

SHARK'S EDGE EXCERPT

SHARK'S EDGE BOOK ONE

ANGEL PAYNE & VICTORIA BLUE

CHAPTER ONE

ABBI

I was hot.

Sweaty. Aching. Breathless.

Just how a girl should feel after being jolted awake in the middle of a naughty dream.

“Uhhh.” I shut off my phone’s alarm, fell back into my pillow, and glared at the time display through squinting eyelids.

Getting up at four thirty in the morning just wasn’t sane.

Wasn’t. Sane.

My screen flared to life with a text message from a sender whose profile picture was a skull-and-crossbones Chuck Taylor high-top.

Rio.

I couldn’t help but grin. My sister-in-law and right-hand woman loved to message me when she knew I should be getting up. She usually offered some bullshit reason for the predawn communiqué, but I saw right through her game. I had a terrible habit of oversleeping, and everyone in my family knew it.

Did I interrupt a good dream?

I forced my eyes open enough to tap back a reply.

As a matter of fact, yes.

I hit Send, hurled the phone into the covers, and draped the crook of my elbow over my face.

“Oh, God.”

The entirety of my dream crashed over me.

It had been another one of those dreams.

A dream in which I really had been hot and gasping, sweaty and stripped...

With Sebastian Shark.

Sebastian. Freaking. Shark.

The CEO of my catering company’s biggest account. He who sat in his penthouse high in the Los Angeles skyline, ruling his kingdom with the subtlety of a Mack Truck. He with the body of a modern-day pharaoh—and the allure of one too.

That dark, dangerous allure.

Another moan tore up my throat. *Shark*. He was the last person on the planet I should’ve been harboring these cravings for, but he was the one my subconscious refused to forget. I couldn’t ignore his hypnotic sensuality, his raw animal attraction.

If only my dream mind would listen to my awake mind.

Sebastian Shark liked the fact that he shared his name with a predator, and he made damn sure the entire world knew it, each and every day. And today would be no different.

“No different,” I repeated to ensure my psyche got the message—and to prepare myself for the ordeal.

And yes, that was the right word. Though I was only going to be delivering lunch to him, the experience was always an ordeal. On good days, he’d give me an obligatory nod from behind his computer monitors. On the rare occasions when he decided I deserved a hello—never an actual smile, though—I relied on the breathe-deeply-and-count-to-ten method to deal with the war in

my senses. And yes, that was the right word too. It was a war in there. My raging libido versus my frustrated logic.

Because I knew I wasn't imagining the way the air thickened between us. An unmistakable call of his body to mine like mating animals in the springtime sun. Invisible strings pulled between us. And from the way he tracked my every movement with fixed attention while I set up his lunch each day, I knew he felt it too.

It was insanity.

"No." I brought my feet down on the rug next to my bed, but this morning the trendy shag pile was useless. The polished concrete floor of my "Bohemian Charm" condo felt like an ice block. Right now, that was a good thing.

"You're a glacier with that man, Abbigail Gibson," I growled at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. "Glacier. Cold. Glacier. Calm."

No more letting Sebastian Shark under your skin.

No more letting Sebastian Shark into your damn dreams.

After quickly showering and dressing for the day, I threw my long hair into a high ponytail and headed out the door for the large commercial-grade kitchen I rented in Inglewood. Fifteen minutes later, I parked my F-150 next to the van we used for deliveries—but stopped short when a distinct smell hit my senses. Savory. Earthy. Cheesy.

I hurried toward the door adorned with the words *Abstract Catering*, noticing the prep area lights were already on. Inside, a petite woman was folding serving containers and humming along to the radio.

"Morning." My greeting was lifeless but accomplished the job.

"Morning, sister friend!" Rio called out in return.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t you mean slacker?”

The whiskey of her irises flashed to gold. “Abs, you’re a lot of things—but a slacker isn’t one of them.”

“Says the woman who probably sent me a wake-up text from here.”

She smirked. “I couldn’t sleep. Big deal.”

Again?

I kept my question to myself for two reasons. One, it wouldn’t get me anywhere. Rio had her demons, and she made it clear the one time she told me about them that it would also be the last. Two, we had an insane morning ahead of us. On top of our regular lunch-order routine, we had to prep for a private party tonight in Brentwood.

“You’re crazy,” I said.

“But you love me.”

“Yeah, well...nobody turns veggie loaves into an art form like you. They’re my biggest seller on the lunch runs.”

“I don’t think art has anything to do with it,” Rio said. “More like all those health nuts in the skyscrapers would kill their own mother for something that tasted anything like meat.”

“Which is why I love what you do with those.” I nodded toward the row of loaves she’d just pulled from the oven. Their smell was savory to the point of mouthwatering.

“Yeah, well...” She moved to transfer the cakes to the individual serving containers, working to preserve as much of their heat as possible. “I know my meat, even when it’s the fake stuff.”

I spilled a wry giggle. “Not sure you want me touching that one.”

She scooped up a bottle of Abstract Catering’s secret sauce and swirled the amber goo over the boxed loaves. If there was anything customers loved more than Rio’s veggie loaves, it was that damn sauce. Never would I reveal that the special recipe was a simple mixture of ketchup, mustard, and—gasp—garlic mayonnaise.

“So…” The woman’s suggestive tone put me on high alert. “It’s Wednesday, which means your route includes Viktor Blake’s office, yes?”

Clang, clang, clang. And there went the alarms.

“You know it does. But that means nothing more than my delivering his yummy veggie loaf promptly at eleven thirty, and that’s it.”

And it really was. Rio knew this drill already. I’d never be more than the lunch delivery girl to any of the high-powered executives on my downtown route, and that was by my design.

“Abbi—”

“Rio.”

“We need to talk about this.”

“We’ve already talked about this, which means you know how the conversation is going to end.”

“Jesus Christ on cornbread.” She capped her retort with a frustrated tilt of her head.

“Unfortunately, I do. Also unfortunately, it won’t be with you and that beautiful hunk getting horizontal.”

While I let out an awkward laugh, Rio folded her arms and pouted. The woman was a force of nature when it came to scheming for everyone’s Happily Ever After.

The idea of Viktor Blake wasn't horrific. Quite the opposite. He was a blond-haired, blue-eyed hottie who honored his sinewy Russian heritage so well, he'd been offered a promo deal with Stone Global's fitness supplement division.

If getting horny and horizontal with someone were my main goal right now, the man would be in the top three on the list. But still third. One of the spots would always be filled with Chris Hemsworth's name. And the other?

Sebastian Shark.

Viktor Blake was no Sebastian Shark.

A fact that neither man mourned, if the rumors about their professional rivalry were true.

"Come on. Getting horizontal with Viktor the Golden God has to have crossed your mind, Abbi. No disrespect to your brother, my amazing husband, but it crossed *my* mind when I covered for you that afternoon last month."

I raised a firm hand. "See it and talk to it, Rio. Shit like that is not going down between Viktor Blake and me."

"But—"

"Leave it."

"But—"

"Leave. It." I could hear the next *but* already churning in her throat. "You know my rules, okay? I didn't just make them up for my health. Or even for...How do you always say it?"

"Misplaced nobility." Her tone was wry but incisive.

"Ahhh, yes. My misplaced nobility."

My own tease earned me a huff from my sister-in-law. She folded her arms, facing me like a lawyer in cross-exam mode. "Why don't we just call it what it really is?"

“And why am I scared to ask what it really is?”

“Because you know what I’m about to say.” She filled the air with tinny clangs as she tapped a fingernail against the table. “They’re self-erected walls between you and humanity.”

“Self-erected wa— I don’t erect anything!”

Rio turned her hand over with splayed fingers. “Dropping the mic. My work here is done.”

I pressed my lips together, holding in a retort. All right, fine. Maybe I was fond of walls. But sometimes—a lot of times—the world needed walls. They kept life organized. Created boundaries where they were needed.

I wasn’t indifferent and unfeeling. I was ambitious and focused. Separating professional and personal relationships was good business. And good business led to great business. And great business was the measure of my success.

And success—the resounding, undisputed kind—was where I was bound. No matter what it took. Including lifelong celibacy.

Since arriving here four years ago, just a month after high school graduation, I’d worked to build my name in a city where every other person owned a restaurant or catering outfit. Some of LA’s most prominent companies—and with their notable leaders—relied on me. Crossing the line with any of those clients would be killing my dream before it began.

Speaking of that dream...

“Not so fast, dear sister. Your work here also means prepping the appetizers for the private party tonight.” I smacked my hands together. *Back to the grind*. Best subject change in the world.

“Chop-chop. We’re running behind on the pesto.”

“And you’re running behind on the erections.”

“Burning daylight, girlfriend,” I hollered while turning and punching the button for the roll-up door, preparing to load the van with the lunch delivery boxes.

“Wasting your va—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence, Rio!”

I looked back into the kitchen from the loading dock and saw a glazed stare overtake Rio’s face. I thought it was my threat that brought her crass retort to a grinding halt, but I was mistaken.

“Holy shit,” she muttered as I got closer. Eyes riveted to the TV in the corner.

I rushed back into the prep area as fast as I could. Though the verbal expression was one of Rio’s favorites, there was something extra in it that jolted every hair on my neck. “Holy shit *what?*”

We’d typically watch the local morning news during our meal prep hours to stay informed about weather and traffic conditions, but it wasn’t Cy the Commute Guy on the screen. Rio was staring at a fresh-faced blonde, newly arrived from Omaha, who’d clearly never had to deliver difficult news. But she had to now, as the word *suicide* scrolled across the bottom of the screen, accompanied by video footage depicting emergency responder trucks next to a large expanse of water and a massive suspension bridge.

“Oh my God. Is that the Vincent Thomas?”

“Yeah,” Rio rasped.

“Holy crap. Did someone—”

Rio finally located the remote and turned up the volume. “The woman, identified as twenty-seven-year-old Tawny Mansfield from Inglewood, leaped off the iconic bridge in San Pedro

during the early morning hours. A dock worker who witnessed the event called 9-1-1. Her body was recovered from the water within hours.”

The newscaster paused to take a drink of water. I didn’t blame the woman. At last, she set down the water bottle and continued.

“The woman, wearing jeans and a sweat shirt, had an airtight plastic bag wrapped around her torso, in which the police located a suicide note with details about Mansfield’s recent breakup with local businessman Sebastian Shark.”

And suddenly I was the one craving a drink.

Maybe two or three.

Within seconds, I was overheated. Aching and agitated. Unable to find the rhythm of my heart, the cadence of my thoughts, or the feeling in my toes.

Because that was what a single mention of Sebastian Shark did to me.

Oh, God. That had to make me the most messed-up person in this city. This state. Maybe in the entire world.

It changed nothing.

“Oh, hell. Sebastian Shark. Why am I not surprised?” Rio said.

Her comment, a bizarre mix of fascination and irritation, affected me like a fist to the gut. I was compelled to defend him. Demand she be fair and not accuse him of something we knew nothing about. All I could think about was how the news must have hit him.

Who the hell was I kidding?

He’d likely hit back even harder. Like he always did. With fire in his eyes, thunder in his swing, and ambition that’d likely be called inspirational in some future news piece.

“Shark, the enigmatic owner and CEO of Shark Enterprises, amassed his substantial fortune in worldwide logistics and shipping.” Cindy was clearly more comfortable with these details of the story. “However, his business portfolio has expanded throughout the years. Recently, he announced plans to construct Shark’s Edge, on target to be the tallest and most luxurious skyscraper in the LA skyline.

“Through our exclusive sources, Spotlight News has learned that Miss Mansfield’s note made references to Shark’s obsession with breaking ground on the building as soon as possible. There were several other items found in the airtight pouch, but as this is an ongoing investigation, those items have been collected as evidence and are confidential at this time.”

Rio sniffed. “Oh, I can imagine what that’s about.”

I backhanded her shoulder. “Stop. Someone’s dead.”

“Exactly. Most likely after that man tossed her out of his life like rotten coleslaw.”

“Coleslaw?”

“Clearly you haven’t had to toss out an old batch lately.”

“For which I’m grateful.”

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and tugged her close. She returned the embrace, but as we pulled apart, she hurled her next blow to my gut. “So how long do we wait before dropping Shark Enterprises?”

I laughed. Then scowled. Then laughed again. “Uhhh...none.”

“Abs.” Her stare turned to fire. “You’re not seriously thinking—”

“Of continuing to serve the biggest client we have right now?”

She re-crossed her arms. “And because of that, you’re automatically taking his side?”

“Whoa.” I raised both hands. “How are there suddenly sides?”

“You don’t realize the media is already creating them?”

“That woman jumped on her own. He wasn’t up on that bridge with her.”

While she openly fumed about that, I grabbed the chance to neutralize my own features. My argument to retain Shark Enterprises as a customer made a ton of sense, but no way could I reveal it was based on anything except business. No way could Rio—or anyone else—discern what a mess Sebastian Shark made of my nerves, my senses, my sex drive.

“Look, I know the guy seems like a real douche sometimes. But we don’t have to be in bed with him for—”

Rio cut in with a cute snort. “Luckily, we don’t have to be in bed with him at all.”

With an eye roll, I said, “You know what I’m talking about. The checks I’m collecting from Shark Enterprises are the surplus revenue we need to make headway on the dream.”

I didn’t elaborate past that because I knew Rio got it. My whole family did. Ever since the day my mom was suddenly supine on the kitchen floor, breathing her last breaths due to a massive coronary, making me promise I’d never give up on our vision. Ever since that morning, when I swore to her I’d one day own and operate a full restaurant and not a piddly food-delivery service.

Rio’s huff saved me from diving down that heartache hole. “I get that. But you can get someone else as big as him, Abs. There are hundreds of huge corporations downtown.”

“Yeah? And tell me how many of them are planning to break ground on a skyscraper that’ll be a hundred stories high? That’ll have both professional occupants and personal residents? That’ll have hundreds, maybe thousands of people not just wanting lunch at noon but something easy to cook up for dinner that night? That’ll be one of the largest exclusive catering contracts to ever be landed in the city?”

She hauled out a headstrong pout. “I hate it when you’re right.”

I preened—but just a little—and said nothing else. We were wasting time, and it was going to be a scorcher of a day. So instead, I refocused on loading the sandwiches and entrées for the day’s runs.

Our new silence meant we could hear Cindy again. “LAPD has stated they’ll be reaching out to Mr. Shark today, hoping he’ll be able to provide more clues about Miss Mansfield’s actions. But at this time, no foul play is suspected, and Mr. Shark is not under criminal investigation.”

“Not a suspect.” Rio harrumphed. “Too bad shattering a woman’s heart isn’t a criminal offense.”

I had no idea whether to laugh, scream, or both. “The prison system would have an even bigger overcrowding problem then, wouldn’t it?” I walked toward the delivery van. “Text if you have any issues with the pinwheels.”

“Only if you promise to text back with pics of the circus at Shark’s office.”

I halted in my tracks. “Huh?”

She stared back, lips quirking, before drawling, “The...media circus?”

“*Pffft.*” I shook my head. “Not going to happen.”

Her grin grew into a full giggle. “How do you call yourself an Angelino?”

I shot her a narrowed glare. “There’s not going to be a circus, Rio.”

“I predict at least a dozen rings, honey.” She brightened and raised a finger in the air. “Hey, if you see TMZ, can you snag a selfie with their cute ginger reporter for me?”

“Oh my God.”

“No, just little ol’ me.” She shrugged and gave me a playful wink. “The one you love with the passion of a thousand suns.”

I spread my arms heavenward and turned to leave as Rio pumped a victory fist into the air.

“Pesto pinwheels!” I yelled over my shoulder.

“Cute ginger!”

“I’m doomed,” I muttered for my ears alone while climbing into the driver’s seat.

* * *

The frantic energy in the air was palpable the second I turned onto Hill Street. It was the same vibe that emanated from crowds gathering to ogle film or TV shoots, except worse.

Traffic crawled for several blocks before reaching the turnout where I normally kept the van while making deliveries in the building Shark Enterprises occupied. Not happening today. Four bulky vans were parked bumper-to-bumper in the spot, with a fifth attempting to be part of the mayhem.

“Dream on, asshole,” I growled at the van, its back end trapping me in place while the honking cars behind me tried to merge into the next lane over.

I was getting ready for some head-slams onto the steering wheel when a bright spot in the chaos appeared. A cutie with a lanky physique and big hair jogged out to the curb. I pressed the switch to lower the van’s passenger-side window, and Maddon leaned in.

“Yo, sandwich goddess,” he said in a relaxed drawl. “So what’s the sitch, right?” He gestured toward the media mob with a dazed look.

“Hey, Mads.” I gave him a friendly smile. I admired how hard the guy worked but always made it look like fun. “Guess it’s a slow news day.”

I’d have to admit to Rio how right she was about all this. *Damn it.*

“Truth. And there’s more of them inside. This is just the overflow.” He dragged a hand through his wild auburn locks. “Apologies about your spot. I set cones out, but CBS flattened them. Crazy, right?”

“Right. Crazy.” But that wasn’t going to help me unload sixty prepaid lunch orders...Most notably, the meal for the man everyone was here to see.

The man in the penthouse.

The same man who hardly stopped to look at what I brought anyway.

Still, as I considered the likelihood of going a day without Sebastian Shark’s menacing glory, there was an undeniable sensation in the pit of my stomach. The feeling seemed to swell until it lodged between my breasts, causing every inhalation to be a physical ache.

What the hell was this?

The answer wasn’t reassuring.

Disappointment.

Unfounded. Unexplainable. But there all the same.

Maybe I really should have let someone pop my cherry at some point over the years. Maybe I wouldn’t be sitting here in a funk over a man who barely knew I existed.

“I know it’s not a perfect fix, but I called back to the loading dock.” Maddon grinned, as if that alone was an accomplishment and a half. “They have a place for you to park back there if you promise not to take more than an hour.”

And just like that, my frustration turned into jubilation. “Mads, I could freaking kiss you.”

The poor kid looked instantly conflicted. “Or I could have a turkey and tomato on rye instead?”

I swooped the sandwich out with eager speed—and a hell of a lot of gratitude.

Which was the last sensation I should've had as I drove the van to the rear of the building, now making my load in twice as difficult.

I unpacked the delivery coolers and ordered myself to take in calming breaths, begging the extra oxygen to ease my anticipation. The same ritual I practiced every time I arrived at this building.

No use, though. Apparently changing how I entered the building didn't change the emotional riot inside me once I did. My nerves got no relief. The torque in my stomach became the pressure in my chest—and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it until I was up in the penthouse.

And why was that? I'd be lucky to get a hello, yet I craved his attention like a forgotten middle child. But my body had become addicted to the physical reaction he induced. The chemical high I got from the excitement of knowing he watched me. I caught him enough times by then to know it was a part of our regular routine. He was getting bolder, though, and no longer bothered to look away when our eyes met. I was usually the one who would quickly avert my gaze back to my approved task.

Did that make me a coward? Maybe. But at least things would be in their proper place, business as usual. Everything that was expected to happen would. Right on cue. Rules followed. Lines colored within. Everyone knowing their roles.

Walls erected.

Whatever. So what if Rio was right? It wasn't a bad thing to keep professional lines very clear. Even if I wasn't the only one blurring them. All this nonsense just served as a reminder. A reminder to approach this whole ordeal like tossing out bad coleslaw. Just like Rio said. It would be unpleasant for a little bit, but I'd be better off in the end.

“Coleslaw.” I turned it into a whispered mantra while disembarking the elevator at the penthouse level. “Coleslaw. Coleslaw. Coleslaw.”

But there was just one hitch with that plan now.

Damn it...

I really liked coleslaw.

CHAPTER TWO

SEBASTIAN

Two hours. Two goddamn hours into the day and my brain felt like it was splitting along the corpus callosum into its two equal halves.

The collection of oversize monitors on my desk displayed different news channels' coverage from outside my own building. Overly dramatic talking heads were spouting facts and less-than-facts about a woman who threw herself from the Vincent Thomas Bridge in San Pedro before dawn. Somehow, my name was being dragged into the fiasco, and now the bloodhounds were sniffing and yipping at my front door, looking for an exclusive scoop.

A sharp knock on my office door barely sounded above the helicopters that droned overhead.

"Terryn! I told you, I don't want to talk to anyone."

I had to give my assistant a bit of credit. She'd lasted longer than all the others. We might even see the full turn of a calendar at this pace.

"Sorry to let you down, boss man. Not Terryn." Grant Twombly strode into my office and quietly closed the door behind him. My best friend—hell, my only friend—had a grin on his face that was completely out of place considering the media hailstorm swirling around the building.

"I hate when you call me that." I stabbed at the keyboard to bring up a different news outlet on one of the screens.

"Precisely why I say it." He chuckled, his grin growing impossibly wider.

“What can I do for you, Grant? I’m a little busy, in case you haven’t noticed.” I motioned with a huff toward the monitors on my desk and then to the floor-to-ceiling windows lining the far side of my expansive penthouse office.

“You’d have to be unconscious not to notice the chaos in here today, my man. What have you gotten yourself into this time?” He rubbed at his chin with his thumb and index finger, looking at me with open skepticism.

“This is complete bullshit. I didn’t even know this...this...” I thought better of calling a recently deceased woman the derogatory term that came to mind. Even a bastard like me knew that would be in poor taste.

“Way to rein it in, Bas. Charm school is finally paying off.” Of course Grant didn’t miss my self-edit.

“Fuck off,” I muttered again, not bothering to spare him my true feelings. He’d seen me at my highest highs and my lowest lows. We’d grown up together on the streets of the east side of LA and had each other’s backs more times than either of us cared to remember. Our friendship was beyond brother-deep.

“Seriously though, my friend. What’s the story here? Before the legal team assembles. You must have really done a number on this one.” He flopped down onto one of three black leather sofas that were arranged in a perfect U shape in the sitting area of my suite.

Just as he stretched his long legs out to prop them on the table in front of him, I stood and scolded, “Keep your nasty feet off my furniture. Do you do that at your own house?”

“Actually, I do. Why do we go through this every time I’m in here? You’re worse than a nagging wife.” He planted his feet on the floor and sat farther back into the deep cushion. At six

feet six, it was hard for the man to sit comfortably on most furniture, but that was hardly my concern.

“Because if Pia saw you putting your feet on that table or sofa”—I stabbed my finger at each piece as I lectured—“or anything other than the floor, she would serve us both our balls for lunch.”

Grant held up his hands in surrender. “Enough said. Enough said. But speaking of lunch, when does the little redhead scurry by? I’m starving.”

“Those are Terryn things. Not Shark things.”

“Nice try. And we’re talking about ourselves in the third person now? How dictatorial asshole of you.”

I leveled my stare at him to convey *explain*.

“I see the way you sneak in gawks at that catering girl’s ass.”

“I do no such—”

“Cut the shit.” Only Grant could get away with such rudeness and live to do it a second time. He stood and walked over to my desk. “This is me you’re talking to. The same guy you confessed your crush on Miss Dandelion to when we were in the third grade, remember?”

“Yeah.” I let out a sigh, remembering our heavenly third-grade teacher. “But her tits...”

“They were stellar tits.”

“I wonder whatever happened to Miss Dandelion.” I let myself drift to the past, away from the disaster of the present. Life was so much simpler then—even if my father was a neglectful drunk and I was already taking care of myself and Pia.

Grant’s voice interrupted my memories. “Every boy in the class sported their first boner for that doe-eyed teacher.”

I shook my head hard before snapping, “Yeah, well, some douchebag probably plucked her pretty flower and then she became old and bitter, just like the rest of the teachers at that school.”

I smacked the top of my desk with my palms, making Grant jump.

“So jaded.” Sadness clouded his normally lively eyes. “Always so jaded.”

“It’s called reality, Grant.” I walked over to the wall of windows while I spoke. “And you know it’s the truth. Look at the bullshit going on right now if you think it’s anything else.”

This was my usual thinking spot. Mid-room, staring out from the top floor of my downtown building over the City of Angels. I crossed my arms over my chest and faced the extraordinary view, this bird’s-eye vantage point of my empire. I owned a good portion of this city and made deals by the hour to acquire more.

A king.

My kingdom.

I’d earned every bit of it.

Every. Single. Bit.

But now someone was messing with me, and they wouldn’t get away with it. I barely recalled the woman’s name, even though it kept popping up on the news reports. *Tawny Mansfield*. But really, in a sea of Candys and Sugars and the occasional Minx or Jinx, Tawny didn’t seem all that special.

I wasn’t doing much better with her face in the grainy photo that flashed across the screen repeatedly. Dancers and escorts had a certain look in common. A little too much makeup, a little too much hair product, clothes that were worn a little too tight. Nothing really stood out about her appearance either.

What did it matter?

What did they matter?

Well, of course they mattered, but not to me. That was my issue. Mine. I wasn't interested in getting attached. I didn't have time for relationships, and I certainly didn't have time for emotions. I stuck to secure sexual transactions. Uncomplicated arrangements where both parties knew exactly what was—and wasn't—expected.

“Do you think she was one of LuLu's girls?” my best friend asked, as if he had a direct link into my thoughts.

“I don't think so. I imagine LuLu would've already been breathing down my neck by this point if she were. She's fiercely protective of her assets.” It wouldn't hurt to confirm the thought, though.

“Siri, page Terryn.”

“Do you mean fucking Terryn?” the disembodied voice volleyed back.

“Yes!”

Grant's face split in two with a wide grin.

“Yes, Mr. Shark?” Terryn's voice came over the intercom speaker.

“Get Louise Chancellor on the phone.” I didn't bother with “can you” or “please.” Just merely stated what I needed and expected my assistant to make it happen.

“I can, but I may be able to save you a call. Ms. Chancellor left a message about fifteen minutes ago. I'm sorry I haven't been able to give it to you before now, sir. It's been a bit hectic out here.”

“Cry me a river, Terryn. Just tell me what she said.” I scrubbed my hand down my face, hoping to hell Tawny Mansfield hadn't worked for the high-end madam I regularly used.

“Ms. Chancellor said, and I’m quoting…” Terry inserted a dramatic beat. ““She wasn’t one of mine.”” She paused again before adding, “Uhh, I’m guessing that makes sense to you?”

“Terry?” I queried, impatience oozing from my voice.

“Sir?”

“Is it your job to play superspy decoder ring or just give me my phone messages?”

“Uhh. I was just trying to make sure—”

“Terry?” I cut her off before she could stammer any longer, wasting my valuable time.

“Yes?” she answered timidly. *Christ*. I’d break this one too. It was just a matter of time.

“Just answer the question so we can both get back to work.”

“To give you your phone messages, sir.” Her voice had gained strength as she repeated the answer option verbatim.

“Perfect. Now where’s my lunch?” I switched topics, ready to move on to the next item.

A soft knock sounded on the door, and just like that, my dick twitched in my slacks. It was like my goddamned body sensed the young redhead was within a fifty-foot radius.

“Never mind,” I said, disconnecting the intercom. “Enter!” I shouted toward the door, the way I always did when Little Red Riding Hood came by with my lunch.

Most days, I attempted to appear occupied with my work as she set up my meal, but since I was already standing in the middle of the room, there’d be no way to avoid her today. Maybe that was a good thing. It just meant I could sneak in a few glances of her glorious, lithe body from a new angle. I’d been getting more obvious with my staring lately, but it couldn’t be helped. The air thickened between us the moment she walked through my door. The thrill of the hunt, maybe?

“Oh. Well. Hi. Hello,” she stammered, taking in my looming form from head to toe as she came into my penthouse office. Gazes locked. Breaths stuttered. Cheeks flamed.

And then my annoying COO cleared his throat, tramping through our moment like a wayward puppy through a newly planted flower bed. I gave him a sideways glance, and Ms. Gibson slipped past me while asking her daily inquiry.

“Where would you like me to set up lunch today, Mr. Shark?”

On your flat stomach. Between your milky thighs.

“Here, let me help you with that.” Grant, a warm smile on his face, all but tripped over himself to take the large tray from her.

“Sit down, Twombley. Let the girl do her job.” *Because you’re spoiling my view.*

He glared at me over his shoulder and continued taking the burden off Little Red, ignoring me completely. “This looks fantastic,” he said, giving her the full force of his pussy-slayer grin.

“Thanks. I tried something new with the dressing today. We’ve been working on a few new recipes.” She gave an impish shrug toward the food before looking back up to Grant. “Are you having lunch in this office today, Mr. Twombley? I can get your tray off the cart and set it up in here as well.” As they moved deeper into the penthouse to the area I used for meetings, they continued chatting. She tilted her head way back since he towered over her by a solid twelve inches. Then they both swung their gazes to me.

“Well, shit, don’t let me interrupt.” I threw my hands up, unexplainably pissed after watching their exchange.

Who was I trying to kid? It was completely explainable.

It’s called jealousy, motherfucker. The good old-fashioned green-eyed monster.

But what the hell was that about?

I didn't experience jealousy. I inspired it.

I narrowed my eyes at the young caterer and then shifted my stare to Grant. "We need to strategize about this Mansfield situation. More specifically, how it might delay progress on the Edge. We can do that while we eat."

Grant pivoted smoothly back toward Abigail. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble, then...I'm sorry. I don't think I've ever caught your name." He set the tray down on my sleek stainless-steel conference table and offered his hand. "Grant Twombly."

I continued to stare in borderline fury while my chief operating officer gently caressed the inside wrist of the intriguing redheaded sandwich girl. Her lips parted slightly while she stuttered to form her own name, wholly affected by his attention.

"Abigail Gibson. Abstract Catering. It's very nice to meet you, umm, Mr. Twombly." She smiled shyly, causing me to suck in air sharply. The woman yanked her hand from Grant's at once, darting her eyes in my direction as if caught doing something she shouldn't be doing.

Grant leaned down, sharing a conspiratorial murmur. "Ignore him. Nearly everyone does."

"I find that hard to believe," she replied quietly. I almost thought I misheard her but trusted my senses. I also had help from the sexy red flush spreading like wildfire up her neck and cheeks.

What the hell was it about this girl that had my balls pulling up so tight?

Literally.

She was young. Very young. Something that generally had me running the other way quicker than a wedding band on a flirtatious woman's finger. But there was an unmistakable pull from her that rendered the complete opposite effect. And that bastard Twombly—who knew me better than anyone—was playing me like a fiddle and using her as the bow.

“So, Mansfield wasn’t from LuLu’s stable. Are you using anyone else?” Grant asked as we sat down to eat. Anyone who had access to this room had signed a nondisclosure agreement, so we didn’t have to censor our conversation.

I watched the sandwich girl walk out of my office to get his food, finding it impossible not to focus on her tight ass as she went. Christ, I’d love to dig my fingers into the flesh of those perfectly round cheeks while she bounced on my lap and I gave her the best ride of her life.

“Dude.”

I shook my head slightly. “No, but I’ve been thinking; maybe she was from Club Delilah. That’s the only other place I may have met her—if I ever met her at all. I’m still not convinced I did. She doesn’t look familiar. This whole thing could be a setup.” I shifted in my seat, trying to adjust myself in my suddenly too tight slacks.

Abigail came bustling back in with another tray of food for Grant.

“This smells like that Russian bastard if you ask me.”

Grant scoffed. “I think you’re giving Blake more credit than he deserves. How would he manage details of this magnitude? Finding a woman you slept with, a damaged one at that, and then planting a suicide note that implicates you? Think about it. Just saying it all out loud”—Grant shook his head slowly—“do you hear how ridiculous it sounds?” He leaned back in his chair to make room for Abigail to place his food in front of him.

“I don’t know,” I said, unrolling my utensils from the tidy rolled linen napkin that always accompanied my lunch. “I wouldn’t put anything past him. He’s a bitter, ruthless cocksucker. Vengeance drives men to do unhinged things.”

“Excuse me, gentlemen.” The caterer stood off to the side, waiting for a break in our conversation.

We both looked to Little Red. Grant smiled, but I was mid-chew, just about to swallow the first bite of my lunch.

“Forgive my interruption...I just wanted to see if you needed anything else before I left.”

“Did we ask for anything else?” I tilted my chin in her direction.

Her already large green eyes widened farther.

Grant quickly interjected. “This looks great. Thank you so much, Ms. Gibson.”

My God. Her eyes. Green like emeralds. Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz* emerald. They were mesmerizing.

She slid her head back as if ready to launch into some sort of tirade or comeback. Likely about my lack of civility. With a rough swallow, she tamped down the inclination.

Without another word but with the unmistakable welling of tears in her huge green eyes, Abigail Gibson bolted from the room. Complete with a slight—and sexy as hell—stumble right before she reached the door. She caught herself on the ornate knob and then let herself out. My ears vibrated, catching the buzz of her mumbled comments as she frantically exited.

“My God, you can be an asshole.” Grant stared at me in disbelief.

“What?” I said around a second forkful of greens, making the delivery something more like “*Whuu?*”

“You made that girl cry.” He pointed toward the door with his fork.

I chewed slowly and then wiped my mouth with the linen napkin. Today it was sky blue. A different color every day. Yes, I’d noticed.

“I didn’t make her cry, Grant.” I grinned from behind the napkin. “But now I have a hard-on, too. This day just keeps getting better.”

“Her crying made you hard?”

“I’m an asshole, Grant. Why are you acting like it’s breaking news?”

“You’re going to die a lonely old man.”

“Again, breaking news? And to clarify, I don’t enjoy making women cry. But something about seeing her cry…” I shook my head, bewildered. “I don’t really understand it myself. She just looked so fragile and vulnerable. Like she needs someone.” My voice had gotten unusually quiet as I pictured the tears filling Abbigail’s eyes. “Someone to be her everything.”

Wonder of wonders, I’d finally rendered my best friend speechless. There really was a first time for everything. But I’d also succeeded in coating the room with a heavy shroud of intense emotion. An environment in which neither of us were particularly comfortable.

So I shrugged and took another bite of my salad. “And really, she should’ve left the dressing recipe alone. This one sucks.” I pushed the plate to the side. “Why can’t she just serve an old favorite like coleslaw? Everyone loves coleslaw. My mom made the best coleslaw ever, and we’d always bring it to family reunions. When we went to those sorts of things.”

Enough of Abbigail Gibson talk for the time being. I had real problems to deal with, as I was reminded by Terryn’s familiar knock on the door.

“What?” I called from the far end of the room.

“Sir? Your twelve fifteen is here.” Her mousy voice sounded from the other side of the panel.

“Damn it!” I thought for a second. “Terryn, get in here.”

She opened the door slowly, looking like she was ready to duck and take cover in case I threw something. Which, for the record, I had never actually done. The woman was as overdramatic as Grant.

“Clear this out of here.” I made a sweeping gesture to the lunch spread on the table. “I need to take the meeting here.”

She looked down at the barely touched lunch. “Do you want me to wrap it for later? You’ll probably be here late; your schedule is pretty full today.”

I knew I should be touched—or some shit like that—that she was thinking of my well-being and planning for the entire day, not just appointment by appointment. I admired that about this assistant, but I wasn’t about to dole out compliments and risk her getting full of herself.

“No. It wasn’t good the first go-around. I can’t imagine it reheated.” I grimaced.

Grant stood. “Terry, please wrap the plate for Mr. Shark. It’s a sandwich, for Christ’s sake. It won’t need to be reheated. He’s just being his usual pleasant self. If he doesn’t eat it, I will.”

She smiled up at him while he helped her consolidate the leftovers from both our lunches onto one tray and stack the empty plate beneath, and then he held the door open while she scurried out with the food. But not before she gave him another imploring smile and a quickly mouthed *thank you*.

“You’re such a pushover.”

“Next to you, everyone looks like a pushover. Ebenezer Scrooge would look like a doormat next to you, Bas.”

“Meh.” I shrugged. “Dude was a cuck. What can I say?”

* * *

The meeting with the soils engineer was dragging on for the longest thirty minutes of my life. The spreadsheet in front of me showed seismic fault evaluations, color-coded by date and lot number, for most of the downtown corridor where my new building would be constructed. But

between the tedious nature of the material being discussed and the constant nagging reminders of what was going on with the media outside the front doors, focusing on any of it was challenging.

The project had been named Shark's Edge years ago when I'd first announced my dream to the team I'd assembled to turn my lifelong vision into reality. The marketing gurus I had paid ungodly amounts of money felt like the name reflected both my corporation's mission statement and my personality's strong attributes all while mirroring the architectural design elements of the edifice itself.

"Is any of this going to delay the forward momentum? I'm committed to staying on schedule." I looked pointedly at Jonathan Brookside, the man sitting across from me, expecting a straightforward answer.

"Well, that's hard to say." Brookside shifted in his seat.

"*Boooooonnnnkkkk*," I blared obnoxiously, imitating the quarter-ending horn at a basketball game. Grant scowled in my peripheral view. "Wrong answer, my man."

Taking a fortifying breath, Jonathan launched into an explanation of why he was, indeed, giving the right answer. By the time he was finished, I was both annoyed that he'd challenged me and impressed because the man really knew what he was talking about.

"It's a complicated process, Mr. Shark." He set down his pen and spun it from the center. "As we outlined in our initial proposal, many factors are at play here. They come together to form our final report for the architect and structural engineer. Both entities need our report for sign-offs with the city's inspectors. We sent you images when we did the on-site boring to obtain soil samples several weeks ago." He looked up to make sure I was still listening. "Did you get that email?"

“Yes, I did, and I appreciate you keeping me in the loop. This project is of the utmost importance to me. Despite what the circus out front may imply.” I settled back in my chair and waited for him to continue.

Brookside nodded once and continued. “The lab is wrapping up their testing of those samples. I’d like to schedule another meeting next week to present our final package. Your team will be able to see the three-dimensional geometry of the underlying earth materials, the lab results from the soil samples, the seismic fault evaluations and predictions, similar to what you have in front of you here.” He tapped his neatly manicured finger on the spreadsheet in front of me. The man dealt with dirt all day but apparently didn’t touch much of it himself.

“Lastly, we will recommend foundation and sewage disposal options for your project based on the compiled data. The only issue we’ve had up to this point is obtaining public records for the property itself and the surrounding lots. This information is vital in forming a complete picture.”

Keeping his eyes fixed on me, he asked bluntly, “Have you pissed someone off at City Hall?”

Grant chuffed from the seat beside me. “You’d probably be better off asking who he hasn’t pissed off. Anywhere. Ever.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. I realize you don’t know me from Adam. I also get the distinct impression you aren’t the sort of man who takes advice easily. But I’m going to give you some anyway.” He held up his hand to stop me from spouting off before I could say a word.

“I’ve built a lot of buildings in this city, Mr. Shark. Start playing nice with the suits up there. They can make this project a real headache for you if they want to. And figuring out what the

holdup is can be nearly impossible. If someone owes you a favor, hold on to it. You'll probably have to call it in."

He efficiently shuffled his papers together and stood to leave. We shook hands and agreed he would set up a follow-up meeting with Terryn on his way out. When he cleared the door and closed it securely, Grant heaved into the sofa, much as he had earlier.

"I knew we were going to run into trouble at the city."

"Anything worth having is worth fighting for, my friend."

He sat forward, rubbing the back of his neck. "God, my neck is stiff already. I need a massage. What's next?" He slumped down lower on the couch to rest his head on the low back cushion.

I scrolled through the calendar app on the monitor that displayed my dashboard—the hub of the inner workings of my life.

"I thought I had a meeting with Pia, but that's been moved to dinner." Frustrated, I activated the computer's virtual assistant. "Siri, page Terryn."

"Do you mean fucking Terryn?" the voice asked from the built-in speakers.

"Yes!" I turned to Grant. "How am I ever going to retrain that thing?"

He laughed. "I think you're stuck with it like that. I hope she never hears it, though."

"Yes, Mr. Shark?"

"Why has my appointment with my sister been moved to dinner?"

"Because the police are here to speak with you. I called to reschedule with Pia, and the first thing she had open was at six. She said if it doesn't work, you can see her Sunday at Vela's game."

"Fine."

Dead silence.

Then finally, “Sir?”

“What?” I snapped.

“Shall I send in the detectives?”

“Give me three minutes and then send them in.” I mashed my fist onto the keyboard to disconnect the conversation, launching an unwanted web browser window and opening a new email message all at the same time. Muttering a string of profanity, I began quitting the unnecessary applications I’d opened in my frustration.

“You’re going to blow a gasket if you don’t settle down,” Grant mumbled, rubbing his sore neck. I didn’t miss the tension he was holding himself.

“Thank you, wise and healthy one.” I checked my email and spotted an incoming message from my amazing, smart, and sassy niece, Vela. She was only eight, but she already showed her mother’s take-charge temperament.

Dear Uncle Sebastian,

I can’t wait to see you at my soccer game tomorrow. My number is four so you can look for me on the field. Mom says your eyesight isn’t that great because you are so old. She was laughing when she said that, so I think she was just teasing you like she likes to do. After the game we have snacks and juice, but I will share mine with you if you want.

See you tomorrow!

Love,

Vela

That child was one of the few things that brought light into my life. A genuine smile spread across my lips but vanished as Terryn knocked on the door. The escape was nice for the two minutes it lasted.

“Email from Vela again? That’s the only time I see that peaceful look on your face.” Grant stood and slid on his suit jacket.

I quickly did the same, buttoning up and pulling the cuffs of my shirt into place.

“Yeah.” I sighed heavily. “She’s so precious. Innocent. I want to protect her from everything. All the bad shit in the world. All the bad people. My sister gave humankind the best gift when she created that little girl. On the other hand, if I ever find the loser who fathered her and then abandoned her...”

With that unpleasant thought, I strode across the room to greet the two police detectives, hoping to convince them I had nothing to do with Tawny Mansfield’s alleged suicide.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” I shook my head, hand outstretched to greet the two detectives.

Terryn looked crestfallen that she’d missed the opportunity to do some sort of dramatic introduction, but when the taller of the two cops clasped my hand heartily and grinned from ear to ear, it became clear to her that introductions wouldn’t be necessary.

Grant stepped in to slap the man’s back in hello. “Josh Peters, how long has it been, man?”

“Too long. Too long. You both look good.” The blond detective looked Grant and me over from head to toe a couple of times and then took a quick turn around the penthouse. “I should’ve stuck with the two of you back in the day. Apparently whatever you’re doing for a paycheck beats the hell out of the police force.”

“Let’s sit down, please. Can I get either of you something to drink?” I offered, reminding Josh of the partner standing beside him.

“Shit, sorry, man. This is my partner, Detective Branson Hale.”

I shook the stout man’s hand, introducing myself. “Sebastian Shark. This is my chief of operations, Grant Twombly.” Grant leaned in to shake Detective Hale’s hand too.

“Drinks? Anyone?” Grant asked, heading toward the refrigerator as I motioned to the sofas for the detectives to get comfortable.

“No, thank you,” they answered in unison. Josh chuckled but Branson winced.

“We won’t take up much of your time, Mr. Shark. We have a few routine questions regarding an incident that took place this morning on the Vincent Thomas Bridge in San Pedro.”

Grant rejoined us while Detective Hale spoke, and I made eye contact with my old friend, Josh. I could already tell his partner was a completely by-the-book kind of police officer.

Good. I had nothing to hide, and the sooner any suspicion surrounding my name was cleared, the better.

“Judging by the chaos in front of your building, I assume you’re familiar with the incident in question. Or do you always have that many reporters and groupies with signs hanging out near the entrance of your office?” Josh asked, more lighthearted than his partner.

“No,” I said, forcing a laugh. “That’s a new development.”

“So how did you know Ms. Mansfield?” he asked, brows raised.

“I’m not sure I do. Or did, rather.”

“You never met the woman?” Hale twisted his mouth with doubt. “Odd, since she claimed you were dating. And that you broke her heart.”

“We definitely weren’t dating. I don’t date.”

Hale went on as if I never spoke. “She went through great lengths to secure a suicide note, detailing the whole thing, to her body before jumping off that bridge.”

“I don’t know how else to word it, Detective. I don’t date women. I fuck them. Usually once. That’s it.” I shrugged. Seemed pretty cut and dry to me. I looked at Grant, and he gave a matching shrug.

See? He understands where I’m coming from.

“Why do you think this woman, Ms. Mansfield, would say that you broke her heart, then? That seems a bit extreme if you only slept with her one time.”

I pushed Josh’s knee so it knocked into his other one, playing up our friendship. “You know how women can get after you sleep with them—all starry-eyed. Add in my money and shit, maybe she thought I was going to be her next sugar daddy? I don’t know.”

But Hale was like a dog with a bone. Question after question until I finally stood up, calling an end to the interrogation. “I think I should probably have my attorney present if you gentlemen need to ask me anything else.”

“I think we have everything we need for now. Here’s my card—”

Hale made to offer his card, but I held my hand up to stop him. “I don’t need your card, man. You can leave it with my assistant if you feel like you need to, but I won’t be using it. Guaranteed.”

“Sebastian.” Josh shook my hand, giving me a solid smack on the shoulder while doing so.

“Grant.” He repeated the gesture with my best friend while I showed them to the door.

“Thanks for taking the time to chat with us. It was great to see you two.”

“Same here, Josh. Take care,” Grant said as he closed the door and faced me.

“What in the actual fuck is going on?” I asked him, rubbing my throbbing forehead.

“I was just going to ask you the same thing.”

