

*December 1*  
*Present Day*

*B*eat stood shivering on the sidewalk outside of his thirtieth birthday party.

At least, he assumed a party was waiting for him inside the restaurant. His friends had been acting mysterious for weeks. If he could only move his legs, he would walk inside and act surprised. He'd hug each of them in turn, like they deserved. Make them explain every step of the planning process and praise them for being so crafty. He'd be the ultimate friend.

And the ultimate fraud.

When the phone started vibrating again in his hand, his stomach gave an unholy churn, so intense he had to concentrate hard on breathing through it. A couple passed him on the sidewalk, shooting him some curious side-eye. He smiled at them in reassurance, but it felt weak, and they only walked faster. He looked down at his phone, already knowing an unknown caller would be displayed on the screen. Same as last time. And the time before.

Over a year and a half had passed since the last time his black-mailer had contacted him. He'd given the man the largest sum of

money yet to go away and assumed the harassment was over. Beat was just beginning to feel normal again. Until the message he'd received tonight on the way to his own birthday party.

*I'm feeling talkative, Beat. Like I need to get some things off my chest.*

It was the same pattern as last time. The blackmailer contacted him out of the blue, no warning, and then immediately became persistent. His demands came on like a blitz, a symphony beginning in the middle of its crescendo. They left no room for negotiation, either. Or reasoning. It was a matter of giving this man what he wanted or having a secret exposed that could rock the very foundation of his family's world.

No big deal.

He took a deep breath, paced a short distance in the opposite direction of the restaurant. Then he hit call and lifted the phone to his ear.

His blackmailer answered on the first ring.

"Hello again, Beat."

A red-hot iron dropped in Beat's stomach.

Did the man's voice sound more on edge than previous years?

Almost agitated?

"We agreed this was over," Beat said, his grip tight around the phone. "I was never supposed to hear from you again."

A raspy sigh filled the line. "The thing about the truth is, it never really goes away."

With those ominous words echoing in his ear, a sort of surreal calmness settled over Beat. It was one of those moments where he looked around and wondered what in the hell had led him to this time and place. Was he even standing here at all? Or was he trapped in an endless dream? Suddenly the familiar sights of Greenwich Street, only a few blocks from his office, looked like a movie set. Christmas lights in the shapes of bells and Santa

heads and holly leaves hung from streetlights, and an early December cold snap turned his breath to frostbitten mist in front of his face.

He was in Tribeca, close enough to the Financial District to see coworkers sharing sneaky cigarettes on the sidewalk after too much to drink, still dressed in their office attire at eight p.m. A rogue elf traipsed down the street, yelling into his phone. A cab drove by slowly, wheels traveling over wet sludge from the brief afternoon snowfall, “Have a Holly Jolly Christmas” drifting out through the window.

“Beat.” The voice in his ear brought him back to reality. “I’m going to need double the amount as last time.”

Nausea lifted all the way to his throat, making his head feel light. “I can’t do that. I don’t personally have that kind of liquid cash and I will not touch the foundation money. This needs to be *over*.”

“Like I said—”

“The truth never goes away. I heard you.”

Silence was heavy on the line. “I’m not sure I appreciate the way you’re speaking to me, Beat. I have a story to tell. If you’re not going to pay me to keep it to myself, I’ll get what I need from *20/20* or *People* magazine. They’d love every salacious word.”

And his parents would be ruined.

The truth would devastate his father.

His mother’s sterling reputation would be blown to smithereens.

The public perception of Octavia Dawkins would nose-dive, and thirty years of the charitable work she’d done would mean nothing. There would only be the story.

There would only be the damning truth.

“Don’t do that.” Beat massaged the throbbing sensation between his eyes. “My parents don’t deserve it.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I didn’t deserve to be thrown out of the band, either.” The man snorted. “Don’t talk about s\*\*\* you don’t know, kid. You weren’t there. Are you going to help me out or should I start making calls? You know, I’ve had this reality show producer contact me twice. Maybe she would be a good place to start.”

The night air turned sharper in his lungs. “What producer? What’s her name?”

Was it the same woman who’d been emailing and calling Beat for the last six months? Offering him an obscene sum of money to participate in a reality show about reuniting Steel Birds? He hadn’t bothered returning any of the correspondence because he’d gotten so many similar offers over the years. The public demand for a reunion hadn’t waned one iota since the nineties and now, thanks to one of the band’s hits going viral decades after its release, the demand was suddenly more relevant than ever.

“Danielle something,” said his blackmailer. “It doesn’t matter. She’s only one of my options.”

“Right.”

How much had she offered Beat? He didn’t remember the exact amount. Only that she’d dangled a lot of money. Possibly seven figures.

“How do we make this stop once and for all?” Beat asked, feeling and sounding like a broken record. “How can I guarantee this is the last time?”

“You’ll have to take my word for it.”

Beat was already shaking his head. “I need something in writing.”

“Not happening. It’s my word or nothing. How long do you need to pull the money together?”

Goddammit. This was real. This was happening. *Again.*

The last year and a half had been nothing but a reprieve. Deep down, he’d known that, right? “I need some time. Until February, at least.”

“You have until Christmas.”