.”

“She did but that’s not her fault. That’s mine. I let it happen. I made an exception. And now... I don’t know where I stand with her.”

Marcus doesn’t press. He lets the silence settle. That’s why he’s my second. He knows when to talk and when to let me work it out myself.

I dig into my breakfast and let the structure of my business ground me. The company I built after years of working chaos. I made a name for myself by being calm, effective, and selective.

My contracts are air-tight. Risk assessments get triple-checked. I don’t gamble on people anymore. Not unless they show they’re worth it.

And now I’m trying to pretend like Wren Sinclair isn’t the first person in years who

made me want the mess again.

“I still care about the work,” I say at last. “I still get that adrenaline. But now, it’s about being in control. Choosing what I say yes to.”

“And Wexler checks the boxes?”

I nod. “Wexler checks the boxes.”

He studies me for a beat, then stabs a piece of steak. “Alright. I’ll run point on client coordination. You want me to prep a full logistics packet?”

“Yeah. And keep Miles close. If Wren’s launch event goes smooth and she and Eric move out without incident, I’ll be ready to shift back into rotation by next week.”

Marcus leans back, satisfied.

I finish the last bite of my scramble and push the plate away.

“After the launch, I’ll know if she wants me back.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then I go back to the job. Full-time. No mess. No exceptions.”

But the truth is, I’m not sure that life fits anymore. I might’ve built my company to eliminate chaos. But now I’m wondering if the right chaos is what I’ve needed all along.

## WREN

The sun hangs low over the Hollywood Hills, casting a soft golden wash across the glass walls of the Elysian Conservatory. Perched at the edge of the cliffs, the venue feels like it's floating—an open-air botanical haven wrapped in light and citrus.

This is the moment.

A gentle breeze carries the fresh scent of lemon blossom and eucalyptus over sleek white lounge chairs. Every detail is curated from the silk canopy tents in soft cream to the interactive skincare stations with gold-rimmed mirrors, “Glow Lounge” wellness nooks where guests sip citrus-infused water and try facial mists infused with white lotus and lemon balm.

Above the arched entrance, delicate script glows in the light:

Reclaim Your Glow

The new Lemon Glow collection tagline—part mantra, part mission.

I stand just beyond the main pavilion adjusting the lapels of my cream silk blazer. Beneath it, a champagne slip dress shimmers faintly in the sun. It's the most “me” I've felt in weeks.

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I glance at the expanse in front of me. Hundreds of guests gathered, from glossy influencers to longtime investors, editors from Elle and Byrdie, loyal customers, fans and curious media.

Raj is straightening a product pedestal again. Talia is deep in conversation with a Vogue contributor, nodding with just the right amount of charisma and authority. Jen is surrounded by admirers, all shining hair and laughter, making everyone feel like her new best friend.

And Sean. He's posted near the garden entrance in a charcoal gray suit that fits like it was made for him. His stance is calm, but I know better. I know the way he's tracking entrances, watching hands, glancing toward me every thirty seconds. Our eyes meet, and the pressure in my chest lightens for the first time all day.

"Five minutes, Ms. Sinclair," a headset-wearing coordinator whispers beside me.

I nod. I've practiced this speech dozens of times, but at this moment, all I want is to say something real. Something true.

The soft chime of a bell echoes through the space as the crowd's attention focuses toward the stage. The garden quietens and photographers reposition. The sun slips a bit behind a cloud, bathing everything in diffused light like even the sky is cooperating.

I step up onto the platform, the city unfolding behind me like a painted backdrop.

"Good afternoon," I begin, voice steady despite the thundering of my heart. "First,

thank you. For joining us here today. For believing in us. For riding the wave, even when the waters got choppy.”

A few smiles. Curious eyes. I keep going.

“When I started Lemon LLC six years ago, I didn’t have a boardroom. I didn’t have investors or press coverage. I had a toddler who pressed his little hand to my cheek and told me, ‘Mama smells happy.’” I smile, and a ripple of warm laughter passes through the crowd. “I’d been using homemade lemon balm. That moment is where this began. In a moment of connection. And joy. It became the foundation for everything we built.”

“I won’t pretend the last few months have been easy. The accusations... the betrayal... the public spectacle—it shook me. But it also reminded me why this company exists. Lemon LLC was never just about beauty. It’s always been about healing. Creating products that soothe. That reminds us of who we are.”

I pause, letting my gaze wander across the audience. When it lands on Sean, I feel steadier. Grounded.

“That’s why today’s launch matters. We’ve named this Lemon Glow collection, Narrative, because it’s time to reclaim our story.”

There’s a soft gasp as the curtain behind me draws back, revealing rows of minimalist ivory packaging etched with gold lotus petals, sitting atop glass pedestals with soft backlighting. Sleek. Pure. Hopeful.

“Narrative features our signature lemon extract now paired with white lotus. White lotus is a flower that rises through murky water to bloom in perfection. Just like all of us. We rise. We bloom. We glow.”

Camera shutters click. Phones lift. Applause trickles in, soft at first, then grows into a chorus.

“I want to thank my efficient team for their tireless work and dedication to make this day a reality. I have the best team in the world and I’ll never not be thankful for them. Here’s to doing more great stuff with you all.”

My eyes darts to my executive team gathered near the podium. Talia smiles, giving me a nod.

“There’s one more person I need to acknowledge. Someone who reminded me that strength doesn’t always look loud or fearless. Sometimes it’s quiet. Steady. Sometimes it shows up wearing faded blue jeans and a Dodgers cap and refuses to let you go through it alone.”

I don’t say his name, but I don’t have to. The cameras find Sean, but no one else but I knows how real that gratitude is. How much more it means.

“This isn’t just another line of skincare. It’s a declaration. It’s a reminder that we don’t break. It’s a reminder that beauty lives in the comeback.”

Applause swells again as I step down. People swarm with congratulations, compliments, reporters with questions, cameras, cameras, cameras. I smile, I pose, I answer.

But my heart is somewhere else.

Later, I find him beneath the lemon trees. He’s watching me with that unreadable softness that makes me want to unravel.

“That was incredible,” he says, low and private, meant for my ears alone.

“I meant every word.” My voice wavers. “And the part about you.”

We speak at the same time. “Wren, I need to?—”

“Sean, I wanted to?—”

We laugh. The tension breaks.

“Let me go first,” I say, breath catching. “That night after the gala... it wasn’t pretend. None of this is pretend anymore. I know we said it would be temporary. Professional. But somewhere along the way, I—” My voice fails.

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He's still, his gaze holding me in place.

I continue.

"It scared me. That's all. I thought... if I didn't say it first, if I didn't call it a mistake, you would. I couldn't bear the thought."

He steps closer, his hand grazing my face.

"It was never a mistake. I've been waiting for the best time to say this," he says, his blue depths holding mine. "To confess my feelings. I'm in love with you, Wren. I love you and I don't want to keep it to myself anymore. I want something real with you. I don't care for the cameras. I don't care for whatever people on the internet have to say. I don't care about the conspiracies or whatever. I know what's real. I just want...you."

Joy swells inside me. And then?—

Oh God.

A wave of nausea crashes through me. I stagger.

His hand catches my elbow. "Wren?"

"You okay?"

"I... I think I need to sit down?—"

But it's too late. I turn and bolt, making it to a nearby restroom just as I crash to my knees, the floor cold beneath me. I empty my stomach.

Humiliation burns hot through my veins. Of all the possible reactions to a love confession, this has to be the worst.

A soft knock. "Wren? Do you want me to get Jen?"

I rinse my mouth, my reflection pale and wide-eyed.

"I'm okay," I lie. "Just... stress."

"You're not." He presses the back of his hand to my forehead. "This isn't the first time this week you've looked pale. I'm taking you to the hospital."

"I can't?—"

"Yes, you can." His tone is final. "I'm taking you to the hospital. No arguing."

I don't. I'm too dizzy.

We slip out through the service corridor. Talia catches my eye, her worry obvious, but I give her a small nod. She'll handle the rest of the event. Jen is sitting with Raj and Ava, laughing at something Raj said. She walks over, offering to come with us but I know Raj is enjoying his conversation with her far too much. I insist she enjoy the rest of the event.

At the hospital, everything moves fast. Blood is drawn. Blood pressure taken. Questions and more questions. Sean waits outside while I sit, feeling fragile in a way I haven't since Eric was born.

The doctor returns with a kind smile and a clipboard.

“Ms. Sinclair,” she says. “You’re pregnant. About six weeks.”

The words flatten me. I blink.

“Pregnant?”

She nods. “Would you like me to send in your partner?”

Partner. The word makes my throat tighten. I nod.

The second she leaves, I feel the walls close in. Six weeks. The gala. The night everything changed.

Sean comes in, worry etched into every line of his face. I can’t even speak. I just look at him.

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“What is it? Are you okay?”

“I’m pregnant,” I say.

His eyes widen and then soften.

“You’re pregnant,” he echoes. The way his voice changes with wonder softening every word makes my breath catch. “Our baby?”

I nod, already bracing for him to bolt. To back away.

My throat tightens. “I didn’t plan this. I don’t expect anything. If this is too much?—”

Sean silences me with his hand on mine.

“Wren.” His voice breaks a little. “Tonight I told you I love you. Why would it change now? Why would I leave? This doesn’t scare me. It makes me more sure. It grounds me. I want this. I want us.”

I shake my head, overwhelmed. “But we’re still figuring us out.”

“We’ll figure it out together.”

He kneels in front of me, hands cradling mine.

“I want you. I want Eric. I want this baby. I want a life that doesn’t end when the job does.”

“I love you,” I whisper. “I didn’t expect any of this but I love you. Even when I didn’t want to. Even when I was afraid.”

I sob. He gathers me close. His arms are strong and steady, and he holds me like he’s never letting go.

He murmurs into my hair, “This is real. This is everything.”

In his arms, beneath harsh hospital lights, for the first time in a long, long time, everything feels just right.

## EPILOGUE

### WREN

The late California sun hangs low in the sky, casting long golden shadows across the lemon orchard. The orchard smells like summer—sweet, tart, alive.

I lean into Eric as we walk along the narrow path between the trees. My dress sways as a breeze rushes past, and I catch his eyes flickering to my six months baby bump.

Up ahead, Eric darts between rows of trees, his laughter breaking through the quiet as he chases after butterflies.

“Careful, buddy!” Sean calls out. “Don’t go too far.”

“I won’t!” Eric shouts over his shoulder, already off chasing another one.

“He listens to you more than he listens to me these days.”

“That’s because I’m still the novelty,” he says with a soft laugh. “Wait until I’m the

one nagging him about cleaning his room every day.”

His tone is light, but the casual way he talks about our future still makes my chest ache in the best way. After so many years of people walking out or slipping through my fingers, his steadiness feels like a miracle I don’t fully know how to hold. But I’m learning.

We reach a small clearing where a wooden bench rests beneath the shade of a gnarled lemon tree. I remember the real estate agent saying this tree is over fifty years old. When Sean asked for my opinion in buying the property, I told him everything about the house calls to me.

“Want to sit for a minute?” Sean asks, noticing my breath catching.

I nod and lower myself onto the bench. I expect him to sit beside me, but instead, he stays standing. He steps in front of me, and that’s when I notice the shift. Something’s coming.

“I love this view,” I say, looking out toward the hills rolling toward the ocean. “This house is breathtaking. I can’t believe it’s yours now.”

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“About that,” he says. His voice has a nervous edge I don’t hear often. “This is not just my house, Wren. It’s ours.”

My pulse quickens as he reaches into his pocket and then, to my absolute shock, drops to one knee in front of me. My hand flies to my belly.

“Sean?”

“I had a whole speech prepared,” he says, voice rough. “About how you changed everything for me. How I didn’t think I’d ever feel this way again. How you and Eric reminded me of pieces of myself I thought I’d lost for good.”

He opens his palm. It’s not a ring box. It’s something delicate and gold—a pendant in the shape of a lemon. Small. Perfect.

“But it’s pretty simple. I love you, Wren. I love your fire and your patience. I love how you fight for what you believe in. I love watching you with Eric. I love that you don’t need me to protect you but you let me anyway.”

Tears are streaming down my face before I can stop them.

“Wren, I want to be your husband.” He lifts the pendant. “Will you marry me?”

I let out a teary laugh as I touch the little lemon charm. “A lemon instead of a diamond? You really do know me.”

He raises his eyebrows, waiting.

“Yes,” I breathe. “Of course, yes. Yes, I’ll marry you, Sean Langston!”

His whole face transforms with his smile as he stands and helps me up. He fastens the necklace around my neck with a tenderness that undoes me.

“I have a ring too,” he says, pulling a small box from his other pocket. “But this felt more... us.”

Inside the box is a cushion-cut diamond set in yellow gold. Understated and timeless just like I prefer. He slips it onto my finger, and I slide my arms around his neck.

“I never thought I’d say this,” I whisper into his ear, “but you’re the softest bodyguard I’ve ever met.”

He laughs, holding me close. “Many people would disagree.”

“Many people don’t know you like I do.”

I pull back and look at him, warmth spreading through my chest. This man who once showed up at my door with a job to do, and who’s now my home.

“Mom! Uncle Sean! Look what I found!”

Eric runs toward us, his hands cupped.

Sean keeps one arm around me as we both turn to look. Eric opens his hands slowly, revealing a perfect butterfly. Its wings flutter like it’s catching its breath.

“It’s beautiful,” I say in a soft voice. “But you should let it go, sweetheart. It needs to be free.”

Eric nods like he understands. He raises his hands and gently blows on the butterfly. We all watch it spiral into the golden light, rising higher and higher.

Something about the moment knocks the wind out of me. Eric's joy. The butterfly. The way Sean's hand is steady at my back.

I lean into him. "When I was little... in foster care," I say, "I used to say a kind of prayer every night before bed. I'd close my eyes and ask for two things. Love and luxury."

"I thought if I could build something valuable enough, make enough money, I could for once feel safe. I didn't realize... I was always chasing the wrong thing."

Sean plucks a lemon from a low-hanging branch and hands it to me. It's cool and firm in my palm.

"Who knew a fruit would be the way in?" he murmurs.

I laugh, a real, unguarded laugh. The kind that shakes something loose inside.

"Lemons, love, and luxury," he says, brushing a finger across the charm now resting against my collarbone. "You got all three."

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I nod, still smiling through my tears. “Maybe I’ll write a memoir someday. Use that as the title.”

“I’d read it,” he says, pressing a kiss to my temple. “But your story’s not over yet.”

“No,” I whisper, watching Eric chase another butterfly through the orchard, his curls bouncing in the sunlight. I feel the soft flutter of movement in my belly—our daughter. I glance down at the ring on my finger. The lemon pendant. The broad-shouldered man at my side.

“It’s just beginning.”

Above us, the lemon tree’s branches sway to the rhythm of the breeze, scattering golden light across our skin. The sun dips toward the horizon, turning the sky rose and gold and endless.

Once, I thought happiness was something reserved for other people. People with mothers who stayed, and fathers who called, and childhoods that didn’t leave scars. But Sean’s arm is solid around me. Eric’s laughter fills the air. And the butterfly my son set free dances upward on the wind.

Free. Happy.

Just like me.