

Playing with Power

Book 1

Adele Huxley

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All requests should be forwarded to: AdeleHuxleyWrites@gmail.com

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www.AdeleHuxley.com

Prologue

It's difficult to pinpoint the best moments in life until after they're gone. The fondest memories aren't always announced. They don't come with balloons and feasts and circled dates on the calendar. Instead, they're a collection of everyday things we only miss when they're gone or have irrevocably changed. Unaware how special each minute can be, people rush through their lives confident that the best is yet to come. Lauren was no exception. Not knowing it then, as their car sped down the highway, she was leaving the last vestiges of her adolescence behind. Years later, Lauren would look back to that trip with Nick and feel a bittersweet twinge of regret.

She'd think, *If only I'd known then how quickly things would change, I would've held on tighter, remembered more.*

The roar of the open windows reduced the music to a loud, wordless melody. Lauren leaned against the head rest, her dark hair whipping in the wind, and closed her eyes. It was a day that felt somewhere between spring and summer, a clear blue sky with a warm sun. The traffic on the highway was light, a pleasant surprise as they drove into the city on a Sunday afternoon. Nick grabbed her hand and kissed her fingers, pulling his eyes from the road for a second to grin at her.

"You can't fall asleep now, we're almost at your favorite spot," he said, his blue eyes sparkling.

"You can't blame me. You barely let me sleep this entire weekend."

"It's not my fault I can't keep my hands off of you! Stop being so sexy."

Lauren reached her arms above her head and stretched. Two hours in their cramped rental car and she just wanted to be done. "It was really nice to get away just for a couple days. I never noticed how quiet the country is until we moved—or how dark."

"You know, we could have that all the time," he said coyly, tiptoeing around a topic he knew was volatile.

She sighed. "We spent all weekend talking about this. I'd really rather not rehash it. We made a decision together, remember?"

"I know, I was just thinking aloud, didn't mean anything by it." He slipped his sunglasses down and scowled. Lauren rolled her eyes and stared out the front, hating that he made her feel like a mother putting her foot down. Her bad mood didn't last long because just over the next hill was something she'd been waiting to see for hours.

The New York City skyline slipped into view. Even if it meant going out of the way to get there, Lauren always made sure to enter the city from the same direction for just a glimpse. The whole of Manhattan stretched along the horizon. From the Freedom Tower on the right to the cluster of soaring, iconic buildings in midtown, to the void where she knew Central Park rested. The awesome sight made her feel significant and insignificant all at once. To be one of millions living in one of the greatest cities on Earth, struggling to make it, to succeed—the skyline embodied all that and more.

"There it is," Nick said casually, as if she liked it for the same reasons everyone else did. Lauren knew he'd never understand. To her, that urban landscape was like an affirmation. It was where all her hopes and dreams would come true.

The road dipped and curved, the brief view now obscured. She didn't know it but that would be the last time she'd look on that skyline with the hopeful optimism of youth. The next time her eyes fell on that outline, her life would be one big adult mess.

Never outshine the master

Always make those above you feel comfortably superior. In your desire to please or impress them, do not go too far in displaying your talents or you might accomplish the opposite – inspire fear and insecurity. Make your masters appear more brilliant than they are and you will attain the heights of power. - The 48 Laws of Power

Parker Jarvis, CEO of StyleSpur, stumbled through his presentation looking more like an ill-prepared high school senior than a multimillionaire businessman. Lauren Kemp sat with her legs crossed, appearing engrossed in the presentation but secretly hoping her face didn't betray the disdain churning in her stomach. *Always the very picture of calm, collected support*, Lauren thought. *One of us has.*

Positioned in the corner of the meeting room, she was able to chance a quick glance at the group of businessmen arranged at the table. It was difficult to gauge their responses. Their starched collars and \$2,000 watches were in sharp contrast to the basket of Nerf guns sitting in the corner and while this was only the second investor meeting they'd held in the StyleSpur office, she hoped it was the last. Lauren didn't have to turn around to know the entire team, all fifteen of them, were nervously watching through the glass windows.

"As you can see here, our projections show that we are on track to continue disrupting and transforming the online retail business. Consumers are ready for this paradigm shift and StyleSpur is in position to give it to them."

Parker, you idiot. It's like you're playing MadLibs with business jargon! You think they can't see though all that? If you'd just taken the time to look at the presentation beforehand— She cleared her throat and leaned forward. With all eyes on her, she tried to salvage what she could.

"Obviously, the key to business is staying ahead of the competition. After our dynamic breakout, retail companies have been chasing StyleSpur for the last three years." Lauren keyed the next slide forward, a sales projection for the following three years. Ignoring the thinly-veiled irritation on Parker's face, she continued. "The system we've created will revolutionize how the public interacts with fashion online. Companies will no longer chase us. They'll join us. We're already at the front of the pack and with this boost, we'll be leading the way for decades to come."

“I was just about to say that, thank you Lauren,” Parker said caustically. *Same to you, buddy*, she thought as she smiled sweetly.

Henry Adams from Pinnacle Ventures raised his hand to interrupt. It’d occurred to Lauren if the Urban Dictionary ever needed a photo of a certifiable silver fox, he’d be the man. With his tanned skin, white hair, and athletic physique, Henry was gorgeous. Gorgeous, ridiculously wealthy, and kind of a jerk.

“Parker, for the sake of saving a bit of time here, why don’t you just show us what it is you’ve created?”

“Of course, we’re all busy men here,” Parker grinned.

As he sped through the demonstration, Lauren’s annoyance skyrocketed. He flew through the features of their new website, brushed past the innovative app Lauren had designed and developed on her own, and essentially took credit for everything. It’s not that she needed a pat on the back but a little appreciation or acknowledgment wouldn’t hurt. *Hell, there wouldn’t be anything to present if it weren’t for me*, she thought bitterly. Parker set the remote on the table and leaned forward on his hands.

“Let’s skip over all the buzzwords. We have plans the other guys can’t even comprehend. We’re on top and plan on staying there. What’s so wrong with making bundles of cash while we’re at it?” Lauren resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Of course Lauren here has been invaluable to the creation of these new features.” Lauren smiled at the investors and, for a brief moment, thought Parker might redeem himself. “Without her keen feminine insights, I don’t think we would’ve been able to get this far. Being able to tap into the brain of a woman on a daily basis—I don’t have to tell you all how tiresome it can be but turns out, surprisingly valuable too.” The men at the table laughed as color flooded Lauren’s cheeks. She managed a small chuckle as Parker patted her on the shoulder. “Just kidding, sweetheart,” he muttered under his breath, just loud enough for her to hear.

“Well Parker, I think we’ve seen everything we need to see,” Henry said as he stood. “That’s enough shop talk for right now. Let’s go grab some dinner.”

“Only if you let me buy, Henry. I’ll tell you about my trip to the Seychelles.”

Lauren smiled politely as the businessmen filtered out of the meeting room. They regarded the office and employees as if they were exploring an exhibit at the zoo; programmers in the wild. After they’d left and she was sure she could move without shouting a string of obscenities, she returned to the open plan office. A dozen pairs of expectant eyes were on her in an instant.

“Guys, you’ve got to stop this! We have so much work to do and I can’t have you worrying about every meeting Parker and I sit on. It’s early stages. You can’t get worked up every time a suit walks in here.” She settled into her desk in the center of the large room. “You all have more important things to worry about. For instance, how is it possible I manage to kick your asses at foosball every day.” They laughed, relaxing and thankful for the reassurance.

Lauren wished someone would do the same for her.

2.

“He didn’t even acknowledge I’d written any of it. To every person in that meeting, thanks to Parker, I was just the token woman.” Lauren knocked back a shot of tequila and shook her head. “It’s like he wanted me to stand up and say, ‘I have a vagina and I approve this message’ or something.”

“That guy is such a creep,” Ali grumbled. They were in their favorite booth in their favorite bar, Pony Up, a dive bar that wasn’t in any travel guide.

“He really is. What’s worse is that he’s really good at what he does.”

“It doesn’t give him an excuse to be an asshole. Plenty of successful businessmen are nice people. Look at Warren Buffet or the guy that runs Virgin.”

“Richard Branson. Yeah, I know but for every one of them there are a hundred Parkers. Eh, I don’t need to like him, I just need to work with him, but even that is difficult most of the time.”

Alana Novak was Lauren’s best friend. She grew up in a tiny Oklahoma town but moved to New York City as soon as she could afford it. Ali didn’t have an ounce of Midwest left in her and you’d never guess she’d grown up throwing hay. But if you took one look at her dark hair, hipster glasses and pegged her as a struggling actress, you’d be right on the money. Lauren and Ali met at a company bowling night shortly after she’d started dating a salesman at StyleSpur. Long after Ali’s relationship fizzled, the girls remained close friends.

“I have an idea,” Ali said. She leaned forward, her blue eyes almost glowing in the dim light. “We’ll arrange a way for me to meet him. I’ll seduce him, make him fall in love but resist his sexual advances. Once I know I have him snared, I’ll lure him to a romantic weekend away in the Hamptons. He’ll pay, of course. One night, after a nice meal of lobster and expensive champagne, I’ll insist we go for a drive to look at the stars. ‘Oh, it’s so romantic. I miss the stars living in the big, bad city!’ He’ll eat it up. We’ll spread out a blanket near the water and I’ll strip him down, promising to deliver untold pleasures. And when his little pecker pops out,” she paused for dramatic effect, looking left then right before leaning back against the booth. “I’ll just laugh. Laugh and laugh and then snatch up the keys, steal his car, and leave the little urchin naked and alone.” Ali nodded solemnly, as if everything she’d just said was absolute fact.

Lauren tried to keep a straight face but burst into a fit of giggles. Ali merely smirked.

“I’m serious. I’ll do it. Just give me the go ahead. I might even push him into the water for good measure...”

“I think it’s great! Really, you should definitely do it but there’s one fatal flaw in that plan,” Lauren laughed. “You’d actually have to spend time with him and I’m pretty sure you’d last five minutes before just punching him square in the jaw.”

“Fair point,” Ali said raising her pint glass.

“You are totally the creative yin to my nerdy yang,” Lauren laughed. “Just promise to never join a cult or commune without me, okay?”

“I swear it,” Ali said somberly, one hand over her heart the other raised in a three-fingered girl scout salute.

Lauren gave one final laugh before crossing her arms. “Ugh, I’m just so sick of it. I’ve worked so hard for that company and all for what? The hope that we’ll keep surviving these stressful milestones and have the money to keep going. Or maybe, just maybe, a big fish will come along and buy us out.” She groaned and flopped on top of the table. Resting her head on her bent arm she continued, “Problem is, because Parker is who he is, I’m getting the chance to learn so freaking much. I’m getting an up close look at how startups operate and at my age with my experience? Priceless. Anyway, I’m sick of hearing myself talk about it. How did your audition go?”

“You sure? It’s just gonna be me bitching now. It went alright, I guess. I really like the role, I think I did well and they probably liked me so that means I’m not gonna get it.” Ali pulled one long leg up and hugged it to her chest. She played with the condensation on the outside of her beer glass.

“Oh stop it, don’t be so pessimistic.”

“You know it’s true. Whenever I like something, or somebody for that matter, it’s doomed.”

“You did choose one of the harshest careers in the world. I honestly don’t know how you do it. Everyone judging you, critiquing you, measuring. What about that guy you knew who was told his head was too big for his body? What the hell can you do about that?”

“He *did* look like a bobblehead. Hell, if I had your body I wouldn’t have anything to worry about! See, with your dark hair and eyes and skin color you could easily be Latina, Eastern European, even Asian with the right makeup. I’d be turning parts down left and right. We should figure out how to Freaky Friday ourselves.”

“Um, I’m not saying no...I’m just saying I think I might need to talk to Nick about that before committing to anything Freaky Friday-ish,” Lauren laughed.

“Speaking of the devil,” said Ali.

Lauren jumped as a hand touched her shoulder. She spun around to see her boyfriend grinning down at her.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. Scoot in, will ya?” Lauren shifted to the middle of the booth and they shared a brief kiss.

“All done? It’s so early.”

“Yeah, it’s dead in here. She let me knock off early tonight.” He rolled up the sleeves of his red plaid shirt, exposing his muscular forearms.

“Yay!” she exclaimed, giving him an excited hug. “I’m glad.”

“Nick. My dear sweet, obscenely handsome Nick,” Ali sighed.

“Yes, my dear sweet Llama?” He grinned.

“How many times do I have to tell you? You keep this thing up with Lauren and you’re gonna provoke my jealous side. I don’t think you’ll like me when I’m jealous.”

“You know, you never explain what it is specifically you’ll be jealous of. Is it because you want Lauren to yourself or are you secretly in love with me? I think it’s time we ask these difficult questions because I’m starting to think you’re just full of idle threats.”

“A little from column A, a little from column B. Did you know our little gal here had a shitty day.”

“Again? What happened?” he asked, his eyes filled with sweet concern.

“It’s alright, we can talk about it later. To be honest, I just want to play a little pool, get a little buzzed and go home, okay?” Lauren suddenly felt too weary to talk about anything related to Parker and StyleSpur without a good amount of alcohol in her body.

“We can definitely take care of that. Lemme grab a round and you girls put some quarters up on the table.”

Pony Up was pretty quiet for a Wednesday night. The music was turned low and a couple were playing darts on the other side of the room. The air conditioning cut the humidity and the stale beer smell every bar seems to have. Lauren was balanced on a bar stool sipping a Juan Collins, her feet dangling far above the floor. They’d been taking turns on one of the three pool tables before giving up the pretense. Now they were just drinking and she finally felt content.

“You doing okay, babe? You look thoughtful,” Nick said as he wrapped his arm around Lauren’s waist.

“Do I? I don’t feel it. I don’t know, Parker was a dick again today and it just brings back everything I’ve been saying since I started.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” he said giving her a squeeze. “Have you thought about

what we were talking about last weekend? It's so expensive here and things haven't worked out the way you thought they would. Maybe it's time we—"

"Shhh," Lauren said with wide eyes. "If Ali hears you she'll flip."

"Alright, but we should seriously talk about it. I know it isn't the greatest plan but I'd have a job at Phil's and you could do contract work or something. It's so cheap we could have our own place finally. Plus, you know you love summers back home..."

"True," she said reluctantly. Lauren quickly changed the topic when she spotted Ali approach from the bar, her long swinging strides meant for the guy watching her walk away. "The guys from Pinnacle seemed interested," she said as Ali drew close. "I think we won't have to be dealing with all this funding stuff for very long."

"Little Llama, how would what's-his-name feel about you getting phone numbers from other men?" Nick said with a smirk, watching her tuck a folded napkin in her pocket.

"What's-his-name is a single man in New York. He's got it easy. I need to keep my options open. Plus, how old school is actually writing your number down? Love it." Ali replied setting her beer on the bar table.

Lauren perked up. "That reminds me. I heard about a start up that just got funded. I can't remember their name, but basically they hire private jets to fly single women from New York out to Silicon Valley on the weekends. There's such an imbalance in the gender ratios and everyone's too busy to date anyway. Isn't that hilarious?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna need the number of that company," Ali laughed. "Isn't that what you guys are doing now? Trying to get funding?"

Lauren looked around the bar. There was little chance anyone important could overhear but stranger things have happened in the business world. StyleSpur was in a delicate position and if the wrong people heard the right information, everything could disintegrate.

"Right, so you really want to know?" Ali nodded. "Alright, let's use the lemonade stand analogy. When you were little and wanted to start a lemonade stand, you probably went to your parents and asked for money to get started. You had to buy the mix, sugar, cups, paint for the cute little sign you were going to make, all that stuff."

"Don't forget to paint the little backwards 'e' at the end of 'lemonade,'" Nick added.

"Obviously. So with that seed money, you started selling lemonade and because you were a clever little Alana Llama, you made sure your income covered your costs. Now, not only were you a clever little girl, you were hungry. You were ruthless. That tiny profit wasn't enough and you had bigger plans. With me?"

"Yup. I like that this is all about me so far but gonna be honest, though. If there isn't a mobster or car chase soon I might mentally check out," Ali replied.

“Fair enough. So, you wanted to branch out. More lemonade stands, maybe even get into growing organic lemon trees so you can start supplying to other kids in the neighborhood but you’re gonna need more money. Your parents are already tapped out, so you have to get it from somewhere else. You start quietly asking around if anyone is in the market to invest in your amazing lemonade company and hopefully you find someone who has the capital and the industry connections to help out. That’s where StyleSpur is at. We’re asking around to see if anyone is interested in helping us expand, make sense?”

Ali nodded but waved her hand as if to say, *go on...*

“Oh! Um, and you have to pay off the local mobsters for protection. For a small price, Gino the neighborhood kingpin, will make sure no other lemonade stands open up nearby.”

“Thank you,” Ali exclaimed, throwing her hands up dramatically. “No really, thanks. That all makes sense now.”

“I still don’t understand why you need to be involved in any of that,” Nick said. “You’re just a programmer.” She loved the way his forehead furrowed when he frowned, his dark eyebrows casting shadows over his eyes.

“Because Parker had no desire to learn anything about his own business. You’d think he’d want to at least try and understand what I’ve designed and how it works but no. It’s easier for him to just drag me along to all these meetings and waste my time,” Lauren grumbled.

“Shouldn’t that be his brother’s job?” Nick asked.

“Philip? Yeah, it is. He’s technically the CTO but he hasn’t been in the office in over a month. Apparently he’s on the West Coast meeting with potential investors.”

Ali pulled over another bar stool and sat. She leaned forward and rested a comforting hand on Lauren’s knee.

“It seriously sounds like it’s time for you to quit,” she said.

“Maybe. Something else happened during that meeting today. As I was sitting there listening to him ramble on and on, I remembered this idea I’d had months ago. I don’t really want to go into it because I haven’t thought it all through, but I think it could be pretty big. I’d have to review my thesis to make sure I know what I’m doing and I’d need to find a way to calibrate the cameras...” she realized Ali and Nick were staring at her blankly. “Anyway, I think it might be something that could guarantee us some serious funding. Once we get enough money to move forward and everything settles back down, things can go back to normal and I’ll be less stressed.”

“Will you have enough money to hire a hit on Parker cause there’s the source of your stress,” Nick snorted. Ali nodded in agreement. She leaned back and pretended to crack her knuckles.

“I’m cheap, sloppy, and would probably crack after five minutes of interrogation, but I’d do it for you.”

“Aw, you’re too sweet,” said Lauren. “No, I liked your idea from earlier. Much more humiliating.” The girls burst into laughter as Nick remained confused.

“What idea? Can I help?” They looked at each other, both imagining how he could possibly help in Ali’s original scenario, and laughed even harder.

Crissy tapped Nick on the shoulder. She was the petite blonde manager of Pony Up and she didn’t look happy.

“What’s up?”

“Hey guys. I’m really sorry to do this Nick, but do you think you can work tomorrow night and Friday? Trisha just no-call, no-showed for the second time. I’m gettin’ rid of her and I need to cover her shifts.”

“I’m sorry, Cris, of course I can. Let me know if you need any for next week, too.” Visible relief washed across her face. Crissy worked nearly every night and kept getting screwed over by her staff. From what Nick said and what Lauren could see, she was a good manager, just unlucky and probably a little too nice.

“Don’t know what I’d do without you. Let me get you guys a couple of shots.”

“Oh! I want Fireball!” Ali exclaimed, bouncing after Crissy towards the bar. Nick reached out for Lauren’s wrist and pulled her back, wrapping her in a huge embrace.

“I love you, you know,” he said burying his face into her hair.

“I love you,” she said muffled against his broad chest. The top of her head barely reached his shoulders and his long arms circled her completely. After a squeeze, she pulled away and looked up. *How did I get so lucky*, she asked herself. He brushed the hair out of her face and kissed her softly on the forehead.

“It’ll all work out, one way or another. You’ll see. Now let’s go get a little silly.”

Lauren leaned against Nick’s left shoulder as the cab flew down the road. It was late, she had to be up early, but all she could think about was getting home and getting his clothes off. His scent, a sweet mixture of sweat and cologne always stirred deep emotions in her. She subtly pressed her breast against his arm, the contact seemingly incidental and unnoticed. Her hand traveled up his thigh, squeezing the thick muscle. Nick looked down at her with an arched eyebrow. With a practiced look of innocence, Lauren returned his gaze.

“What?” she whispered. He smirked.

Nick cupped the side of her face as their lips met. Even after all these years, his touch caused her body to shiver with excitement. Their tongues met and she hungrily wanted more. Her fingers wound a path through his hair as he nibbled on her lip. She slid her left leg across his, draped across his lap. His scratchy stubble prickled her soft skin. He caressed her breast, her nipple growing hard through her shirt.

The driver suddenly slammed on the brakes, throwing them forward and out of their blissful daze. The cabbie blasted his horn, shouting out the window. Lauren suppressed a giggle, feeling like a teenager who'd just gotten caught making out by her parents. She smoothed her hair and settled back in the seat, but couldn't ignore the slickness between her legs. Thankfully they were only a few blocks away from their apartment.

Nick playfully slapped her ass as he held the front door of their building open.

"After you, my dear."

"Shhhh, we have to be quiet," Lauren whispered loudly. She didn't feel too drunk but could hear her words slurring together. "We don't want to wake Jess up again."

"I'm not promising anything," he replied.

They stumbled into the apartment and crept down the hallway to their room. Lauren softly closed the door. As she turned, Nick stepped forward and swiftly scooped her up in his arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he pinned her against the wall, his mouth hot on her neck. A surprised yelp escaped her lips as he sucked on her sensitive skin. He carried her to the bed and threatened to throw her down.

"No, don't do it!" Lauren squealed, clinging to him and laughing.

"I'd never," he smiled, lowering her gently onto her back. He lifted the black t-shirt over his head and Lauren couldn't help but reach out and touch his muscular body. He'd always been chiseled without trying, just from working physical jobs.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Lauren undid his brown leather belt, unzipped his jeans, and tugged them down to his ankles. She caressed the growing bulge in his black boxer briefs and looked up at him.

"I've been wanting to do this all night."

She carefully slid his underwear down and wrapped both hands around his hard cock. She gently rubbed the sensitive underside with her thumb and was rewarded with a shimmering drop of precum. She massaged the lubricant across his skin.

"Somebody's a little excited!" Lauren smirked up at him as she slid her tongue along the path her thumb had just traced.

After years together, Lauren knew exactly what to do to drive him crazy. Rather than

swallow him whole immediately she teased. Licking the length of the shaft, her hands expertly stroking in between, she had him squirming in no time. Slowly sliding her wet lips over the head, he pushed his hips forward. Pulling away, she shook her head and gave him a cheeky tsk. Resting him on the flat of her tongue with a smile, she looked up into his eyes posing like a porn star. A low groan escaped his throat and she giggled. The only downside of all this was how she teased herself. Igniting his lust, watching his reactions, it drove her crazy too.

Nick moaned as she tightened her lips and took him fully in, her tongue softly caressing as she went. He gently held the back of her head, her hair gathered loosely in his fist. After a few moments he stepped away to strip completely. Lauren helped him pull her blouse over her head before he climbed on the bed beside her. Kissing her neck, her shoulders, hands moving down to her waistband.

“It’s not fair. I’m naked and you aren’t,” he whispered tugging at her trousers.

She lifted her ass off the bed, allowing him to tug them off. Lauren laid flat on her back, Nick to her side as his hand slowly traveled down her belly. His fingers tickled the inside of her thighs, tracing intricate paths inching ever closer and closer to the place she most wanted to be touched. She spread her legs for him, encouraging him, yet his fingers traveled no closer than the crease of her leg. Soon she was squirming, arching to meet his fingers with every pass.

Nick kissed her hungrily. Just as his mouth found her sensitive nipple, he slipped his finger inside her wet pussy. Lauren exhaled loudly, the anticipation replaced by sweet pleasure. He nibbled lightly on her breast as his finger slipped out to tease her clit. She couldn’t take very much before she pushed his shoulder down to the bed, pressing him to his back.

Lauren grinned down at him, squeezing her breasts as she playfully bounced up and down. Straddling his hips, she gently guided his cock inside, working slowly to accommodate his girth. Once inside, she braced her hands against his chest and leaned forward, rocking her hips back and forth. Lauren closed her eyes and was lost in the sensations, his hard body slippery with sweat beneath her. Pressing their foreheads together, they gazed into each other’s eyes, her dark hair dusting the pillow.

“You feel so good,” she murmured. She leaned back and began rubbing her clit. Bouncing up and down on his cock, it didn’t take long before her fingers expertly triggered a powerful orgasm that rocked through her body. As the waves of pleasure subsided, she once again began to writhe. She leaned forward, far enough only the head of Nick’s cock was resting inside before smoothly rolling her hips back. He closed his eyes and groaned, his fingers digging into her hips.

Lauren rode him hard and fast, his hips rising to meet her every down thrust. She grabbed his hands and pinned them above his head, watching his expression of agonized pleasure. His eyes glittered with passion and his breathing shallowed.

“Keep going,” he whispered. Lauren squeezed her muscles tight around his cock, timing the contractions with each stroke. “Oh fuck,” he grunted through clenched teeth. His body stiffened beneath her as he exploded. Pieces of her dark hair stuck to her face and neck with

sweat as she smiled down at him. They rested for a few blissful moments before she slipped off him as he softened. Pulling the light sheet over her slick body, she felt much more sober and relaxed.

They chatted for a few minutes, plans for the weekend, a funny thing that happened to Nick at the shop. Before she started feeling drowsy, Lauren stepped to the bathroom to clean up.

“I really mean what I said earlier,” she called into the bedroom, sitting on the toilet.

“What about?” His voice was thick with sleep.

“Getting away from Parker and all his bullshit. I mean it this time. I’m gonna do my time, help them get funded, take my portion and get out.”

“Totally,” he mumbled. She flicked the light off and stepped lightly towards the bed seeing that Nick was nearly asleep. Kissing him sweetly on the forehead, she climbed in next to him.

“I even know how I’m going to do it.”

“Mmmhmmm...”

Lauren stared at the ceiling, listening to Nick’s breathing slow beside her. The passing cars threw light across the room and for nearly an hour she lay awake, her mind racing with plans and ideas.

June 3rd

Had a rough day yesterday but then it was like something snapped inside of me. When I was at the bar with Ali and Nick it just became so clear. I was telling them about Parker and all the bullshit at work and it was like I lifted out of my own body. It was like I was a fourth person in the group hearing myself talk and I just hated what I was hearing. All I heard was complaining and bitching about problems I either have no control over or could easily fix if I put my mind to it. I know it sounds ridiculous, but it was almost like an epiphany.

I’m the one that’s holding that place together. I’m the one that designed everything. Parker will never care how much of myself I put in and to be honest, the more I put in the more he expects. The only thing I can hope for is that the company gets bought out or becomes so successful it doesn’t matter. I’ve got my equity, if I can make it until then, I’ll call that a win. I resent Parker getting a dime off my hard work but what can you do?

A few months ago, when we were still in the planning stages of these new updates, I had a hint of an idea that I haven’t been able to shake. I even brought it up before but Parker shot it

down immediately. It's just floated there in the back of my mind and it wasn't until last night I was able to put everything together. I think it could be the key to everything. We'll get funded, I'll make my money, and then I'll be free to do what I want. There's been a shift inside of me, like my life just switched tracks and I realize how odd that is for me to say. This isn't like me at all and maybe that's a good thing.

4.

"Yeah, it's getting pretty hot here too," said Lauren. She walked towards the subway station, using her hands-free piece so she could juggle coffee, purse, and gym bag. The streets were heaving with people, dodging this way and that. StyleSpur had flexible hours so she never had to rush to get to work yet the surrounding bustle always spiked her stress levels.

"How's your day shaping up?" her mother asked.

"Eh, can't complain. Nick and I booked a brunch cruise for Saturday, should be good. Ali and her new boyfriend are coming too. Hey, how's Dad's knee? He keeps ignoring my emails about it."

"Oh, you know him, he doesn't complain but I can tell it's bothering him. School finishes in a little over a week and with all the kids gone, I'm hoping he can slow down. Who knows, though. The district's cutting back so Jimmy and Dwayne are only there part time over the summer. Your dad's the only full time janitor for both schools." Lauren pictured her mom sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and her People magazine. Nearly twenty years in America and her Hungarian accent was finally starting to fade.

"Aw man, that stinks. Well, keep an eye on him. If he needs to go to a physical therapist it's better to do it early. You know I'll sneak you some money for PT but I don't think I'd make much of a dent on knee replacement surgery."

"My little Wren, always looking out for us."

"What are you doing today then? Relaxing by the pool while the maid cleans?" Lauren smiled as her mother laughed on the other end. She could almost see her throw back her head and chuckle at the idea.

"No, I've decided to give Francine the day off. Poor dear works so hard, you know. No, I'm heading over to Mrs. Barnes' to help with her garden."

"Alright ma, I'm about to go underground. Love to Dad and Dave. I'll Skype you guys next week sometime, okay?"

"Sure sweetie, have a good day. Love you!"

“Love you too,” Lauren said as she jogged down the station steps.

The weather didn’t seem concerned about the date on the calendar. When Lauren had first moved to New York City in the autumn, everyone warned her about how horrible summers were in the city. Having grown up three hours upstate, Lauren nodded at the warnings but didn’t take them to heart. Now heading into her second summer, she was better prepared for the oppressive heat. The station air was muggy and hot, almost like standing in a sauna. A gust of wind from an approaching train tossed her ponytail around, providing the illusion of a cool breeze without any of the refreshment. She squeezed into the train and jostled her way to a pole. *I’m so squished in here I hardly see the point. It’s not like I’m gonna fall over*; she thought sarcastically.

As the train lurched forward a loud voice rang out.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m sorry to disturb you but I’m a homeless veteran. I haven’t had anything to eat since yesterday morning. Anything you can give would be greatly appreciated, God bless.”

Most of the passengers ignored the old man. His tattered clothes smelled and his teeth weren’t in great shape. They shifted away as he made his way down the car, his hat extended for any loose change. Lauren handed him a protein bar from her bag which he accepted gratefully. As the train rolled to a stop, the old man shambled out and a woman to her left spoke up.

“You shouldn’t do that, you know. It’s illegal for him to beg on trains. You’re just encouraging it.” The woman looked middle-aged, more tired than upset, but the comment irked her.

“I always throw a couple extra bars in my bag in case I see someone who needs it,” Lauren replied with a shrug. “But you’re right. I’m sure he’s in an alley right now, trading it for crack.”

The woman pursed her lips and looked away. Lauren could feel the heat rise in her cheeks but remained calm. She bit back a few more choice words she had for the cruel woman, the remainder of the argument still raging in her mind. By the time she stepped off the train, she’d won three times over in her imagination and her expression must’ve betrayed her mental victories.

“What are you so smug about?” a familiar voice said beside her.

“Oh hey, Josh. I didn’t see you. Nothing really, I’m just in a good mood.” Josh was a junior programmer at StyleSpur and only a few months out of college. He was a sweet guy, eager to please, and he always looked like he was in desperate need of a haircut. He fell into step beside her.

“I need a couple cups of that,” he said pointing to her travel mug, “before I’m as chipper as you in the morning.” They pushed through the turnstiles and trudged up the stairs to the street. StyleSpur offices were located in the Garment District on 37th Street between 8th and 7th

Avenues, which made them easy to get to and busier than hell.

“You wanna know a secret? I spike it with whiskey.”

“Seriously?” he nearly squeaked, his eyes wide.

Lauren laughed at his naivete. “No, not really but now that you mention it, I shouldn’t be this happy. I should be at least a little hungover. Maybe I should start adding a lil’ somethin’ somethin’,” she joked dodging between people. “How you coming along with your assignments? Running into any roadblocks?”

“Nope, I’m right on track. If you have a minute this afternoon, I wouldn’t mind going over an idea I had that might fix the issue we’re having with the search.”

“Yeah, of course! Anything you come up with, even if it’s just an idea, I wanna hear it. That’s the real difference between big companies and startups you know,” she paused as her phone buzzed, a text from the office manager.

Lauren, hope you’re close. Parker’s in one of his moods...

“Shit,” Lauren whispered under her breath.

“Is that your good mood ruined?” Josh said with playful but genuine concern.

“No, it’s just Faith. Nothing to worry about,” she replied with a small smile. “Above your pay grade. Have a look at my calender and reserve a half hour at some point today so we can talk, okay?”

Lauren hadn’t even gotten a chance to set down her coffee cup when Faith rushed over to her. The gorgeous tall blonde was very clever but suffered from some of the worst self esteem issues Lauren had ever seen. A few weeks after Faith had joined StyleSpur, the small team had a “team building” night on the town. Perhaps thankful for another woman in the office, Faith immediately attached herself to Lauren. That night she’d drunkenly told her about the abusive boyfriends she’d had, her failed attempts at modeling, and the friends-with-benefits arrangement she’d already started with Parker. Lauren still wanted to forget that last confession.

“Hey,” Faith said, her expression tight. “Let’s go to the kitchen, I’ve got this awesome new lowfat coffee creamer I want you to try. Tastes like Bailey’s.”

“Um,” Lauren said looking at the coffee cup in her hand, “okay, sure. Coffee.” She tossed her bag under the desk and followed Faith’s brisk steps to the empty kitchen. The StyleSpur offices were as open plan as possible. Each wall was floor to ceiling glass so it was difficult to find any true privacy. Lauren and Faith had perfected their clandestine meetings. They kept their expressions and body language happy, spoke softly, and turned away from watching eyes who might try to read their lips.

“What’s up?” said Lauren.

“I haven’t seen him this upset in a really, really long time. Pinnacle pulled out.”

“Damnit, what happened?”

“I think Parker said something and Henry took it the wrong way.” *More likely Parker put his foot in his mouth*, Lauren thought.

“Well that can be salvaged, surely,” said Lauren.

“No, not this time. The way he was ranting last night...sounds like they won’t ever be working together again. Something happened when they were out to dinner.” Lauren turned her back on the office and faced the counter, pretending to stir her coffee.

“Shit, this isn’t good. Henry was supposed to be in the bag.” She turned back to Faith with a broad smile. “This happened last night and he’s still in a bad mood this morning?”

“Well,” she blushed, tossing her hair over her shoulder, “he didn’t say a word this morning on the way in to work. He just parked the car and stormed away before I’d even gotten a chance to open the door. He’s been in his office since seven this morning.”

“Okay, fine. It’s not the end of the world. Let me go find out what’s going on, don’t worry about it, okay? Where’s this Bailey’s coffee stuff anyway?” she asked peeking into one of the cupboards.

“We don’t have any,” Faith laughed. “I made it up in case anyone overheard us talking, good excuse to get you into the kitchen. They really make it though, I can get you some if you want.”

“Nah, skip the creamer. I think I really should start Irishing up my coffee to get through the day.” Faith nodded, rubbing Lauren’s back sympathetically as they walked into the office.

Lauren settled into her seat, pulling her chair tight against the edge of the desk. She wiggled the mouse and both monitors flickered on. She quickly scanned through her email and any work that’d been checked in the previous night. After adjusting her headphones and keyboard, she organized various windows across the dual monitors and got to work.

After years at MIT, Lauren had developed good work habits. She started as one of a small group of women in the computer science program freshman year. By the time she graduated four years later, she was only one of two. Most of the guys in her classes were too shy to approach her and once they realized how talented she was, they were doubly intimidated. On top of that, most of the men she met outside her program were put off by her academic success, so Lauren was stuck in the middle. While she’d been popular in high school, college had been a lonely time.

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