

Starting Reading Now!
An extended excerpt.

PHILLIP

7 Brides for 7 Blackthornes, Book #4

New York Times Bestselling Author
Cristin Harber

PROLOGUE

Twelve Years Ago

Harvard College

Ashley Cartwright stood in the center of the business school auditorium stage and fumbled over the well-practiced lines. For weeks, she'd prepared for the mock presentation to the shareholders and the board. But now, instead of the memorized lines that detailed the success of the mock business she'd worked on all semester, she only replayed the polite applause from her class after Dean Dunbar had introduced their special guest.

Famed lifestyle guru and media mogul Agatha Cartwright handled the limelight as though she were born for the attention, and with an air of perfection, she'd gracefully taken her seat next to the dean. Her mother had shown no sign of recognition when Ashley was randomly called as the first student to present.

Turning to glance at the presentation projected on the screen behind her, Ashley regathered her thoughts. "Several factors contributed to the company's growth." Sweat dampened the back of her neck, under her hair. She'd simply blown it out this morning. If she'd known she would come face-to-face with her mother, she would've worked to add volume and a hint of shine, something to draw attention from her unlined lips. They'd talked this morning! Not about anything great—mostly about the mistakes Ashley was making in her life—but her mother could've warned her. "Including a focus on pricing and cost control."

Her mother pinched her lips and jotted on her notepad. *What did I do wrong now?* She wondered if her mother had taken notes like that earlier when they were on the phone.

Ashley hated public speaking. She loved working behind the scenes. Ensuring that her mock company was a well-oiled machine had been fulfilling, but explaining the process was simply hell.

“Including p-pricing and cost control...” she stammered. Murmurs and whispers mixed with poorly disguised laughter. Humiliation crawled up her back. “I mean, with production volume rising quickly...”

Her mother continued writing feverishly.

A strange sound mixed with the students’ laughter. She heard something like a “*baaa*” like an animal. *Ignore everyone. Don’t watch Mother.* Ashley clenched her clammy hands, checked the presentation over her shoulder, and continued. “Meeting consumer demands.”

“*Baaaa.*”

The bleating “*baaa*” called again as her peers quieted. Then the whispers began again. The next few seconds in her presentation were vital. The explanation of her company’s success was the largest part of her grade. Failing in this very specific moment would’ve been the equivalent of a comic ruining his punch line.

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin, catching sight of her boyfriend at the top of the auditorium. Her heart squeezed. He’d promised he would be there, ready to make her laugh and relax during her speech. She rebounded at his encouraging smile, able to ignore the niggling concern that her mother would notice her fingernails weren’t manicured.

“As demand grew, word of mouth grew.” Her confidence grew. She clicked the button for the next slide. “The first peak on the chart marks organic growth. The second...” She accidentally glanced at the first row. Disapproval shadowed Mother’s gaze. “The second—”

“*Baaa. Baaa.*”

Another wave of murmuring laughter cascaded down the auditorium.

“Shhh! Easy!” A man’s quiet commands mixed with the growing laughter.

Some students turned in their seats while others pointed toward the noises.

Dean Dunbar apologized to her mother and then turned from his front-row seat. “Quiet down.”

“Stop. Stay,” ordered the unseen man. “*Stay.*”

Concern skipped across Ashley’s skin. That sounded like Phillip issuing dog commands. She scanned the room but couldn’t see him anymore.

Gasps and giggles mixed with the bleating sound. An animal—a goat—clip-clopped quickly down the stairs, seemly unfazed. Phillip raced behind the goat, his arms open as though he were going to catch it. Ashley blinked, unable to make sense of the disaster but sick to her stomach that her boyfriend was behind it.

Her mother stood, and Ashley saw the exact moment of recognition. Disgust and disapproval creased the woman’s forehead. Ashley glanced from her mother to her boyfriend and back again until he and the goat were in the center of the auditorium.

“What are you doing?” Ashley hoarsely cried.

Phillip stopped and gave an apologetic shrug. “I brought you a sensitivity goat.”

Her jaw fell. She wasn’t sure if her shock or anger was stronger. “You didn’t…”

“Mr. Blackthorne,” Dean Dunbar called out. “Is that your *goat*?”

“*Baaa. Baaa.*” The goat turned to face the auditorium. Several students stood to help Phillip. The goat spun and ran, skirting back and forth along the raised stage. Then it stopped at the stairs that led onto the stage and lifted a hoof to the first step.

“Don’t,” Ashley whispered.

“Billi,” Phillip warned as he inched closer. “Stay.”

The goat eyed him and perched its other hoof onto the first stair. Uproarious laughter broke out again. Two guys from the front row accompanied Phillip as they moved in.

Phillip offered her a conciliatory grin. “Surprise.”

This time he’d gone too far with his tricks and fun. She would kill him—and oh, this was exactly what Mother had said was wrong with him. *Dangerously unpredictable and unstable.*

“Catch it,” Dean Dunbar ordered.

Phillip and his wingmen approached, their arms spread. The goat bleated and clattered up the stairs. Raucous amusement filled the auditorium. Ashley jerked back as the goat skittered to center stage.

“You’re on your own,” one of the guys told Phillip.

“Sorry,” the other said to her then lifted his shoulders in defeat. Both went back to their seats.

Phillip climbed on stage, cooing to the goat like he might coax it onto the leash and collar that hung from his hand.

The goat turned to Ashley, sniffing, and stepped closer. Its bright eyes wouldn’t blink, and its wriggling nose seemed wet.

“Phillip,” she hissed. “Catch it.”

“Don’t move.” He closed in behind the goat. “Stay perfectly still.”

The goat moved closer. Maybe it liked the flowers on her dress. “It’s going to bite me.”

“He won’t.” He inched closer. “Right, Billi? Billi Vanilli’s a petting zoo goat. He’s friendly. I promise he won’t bite.”

Billi Vanilli? Her hands trembled as the animal with a distinctive barnyard scent nuzzled her skirt. Its warm, snotty breath dampened the fabric against her knee. “It’s touching me.”

Phillip inched closer. “Don’t move.”

“Why do you have a goat?” she whispered, her voice shaking.

Phillip paused like she’d missed the obvious reason. “I promised you I’d come up with a distraction.”

“*What?*”

“To help you relax during the big speech.”

“Are you insane?” she hissed.

The goat jerked away as Phillip raised the collar near its neck.

“More like creative, but the little dude got loose,” he suggested, reangling. “*Don’t move.* I’ve almost got him.”

Who on earth gave him a goat?

The goat spun to face Phillip head-on. Its hooves clattered as it backed toward her. Its backside pushed against her legs, barely missing her feet! Ashley jolted.

“Ash, don’t move.” Phillip held the leash out in a loop so he could wrap it around the goat’s neck.

“*Baaa.*” Billi shuffled in place. Its animal sounds echoed from the stage throughout the auditorium. Ashley made the mistake of turning toward her mother. She’d always hated Phillip, complaining about his lack of maturity. Ashley had never disagreed over that point with Mother. He wasn’t the most responsible person she could have dated, and more than that, she would do anything for her mother to give her an ounce of approval.

Right now, that approval would never come. Mother's reaction had turned to cold indifference. The chasm between them felt like a public disowning.

Another sound came from the goat along with a sickening smell. "Ew! Oh God."

Phillip collared the goat. "Got you."

Plop. Plop. Plop.

"Phillip!" she cried, gagging. "No!"

He clipped the leash on as his eyes widened. "Oh, shit."

Laughter boomed through the auditorium. She staggered from the mess on the stage floor. His lips quirked, and he offered a helpless shrug.

Disgusted, stunned tears streamed down her face. Dean Dunbar called for a janitor and yelled for silence as her mother, Harvard's esteemed special guest, left without so much as a concerned glance or wave.

"That's..." Phillip couldn't finish without a laugh.

She wiped her cheeks, now the laughingstock of Harvard's campus.

"That's unfortunate," Phillip finally finished.

"Do you think this is funny?"

"Come on, Ash. It *is* funny."

"You think everything is funny! And if it isn't, you make it that way."

"Ease up." He gave her a sideways glance and tugged on the goat's leash as Dean Dunbar yelled for him to leave.

"Ease up?" she shouted, catching an awful whiff of the animal waste. "I can't do this anymore." She gagged, slapping her hands over her mouth.

Ashley stepped away and saw that the toes of her shoes had been *contaminated*. Her stomach turned. This time he'd gone too far. She kicked off her high heels as the goat bleated. The auditorium roared with laughter. The chaos surrounded her, strangling her, stealing her manners and compassion. "I hate you," she hissed.

Phillip, trying to lure the goat down the stage stairs, gave her another sideways glance.

He doesn't get it. "I'm done. I can't do this with you anymore." She turned away and ran.

CHAPTER ONE

Present Day

Upstate New York

All alone. Well, Ashley wasn't really all alone, but that was how Agatha Cartwright would see Ashley's breakup from Sean Paget, the man her mother had set her up with. There had been an unagreed upon expectation that he would be *the one*. He wasn't even close.

Ashley smoothed her hands over the silk skirt recently highlighted in *Home* magazine. She'd worn it especially for her mother to note. Though, if she had, Mother hadn't mentioned it, despite the skirt having been front and center in this month's list of Mother's favorite things.

Ashley crossed her legs under the mahogany table, waiting in the formal dining room of her childhood home for Mother's lecture. It had taken several hours for Ashley to drive south to Upstate New York, but there she was, coming when called. All the therapy in the world hadn't helped her with that yet.

"The tulips are lovely," Ashley offered to kick off the conversation. That was true. The flowers were breathtaking. The entire home was always immaculate.

No matter if there were film crews on location to tape B-roll for Mother's nationally syndicated lifestyle show, or if it were a *simple* family dinner, the Cartwright residence sparkled. *Always picture perfect.*

"They are," Mother said in a way that confirmed rather than agreed.

Ashley forced a grin but dropped her gaze to the square glass vases. Each had a ribbon tied near its top. Garden-fresh tulips packed each vase and lined the antique linen table runner in a way that softened the harsh dark wood.

But the antique table linen didn't soften her mother. With sharp features and perfect posture, Mother walked behind the chairs on the opposite side of the table. Her manicured fingernails trailed over the tops of the ornate high-back chairs.

“Mother?”

The older woman stilled then and turned, letting disapproval tug the corners of her coral-pink lips down.

Ashley refused to shrivel under the scorn. Even if she couldn't keep from coming home when called, she had mastered the ability to ignore the criticism... sort of. “Look, Mother—”

Her mother held up a hand. “Really, Ashley Catherine.”

“I—”

“It's bad enough that you ended a fantastic relationship without cause—”

“Mother—”

The upheld hand shook for Ashley's silence. “But that I had to hear the news from Robert Paget is embarrassing.”

True to form, Mother's concern was the family image, not how her daughter might feel. Ashley knew better, but still, disappointment roiled in her stomach. She also knew better than to say, “It's my life.” Instead, Ashley offered, “We weren't a good fit.”

Her mother's lips puckered. “That's not an excuse.”

It wasn't supposed to be an excuse. It was a simple fact. She and Sean Paget were not the least bit compatible, not in love, not in life, not even in general. She couldn't see how Mother

thought they were a good fit in any way except for the Paget surname. Still, the ever-present disappointment niggled at the back of her head. Even though Ashley was committed to living her own life and refused to kowtow to her mother's expectations, the sense of failure was never very far.

Ashley focused on the rhythm of her breath and regained control of her emotions.

"That's what people do. They date, and if it's not right, they move on."

Her mother folded her arms over her cream-colored blouse. "The Paget family are not *people*."

"Actually, they are. I checked. Sean was human."

"You know exactly what I meant," Mother snapped.

Her shoulders slumped. "Yeah, Mother, I do."

As though the conversation made Mother weary, she pinched the bridge of her nose. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

"You could do *nothing*." But that suggestion never helped. Ashley could be straightforward, shouting that she was her daughter, not a business in the market for an acquisition. Or she could mention a hope for romantic love.

Her mother clucked. "If I'd known you'd become harder to manage the older you got—"

Ashley called upon years spent with a therapist to stand up to her mother's iron will.

"Please, stop. My love life isn't a topic for conversation." Even though she knew it was the topic du jour when her mother demanded an appearance.

The sleeves and neck of her shirt seemed to cinch tighter. She rested her palm over her stomach and carefully monitored each slow breath, reminding herself that she was in charge of

her response. Then Ashley offered a different approach. “I’m sorry you were put in an embarrassing position.” She swallowed her aggravation. “I never meant to upset you.”

Mother’s chin lifted as she placed both hands on the top of the chair. A small grin formed in place of the scowl. “I appreciate that.”

But silence lingered. Ashley hadn’t said enough.

She searched for what else her mother wanted to hear, then offered, “The relationship ended amicably.”

That comment got no reaction.

“And... and we intend to remain in close contact.” *Still nothing.* “As friends.”

“Ashley Catherine...” Her mother eased into the chair. “I’m looking out for you.”

“I promise I’m fine.”

“You have no companion. No one in your corner.”

Ashley bit her tongue. Mother didn’t see that as the job of a family. Her father was happily aloof in his own world, which revolved around Wall Street. Her mother’s life revolved around making everything perfect. Together, Glenn and Agatha Cartwright made a terrific power couple, happy together as it served their individual and professional needs.

“I have my friends,” Ashley pointed out. “My company.”

Pity creased the corners of her mother’s mouth. “I can’t see how you have provided for yourself.”

The truth was, she was lucky. Still, Ashley’s molars sawed together. Yes, she came from a well-off family, she’d inherited an amazing place to live, and she’d had the privilege of a Harvard education to top off family business lessons. But in addition to that, she was tenacious, even if a bit stubborn. That had given her the gumption to provide for herself, even if she hadn’t

pursued the corporate executive lifestyle her mother had assumed she would take within Cartwright Media, the conglomerate corporation that owned the corresponding companies for the magazine, television show, home goods, and whatever else existed.

Picture Perfect, her event company, was all of her own making, and Ashley enjoyed the behind-the-scenes action. “I provide for myself, and it’s fulfilling.”

Mother mouthed, “fulfilling,” her feathers seemingly ruffled. “The Paget family offers stability, reliability, an impeccable image that would only enhance your little”—she waved her hand—“company.”

Ashley rebuffed the condescension and focused on her breathing. “That’s all fine and good, but I want to fall in love.”

“Like I said, you used to listen and ignore such foolishness.”

The jab hit like a spear through her heart. “Ignoring the foolishness” had served as a pivotal point in her life. Ashley might’ve walked away from love, but she pictured how her life might be if she’d continued in Agatha Cartwright’s *perfect* steps. Perfectly corporate and perfectly miserable.

The jab at Ashley’s foolishness had been what Mother considered a dismissal. Without a goodbye, she left the immaculate table, and Ashley was, thankfully, alone again—except for the turmoil consuming her thoughts: Phillip Blackthorne. He was the most irresponsible and worst decision of her life, hands down. Falling in love with him. Running away from him. Phillip had been a lesson she’d had to learn on her own, even if the rise and fall of their love still seared her heart.

CHAPTER TWO

King Harbor, Maine

Phillip Blackthorne leaned into the corner of his golf cart as it edged the immaculate path up the hills that made King Harbor Country Club's golf course legendary. Someone needed to note the balance of their golf carts, too, Phillip mused. The award-winning course was one thing. But a golf cart that he couldn't bring onto just two wheels? That was a completely different challenge that he was ready to accept.

The cart skated into the manicured greens, still on four wheels. Phillip roared with laughter. His brother Brock, not so much.

But Phillip had had to do something to ward off the anxious knot building in his chest when Brock broached the topic of Aunt Claire walking out on Uncle Graham at her sixtieth birthday party. Brock worried over the potential for corporate fallout and how outsiders would see the Blackthorne brand.

Phillip had no such worries and avoided family problems with distractions and adrenaline shots while his youngest brother, Brock, ate stress for breakfast, so long as it was properly branded with the barrel and thistle logo.

They bounced from the trail to the green and back onto the path again. Brock might not approve, but Phillip would bet his Callaways that his brother was having a hell of a good time.

"Enough," Brock barked, seemingly unruffled.

They bounced hard over a bump, and Phillip cut a sharp turn. “What?” He gassed the cart on a straightaway. “I couldn’t hear you.” They rumbled over a dip, and their drinks sloshed from their sweating plastic cups.

“If someone sees you acting like a jackass,” Brock said, “who do you think will clean up that mess?”

“Relax. We’re home free.” Phillip jabbed his elbow toward his youngest brother. “No one comes over here.”

They reached the top of a hill at full speed, and his stomach lurched as they crested, hitting a small swell hard. The cart jumbled back and forth before making a downhill streak. Phillip worked the steering wheel, but it seemed too loose.

“Phillip,” Brock shouted. “Watch out.”

He glanced down the long hill. A large event tent covered the open space between the thick barrier of trees on either side. “Shit!”

Phillip hit the brakes. A mechanical whir whined from below his feet. His foot pressed the brake pedal to the floor. Nothing happened. He pumped the pedal again, and still nothing happened. Adrenaline rocketed into his blood.

“The brakes?” Brock demanded.

He shook his head. “They’re gone.” Phillip jiggled the steering wheel. Their trajectory remained unchanged. “And the steering’s gone too.”

“You’ve got to be joking.” Brock glanced from the tent to the steering column. “Turn it off. Turn the key.”

He was already trying that. “It won’t budge.” They were running out of time, and he didn’t want to die today.

“We can’t hit that,” Brock said, stating the obvious. “Not if people are in there.”

“And ’cause we don’t want to die,” Phillip muttered, pressing the brake pedal to the floor and trying in vain to change course. They had less than a minute to figure out what to do. “We have to bail out.”

“Are you insane?” Brock threw his arm toward the tent.

“We jump out and do our best to knock the cart over.”

Brock’s jaw ticked.

“Or at least off course.” Phillip jerked the steering wheel and attacked the brakes. “Have a better plan?”

“I told you to act like a Blackthorne.” Brock tried to rock the cart. “You never learn.”

Phillip ignored Brock and kneeled on his seat. “Out the back. If we jump together, it might turn.”

Brock shook his head as they both climbed over their seats, precariously balancing next to their golf clubs.

Phillip looked over his shoulder at the tent. “Ready?”

Brock grumbled.

It was now or never. “One, two, three!”

The magical sound of happy guests chattering over leafy greens and the finest white wine filled both the tent and Ashley’s heart. The Laumet Society’s charity luncheon was, thus far, the pinnacle of her event-planning career. Even though she was grandfathered, or rather,

grandmothered, into the exclusive club, her membership was only considered social, which didn't mean much. She'd had to schmooze her way into handling this event, beating out well-known party and event planners. But she'd done it! The luncheon she'd spent nearly a year planning was now underway as the string quartet transitioned to "Amazing Grace."

Lori Wynell, the local-news television reporter, smoothed her hair behind her ear. "We're one minute out."

Ashley swallowed over the knot in her throat. "Great." While planning the charity event couldn't have gone any better, she would do nearly anything to avoid live television. Public speaking was her Achilles' heel. But Bitsy Montauk, reigning Laumet Society president for at least a decade, left her no choice, pushing her toward the camera with only polite introductions and strict instructions to share The Laumet Society's charity app.

Ashley could do that. How hard could it be to answer a few questions and explain how to participate in the online silent auction? Perhaps the camera would spend more time on the array of donation items than her.

Either way, after a lifetime of instruction from her mother on graceful presentation, she could do this. Ashley balanced her weight in such a way that she kept her slingback heels from sinking into the thick carpet of perennial ryegrass. The golf course at the King Harbor Country Club looked like an emerald velvet rug. The cool, thin blades were perfect for golfing. But high heels, not so much.

"Ready?" Lori asked Ashley as her camerawoman, Trinity, moved into place.

You can do this. She nodded and focused on the delicate clink of silverware against china plates that filtered through the high-vaulted ceiling of the air-conditioned tent. "Yes."

In the background, tuxedoed waitstaff worked their way through the elegant tables, clearing the salads and serving Maine lobster panzanella. She could picture each dish, garnished with grilled corn and roasted tomatoes, as clearly as she could recall each salad plate, with the decorative drizzles of olive oil and sprinkles of lemon zest. Everything was simply perfect.

Trinity extended five fingers. Lori cleared her throat, spoke to the newsroom, then to Ashley. “This will be a piece of cake.”

She hoped so. “Let’s get it over with.”

Lori smiled as though she understood Ashley’s nerves. Trinity signaled two seconds out, one, and showtime.

“Thanks, and that’s right, we are at the King Harbor Country Club, where The Laumet Society is hosting their annual luncheon and silent auction.”

Ashley’s heart skipped as Lori focused on her.

“Ashley Catherine Cartwright, the leading lady behind Picture Perfect, is here to share details about how viewers at home can participate in the charity auction.”

She leaned toward Lori’s microphone and wondered where to look. *At Lori or the camera?* She decided to do some of both. “The Laumet Society raises funds to help Maine’s homeless families, particularly their children, have a safe place to go, especially when the weather turns cold.”

Trinity glanced from her camera as Ashley paused, thinking that Lori would jump in for another question. The reporter paused briefly, unsaid questions passing between her and Trinity, before she asked, “How can viewers at home participate?”

Ashley recalled Bitsy’s wording. “This is the first year we’ve taken bids online. Anyone at home—”

“Move!” Trinity waved her arm. “Move! Now!”

Shocked, Ashley and Lori faltered, their high heels catching in the grass. Trinity pushed them aside, and they fell as a golf cart crashed into their tent.

CHAPTER THREE

The golf cart tore through the canvas tent wall and crashed into the silent auction table. Ashley gasped as the table turned. The string quartet screeched to a stop. Guests yelled and fled as silverware and plates crashed.

Everyone ran for safety except Ashley, Lori, and Trinity. The newscast duo morphed from society duty into recounting a catastrophe, narrating the collapse of the far side tent wall.

Ashley pulled herself up and gaped at the damage. “Is anyone hurt?”

“Anyone hurt?” immediately echoed, but in deep baritone voices. “Is everyone okay?”

She turned toward the voices. Two men rushed into the damaged tent and stopped, surveying the destruction.

Shell-shocked, Ashley did again as well. They were lucky no one had been in the direct line of the golf cart that now was pinned between two tables.

The scent of burning rubber hung in the air. Sirens rang in the distance. People could have died! Her legs wobbled as an ice sculpture crashed. She and Lori yelped as Trinity swung her camera toward the men.

Their dark hair was ruffled, and their crisp polo shirts grass stained. Her gaze narrowed, and another rush of anxiety hit. “Brock?”

He stopped, blocking the identity of the other man behind him, but Ashley would know him anywhere, even when masked by the unusual longer hair and stubble. Brock’s focus on the camera registered the seriousness of the situation, and she could’ve sworn he mouthed a silent curse. But that was Brock, ready for the camera, always confident and controlled.

And if that was Brock, and this was a disaster... Her stomach turned. *Years of avoidance.* For years, she'd changed her plans and done everything to avoid her ex since the day she'd broken their hearts and run away.

Phillip stepped into her clear view.

"Oh God." Her hand clutched her chest at the sight of Phillip Blackthorne—the king of shenanigans and skirter of responsibility, the only man she'd ever loved. He was a paradox of playfulness and deep, hidden emotions. A flood of embarrassment and anxiety nearly took her to the ground.

Brock strode forward, greeting all in his professional tone.

Phillip came alongside his brother, greeting only her. "Ashley."

Her name on his lips made her weak. She needed to hold on to the disaster that surrounded them, remember that this was who he was, and what happened when he was around. But her heart nearly screamed.

"Phillip." Tears burned her throat. "Hello." She didn't know why she ached or how to make that pain go away.

"It's been a while." His jawline had sharpened over the years, but his dark, playful eyes remained the same, dancing and daring her to hide anything from him.

But something in him had changed beyond surface level. She didn't know what and shouldn't care. Their differences needed to keep her from him.

"It has," she admitted. Heat rose to her cheeks as did a tornado of emotions. She had been angry and a coward when she'd run off the stage at Harvard. She'd also been weak and far too easy to influence. All the years she'd thought about apologizing to him, wondering about the

possibility of what they could have been, but knowing, despite her immature means, the breakup had been the right decision.

Ashley swallowed but then came back to the here and now. She was surrounded by everything she needed to know about Phillip's irresponsibility. But this time, his recklessness had nearly killed her. Just like her mother had said, Phillip was a risky disaster. And her mother, famously, was never wrong.

Brock abruptly turned toward the reporter and camerawoman, reminding Ashley they were still there. As if the acknowledgment gave Lori permission, she launched at Brock with a tirade of questions. Always unfazed, he shifted the conversation and the reporter's line of sight away from her and Phillip and the damage to an unmarred tent wall with large plastic picture windows that overlooked the green.

Phillip cocked his head, stepping to Ashley's side. "Small world."

"Small world," she managed, tight-jawed.

The corners of his lips quirked. "You don't look happy to see me."

Oh, the jokes. His irresponsible quips came roaring back. "That might be the understatement of the summer." Her teeth tapped, a mixture of nervous energy and sudden irritation—both at him and herself. "I'm not thrilled to see you."

"Consider me shocked." He smirked. "Would you like to scurry off? I think Brock has this handled, and you're so good at running away."

Her molars ground together. "This is the wrong time to turn us around on me."

"There is no us. Remember?" He crossed his arms. "You decided that years ago."

"A lot of good that did me." She was a strong woman. Perhaps stubborn, somewhat too strong for her own good, but she likened her resolve to steel in so many situations. *Unmoving.*

Unyielding. Steel was the strongest metal known to man, impact resistant and unscathed when pulled in opposite directions. Right now, that was what she needed to be.

Phillip dabbed at a cut above his eyebrow, masking a small wince.

“Are you—” She made herself stop. He had a small cut when he could’ve killed people. That was what she needed to focus on.

“Ashley,” Lori called, snaring her attention.

The camera swung toward her and Phillip, and worry creased Brock’s forehead. But she was a professional—even if petrified of public speaking—and he knew she would handle herself under pressure. They’d worked together, fixing problems behind the scenes before, though nothing of this magnitude. Ashley straightened her shoulders and stepped toward the camera, reminding herself to be steel, and listened for what Lori would ask next.

“There she goes, leaving again,” Phillip muttered under his breath.

Brock seemed to sense the brooding trouble and loudly, if not smoothly, pulled the camera’s attention back toward him.

That was her cue to get rid of Phillip. With an elegant turn, she whispered, “Go away.”

“Not yet.”

Ashley wanted to shake that smug, cocky half grin from his face. Instead, her hands clenched, and she muttered, “To think, I forgot how I hated you.”

Phillip cackled as though that were what he was hoping to hear. “Glad to see nothing has changed.”

Gah! She hated this... *feeling*, whatever it was.

Lori cleared her throat.

Ashley focused on the waiting microphone. Embarrassment rocketed up her spine, flushing heat across her face. Her stomach turned as Lori repeated her question, and Brock, again out of the frame, mouthed, “We’re still live.”

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