

EXTENDED SAMPLE OF THE BASTARD BILLIONAIRE
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Chapter 1

The flames in the fireplace were nearly extinguished, the curtains drawn on the high windows of Elijah Crane's office. Rain pattered on the glass, providing a soothing backdrop for his work. He pecked at his keyboard, his mind on the e-mail, when a mousy, quiet voice lifted in the darkness.

“Mr....Crane?”

The desk lamp and a slice of natural light made its way past the doorless entry to his office. His newest temporary assistant stood blocking that light, her shadow a long, narrow wedge.

“Reese Crane called,” she said as she walked into his office. “Your brother.”

Like he needed that clarification?

“I know who Reese Crane is, Melanie.”

“He asked me to...” Her small voice grew smaller until it vanished altogether.

Reason being, Eli had taken a deep, rumbling breath and pushed himself up from the desk.

Slowly.

Let it never be said intimidation wasn't an art form.

He kept his eyes on the woman now standing at the other side of his desk. She was young, in her early twenties, and from what he'd gleaned in the last eight or so hours since she'd started this position, weak. He'd bet he could run this one off in record time. Not that he was keeping track, but maybe he should. He was getting good at it.

He blew out that same breath, keeping his lip curled, his expression hard. He let the breath end on a growl.

"What did I tell you this morning?" he asked, his voice lethal.

His latest temporary personal assistant currently putting a massive cramp in his style blinked her big, doelike eyes. "Not to interrupt you, but, Mr. Crane—"

"Not. To. Interrupt me." He made a show of pulling his shoulders straight and hobbling around the table. Her gaze trickled down to the prosthesis at the end of his right leg as he affected a limp. One he didn't have. One he'd trained himself *not* to have.

The help found him more intimidating when reminded he was an amputee. He'd used it to his advantage on more than one occasion. "Do I look like I need to be bothered with trivial questions, Melanie?"

"N-no, sir, but it's about Crane Hotels and I was hired to—"

"You answer to me," he told her point-blank. "I don't care if it's a memo from the Pope. I asked not to be interrupted. I *expect* not to be interrupted."

"But the board meeting..." Melanie trailed off, her eyes blinking faster as if staving off tears.

Tough shit, sweetheart.

The sooner word reached his brothers that the ninth—or was Melanie the tenth?—PA to set foot in Eli's warehouse left in tears, the better. He wasn't interested in resuming a position with Crane Hotels for a myriad of personal reasons, none of which he'd shared with them. The thickheaded men in his family didn't listen when he'd clearly and concisely said no to a pencil-pushing position at the Crane home base, so he'd resorted to showing not telling. The more assistants Reese had sent, the brasher Eli had become.

"Mr. Reese Crane said all you need to do is read this report and give your opinion. I can reiterate on the conference call for you," she squeaked.

Eli elevated his chin and stared her down. She didn't hold his gaze, hers jerking left then right and very purposefully avoiding dipping to his missing limb for a second time.

Sucking in a breath, he blew out one word. "Fine."

"Fine?" Melanie's eyebrows lifted, her expression infused with hope. She was sweet...and about to get a lesson in hard knocks. He hadn't always been this rigid, but change was inevitable after what had happened. She was about to be on the receiving end of the not-so-nice guy he'd become.

"You want my opinion? I'll give you my opinion." He lashed a hand around her wrist, removed the folder from her hand, and tossed it into the fireplace. There were mostly embers now, but a single flame crawled over the edge of the folder as it slid onto the concrete floor. Then the fire fizzled, smoking instead of igniting.

Well. That was unimpressive.

“You...you’re...” Melanie’s fists were balled at her sides, her eyes filling yet again as she visibly shook.

“Spit it out. I don’t have all day.”

“You’re a monster!” She turned and ran—yes, ran—from his office, through his dining room and to the warehouse elevator. He stepped out from behind his office wall to watch the entire scene, arms folded over his chest. There were few doors and walls in this place, so not much hampered the sight of another victory won by Eli “Monster” Crane.

Back in his office, he stomped on the smoking file folder at his feet. Once he was sure he wouldn’t burn down his house, he chucked the folder into the wastebasket at the side of his desk.

“Sorry, Reese,” he said to thin air. “You’ll have to manage without me.”

They’d managed without him for the years he was stationed overseas. His brothers could put one foot in front of the next without him. God knew being away hadn’t improved Eli’s ability to weigh in on financials.

But that’s not why they wanted him there. Reese and Tag, and their father, wanted Eli there because they believed Crane Hotels was part of Eli’s future. A legacy, like CEO was for Reese. Like Guest and Restaurant Services was for Tag.

Eli’s avoidance was in part because he had spearheaded a sizeable personal project and in larger part because wherever he went, unfortunate events unfurled. He wasn’t *quite* ready to topple the company his father had grown into an empire.

His cell phone buzzed with a text from an old friend he'd contacted earlier this week. He lifted the phone and walked smoothly from his desk to the kitchen, reading the text.

Yep, still in business.

He tapped in a reply. *Let's talk more next week. Give me a choice of dates.*

He pocketed his phone, feeling a charge shoot down his arms. Since he'd come home, he'd been consumed with giving back. With changing the worlds of men and women who'd made sacrifices. For their country, for their families. Men and women who'd returned home with less than they'd had before they left and were expected to drop back into the flow of things.

Penance, some might argue, for everything in Eli's past. He wasn't above admitting that evening the scales for his failures was a big part of what drove his actions now.

Which meant he had no interest in stepping in as chief operations officer of the gargantuan Crane Hotels, no matter how many PAs his oldest brother sent over.

Keep 'em comin'.

Eli had become adept at running off PAs. In fact, he'd become even more creative about the ways he could get them to quit.

If poor Melanie had her way, he'd reside in a creepy mansion atop a hill. The gossip rags would murmur about the beastly Crane brother no one dared bother lest they suffer his wrath. He let out a dry laugh, amused by the bend of his thoughts.

After the year he'd had, that sounded a lot like heaven.

* * *

The phone was ringing off the hook today, which normally would be a good sign. But the caller on hold sent Isabella Sawyer's stomach on a one-way trip to her toes.

"Isa?" her assistant called again from her desk. "Do you want me to take a message?"

"No, Chloe, I'll take it." She didn't want to take it, but she'd take it. She shut her office door and in the minimizing crack watched as her friend's face morphed into concern. Isa gave Chloe a thumbs-up she didn't quite feel. Lifting the handset of her desk phone was like facing a firing squad.

"Bobbie, hello," she said to Reese Crane's secretary.

"Hold for Mr. Crane," Bobbie clipped in her usual curt manner.

She'd had similar conversations with Reese several times already. *Nine* other times, to be exact. One for each of the personal assistants she'd sent over to work with his brother. Isa was pretty sure this was the "you're fired" call she'd been expecting three assistants ago. At least she had a prepared response this time.

"Isa. Here we are again," came Reese's smooth voice.

She'd met him once in passing, at an event she'd attended on behalf of her personal assistant company, Sable Concierge. Reese Crane was tall, intimidating, handsome, and professional.

And married. Not that he was Isa's type. Business guys in suits for clients, yes. Business guys in suits for dating potential, no thanks. She'd been there, done that, and picked up the dry cleaning.

“Mr. Crane, I’m sorry we aren’t speaking under better circumstances.”

“So am I. You promised me you’d found the ideal PA for Eli this time around.”

Melanie hadn’t been second string, but Isa had already gone through her top choices. Elijah Crane had chased off every last one of them. They were down to her assistant Chloe, who Isa needed here in the office, or a new hire named Joey. No way would he last thirty seconds.

Isa refused to pull her other PAs off current assignments to cater to Elijah Crane. If she lost the Crane business, she’d need her current roster of clients or they’d all starve.

“Solve my problem.” Reese’s commanding tone brooked no argument, nor should it. Isa was at his beck and call for one simple reason: his seal of approval would help her budding business advance to the next level, or, if she continued failing to provide a suitable assistant for his brother, could tank it. She wanted to wedge a foot in the door with the elite in Chicago, and since her parents weren’t supportive of her choice in vocation, Reese Crane held the key to that door.

“I have a solution. A PA who has over three years experience at my company and a decade prior working as right-hand woman to Sawyer Financial Group. I can guarantee your brother will absolutely *not* scare her away.”

“Who is this maven?” he asked, but the lilt of his voice suggested he’d already figured out.

“Me.”

A quiet grunt that could have been a laugh came through the phone. “I take it you’re not much of a wilter.”

“No. I’m tenacious and stubborn.”

“An exact match for Eli.”

“Once I convince him to get more involved in Crane Hotels, I’m sure I can place one of our many qualified assistants in my stead. I do have a company to run.”

Afraid she’d overstepped boundaries with her confidence, she cleared her throat, her mother’s scolding voice in the back of her mind whispering, *Be polite, Isabella. No man appreciates a woman who disrespects him.*

“My foray as his assistant will be brief,” she continued. “But there’s no need for him to know I’m top brass.”

“Right. Let’s not give him a challenge he’ll embrace,” Reese muttered.

“Exactly. I’ll act as if the company sent me. Like I’m a nameless number eleven. But trust me when I say, I’ll exceed your expectations.”

“Eleven,” Reese muttered.

She could have kicked herself for reminding him how many assistants they’d run through already.

“I apologize for the lack of professionalism you’ve seen so far. I appreciate you giving Sable Concierge another chance. My company is one I want you to lean on any time you’re in need of help.”

“Your company came highly recommended, Ms. Sawyer.” Reese said, his voice taking on a gentle quality. His voice did that whenever the topic of his wife came up.

“Thank Merina for me again,” Isa told him.

“I will. Your success is imminent, I presume.”

“You can bank on it.” She said her goodbyes and hung up the phone, pulling in a steady breath. One more shot. She had one more shot to pull this off. No, Reese hadn’t said it, but he hadn’t needed to. She’d fire her if she were him. Wife-recommended or no.

Last fall, Isa randomly scored a position for one of her assistants at the Van Heusen Hotel with Merina. The other woman had suggested Isa’s company for Elijah’s transition from Marine to Crane COO. In comparison to what Merina’s brother-in-law had been through serving his country, placing a PA was supposed to be easy. Eli had been through the physical hoops to regain his mobility using a prosthetic leg, and his warehouse home was equipped to accommodate his working from there as well.

The assistant’s job was to help Eli field Crane Hotels conference calls, answer and forward e-mails, and tend to the light load of work Reese had handed down to Eli to oversee.

Eli had done none of it.

Isa sent in seasoned help, and a startling number of her employees left either in tears or so angry Isa nearly lost them altogether. Elijah Crane, regardless of the team’s sensitivity training and the day they’d spent with a rehabilitation expert for amputees, was not an easy guy to feel sorry for.

He was “mean,” according to one of her employees, “miserable” according to another, and to poor Melanie, who unfortunately had turned in her notice after her first and only day at Eli’s, had referred to him as a “monster” on her way out the door.

Well. The scourge of Eli Crane ended here. Isa wasn’t accustomed to buckling under pressure. If Eli was determined to be miserable, he could ruin his own life, but she

wouldn't allow him to tank her company's future. Despite the reassurance she'd given Reese, Isa had expected Melanie to last two or three days. She'd lasted one.

Chloe had been trained to run the office in case Isa was away, so Isa had no doubts she could handle Eli during the day, then tend to Sable Concierge after hours. Answering e-mails could be done at any time of night, and she could return phone calls during lunch or early in the morning.

As owner and operator, Isa was willing to do whatever it took to make her business a success in Chicago. If she had to work two jobs for the short-term, so be it.

Elijah Crane hadn't given her a choice.

* * *

Eli sat at the kitchen table and watched the hubbub in front of him, face resting in his hand, scowl on his face. His sister-in-law, Merina, was bustling around setting the table. She paused in front of him.

"You look like your brother when you do that." Her mouth flinched into a teasing smile.

"The one you married or Tarzan?"

"I heard that." Tag loped into the room with three to-go bags from Chow Main, the best Chinese food joint in town. Eli's mouth watered at the sight of the generic paper-inside-a-plastic bag with the red happy face on it that read Have a Nice Day!

Tag's girlfriend, Rachel, followed him in, a bottle of wine in each hand.

"Hey, Rach," Merina greeted, setting the last place. She accepted one of the bottles and spun the label around. "Ooh, good choice."

“It’s a customer favorite. Or was, when I bartended.” Rachel flashed Eli a quick glance, then looked away. She wasn’t sure about him yet, and for good reason. They hadn’t spent a lot of time together. He hadn’t exactly been warm and fuzzy since he’d returned home.

Reese filtered in behind them, still wearing his suit from work. Merina reached up and tugged the knot in his tie loose, standing on her toes to press a lengthy kiss to his lips.

“Sexy man,” she murmured.

“Vixen,” Reese commented, cupping her ass in one hand.

Patience shot, Eli gestured at the dishes on the table and bellowed, “Can someone please explain why we can’t eat Chow Main out of the containers like normal human beings instead of dealing with this bullshit?”

He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at his family, all of whom had glued their eyes on him. Merina clucked her tongue. Reese’s lip curled in mild irritation. Rachel bit her bottom lip and stepped closer to Tag, who wrapped an arm around her, opened his mouth, and let out a hearty laugh.

At that laugh, the tone of the room shifted back to light and fluffy, and the chattering continued as Rachel and Tag unloaded the food onto the table.

It seemed the only person Eli was capable of scaring off were assistants. His family was entirely immune to him.

“We’re here,” came a call from across the warehouse. Eli’s father, Alex, and his assistant for years, Rhona filed in together, her hand linked in his. It’d been recently discovered that Alex and Rhona were partnering in more than business, and since Eli’s

old man was retired and had been for some time, Eli guessed that Alex and Rhona were partnering more often than not on a personal front.

Love was in the fucking air, he thought with an eye roll.

“Hey, Eli.” Rhona pulled her scarf from her neck—it was only September, so he had no idea why the scarf—and smiled brightly at him.

He lifted a hand and gave a brief wave. Rhona filed into the fray, cooing over the wine as Merina apologized about not knowing she was coming and pulled an extra set of dishes from the cabinet. A low sigh worked its way through Eli’s chest.

Happy. Every last goddamn one of them. Surrounded by this much love caused a heavy streak of loneliness to course through him. Damned if he could understand why. He’d been a miserable bastard lately.

“Beer, bro?” Tag asked, collapsing next to him into a chair. His brother’s hair was down in golden-brown waves, his beard full like Eli’s but neatly trimmed, *not* like Eli’s. He’d let the facial hair and the hair on his head go and he resembled a homeless dog some days. Meanwhile, Mr. Pantene Hair next to him...

Eli swiped the bottle. “What, no frosted glass? Shouldn’t we have coasters?”

He gestured to the set table, in the center of which rested a bowl filled with oranges his last assistant brought over. She’d probably been instructed by Reese to monitor his vitamin C intake. That was another thing—since he’d been back, he’d been tended to, coddled, and overly cared for. He’d busted his ass getting himself up and moving so he was dependent on no one. As a completely independent and capable man, he resented the fussing.

“It’s been half a year, E,” Tag said, leaning back in the chair and sucking down some of his own beer. “You’re going to have to get used to us being in your face. We missed you.”

That last bit paired with an elbow jab and Eli grunted. He knew they missed him. Hell, *he* missed *them*. His brothers and father had found happiness, which Eli admittedly found soul-sucking, but it didn’t mean Eli wasn’t happy for them. He just wished they would go be adorably coupled off somewhere far, far away from his sanctuary.

“I can go out into public, you know,” he grumbled, setting the beer bottle next to his plate—on the table, no coaster, *thank you very much*. “You guys don’t have to come in here and serve me.”

He was skilled at his new role of miserable bastard, and since everyone expected it now, he was determined to excel.

“Oh but we do, Lord Crane.” Merina smiled demurely as she leaned over and handed him a glass. “We know you don’t want to be seen out and about yet. Trust me, I spent enough time with the media breathing down my neck. I don’t blame you.”

Wasn’t that the truth? Other than a brief article in the *Trib* that mentioned him as a war hero and a quote he’d said over the phone taken completely out of context, Eli had successfully avoided the limelight. Reese and Merina had not, but that’d been the plan. And it worked out well for both of them, despite their initial mutual dislike for one another.

Eli liked Merina. She was tough. She was bold and clearly had enough forearm strength to pull the stick out of Reese’s ass. At least partway. Eli had never seen his oldest

brother this...at peace. And now that Reese was living a utopic existence with his biggest dreams coming true, he wanted Eli on board to tiptoe in the tulips alongside him.

No, Reese wasn't through pressuring Eli into coming back on at Crane Hotels full-time, but he had lightened up some. As evidenced by him strolling back into the dining room area sans tie and jacket. Unlike Tag, Reese was always suited. Tag was the opposite, typically in cargo pants and a skintight Henley to show off biceps he was always pumping into ridiculous sizes.

Eli was as comfortable in a suit as out of one. He could don fatigues, jeans and a tee, or a three-piece Armani and feel like himself. The clothes, in his case, did not make the man. Even his body didn't make the man, though he worked his ass off to maintain his. He couldn't do all the things he used to be able to do, but the better shape he was in, the better he felt about the leg.

"The media doesn't give a shit about me," Eli said, and that was the way he liked it.

"They will when we name you COO," Reese piped up.

Eli sent him a death glare. Reese, the oldest, didn't flinch. Even with a sleeve of tattoos and a surly attitude, Eli didn't intimidate his oldest brother. Reese had known Eli when he'd sleepwalked to the neighbor's house, so Reese wasn't about to be intimidated by a grumpy Marine.

"We found you a new PA," Reese announced.

"No."

"She starts next week," he continued as if Eli hadn't spoken.

“Well done, Reese.” Alex took his seat across from Eli. He folded his fingers at his chin and smiled through a snow-white goatee, looking very Dos Equis’s “Most Interesting Man in the World” in that position.

“You’re wasting your time,” Eli said to the collective masses. “I’ve told you repeatedly, I’m not interested in Chief Pencil Pusher, but if you insist, *Clip...*”

Tag barked another laugh, proud to hear his nickname for Reese (Clip, short for Paperclip) used by someone other than himself.

“You’re the most like me, Eli,” Alex said, starting the familiar speech.

Because Eli had heard it about a dozen times over the last nine months, his vision began blurring at the edges. Talk of legacy and history would follow.

“Reese has my business savvy,” Alex said, a proud smile stretching his goatee. “He was made for CEO.” On that Eli couldn’t disagree. Reese bled Crane Hotel’s black and white. “Tag is my free spirit, perfect for the entertainment sector of Crane. He’s always winning hearts.”

“He won mine.” Rachel slid onto Tag’s lap instead of sitting in her own chair. Eli looked past lowered eyebrows to see her nuzzle Tag, who smiled like a lovesick fool.

Must be nice.

“But you, Elijah,” his father continued. “You have my sense of duty. You have a lion’s heart. That same sense is what propelled me into the service.” Alex pushed up a sleeve, revealing a faded tattoo reading *semper fidelis*. Eli turned his arm to show off his matching tattoo. They did have that in common. What they didn’t have in common was

that his father was a war hero who saved people, and Eli, though he'd been lauded one, had saved no one.

“But now your duty lies elsewhere, son.”

Here it came. *Don't say it. Don't say it.*

“It's time to be the man Crane Hotels needs you to be.”

Next to Eli, Tag snorted. Reese even cracked a smile.

Eli referred to this as Dad's “Batman” speech. It always ended with that same ode.

“I'm busy, Dad,” Eli skirted. Because *cursed* would have sounded maudlin.

“We'll see.”

He and his father locked eyes for a few beats before their stare-down was interrupted.

“Okay, food!” Merina gestured to the spread. Typically, Tag ate three entrees on his own, but Merina preferred to have a bite of everything on the table. If Eli wasn't fast, she'd dig into his without asking. “Ooh, Eli. Your shrimp pad Thai looks amazing.”

He pointed. “You have to give me an extra crab rangoon if you steal my food.”

She slid a glance at Reese. “Did he used to be nicer?”

“No,” Reese deadpanned.

Eli and Reese exchanged what could be construed as brief smiles. Reese knew better. Eli used to wield affable charm like a weapon. Before war had hardened him. Before his friends died because he hadn't been able to save them.

But that was in the past, and this was now. His new normal was his family's presence every other Friday since he'd returned after leaving parts of himself in

Afghanistan. Yes, his leg, but also two very good men. While he was away, a lot had happened to him, and as much had happened to his brothers. Reese was married, for the second time to the same woman; Tag was practically married; and Dad...whatever was going on there.

Eli understood how everyone assumed he'd slip into the slot bookmarked for him at Crane Hotels the moment he was well. For him, things weren't that simple. He loved them too much to fail them.

Reese dished out some of his Mongolian beef onto Merina's plate while she stole a sip of his wine.

Rachel slid off Tag's lap with a smile and Tag lifted her hand and kissed her fingers.

Rhona unwrapped a pair of chopsticks and handed them to Alex, who beamed at her, the happiest he'd been since Lunette Crane's death.

Eli reminded himself again that he didn't want what they had. He refused to want something he couldn't have. Life had spoken. He was listening.

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