

ALL THE WAYS

WE BURN

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All characters portrayed are consenting adults, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

BURNING NOTICE



Naomi

The email came in at 2:07 AM — subject line: **NO**.

I stared at it for a full minute, waiting for the letters to shift into something softer. Something that wouldn't feel like a brick to the chest.

Nothing happened.

It stayed exactly as it was, blunt, final, carved in all caps like Henry had typed it through gritted teeth.

I should've never checked my inbox.

Rookie mistake.

But insomnia turns your brain into this weird little gremlin that thrives on self-sabotage. So while normal people scrolled TikTok at night or, I don't know, slept, I scrolled through rejection emails.

Just to spice up the existential dread a little.

I tapped the message open with one finger, already bracing myself.

Naomi,

This isn't the story we discussed. Too much opinion, not enough objectivity. You're letting your personal bias against tech companies cloud your judgment. Again.

Find something else. Something neutral.

Or don't bother coming in on Monday.

The last sentence punched me straight in the stomach, the kind of blow you don't even feel right away. It just lingered, blooming slow and ugly under my ribs.

I dropped my phone onto the mattress and pressed the heels of my palms against my eyes until white stars burst behind my eyelids.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

Henry was trying to break me, I knew that. He'd been trying to break me since the day I walked into *The Daily Pulse* newsroom with my ruined reputation and entirely non-neutral opinions.

But it still worked. Every. Single. Time.

I hated that about myself, how easily I folded under the weight of one little rejection, like a cheap lawn chair.

I shouldn't care what he thought, what *any* of them thought.

I'd built half my career exposing companies exactly like the ones Henry wanted me to write puff pieces about.

I was good at it, tearing down polished, manufactured illusions until all that was left was rot.

But sure. I was the one with the bias.

My phone buzzed again.

I groaned, reaching for it blindly. If Henry had the audacity to send me a second email, I was quitting. Right here. Right now.

But it wasn't from him.

Adrian Stone.

My stomach did a weird little flip, the kind that made absolutely no sense, because I'd never met the man. Never even spoken to him. Nobody had.

Adrian Stone wasn't just a ghost in the business world, he was a myth. Three years of breaking every tech valuation record, founding one of the fastest-growing companies in the country, and not a single interview.

No press conferences. No public appearances.

People called him the *Phantom CEO*.

Some said he was just a front for something bigger. Others swore he didn't exist at all, that the whole persona was generated by AI, a carefully crafted digital illusion.

I'd pitched stories about him before. Half a dozen times at least.

Henry shot them down every single time.

"Find something else, Naomi. Something neutral."

Like I could stay neutral about a man who built a billion-dollar empire off facial recognition software yet refused to show his own face.

I tapped the email open, fully expecting another polite brush-off from his PR team.

But there was no PR jargon. No assistant signing on his behalf.

Just three lines.

Naomi Brooke,

Your request for an interview has been granted.

Full access. Two weeks.

I reread it three times, half-convinced I was hallucinating.

Adrian Stone didn't do interviews. Definitely not two-week exclusive, full-access interviews.

And definitely not with... me.

I didn't sleep.

By the time the sun started bleeding through the blinds, I'd read the email thirteen times and convinced myself it was either an elaborate prank or some kind of trap.

I still printed it out.

I still folded the paper into perfect thirds and tucked it inside my jacket pocket before I walked into the office like I wasn't vibrating out of my skin.