

August and Everything After

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/17661245) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/17661245>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	F/F , F/M
Fandom:	The Black Tapes Podcast
Relationship:	Alex Reagan/Richard Strand
Characters:	Alex Reagan , Richard Strand , Nic Silver , Emily Dumont , Howard Strand , Cheryl Baker , Original Characters , Tannis Braun , Thomas Warren
Additional Tags:	AU: Coworkers , alternative universe , Slow Burn , Hate to Love , Enemies to Friends to Lovers
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2019-02-04 Updated: 2019-02-15 Words: 11,487 Chapters: 4/?

August and Everything After

by [krushnicc](#)

Summary

Inspiration comes from the Latin *inspiratus* and in English has the meaning "the drawing of air into the lungs." In theology it refers to a divine influence upon a person, from a divine entity.

Alex Reagan is hailed as one of the best in the photography field. Enter Richard Strand who starts making her question if she's drawing art from a dead past.

And so the unbecoming of Alex Reagan and Richard Strand starts...

Neptune

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Oh, he’s hot.”

“You believe every guy in a suit is hot, Emily,” Alex takes a slow sip from her mug and sighs with the taste of caffeine making its way through her blood, “Isn’t he... like... old?”

“Not that old but I would have never imagined he would take up the post since he has other degrees besides the study of art and stuff,” Emily waves her hand around. “He seems nice though. He came by the office to say hello to the staff yesterday and I drowned in his god damn blue eyes.” Alex rolls her eyes as Emily giggles like a schoolgirl.

“I’m gonna miss Cheryl.”

“Yeah, we all do.”

“Do you think he was just forced to take up the post because Howard wanted to keep it within the family?” Alex was bitter as she had hoped she was a candidate for the job. She’s been part of the Strand Creatives for over seven years and she knew she qualified enough for the promotion. While she was on a work trip, she was prepping to talk to Howard Strand, the CEO of Strand Creative, if she can take Cheryl’s job since this would be her last year. Alex didn’t expect Cheryl to leave six months before the year ended and didn’t even give a goodbye in person. Cheryl sent a mass email to everyone but Alex thought it was impersonal. She was bitter about that.

“I don’t think so. While you weren’t here, he made quite an impression on us with his decisions for the publication for next month. He wanted to add more flair to the articles; he says fluff pieces will be one to two pages and then he wanted to re-haul the branding and marketing for the Marcus Hotel,” Emily hums, stroking her chin, “So I don’t believe he’s incompetent and just a face for familiarity. But it makes you wonder why he has degrees in religion, mythology and psychology, which are remotely far from our field.”

“Jesus,” Alex mumbles, “This was just in the five days I was gone? What else did he do? Change our seating arrangement because his psychology degree told him so?”

Emily laughs, “That’s a bit dramatic and yeah he changed up the layout in our office.” Alex groans and had half a mind to hit her head on the table. “You’re still in your little office so don’t you worry! The layout is more open. Strand says having a huge table in the room’s middle works better for creatives to feel connected and, well,” she shrugs, “he isn’t wrong.”

“You’re already brainwashed by this guy,” Alex sighs more and places a hand on her forehead, tipping her head back, “I have lost my comrade!”

“Give him a chance, Alex,” Emily gives her a small smile, “he’s not half-bad.”

At five-thirty pm, Alex has never felt this tense since helping with the re-branding of a large coffee-shop chain three years ago. She also hasn't been this annoyed in a while.

"Give him a chance," Alex mocked Emily's voice, "Pft, dude is a douche. A pain in the ass, an asshole," and continued to spout profanities as she angrily packed her things. "I'm Richard Strand and I have three degrees from Yale and I'm smarter than everyone and your photos don't have that certain emotion and look and ugh, fucking prick!" She huffed and puffed her way out of the office to the elevator still mocking her conversation with Strand under her breath as she waited for the elevator.

"Hello, Miss Reagan," the voice snapped Alex from her angry bubble and looked up to see Strand holding the door open for her.

She nodded her head as she stepped in, "Mister Strand."

"Ah," Strand clears his throat, "just call me Strand. Mister Strand is my father and I don't feel comfortable with the honorifics."

"Duly noted."

The elevator ride was uncomfortable with Alex shifting her weight between her legs every ten seconds as she scrolled on her phone. During their first meeting, Strand talked to her about her recent photographs and she felt angry but a little embarrassed with her little tantrum... Even though he doesn't know about the tantrum? Alex, displaced with her emotions, darted from the enclosed space as soon as the elevator doors opened, missing Strand's goodbye.

Alex drove home annoyed however she can't help the tinge of hope that there's a possibility the guy isn't much of a douchebag if he considered being called Mister Strand was a bit too much.

"Hey," Emily poked her head in Alex's office, "didn't see you for all day after our lunch break? How did it go with Strand? Isn't he dreamy?" She leaned against the frame.

Alex could lie and say Richard Strand was ugly to her but knowing Emily, she could smell the hot pile of bullshit. Richard Strand was not ugly. The Strand family are a bunch of good looking bastards. If Alex could describe how the family looks, 18th century vampires of Transylvania comes to mind. The kind of vampires that have flawless skin, flawless hair, flawless voices. That's what the Strand family is; Richard is another living proof besides Cheryl that great genes come strong and will last through the test of time. It's annoying how good looking they all are. "He's not half-bad," Alex dryly comments. "But yeah," she sighs, "I was practically with him for the duration of my day going over my recent work and told me where I can improve and what not."

Emily enters her office and slinks down on one chair in front of her desk. “Ooh boy, that’s a doozy,” Emily cups her face with one hand and looks at Alex, “how’re ya holding up, bud?”

Alex throws her a crumpled up post-it, “Fuck off Dumont.”

Emily laughs, clapping her hands. “I know you, Reagan. You,” she leans back on the chair throwing the crumpled post-it in the trash can, “don’t like criticism... Especially from older men.”

“That’s because they always sound so condescending.”

“And Cheryl wasn’t?”

“Cheryl could be ruthless but at least with her, she *trusted* me...” Emily cocks her eyebrow up, “She trusted us. Richard Strand sounds like a pompous guy. He doesn’t even have a degree in marketing, at the least associates in it, and we’re supposed to follow this guy because his dad named him next in line to the throne?” Emily stays silent as Alex continued to vent. “He told me my photos lack emotion and tone. Tone? What fucking tone does he want? Tone sounds like something someone with three degrees in useless shit would try to hide behind from because maybe he doesn’t understand art. Art is subjective.”

Emily hums and gives a breathy laugh. “What?”

“He probably meant your style of shooting for our clients,” and Alex felt a little of an idiot. Because that’s what Strand meant and Alex was too annoyed to realize it during their session. “Don’t get mad but,” Emily chews the insides of her mouth, “ever since your fall out with... You know who... Your photos seemed to lack the *Alex* touch.”

“Wh-What?”

“Well, you know, it changed. It’s subtle but, I’m your editor Alex... I saw a shift when you shoot now,” Emily doesn’t look at Alex, she looks at everything but Alex and her frustration bubbling. “Your photos seem so robotic this year is all...” Finally, Emily meets Alex’s eyes and Emily looks guilt. “Your photos are still great! Oh my god, they’re great but... Strand is right about your style not being there. Maybe he sees it, maybe he’s being stupid, but he’s not wrong that your photos aren’t the same.”

Alex closes her eyes and tries her breathing exercises her therapist taught her to do whenever she realizes her emotions were overwhelming her. She doesn’t want to yell at Emily. She doesn’t want to get in a fight with her friend, colleague and editor. Alex can’t let her emotions ruin another day for her. Alex opens her eyes, and she replies, “Duly noted.”

Emily gets up to walk out of the office and before she left Alex’s office, she pauses at the door frame, “You’re a fantastic photographer, Alex... We all know but give the guy a chance before you write him off as a guy with a ‘degree in being a fucking asshole.’” And Alex felt blood rush to her cheeks with Emily cackling as she closed the door. She has got to stop tweeting her thoughts. Most of her coworkers follow her on Twitter and someone can be a dick and share screenshots of her lapse in judgement and bye-bye Senior Photographer title.

Alex came back from her latest food session with La Roux Restaurant satisfied. She turned in her cards, packed up the gear, started her article for the magazine and wrote captions for the upcoming social media posts. She was back in her good mood. Alex delighted La Roux's head chef with the images from the back of Alex's camera and that was one perk of her job - knowing her photos sparked joy with people. She still had her *Alex* touch if the clients enjoy and rave with the results of her images she thought to herself.

Emily and Strand are deluded for thinking she's losing her touch but come on, the clients are happy... Isn't that enough? She stops typing, already lost in her own thoughts, reclining back to her chair in a slump. She turns her chair to face the window, watching the massive buildings and the ant sized people below hustling and bustling. If she was losing her touch, how come she's not noticing it? Is she out of touch? Over-worked? Yes, but she enjoys the travel her work makes her do. Alex enjoys all the people she meets, the stories exchanged and the confidence boosts when even the most awkward seem so relaxed in her photos. Alex is a natural with people and as a photographer, it was important to make them feel comfortable...

And so far in her seven years as a photographer for Strand Creatives, she's had ninety-five percent success rate with their clientele. The other five percent? They're just shitty people without a nuance for art.

Two knocks pulled Alex out of her thoughts and she whirled around just in time to Strand opening her door. "Miss Reagan, sorry to bother," Strand says as he, Alex notes, took long strides towards her desk. "I'd like to discuss your upcoming project for the Marcus Hotel."

"Shoot," but then Alex halts, kicking herself mentally and looks at Strand horrified. "I mean, y-yes. Let's discuss." She nervously laughs as Strand sits down in front of her laying down papers. "I'm sorry, I'm still used to the way Cheryl and I would talk."

"I see you are the reason that Cheryl used that term in passing."

Alex shrugs her shoulders and smirks, "She's taught me how to deal with difficult people so I taught her how to loosen up a little. It's a nice trade off." She sees Strand upper lip twitch up, but it isn't a full smile.

"I see," is all he says and changes the subject back to the Marcus Hotel. "For the Marcus Hotel, I believe we need to re-imagine their branding. Cheryl was into photographing the architecture and I agree the Marcus Hotel is one of the few hotels in the country to have beautiful and ornate interior, however, I esteem that incorporating people interacting to the architecture would boast its appeal to contemporary and asynchronous audience. What do you say?" He lost Alex. Strand was using archaic words she's only read in research papers and the look she had on her face betrayed her. He sighed, "Where did I lose you, Miss Reagan?"

"Um, asyn-asynch-," Alex stumbled, "that word thing you said."

“Asynchronous. The traditionalist consumer, which is in line with my father’s age group,” Strand chuckles under his breath. “Your photographs of the interior are masterful, but it lacked a certain tone.” Alex told herself to control herself because she can’t, as much as she wants to, tell her director to fuck off. She looked through the papers and half-listened to Strand drone on. “I’d like for you to research The W’s social media accounts and ad campaigns to get a sense of the tone they present. I don’t mean to copy but perhaps to inspire the next tone for the Marcus project.” Her hand stops shifting through paper mid-way.

“You mean style,” Alex says.

“What?”

“Style. Not tone. We use the term ‘style’.”

“Oh, okay.” There was a few beats of silence between them, Alex not taking her eyes away from the paperwork Strand laid before her. He clears his throat, “I was hoping you could spend your work day at the Marcus Hotel to photograph a couple models and some real guest interaction. If you approve of my suggestion, I will talk to Mister Dirk Abruzzi about our plans. I’ll also ask Nic to find the models and you two can build a *style* board. The Marcus Hotel isn’t until August so that gives us time to research and build up a *style*.” And if Alex heard the sarcasm, she didn’t have the energy to retort, but she re-classified Strand as *little shit* in her mind.

Strand leaves her draining out her small glimmer of happiness from her session earlier. She’s left with a bubble of aggravation and wanting to chuck her mug when Strand closed her door but that’s a bit dramatic.

“Little shit,” was all she muttered.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Thanks for reading! I'm not sure how long this will be but I'm excited and inspired to write this. It's a little based off of my life, however, I don't have that much contempt for my director as much as Alex.

I'm still deciding if I'll ever write in Strand's voice but I feel more comfortable in Alex's.

Some notes:

1. In this universe, there's only a 10 year gap between Alex and Richard. Alex is 32 years old and Richard is 42 years old.
2. Richard never married in this universe, still a single dad though and instead of Charlie being close in age with Alex - Charlie is 15 and quite... A handful (Alex likes her though)
3. Coralee doesn't exist in this universe (shrug)
4. All the members of the Strand family are alive and well, Howard isn't an asshole of a father [he's just harsh with his employees because he wants to be the best in the creative

industry].

5. Some characters from The Black Tapes canon verse will appear every now and then.

6. Emily Dumont isn't pompous. In fact, I'm writing her to be likable (aspiring writer though)

And that's all the notes I have so far that are... Relevant.

Again, thanks for reading! I'm heresasimmer.tumblr.com so drop by to say!

Uranus

Chapter Summary

Alex still has a hard time wrapping her head around the new art director but she's trying.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Howard Strand rarely makes an appearance among the employees. He's primary contact is with each division manager and simply carries an employee meeting when it's critical. This morning's email from Howard Strand took everybody by surprise because if he has meetings with staff, he makes certain that everyone is free.

Dear All,

We will have an employee meeting today at the hall.

Please cancel all your appointments and apologize on my behalf to our clients.

Thank you.

Howard Strand

CEO, Strand Creatives

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Alex held three cups as she slid next to Cheryl and Emily came a second later with a plate of snacks. The abrupt call for an employee meeting was unsettling within the office and it was the conversation topic within all the departments.

Rumors stemmed from: 'Alex being promoted,' 'Emily getting a raise,' 'Accounts team adding more people,' 'Howard Strand stepping down and possibly naming Cheryl as next in line,' and lots of other hopeful good news but what no one expected was Cheryl stepping down... In actuality, she's stepping away from Strand Creatives to engage in something much more important to her that no one knew.

She's pregnant.

As she addressed everyone in the room, her voice became subdued to Alex, absorbed in her thoughts. Cheryl got married a year ago, and no one expected for her to get pregnant because

Strand Creatives was her world; the most important piece of Cheryl's life. Alex recognized the hardships Cheryl went through to get the position. Howard Strand may spoil his children but he doesn't hand them everything with a silver spoon. A small voice in Alex's head chants, *'this is your chance, this is the moment Cheryl has been training you for,'* but she shakes her head to push away from her thoughts.

"I'll be taking off at the end of this year," several exclamations and whispers within the crowd, "I'm sorry it's so unexpected, but I am delighted I can pursue my other lifelong dream. I am honored to have grown with each of you and I'm confident the next individual to pick up the torch from me will be even better," Alex locks eyes with Cheryl, a slight smile lifting her upper lip, "I look forward to this last year with you all."

For the duration of the meeting, Cheryl stayed by her father's side. Possibly trying to avoid Alex and Emily as they were yearning to pounce on her. She stood confidently next to her father, who only towered over by a mere three to four inches but no one missed the stolen moments Cheryl would stroke her belly in silent pleasure. Pregnancy looked excellent on Cheryl and Alex noticed how much it made her look comfortable. With the stress of being an art director for a successfully established and profitable advertising firm, Alex agrees that it's best Cheryl steps down to concentrate on her health...

Alex and Emily waited for Cheryl in her office after the meeting. Cheryl's office is on the third floor of the building, a corner suite opposite of Howard Strand's office. Alex has been in Howard's office once and it was as if she walked into an Architectural Interior Design magazine set. Howard's interior design was minimal; one side adorned with plaques-achievements in design and innovation in advertising, one side with racks of color-coded books and magazines, his desk in front of a floor to ceiling glass-overlooking a view of central Seattle, and his desk immaculate of clutter. The minimalist style to Howard's office may seem cold but it felt homey.

Cheryl's office differed from her father's; her walls carried on plaques, framed pictures of people she cherished, several cork boards with pinned pieces for inspiration, and a corner with two sofas that Alex, Nic and Emily has operated on many nights to lounge in while passing ideas back and forth. Cheryl made her room her second home and as Alex and Emily glanced around they realized they would miss this part of Cheryl too.

"Who do you see will be the next director for our department?" Emily murmured, draped on the sofa next to Alex. "I hope we have someone as cool as Cheryl. I might just quit if we get a boring ass dud."

"In this job market? I might just swallow my pride," they both snickered. Silence envelopes them for a second until Alex speaks up then, stammering. "Do... Do you think... Maybe I have a chance?" Emily sat up and peered at Alex, who was pulling at her sleeves. "I... I've been thinking maybe... Or... Well, never mind," she waves a hand in front of her, bending her head back on the top edge of the sofa to look up at the ceiling wanting to avoid Emily's eyes.

"I think you could."

"Big shoes to fill."

“Have you ever considered it?”

Silence.

“No.”

Alex picks her head up and looks at Emily but before she can inquire why, Cheryl opens the door and they both whip their heads towards their friend, their boss.

“Ladies,” Cheryl smiles. “Before you bombard me with questions, I’m sorry I didn’t say anything.”

“It’s cool!” Emily shrugs, “Girl, that’s your personal business. We’re just so happy yet sad at the same time.”

“Yeah,” Alex meekly replies. “We’re still shocked you’re stepping down or well... Leaving but we can understand why you would... How far along are you?”

Cheryl strokes her belly and glances at it with fondness, “Thirteen weeks and seven more weeks until Brad and I find out the gender.” She looks up with a grin on her face.

“Sometimes I can’t believe I will be a mom...”

“Motherhood already looks wonderful on you, boss,” Emily puts a hand on Cheryl’s shoulder.

“Ye-yeah, it does,” Alex gives Cheryl a sad smile. “Can I be selfish for a moment and say we will miss you so much and it will suck with the new art director?”

Cheryl laughs, “Are you implying that you will disappoint me, Alex?”

“I-I... What?” Alex’s eyes dart between Emily and Cheryl, both grinning at her. “What?”

“I’ve mentioned to dad about it,” Cheryl shrugs and walks to her desk. “He doesn’t want to think about me going but I know he’s already thinking about my replacement and I spoke of you,” she sits down and cups her face with one hand on her desk, “why wouldn’t I? Alex, you have been with the firm for almost eight years. You have grown so much from when you started and climbed the ropes the same way I did.” Emily shakes Alex’s arm, snapping Alex from her trance. A thousand thoughts swirled in her mind and she missed every word Cheryl said after, ‘I’ve told dad about it.’

“No-not gonna lie, I didn’t have the goal of being an art director but,” Alex pauses and looks down on the floor, “Now that I think about it and being in your office... What if I can’t pull it off like you do, Cheryl?”

“You’re our senior photographer, Alex! If anyone is qualified, it’s you. You know most of our clients and you’re basically Cheryl’s right hand... Besides Nic, who is her left hand. Mister Strand can’t disqualify you as a candidate!” Emily grinned.

“And it’s not about pursuing my footsteps, Alex. It’s about forging yours.”

Three weeks under new management, Alex is growing used to the second Strand spawn. Richard Strand still gets on her nerves but she's learned to deal with her frustration around him. She's also reduced her tweeting every time Richard does something that offends her. Every day, he finds a new way to aggravate her and at the of the work day, they ride the elevator in silence.

Alex walks in her office thirty minutes earlier than her usual time and sees stacks of magazines on her desk. A post-it on one of three stacks read: 'I hope these aid for inspiration. - RS.' Alex was caught between rolling her eyes and laughing because Richard Strand gave her homework. If in his past life he was a professor, Alex wouldn't be surprised.

Alex flips through the magazines on her desk and finds an assortment of Architectural Interior Design, Black & White Photography, Vogue Special Editions and Travel Lifestyle. She notes that all the magazine she skimmed through had the same name addressed to: *Richard M. Strand*. It causes her to chuckle. He may not have a degree but she could see he has an interest for it.

Hello Strand,

I received the magazines. Thank you for the references.

Regards,

Alex Reagan

Senior Photographer, Strand Creatives

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She may not like him but she was educated to be polite.

Hello Miss Reagan,

You're welcome.

Regards,

Richard Strand

Art Director, Strand Creatives

+83.533.6271 ext. 1141

Alex looks through a random issue of Architectural Interior magazine, flipping through pages every five seconds until she pauses at one page. The author's name catches her off-guard and knocks air from her lungs. As quickly as a tinge of hurt comes, anger replaces it and she thrusts the magazine in the trash can. She pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs. It's been months, and she's still butt hurt over it-even at the mere sight of the name... It makes her feel anger, sadness, hurt, silliness. Alex refocuses and packs up for her meeting slated for later that day.

Her meeting with Tannis Braun was brief, but it helped her refocus and push the thoughts aside. Tannis Braun is a tall man with sharp looks. If Alex could briefly describe the man, she would say he was a mix of a young Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise. He's more than a man easy on the eyes, he's one of the few clients Alex likes to work with. Tannis knows what he wants, and he conveys it effectively. He's at every photo shoot and never late to any of their meetings.

"How's the new art director?" Tannis changed the subject.

"How did you know?"

"Cheryl emailed me about the change a month ago." Alex nodded her head and looked down at her notebook, pretending to write. Cheryl knew about it and decided not to bring up anything to her? Alex felt a pang of betrayal shoot within her. "I'm guessing she didn't mention it to the staff?" Alex shook her head, looking up from her scribbles of nothing.

"It's not a big deal," she lies, "the new boss is cool too but not as cool as Cheryl." Alex lets out a breathy laugh, almost a whisper. "Don't tell him I said that!"

Tannis makes a hypothetical 'X' over his heart, "Scout's honor." They both laugh and Alex changes the subject back to her home court, bringing the attention back to their previous discussion. Alex and Nic had worked on the vision board for Virtue in, hurriedly, few days. Nic complained to Alex that this is a deadline he wishes never becomes a habit, which Tannis already apologized even before they sat down at their table. With the corrections and schedules established, Alex and Tannis parted ways. She returns to the office and heads straight to Nic's to review the latest changes. Alex didn't expect Richard Strand to be in Nic's office when she hastily opens the door with obscenities.

"Nic! We got a long fucking nig-" Alex stops in dread, "Oh... Crud."

"Hello, Miss Reagan," Strand turns from his sitting position, face unreadable. Nic looks panicked behind his desk. "How nice of you to accompany us."

"I-I-I'll come back. It's not... I'm so sorry," her cheeks are on fire and her armpits are sweating.

"No, no. Come in," Strand waves his hand. "If possible, I'd like to be a part of this session," Strand looks at Nic, who nodded in response. Alex had no other option. She approached the two of them and set her messenger bag on the floor, placing the binder and her laptop on the edge of Nic's desk. Alex is struggling to regain her professional composure, but she feels warmer than the temperature in the room.

"Braun wants to make adjustments with the locations, wants to include two more models, extend the shoot dates from two to four days and he also wishes to add a video campaign at the same time as the photo shoots," she points at the circled notes Tannis Braun made on the pages. Alex flips her laptop around to face Nic and a little angled away from Strand. If she doesn't look at Strand in the eye, maybe he'll disappear. "The locations he wants are a mix of urban and rural," she swipes through the powerpoint, "he wants a downtown Seattle scene but not really? I... I kinda see what he means but I also think that's ambiguous."

Nic scoffs, "It's ambiguous."

"Totally."

"For the video campaign, does he require a thirty second clip or a full minute?"

"He didn't mention but maybe quote him for both and we'll see which one he'll take?"

"Yeah, ok."

From the corner of Alex's eye, she sees Strand reach for the notes and combs through them.

"So," Nic clears his throat. "Strand?" Alex still doesn't look at Strand and pretends to scroll through her notes.

"Hm?"

"Thoughts?" Nic offers.

"Their concept for their fall campaign is, live, love, laugh?" Strand sounds confused, lost and Alex couldn't stop herself from laughing.

"Virtue's marketing head gave us that... Nic and I couldn't stop laughing for hours."

"It's terrible. I feel like they went on Pinterest and took the first inspirational image quote they found," Nic sighs, "Now you can understand the anguish I had planning their vision board."

"I understand how frustrating it can be. It's lacking in charm."

"Don't hold back, Strand. It lacks creativity," Alex says and glances at Strand still flipping through the folder but she thinks she sees a hint of a smile.

"Do you think he'll pay for travel expenses if we recommend an out-of-state city?" Nic types on his keyboard, focused on researching cities within a ten or fifteen-mile radius of Strands Creative and out-of-state locations. "And instead of airfare, we can drive."

"Let's stick to identifying areas around us. I'd like to conserve costs for the client," Strand adds. "Use the neighboring areas before giving an option for out-of-state travel." Alex hums in agreement.

"Plus I just got back from flying. I kinda miss my city," Alex leans back against her chair, taking her laptop with her and opens Google Chrome.

"That was almost a month ago, Alex," Nic points out which makes Alex ball her hands in separate fists and taps the sides of each hand twice at Nic. It's their secret way of flicking each other off while in a professional environment. Nic returns the favor. They don't notice Strand drawing his brows together and darting his gaze between them. Nic returns his attention back to his computer screen, which Alex does the same to hers.

Strand leans closer to Alex, showing her a page from the binder. “Alex,” Strand points at a picture, “could you interpret these sample images?” Alex looks at the four photographs on the page. She doesn’t look at Strand as her finger floats over the images as she describes each one and how it matches the conception.

“I wanted to approach this photo shoot with a mixture of odd angles, different from the conventional straight on and at eye-level shooting style, incorporating faked candid displays displaying a belief that you’ll feel more carefree and confident in these outfits while hangout with your friends. In this last image the subjects are laying in a field with smiles on their faces,” she explains looking at him and he stares back.

“Yes but do most teenagers lay in fields?”

“Well... For the gram they would.”

“The gram?”

“Instagram.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I’m re-considering what Braun said about what he prefers for a location with his... Vague and ambiguous vision...” Strand and Alex turn to Nic who turns his screen towards them. In the short time, Nic built a location board on Adobe Illustrator. Alex strains her eyes to read the words on the screen but only manages to read the town names. “Here are my top five recommendations and two are towns that are an hour to three hours away from our home base.” He points to each place to explain what’s there and what it can produce for the photo shoot.

“Make Leavenworth and Bellevue the options for Tannis and his team, forget the others,” Strand’s mobile rings, interrupting him, “but kudos for researching Nic.” He reaches in his pocket and either placed the phone on silent or he hung up on the caller. “I’m leaning towards Leavenworth. I think their concept may fit the landscape there and may not understand until we explain. A small town vibe can bring a different *ton-style* to the ad campaign.” Alex misses the tiny smirk on Strand’s face at his change of words. Nic nods and rotates the screen towards him again. Strand’s phone rings again and this time he excuses himself out of Nic’s office.

As soon as the door closes behind Strand, Alex lets out an exasperated exhale and stretches in her seat. “Oh, thank god,” and placed her foot on the spot Strand was sitting at. “Now we can talk shit, Nic.”

“Man, I’m so glad you came in earlier. I was getting real fucking sweaty.”

“What was he hounding you about?”

“Well, it was about sharing the load of creating vision boards. He was asking me how I was making them and what he can do to help. I was getting nervous because... I’m... You know...”

“Anal.”

“Sure, let’s go with that word.”

“You are anal about the vision boards. Majority of my sample images hardly make it.”

“No comment.”

“Asshole.”

“Jerk.”

“So,” Alex leans on Nic’s desk, resting her chin on her hand. “Strand doesn't know how to make vision boards?”

“It’s not that he doesn’t know. He has an idea, but he wanted to know how I was doing it, mentioned something about streamlining the process and crunching out more per week.”

“Maybe he’s bored?”

“Possibly.”

“He can help with my shoots,” Alex groans, dipping her head to her forearm, muffling her next words, “I’m so swamped for July. I have shoots every week and I’m flying out again in two weeks for the weekend for a catalog shoot.”

“Oh? Do you want our art director to follow you at shoots, Miss Reagan? Do you want to drive and stay in hotels with one of Seattle’s eligible bachelor? The son of Howard Strand, one of the most prominent CEOs?”

Alex shot up and glares at him while he waggles his eyebrows at her, “No dumbass. He takes over some of my shoots. By himself.” Nic laughs. “I don’t like him like that. I never will.” Nic doesn’t say anything. “He’s-He’s kind of infuriating but I won’t deny that he tries to embody the role of an art director... I guess. Did I ever tell you what happened when I first met him?” He shakes his head, Alex groans. “Oh my god, he spent the majority of our day just nitpicking my portfolio, claiming certain images lack emotion, tone and direction... Just because he peruses through aesthetically pleasing magazines doesn’t make him qualified to critique.”

“He’s our boss now.”

“Strand shouldn’t be if his resume doesn’t include an ounce of experience in our field.”

“He’s a Strand... I’m sure he lends a helping hand from time to time.”

“I guess...”

“Give him a chance. He’s a cool dude.”

“Not you too! Emily told me the same shit.”

“Has he done anything offending in the last few weeks since the first time you met?”

“... No... Well... I don’t know. His first impression still lingers in my mind.”

“Let it go, Alex,” Nic chastises her, giving her a look that makes her feel like a child. A bratty child.

“Maybe you would understand if you spent time with him and he just critiqued your work.”

“I do. You don’t think he came in here and questioned my process, imparted a few tips and critiqued some of my previous and current vision board? I was mortified, and a little discouraged but I saw, after mulling over it, what he meant. The guy means well and I think he spent months preparing himself for the role so cut him some slack, Alexandra.”

She sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose, “Yeah okay. I fucking will.”

“Good... Now, let’s work on the new vision board.”

Chapter End Notes

Alex keeps telling everyone who'll listen how much Strand gets on her nerves but I o l everyone likes Strand. Strand can sense Alex's tense mood around him but he doesn't say anything because at this point, he doesn't care as long as she's doing her job.

In the next chapter, we get more interaction between them :-)

Pluto

Chapter Summary

36 days after Richard took over, Alex snaps.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alex was sure of two things: one, she doesn't like her boss.

Last week, Strand called her out during the brainstorm session that two of her vision board seemed similar and forced her to give one of her clients to another photographer in the team.

Four days ago, Strand had gotten on her case about her lack of updates through email about a pending project he asked her to do. She emailed back with being busy with other projects and she'll fucking get to his request—minus the profanities a little more work polite.

Yesterday, Strand was in her office for almost two hours discussing about her recent photographs for their client, The Hive. It took all her energy not to yell at Strand that if he doesn't like the photos, *he can stick it where it doesn't shine and he can take his own photos* like a child but she didn't.

Two, the art director job was to be hers but as she finds out from Cheryl's email she received out of the blue, Howard Strand gave the job to his son.

It's been exactly thirty-six days since Cheryl's departure from the firm and exactly thirty-six days since she and Alex have talked. Cheryl has also ignored Alex's messages on WhatsApp, thirty-two days ago.

When *Cheryl Baker* appears in her Inbox, Alex stops and contemplates. She leaves it unread for the duration of the day until it was close to clocking out. The bright blue dot next to her name gnaws at her and she takes a deep inhale as her mouse clicks it open.

Hey Alex,

I'm sorry I've been on radio silent and I know you're angry at me, that's understandable. I left while you were traveling for work and I only sent a generic mass email about my abrupt goodbye... I've been mulling over how to write this email for weeks and I could come to the office to do this in person but I can't.

I left because the stress was proving to be taking a toll on my body. Father told me to leave immediately for the sake of the baby's health and I listened without a protest... I could have waited for you for a proper goodbye with everyone in the department, I could have approached you when you got back but I couldn't.

This sounds like a sorry-ass excuse of an email... There's so much I want to say... But I shouldn't have promised the job.

I got your hopes up and I felt immensely guilty.

Father considered you very much so but then Richard took interest during dinner and then it spiraled out of my hands.

Her cursor stops and lingers at the end of the sentence, she felt her blood run cold. He took an *interest* and so he *fucking* asked for it? She continued to read feeling wrath build inside her.

Alex also felt betrayal.

When I'm not at work, I was with Richard training him to take my role. I should have told you as soon as I found out but I didn't have the heart to and now I feel shame. I'm so sorry Alex... I'm sorry I left in such haste, I'm sorry I kept you in the dark, I'm sorry that I got your hopes up.

I understand and accept your bitterness but Richard means no foul. He's as blunt as my father and that could rub people the wrong way but I assure you he means well. There will be rumors of his lack of degree or experience but I have trained him. I hope you two are getting along. I plan to visit once I am able and hope we can reconcile.

*Warmest Regards,
Cheryl Baker*

Alex re-reads the email three times and all those times she felt angrier and angrier. Thirty-fucking-six days later and Alex finally lets out an angry scream. She didn't care if her colleagues heard her through the thin walls because she was seething. Her body temperature was one degree higher with fury running through her.

She replies but mid-way through her outrage; she stopped. Cheryl doesn't deserve this. Richard *fucking* Strand does.

Alex quickly stands up from her desk and stomps her way towards Strand's office. If looks can kill, Alex's can tear up the world in half.

Richard Strand has no clue what was coming for him and Alex doesn't knock, but opens his door with such force it made Strand stop packing up his bag. The wrath she feels combined with a voice repeating, *but then Richard took interest during dinner*, fueled her angry stride towards his desk. The mantra did nothing to appease her.

"Miss Reagan, how may-"

She slams her hand on his desk, "You took my fucking job from me!"

"Excuse me?"

"Your position was supposed to be mine," she slams her hand again on the desk, "and *you* so much as just asked your dad and *you* get the job! They handed it to you without so much of

an afterthought maybe someone is qualified with credentials and experience and *you* fucking took it from me." Her voice was cold and high-pitched. Alex hardly gets mad but when her rage rears its ugly head, it goes in full force.

Strand, calmly adjusts his sitting position and folds his arms over each other on his desk, looking at Alex. "Miss Reagan, I'm not sure what brought upon this behavior from you but this is highly unprofessional. What would have happened if I had client here?"

Alex doesn't relent. "You don't have a client do you? So I came at the right fucking time."

"Did you? Client or not, you storming in my office is indecent." Strand lets out a venomous laugh. "And here I was with such high regards of you."

"Don't patronize me, Strand."

"I'm not," he adjusts his glasses on his nose and stands up from his desk and walks over to the window looking out towards the many buildings towering theirs. His back facing Alex, "I'm a little insulted you regard of me so lowly, Miss Reagan."

"I'm not like everyone here who humors your self-righteousness. You can pretend to indulge in our jobs but I'm in the minority to think you don't have the capabilities for this job."

Strand turns to look at Alex, his lips in a tight line. Alex stands tall, her arms crossed over her chest. "You think I was *given* this job? That it landed on my lap out of thin air? I got a call from my father out of the blue with an offer from this job?"

"No, I know you asked for it." He stays quiet, his expression unreadable. "Cheryl emailed me this morning... After thirty-six days since her departure, she finally contacts me," she huffs a sarcastic laugh. "In her email, she tells me you *asked* for it from daddy dearest."

"I asked in curiosity. I didn't ask for the job offer."

"Well, that *fucking* bumped you up on your dad's list of candidates. Here I was thinking Howard Strand would never do such a thing, but he goes ahead and proves me wrong."

"Language, Miss Reagan. You can express yourself without have to resort to profanity."

She waves her hand erratically, "oh fuck you and the high horse you sit on, Strand."

"Read the Oxford dictionary or this conversation is over," Strand says coldly.

Alex huffs, "I was considered and trained by Cheryl. I was gearing up after my trip from Tokyo to talk to Howard about the position to get the ball rolling and then *you*," she pinches the bridge of her nose, "*you* came in to swoop the rug under me."

"I gave almost ten years of my life to this firm. I know most of the clients, have worked with hundreds, the *right* credentials and experiences... What do you have? Three degrees from Yale, the son of the CEO, the brother of the former art director, subscriptions from curated design magazines?" Alex continues. "I wish I had that kind of credentials in my resume!"

They both held onto their glares until Strand looks away to walk back to his desk with a bitter laugh. He continues packing.

"Miss Reagan, I now understand the animosity you have given me this past month," as he closes the lapel of his messenger bag he looks at Alex. "You will get over this childishness and act like a professional starting tomorrow. I will no longer entertain your baseless accusations. Get over it or pack up if you will allow this to continue to cloud your performance in this firm."

Alex's anger simmers down within her and grits her teeth, taking a sharp inhale and a shaky exhale. "Must be nice for your dad to hand you a job," she mumbles.

"What was that?" Strand glares at her.

"Nothing," Alex responds.

"Get a spine, Miss Reagan and again, I expect your professionalism to return tomorrow."

Three days ago, she had an altercation with her boss and for the days that followed after; it was weird.

Alex, the morning after, tried her best to avoid any kind of contact with Strand but that proved to be difficult. Whenever she needed to get approval from Strand, she would request the help from one intern.

On the third day after their fight, she receives an email from Strand as she was leaving for lunch with Emily and Nic.

*Miss Reagan,
Please come to my office after lunch when you are available.*

*Regards,
Richard Strand
Art Director, Strand Creatives
+83.522.6271 ext. 1141*

She gulps and quickly responds with:

Noted.

Alex doesn't tell Emily or Nic what happened between her and Strand. A part of her knows Nic will chastise her and tell her she's in the wrong. She's not in the wrong for calling him out. Maybe storming into his office and yelling at him is wrong but not for getting angry for stealing the position she was working hard to attain for the past few months.

"Earth to Alex," Nic waves his hand in front of her face. She snaps from her trance and her eyes tries to adjust to Nic's face. "You ok?"

"You looked daze there, Reagan," Emily adds.

"Um, yeah... I think the late nights are getting to me," she laughs. "This month was even supposed to be slow but I'm shooting something every week."

"Strand has been getting a lot of new clients since he's started," Emily twirls her pasta and shoves a big chunk in her mouth. "Kudos to him," muffled by her chewing.

"Emily, please chew before you speak," Nic makes a disgusted face. "Please be more ladylike."

"Hop off my dick, Nic," she swallows the last of her pasta.

"I'm friends with a bunch of fifteen-year-olds," Alex laughs again. "But yeah, I'm just exhausted. I haven't been sleeping well is all."

Nic makes a worried look. "You can pass off some of your workload with the other photographers, Alex. I know you're supposed to handle the big clientele but some of them are fluff shoots. Simon can probably handle The Hive shoots and Anna can handle La Roux Restaurant."

"Yeah," Alex plays with her salad. "Maybe I could do that."

"Talk to Strand about it. I'm sure he can understand," Emily says. Alex freezes for a second and shifts in her seat. "I know you don't like him but he's a nice guy... He doesn't bite," she chuckles.

"I finally released some workload I had with our interns and man, I feel relieved," Nic chimes in. "Good guy Strand."

Alex only nods her head and gives Emily and Nic a fake smile. They continue their lunch discussing their weekend plans while Alex mulls over her outburst from days ago. *They will definitely steamroll over me and take Strand's side*, she says to herself.

When they return to the firm, Alex takes her time back to her office. She plays multiple scenarios in her head as she walks to her room. Is Strand going to reprimand her? Did Strand telltale to his dad and now she's probably fired after the stunt? Did she possibly just ruin her professional life? Alex groans a little too loud that the visitor in her office turns a jilted Alex.

"Hello, Miss Reagan," his voice doesn't sound angry. She cringes at her brain suddenly replaying *that* scene in her head. "Did you enjoy lunch?"

"Um, Strand... I thought I was meeting you at your office?" She slowly strolls behind her desk, avoiding Strand's eyes. As Alex settles down in her chair, she sees him from her peripheral, he leans back and rests his elbow on one of the armrests, scratching his chin.

"I was already on the floor so I decided to meet you at your office."

She moves her mouse around to turn her computer back to life, "I hope you weren't waiting too long." Alex still hasn't met Strand's eyes.

Strand clears his throat and Alex chews the insides of her mouth, waiting for Strand to speak. "Look, Miss Reagan... About what happened a few days ago... I don't appreciate your assumptions of me and how I got the job to yell and talk obscenely." Alex finally meets Strand's eyes, his expression was neutral. "The way you acted could be grounds for termination," she shifts in her seat, "but I asked Cheryl about the email she sent the other night and I'm disappointed in the manner she conveyed the scenario."

"No one deserves anything without working for it. I learned from my father in my early stages of development that perseverance and inordinate work ethics are traits in a person that is crucial for professionalism." Alex stops fidgeting with her mouse to give her attention to Strand and he clears his throat, "My father deems you with such high regards, Miss Reagan that it was between you and me for Cheryl's position."

"Then... Why, you?"

"Believe it or not, Miss Reagan... I'm not sure myself. I was... Shocked." Strand takes a moment before he starts again, "When my father called to tell me I will replace Cheryl, I didn't know how to respond because it was seven months earlier than her slated departure and also because I knew from Cheryl how hard you were training to be the next successor. Cheryl was training me but it was not because father had already decided but it was to even the playing field."

"Cheryl knew your dad would have chosen you over me because why else would she not say anything to my face?"

Before he could answer, a knock interrupts their moment, and an intern pokes her head. Strand and Alex looked at the door opening ajar. "Hi Alex and... Mister Strand," she opens the door a little more to let herself in. "Alex, I have faxes from Mister Tannis Braun. They seemed a little urgent. I'm sorry for interrupting."

"You're not interrupting, Kayla," Alex gives a small smile at the intern. Kayla quickly walks to Alex's desk and places the small stack on her desk. Alex whistles. "That's... A lot."

Kayla nods her head. "I took the liberty to skim for you and it's in regard to changes to the vision board you and Nic sent last week."

"Jesus, we're still making changes?" Alex groans as she reaches for the stack, rapidly flipping through the pages. "Did you make copies for Nic as well?" She nods her head. "Awesome, you're the best."

Kayla closes the door behind her, leaving Alex and Strand alone again.

"We can put a pin on this, Miss Reagan. You have more pressing issues than this infantile affair." Strand rises from his chair and walks to the door and before he leaves, he turns back to Alex, "Please don't be angry at Cheryl. She has her reasons and I may not understand them very well but I know my sister never intends to hurt those she cares for."

She watches him go, and she sits in silence far longer than she intends, replaying what had just happened, dissecting dialogues. Alex had more to say; the anger may have lessened but

the hurt she felt between the Strand siblings lingered.

Cheryl, not once, told her about Richard taking interest and training him the same time as her. Richard Strand for being... Well, for taking her dream job just because it piqued his interest. So much *fucking* privilege and he chooses to be ignorant about it.

She groans in her hands and runs her hands through her hair, gripping her scalp as she took long deep breaths.

Alex, for the second time this year, was left to pick up fragments of her bruised ego from the floor.

Chapter End Notes

I was going for another lighthearted chapter but whoops... I went angst. I can't promise a happy chapter for the next update... Maybe. I already have Chapter 4 written but that might change with the recent development of this chapter.

Thank you for reading :-)

Moon

Chapter Summary

Maybe it's time hearts start to mend and maybe the art department can finally breathe out a sigh of relief that tension between Alex and Richard is starting to disappear... Maybe...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Nic," Alex pulls at the dry skin around her thumbs, she waits for him to look up from the board. "Nic."

He finally looks up, an eyebrow arched up.

"I believe I fucked up."

"Did you forget about a client shoot today?" Nic holds a photograph and straightens his shoulder to eye Alex. "Which client is it?"

"No... I, um, well... Man..." Alex sighs and gulps. "I fought with Strand."

"Like with fists?"

"Dumbass... You assume I can punch that tall-ass man?"

"I guess you could," Nic seriously ponders about it and Alex softly chuckles.

"But Nic... I verbally fought with Strand. I, um," she nibbles on her thumb and muffles her words.

"Alex, I can't understand you."

She pulls her thumb out of her mouth and groans, avoiding Nic's eyes, "I accused Strand of taking my job from me... Because he's a Strand..."

"No... Alex..." Nic's jaw remains open, and he rubs his hand on his forehead. "You. Did. Not." He took several times, three times Alex counted, to speak. "Alex, what did you say?"

"Well, I... I cussed... A lot. My anger took over."

"Why? Why did you let that happen?"

"Cheryl emailed me and it filled me with so much wrath... Instead of sympathy for the devil, I got angry."

"When did this happen?"

"Three days ago."

"Three-Three days ago!? And you're just telling me now!? Does Emily know!?"

"No one knows... I've been avoiding him like the plague until... Well, until after lunch when he came to my office to *talk*, but we didn't finish because Tannis faxed us these," Alex points at the board. "Thank goodness because I was sweating in my seat."

"*Thank goodness!?* Alex, you *swore* at our boss! He could have fired you!" Nic waved his hands erratically, making Alex feel smaller in her chair. "Why would you even accuse him of stealing *your* job? I know you were vying for the spot but Howard Strand knows what he's doing."

"I was working hard for that position, Nic! Cut me some slack," Alex huffed.

Nic glared at her, "No. You're acting like a *child*, Alex. A bratty child. The person who needs a break is me and also Strand. You're not giving the guy a chance because of what? You immediately marked him as some guy with zero experience. He's a Strand, Alex. Do you have a degree in photography?"

She looks down at her hands, lips parted. That was a blow.

Nic groans and continues with a lower tone, "Alex, Richard Strand is an intelligent guy and he's doing his best to get used to the environment he's thrown into. You may harbor ill feelings because you didn't get the job but be professional. You can't let your emotions get in the way again."

Again, Alex repeats in her head. *Not again*.

Alex groans and closes her eyes to stop the tears in their tracks. When she exhales a shaky breath, her eyes open and avoids Nic's.

"Alex, I didn't mean... I'm sorry," his voice softer.

"Don't apologize," she tries to laugh, catching the stray tear from the corner of her eye.

"You're right... I've been an angry, bratty child," her laugh coming out jagged. "I wanted the job so badly after Cheryl got me so hyped up for it. I thought... I thought I had a chance. It would have been nice to get the promotion."

"Yeah," Nic takes a moment, Alex looks back at him. "We all knew you wanted that job, but life doesn't always give you what you want."

"Anyway, we should get back to the project... Sorry, it's been eating me up. I had another *moment* with him earlier and I don't know, I guess I needed validation or some kind of wake-up call."

"Well, you came to the right person. Emily would have hyped you up to fight him even more."

Alex laughs, "Nah... She's a big Strand fan-girl. I imagine she would have slapped me silly if I told her I cussed out her precious cinnamon."

"Her what?" Nic makes a face.

"I don't know, man... She just calls him that from time to time."

"Does he smell like cinnamon?" Nic whispers, lowering his head, his eyes up at Alex. Alex copies his posture.

"No, and why are we whispering?"

"I'm asking you about how another man smells like. I compromise my masculinity if I didn't lower my voice."

Alex sits back up and cackles, "You're the bee's knees, Nicodemus. The bee's knees."

Nic picks up the photograph he dropped earlier and looks for a section to place it on the board and speaks without his attention to Alex, "Now I'm curious... Tell me about the fight."

Nic and Alex continue arranging and redesigning the board as Alex recalls her fight with Strand. She leaves nothing out but rephrases certain parts. Certain parts made Nic gasp and exclaimed how it made him feel he's in an episode of *Desperate Housewives*, which made Alex roll her eyes. Other parts of the conversations, Nic pointed out how Alex needs to control her sailor's mouth and Alex shrugged. *'He's still your boss, Alex.'* *'Bite me, Nic. This is my story.'*

They continued dissecting conversations prior and after the fight over Virtue's fall campaign vision board and half-cups of coffee.

Once they finished the redesigns, Alex stretched her limbs and stood up from the chair she's been sitting on for over two hours. Her butt was sore, and she needed another cup of coffee. She looked at her phone, the first in the time she and Nic spent together, to see an onslaught of notifications of work emails and text messages from Emily, her mom and Simon. It was close to four in the afternoon. There's still an hour left of the workday.

Alex returns to her office but not long after sitting down to go through emails, a knock disturbs her.

"Miss Reagan?" She looks at Strand whose head is only visible from the doorway.

"Yes?" she beckons him in.

He opens the door a little more to invite himself in to her office. "I apologize to disturb you so late in the day, however, it's regarding your updated vision board for Marcus Hotel." Strand took a seat across Alex.

Alex internally groans. She's been working on that board for a week and has been venting to Nic about the ridiculousness of re-shooting for Marcus Hotel.

"Ah, okay. What did you want to discuss?"

"I'm proposing you need not to re-shoot any of the rooms unless the models are interacting with them."

"What do you mean?"

"You have already photographed the property intensively. Don't you reckon it's a waste of time to re-take the images of the rooms and the property? Also, you have exhausted every angle for the property. I saw the gallery."

"Aren't we re-branding the hotel? It makes sense to re-shoot if we're re-branding?"

"I called Marcus Hotel in advance and there are no current or plans of remodeling so your photographs from nine months ago are still usable. Emily could go over them for a re-edit to update its look. After slashing that portion, the shoot gets cut from being seven hours to three hours."

"So... Why are re-branding for them again?"

"Their social media and websites lacked a human touch. I scrolled through their feed and it was mainly photographs of the interior and snapshots of small items. I have tossed the idea around with Cheryl before I took over and she admitted that she wished she included more during production."

"We couldn't wait 'til... Oh, I don't know... Next year for re-branding since the hotel will update their contract then?" Strand stares at her as she crosses her arms. "I just assume it's a waste of our budget and time to re-brand mid-way through their last few months as our client. I would have waited until the renewal to re-haul and re-brand."

"Are you insinuating that I'm wasting funds?" There's an edge in Strand's voice that makes Alex flinch a little.

"I'm just saying we should have waited til next year. We have other clients to handle and doing a re-branding for a finished client amid current projects is a little..." She searches for a word, something to lessen the intensity of Strand's stare. "Chaotic."

Strand sighs, picks up the binder from Alex's desk. "Miss Reagan, if you have your hands full please let me know. I can assign this this project to other photographers within the firm. I understand you are the senior photographer and you get assigned to our big leads, but it's okay to tell me no."

"I can handle it, Strand. You're not getting what I'm trying to tell you," controlling her tone from exploding, "We shouldn't be re-branding in the last three months of the client's one year contract."

"Why not?"

"Because it's unfair to other clients. We charge them for re-shoots and we're doing this one for *free*? Because you felt it lacked something? Make a note of it and move on. Marcus Hotel already approved of the photographs and it was a done deal."

"However, we're lacking in our agreement for the contract."

"And that is?"

"Their growth and engagement on social media accounts. They're barely racking in hundred followers... Per month. We outlined in their contract they will grow exponentially but in the time they've signed with us and took over, the numbers I've read were disappointing."

"Take that up with accounts, this is the art department, Strand."

"It deals with our department. Accounts use our photos, designs and video clips for marketing. It comes from us so do I still take that up to accounts?" *Oh. He wants to be a little shit today?*

"Are you *insinuating* my photos suck, Strand?" Alex rose from her chair, placing hands on her desk to lean towards Strand. With him sitting down, they're still at eye level and this looked better in Alex's mind.

"No. I'm merely implying that it lacked human interaction in the photos with the environment. How can we portray a five-star experience with just perfect images of the hotel interior and carefully placed hotel items? I'm not insulting the work you produced, I am advising to add more to the gallery for extra options for accounts to use." Strand's eyes stay on Alex's, meeting her glare with composed patience. "Looking through the vision board I tasked you to handle, I can see we had a miscommunication."

Alex wanted to scream, but she's a professional. God, was she annoyed with Strand. "Duly noted," was all she said. She relaxes her stance and looks at her wristwatch. "Let me email Simon to take over one of my shoots."

"Oh," Strand shifts in his seat. "We can do this after your shoot."

She shakes her head, "It's fine, we'll work on this now," waving her hand and moving her bag down to the floor while grabbing her laptop out. "Simon can easily handle The Hive."

Hey Simon!

Can you take over The Hive shoot... In like 45 minutes?

Strand wants to discuss a project so I'm unable to make it.

I have attached the vision board for next month's social media things.

I owe you coffee! :-)

Regards,

Alex Reagan

Senior Photographer, Strand Creatives

+83.533.6271 ext. 1103

"Sorry, one more email," Alex says.

Hello Jon,

I won't be able to make it this evening as something came up in the firm that needs my attention. Simon Reese will cover for me and is up to speed with what needs to be conveyed the branding for next month.

Again, I apologize for the sudden change.

Regards,

Alex Reagan

Senior Photographer, Strand Creatives

+83.533.6271 ext. 1103

"Okay, sorry," Alex pushes her keyboard and mouse aside to make space.

"It's fine," Strand says as he places the binder on his desk. "I apologize for barging in but I believe we have to complete the board as the shoot will be in less than two weeks."

"Shouldn't Nic be here too? He is assisting me on the day of..."

"I went to Nic's first and asked him if he could join us but he politely told me he has another engagement to attend to," Strand sighs. "Also, I've placed enough on Nic's plate... I'd like to work on this with you if possible, Miss Reagan?"

"Yeah... Of course... Yeah," Alex says. "Have you ever looked into hiring another person to assist Nic? I know he's slowly giving up some projects to the interns but Nic is... *Particular*... So he's not handing over a majority." She looks at the red lines and circles Strand has made on her board, "and the firm has seen an increase in our new clients... I think between Nic, Jonesy, the interns and sometimes me, I'm not sure if we can keep up without having to do over time twice a week."

"I could assist but Nic says I should focus on "whatever art directors" do," and Alex, looked up at the right moment, couldn't help chuckle at the sight of Strand doing air quotes with a straight face. "What *do* art directors do, Alex?" *Oh. He's such a little shit*, Alex agrees with herself.

"If you're just here to mock me, you re-build this vision board yourself, Strand," Alex rolls her eyes, her upper lip trying not to curl up too much.

Strand gives her a smile, "You seem fervent you deserve the job so... Enlighten me."

"We're not doing this talk now, are we?"

"I intend we continue the talk." Nic's words haunt her, '*admit defeat and apologize.*'

"Strand," Alex chews the inside of her mouth, staring at him. A million words racing in her head and she's trying to grab ahold of her mind. "I'm..." She takes a deep breath in and exhales, Strand's eyes searching around her face. He places his elbow on the desk and cups

his head with one hand. *Little shit all right, he's enjoying this.* "I'm sorry for my behavior. I felt jealous, and I acted like a child."

Alex is a little surprised at how easy that was but she raises her hand to stop Strand from speaking.

"We've butted heads since you got here because I was angry and, I felt pretentious that I was well-deserving of the job I was vying for. I'm sorry I cussed you out. I'm sorry I've made it hostile between us but I will not stop challenging you and all your decisions."

Strand puts his hand down and chuckles, "I don't expect you to make this easier for me, Alex but I appreciate the apology." He looks at her with a bit of warmth in his eyes. Something in the way he looks at her now differs from the past month of aggression between them that Alex had created. Maybe she's imagining things.

She smiles with relief. "I still think you're ignorant of your privilege."

"I still think I should terminate you." Her eyes go wide. "I'm kidding."

"That's... That's not something to joke, Strand," Alex sheepishly says.

"Well, maybe you should control your emotions a little better, Miss Reagan."

"Alex," she says, avoiding his eyes and fakes her interest with the board between them. "You can call me Alex." Alex misses the small smile Strand gives her. When she looks up, Strand clears his throat and they discuss the notes and corrections he's made. In between redesign, they make small talk.

"So why three degrees?" Alex takes out two photographs and replaces it with a different photo.

"Why not?" Strand takes the photo Alex had just placed, and she glares at him.

"You're just a giant nerd, huh?"

"Or I'm fascinated with expanding my knowledge," he places a post-it that lists prompts for the models

"A.K.A. I'm Richard 'Nerdy Cinnamon' Strand," Alex laughs.

"Cinnamon?" she stops laughing and fakes a cough.

"Uh, nothing."

"Cinnamon? I don't understand that reference." She shrugs, and it gets quiet between them.

They're closing in to finishing the board. There were bouts of small arguments between them regarding if the marketing team from Marcus Hotel would understand whether a model could convey a certain prompt Strand had written, if the outfits Alex had planned would match the color scheme and mood of the shoot, if the photographs they had chosen would suffice and wow at first glance, and which of their interpretation of lifestyle photography is correct.

Strand putting the last finishing touch asks Alex, "How did you get into photography?"

Alex eyes the board, buried memories and moments hitting her like a freight train within seconds of hearing the question, before she turns to Strand, "My ex-girlfriend got me into it." *Her* face comes appears in her brain, a barrage of photographs she's taken of *her* along with it.

"I'm sorry to have asked," he whispers.

"Don't be sorry, Strand," she laughs weakly. "She got me into it but I continued without her."

"Okay," was all he said and Alex returns her gaze on the finished project before them then looks at the tiny digital time-stamp on her computer screen. It's a little past six-thirty.

"I believe we did well on this," she breaks the ice. "Good job."

"Yes, a good job," Strand straightens his posture and cranes his neck left to right. He grabs the board when he stands up. "Thank you, Alex."

"No problem, mister art director. Happy to be of service," she huffs a laugh and gets one back. Strand leaves her to pack. A part of Alex feels... Happy because of the recent progression of her relationship with Strand. He's still a pompous little shit, but he has his moments of being endearing. She also notices a wave of sadness at the rush of memories of Amalia from earlier lingering.

She drives home with an ache she had pushed aside but now has returned, burning through the icy walls she's built once again. Alex succumbs to her fatigue.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to prolong the fight but then I decided to tie it up but it's not like they're out of the woods yet... heh. The next chapter will explore Amalia and Alex's relationship and she became a photographer (not much of a Strand mention). Also for this chapter, the timing continues from Chapter 3 (same day).

Also threw in a bit of Castiel (from Supernatural) reference in there, let me know if you catch it—*heh*

Again, thanks for reading — I appreciate the kudos and comments I receive! Ahhh
(happy tears)

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