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**THE
TENANT**

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Poisoned Pen
PRESS

CHAPTER 1

BLAKE

Six months ago, someone stood in this exact spot—on the twenty-fifth floor of the high-rise building that houses Coble & Roy, the Manhattan marketing firm where I work—and tried to jump.

Unfortunately (or fortunately) for him, the window only tilts open to allow a gap of about three inches, which isn't enough for a grown man to squeeze through. He attempted to wrench it open enough to contort his body into the space, but it didn't quite work. Security stopped him before he plummeted twenty-five stories to his death, and now he's at some retreat in upstate New York, picking daisies or singing songs or getting shock therapy or whatever crap they do at those places.

And now I've got his job.

I wanted the job. I've wanted it since I started working here. It's a *great* position. Everyone was vying for it after Quigley tried to take that nosedive. And now it's mine.

And my new office? It's phenomenal. The leather

desk chair perfectly contours to the shape of my spine and cost more than my first car. The brown leather sofa matches the Peruvian walnut bookcase, which in turn is the same shade as the desk in the center of the room, like someone built them from wood harvested from the same tree.

But the best part of all is the nameplate on the desk, spelling out in gold lettering:

Blake Porter, Vice President.

I stare out the window at the view of the skyline of New York City, dotted with its legendary skyscrapers. When I was a kid growing up in Cleveland, I wanted to see the Empire State Building more than anything, and now I get to look at it every day. Then I drop my gaze to the street below, where, twenty-five stories down, people mill around like ants and the vehicles look like the toy cars my mother used to snag for me at neighborhood yard sales.

What kind of chump tries to jump out the window when he's got an office like this? What an idiot.

He couldn't handle the pressure. I can.

My phone buzzes from where I left it on my desk. I swivel my head so I can make out the name *Krista Marshall* flashing on the screen, and I snatch it up. There are calls I duck and calls I take, but I *always* answer when Krista is on the other end of the line.

"Hey, babe," I say.

"Hello, Mr. Vice President," Krista giggles.

Man, I won't get sick of that for at least another week.

"So how are you holding up?" she asks.

I eye the piles of paperwork on my desk, which are only rivaled by the hundreds of emails waiting for me

in my inbox. If I take a bathroom break, I've got twenty messages waiting for me when I get back. And I piss fast.

But you know what? That's perfectly fine. I landed the promotion to VP of marketing last week because I could handle it. Because I *earned* it. You got a week's worth of work I need to blow through in an hour? Great. Bring it.

"I'm good," I say.

"Will you be home in the next few hours?" she asks me. "Do you want me to grab Chinese food?"

It's nearly six, and no, I'm not anywhere close to finished. But also, I've been stumbling home at bedtime to eat cold takeout or a protein bar every night for the last month. I close my eyes and imagine my fiancée waiting for me in the living room of our Upper West Side brownstone, her strawberry-blond hair pulled into that sexy, messy bun she always wears piled on top of her head, her black leggings fitted to her waist just right.

I popped the question two months ago with a diamond that I hoped would make her head spin, and I've barely had a minute to catch my breath since then. We haven't had the engagement party she wanted; we haven't even had an engagement *dinner*. She deserves much better than this.

"No takeout tonight," I say. "I'm leaving early."

"Really?"

The fact that she seems so astonished tugs at me. "Yes, and I'm taking you out to dinner."

"Blake," she says softly. "You don't have to do this. If you need to work, I understand..."

"You're more important." My voice is firm—it's the voice people don't say no to. "We are going out to dinner,

and it's going to be someplace really nice, so save your appetite. I'll be home by seven thirty."

She sounds so happy. And all this work will be here tomorrow. Also, I've got a laptop I can crack open after she's gone to sleep.

I'm loving domestic life with Krista. When I was twenty-five, the idea of living with a woman would have been unthinkable, but it's been great. It's been going so well we even decided to get ourselves a pet, which we tacitly agreed was a practice run for when we have a child together. We thought about getting a cat or dog, but we couldn't handle that much responsibility, so we ended up with a goldfish. Her name is Goldy. Granted, I know goldfish aren't particularly cuddly, but I'm already attached.

But I need to learn to balance my work and home life. I needed this promotion to give Krista and me the life we want—the life she *deserves*, which will hopefully be better than what my mom had. I needed it to pay for the brownstone, because the mortgage was eating up my whole paycheck.

I came from nothing and hated it. My dad owned a small hardware store and was always struggling to keep it afloat, so I've taken steps to ensure that *my* life is going to be different. I never want to have to worry about the lights being shut off.

I shove my phone into the pocket of my crisply tailored pants. I'll tie up a few loose ends here, and then I'll take off. But before I turn back to my desk, I take one last look out the picture window. I can vaguely see my own reflection in the glass—I'm on the taller side, close to six feet, with brown hair that I always keep clipped very short because it has an annoying tendency to curl, the hint of a

cleft in my chin, and dark brown eyes that are a little too close together but have been called "intense," which I take as a compliment.

"Blake?"

I tear my eyes away from the window. My boss's secretary, Stacie, is standing at the open door to my office, her fist poised to rap on the doorframe to get my attention. And she's got my attention. In that skirt—yes, holy crap, she has my attention.

"Hey," I say. "What's up, Stacie?"

"Wayne wants to talk to you."

I glance back at my watch again. It's late in the day for a meeting. "Now?"

"Right now, he said."

She's not meeting my eyes like she usually does. She's looking down at the oriental rug on the floor, like it's the most interesting thing she's ever seen. And I think to myself, *That's strange*.

"Okay," I say. "I'll be right there."

As I turn away from the window and follow Stacie out of the office, it doesn't even occur to me that in the next five minutes, my whole life will come crashing down.

CHAPTER 2

Wayne Vincent has been my boss for the last decade, ever since I graduated from NYU.

He was the one who hired me. Everything I know about marketing, I owe to Wayne. He taught me how to develop a campaign. He taught me how to organize a budget. He taught me how to analyze the competition and the market. In the time I've known him, he's gone through two wives, gained and lost about forty pounds, and together, we have consumed the equivalent of a truckload of alcohol.

And right now, he looks *pissed*.

He is sitting behind his mahogany desk—about 50 percent larger than mine—and he glowers at me as I enter the room. When I hesitate in the doorway, he points a single finger at the chair in front of his desk and barks, “*Sit.*”

I don't know what this is about. I've had this job for one week, and I'm doing it well. No, I'm doing it *great*.

So whatever this is, it's bullshit. I feel my hackles rise preemptively.

But even if he's wrong, he's still my boss, so I lower myself onto the cushion of the chair in front of him. “Everything okay, Wayne?”

He folds his beefy arms across his barrel chest, only partially concealed by the expensive suit he's wearing. “You tell me, Porter.”

He called me by my last name. He never calls me by my last name.

“I'm on track with the Clemente campaign,” I say. “I'll have a mock-up by Friday. Thursday, if you need it.” I can get it done a day early. Who needs sleep?

Then he says something that shocks me: “You shared the Henderson campaign.”

“I... What?”

His scalp turns pink under his receded hairline. “You showed our campaign—*everything*—to our competitors. You let them steal it from us, you thieving asshole.”

What? My mouth falls open. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“I know you did it, Blake.” His jaw ticks. “All I want to know is who the contact was and how much they paid you.”

“Wayne...”

“*How much*, Porter?”

“Wayne.” A misunderstanding—that's all this is. I clear my throat. “I swear to you, I would never—”

“Bullshit.” A fleck of his spit hits me in the face with this enunciated word. “You're fired, Porter. Pack up your office and get out.”

What?

"Wayne!" I leap out of my seat, my heart jack-hammering in my chest. "You can't possibly think I would do something like that to the company—to you. I don't know why you think I would—"

"I said, get out."

I can tell from the sneer on his face that this isn't some kind of elaborate joke. Nobody is going to jump out of the closet with a surprise cake to congratulate me on my promotion. He is dead serious. He wants me out. After a decade of loyal service, I'm *fired*. Just like that.

A cold sweat breaks out under my armpits. "Can we please discuss this?"

"Get. Out." He picks up the receiver on his desk, his other hand punching numbers on the keypad. "I'm calling security to escort you from the building."

This is really happening. I've lost not only my promotion but my *job*. What the hell is going on? This has got to be some sort of misunderstanding.

"Okay." I hold up my hands. "I'll go, but...maybe we can discuss this later."

The look on Wayne's face indicates we will never discuss this ever again. "Just get out. And forget about a severance package after what you pulled. Don't even think about applying for unemployment. I'll prosecute you for theft, you piece of shit."

I can only shake my head, unable to conjure up the words to respond to that.

Even though it's six in the evening, practically everyone is still at the office, and all of them just heard every word of what happened. I pass Stacie's desk on the way out, and once again, she won't look at me.

"Stacie," I say.

"Sorry, Blake," she mumbles, not lifting her eyes from her computer screen. "There's nothing I can do."

Okay, so that's how it's going to be. Well, to hell with them all. I'll find a job ten times better than this one.

I make the walk of shame back to my office while my coworkers buzz about me from ten feet away. Chad Pickering will be the happiest of all—he thought the VP promotion was his before I snagged it. But he won't be the only one celebrating.

What can I say? If you want to get ahead, you have to make a few enemies.

When I get back to the office, *my* office, I realize there's very little I'll be able to take with me. The framed photo of Krista. The pen my grandpa bought me as a graduation gift—he was so proud that I was the first in our family to ever finish college.

And I'm sure I can take the nameplate that says *Blake Porter, Vice President*. Nobody here has any use for that.

Impulsively, I snatch the nameplate off my desk and hurl it at the wall with so much force that it dents the paint. The nameplate falls to the floor, fractured in half. The office has gone completely silent, watching my little performance. Fine—let them watch. At least I didn't break my hand punching the wall like that dumbass Craig Silverton did after he lost the Roberts account.

I walk over to the window to get one last look. I lean my forehead against the cool glass, not caring anymore about smudges.

And for the first time, I understand my predecessor. Because I wouldn't mind if this glass broke and sent me plummeting to my death 350 feet below.