

3. The Portraits

Two weeks.

I search fruitlessly for a job for two weeks. The moment my name is heard, they come up with excuses for why they can't employ me, even as a janitor.

Ray hasn't kicked me out yet, and I know she won't, but taking the brunt of the expenses is taking a toll on her. She's been working overtime while I sit on her couch like a sack of potatoes, depressed for the life of me.

It takes two weeks before I summon the courage to return. To beg for my job to be handed back to me.

And I despise every moment of it.

I don't bother with a smile as I cross the ground floor of Winchester Global, the sharp clicks of my heels echoing on the marbled floors. Heads turn in my direction, and I stare right back at the workers who watch me with awe and fascination.

Wearing a black dress to work on my first day was carefully calculated. I am anything but happy to be here. Stormy. Hateful. Gloomy. Stay the hell away from me. That is the vibe I aim to give off.

"Hi. Mr. Winchester--"

The receptionist doesn't look up from her desk as she cuts in, "What time are you booked for?"

"What?"

She adjusts her glasses, staring at the screen of her computer. "You'd need to book an appointment with him a month prior."

"Right," I mutter, heat creeping up my cheeks. "He's...ah...expecting me."

She looks up, stern grey eyes taking me in. "Miss, I'd suggest you--"

The telephone beside her suddenly rings, startling us both, and her composure turns alert as she presses the phone to her ear. "Mr. Winchester--"

My heart slams into my chest and I look around, noting the CCTV cameras everywhere. Of course. He'd seen me walk in, had known to look out for me.

My gaze returns to the receptionist to find her reassessing me, lips drawn in a thin line. "Yes sir."

She drops the phone, and suddenly smiles pleasantly, rising from her chair. She is shorter than I am and petite in a way that human men seem to like their women. She reaches for my hand that rests on the counter, no doubt for a handshake, and I flinch, taking a step back.

I don't like people touching me.

"Welcome, ma'am," she says anyway, and my brows rise at the honorifics. "He will see you now," she adds, gesturing towards the elevators at the far end of the lobby, muttering something about the office with glass panels.

I stifle the urge to say, *told you*, and make my way to the elevators. The ride feels like an eternity and I can't help but wonder if HE is watching me even now. I can't tell what builds--anticipation or terror.

When the elevators finally open, I step out onto the executive floor, greeted by the sight of a modern sophisticated workspace that seems to stretch endlessly in every direction. I feel a little lost, standing in the middle of a vast hall with people rushing about their businesses, paying me as much attention as they can--none.

My gaze snag on the reserved area with sleek glass panels for doors and walls. I can't see into it, but I can feel the weight of his gaze. Fire on my skin.

Nerves wracking my being, I approach the door, mentally readying myself to see him again.

I rub my palms against my dress and loosen a breath as my knuckles rasp against the opaque glass.

"Enter," a deep, elegantly cultured voice says from within.

Pushing the door open, I step inside. The office is impressive. Vast. The large, imposing desk at the far end, positioned beneath an expansive window offers a breathtaking view of the city skyline, and behind it, Mr. Winchester sits and if I had been an artist, I'd capture this moment--the sun catching in his dark hair, his head propped on his fist as stares lazily at his screen, his shirt slightly undone, revealing hints of curly hair on his chest.

To the left of his desk stood another, albeit smaller, desk with stacks of paper and neatly organized folders. My desk. Yay?

The walls are adorned with paintings of--my lips part in surprise. Are those... why on earth are there paintings of exposed female parts on the walls?

There is one for each wall. Big, horrid paintings. The one directly in front of my desk is of the female's core dripping with cum. The other is a very vivid image of...Goddess have mercy. Can one really be positioned that way? Wouldn't it hurt?

Aghast, I stare at him. "Do you subject all your clients and employees to this level of obscenity?" I can't imagine that he does.

He looks up from whatever has his interest on his computer and his intense gaze locks onto mine. My heart does a flip flop, a thrill building in me. Or Ezra. Definitely Ezra.

"No. I had them brought specially for you."

I want to ask why, but I change my mind. I don't want to know. Coming here was a mistake. A carefully thought out mistake. I couldn't have Ray kicking me out. I'd probably head under a bridge or something. I could return home, but that'd mean wedding my uncle.

If that happened, I'd take his life, and then mine.

It was the least he deserved, the bastard. I could never forgive him for what he did to me, but the one I have damned to hell is my father. He'd known that I still wake from nightmares of Alaric touching me, and he hadn't cared enough not to suggest it. He had known and seen Alaric watch me lustfully, touch me questionably in the guise of greetings, and it was to him I had to when Alaric forced me.

It is one of the reasons I left. So Alaric would never find me--because I knew he was searching. It'd take years before he would find me here, unlike in Lycanthia where his influences stretched out to every city and village.

When I don't respond and keep standing in the doorway, he inclines his head toward the chair. "Sit."

I don't. "How's *Ei*?"

He leans back, spinning his chair. "Recuperating. The wedding's been rescheduled to a much later date, if that is what you're asking."

It isn't what I was asking. I couldn't care less.

"Do not shift it on my account--"

His soft chuckle interrupts me, skittering off my bones. "I wouldn't, even if you kissed my feet, lovely as that may be."

Ouch.

I nod, looking around. "When do I start?"

He pushes up from the chair, rising to his full height. Adrenaline pumps through me as he draws closer, stuffing whatever space is left in the room, regardless of how vast it is.

He begins pacing a small circle around me and I turned with him, unwilling to give him my back. "I had you looked into."

I stiffen, and he stops circling. "No records prior to a year ago. Where, pray tell, do you come from?"

"Where do you think lycans come from?" I snap, watching his face carefully for any form of reaction. Lycan or wolf, which is it? I can't place it. His scent is disturbing and confusing.

His expression doesn't change as he shrugged. "You visit the libraries often. You must have seen how little of our history is on display. How much of a myth we have become in this world."

Lycan then. "Just how much information do you have on my day to day activities? Surely, you have better things to do than tail me."

A hint of a smile hovers on irresistible firm lips. "Enough to know you spent two hours in the shower, preparing yourself for this. Me," he coos, eyes drooping to my covered chest, like he can see right through the dress to the maroon see-through bra I'd opted for this morning because I was out of choices. "I quite liked the white lace better."

The urge to cover my chest hits me, and I fight against it. I had tried on the white first, but I'd deemed it too fancy for work.

I make a mental note to fall the curtains the next time I am dressing. Rather than react to the fact that he is stalking me, has probably seen me naked, I stare at him coolly. I understand what his game is. Getting under my skin, riling me up, getting a reaction from me, he enjoys this.

He plays mind games to ensure that he remains in my thoughts all day, either from hate, anger or lust. He'd hung up the portraits so that every time I looked at it, I would think of him, us, in those positions.

Clever, this one. It's the perfect plan. Invade my thoughts and my space until I have no choice but to give in to him.

But he doesn't understand how exhausted I am in my body and soul. Even the mating bond isn't enough to make sparks fly where I am concerned, and though he might be the most alluring man I will ever come across, I am not interested.

"Good to hear. I like it better," I tell him, stepping around him to reach my desk. For a moment, I consider ripping off the stuido portrait, but I won't give him the satisfaction of watching me squirm.

He watches me as I place my purse on the table and begin arranging the files to create more room for work. Placing file after file atop each other has me reading the headings and noting the figures. I don't understand shit that's written on it. I can read, but I don't understand any of what I'm looking at. Just what do I hope to do here? Sit and look pretty? Why did he hire me? To humiliate me? Is he laughing as he watches me fumble with his files?

I grab the last file off to the edge of the table, propping it on the rest of the documents but I pause as I start to put it away.

My fingers graze the edge of the file. It has my name on it. "What is this?"

"Your identity and schedule."

I jump. He is right behind me, nose in my my hair, torso flush against my back. He chuckles at my reaction, and pulls back, settling at the edge of the table beside me. "You are my person assistant. The least you should have is a surname and a past. I have enemies who will look into every aspect in my life, those I keep close, and they will use whatever holes they can to attack me. This is precaution."

I do. I just discarded it when I got here. It'd make it harder for Alaric to narrow down his options of where I could be.

I flip through the file. Through my 'gifted identity'. Through my schedule. Nearly every hour is occupied. I am to resume every day by 6am and get off work by 11 pm. Only Thursdays and Fridays don't have work on them, because 'SCHOOL' is written very boldly on it.

My breath catches. "What the fuck is this? Gin Sullivan? Who the fuck is 'Sullivan'? I'm Twenty-four? Born in Manhattan? Orphaned? School? Did I fucking ask for any of this?!"

I toss the file to the ground, bander rising within me. "If I am to work with you, I will have you know that there are boundaries you do not cross with me, Mr. Winchester. You might own this building, the markets of New York and beyond, but you do not own me. My identity is mine alone. My life is mine alone. However I choose to live it is my choice. The next time you spring this sort of bull on me, by the Goddess, I will hurt you."

He stares at me, jewel-toned eyes filled with...wicked delight.

Goddess, I can't stand him.

Snatching my purse, I head toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Home!"

"I will see you here by six tomorrow. Have a good day, Ms. Sullivan."

My head snaps back, and I snarl, "Fuck you."

His sapphire eyes rake me in from my head to my black stilettos. "Oh, I will."

I slam the door behind me, shattering the glass to bits.