

CRUEL TRUTHS

**A Grumpy Boss – Enemies to Lovers
Romance**

T. Christensen

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

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Pinterest Board Message

When I start a manuscript, I create a Pinterest board and pin various items (outfits, cars, rooms, etc...) that I use for inspiration. What follows is my Pinterest page information for the ***Cruel Truths Board***.



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Thank you for reading Cruel Truths!

Chapter One

I'd been sitting in this chair at Kingsley Marketing for the last twenty minutes, and the tension in the room was closing in around me. The typical pre-interview butterflies had gradually stopped fluttering and dropped like rocks into the pit of my gut. I remained motionless in the white modern-retro armchair, but my eyes were in constant motion.

I thought I had escaped the desperation I was witnessing in this New York skyscraper waiting room. Growing up in the inner city of San Jose, I had learned to read a room to avoid the dangers of saying or doing the wrong thing. Right now, my gut was riding me hard to leave, but I forced myself to remain still and unnoticed. Opportunities to work my way into the fashion industry were few and far between.

"Where's the last place you had it?" the twentysomething man whispered caustically while his eyes bounced to every surface in the room.

"I thought it was in my file with the other active projects. And I swear I put the electronic file in the shared drive project folder," the fiftysomething lady whispered back with a tremor. It was the receptionist that had asked my name and absentmindedly told me to take a seat.

All I could be thankful for at this point was that I'd worn my dressiest outfit because everyone here was dressed as if this was a Fortune 500 company. Oh wait, it was. I'd gone with a black blazer over my all-purpose black leggings to dress the outfit up. It also hid the fact that my white collared shirt was soaked from the stress surrounding me.

The sound of a door opening down the hall made them both freeze. The off-white marble floor created an echo effect in the hallway with every footstep. Their faces filled with fear, as if the mythological Kraken had been released. The guy uttered, "I'm out of here" and fled out the door I'd come through.

The lady's wide-eyed gaze locked on the hallway as she pushed her straight ash-blond hair behind her ear and braced herself. My chair was positioned so I couldn't see down the hall

where the ominous footsteps were coming from. But I swore I could smell fear as the mysterious person got closer.

“Mrs. Roberts, I need the Coppers Coffee file. Now.”

I sucked in a quiet, steady breath, reminding myself I was not the focus of that cold, unrelenting stare. Now I understood the frantic, unnerved atmosphere. I’d faced a lot of gangbangers trying to intimidate me, and this guy was on the list of people I would not want to encounter.

The guy commanding the room didn’t look like a gang member. In fact, he looked like he could be a slightly older version of a Hugo Boss model, but this was no playboy.

He had to be over six feet tall, and his solid frame filled his immaculately tailored suit to perfection. His dark brown hair had just enough natural highlights to make it interesting to look at, even though I would consider it a longer version of a military crew cut.

He had dark and handsome down pat, but the implacable stare was unnerving.

“I, uh, well.” Mrs. Roberts cleared her throat and looked down at her desk. “I’m still...” She bit her lip before whispering, “...looking for it.”

The man’s face tightened, which showcased his sculpted jaw. I got the feeling he was doing his best to keep his cool but failing miserably. When his jaw started ticking, Mrs. Roberts’s face drained of color. The air was so thick it was suffocating me, and I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Did you search in File Explorer?” I wanted to slap a hand over my mouth as soon as the words came out, but it was too late.

Eyes so dark I wasn’t even sure they had any color tore over to mine and his eyebrows slashed into a ‘V.’ Now I was the object of the brewing storm and my breath seemed to be trapped in my lungs.

Without taking his scrutiny off me, he snapped, “Who is *this*, Mrs. Roberts?”

I sat up straight at his condescending tone. I didn’t enjoy being the focus of his unnerving scrutiny, but I refused to be disrespected.

“I’m here for an interview that was supposed to start fifteen minutes ago.”

I boldly held his narrowed eyes like my body wasn't bracing itself for a flight-or-fight response. It took all my fortitude to not look away and be the first to break the unspoken challenge. I'd learned early in life that if you backed down from a bully, they would never leave you alone.

He didn't break our stare-off, but I felt like I had won when he broke the silence. Until what he said next sunk in.

"Mrs. Roberts, tell *Ms. Lindy Garcia* who I am."

How did he know my name? Unless . . .

My stomach bottomed out, and I closed my eyes. It felt like I was going to upheave all the rocks that had settled there. There was only one reason he would have known my name.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Kingsley. I forgot to tell you she was here," Mrs. Roberts rushed out in apology. The air was so stagnant I swore I heard her swallow.

Shit! This *was* the man I was supposed to interview with. The man who needed a personal assistant. The man I'd been determined to win over with my outgoing personality.

I loved people, and I had no problem connecting with them, but I couldn't imagine a worse scenario than I'd inserted myself into here. There was no going back now. I'd have to brazen this out.

Working as a manager at Whitney's clothing store was no longer a reason for me to stay in New York and struggle to live month to month. I could do the same job in San Jose where my family was. To justify staying, I needed to take the next step in my career. When I'd read the job description for this position, I thought it was a sign for me to stay in New York.

Trying to block the intensity that I could still feel focused on me, I went through my options. My nature was to stand up, look this jerk in the face, and tell him he was being an asshole. It galled me to swallow my pride, but I had promised myself and my family I would get my foot in the door no matter what.

I raised my chin, opened my eyes, and promptly lost my train of thought. An expectant gleam met my gaze. It was like he knew I was getting ready to grovel, and he was clamoring to hear it.

When the silence stretched between us, one of his eyebrows shot up. He was being an ass, and my resolve to apologize

withered away. I wouldn't beg and grovel. That wasn't me. It would never be me.

The door by my chair opened, and as soon as his eyes swung to the newcomer, I sagged. In the next breath, I was angry at myself for feeling relieved.

"Mr. Kingsley, our meeting for the coffee campaign is at 2:00. When are we going to review the file?"

This was the type of man I'd been expecting to interview with. He was the typical executive I'd seen walking the streets. His suit was a good quality, but it didn't have the same expert tailoring, and it didn't do a good job of concealing that he was out of shape. His thinning silver hair was as unkempt as the loosened tie around his neck.

"Harry, as soon as Mrs. Roberts finds the lost file, we'll review it."

Harry's eyes bulged. "What?" Then he recovered with a hopeful, "Just print out a new one?"

Mrs. Roberts joined the conversation hesitantly. "I was going to do that, but I, ah, I can't seem to find it on the shared drive."

The room once again fell silent. All eyes turned to Mr. Kingsley.

Mrs. Roberts started to babble. "I'm so sorry, Harry. I-I-I'll keep looking, and . . ."

I felt bad as she trailed off, but I wouldn't insert myself again.

"Mrs. Roberts, instead of talking, start looking." Mr. Kingsley's voice was like a whip.

She jumped up and scrambled to the set of filing cabinets behind her desk.

"Ms. Garcia."

I pulled my eyes from Mrs. Roberts's fumbling motions toward the deep voice demanding my attention. My nerves were taut, but like I'd done a hundred times in high school, I made sure my face was blank and my voice betrayed nothing of my inner turmoil.

"Yes?"

I couldn't get myself to address him as Mr. Kingsley. It was a sign of respect he hadn't earned from me.

He gestured toward the computer on Mrs. Roberts's desk. "Do the File Explorer search."

It hadn't been a request, and I didn't do well with being told what to do. I bit my cheek to suppress the urge to tell him to *ask nicely*. I stood up and ignored the clawing at my insides.

As I walked closer to the looming computer, all my nerves converged into one big knot. But there was no way in hell I was going to let *him* know that. I wouldn't admit defeat until I'd tried everything I knew to find the file.

After saying a quick prayer, I wiggled the mouse. The computer came to life and luckily there was a familiar toolbar at the bottom of the screen. I clicked on the yellow folder.

"You said the file name was Copper Coffee?" I asked while typing in the search bar.

"Yes." The answer came from Harry, who was walking toward me while elaborating. "There should be a folder with the name and project number."

I inputted *Copper* and nothing came up. I tried *Coffee* and still no results.

"No luck, Ms. Garcia?"

Of course the sardonic question came from Mr. Asshole, who was standing across the room. I was more determined than ever to do this.

I looked up long enough to say with a false sweetness, "Nothing yet, Mr. Kingsley, but you never give up on the first try."

It felt like my heart was trying to beat out of my chest after my third attempt at different word combinations and I still couldn't find the file. I sat staring at the screen and trying to think through my anxiety when that irritating drawl was once again directed at me.

"How about now, Ms. Garcia? Are you ready to admit you can't find it?"

My blood pressure soared and my temper hung on by a thread. There was no way I was admitting to anything, and then it came to me.

"What's the project number?"

I directed my question at Mrs. Roberts, purposefully ignoring the looming presence determined to make me surrender.

She fumbled around and gave me the number, and I found the file. I resisted the urge to jump up and say something snotty. I settled for turning to Mr. Asshole and gesturing to the screen.

“Is this what you were looking for?”

With my smirk in place, I looked at Mr. Kingsley expectantly, waiting for him to acknowledge my success. It was Mrs. Roberts who leaned over my shoulder and gushed, “That’s it! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Harry, you and Mrs. Roberts get what we need for the meeting. Ms. Garcia, follow me.”

I stepped back to allow them to be in front of the computer. My moment of triumph was squashed as Mr. Asshole strode down the hall he’d come from.

I hadn’t even gotten a thank-you from the man who’d thrown down a challenge and expected me to fail. My feet itched to leave, just to show Mr. Asshole I wasn’t a mindless minion who would do whatever he said.

Instead, I sucked it up and followed him. This job, what little chance I had of getting it, was still an opportunity. I couldn’t just throw it away.

I attempted to regain my equilibrium while following Mr. Kingsley’s footsteps. I needed to calm down, but I wasn’t going to take his crap either.

Pausing a couple of steps in front of the office he’d gone into, I closed my eyes and pictured Jordis, my adorable, feisty niece in San Jose. With one more deep breath, I entered the lion’s den.

“Close the door.”

My irritation immediately bubbled back to life. It was the same flat, demanding tone as before, but this time he wasn’t even looking at me. The fact that he stared intently at his computer screen, like I was a nuisance, got under my skin.

After pushing the door shut a little harder than necessary, I stood in front of his teak desk. The same teak that matched Mrs. Roberts’s desk and the other teak accents throughout the floor of Kingsley Marketing. Despite its sleek table-like appearance, the two thick, solid pedestals holding it up declared it a masculine desk.

I continued to stand while I waited for Mr. Kingsley to look up from the computer. The teak matched the grain in the marble flooring. I looked to the bookshelves and cabinets behind his desk, but I didn’t allow my gaze to wander farther. When I’d walked in, I saw a seating arrangement, and I thought a bar farther back in

this huge office, but I didn't let myself satisfy my curiosity. I didn't want him to look up and catch me gawking at his opulent office.

I was a little overwhelmed by the lavishness of the entire office building, but I didn't want him to know that. I kept standing to force him to acknowledge me like a civil human being and focused on his hand manipulating the mouse. It was a slightly deeper bronze than his teak desk.

"Sit down." When he made the monotone demand while not even looking at me, I was stirred out of my musings.

I smashed my lips together and stared down at his profile. After several thumps of my heart, Mr. Asshole lifted his head and raised his eyebrow. I parroted his action.

"Is there a reason you didn't do as I asked?"

My hand fluttered to my chest. "Oh, were you speaking to me?"

"Is there anyone else in the room?"

With a falsetto voice I'd never heard come from me, I informed him, "Well, I was taught to look at a person when I was talking to them. I thought you needed a moment to finish whatever was occupying your attention on the computer."

I plastered a smile on my face. The smile became genuine when his eyes flashed and his jaw flexed. Finally, a sign that what I was saying was getting through to him.

The more the silence dragged on, the tougher it was to keep my smile, but it would take the fire alarms sounding to make it disappear.

"Sit."

Cold, shuttered eyes dared me to disobey him. Having proven my point, I sat on the edge of my seat, hands folded, and tried to appear attentive. I pretended I wasn't aware of the staredown we were currently engaged in. With a prim smile, I ignored my coiled muscles that were ready to escape through his office door, down forty floors, and out the front door to breathe some tension-free air.

This game of chicken was not me, but I was determined to see it until the end. Either I was going to eventually impress him, or he was going to kick me out.

Between the dark *don't mess with me* vibe coming from behind the desk and my impatience, my breathing slowly became more constricted.

What seemed like three hours later, Mr. Asshole leaned back in his leather steel-trimmed chair and steeped his hands.

"You can sit and not talk. I have to say I'm surprised."

I slammed my lips together, and as soon as he flicked his gaze down to them, my stomach twisted. The look lasted only seconds, but even when he looked back at my eyes, my lips thrummed.

The new silence was excruciating for an entirely different reason. The awareness of him was more disconcerting than anything else that had happened.

Luckily, when he spoke again, it was with the same droll tone that raised my hackles.

"I'm assuming you have some knowledge of the fashion industry since that was one of the required qualifications?"

Apparently, we were actually doing the interview now.

"Yes, I've worked as a manager at Whitney's for the last year, and. . ."

"Isn't Whitney's a national chain most prevalent in malls?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Do you know the Carrington Couture brand?"

If I could have breathed fire, I would have done it right now. This man was a pompous asshole. I put my hands under my legs to prevent myself from reaching over and choking him.

"Well, Ms. Garcia?"

The brow raised, and I lost my cool.

"Well, Mr. Kingsley, if you would let me finish a sentence, I would have told you I have a degree in apparel merchandising, and I'm well versed in the Carrington brand."

I waited a heartbeat to see if he would interject anything. Luckily, for the sake of his health, Mr. Asshole's emotionless stare remained steady on me, but he didn't interrupt.

"Adelle Carrington Kingsley started the high-end brand for the elite women of New York. She grew up as a socialite and accidentally fell into the business. She made some alterations for her friends that turned into making dresses, which then morphed into a business empire. It started with formal gowns. Through the years it went from. . ."

“Enough, Ms. Garcia.”

I opened my mouth to tell him off, but he kept talking, effectively shutting me up.

“I’m on the board of Carrington Couture. I need someone with an understanding of the fashion industry to help me with that work.”

Holy shit! Working with Carrington Couture would be a dream come true. This interview took a new turn for me. I loved Adelle Kingsley. She’d had to fight tooth and nail to get what she wanted. No one had taken the spoiled socialite seriously, but she’d proved everyone wrong.

“The job is as my personal assistant. You’re always on call. There are no set duties. Which means you will do *whatever* I want you to do.”

A hundred thoughts ran through my head. I didn’t know what to address first. I didn’t like the emphasis he’d placed on whatever. What did that mean, exactly? Why was he telling me all of this? Was he offering me the job? No. That couldn’t be right. I think I’d broken every rule there was about interviewing.

I felt like I was in the middle of the street with a car’s headlights blinding me. I should say something, but I wasn’t sure what.

“This is where you talk, Ms. Garcia,” Mr. Asshole said dryly.

“What do you mean, whatever you want?”

And then with hardly a breath, I continued. “Did you just offer me the job? Are there benefits? What is the pay? Is my working space by you?”

His eyebrows flew to the top of his head. It was the most expression he’d shown since I’d arrived. However, he responded in the same condescending tone as before.

“Whatever I want means just that. You could be going through Carrington Couture files, running to get me a sandwich, responding to e-mails for Kingsley Marketing, or picking up my dry cleaning. Whatever I need done.”

I replayed his words and bopped my head up and down.

“Are you going to accept the position?”

“Yes.”

I reared my head back after I spoke. Wait, did I just say yes? What was I thinking? Oh, he'd just dazzled me with the mention of Carrington Couture and Adelle Kingsley.

I finally connected the dots.

"Are *you* Adelle's son?"

This dispassionate, condescending man was nothing like the vibrant, caring woman who'd been at the top of the fashion industry for years.

"Does it matter?"

"Well, no, but she's . . . and you're so . . ."

I waved my hand toward him and then trailed off when I finally tuned back into what I was saying and how it was being received. His face was no longer impassive. It looked like it was carved from stone and his eyes were like ice.

"You will not speak of *her* unless it is business related. Do you understand?"

Mr. Asshole didn't move as his eyes drilled me into my chair, waiting for my answer. My gut tightened. Antagonizing this man any further would've been a mistake.

"Yes," I answered calmly with no attitude.

Like a magic wand had been waved, the danger that had wrapped around me dissipated. I slowly released my suspended breath when he went back to staring at his screen. It got caught in my throat when he informed me, "I'll see you in two weeks at 8:00 a.m."

Chapter Two

As I rode the subway back home, it slowly sank in that I had gotten a job that was inching me closer to my dream job of working for a fashion house. I would be working for a man I'd dubbed Mr. Asshole, but I wouldn't let that deter me from my excitement.

I burst through my apartment door, dying to share my news. I quickly scanned the living room and saw no sign of Sloane. Our apartment complex was built before open concept was all the rage, so I yelled, hoping she was in the closed-off kitchen or her room.

"Sloane! Guess what? Sloane!"

My voice echoed back to me off the maple laminate floors and white walls. I deflated when the stillness of our one-bedroom apartment sank in. My roommate wasn't here. I made my way to the kitchen, and there was a sticky note on the half-sized refrigerator.

Went to a tryout.

Sloane

I was bummed there wasn't anyone to celebrate with, but it wasn't unexpected. Sloane was a dancer, and when she didn't have a gig, she was a server. Sharing the apartment worked out well for us. I had a day job, so when I was here at night, she was at work.

The apartment was decent by New York standards. It was smaller than the one I'd had growing up in San Jose, but there had also been four people living in my childhood apartment. Instead of three bedrooms, this one only had one bedroom with a walk-in closet. The closet was my bedroom. It fit a twin bed, and the shelves were perfect for all my stuff.

I wouldn't have been able to afford this apartment by myself. Sloane's parents had helped her with the rent before I came along. Even half the rent stretched my budget, but it was worth not having to live in a drug-infested, crime-riddled part of the city.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Tessa's number, bouncing up and down on our well-loved brown sofa, which was really the only

splash of color in the apartment. The décor hadn't changed from when it was just Sloane living here. There were black-and-white store pictures on the walls and frames of snapshots from various points of Sloane's dancing career. My pictures were in my *room*.

Finally, Tessa answered her phone with a soft, "Hello."

"Guess what?"

"You got the job?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes!" I jumped up from the sofa and started circling it. "I'm now Cade Kingsley's personal assistant. He's an ass, but he's the son of Adelle Kingsley. Adelle Kingsley, Tessa! This is the woman I did my final paper on in college. She's amazing. She didn't let anyone's perception of her deter her from becoming a force in fashion."

"I knew you would get it! When do you start?"

"In two weeks. I'm giving my notice to Whitney's today."

I sunk back onto the couch and threw my arm over my eyes when the realization hit me. I didn't know what my salary would be.

I bit my lip and admitted, "I'm not sure what my salary will be, but I'll keep sending money."

And I would, even if I'd be making less. I'd figure it out.

"Lindy, you don't need to send money. This is your dream. You worry about you. Don't worry about us."

Tessa Parker, for all intents and purposes, was my sister, and the most selfless person I knew. I felt like a bitter old woman next to her. Considering what she'd been through, giving up her dream job and still living in the apartment where we grew up, it was amazing she was still so open and giving.

"You're family, Tessa. Your mom can't work, and you're the sole provider for her and Jordis. I know my mom helps, but I need to do this. And remember, we always look after each other. Always." I fiercely repeated the mantra our moms had drilled into our heads growing up.

There was a long pause, and I could hear her moving. Tessa worked part-time at a children's advocacy agency, and her workspace was a typical cubicle. Her degree was in teaching, but she couldn't take care of her mom and daughter while working full-time.

Instead, Tessa worked part-time at night. She still got to work with kids, but it was one-on-one instead of in a classroom. My mom still cleaned houses during the day, but at night she looked after Jordis, Tessa's daughter, and did anything Jessica, Tessa's mom, couldn't.

Every time I talked to my family, I felt guilty. I'd moved across the country to chase my dream. I was never there to help. It was like I was the weak link in our family chain.

When I heard what I assumed was a door closing, Tessa said firmly, "Your mom helps, and when my mom can, she does as well. We are *fine*. You live your life. Move out of the closet and get something for yourself."

My chest tightened. "I'm not moving out of my perfectly fine closet while you're still sleeping in the same bed in the same bedroom we grew up in. Only instead of sharing it with me, you're sharing it with your two-year-old daughter."

Another pause.

"Lindy, I made *my* choices. I chose to have Jordis. I chose to not tell her father. These were my choices, not yours. It's enough that I know I can talk to you whenever I need to. I don't want you to pay for my choices. I would never forgive myself."

Tessa's voice wobbled at the end, and I had to draw in a breath and be firm. "It was not your choice for your mom to get ill. You're only working part-time so you can care for her. She doesn't have any benefits and you're paying her medical bills. You're making a choice to be with our family and care for them, and I'm not."

"You listen to me, Lindy. I will never forgive you if you give up on your dream. And you know your mom would kill you. Come home when you've accomplished what you set out to do."

I would be miserable in San Jose knowing I'd given up on my dream, but the rest of my family was there and struggling. On the other hand, if I worked hard and fulfilled my dream of working in a fashion house, my salary would increase and then I would be an even bigger help.

"Okay, okay. But promise me you'll call if you need me?"

"You know I will."

As soon as I hung up with Tessa, I texted Sloane. She usually had downtime as the tryouts progressed.

L: I got the job! We're going out tonight.

The bubbles appeared moments after I hit send.

S: YES!! Party!

There was nothing like going out in New York City. And the hottest club was Transformation. It was always fresh and new because it got reinvented at least once a year.

I was still on an adrenaline high even after I called my regional manager to resign. To burn some of the excitement that was threatening to explode from me, I did some cleaning, took a shower, and did my hair and makeup. I was still having a hard time sitting still when our front door finally opened.

Sloane threw her bags to the floor just inside the door, and I sprang up from the couch. We both squealed as we raced to meet and threw our arms around each other.

“Congrats, Lindy! I knew you would kick ass.”

“Thanks, chica! How did your audition go?”

Sloane's face lit up. “I got a callback for next week!”

I threw my arms back around her and we sprung up and down like we'd just won the lottery. I pulled back and told her, “We're shutting Transformation down tonight! We need to get there by 10:00 to avoid the cover charge, so get a move on!”

While Sloane was in the bathroom, I changed into a clubbing outfit. I didn't feel hungry, but I still snacked on some cheese and crackers. I'd regret not eating as soon as I'd had a couple of cocktails.

When she came out of the bedroom and strutted toward me in her nude heels and a formfitting two-piece red outfit, my jaw dropped.

With her toned dancer's body, Sloane always looked amazing, but tonight she had brought out all the stops. Her natural blond waves were up in a sophisticated messy bun with curling strands framing her heart-shaped face. Her catlike, sunny-blue eyes popped and drew you in.

I whistled. “Damn, Sloane, you look even more amazing than usual!”

She popped a hip. “I've been saving this outfit for a special occasion. Do you like?”

The fire-engine red top had spaghetti straps that fastened around her neck, and the rest of it was like a bustier that lifted and

pushed the girls out. The matching high-waisted miniskirt started after a brief glimpse of her stomach.

“We won’t be buying any drinks tonight!” I declared.

Sloane laughed and nodded. “You’re going to be helping our cause. That outfit always kills it.”

I ran my hands down my all-black multipurpose outfit. With a few modifications, I could wear it for work or a night out. Since Sloane’s parents helped her with money, she had more leeway on discretionary spending. Me on the other hand, I was completely on my own, so I needed to pinch pennies wherever I could.

My black leggings, the same ones I’d worn to my interview, were more than I would usually spend. But I wore them all the time and they had been more than worth their pricy investment. It was the same with the black tube top I was wearing. It had a sweetheart neckline and hugged everything while highlighting all my curves. During the day I rolled it down so it covered my torso and threw a jacket or cardigan over the outfit to make it more conservative.

My chestnut locks hung down my back. Tonight, I’d taken the time to put some waves in my hair. The front half was up in a loose, messy bun.

Last but not least, I was wearing my well-loved pair of black ankle-strap pumps. When you were 5’4” you’d do anything you could to at least be average height. I’d found these babies at a secondhand store, and I wore them with everything.

We grabbed our credit cards and phones and headed out at 9:15. It was still early by New York club rules, but we needed to be there by 10:00 to avoid the cover charge. There was still a line when we arrived, but luckily Sloane knew the bouncer, which meant we got to go in without waiting.

As soon as we cleared the door, we were in another world. The stairway heading down to the club was lit with neon purple. When we reached the bottom, I stopped and took a moment to absorb it all. Purple was the theme throughout and gave off a dark and mysterious vibe, especially against the black wall backdrop. It gave me the urge to dance with an edge of sexy. I’d always loved a good party, and Transformation never disappointed.

Everyone was here to let loose and give themselves a brief pause from real life. I’d come for all of that and to flirt. I loved

flirting, even though it was all superficial. I still enjoyed the looks of appreciation and the sexy banter.

Sloane was already searching the U-shaped seating areas that lined the wall and faced the dance floor for the best-looking group of guys. Illuminated white coffee tables shone like a beacon in the middle of the low-lit basement club. The booths surrounding the lit tables were also white and low, so you could see everyone over the top. The same purple that lit up the stairwell shone from under the booth, giving the same vibe everywhere in the club.

Sloane and I were made for each other. Neither of us squandered an opportunity to let our hair down and have a good time. Where we differed was that I wouldn't be taking a guy home or going to his place. Sloane was all about getting the big 'O' to work off her stress. Dancing and flirting were enough for me. And as much as I was reluctant to admit it, I always heard my mom in my ear.

Carino, always enjoy yourself, but remember, boys and girls are different creatures. Boys fall in love with what they see and girls fall in love with what they hear. They will say anything to sleep with you. Value yourself more than they do.

I wasn't a virgin, but I'd only slept with one guy, and I didn't have an orgasm. I didn't regret it, but I was of the opinion that the sex hype was overrated. Even the guys I'd kissed hadn't given me the overwhelming urge to have sex again.

I'd thought we were heading toward a relationship, but I was wrong. In the end, my mom was right. As soon as we slept together, the dating stopped. Now, I was all about dancing and flirting. And I always made it clear that nothing else would be happening.

Ten minutes later, a trio of guys we'd joined bought us drinks, and we were all on the dance floor. Sloane and I were playing it up, letting the guys take turns grinding up behind us. We must have danced for a half hour before I felt eyes on me.

Nonchalantly, I looked around while still feeling the beat, but I couldn't see anyone. After dancing farther into the crowd, I couldn't shake the feeling I was being tracked. The stress I'd lost from dancing came back in full force.

Never ignore your instincts. Always trust them, Lindy. My mom's words swirled in my head.

After scanning the area, I still didn't see anyone focused on me, and I felt like I was being paranoid. Who would be intent on watching just me in this packed club? But the hairs on the back of my neck were demanding I act.

I leaned into Sloane's ear and yelled, "I'm going to get a drink and take a breather."

She nodded, and I moved out of our circle of admirers that had closed tighter around us. I wasn't worried about Sloane. She was in her element with the attention of three guys and was reveling in the decision of who she wanted to hook up with.

Once I was clear of the packed bodies, I stopped at the edge of the dance floor. The feeling was still there, and my whole body was prickling. I made my way toward an empty seat at the bar. While I waited for the bartender to make his way toward me, I turned on my barstool, leaned my elbows against the bar, and perused my surroundings.

Immediately, the hairs on my neck stood at attention. I casually but steadily started searching through the packed club, determined to find who was focused on me. Starting close and slowly expanding outward, I was almost ready to give up, but then I looked up. The music faded away. I was caught in the vortex of Cade Kingsley. He gripped the rail of the VIP section as his focus remained steadily on me, despite the activity going on behind him.

He had the same expressionless look as he did in his office, but the intensity of his gaze had been turned up by a hundred. I took a shaky breath to try to get my discombobulated body under control.

One second my surging blood was flooding my body with heat, and in the next moment my muscles locked and I couldn't move. It was like I was in a sleep paralysis. I wanted to move, but I couldn't tear my eyes from him.

An elbow jabbed me in my side, and I was able to spin away and inhale a lungful of air to break the shackle holding me immobile. I could still feel Cade's eyes boring into me, but I refused to look. Instead, I focused on the bartender and requested a glass of water.

After I guzzled the water, I headed back to the dance floor. It was getting harder to ignore his unrelenting regard, but I refused to give in to his silent demand to look at him. I determinedly

weaved through as many people as possible before finding Sloane again on the dance floor.

A slow, sultry song started up and she attached herself to the bouncer who'd let us skip the line. The rest of our entourage had moved on, but if I let the music consume me, I could attract a partner. I started moving and closed my eyes, trying to lose myself back in the music.

Gradually, it infiltrated me, and I moved to the rhythm. It wasn't as effortless as it was before I knew his judgmental stare was tracking me. My lips tilted up when a guy came up behind me, and together we moved to the hypnotic beat.

I'd danced like this with hundreds of guys. I loved the feeling of connection. It was a heady feeling knowing my dancing attracted someone to me and we could enjoy a moment of closeness without leading to messy feelings. Tonight, I couldn't.

No matter what I did, I couldn't shake off what felt like disapproval tracking my movements, and it was pissing me off. I was being a normal twenty-four-year-old woman. He didn't get to make me feel like this. Determination entered my veins.

While still moving, I opened my eyes and glared at the last place I'd seen Mr. Asshole. He was still there and glaring down at me. There were conversations and dancing happening all around him, but he was like a statue on an island fixated on me.

I boldly stared up at him and held his narrowed eyes as I shimmied down my partner's front side with my back to him. His mouth tightened and then he flicked his eyes down to where my partner gripped my hips before slashing them back up to mine.

I brought my hands up behind my partner's neck and we swayed to the beat. Cade was still unnaturally still, but I sensed he was like a coiled spring fighting to restrain himself.

I let a smirk grace my face, and then our connection was broken when my partner turned us. The music transitioned back to a fast tempo, and we began dancing apart from each other.

Unable to resist, I looked up. When I didn't see him, I scanned the rest of the railing. When I still didn't see him, I deflated. Then I lectured myself to forget about him and not let him ruin the rest of my night.

Several minutes later, my partner left to mingle through the dancing throng, and I became irritated at everything around me,

including myself. Suddenly the music was too loud, and all the bodies brushing up against mine were annoying. This night was done. I made my way to the bathrooms and refreshed myself with some cool water. It was only midnight, but the magic was gone. I wanted to be in my bed.

I texted Sloane, letting her know I was headed home.

Chapter Three

I stared up at the cold, intimidating skyscraper and took my hundredth deep breath since I'd been stuck in this spot. Everyone was nervous on their first day. But not everyone's new boss saw them in a club drinking, grinding on men, and being defiant. My blood still heated and thumped through me when I started thinking about our strange encounter.

My head fell back to the sun and I closed my eyes. If I didn't push through my nerves every time I felt uncomfortable, I'd still be in the inner city as some gangbanger's piece. Entering this office building couldn't be as bad as my first day of high school. Seeing students go through metal detectors and pat downs was soul-crushing.

Determined not to waste this opportunity, I flicked my eyes open, raised my chin, and threw my shoulders back. I walked through the doors to join the rest of the coffee-laden people waiting for the elevator while scrolling through their phones.

Mrs. Roberts greeted me as soon as I walked into the executive offices' reception area. I noted her curve-hugging black dress and prayed she didn't notice I was wearing the same white button-down from my interview. I'd covered it with a black crewneck sweater, so it had a fresh look. At least I didn't wear my leggings. Instead, I wore my wide-leg black trousers.

"Lindy. I hope it's okay to call you that. I'm so happy to see you."

"Thank you . . ." It seemed weird to call her Mrs. Roberts, but I didn't remember if I'd ever heard her first name. Luckily, she laughed and filled in the blank.

"It's Melanie. Our initial meeting was anything but typical, but you were a lifesaver. Come with me. I'll show you your office."

"I get an office?"

"Yes," she said with a small smile, walking down the hall and opening a door. I bit my cheek, trying to not act like a two-year-old who'd just gotten a new balloon.

As a clothes store manager in a mall, my computer had sat on a table in the stockroom. This was an actual room with four walls. It was small, maybe ten square feet, but everything in it was mine.

The same marble flooring that ran throughout the floor formed a border on the outside of my office. There was a rich jewel, citrine-colored carpet inset underneath my desk and guest chair. The desk was teak, which again kept with the theme of the entire floor, but it was like a writing desk with drawers on one side. It was the perfect scale for the smaller office.

“That door connects to Mr. Kingsley’s office.”

My eyes followed Melanie’s arm to the door I’d missed. Even that news couldn’t dim my lightened mood. Until the door opened and all the joy was sucked out of the room.

Mr. Ass— No. I’d promised myself he would get a fresh slate. Mr. Kingsley’s sharp eyes drilled into mine. “You’re here. Let’s get started.”

He swiveled his attention to Melanie, who jerked into action.

“I’ll go back to my desk.” Her tone was subdued. “Let me know if you need anything.”

As soon as the door shut, Mr. Kingsley strode through the open door connecting our offices. I swallowed down the urge to sarcastically mutter, *Good morning and welcome to the company.*

I’d done some googling the past two weeks about Kingsley Marketing. The more I searched, the more I realized landing this job was a blessing. Cade’s father had started Kingsley Marketing, but Cade was the one who’d grown it into one of the top ten in the world.

Neither one of our two meetings had started out on the best foot—in a crisis situation and in a club—so I was determined to put those out of my head and suck every piece of knowledge from Cade Kingsley.

I would’ve been happy working in the fashion industry, but my ultimate goal was to design clothes. If I had my own line, I would need every bit of marketing knowledge to make it a success.

“We’ll always start the day with you giving me an update on my calendar.” He talked as he turned and walked through the connecting door.

Shit, he literally meant to start work right now. I threw my cross-body purse on the sole guest chair in front of my desk.

Thankfully, there was a pen and pad of paper sitting on top of my desk that I quickly grabbed, and I scrambled into his office.

Mr. Asshole—well, that resolve didn't last long—was sitting behind his desk. His annoyance was clear as he watched me walk briskly to one of the two chairs in front of his desk. I'd barely sat down when his decrees started.

"You have access to my calendar that has both personal and business appointments. Your top priority is to manage it. I expect all the relevant files attached to my appointments *before* I arrive in the morning. If there are any changes throughout the day, I expect a text."

I clenched my jaw as I tightened my grip on the pen. He was talking to me like I was an idiot. It was my first day. It wasn't like I'd been here for months and I kept screwing up. During the last two weeks, I'd convinced myself it was the circumstances that had made him such a dick, but I'd been wrong.

I reminded myself that I could do this for the opportunity to be exposed to New York fashion, to learn about marketing and business, and for my family.

"Ms. Garcia." I snapped back at the whip in Mr. Asshole's voice. "It's only 8:05. I hope your attention span is longer than five minutes or this won't work out."

My back went rigid, and words started spewing out. "Good morning. It's so nice to be here. Thank you for the warm welcome." I flashed him an insincere smile and continued.

"Two weeks ago, you said, *Be here at 8:00 a.m.* I was here at 7:55, shown to my office, and before I could put my purse down, you were throwing orders around. I'm *so sorry* for taking a moment to gather myself."

The air chilled, and time seemed to stop. Shit. My mouth had gotten me into as much trouble as many times as it had gotten me out of it. I held my breath as his rich brown eyes darkened.

I might have gone too far, but if I didn't stick up for myself now, he would continue to walk all over me. And no one treated me disrespectfully. Not even under the threat of losing my job.

His steady, intimidating stare made my insides constrict, and I hated it. My nerves were unraveling, and I don't have it in me to continue this silent battle. Like I hadn't just lost my temper, I

asked in a moderate voice, “What time would you like me here in the future?”

Mr. Asshole narrowed his eyes, and my heart started galloping. After a prolonged silence, during which I thought I might pass out from holding my breath, he said with cool sarcasm, “Are you ready now, Ms. Garcia?”

This time I thought before I spoke. “Yes. Thank you for asking.” I plastered a smile on my face and blinked at him.

“We’ll meet at 7:00 a.m. to go over my schedule for the day. If I have a meeting at 8:00, then I’ll be here before 7:00 to look over the file. So I expect you to manage your time accordingly.”

I groaned internally. That was one perk of a mall job. The store didn’t open until 10:00, so I never had to get up at an ungodly hour. I guess that would be changing.

“Is that going to be a problem, Ms. Garcia? I don’t want to cut into your clubbing.”

I hissed in a breath. This asshole was judging me for going to a club, drinking, and dancing? I gritted my teeth. At this rate, I wouldn’t have any molars left by the end of my first week here.

I strangled out a response. “No problem.”

