

## Chapter One

Now

A spoiled tart.

Or was it spoiled brat?

I purse my lips and try not to sneer at Tripp Porter as he drones on with a status update about the continuous permit delays, his monotonous voice flat enough to sink a yapping Jack Russell into a coma. Meanwhile I'm struggling to recall *exactly* what this arrogant ass called me at the holiday party. Of course, he was oblivious to the fact that I was standing on the other side of the pillar while he bad-mouthed me, his crimson bow tie hanging loose around his collar, his tongue flapping after his umpteenth gimlet.

It was the same night that Dad officially announced my leaping promotion to the newly created role of senior vice president at Calloway Group—my stepping-stone to president when he retires. With an MBA from Wharton and ten years of experience at CG between summer internships and post grad, he thought I was ready.

Clearly, Tripp Porter did not.

And by the thinly veiled smirk that curls his lips every time he looks my way, he *still* doesn't. But that could also be because he's under the impression that *he* should be in the senior vice president's role, and not reporting to the twenty-nine-year-old leggy brunette tart who once fetched his coffee.

Spoiled *tart*. That was *definitely* it.

Who the hell even uses that word, anyway?

I let my gaze drift around the room of suits—CG’s management team, mostly wealthy white men in their mid to late fifties, afflicted with varying degrees of male pattern baldness—and wonder how many of them share Tripp’s viewpoint, that Kieran Calloway has lost his damn mind, setting up his daughter to one day take over. That I should be finding ways to spend my trust fund, not wasting *their* time by dragging them into this meeting and demanding answers on two billion dollars’ worth of projects.

Unfortunately for them, I’m not going anywhere. *And* I’m beyond fed up, because I heard the same bullshit update from Tripp last meeting.

“So what you’re saying is that you’ve made no progress with the Marquee,” I interrupt loudly, topping my blunt words with a saccharine smile. My French-tipped nails trace the walnut swirls of the polished table. We bought the struggling hotel for \$120 million two years ago. *I’m* the one who brought the project to the table. *I’m* the one who pushed Dad to buy it, insisting it would make an excellent condo conversion. Dad leaned forward on it for *me*. And now, despite rounds of meetings and revisions to the blueprints, we *still* can’t seem to get the city’s approval for construction to begin.

I catch glances exchanged and brows arching around the table. *Some* of these people *must* share my frustrations, right?

“What *can* I say, Piper,” Tripp begins, adjusting his navy-blue tie around his stout neck. *And there’s that condescending smirk again.* “I’ve already told Kieran that we should sell it and cut our losses. The groundwork for this project wasn’t set properly, and it’s taking more time to fix the mess than I anticipated. I’ve got a meeting with the city on the twenty-ninth to get to the root of the problem.”

I was the one overseeing the project until my promotion and when I left, it was on track. It doesn't take a genius to hear what he's implying—that the “mess” is thanks to *my* poor directive.

I grit my teeth to keep my composure. “That’s nearly a month away.”

“Yes, you’re right,” he says slowly. Annoyingly.

“We’re now six *months* behind schedule,” I emphasize sharply. “The investors are inquiring.” I don’t have to tell Tripp, or anyone else here, how irate that makes my father, who prides himself on our remarkable track record for reliability and on-time completion.

Tripp sighs heavily. “I don’t know what to tell you, Piper. It’s the earliest meeting date that old shrew Adriane Guthrie would agree to. You know how inflexible she is. Well, maybe *you* don’t, but ask your father.” He reaches for his phone and begins scrolling through his messages, as if this conversation is over.

I wasn’t going to do this until after the meeting, in private. But since Tripp is hell-bent on making me look like some clueless bubblehead, maybe everyone around this table is in need of an education.

“I spoke to Adriane this morning. We had a lovely chat.” I smile sweetly at Tripp, whose indifferent gaze has been replaced with suspicion. Adriane is a clever older woman whom I sat next to at a dinner event a few years back; we bonded over the same tastes in books and movies, and the same unsavory viewpoints about men like Tripp. She’s always been willing to make time for me. “It seems you missed the last scheduled meeting—”

“Something important came up,” he smoothly deflects.

“—without the common decency to phone her,” I finish.

His bushy brows draw together in a deep frown; he's no doubt quickly thinking up some bullshit reason for that.

"I also spoke to Serge," I add. The senior project development manager handling the day-to-day work behind this project, a guy who puts in twelve-hour days and has a bad habit of chewing on pens as he works.

Tripp's eyebrows arch.

"He was told to forget about the Marquee and focus all efforts on the Waterway project."

*Told by you.*

"The Waterway project is the crown jewel for this company. That's where our focus is right now," Tripp retorts, his chest beginning to puff out as he gathers his confidence back.

"Yes. It's an enormous project. Too large, some are suggesting." Architecturally beautiful twin towers of mixed residential and hotel atop the city's waterfront market. "And we're still looking for investors for that, which means now is not the time to be dropping the ball on our other projects," I remind him sharply. "Mark?" I turn to my assistant, who sits beside me, studiously typing out meeting notes on his laptop. "Did Adriane's assistant call back yet?" I ask lightly.

Mark clears his throat, struggling to keep a serious face. "Yes. She has tomorrow morning at nine available." The same time as Tripp's standing tee-off time. To be fair, I didn't specifically ask for a Friday morning meeting when I called Adriane.

"Perfect. We all know Tripp is free then." I turn back to Tripp, whose cheeks are flushed with red. "Make sure you bring the right people with you when you go in to meet with her. And call me on your way back with an update, which I expect will be favorable. Unless you *need me* to come with you to the meeting to help get the final sign-offs?" From the corner of my eye, I

catch a few smirks around the table. I don't acknowledge any of them, though, keeping my steady gaze locked on Tripp, my expression flat.

"No. Of course not," he answers gruffly.

"Good! I think we're done here, then." I force a chipper tone. I collect my phone and my notepad and stand, feeling a room of gazes drift downward to my emerald-green dress, the sleeves capped to show off my toned arms, the waist cinched to flatter my curves. Whatever they may think about me running the show, none have ever hidden the fact that they enjoy the view. I don't particularly relish the attention, but I also refuse to hide my femininity behind wide-leg trousers and bulky blazers because they can't keep their leering eyes away.

"See everyone at the next meeting." I stroll out of the boardroom with my head held high, making sure my heels clack extra loud for Tripp, in case he missed the part where the tart just handed him his ass.

"That was deeply satisfying," Mark murmurs, closing the distance quickly to walk beside me, his laptop tucked under his arm.

"Let's just hope it works," I mutter, the wave of adrenaline that spurred me on now giving way to anxiety as I wonder what Tripp's next move in this power play will be, and how I'll need to pivot. I swallow against the case of nerves and peer up at Mark, meeting his broad smile. "But yes, it was, wasn't it?"

Mark is tall—well over six feet—and wiry, which makes every button-down shirt he wears too baggy on his slender frame. I'd love to give him a few pointers in the wardrobe department, but our employer-employee relationship hasn't reached that stage yet.

We're quite comfortable in the "plotting together to trounce misogynistic jerks" stage, though.

He reaches around me to pull open the glass door to Calloway's executive wing— executive alley, we call it—and hold it for me.

“Thank you, kind sir,” I offer dramatically, smiling as I recall the first time he did this, during his interview for the assistant's position. I had faltered at the threshold, surprised by the gentlemanly gesture. He immediately began backpedaling, promising through stumbled words that the move in no way reflected his beliefs about a woman's ability to hold her own doors open. He confided later that he was sure he had blown the interview.

Meanwhile I knew right then and there that, while he had zero experience, he was the right person for the job. Polite, considerate, but also in tune with the twenty-first century.

“You're welcome, milady,” he says without missing a beat and with a terribly fake cockney accent that makes me chuckle. Deep dimples form in his cheeks. He's attractive, with a full head of blond hair that he runs a gel-coated hand through each morning, at most; earnest blue eyes that lock on yours when you're in conversation, and a clean-cut jaw that makes him look a decade younger than his thirty-four years. If I were interested in dating, and *not* his boss, Mark might be a man who'd pique my interest.

But I *am* his boss, and I'm eons away from heading back down the let's-get-to-know-each-other path with *any* man.

Thanks mainly to the jackass in the custom-tailored navy suit lingering straight ahead.

I sigh heavily. If there is one person who can deflate my triumphant high, it's David Worthington. “When's my next meeting? Noon?” I ask Mark.

“One P.M.” His gaze narrows on David's hand as it carelessly flicks the wooden blades of the delicate miniature windmill on Mark's desk—a gift from Mark's mom to celebrate his first

desk job; a symbol of his Danish roots. A replacement of the one David broke a month ago, doing this very same thing.

Mark dislikes David—with a passion, I'd hazard—but he has yet to say anything openly. That could be on account of David being VP of Sales & Marketing.

Or because David's missing an assistant and Mark has been helping to fill the gap, catering to David's demanding and sometimes childish needs.

*Or* because David's my ex-fiancé.

"I'm gonna run out to grab sushi. Do you want me to pick you up some?" Mark offers, eager to get away.

"No, I'm good, thanks. I need to go for a walk soon anyway. I'll grab lunch then." Even with all the glass walls and windows, the air turns stifling around here after too long.

"Kay. See you in a bit." Mark offers David a polite nod as he passes through to lock up his things.

I don't even offer that much, pushing through the door and into my office, knowing David will be right on my heels.

My office, much like every executive office on this floor save for my father's, is all glass—glass walls, glass door, floor-to-ceiling glass windows. It affords plenty of daylight but no privacy. I've attempted to create some with a decorative coat tree strategically placed to the right of the door and a six-foot potted palm to the left. A few key pieces chosen by an interior decorator—a mid-century-style writing desk, camel-colored leather wingback chair, and a Persian rug bursting with shades of fuchsia, gold, and navy—add panache to an otherwise bland space.

Entering my small corner of this vast building brings me comfort during the hectic, long days.

Except when David is in it.

“Running out to grab a quickie with his boyfriend again?” he murmurs as soon as the soft click of the door sounds.

I drop my notebook onto my desk with a loud thud. “Mark is *not* gay. You just *want* him to be, because you feel threatened by him.”

David snorts, as if the very idea of *him* feeling threatened by a guy who doesn’t own a Maserati and lives in a rented bachelor pad on the outskirts of the city is preposterous. “Oh, come on, Piper. The guy spends his weekends running around the park in tights. *For fun.*”

“He’s an actor!” Mark was a theater major in college; not exactly a good fit for CG. When Carla from Human Resources passed along his résumé, she did it in jest, thinking I’d catch on quickly and toss it aside. It was my sheer curiosity that got him through my door for an interview.

“*Exactly* my point.”

I shake my head. “You’re an idiot. Besides, that Shakespeare in the Park production is renowned. Maybe you should go and see it before you judge. *We* built the entire place, after all.” A city contract that we bid on and won, along with several awards in the years following. It was the first development project I ever worked on during my summer internship here.

David folds his thick arms across his chest and smiles knowingly at me. “So *you’ve* seen him perform?”

“I’m going this weekend.”

“What time? I’ll come with you.”

“Shouldn’t you be interviewing some poor fool for your assistant’s position? And, by the way, Mark is not picking up your dry cleaning, so stop asking him to.” David knows I’m lying about going to see the play, that I enjoy theater about as much as I enjoy golf, which is exponentially less than, say, sitting on hold with the tech help desk or waiting for my nail lacquer to dry.

“Not for another hour.” He grabs my apple off my desk and settles into the chair across from me, legs splayed.

“Try not to scare this one into early retirement, too,” I mutter, focusing on my computer screen as I scroll through my calendar and then my emails, opening one up to read.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll make sure this one is *much* younger.” He bites into *my* apple, and I do my best to ignore his penetrating gaze.

How I fell under the spell of David Worthington, I’ll never understand. I guess it was for the same reason most women fall for him at first: the thick, coiffed blond hair, the playful azure-blue eyes, the square jaw, the straight white teeth, the muscular body that he treats like a temple with daily workouts and zero refined sugar. Physically, he’s an Adonis, and from the first day he strolled through the doors of CG three years ago as the new executive, he had my attention.

Add the fact that he’s Ivy League educated, whip-sharp, charming, born into the right pedigree, and highly successful, and you have a man who always gets what he wants. For a time, that was me. For almost two years, in fact. But then he slipped that gaudy two-carat diamond bauble—that spoke more to his taste than mine—on my finger and the polished veneer gave way to the ugly reality that David is a classic narcissist.

I realized that somewhere between him putting a deposit down on a house he knew I didn’t want, telling me about his “guys’ Vegas weekend” trip while he was already *on the way to*

*the airport*, and strongly suggesting that our marriage would fare better with only one of us working at CG.

So I set the engagement ring on the dining room table and moved out. It was an easy decision but a tough life lesson, compounded by the fact that I have to see him almost every day. *Literally*. His office is directly across from mine. I look up from my desk and *there he is*.

He devours half my apple before I finally snap with irritation. “Seriously, what do you want, *David*?” His name is a curse upon my lips.

“Any highlights from the meeting?”

“You’ll get the meeting notes by end of day. And why weren’t you there, by the way?”

“I had a call with Drummond.” Our potential anchor tenant for the Waterway project, the draw for other retail space leasing. We need them to commit before our project unveiling next month.

“How’d it go?”

“Ninety percent there.” He pauses. “I heard Tripp’s still being a dick.” At least his voice has lost its obnoxious edge.

Maybe it’s because I miss sounding off about work to David, or maybe it’s because I have no one else to talk to about it—venting to Mark wouldn’t be appropriate—but I abandon my computer screen and lean back in my chair. “It’s like he *wants* the Marquee to tank out of sheer bitterness.”

“More like he wants *you* to tank.” There’s no love lost between David and Tripp. It was Tripp who objected vehemently to my father going external to hire a then thirty-two-year-old David from a New York firm, pushing for Dad to instead bring in one of his cronies to fill the role.

David frowns in thought. “He’s been here for, what is it, twenty-eight years now?”

“I don’t care if he laid the first brick to the very first building we ever developed, there’s no excuse for the way he’s been acting.”

He holds his hands up in surrender. “All I’m saying is that he’s *finally* seeing the writing on the wall. He’ll never run this company and he’s not liking it.”

I can’t help the snort. “He’s getting paid enough to fake liking it.” The old toad has a new luxury sedan every year and lives in the swanky estate community of Ferndale with his third wife. He’s far from hard up.

David smooths his index fingers over his eyebrows. It’s a small tell of his, something he does when he’s thinking, without realizing it. I used to always tease him about it. “Have you said anything to Kieran yet?”

“I’m not running to my *daddy* about issues with Tripp.” What would that do, besides prove that I’m not ready to be in this position, let alone take over when he retires? “It’s on me to handle, and I’m handling it.”

He aims and tosses the apple core across the room, into my trash can. “Where is the silver fox today, anyway? I thought he was back from Tokyo already.”

I smirk, my gaze drifting to the closed office door at the end of the hall. My father, an arresting presence in any room, is more attractive and fit at sixty-six years than a lot of men two decades younger. Which is why he has no problem finding women *three* decades younger to date. “Industry meeting.”

“Oh, right. He’s shooting eighteen at Bryant Springs. He told me about that.”

I roll my eyes. Of course he told David. My father tells David *everything*. They text like schoolgirls. David is the son Kieran Calloway never had, despite the fact that he has a son. Rhett, my older brother, a guy who wants nothing to do with the corporate world. Or my father.

My father was joyous when David and I announced our engagement and furious with me when I ended it. There was a point, right after the breakup, when the very air circulating around David and me was toxic, when I asked him to fire David. He told me he'd do no such thing because his quasi son is too *good for the business*. Then he kicked me out of his office for even coming to him to suggest it.

I considered quitting out of spite, but decided I'd already given David enough of my past; I wasn't going to lose my future because of him, too.

Silence lingers in my office.

And then David sighs wistfully and waves a hand between us. "This is nice, isn't it? Us, talking like this again?"

"Yeah. It is," I concede.

"Let's do it again sometime. Like over dinner tomorrow—"

"No." I stand and round my desk, heading for the door. It's the only way I'll get rid of him. "It's over, David, and you know it."

"It wasn't *all* bad times, Piper. I seem to remember you enjoying some of it *a lot*."

I turn to find his heated gaze drifting over my legs, my hips, my chest, before settling on my face. His lewd thoughts are practically scrawled across his forehead.

My cheeks flush. "*That* part was never our problem." It's one instance where David has never been selfish, though I think it may have more to do with him wanting glowing reviews

when his conquests kiss and tell. And it was easy to ignore our deeper issues when the wild chemistry between us drowned everything else out.

That last time we were together, *after* I called off the engagement, when I came to collect my last few things and he begged me to “talk” . . . well, that was a moment of sheer stupidity on my part. One I’ll never repeat.

David finally heaves himself out of the chair. “You just have to stop being so uptight about everything.”

I take a deep, calming breath. Four months post-breakup and he has yet to accept an ounce of responsibility for our demise. “Who *you* are and who *I* am are not compatible. You’ll do best with a spineless trophy, someone who’ll let you walk all over her whenever you feel like it.” I pull the door open. “Go forth and find thee thy perfect doormat.”

He pauses at the threshold, a mere foot away, close enough that his Tom Ford aftershave fills my nostrils. That scent alone used to get my blood rushing. “You say that now, but I doubt you’ll like it when I start dating again.”

“Let’s test that theory out.”

“Fine. I’m going out to dinner with Vicki tomorrow. You remember her, right? That sexy blonde from the gym. She’s been after me for years. Pretty sure she’ll be staying over.”

“Tomorrow, you say?”

“Tomorrow.” He smiles smugly as he peers down at me, waiting for a reaction.

“Didn’t you just ask me out to dinner tomorrow? Because having dinner with your ex-fiancée when you already have a date for that night is sleazy, even for you.”

“I . . . We . . .” He stammers, caught in his lie. “I meant, *hypothetically*, I *could* go out with her.”

I chuckle. “Sure, right.”

“That’s not the point.” His expression sours.

“No, the point is that I don’t care who you date, screw, or marry,” I usher him out with a hand against his broad back, “as long as you accept that it’ll never be me again.” I push my office door shut with a heavy sigh.

I believe that, deep down inside, David knows we don’t belong together. He’s just not the kind of guy to accept losing. It’s not something his ego can handle.

But is this what my life has become?

Managing fragile male egos all day long?

I groan into my empty office.

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The elevator corridor in the lobby is eerily empty when I step out onto the ground floor just before one P.M., though evidence of a recent pizza delivery lingers in the air. It won’t remain quiet for long, as any number of the six elevators are surely about to open, delivering a small horde of tenants and visitors from the twenty-four floors above.

My heels click against the travertine as I march through the atrium, past rows of planters brimming with palms and ferns. Midday sunlight streams in from the glass dome above, broken up by an archway of crisscrossing beams. Our lobby is an architecturally stunning masterpiece, designed by Fredrik Gustafsson, the very same man at the helm of the Waterway project.

We own this building, though we occupy only five floors of it, renting out the rest to a host of companies in the finance, insurance, and real estate sectors. The land was part of a smart investment by my father, who began quietly buying up defunct industrial properties around Lennox’s waterfront decades ago, around the same time that he began lobbying to city officials

that the neglected area could be revitalized into an urban mecca. Slowly, he's had the ramshackle mills and warehouses demolished and area rezoned and, project by project, has brought the area—now pegged Augustin Square—back to life.

“Off to lunch, Miss Calloway?” a baritone voice booms as I pass through the security gate.

I turn to find Gus grinning at me. I've known the cheerful security guard with the Jersey accent since I was wearing pigtails and Mary Janes. He was getting on in age even back then. Now, his tight gray curls are a stark contrast to his deep brown skin. But, while he could retire, he's shown no interest in doing so.

Gus has become as much a part of CG as my father. When we moved buildings, my father specifically asked Rikell, the company that we contract our security resources from, that Gus come with us. And by ask, I mean he told them that if Gus wasn't coming, neither were they, to this building or any others that he owns.

My father isn't the easiest man to negotiate with.

Not only did Rikell oblige, but they gave Gus a promotion to supervisor, managing schedules and staff onsite, and having final hiring say on the guard staff. But still, Gus sits at this front desk, greeting every building occupant by name, breaking up the monotony of the daily grind in the most pleasant way.

“What's it gonna be today?”

I can't help but grin back. “Not sure yet. Something good.” We're a seven-minute walk to the Pier Market, a long, narrow construct packed with vendors and a popular locale by the river, where you can find everything from fresh cut flowers to lobsters to French macarons. Around it is an array of restaurants, peddling every culinary taste imaginable. I've gotten lost in the menus

posted outside the doors on many occasions, drooling over the idea of a comforting moussaka or chicken biryani or green curry for lunch.

I always end up bringing back a salad.

“Oh, I’ll bet,” Gus grunts, knowing as much.

I make a point of leaning over to brush the dusting of fine white powder from his uniform shirt pocket. “Have you been eating donuts, again?” Talk about embodying a stereotype.

“Not just *any* donut!” he scoffs. “They’re these . . . oh, I can’t remember what Basha called them, but they’re covered in icing sugar, and have this plum jam filling inside.” He smacks his lips. “I’ll save you one next time.”

My eyes narrow. “And exactly how many did you eat, Gus?”

“Just the one.” He averts his gaze to a stack of papers on the desk.

“Four. He ate *four* donuts for lunch,” says Ivan, the young security attendant with a dark olive complexion and an excessively thick neck sitting beside him. He emphasizes that by holding up four fingers.

“It’s a good thing you’re leaving next week, you rat,” Gus mutters before flashing a sheepish smile my way. “Basha said they were best eaten fresh.”

“Oh, well then that makes *complete* sense.” I shake my head. Ever since Gus’s wife died of an aneurysm five years ago, his waistline has been growing at an exponential rate. Sometimes I think he’s intentionally eating like this to shorten his days so he can join her in the afterlife.

“I’m bringing you back a salad.” I give the counter a pat, as if passing my judgment with a gavel, and then head for the exterior doors.

A man steps out from behind a closed door ahead of me and begins heading for the same exit. He's in simple business attire—black dress pants and a white button-down shirt that looks extra crisp with a gold tie—that clings to his solid, muscular body in the most pleasing way.

After spending two years with David, fit bodies alone don't immediately grab my attention anymore.

But there's something about this guy . . .

The way he moves, that slender nose, the shape of his forehead, that hair color . . .

It's been *years*, and he looks so different, but . . .

I frown and my steps falter as I watch him climb the steps. No. It can't possibly be *him*.

It can't be the boy who broke my heart.

"Kyle?" I call out.