

# ONE



Dear Debra, I am going to kill you.

I aggressively backspace before a nosy colleague can read the brash email draft over my shoulder. Narrowly escaping the cubicle life—and the privacy that comes with it—means the whole office is privy to everything I do between the working hours of eight and four, when my ass is glued to my seat behind my receptionist desk by the front door. Of course, their asses should also be glued to their seats, but I'm convinced nobody does time theft quite like the employees at Curated Care Life Insurance.

I try again for something less likely to get me reported to HR.

Dear Debra,

I hope this email finds you well! I'm circling back to see if the end-of-week report is ready? I'd love to drop it on Luke's desk by four.

Thank you, and let me know if there's anything I can do to help!

Best,  
Brie

I debate taking out the exclamation marks, but at this point, fuck it. If Debra didn't want an over-eager receptionist in her inbox, she should have sent the reports by noon, like she's supposed to.

A huff escapes as I click send and push away from my desk. In the five months since starting at Curated Care, I've gone from teary-eyed gratitude at finally getting hired somewhere to needing to give myself morning pep talks in the bathroom mirror every day while getting ready.

Moisturizer: *It's a new day. Make it a good one!*

Eyeliner: *You're the hottest receptionist (see also: only receptionist) in the place. Work it.*

Mascara: *How lucky you are to get a biweekly paycheck! Thriving!*

With twenty minutes to kill before end of day, I wander to the water jug, which is adjacent to Debra's office. Since we share the same floor, I can just nag her in person, which worked fine until recently. I even kind of enjoyed it. Debra used to give off gracious granny vibes, like she loved nothing more than letting me sit in her office while she stuffed me full of gingersnaps from the cookie jar she keeps on the corner of her desk. But I'm starting to suspect that was just a make-the-new-girl-feel-welcome ruse. I'm now well acquainted with the procrastinating menace beneath her sweet-as-pie facade.

I'm pretty sure she's asleep at her desk, if her tucked-in chin is any indication. I clear my throat, then do it again when she gives no response. Jesus, is she *dead*? I know she's old, nearly at retirement, but not *that* old.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter, giving the empty water jug a shake. A few drops drip sadly into my waiting cup, but nothing more.

“Nearly that time,” Ted from Sales says, passing me from the hall that connects the office with the stairwell leading to the back door. He smells faintly of something too sweet to be natural, a sure sign he was on a vape break. “Also, don’t forget to fax this week’s sales numbers to Corporate. I think I saw Luke leave a note about it on your desk earlier.”

First off, Ted, mind your fucking business. Second—

“Just waiting for Debs to send me the report,” I say through clenched teeth. The Post-It note I found stuck on my clunky keyboard upon returning from lunch read in neat print:

B,

*Please fax the weekly report to corporate and leave a copy on my desk.*

*Thanks in advance,*

L

As if my boss thinking I can’t competently do my job without nudging isn’t bad enough, I also have the joy of bracing myself for my weekly brawl with our prehistoric fax machine. Meanwhile, the fact that I could send the report as a PDF attached via email hangs over my head like a juicy steak. If only Curated Care didn’t still abide by operations put in place in the ’80s.

Ted takes the initiative to strike up a conversation and props an elbow on the empty water jug. “Any fun plans this weekend?”

Ted is the type of man who shows just above the normal colleague-level of interest in my life, but his salt-and-pepper hair and receding hairline make it difficult to tell if his weekly asks

are in the office dad way or the office dad-*dy* way. I desperately hope it's the former, for both our sakes.

"Nothing much," I say, the same answer I've given every Friday since starting here. "Takeout, trashy TV, tequila, oh my!"

I should return the question, but I never do, because that breaks one of my most sacred rules: Don't get personal with others, and they won't get personal with you.

He smiles in a clueless way that suggests he doesn't get my reference. "Cool, sounds like a great time. I miss the days when tequila didn't end with my head in the toilet."

"Stomach of steel," I boast. A lie, given I don't even drink tequila and wouldn't put money down on it not coming back up if I did. It's admirable if I consume more than two cups of water most days, even with a full water jug.

Before we can dig into the conversation further, I toss my empty paper cup into the trash and turn back toward my desk.

I only make it a few steps away when he clears his throat. "Oh, and, uh, also, the water jug is out. Might be nice to replace that so you won't need to worry about it Monday."

He ambles back to his desk and I try not to throw the finger at his retreating form. When I signed on for this job, I didn't realize it'd make me into the office pleb.

As I haul a fresh water jug out from the storage closet, I brighten marginally to see Debra is awake again, her open inbox reflected in her glasses. After getting my workout for the week while switching out the jugs, I sprint back to my desk to see an email from her in my otherwise empty inbox.

The report is attached . . .

That's all she wrote. If this were our first rodeo, the foreboding ellipses might be cause for concern. But after weeks of this

cat-and-mouse dance, I'm immune to Debra's lack of email etiquette, though she usually adds a closer. Like me, she uses *Best*, but unlike me, she doesn't do an anxiety double scan, so more than once I've received a response with the signature:

*Bet,*

*Debra.*

I really can't blame her, because if I was seventysomething and working at the same company I'd started off at as a twenty-seven-year-old receptionist, I wouldn't give a shit, either.

Then again, I have zero plans to still be here forty years from now.

I fire off a quick *Thanks!*, print the pages, and staple one set for Luke. Just in time for the little hand on the clock over the door to click over to four.

Ted and the rest of the Sales team are out the door first, as usual. Everyone else files out after, chatting about weekend plans and the impending holiday. Eight AM and four PM are Acknowledge Brie Hours, where I get a stream of hellos and goodbyes from people I barely communicate with aside from during full staff meetings, when someone has a birthday—I was bullied into joining the birthday committee as a newbie—or, apparently, when the water jug needs to be swapped out for a new one.

“Hey, angel, ready to go?”

And then there's Krystal Santiago.

“Almost,” I say, shrugging my coat on as Krystal leans against my desk. The fluorescent lights don't make her look half as sickly as me, though whether that's due to her glowy light brown skin, thanks to a ten-step skincare routine she swears by like it's the Bible or the hummingbird, glass-half-full energy she radiates, I don't know. Before moving to Tarentown, Pennsylvania, I had never met anyone who smiled as much as Krystal, except my

dad. Maybe that's why she's the only one I let weasel in. As painful as his memory is, I'm greedy for any scraps to feed it so he doesn't disappear.

I hold up the report, flashing her a smile. Not the fake kind I used on Ted, but a real one. "Just gotta drop this off in Luke's office."

Her freshly waxed brows pop up. "How much coaxing did Debs take this week?"

"Only my soul and the blood of my firstborn," I reply. "She's been exceptionally forgetful lately," Krystal comments. "She never used to give you this much of a hassle."

"Lucky me." I round the curve of my desk and knock on Luke's closed office door. He doesn't answer, which I expected since I can see it's empty through the open blinds. Normally, I wouldn't barge in, but it seems safe to leave it on his desk since he told me to in his note.

His office looks as drab as every other time I've been in here in the month since he started. Nothing but a **WORLD'S BEST BOSS** mug of pens on the intricate rosewood desk, a few books on the shelf to the right, and a plaque that the old boss got him that reads **LUKE D'ANGELO**. No wall decorations or photos of a partner or kids. Or any family at all. Luke has yet to lay down roots.

That makes two of us.

My gaze catches on a sizable brown paper bag tucked behind his desk. It sits on top of a huge book with a cracked leather spine. There's faded gold lettering across it, but even with my contacts in, I can't make out what it says. I plant my palms on his desk to lean closer so I can read it—

"Do you need something?"

I spin to face my boss in the doorway. Except, he's not in the doorway—he's *here*. Right behind me here. So close that my

shoulder smacks into his and I reel back from the collision. But then there's his desk, and there's nowhere to go as the backs of my thighs bump against it and I fall backward, planting both butt cheeks on it as my balance vanishes with my dignity.

Hands grab my arms to steady me before I fully topple over. The world stops moving, my balance returns from war, and I stare at a silk eggplant-colored tie because I can't let my mortified gaze meet the eyes of the man whose *desk I was just bent over*.

"You scared me!" I burst out.

"It *is* my office." If my ears squint, they might detect a hint of wryness in Luke's usually even tone. His hands leave my arms and he backs up so I can hop off his desk. "Do you need something?"

The repeated question isn't accusatory, but I still feel like I've been caught doing something I shouldn't. Which, yeah, it probably *looked* that way, when in reality I was just being nosy.

"I was coming in to give you the report." I pry it off his desk and hand it to him. The pages are wrinkled from being sat on, but if holding a piece of paper with the imprint of my ass bothers him, he doesn't mention it.

He gives it a quick once-over. "Thanks for dropping it off."  
*And for the embarrassing show*, I add silently.

"Sales numbers looked good this week," I say instead.

He nods approvingly. "That's great."

Humiliation burns my face, made all the worse by how hard I'm trying not to notice that the sleeves of his white button-down are expertly rolled up to just below his elbows, giving way to tanned forearms leading to veined hands. Hands that I can still feel the phantom warmth of on my upper arms. I jerk my eyes up, but the rest of him is no better. Short dark brown hair that curls at the edges, equally dark eyes that are impossible to

read. They're what make it difficult to guess his age, though I'd wager that he, Krystal, and me are the youngest trio in the office by at least a decade.

"Do you need anything else before I head out?" I ask, never quite sure how to end conversations with him. He's the one person in this office I can't figure out. Like me, I don't think he's keen to let anyone in. Which *should* be comforting, but his lack of familiarity gets under my skin. He's made it clear my use to him lies in successfully herding everyone into the conference room for the monthly All Hands meeting and bugging Debra for the weekly report so he doesn't have to. If his Post-It note prodding is any indication, I'm sure he's already come to his own conclusions about how efficient I am at the latter.

"I'm all set. Have a great weekend, Brianna."

It takes everything in me to hold in my bristle. I don't like when people call me by my full name, but since Brianna isn't even my actual name, it's doubly insulting. At first I let it slide because he was new, then a week turned into two and now here we are. But between the water jug and Debra's evasiveness, I need to start earning a little respect around here. "Actu- ally, it's—"

"Deb?" Luke calls out, brushing past me. His knuckle grazes my wrist and a jolt thrums through my body. "Can you stay a few extra minutes? I have some questions about the report."

Frustration burns away the remainder of my embarrassment as I exit his office while Debra slides past me. I wait until Krystal and I step into the hall to go off.

"Whatever *questions* he has, he could have asked me," I fume, stabbing my finger into the down button on the elevator. "All Debra does is click a button to generate the report. I'm the one who actually looks it over."

"I'm sure he just didn't want to keep you longer," Krystal says

as we step in. “He probably assumes you’re going home to some hot stud who will beat him up if anyone inconveniences his beautiful babe.”

“Is the beautiful babe in the room with us?”

She laughs, hooking her arm through mine as we exit the elevator and walk into the parking lot. “Come on. With that gorgeous head of hair,” she says, then blows a frizzy brown curl out of my face. Her breath smells like bubblegum. “And smoldering face—”

“I’m pretty sure most people call it an RBF—”

“Luke’s probably dying to go deeper with you. I mean that literally *and* physically. You should have seen how fast he speed-walked to his office when he saw you go inside. Olympic-worthy stuff.”

“Yeah, right.” I wrinkle my nose, tucking the loose curl behind my ear. The ends fall just past my shoulders and are lighter because fully cutting off my grown-out highlights would have resulted in a bob. That would have been *too* receptionist of me. “I also fell on his desk.”

“I know. I watched the whole thing. Pretty sure anyone who was still here did. It was a slow Friday.”

I groan. “Then you’ll understand why I have to move to Alaska and change my name. Which reminds me—Luke can’t even get my name right! He called me Brianna again.”

“Maybe *she’s* your gorgeous, sexy alter ego dying to bang her boss.”

“I think we can give Brianna higher standards than a man who chalks decor up to a WORLD’S BEST BOSS mug. Besides, keyword here is ‘boss.’ Off-limits.”

Krystal rolls her hazel eyes at that. “He’s *middle management*. The peak of his power is controlling the thermostat, and as fresh meat, he probably doesn’t even know how to do that yet. I doubt

he'll last long. Seems overqualified. But enough about Luke. I want to talk to you about something else."

Like every day, our cars are parked side by side. We stop at our trunks and she fiddles with her keys, uncharacteristically hard-pressed for words.

"Am I in trouble?" I joke.

She laughs. "No, not at all. I just wanted to invite you to join Amelia and the girls and I for Thanksgiving. If you don't have any plans, of course."

A knot forms in my chest, squeezing the air out of my lungs. Thanksgiving. A holiday to spend with family and loved ones. I knew it was coming up, but I didn't realize how close it is.

"Oh, that's really nice of you," I force out. "But I—"

"You don't have to let me know right this second," she cuts me off, sensing the denial. "It's still two weeks away. We just do a casual thing with my in-laws. And Aurelia's been practicing for the turkey musical at school and plans to put on her own rendition of the performance, so there will even be entertainment. For a kindergartner, the kid's got pipes."

I try to imagine it. Sitting around the dining table in Krystal's home with her wife, Amelia, and their two young daughters. Her in-laws asking me if I want gravy on my mashed potatoes. Trying to keep a smile on my face while the memory of last Thanksgiving gouges out the last morsel of my will to live. Which makes me feel awful, since Krystal is the proud sponsor of that last morsel to begin with.

"Thanks. I'll let you know next week."

My answer isn't going to change. I'm not interested in celebrating the holidays, I just need to survive them. The best way to do that is by pretending they don't exist in the first place.

"Great!" she brightens up again. "See ya then."

I slide into my old Ford Escape and am nearly out of the lot

when I slam on the brakes. “Shit!” I groan, dropping my head onto the wheel. I forgot to fax the fucking report.

I don’t bother parking again, just pull up to the curb and hop out. I’ll have to be quick so I don’t miss my window to make it home before dark. To my annoyance, the doors are already locked. They’re supposed to stay open until six.

I ring the buzzer a few times. Despite Luke and Debra’s cars still being in the lot, neither lets me in. Thankfully, the back door is nudged open with an empty paper towel roll and I slip inside. “Thank you, Ted and your nicotine addiction,” I mutter, jogging up the stairs.

The lights in the office are off, steeping the space in a red emergency glow. I’m halfway to my desk when a thump sounds from Luke’s office.

His blinds are closed and the lights are off, although a soft glow permeates from under the door, like a candle.

But why would Luke have candles and thumping noises coming from his office?

“No way,” I breathe, horror filling me as what might be a groan floats toward my sweet-summer-child ears. There is *no way* that Luke and Debra are doing the dirty right now. No way. She could be his *grandma*.

But maybe he’s into older women. Maybe he’s embarrassed, or if it really is Debra, doesn’t want to start what would surely be an HR nightmare.

Maybe *that’s* why Debra was so sleepy today.

My hands fly to my mouth. I should leave.

Luke’s muscled physique flashes in my mind. He’s taller than me by a solid few inches, and I’m taller than Debra by at least half a foot. He’d overpower her easily. Could Luke be hurting her? Once the thought is planted, it’s like a weed. I can’t leave without being sure.

Steeling myself to be traumatized, I quietly march down the aisle of cubicles until I get to Luke's door. The groaning is louder here, but no, that's wrong. It's more like *gurgling*.

Dear *God*.

Past the gurgling, another sound hits my ears that's even more peculiar. *Chanting*. And in what sounds like Latin, or something equally ancient.

Before I can consider the lasting damage this might do to my retinas, I peek through the small window on Luke's door.

My inhale is sharp, full of all the disbelief that floods me at the sight. Unlike my fears, Luke and Debra aren't in the nude getting freaky on his desk. But this might be worse.

Luke's desk is shoved against the bookshelf, leaving an open floor where a blue tarp has a *pentagram* painted on it in what looks like blood. Candles are lit at the five points, and in the center, Debra writhes. Her jaw looks like it is unhinged from the rest of her skull, the gurgling sound thanks to a shadowy black mass getting pried out of her by an unseen force.

In the opposite corner of the office, Luke's face is twisted with cold, dark fury. Chanting spills from his lips as he reads from the book I saw on the ground earlier.

"What the *hell*?"

I slap my hands over my mouth, but it's too late. Luke's eyes wrench away from Debra, widening in shock as they meet mine.

That break in concentration is all it takes. The shadows suck back into Debra's body, her neck rolls, and her eyes snap to me, pools of inhuman black.

And faster than any seventysomething woman should ever move, she lunges for me.