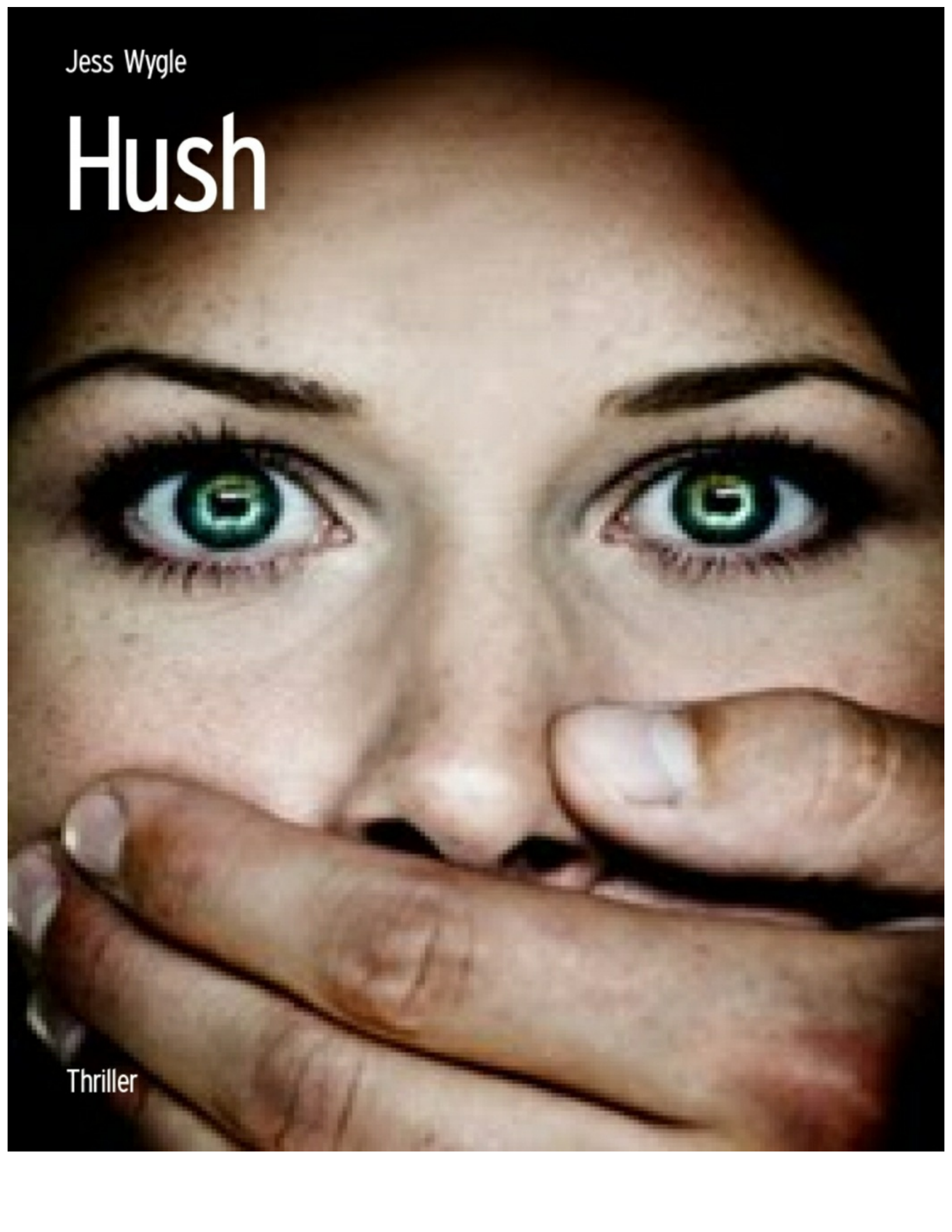


Jess Wygle

Hush

Thriller



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Hush

Preface

When I was younger, I read a story about a demon who lusts for a young, beautiful girl. One night, the demon steals away the girl, trapping her in a realm not for the living but not for the dead, holding her prisoner. The girl could walk through her world, see her home, her friends, her family, but she was invisible to them. Her loved ones searched and searched for her to no avail. They believed her to be dead yet she was standing right in front of them. She was forced to watch them grieve in silence. Having only to extend her hand to wipe their tears, but she was unable.

I don't remember how the story ended. I don't remember if the girl ever made it out of the demon's clutches, if she was ever released from her torturous purgatory, or if she was reunited with her loved ones. I don't know if I even finished the story. I couldn't bear the thought of it, being so close to it all yet so far away; being so disconnected. It terrified me and for many years, I feared I would succumb to the same garish destiny.

Why I assumed such a monstrous thing would happen to me, I don't know. As I grew older, wiser, I found that logic and reasoning diminished those nightmares. I hadn't thought of that girl for many years, until her fate became mine.

"Let's keep an eye on that," I said, looking at Ana's hemoglobin reading, talking to my nurse. "That's still a little lower than I want it to be. I think, what was it last time? Wasn't it just a little higher?" I looked over Janet's shoulder as she scrolled through Ana's file on her laptop to the last test results. "Oh yeah. It's slowly dropping down. Let's do another test in the morning. We may have to think about a transfusion."

Janet nodded, making a note on Ana's file. Joyce, another nurse in the office came around the corner. "Dr. Reinbeck, there are some gentlemen in your office here from Make-A-Wish," she said.

"Oh, damn, they're here already?" I looked at my watch. Time was a concept I've never had a handle on. It was always slipping right out of my grasp. "I've got to stop in to see Dalton really quickly and I'll be in. Could you let them know it will be a few more minutes?"

The elderly RN nodded with a smile and turned back, heading for my office. I moved from the small nurse's nook out into the hall and knocked on Dalton's door before letting myself in. I smiled cordially at Dalton's parents, Mike and Cheri. Dalton's small little body was tucked under the crisp white hospital sheets. Tubes erupted from the brim of the blankets.

"I see he's still asleep," I whispered, making my way over to the bed. A nurse was ticking away at the room's computer, keeping track of his vitals. I leaned over her shoulders to see his progress. "Shouldn't be much longer and the anesthesia will wear off." I pulled back the covers, holding them up to conceal the iodine-stained skin surrounding the ivory gauze placed strategically on his abdomen. I examined the surgery site, looking for excessive bleeding and was thankful to find none.

"You'll want to change this when he wakes," I whispered to the nurse. "Bring in the instructions at that time and show his folks how they'll want to do it."

"Everything looks great." I said, turning to Mike and Cheri. "He's going to be very weak and peaky for the next couple of days. Children generally bounce back from these types of surgeries much quicker than adults. I'll be back to check on him before I head out today," I assured his parents.

Dalton was recovering from a colostomy at the age of four. He suffers from a disease of the intestines. He was born without the proper nerve endings in the cilia of the intestines which causes blockage as food tries to digest and move through the system. He'd be fine now. He'd never be the same again but the most of his and his parent's worries were over, unlike the majority of the patients I saw.

I made the conscious decision to stop by the restroom before heading to my office. Being the youngest practicing oncologist in the office, I tried too hard to keep my appearance up. I looked in the mirror. My long brown hair hung lifelessly and pretty dull

down my shoulders and back. I teased it a little with my fingers, but knew it was no use. These men would look at me and see exactly what everyone else saw; a twenty-one year old girl trying to look like a thirty-something doctor. My face was still youthful, my figure was still petite and toned, and though I tried to dress more conservatively and hide the youth with chunky-framed spectacles, there was no hiding the truth.

I hurried to my office and pushed open the door. I had only occupied this space for less than a year so it was still very bland and forgetful, especially since I spent most of my time in the patients' rooms than anywhere else, not giving me much time to decorate.

Three men, two sitting in chairs and one standing in the corner, perked up when I walked in. "So sorry to keep you waiting," I said as the two men stood from their seats and turned to greet me. Holding my hand out, I approached the shorter, and older of the three. "I'm Dr. Reinbeck."

The man's eyes widened in surprise as he took my out-stretched hand. "Steven Phillips, Make-A-Wish," he said.

"Steven, nice to meet you. It's great to put a face to the name after all of our email correspondence."

"Yes, I'd have to agree," Steven replied.

I turned to the younger man standing at his right, whose face was all-too familiar to me. "No need to introduce yourself." I smirked widely at him, placing my hand in his. "Pleasure to meet you, Damien. I'm so pleased you could make it. We're all big fans of your music around here," I gushed.

"Oh how nice of you to say," the toned and tanned singer gushed back at me, genuinely it appeared.

"And you are?" I asked, pulling myself away from the Adonis to the stiffly professional gentleman with the hard jaw and contradicting soft eyes.

"I'm Callem Tate," suit introduced himself. He was a bit older than Damien, but younger than Mr. Philips. "It's nice to meet you, Doctor."

I smiled kindly before stepping back. "Thank you all so much for coming."

"Yes," Steven spoke up. "We're glad this all worked out so well. Damien is in town for press of his new movie and we hear Ana is in need of some cheering up."

I nodded. "Yes, she had a bit of a crash earlier this week and has been admitted to our care since then," I explained.

"Now, I thought she was in remission?"

"She is, but we've run into a bump in the road, which isn't uncommon, and it sort of rerouted us. She's in good hands here." There was only so much information I was able to give to Make-A-Wish and the fact that Ana may need a blood transfusion due to her hemoglobin level wasn't one of them.

"What is it that she has?" Damian asked.

"It's called Rhabdomyosarcoma," I responded easily.

"There's today's million-dollar word," Damien added.

I smiled. "Yeah, it can be a mouthful. It's a cancer of the skeletal muscle where malignant tumors are formed, usually around the neck or somewhere on the head. Ana's tumors were in her ears and they've since been removed. She has hearing issues now,

but if we hadn't caught the tumors when we did, she may have lost her hearing all together. She does have to wear hearing aids, probably for the rest of her life. I'd say that's a small price to pay when considering the alternative."

"And how is she today?" Steven asked.

"Doing great. I stopped by her room this morning. She's in a good mood. She'll be so excited to see you." I couldn't tame my smile at the thought of Ana's excitement.

"Do her parent's know she was selected for the program?"

I nodded. "Yes. I informed them when I got the news. Like I said, we just weren't expecting you this early."

"You can blame that on me," Damien started. "I wasn't supposed to be in town today. I had a change of plans and I'll be making an appearance at the 'We Are Music' concert tomorrow night. I figured since I was here, I could make my stop, you know, while I'm in town."

Though Damien was a pop singer who seemed like a completely shallow based on what I've seen of him in the media, I couldn't help but to swoon a little as our eyes locked. He really was something to behold, almost mesmerizing. I had to remind myself to blink.

"Well, do you want to follow me? I'll take you to her room," I said, gesturing to the doorway. I had the fleeting feeling that three sets of eyes took the moment to survey my figure as I turned my back on them all. Vultures.

"So how is it you're so young yet in the position you're in?" Damien asked, quickening his pace to walk alongside me.

"Oh, I'm just ahead of the curve, is all," I said jokingly.

Damien laugh, cocking his head back slightly. "No, I'm serious. It's pretty crazy that you're doing a job like this at your age. What's your secret?" he asked, leaning in as if trying to conceal the truth eavesdroppers.

I smiled. "I'm a bit of a whiz kid," I mumbled. I had explained that to so many people that it felt scripted as the words fell from my smirked mouth.

"You're like some kind of prodigy?"

I shrugged. "I wouldn't go that far."

"What, you graduated high school at like 15?" Damien went on teasingly.

"I was 12 actually."

Damien's brows raised. "You've got to be kidding me, and you knew all that time that this is what you wanted to do?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I kind of did. I just really wanted to work with kids and medicine just kind of clicked for me from the beginning." I shrugged, not sure how else to explain it.

Damien nodded. "That makes sense. So how long have you been working here?"

"I've only been on staff for about six months." I steered the group of curious men around a corner, stopping them outside the first door on the right. "Just give me a minute. I'll bring her parents out first. I want to make sure Ana's doing okay before we go in," I explained, knocking on the door lightly.

"Come in," I heard a deep voice say from the other side. Pushing open the door, I

was greeted by two strong smiles, stronger than they'd seen earlier this week. Greg and Cassie were Ana's parents and had been with her all week. Cassie was a stay-at-home mom and Greg was an actuary for a firm in Los Angeles. They had a sweet 16-month old little guy named Shace who'd been spending a bit of time in the hospital with Ana, making her laugh and keeping her company, but he spent most of his time with Cassie's parents, who lived here in Huntington Beach.

After greeting Greg and Cassie, I looked over at a wide-eyed Ana who was enveloped in her iPad. "Hey, can I talk to you two outside for a moment?" I asked, still standing in the doorway.

Greg and Cassie exchanged uneasy glances before heading in my direction. Usually when doctors ask parents to step away from their children for privacy, it means they're receiving bad news. As soon as they stepped outside the room, their fears were diminished. Cassie's eyes immediately widen as they found Damien standing behind me.

Greg hurried her out and closed the door to the room while Cassie gasped in excitement, even pulling Damien into a hug. "I can't believe you're here," she gushed. "Thank you so much. Thank you."

"Mr. and Mrs. Bowman, I'm Steven Phillips from Make-A-Wish, how are you?" Steven shook Greg's hand while Cassie loosened her hold on Damien long enough to shake his hand also, wiping away tears.

"Thanks for being here," Greg said in his usual cool, calm, monotone manner. "Ana's going to love this." Their smiles were infectious.

"There's really no need to introduce Damien, is there?" Steven added causing the group to break out in a chorus of chuckles.

"No, not at all. We know who you are," Cassie said, still gushing. "Ana is such a big fan. She's got your albums on repeat on her iPod. Oh, this is going to be so great for her." Cassie's eyes still filled with tears of excitement.

"Well I can't wait to meet her," Damien said, clapping his hands together with anticipation.

"Shall we?" Steven asked.

I waited in the hall as Cassie and Greg reentered the room. I could hear them tell Ana they had a surprise for her. I could hear her gasp from the hallway as Damien made his grand entrance. Mr. Tate and I stood outside for a minute, giving them time to meet each other.

"So do you do this often, Mr. Tate?" I asked, breaking the silence between us. "Personal security for celebrities?"

"Sort of, yes," he said, clearing his throat. "You can call me Callem. I actually own the security detail along with transportation and an airline, all catering to a more luxurious crowd. Politicians, movie stars, diplomats, CEOs, those are the usual customers."

"Oh okay," I nodded. "And you're catering to a pop star today?"

He sighed heavily, smiling slyly. "For the weekend. I would have pawned him off on one of my other guys, but they're all on other assignments."

"So this is a rather large enterprise?"

"It's growing. We're not much now, but I'm looking to expand."

"There's probably a high demand for your services in this area, isn't there?"

Callem nodded. "We've been keeping very busy. You get one good client who gives you a good review and those kinds of praises are heard by the right kind of people."

"How long have you been doing this?"

Before he could answer, Greg was at the door. "Uh, Dr. Reinbeck, Ana wants to see you."

"Excuse me," I mumbled to Callem as I made my way back into the room. Damien had taken a seat next to Ana's bed. I nearly gasped at the sight of her. I'd never seen such a big smile on that little girl's face before. She was positively glowing.

"Dr. Reinbeck, did you know Damien was here?" she clamored.

"I did. Was this a good surprise?" I asked, stopping at the foot of the bed.

"I didn't know he was coming to see me," Ana spouted, before turning her attention back to Damien. They posed for pictures, he signed some autographs for her, brought her some of his merchandise. She was in another world with her idol, unaware of the crowd watching the two of them interacting. It was such a heartwarming sight to bring so much joy to a little girl who'd been through so much in her short life.

I lost complete track of time, surprise, surprise, and ducked out of the room a few minutes later. I had a few appointments I needed to prepare for. I hurried to the nurse's station, got the files I needed, and went back to my office. Before long, there was a knock at my door.

"Yes, come on in," I called, not looking away from my computer screen. I'm used to nurses walking in and out of my office throughout the day so seeing Callem walk into my office was a little bit of a surprise. "Oh, hi."

"Hello, I hope I'm not bothering you," he said.

I shook my head. "No not at all. What can I help you with?"

"Damien wanted to know what you're doing tonight," Callem asked quickly, looking almost uncomfortable asking.

My eye brows rose and I was at a loss for words for a moment. "Uh, excuse me?"

"Do you have plans for this evening? Damien doesn't perform until tomorrow, but is going to the concert tonight and wanted to know if you'd like to join him."

I sat back in my chair. "Like a date?" Callem shrugged. "Does that sound like a date to you?"

"I'm just the messenger," Callem said, leaving all opinion to himself.

"Right," I mumbled, spacing off. "Um," I knew I didn't have any plans, unless you consider a bowl of steamed vegetables and a glass of merlot on the couch with Friends reruns a date? "What time is it?"

"I think it starts tonight at 7pm at Staples Center."

I shrugged. "Will you be there?"

"Yes, he asked me to pick you up if you accepted. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know much about this guy, other than what I hear on the radio. I guess I'm just paranoid more than anything. It's stupid," I said, shaking off the idea. "You know what, I accept. I'll go. Why not? You only live once and I don't get out much."

Callem nodded. "Could you jot down your address and I'll be by to pick you up, say eight?"

"I thought the concert started at seven?" I said, jotting my address on a post-it.

"It does, but it's all night. I think there are five or six performances tonight," Callem said.

"Alright. Eight it is. Thank you." I smiled as he took the post-it from me.

"We'll see you tonight, Doctor."

"Oh, please, call me Olivia."

A wide, valiant smile spread across his face as he took a few steps backward toward the door. "We'll see you tonight, Olivia."

"Oh, Callem?" I stopped him before he left the office. "Why didn't Damien come ask me himself?"

"I'm not sure, ma'am."

I smiled. "Olivia, please."

The way he looked at me before he left my office made me wonder if I'd met Callem somewhere before. He didn't look familiar to me, but if he owned transportation and security services, he may very well have been at some of the benefits or fundraisers I'd been to, working for one of the other guests. It was hard telling.

It took me a minute to get my mind back on the right track. What had I just agreed to do? Spend the night rubbing elbows with celebs and socialites. I'd be in the direct company of a multi-platinum selling artist. It was all very exciting. Now all I had to do was figure out what to wear.

A single tear dripped onto the hard surface of my suitcase. That's the last one. No more. No more tears. I wiped away the evidence that was trickling down my cheek and zipped up the last duffle bag. There wasn't much I wanted to take with me. The clothes, jewels, shoes, handbags, they all stayed behind. I gathered all the photos, all the souvenirs from our numerous travels, the trinkets, even the priceless artifacts we'd given to each other as tokens of our love were now neatly tucked away, each bearing a new meaning to me.

I didn't want to be sentimental at a time like this, but I couldn't stop myself. Standing in the bedroom doorway, I couldn't help but reminisce. It's just a room in your house, a place to hold things, a place to lay your head, but there was so much more to it. It was the place we made love and made plans. It's the place we dreamt and held each other. Like a blood stain on our crisp white down-comforter, all of that was tainted now.

I hurried down the stairs, fighting back the strong urge to cry. I could smell his musk in the living room. I maneuvered through the strategically placed high-end leather furniture to the wall-length windows, pulling aside the thin white curtains. The cab was already here. I hoped I hadn't kept him waiting.

I walked into the breathtaking kitchen and nearly lost it. I loved this kitchen. I loved this house. I loved the plans I had for it all that were now shattered on the tile floor beneath my feet. It was all a lie. It was all so much bigger than I ever imagined it to be. I set my iPhone, my Mercedes keys, and the few credit cards I had on the granite countertop and turned my back, walking out.

I didn't want any of it anymore, not now that I knew the awful truth. That's why I had to leave. I scooped up the suitcase and duffle bag and strode out the door as easily as the first time I had walked in. The driver stepped out of the taxi just as I appeared on the front step. I had turned on the security system, though I had it in my right mind to leave the house unlocked in hopes he'd be robbed blind. I couldn't bring myself to be the cruel one. That was his job.

"Where to?" the driver asked after the suitcases had been secured in the trunk and we were both in the taxi.

I gazed out the window at the beach front property. I was bidding adieu. Parting is such sweet sorrow. I sighed heavily. "The Omni please," I replied quietly.

We drove along the coast, headed for the city of Angels. "Looks like there's a storm coming in," the driver noted. The waves were striking the shoreline hard today and the water looked dark, almost possessed with an oncoming rage. The wind whipped the palms and the top layer of sand. The clouds rolled in menacingly and the scent of earth was in the air.

Mother Nature wasn't the only one stirring up a storm.

"I'm not kidding," I spat into my phone, juggling a very full glass of wine with the other hand. "I didn't know what else to say. How often do I get asked out on a date?"

"All the time," my adoptive sister, Erin snapped in my ear. "You get hit on by old pervs every day and don't deny it."

"But that doesn't count because I would never actually take them up on the offer," I replied. "Damien is relatively my age and he's a singer. That doesn't happen every day."

"Out of all the things you could have called and told me about your day, this would not have been anything I would have imagined. I didn't even know things like this actually happened. Do you think he expects you to sleep with him?"

"The thought had crossed my mind."

Erin gasped. "What does that mean, you naughty little minx? Where you thinking of giving it up to him?"

I chuckled. "No, nothing like that. I'm just a little paranoid. I'm concerned he only invited me to try to get in my pants because that would just be awkward. It'd feel like a booty call then. It'd totally take the glamour out of the whole thing. I don't know. I just have no intention of sleeping with him, what so ever."

"Not at all? What if he turns out to be a complete gentleman and serenades you over a bottle of wine in his hotel room? Don't tell me you wouldn't drop your panties in an instant."

"Call me a quick judge of character, but he doesn't seem like the type to woo a woman in order to spend the night with her. I think if he wants to get laid, it kind of just happens for him."

"Well, what did you say to him to make him ask you out?"

I shrugged, though I know Erin couldn't see it through the phone. "I don't know. We didn't say much to each other at all. He just asked me why I'm such a young doctor, you know, like everyone else does and that was about it. I didn't get it either. I was really surprised, as you can imagine."

"Wow, I am so jealous. If you decide to back out, let me know. I can be your understudy." We both chuckled. "What are you wearing?"

I grumbled as I stood in front of my closet, taking a sip from the rim of my glass. "That, my friend, is the million dollar question. I knew I should have stopped at a shop or two on the way home. I'm going to let you go. I've got some work to do and not much time left."

"Alright, well call me tomorrow and let me know how it all went. Have fun and be safe."

"I will."

"Love you."

"Love you too." I hung up the phone and tossed it on my bed.

After a bit of a personal debate and a few failed attempts at coordinating, I finally decided on a loose black tank with some beading on the bottom partnered with some skinny jeans and knee-high black boots. My next grumble was even longer when I looked in the mirror at the state of my hair. The bushel of naturally thick and dark brown hair sprouting out of my head was completely uncooperative and I've never been able to do much more with it than flat iron the kinks out and pull it back into a sleek and professional pony tail.

I chugged two more glasses of wine and felt the first affects as I filled my clutch with perfume, lip gloss, and some cash, right next to my cell phone and house keys. Before I could even apply one final layer of deodorant for good measure, there was a knock at my door.

I inhaled deeply before opening up the door. Damien stood on the other side and I was surprised to see he looked a little nervous. "Hi!" he said with a smile.

"Hello."

"Wow, you look great," he said, not being shy about looking me up and down.

I blushed slightly. "Thank you. I wasn't sure what someone would typically wear to this kind of an event."

"That's perfect. It's different from what I saw you in earlier. It's nice. So are you ready? Did I come at a good time?" His smile was so charming I could feel my cheeks getting hot.

"No, yeah, you're just in time. I'm ready to go." I stepped out, locking the door behind me.

"This is a great place you have here," Damien said as we walked down the front walkway. A black car was parked on the curb. "I can't tell you how long it's been since I've walked up to a woman's door to pick her up."

"I'm saddened to say, but I can't tell you how long it's been since I've had a man come to my door to pick me up."

Damien reached for the handle of the door, opening it for me. "That's a shame," he mumbled as I ducked.

"Good evening, Dr. Reinbeck," Callem said from the front seat after Damien closed the door.

I shook my head, scoffing playfully. "Good evening, Mr. Tate," I responded coyly. "I hope you didn't have any trouble finding the place."

"None at all, thank you."

Damien slid into the seat next to me and we were off. "So I'm extremely interested in hearing about your, well, how you came to be a doctor at such a young age," Damien started.

"Thinking of making a career out of it?" I joked.

He smirked. "No. It's just I've never met someone like you before. A whiz-kid, is that what you called it?"

"It's really not as impressive as you'd think. I'm not a genius by any means, which most people assume when they meet me and find out what I do for a living and find out

how old I am. I just have a capacity for storing and processing information at a more rapid pace. When you boil it down, it's an acceleration more than anything, which is why I was able to do all of my schooling so quickly. It doesn't mean my reasoning skills are more advanced than you or anyone else. I just have a better mental filing system than most people do. And I'm rambling now."

Damien chuckled. "No its fine. It's cute."

"You say cute, I hear nerdy."

"But why oncology? I guess it's kind of stereotypical to assume someone with your capabilities would gravitate towards engineering or astrophysics, something like that."

I shrugged. "Though I find criminology fascinating, I always thought it'd be kind of silly to go into law enforcement, you know, like it's a waste of my talents, even though I've always had an interest in it; I've always wanted to help people. This was the best way I knew how."

"Yeah, but don't you think it's a little morbid?" he asked uneasily.

I shook my head. "Not at all. It's actually the opposite. I've helped Dr. Sladek put a number of patients into remission and that's one of the most rewarding perks of my job."

"Who's Dr. Sladek?"

"He's sort of my mentor. I met him my first year of pre-med. He was very taken by my spirit, he told me. I have the wisdom of a scholar inside the mind of a child he'd say. He is also in awe and sometimes quite surprise by me. He's retiring in a few months, which is one of the reasons I got the job I have now. He's been transitioning some of his patients over to me before his official retirement."

Damien was nodding politely, focusing on nothing but me. "I'm sorry, I talk and talk and talk when I'm nervous. Feel free to derail me if I get too monotonous."

"Really, it's fine. As often as I sit down with someone and talk about myself, it's nice to be on the other side of the conversation, you know, and just be the listener."

I nodded. "Oh I can imagine. That must be one of the biggest set-backs of your job, all the interviews and the schmoozing."

"You have no idea. It can be so bad that sometimes I feel like if I open my mouth to say something about my album, or my relationships, or my music video, or my latest tweet, I may produce vomit rather than an explanation. Do you tweet?"

I shook my head. "No. I don't think I'd know how. I don't even have Facebook. I always thought it would be a distraction from my schooling so I never got into it. Call me old fashioned."

"Nah, it's not old fashioned. It's more common than you think. I meet a lot of people who don't partake in that stuff. They think it's just as unhealthy as drugs, you know? It can consume you. I don't tweet often. I try to keep as low a profile as possible, but when you have fans, you kind of want to make them happy, and if that means saying a few words through social media every once in a while or snapping a picture, then I'm game."

"Oh I'm sure they're very demanding." I smiled.

"It's not so much about giving them what they want. To me it's a small way to treat them, I suppose. They're the reason I have a job. They're the fuel that drives me and if

surprising them with a candid puts a smile on their face, what's stopping me from spoiling them a little?"

"So do you keep your nose out of the tabloids because I can tell you, there have been a great deal of them floating around our office."

"Oh hell yes. I avoid those things like the plague!" Damien said. "I used to read them all the time but I'd get so worked up about it. They'd take a picture of me walking out of someone's house and they'll write an article about how I stormed out after a fight with my producer or something and that's not what happened at all. They just want to sell papers. It's a headache I rid myself of a long time ago. You don't believe that shit, do you?"

I chuckled. "No. I never have, but they sure know how to sucker you in with those headlines. You kind of peel back the cover just to read the outrageous claims these editors are ballsy enough to print. It's a wonder they don't get sued more than they do."

"People try all the time, but that first amendment thing is a bitch. So what kind of music do you listen to?"

I raised my eye brows. "This kind of feels like a trap. If I don't say yours, are you going to turn this car around and take me back home?"

Damien smiled. "No, not at all. I know my music isn't for everyone. I know there are haters out there, not to say that you're one of them. There's no way to please everyone in this industry."

"I have heard your music and, don't get me wrong," I started, "but I've never been compelled so far as to go out and purchase your album. I'm more of an oldies kind of girl. Steve Miller Band, Jim Croce, Bob Seger, Tom Petty, that kind of stuff."

"Alright. I can dig it." Damien nodded. "There's no crime in that. You get that from your folks? Your dad I'm guessing, I hear that a lot. Dads are usually the figures that pass on their musical taste, from what I've gotten from other people."

I shook my head. "I lived with a foster family for a couple of months when I was younger. It was a family of four, two girls and their parents and the woman's father lived with them. He was a character." I smiled. "He'd sit and talk and talk and talk, incoherently a lot of the time. Nothing was ever connected or related. He'd just ramble about Vietnam and growing up on a farm and his education and the women he'd been with, the things he and his friends had done. He'd always have a record on, like an old school vinyl. I love the sound of the needle against the vinyl, the small pops you'd hear every once in a while, adding another dimension to the song. I think his name was Melvin. Is that bad? I don't even remember his name. Anyway, he is the one who taught me about music."

Damien stared at me for a long moment, holding a perking little twist on the corner of his lip. "Alright," he whispered playfully. "That's pretty awesome. It's the little things, right?"

I shrugged. "I suppose so."

I could tell he wanted to ask me more. I knew I shouldn't have said so much. It was too much to reveal to a stranger. I really didn't like talking about my childhood and it really wasn't on the list of proper first date conversation topics, if this was even a first

date. I was getting ahead of myself. And now I was rambling in my inner monologue.

Thankfully, the conversation was put on hold by our arrival. Figueroa was a mess. I was thankful for the tinted windows because there were a great deal of cameras on the sidewalk. "Wow, I've never seen the paparazzi this up close and personal before," I mumbled, staring out the heavily tinted window.

"They're a force to be reckoned with, that's for sure. You've never been to something like this before?" Damien asked.

I shook my head. "Not much time between patients. I don't get out much."

"Well, then I'm glad I invited you. Look at all you would've missed if I hadn't," Damien joked.

A long line of spectators crept down the sidewalk like ivy vines looking to take over the exterior of the large arena. Cell phone lights popped out of the crowd like fireflies. Big burly bouncers stood statuesque while anxious cameramen spied the passing vehicles, hoping to get a glimpse of the cargo behind the dark windows.

Callem urged the car through the ever-growing crowd until he was ushered into a small parking lot that was secured with metal barricades and more brawny bouncers. He followed the event staff through the lot and down into a garage below the arena. I didn't watch sports nor had I ever been to Staples Center, but I was guessing this was a player's and coach's entrance for Lakers or Clippers games. I was pretty proud of myself that I at least knew the names of the two teams who were housed in this facility.

After parking, Callem sprang from the front seat to open my door. "Thank you," I said as I exited the backseat. He nodded. Damien met me at the back of the car and offered me his arm.

"Hang on tight, things could get crazy," he winked before escorting me through two large and heavy double doors. Before us was a long hallway littered with people from wall to wall. Damien wasn't even two steps inside the threshold when hoards of people started rushing towards him. Some were fans waving CDs, posters, and cameras in his direction. His arm eventually fell from my grip as he tried to shake hands and scribble autographs and pose for pictures. I stayed as close as the crowd would allow, but they were vicious.

The thud from the arena echoed through the concrete hallway, reverberating off the walls and off my ear drums. I could feel the vibrations in my toes. Damien looked over his shoulder and saw me fall behind. He stopped, reached for my hand and pulled me towards him. "I told you not to let go," he said, leaning his mouth to my ear so I could hear over the roaring, indiscernible concert. His warm breath on my flesh sent a shiver through me.

"Easier said than done in this crowd," I said back, leaning in equally as close as he had, try to act cool as if he hasn't had an effect on me in the simplest way.

"We're almost there. Just hold on," he squeezed my hand as we pushed forward. A short skinny man with an oversized pair of headphones on his ears pulled Damien aside and pointed him down a narrow side hallway.

"Third door on the right," the skinny fellow shouted.

"Thanks man," Damien called back, slapping him on the back as we moved towards

our destination. The crowd was much sparser down this hall. I looked over my shoulder and found Callem tailing us as we navigated down the corridor.

Damien pushed through a door that had a laminated sign on it. "Musician's Suite D". Inside, I felt completely out of my element. Breathtaking women with smooth tanned legs that went on for days stood with lean and fit men all dressed to the nines. A large TV hung in the far corner, broadcasting the ongoing concert that shook the room slightly.

Nearly every head turned as Damien, Callem, and I walked in. A number of people lit up at the sight of Damien. They came over to greet him. He was courteous and introduced me to all of his acquaintances. Most of the men I was introduced to had nicknames that I found hard to decipher over the pounding music. The women looked at me like prey or competition, making the child in me cower with fear.

I stood quietly for a while, trying to keep up with the conversations about production, studio time, and the particulars of editing tracks. Funny thing is, it didn't keep my attention. I stared up into the TV, watching Michael Bublé on stage performing somewhere in this building. It was strange to think a figure like Mr. Bublé, who I'd only ever seen on TV, on my computer, or in magazines, someone who was practically a figment of my imagination, was so close; so near.

"Where are my manners," Damien said, wrapping his hand around my waist and cooing into my ear. "Can I get you a drink? A mix, a glass of wine?"

"Um, I'm okay for now."

"Are you sure?" he asked. I nodded before he turned to help himself to a mix. Damien left me for a minute, standing in the company of other musicians I had nothing in common with. "So how do you know Damien?" The woman who'd been introduced to me as Janelle perked up.

"I don't really know him. We only met today." I leaned in, trying to shout over the noise in the room.

Janelle nodded in approval. "Where at?"

"My office. I'm an oncologist and Damien was there to see one of my patients who was chosen for Make-A-Wish."

"I'm sorry? A cosmetologist?" Janelle asked.

"No oncologist," I corrected.

"What's that? What do you do?" Janelle's face curled up in a bit of a scowl.

"You're a cancer doctor?" One of the men stepped in. Damien had called him C-Bomb.

"Pediatric, yes."

"You're kidding me. You're not old enough, are you? You a med student?" another one of the men, Trey, asked.

I inhaled heavily. Conversations always seemed to be driven around me and my profession and my age. Thankfully Damien returned with a tall glass in hand, stealing the attention away from me.

"Damien, you just met this girl today and you've already got her on your arm?" the small guy named Zeke spat out. What the hell was that supposed to mean.

I looked up at Damien chivalrously. "Nah, man. It's not like that," he said simply

which seemed to suffice for the group.

"Did you know you've got a doctor in this one?" the biggest guy, Bubba said, pointing at me.

"It's really not a big deal," I added, trying to bat away the topic, but I couldn't think of anything else to talk about. "What do you all do?" Posing that question opened the flood gates for more music related conversation, taking the spotlight off little old me.

My nerves were at their peak and the wine was calling to me. Damien's glass was empty within a matter of minutes. "Could I get you a drink now?" Damien asked, letting his hand linger in the comfortable little nook above my butt.

"Yes please, thank you. Just some wine will be fine," I mumbled. I kept my eyes on the TV, hoping his friends wouldn't drag me into conversation again. Damien came back with a rather large glass for me.

I was about to lift the glass to my lips when it was snatched from my hands by Callem. He stepped past me and whispered something into Damien's ear that I couldn't hear. They both started snapping quick, inaudible remarks to each other, pointing to the glass and at each other. I could see Callem's jet black eyes sending a fierce message, surely more powerful than the hushed words he was saying to the pop star. When he was finished, he turned to me and without a word, took my hand and pulled me from the room, not before dumping the drink into the trash.

"What's going on?" I shouted as Callem hurried me through the two long and crowded hallways. "Callem? What's wrong?" I asked again as he burst through the double doors and out into the parking garage.

Callem didn't let go of my hand until he had me in the car. I was getting a little nervous at this point. I didn't understand what was happening. Did I do something wrong? I sat quietly as he swerved the car out of the garage and back onto the busy city streets.

"I'm sorry," Callem finally said after a long heavy sigh. "I couldn't let you stay there anymore."

"What did I do?" I mumbled.

Callem's eyes flicked to the rear view mirror. "You didn't do anything. It was Damien. I could handle the phone calls, talking you up like you were a piece of meat, but I saw him put something in your glass of wine."

My jaw dropped. "He laced my drink?" I felt like screaming. "With what?"

"I'm not sure, but I can guarantee you it wasn't a vitamin supplement."

"What the hell was he thinking? Oh my God. Should we turn him in? Should we go to the police?"

"If we go to the police, I'd be arrested as an accomplice for transporting him and his drugs."

"What?"

"Even if I'm the one who turned him in, I could get my license revoked for transporting prescription drugs. Plus, he's probably ditched his stash by now and he'll lawyer up on you for slander or filing a false report."

"But we don't even know they're illegal drugs, so then there wouldn't be any cause to

get you in trouble.”

“There also wouldn’t be any reason to turn him in if they weren’t illegal drugs.”

“We don’t have to tell them you were driving him around.”

“I’m not in the business of lying to the police, especially when Damien and so many other people can say otherwise.”

“So we’re just going to let him do this again?”

“No. I told him I know every transportation company and security service in the country and if he ever tries anything like that again, I’d go to the media, which is much worse than going to the authorities for someone like him.”

I shook my head. “No, no that’s not enough. There’s no question he had planned on drugging me and taking advantage of me. We can’t just let him get away with that.”

Callem sat silently for a second. He sighed before changing lanes and making a spontaneous right hand turn. “Alright. You’re right.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “Are you really going to get your license revoked?”

Callem didn’t answer right away which was enough of an answer for me. “We’re almost there,” he responded quickly, diverting the subject.

“Could you just take me home please? Just forget it. No harm, no foul, right? Just take me home please.”

“I think we should just go to the police station.”

“Callem, please. Take me home. Please. I want you to. I just want to go home.” I leaned back in the seat. The car was silent the rest of the ride.

2013 - Callem

"No, we need to get out there this week. Let me check my schedule and talk to Liv and I'll let you know when we're leaving," I paused, listening to Red jaw at me on the other end of the phone. "Then reschedule it," I spat. "It's not as important as this. We need to get things under control before someone else comes in there wanting to shut us down. I'll get back to you."

I hung up the phone before I could hear anymore bitching from my wingman. I couldn't stand hearing anymore after being on the phone with Spaniards who think they're being mistreated and are threatening to walk. Mind you, these whiney Spaniards speak a total of twenty-seven words of English, the primary ones being 'fuck' and 'bitch'.

I rubbed my hand through my thinning hair feeling a gravitational pull from the house yanking me closer and closer. I had to think about what day it was before I could remember how long I'd been gone.

Nine days.

Nine long, lonely, stressful days.

I called Liv's cell. It rang before voicemail picked up. It wasn't unusual for her not to answer, not in her line of work so I thought nothing of it. I was hoping she'd be home, but after getting her voicemail three times since I landed an hour ago, I figured she got called into work.

May the loneliness continue. At least for now.

A soft rain pattered the windshield as I pulled into the drive. All the lights were off. Yep, she's at work. The garage door slid open effortlessly and I pulled the Mercedes inside. I was surprised to see Liv's matching Benz sitting in the neighboring stall.

I was trying to think of a reason for her to still be home, but not answering her phone. Maybe she's sick, which would suck because that'd mean I wouldn't be getting any ass tonight. Maybe she went out with Erin and forgot her phone at home, which wouldn't be so bad because she'd come home a little tipsy and may want to welcome me home. Maybe it's on silent and she just doesn't hear it ringing.

After getting my bags out of the trunk, I tapped the garage door button and headed inside. We've lived here for almost five years now. I didn't need the light on to know my way around. I moved through the kitchen and into the living room, setting my bags on the chair before moving up the stairs. My dress shoes slapped against each stair and each slap echoed through the whole house.

"Liv?" I whispered as I cracked the bedroom door open. I didn't want to turn on the light if she really was asleep. I tried to fix my eyes, hoping to make out a figure under the covers in the darkness. I had confidence in my aging eyes. I flicked on the light to find the bed empty. I frowned, still wondering where my wife had run off to. I sat down on the bed and stripped my aching feet of their stiff purgatories, letting my shoes drop to

the floor with a thud.

Peeling back my jacket, I noticed our wedding picture was missing from the wall, which I thought was odd. I stood up and headed for the bathroom for a piss when I was distracted by the lack of distraction. The vanity was completely cleared off. There wasn't a tube of mascara or a bottle of lotion. There wasn't any foundation or eye shadow or hair spray. There was nothing.

"What the hell?" I said out loud, opening up the cupboard and still finding nothing. I popped open Liv's jewelry box and it looked like everything was still there. I walked into the closet. Again, everything looked to be in place.

That's when I noticed another picture was missing. One from our honeymoon in Italy. Popping back into our bedroom, I found more nails in the wall that no longer had pictures hanging from them. The frames from the side tables were gone. The statuette of an art deco angel I got Liv on her birthday was gone. The photo albums from the bureau were gone, also.

"What the fuck is going on?" I grumbled. I swept out of the room and headed for the spare room. I nearly ripped the closet door off the hinges before discovering the suitcases were gone. Taking a deep breath, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed Liv's phone again.

After only two rings in my ear, I could hear a ringing in the kitchen. Her phone was here. I ran downstairs and found her phone on the kitchen counter, right next to her car keys and her credit cards. Okay, she left. Why the hell would she leave? Did someone die? No, she would have told me. She would've called.

My heart stopped beating for a moment. No, she couldn't have...

It's not possible.

How could she have?

I ran back up the stairs, this time heading for my office. I went to unlock the safe, but realized it was already open, hanging ajar as if I were meant to find it this way. "Oh no," I sighed as I pulled the doors open. The evidence of my offenses hung out of my once secret vault, taunting me in the worst way.

If the world started ending around me in that exact moment, I wouldn't have noticed. My breathing seized. I didn't want this to happen. I knew eventually it would, but not like this. I didn't want it to happen like this. How did this happen?

I dialed Red again. It rang three times, three times too many, before he picked it up. "Red, we've got a problem. It's Liv. She knows."

I parked the car in the narrow driveway. I liked this neighborhood. It was quiet, clean. The street was silent as I stepped out, heading for the back door of the car. I hopped out quickly, opening the door for her before she could do it for herself. She seemed like the kind of woman who didn't want me to do that for her all the time. Her petite frame moved with ease from the leather seats.

"Thank you again," Olivia started, "for helping me tonight. It was more than enough."

"It's the least I could do. I just want to you know, if I would have known about this all along, I wouldn't have asked you out for him. I'm just glad I caught it before you had anything to drink at all."

Olivia nodded. She started walking up the drive and I followed. I don't know why I followed. Something compelled me to do so. She looked over her shoulder at me, probably wondering the same thing I was. I stood behind her for a moment while she fiddled with her keys and unlocked her door. I noticed the windows were open and the screen was on the outside.

"You know, someone could easily get into your house," I noted, pointing at the windows as she swung the door open. I leaned over and ran my finger along the seam of the window to see just how flimsy it was.

"Oh, I don't usually leave those open when I'm gone. I must have forgotten," she responded. "Uh, do you want to come in for a minute? Can I get you something for the road? A water maybe." She flicked on the light.

I smiled, stepping in behind her. "You know, that would be perfect, thank you."

"Give me a minute," Olivia said before disappearing around the corner.

A sweet and floral smell hung in the air when I pushed the door open. The small bungalow was very modest and looked like the kind of place Olivia would live, given the little I knew about her. It was bright and inviting. The couches, oversized and plush, just begged to be lounged on.

I hovered next to the large bookcase, reading the spines that faced out. There were a lot of thick medical books, probably text books she used in med school. I found a heavy and quite new edition of Grey's Anatomy standing alone on one side of the shelf. It was next to a framed photo of Olivia on her graduation day standing beside a beaming young woman who looked to equal her in age, though they looked very different.

Curiously, I set the book on its back and lifted the hard cover. "I couldn't be more proud of you if I tried. You did it, Livy! I love you! – Erin" was scribed in the top corner. I set the book back up the way I had found it. On a higher shelf, I was surprised to see a number of books about serial killers. One was rather thick and titled Serial Killers and Mass Murderers Encyclopedia. I nearly started chuckling when I looked down on the bottom shelf and found a couple dozen children's books lined up one right after another.

What a range of reading material she had.

"Okay, here you are," Olivia reappeared, handing me a bottle of water.

"Thank you. You have a great little place here," I noted. "You just need to make sure it's locked up."

She smirked. "I swear, it normally is. I was kind of distracted when I left the house earlier."

I nodded. A silence clouded over us. "Well, if you need anything else, you can always call me," I pulled my business card out of my coat pocket and handed it to her. "That's my cell and I've got it on me all the time."

Olivia looked up at me with wide, doe-like eyes. "I'll keep that in mind. Thank you again."

I nodded before turning to the door and heading out just as quickly as I'd come in. My phone rang as I climbed back behind the wheel. "Yeah," I said, answering the call. The familiar voice on the other end chirped in my ear for a minute. "Okay. I'm on my way," I said quickly and started the car. That's two too many issues with my clients for one night. I had yet another mess to clean up and the night was still young. Duty called.

There was a knock at my office door. "Come on in," I called.

"Doctor, how are you this morning?" Dr. Frank Sladek asked, stepping into my office. His aged face was bright as usual. Small square, rimless frames perched on the bridge of his nose and he brought with him the scent of timeless cologne and leather.

"I'm wonderful, Dr. Sladek. How are you?" I asked, turning my attention away from my computer to give the tenured doctor his due diligence.

Dr. Sladek approached my desk and took a seat in one of the patient chairs before me with a hefty sigh. His eyes scoped the desolate office space. "You need more color in here, Olivia. Got to put a woman's touch on these walls." He winked.

"I know," I sighed, looking around. "I don't spend too much time in here so I don't even notice how drab it is when I am in here."

"Well, I think the girls packed away some older prints and photos in the storage closet that we used to have hanging up in the lobby and the rooms. I'll see if one of them can dig them out for you. Maybe there's something in there you'd like to use. That'll save you some shopping time."

"That'd be great. Thank you."

Dr. Sladek didn't often seek me out like this so early in the day. I waited patiently for him to work up to his point, which came easier than I thought it would. "How are things going with you? I haven't overloaded you with patients, have I?"

I shook my head. "No, not at all. I'm loving all the work. It's a perfect pace I've been set up with."

Dr. Sladek smiled, revealing his perfectly straight and white teeth. They may have looked like dentures, but I was sure that man, despite pushing 70 years old, still had each and every one of his own teeth. "I'm glad to hear that. What I wanted to talk to you about this morning was something I've been thinking about for the past couple of weeks, but couldn't really make a decision one way or another. I thought I'd present it to you and see what you have to say about it."

"Alright." I nodded.

"Even though I've been filtering my patients between you and Dr. Morton, I feel like there is still more that needs to be done, especially given the fact that you're so fresh out of school. I'm not questioning your abilities, mind you. You can understand how my experience gives me an extra perspective. I remember my first couple of years within a private practice and I had a mentor the entire time. You're going to lose me in a matter of months and I'd hate to see you get overwhelmed or overloaded. So, I've been thinking about hiring on another oncologist to have on staff. We've gotten so many new patients just in the last year that we're anticipating the steady flow to continue, especially with Dr. Paulson transferring to Vegas. A lot of her patients are now moving over here."

I nodded to show him I was listening though I knew my eyes were glazed over thinking through Dr. Sladek's idea in my mind. It really didn't matter what I thought because ultimately the decision was up to him. I figured he came to me with this in hopes of hearing what he wanted to hear, not necessarily looking for my opinion. I could tell he was leaning, skirting around one answer over another. He paused, waiting for a reaction. "And I'm guessing you'd interview and hire all before your retirement?"

Sladek nodded. "That would be ideal. I was lucky when I hired you. Our relationship outside of the practice was enough of an interview for me. I'm not really looking forward to going through countless résumés and interviews," he groaned, rolling his eyes behind his spectacles. "I'll probably end up hiring out for that process. The last thing I need before retiring is a heart attack from stress. I should have probably gotten this started last year, but I couldn't have anticipated all the changes we've gone through just in the last few months."

"Well, I think it's a good idea," I said, taking his brief pause to step in. "Not only will it help with patients, like you said, but without you around, it'd be nice to have another professional to get a second opinion from."

Dr. Sladek nodded. "Those were my thoughts exactly."

"So when will you start? How do you even go about that?" I asked.

A pruned hand rubbed the balding top of his head. "I'll probably reach out to a few of my colleagues, see if they have any recommendations for the positions before I take this news to the presses," Dr. Sladek smirked. "If I can find someone based on a recommendation without having to put out a damned want-ad, life will be simple. You know, these days they use the Facebook and those websites to search for people and put out ads. It's insane. I can't keep up with it all. I'm getting worn out just thinking about it."

I nodded with a faint smile, not really knowing what else to say. "Are you feeling okay? You don't look as bright and cheery as usual," Dr. Sladek pointed out.

"Oh, I didn't sleep well last night. I don't know what it was. I think I need to flip my mattress," I rambled quickly. The truth was I couldn't sleep well because of last night's events bouncing around aimlessly in my head all night.

Dr. Sladek nodded. "It's amazing how much that can help, isn't it. I sleep like a baby the night mine gets rotated. I'm sure that's the cure." He smiled. "Well, I better get to work. I think the doors are probably open by now."

He stood from the chair when Carla appeared in the doorway. "Doctors, you each have your first patients here," she said.

"Right on time," Dr. Sladek cackled as he headed for the door, following Carla out.

My days, as they have been since starting at the practice, were ten-plus hours of a big blur. Everything moved so fast. Before I knew it, the sun was setting on beautiful Huntington Beach and I was still elbow deep in work. I was just wrapping up some last minute paperwork when a face appeared around the corner from the nurse's station where I was currently sitting.

"Dr. Reinbeck, sorry to bother you," Amanda poked her head in. "There's someone here to see you. He doesn't have an appointment, but he insisted you'd see him."

I frowned a little. "Who is it?"

"Mr. Tate."

I sucked in a deep breath. I had only recalled last night's events one time today and that was right when I woke up. "Thank you. He's right. I will see him. Could you please let him know I'll be out in a moment?"

Amanda smiled and agreed before disappearing around the corner. A minute later, I stepped out into the lobby of the clinic to find the dashing Mr. Tate waiting for me with a wide smile. "So we meet again," he started. Callem was donning yet another tailored suit. I'm sure his closet was filled with suits just like this one.

"Callem. Nice to see you. I feel silly," I confessed. "I should be the one seeking you out, thanking you for last night, and yet, here you are."

Callem shook his head. "Well I wanted to stop by earlier, but I figured you were busy. Looks like you still are. Hope I didn't disturb you."

"No, it's fine. I was just going over some patient files. Just wanted to make sure I didn't go to the police?" The words echoed in my head and they sounded more brash and uncalled for than I had intended. I tried to laugh it off like some kind of inside joke between the two of us.

Callem's smirked weakly. "No, I wanted to make sure you were okay. I got a little worried about you last night after I left. You didn't seem shaken up. I just didn't know if you were playing it cool for me or if maybe you were freaked out about what had happened. I called this morning to make sure you were in the office and not at home."

I wondered what he would have done if I hadn't been in the office this morning. Would he have come by my house to check on me? "Oh, I didn't mean to make you worry. That's awfully thoughtful of you though, to be so concerned. Not that I've really thought about it, but I can only imagine what would have happened to me last night if you hadn't been there. I'm embarrassed for putting myself in that situation. I don't do things like that. Normally, I don't really do much of anything. When he asked, well when you asked for him, I thought to myself, why not? And look where it got me."

"Well, I hope he didn't put a terrible taste in your mouth. I can assure you not all musicians are like him. I've been doing this for a long time and I've never had to deal with anything like that. I can guarantee you, it's the last time. I sent him back his money and left his ass at Staples Center. I'll never work with him again."

I nodded. We held gazes for a long moment in the awkward, funky silence, one I was all too familiar with.

"Well, I don't want to keep you from your work. I'm glad you're feeling better," Callem said, standing up from the chair. He made his way to the front doors before turning. "Do you have plans for dinner?" My mind raced for something to say. I looked at him, my jaw suspended in mid-excuse. "I don't mean to impose, but it's getting late and I'm guessing you've been here all day. Just thought, if you're heading out, we could get something to eat before heading home."

I made a mental note to close my gaping mouth. "No, yeah, that's a good idea, that sounds good," I fumbled over my words. "I just have one stipulation."

"Alright."

"My treat."

Callem sighed, shaking his head with a smile. "Just this one time. Call it what you will, but I don't usually let women pay for my dinner. For you, I'll make an exception."

"Good. Alright, well, can you give me just five minutes to wrap this up and I'll meet you outside?"

Callem nodded. "No problem. Take your time." He slipped out of the office.

Only a few minutes later, just as I promised, I strolled up to a black Mercedes that seemed to gleam even in the murky street lights. Callem was out of the car at the sight of me, walking around to the other side to open the door for me. "You didn't have to do that," I smiled. "Thank you."

"Force of habit," Callem said before shutting the door and walking back around to the driver's side. "So where to?"

"Have you heard of Seaside Café?"

Callem nodded, pulling the gear shift into reverse. "I have."

I nodded. "Have you ever been to Seaside?"

"Once, but it was quite a while ago. I probably couldn't tell you what I had to eat."

"Oh, we eat there once a month probably, the girls at the office and I," I explained. "It's fairly inexpensive and they deliver. We order it for lunch. They have a panko-crusted tilapia that is to die for. Everything is so fresh. This is a beautiful car," I said. I was rambling. I ramble when I'm nervous. Why was I nervous?

"Thank you. I had a Range for a while, but it's too much for me. I'm more of a car guy than an SUV guy."

"Yeah, a lot of guys drive those big cars to intimidate. I don't think you need to worry about that."

Callem looked over at me. "You think I'm intimidating?"

"Yes. Yes I do. You've never intimidated me, but when you were scolding Damien last night, I was scared for him. In your line of work though, I'm sure having a quality like that comes naturally; effortlessly. It works for you. By the way, I hope you didn't lose any clients because of what you did last night. Now that I've seen what he's really like, I can see Damien bad mouthing you and your business."

"I'm not worried about it. Anyone who's close enough to Damien to take his word on my services, whatever he has to say about them, isn't anyone I want to work for anyway. I know you'd probably like to see him get in trouble for what he did last night. I can't thank you enough for saving my neck."

I shook my head. "That's a little backward, don't you think? You don't need to thank me. You did the noblest thing of the night."

When we arrived at the restaurant, Callem hurried around to my door to open it for me as well as the door to the restaurant. We were seated at a table next to the large windows peering out to the Pacific. The moonlight reflected on the rolling waters and if you listened closely enough, you could hear the song of the ocean humming through the windows.

"So how long have you been doing what you do?" I asked Callem after our server took our orders.

"Well, my father started the business so I've had my part in it since I was a teen," Callem explained. "After high school, I joined the Army and was away for about seven years."

"Are you still in the Army?"

Callem shook his head. "No, I got an honorable discharge for medical reasons. I was doing a 10 mile ruck march and when I got back to the barracks, I took my boots off and my feet swelled up. I was immobile for about a month. It took the army doctors that long to diagnose me with reflexive sympathetic dystrophy."

I nodded. "RSD. That's a fairly rare disease which could have accounted for the lengthy diagnosis."

"That's what they told me, too," Callem continued. "So I came home and started working for my dad. He died almost eight years ago now. I took over operations with his passing. Since taking over, I've really expanded the company. A lot of the men I have working for me are former military or cops. I have a few guys who fought MMA professionally and a few were personal security guards at one time. We're in four different states right now and looking to grow."

"Were you a pilot in the Army? I guess I don't even know. Does the Army have pilots?"

"No. I actually got my pilot's license before I got my driver's license. Since my father had the planes and jets, I grew up around them and I've always wanted to fly so I learned young. He taught me. I was actually an Army Ranger."

"Oh okay. Don't you have to take a number of extra courses and training for that?"

"Yeah. There's a program in Fort Benning, GA that I went to. It's pretty elite, the Rangers are to the Army as the SEALs are to the Navy. I was only a Ranger for about two years before I got hurt. What about you?"

I shrugged. "The most interesting facts of my life you heard last night on the car ride to Staples."

"I'm sure that's not true. You're probably one of the youngest doctors in the state, maybe in the country, right? That's pretty interesting. How old are you anyway?"

There was that question again. "I'm twenty-one."

Callem's eyes bulged for a second. "Twenty-one?! You're kidding me. You're younger than you look. I thought you were probably twenty-four, twenty-five, but not that young."

"Twenty-one isn't that young," I protested.

"It is for a pediatric oncologist residing at a private practice."

"Well it does when you put it that way. Since you're getting so personal here, how old are you?"

Callem's mouth curved up in one corner. "How old do you think I am?"

"I'd say thirty-two."

"Close. Thirty-six."

"No, you don't look a day over thirty-four," I replied playfully.

Callem chuckled. A matching set of dimples appeared on his cheeks. "I'll take that as a compliment, thank you." He reached for his glass of water and took a long sip, keeping

his eyes on me from the top of the rim. "So this whiz kid thing you've got going on, do you have any siblings who are geniuses too?"

"I don't have any siblings, biologically at least. I was orphaned at a young age. My mother didn't know who my father was, which is sad in more ways than one, and she died when I was pushing five."

"How did she die, can I ask?"

"She died of leukemia when she was only twenty-four. I became a ward of the state and spent the next ten years bouncing from home to home. I'd get with a foster family that I'd like or one that was decent and they'd end up giving me back. It's not easy fostering a gifted child. The state was aware of my talents, for lack of a better word, and it was required of my foster families to keep up with my accelerated learning and some families just couldn't do it. I managed to land a wealthier family and I stayed with them for a few years. They got me through high school and Ole Miss."

"And then you moved out here?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Since I was underage, I moved in with another foster family and I still consider them my family to this day. They have a biological daughter who is my age. She was in high school when I was going to Berkeley so I was living vicariously through her. She'd teach me things, oddly enough, about how people my age interacted and social norms. Those were the kinds of things they couldn't teach you at the university and the kinds of things I was severely lacking. She's great. She's always accepted me even though I was weird and awkward back then."

"Does she still live around here?"

"Yes. Well she lives in Downey with her parents for now. She's finishing up a nursing program at East Los Angeles. She's hoping to get on at my office when she's done and she'd probably move in with me until she can save for a place of her own."

"So you guys are really close. Did she want to be a nurse because of you?"

"I don't think so. I think she's always wanted to do that, to go into that field. Besides, she's much more of an influence on me than the other way around. I was probably a good example for her particularly when it came to school work, but other than book smarts, I didn't have much to offer at that age. I didn't have friends. I didn't have time for friends. She taught me how to be a friend to someone. We fought a lot when I first started living with them only because I didn't know how to treat other people. I didn't know the rules of a friendship so she'd get testy and correct me and I'd learn from my mistakes."

"Seems to me you've turned out well. I don't think there's anything wrong with you, socially speaking."

I cocked my head. "But speaking in other terms, you've found some flaws, have you?"

Callem held up his hand. "No, no, I didn't mean that."

I chuckled. "I know. I was just joking with you."

Our food arrived. Callem took my advice and got the tilapia. I got the seafood alfredo. Callem kept his eyes on me as we ate, making small talk about our dishes and our approval for them.

"I remind you of someone, don't I?" I asked.

Callem studied me for a second before answering, "Why do you say that?"

"I'm an observer at heart. I watch people, learn to pick up on little things. If you can decipher someone just by the way they move their hands or where their eyes plant themselves, you're already one step ahead of the game. It's something I've always done. I can tell by the way you look at me, and won't stop looking at me. That's why I remind you of someone. You saw the correlation when we first met too, which is why you felt the need to keep an extra close eye on me last night. You care for her, whoever she is, don't you?"

Callem sat in silence for a second. "Here I thought I wasn't that transparent of a guy."

"On the contrary. You're hard to see past and I think you're not one to boast about yourself, which is why me and my egotistical ways have been dominating the conversation, but your eyes are telling a story of their own. Blame it on them."

Callem chuckled, rubbing his lip with his fore finger. "You're right. You do remind me of someone. Camilla. She and I dated in high school and shortly after. We were together about six years, but she tragically passed away in a drunk driving accident."

"Callem, I'm sorry," I replied, feeling like an ass now for prying.

Callem nodded slightly. "I was in Tennessee at the time for military stuff and in my youth, I blamed myself for her death. I thought if I had been with her, she wouldn't have had to drive. Ultimately, it was her choice to get behind the wheel that night, but grief does awful things to someone. You look a lot like her. It's hypnotizing, in a way."

"Was your relationship serious?" Why did I ask?

"It could've been, but it's hard telling. In those first years of early adulthood when you're first out on your own and you start making your own grown up decisions, well, you get this air about you that makes you feel important and responsible and it's intoxicating. Dangerous at the same time because you don't know any better. You haven't been doing the adult thing long enough to've learned from your own mistakes. The choices I made back then, I've never had more regrets at any other stage in my life. I was dumb and anything could have happened to Camilla and I if she hadn't died, but there's no way to know. Relationships back then were mostly physical and at my age now, you can't base a relationship based purely on physical attraction. I get that now. I didn't get that then. We were just so in love it blinded us. We thought we'd be together forever, but that may not have been the case if things had turned out differently."

"Have you ever been married?"

"No, not me. I'm married to my work."

"No children either?"

Callem shook his head. "Nope."

I nodded slowly. "Is that something you're opposed to?"

"No, not at all. It's just never happened for me. I've dated, casually since Camilla, but nothing strong enough to even consider that step."

I smiled. "I hear you."

"What about you? Lose any promising prospects?"

"Not really," I cringed. "I'm kind of like you. I've never dated much. There were a

few guys while I was doing my residency, but nothing promising. I don't think I could ever be with another doctor anyway."

"Why not?"

"It's a very demanding, consuming profession. I'd either feel cheated or feel like I was cheating him out of me; cheating on him with my job, you know? It wouldn't be fair to either of us."

"But if you found a doctor you fell for, like actually fell in love with, do you really think you'd turn that away?"

That was a good question. I bit my lip. "Well, I don't know love. I've never loved someone in that way. The love I have for Erin and her parents, that's hard for me to consider it love. I think it's more like a deep appreciation and sense of gratitude. I don't know if I'd even know what love was if it hit me in the face. I was robbed of that, uh, innate, primal, instinctive love you get from a family. Sure the people I lived with throughout my life were caring and kind and generous, but it takes so much more than that to love and I just didn't get it. I'm not a bad person for it, I'm just inexperienced."

"Undereducated," Callem added.

I chuckled. "Exactly. So it's hard for me to know what I would do in that kind of situation since I've never had to deal with or fight with or debate with my rational thoughts versus the thoughts of someone in love. I've heard love makes people crazy, but what would I know," I said playfully, rising a hearty laugh from Callem.

It was then I realized we had both finished our meals and were lounging in an awkward pause in conversation. The server brought the sleek black folder containing the bill. He was about to hand the folder to Callem before I intervened.

"Thank you for dinner," Callem said as I slipped my credit card in the folder and dangled it over the edge of the table.

"You're very welcome. I know this is overkill, but I'm still not over how wonderful you were last night. I cringe at the idea of what could have happened and you're in my debt for it."

"Not anymore," Callem said, tapping the folder with his forefinger. "You've just wiped the slate. We're even."

"I hardly think a piece of fish cooked and served to you is payment enough."

"It's more than enough, especially when you couple it with your company."

I turned my head, smiling. "You're too kind." Another silence. I racked my brain rapidly, scrounging for a conversational topic, but came up empty handed, like usual. I'm no good at this.

As Callem pulled up outside the office, dropping me off at my car, I didn't want to get out of his car. I didn't want to say 'good-night'. The scariest thing was I didn't understand why I felt this way.

"Just remember, you can call me if you need anything. A ride home from somewhere or someone to upgrade your security system, anything really," Callem said as he pulled alongside my Toyota.

I nodded slowly. "Well, this was fun. Thank you for the ride. I'll see you around." I didn't know what else to say as I pried myself from his car. He waited until I was in my

car and it was started before he drove off.

I leaned my head on the back of the seat, exhaling deeply. “What the hell is wrong with me?” I whispered.

Breathe. Just breathe.

How did it come to this? How could I have been so blind to all of it? I sat on the edge of the bed, staring into an invisible abyss. My eyes stung from the crying I'd done. My skin was still crawling with disgust. I wish I could take it off and send it to the dry cleaner. That still wouldn't wash off the years of lies and deceit. My hands hadn't stopped shaking since I put the pieces together.

I looked at the clock. I'd been sitting in this spot for almost two hours, memories racing through my mind. So many things I'd missed. So many things that made sense now. So many questions I had unanswered that I probably didn't want to know the answers to.

He'd be home soon. He'd realize I left.

He'd realize I knew.

I stood up, walked over to the phone, and dialed Erin. Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

"Hello," Erin answered after a few rings.

"Hey," I said lightly.

"Hey, who is this?" she asked.

"It's Liv," I said. Even though I called her from the hotel phone and she didn't know the number I was calling from, I figured she still would have known it was me. I must have sounded awful if she didn't recognize my voice.

"Oh, hey stranger. Haven't heard from you all week. Where are you? Did your phone die?"

"Ugh, no I left it at home." I leaned back on the bed against the headboard, taking meditative breaths to keep from weeping into the phone.

"Oh, alright. What's going on? How are you doing?"

Loaded question. "I don't know," I whispered.

Erin could finally hear the distress in my voice. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "Cal and I are fighting," I said carefully. "I don't mean to bother you with this, but I wanted to call."

"Liv, what are you talking about? What happened?"

"Well, I'm not at the house. I left for the night. There are just some things I need to figure out and I had to get out of the house, but Cal doesn't know where I am."

"He doesn't know where you are? What the hell happened?" Erin asked more firmly.

"I really don't want to worry you. I'm calling because he may come by your house looking for me or he might call. If he calls, don't answer it, please. If he comes by the house, just call this number and I'll call him for you. Please, he's going to be upset and I don't want him to take it out on you or say something he wouldn't normally, when he's

got a level head."

"You're kind of scaring me here. Are you okay? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I don't want to get into it. I'm so exhausted from it and it's not your problem. I don't want to bother you with my marital issues. Everything is going to be okay. I just need some time to myself."

"I don't know what's going on, but I'm a little freaked out. I just wish you'd tell me. Despite what you just said, do you want me to come stay with you? We don't have to talk about anything you don't want to talk about. We can just lounge around together, order room service, order some movies."

"No. I just want to be alone. Please, just call me if he tries to reach out to you and I'll call him."

"Where are you at?"

"I'm at the Omni downtown. Don't tell him where I am. I don't want to make a scene here."

"You know, none of what you're saying is comforting me. Did you catch him cheating or something? You can tell me, just to ease my mind."

I scoffed quietly. "Please, honestly, I didn't call to talk about this fight. There's a reason why I'm not telling you. It's," I paused. I didn't even know how to dumb it down. "It's between Callem and me. Please respect that and know I wouldn't put myself in a dangerous or volatile situation. I'm safe. Cal would never hurt me, you know that. I just need some time."

Erin was quiet for a moment, though I could hear her scoffing lightly on the other end. "Alright. Just promise me you'll call if things get out of hand or if you decide you want me there with you. Seriously."

"Alright, I promise. Remember, don't talk to Callem. Just call this number back if he tries to find me through you. Ask for room 831. I'll be here all night. I'll call you tomorrow if I don't talk to you later."

"Alright. Love you."

"Love you, too."

I hung up the phone just as the sobs started to spew out of me. This would be the end of us. This secret; this lie would destroy everything we had together. It will never be the same. As badly as I had to walk away from him, I didn't want to. Did that make me selfish or naive, maybe a little of both?

I knew what I had to do. I knew what needed to be done and I dreaded it with all my might. Why did he do this to me? Look what he's made me do. How could I hate someone so much that I was so deeply in love with? I hated myself for it more than I hated him. No matter how awful the offense, you can't erase the feelings and the memories you've held so close to your heart.

My stomach flip-flopped. I could just imagine him at home, looking for me, wondering where I was, unaware he'd been caught; he'd been found out. I can just imagine his disbelief when he realizes what I've discovered. He'll be so angry. He'll be beside himself. He'll look for me. He'll want to explain, no, he'll want to distract me from the truth. He'll want to make excuses. He'll want me back.

He won't get a chance. He ruined everything.

I had to be strong. He knows me better than anyone. He knows I'm weak. He knows if he tries hard enough he can get what he wants from me. He knows. He's always known. Is that why he picked me? Is that why he got away with it for so long? Because my eyes weren't open? Because I didn't ask questions?

I took a deep breath, wiping the tears off my cheeks. The storm was nearly at my doorstep.

2006 - Callem

I hadn't thought about her in the three months, not since we'd last seen each other for that quick bite to eat. There hadn't been any other reason to see each other, not until my phone rang. "Callem Tate," I answered.

"Callem, hello," a sweet voice cooed on the other end. It took me a second to realize who I was talking to. "It's Olivia Reinbeck, how are you?"

"Dr. Reinbeck, uh, Olivia, I'm doing well, thank you. And yourself? It's been awhile."

"I'm doing great and yes, it's been awhile, hasn't it? Have I caught you at a bad time?"

"No, not at all." If she had called me a half hour earlier, it would have been a bad time. I just dropped off a client at the airport and was heading back to the office. "To what do I owe this call?"

"Well, I'm calling about business. You see, I was asked to step in for one of my colleagues for a conference going on in Chicago. I've never been to Chicago, not that I'm incapable of going on my own, but I thought it'd be easier to have an escort, you know, reliable transportation to get me to and from the conference and the hotel and the airport. It's probably too short of notice to ask for your assistance, but I thought I'd try. You'd mentioned you had a lot of other men working for you so I didn't know if there was someone available."

"Oh, I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem. When's the trip?"

"This weekend, just for the weekend. I fly out of LAX on Friday morning and then back Monday."

I smiled. "Well, today's your lucky day. I'm going to be in Chicago this week working out of our office there. I'd be more than happy to pencil you in while I'm there." I lied. I had no such arrangements to go to Chicago, but she'd just given me a great excuse to check on the boys over there. "Do you have an itinerary you could send my way so I have an idea of your schedule and how much transportation you'll need?"

"Absolutely. The office is expensing your services so I can send you the billing information as well."

"That'd be fine. Do you have my email?"

"Um, yes, I see it's here on your card." She kept my card.

"Great. Just send me the addresses and your schedule and I'll confirm pick-up at the airport Thursday night. Are you traveling alone or is another colleague going with you?"

"I'll be alone for this trip. I really appreciate you squeezing me in on such short notice. I would have called earlier, but I just found out about it last night and was kind of scrambling to make all the arrangements."

"That's not a problem. It happens more than you think. You have to be flexible in this industry."

"Great. Well, I'll send everything your way and I look forward to hearing from you on Thursday."

"Sounds good."

As soon as I hung up with Olivia, I called Red. "Hey it's me. Look, I've got a change of plans. I'm going to Chicago tomorrow. I'm taking one of the jets and I won't be back until next week."

"Why, what's going on?" Red asked me.

"Just got a client going out there. I'll just work out of the office when I'm not on the road. Can you take care of my meetings while I'm gone? I can dial into them in case anything comes up you can't speak to."

"Yeah, I've got it under control. Who's the client?"

"Remember that doctor from a couple of months ago?"

"The one who almost got date-raped by that pop star? Yeah, yeah I remember her," Red said chuckling lightly. "Isn't she like a teenager or something? What are you so interested in driving her around for?"

"It's not like that. I just want to help her out. She's never been to Chicago and her company is picking up the bill so why turn down the work?"

"Uh huh, you're not convincing me, especially when you're trying so hard to dodge this conversation. Is she cute?"

I shook my head. Typical Red to think with his dick. "To be honest, she looks like Camilla, a lot like Camilla. I was kind of freaked out the first time I saw her. It was like seeing a ghost. That's how much she looks like Camilla."

Red paused for a second. "Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?"

"I haven't thought that through yet." I sighed. "It's probably a little bit of both. I know that has a lot to do with why I felt so compelled to look out for her that night at Staples and why I'm dropping everything to do her a favor. Now that I think about it, it's probably a bad thing, a really bad thing."

"Nah, I'm sure it's alright. You're not as dumb as you used to be and if she's a doctor, I'm sure she's a lot smarter than Camilla was; smarter than you, too."

I nodded. "Right, well call me if you need anything from me. I'm going to be heading out of town as soon as the jet is ready. Oh, and could you call Todd and let him know I'm headed his way." Todd was the manager at the Chicago branch and would probably like a little bit of heads up before his boss drops in for a surprise visit.

"Will do, boss. Safe trip."

Red and I have been working together for so long he understood what it meant when I told him about the resemblance between Olivia and Camilla. He knew Camilla and he knew her well. He knew what she meant to me and what it did to me when I lost her.

Let's just hope I'm not making attempts to have that back through Olivia. Olivia isn't Camilla. I couldn't forget that. I can't let my past cloud my eyes and my mind.

I sighed heavily. Oh, this was a bad idea.

"How much did she see?" Red asked as he and I stood in front of the open safe.

"All of it," I spat, stuffing the documents and files back into the safe. "She saw everything. Why the fuck was this thing open? How could you have been so careless?"

"Cal, that's beside the point," Red said calmly, trying to calm me with his cool tone. "You've been tiptoeing around this for seven years. It was only a matter of time before she found out."

I squeezed my jaw. I had it in my mind to grab Red and beat the life right out of him. "Not like this. I didn't want her to find out this way. Don't try to defend yourself. You know you fucked up royally."

Red cocked his head to the side. "Come on, man, I would never choose her over you. You know that. You know me. You're not thinking straight right now, alright? We'll figure this out. We'll find her and then you can work this out. Okay? We just need to get our shit together. We're professionals, remember? We've done this before. She can't hide. We'll just start with Erin, the cab companies, and we'll go from there. If she's not at Erin's then she's at a hotel. There's no one else to call; nowhere else she'd go but those two places. You know she wouldn't involve her parents in this. And if she's at a hotel, she used a card to get a room. This is a cake walk for us."

"We need to get rid of it. All of it," I mumbled, eyes glazed over as I stared into the safe. "Torch it all. She's my wife, but she's also a liability now. I'm not worried about finding her. I know that's not the problem. The problem is getting her back. She won't want me now."

"She doesn't get to make a choice," Red said quietly. "We can't take that risk. She's seen enough to," he paused, "well, it doesn't matter because we'll get her back, one way or another. It may not be pretty. It may not be neat, but we have to do what we need to do, right?"

I looked at Red for a long moment.

"Are you prepared for that, Cal? Are you prepared to do what we need to?"

"Don't fucking talk to me like that," I whispered, dropping my gaze. "We are going to do everything we can to ensure it doesn't get to that point, do you understand me? We're brothers, right? Thick and thin, we've got each other's backs, but I promise you, I promise you I will kill you myself if you touch her. I will."

Red's lips pursed. I hit a nerve and I could see that in his eyes. He nodded slowly. "Don't say it if you don't mean it, man. For both our sakes, let's hope it doesn't go that far. I'd rather it go as far as last time than it come to that."

And now he'd hit a nerve with me. I pulled back and slugged Red right across his face. The blow surprised him and he flew backward, falling into the wall. Before he could right himself, I was on top of him, pulling him to his feet by his shirt.

My face was only inches from his and my clenched hands held fistfuls of his shirt. Red wrapped his hands around my wrists, but didn't fight me. He knew better. He knew it was a fight he didn't want to be a part of. The tension surging between us was palpable. "I won't be able to forget you said that," I managed to whisper through clenched teeth.

I had to force myself to look him in the eye. He was my oldest friend and colleague. Despite that, I wanted nothing more than to bloody my knuckles on his jaw. The first punch was such a tease. Finding my cooler side, I slowly released my hold on him and stepped back. Red kept his eye on me as he straightened himself, afraid I may have another go at him.

"I'm going to call Erin," I mumbled after I caught my breath. "Get on the phone with the cabs. Find my wife."

I smiled when I so easily spotted Callem in the busy airport terminal. He pushed through the crowd to meet me. "Olivia, great to see you," Callem beamed at me. We awkwardly shook hands. He leaned his chest in towards me, as if he were intending to hug before settling with a cordial hand shake.

"It's so good to see you, too," I responded. He looked dapper in his suit, no doubt custom made, and it was hard for me to think of him as 'hired help'.

"How was your flight?" he asked as we headed for baggage claim.

"It was fine. My ears popped on the descent, though and they've never hurt so badly before," I exclaimed dramatically. "I felt like someone was shoving a pick in my ears or something. It's never been that bad on a flight before."

"Have you ever flown private?"

I shook my head. "No. Just commercial."

"Private's where it's at. Next time you travel, call me and we'll just get you a flight on one of my jets. You'll never want to step foot on another commercial plane after that."

I smirked. "I see what you did there. Great product placement for Tate Enterprises."

He chuckled, "You caught that, did you? I guess I've got to work on my delivery a little bit."

After Callem helped me collect my suitcase, he led the way to his car. I was not at all surprised to find a sleek and shiny black Lincoln waiting for us. "So what's this conference for?"

"It's the Society of Surgical Oncology's annual cancer symposium. There will be some innovative medical equipment on display. There are a few presentations I'm interested in. One in particular about multidisciplinary cancer care teams. We're looking to expand our practice so Dr. Sladek is hoping to get some take-away from that presentation.

There are a few others, one on melanoma, one on hepatobiliary malignancy, and a few medical professionals I'm interested in meeting."

"Have you ever been to one of these things?" Callem asked.

"Nothing on this scale. This is an international meeting of some of the most renowned cancer specialists. It's targeted specifically for my field. This should be well worth my while."

Once we got in the car, I was distracted from our small talk by the city. This was my first time in Chicago and I could see why it was so intoxicating. The urban jungle stretched before me as far as the eye could see. Everything moved so quickly around me, not completely unlike L.A. It was almost like a dance, cars moving this way and that, people ducking and dodging in an un-choreographed waltz. You could hear shouts of an impromptu aria from one Chicagoan to another coupled with the honking horns of the brass band cabbies, giving the city its own elevator music.

"I hope I'm not pulling you away from anything important," I said to Callem. "You could have had one of your other guys drive me around."

"The only thing you pulled me away from is desk work," Callem replied. "Really, I prefer to be out and about. I'm not good in an office. It's my pleasure."

Just like the night he picked me up for my date with Damien, I had difficulty interpreting that statement. It's my pleasure. Did he say it because he was working or because he meant it? I couldn't tell. I guess it was one of those things that deserved ambiguity. Best leave it to my own personal interpretation. Sometimes it's safer that way.

"How often do you come out here?" I asked him.

I could see his wide shoulders shrug from the front seat. His eyes were now on me through the rear-view mirror. "I try to hit each site a couple of times a year. It's not hard to run the locations without me, but I like to check in on things every once in a while. I keep in touch with my GMs through conferencing so unless something big comes up, I primarily work out of LA."

"But you do a lot of traveling, for your clients?"

"Yeah. Most of our clients only use our services for a few days at a time. It's rare our services are needed for an extended period of time, but it happens. I've had guys on personal security duty for actors and production companies during filming of movies, which sometimes can take a month or more. I personally stick to the quicker jobs, give the hard work to my lackeys," he chuckled.

"Delegation," I added. "A good tool to use when in a managerial position." Listening to myself, I grumbled at the cheesiness of my nervous words. "I have to commend you, though. You're the head honcho and you're out here working with your employees. You don't see that very often. It must really give you a lot of respect for the job and adds a level of perspective to your decision-making."

"Yeah, I guess you could say it does," Callem said. "And like I said, I don't do well stuck in a room all day. I think I'll always be doing this because it's who I am. It's why I've got this company in the first place."

"How often do you have instances, like where you have to, uh, I mean occurrence of..." I couldn't put what I wanted to ask into words.

"How often do I have to man-handle someone?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, that's what I was trying to say."

"It happens more than you'd think," Callem responded in a flat tone. "I get reports from those kinds of incidents from the other sites. Those types of situations don't always involve the police, but if they do, I have to have record of it and have to have all my ducks in a row. That's something I keep a close eye on. I like to avoid lawsuits if at all possible."

I nodded. "I can imagine. Have you ever been sued?"

"Yes, twice, but I won both times," he said, matter-of-factly. "It helps to have a good lawyer, too." His wide smile reflected to me in the narrow mirror. "I've had multiple suits out against one of my workers or my company, but only the two have gone to court. Normally, these people try to sue because they felt they were assaulted, but a

personal security professional isn't a civilian when they're on the job. There are different laws that govern us, which is why we all have to be licensed. It's a slippery slope that normally always slides away from us."

We arrived at the hotel. Callem brought my suitcase inside and waited for me to get checked in before escorting me up to my room. "Do you do this for everyone?" I asked, when the elevator doors closed. "I'm not used to this kind of treatment."

"Absolutely. We're in the business of five-star care at Tate Enterprises." I had to look at him to find out if he was being serious or not. I knew he wasn't when I saw a wide tacky grin on his face.

I smiled in reply. "It's very hospitable of you."

"So has your agenda for tomorrow changed at all? Everything still the same?" He whipped out his phone and pulled up his calendar.

"Yes, nothing's changed."

"Okay, it'll take us about a half hour to get to the conference from here so I'll be here at 7:30 to pick you up, does that sound good?" He stuffed his phone back in his pocket as the elevator stopped and the doors parted.

"That will be fine, thank you."

"Great. Well, have a pleasant evening, Doctor, and please feel free to call me if you need anything."

I smiled, holding the door to my room open. "Thank you, Mr. Tate. I hope you have a good night, too. See you in the morning."

He nodded before turning down the corridor. I closed the door behind me, locking the deadbolt and chain. Even though I was used to being alone, looking around the glorious hotel room, I hadn't felt that alone in quite a while. Maybe I was just anxious or wound-up from my trip. Something made me want to chase Callem down and ask him for some company.

"No, that's unprofessional," I said to the empty room as I threw my suitcase onto the foot of the bed. "Just put your nose in your laptop and distract your night away. It'll be morning before you know it."

And I did just that.

2006 - Callem

I arrived at the door promptly at 7:30. I only had to knock once when the door swung open. Olivia stood before me in a form-fitting coral pencil skirt, chunky black pumps, and a see-through white blouse with clunky gold buttons down the front. I had to fight every urge to give her a once over as she smiled widely at me. "Good morning," I said with a smile of my own, forcing myself to keep my eyes on hers.

"Good morning. You weren't lying when you said 7:30, were you?" she asked jokingly. "Come on in. I only need one more second and I'll be ready to go."

"Not a problem. Take your time," I said, stepping one step into the room. Her perfume clung to the air in the small space, being challenged by the harsh aroma of coffee. She moved quickly into the bathroom as I stood awkwardly by the door. Her suitcase hung open on the stand next to the TV. Her bed as neatly made as if she hadn't slept in it at all.

She emerged from the bathroom sticking some stud diamonds into her lobes. Her hair was pinned back tightly in the front, but hung loosely in the back, falling over her shoulders delicately. In all my years of working with high society women, I knew dress styles, hair styles, even make-up styles and what each of them meant. From Olivia, I saw a girl desperately trying to be seen as a woman. I was glad she had failed at covering it up.

"Alright, I think I'm ready," she announced, grabbing her designer bag. With her back turned, I was able to admire her sleek curves and long tanned legs, affirming Red's prediction of this job being a bad idea.

I opened the door for her. "After you." I waved her through.

"How was your night?" she asked, as we made our way to the elevator.

"It was just fine, thank you. How was yours? Did you sleep well?"

"You know, when I walked into the bathroom last night," Olivia started as we stepped into the elevator. "I found some ear plugs in with the shampoo and soap and all that. I thought it was odd, but then when I turned the TV off later in the night and was lying down to fall asleep, I realized what they were for. It's really noisy outside."

I smiled and nodded. "Yeah. Downtown especially. I usually stay at a hotel in East Lake View and it's the same thing there. I'm sure if you lived here, you'd get used to it, but it's probably a bit different from your quiet little neighborhood."

"It sure is. You don't appreciate something like silence until you don't have any."

The valet held the door open for Olivia and me. I stepped past her once we were out on the street and pulled the car door open for her.

"So do you stay at the same place each time you're here?" Olivia asked from the back seat, as I cut a gap into the busy morning traffic.

"Yeah. It's an older hotel, a Days Inn, but I'm a creature of habit. I always find I'm

going back there. Plus it's really close to my office. It's just convenient for me to stay there. They know me there. It may be a little older, but it's very well maintained and respectable. The people there are great ,too. It's like a home away from home."

"You probably have one of those everywhere you go, right?"

I nodded. "I do. It's just easier that way. Then I don't have to call all over town looking for a room. I've actually got an old family apartment in New York City. My grandparents used to live there when my dad was younger. They left it to him when they passed and he left it to me when he passed."

Olivia gushed. "Oh, New York. I've never been, but I've always wanted to go there."

I smiled. "It's probably one of my favorite places to go. It's the best in the fall."

I pulled up outside the Feinberg Pavilion of Northwestern University. "Do you know where you're going from here or would you like me to escort you in?" I asked, looking over my shoulder.

"No, it looks like they've got signs all over. I think I should be okay. If I'm not, I probably shouldn't be attending this conference," Olivia said, staring out the window.

I hurried out of the driver's seat, getting to her door before she could open it. "You have my number. Just give me about twenty minutes heads up before you want me to come get you and I'll meet you right back in this spot," I explained, as I helped her out of the back seat. I could see the anxiety in her eyes, like a scared puppy stepping into a vet's office.

"That sounds great. It probably won't be until late afternoon. I hope you don't mind."

"Not in the least. That's what I'm here for." I smiled. "Good luck today," I added before she headed off.

I pulled out my cell phone as I sunk back into the driver's seat. "Alec, it's Callem Tate." I said when one of the workers answered at the Chicago office. "I'm in town and I plan on stopping by today. When will Todd be in? Alright. I'll be there in about forty-five minutes. Don't warn him."

"Okay, looks like she took a cab downtown to the Omni," Red said, bursting into my office. "She left here a couple of hours ago. I called the front desk and they don't have an Olivia checked in. No Dr. Reinbeck or Mrs. Tate either. She used her card there, but put a DNC on her room with an alias. We can do one of two things. We can go down there on third shift and rough up the concierge until they give up her room or we can ask the boys to hack their system and get the info for us."

I sat back, pleased with the information he'd presented me, but unsure how to proceed. "As freaked out as she is, I don't see her going to the police or a lawyer. Legally, she can't turn me in for anything as my wife and I honestly don't think she'll involve the police. She's probably worried about getting herself in trouble by doing so. Let's give it a day, see what she does. I feel better knowing where she is, you know, that she didn't skip town. She won't leave Erin, and I'm sure she's probably already called her."

"Let's just hope she didn't tell Erin anything," Red added.

"If I don't hear from Liv or see her tomorrow, we'll go pay Erin a visit, see if we can shake anything out of her easily. If not, we'll revisit the plan."

I had to be careful about this. I couldn't let things lead down the wrong path, though I didn't see Olivia going that far. She was stronger than that. She was a fighter. Though I would normally be nervous about that, the fact was comforting.

"So what do you need me to do tonight?" Red asked.

I rubbed my forehead. I still hadn't looked at him since our little tiff. I hadn't lied when I said I wouldn't forget what he'd said. It was on the forefront of my mind, stuck there like a fly trapped in a web, squirming to get free. "Can we get a tap on the phone in her room?"

I heard Red suck in a deep breath. "I couldn't do this without knowing what room number she was in. And even then, it could be tricky. Those phones are on their own internal system. It's possible, but would take some time."

"What about a call log? She doesn't have her cell so anyone she wants to call, she'll have to call from there. If we can't hear what she's saying, can we at least know who she's calling?"

"That's going to be easier, but still will take a bit of time. Let me see if I can at least get into their internal system and start going through their guests. Maybe I will be able to narrow her down that way and then get to work on her phone." Red swept out of the room as quickly as he had come.

I was in for a long night.

I tried to engage myself in the conversation around me, but my eyes were on the doors. I felt so out of place, I just wanted to flee, but I couldn't just yet, not without my chariot. I was chatting with Dr. Stephanie Quint, who I had met before at Berkeley and, coincidentally, we bumped into each other at the day's first seminar. She was kind enough to introduce me to a few of her colleagues.

My anxiety kicked in something fierce.

I had called Callem nearly half an hour ago and he still wasn't here. I needed an escape. I avoided their eyes; Dr. Gary Bayliss, a younger surgeon with a faint Australian accent, who worked at the University of Iowa Children's Hospital, Dr. Albert Frese, a seasoned anesthesiologist from Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Dr. Karen Podell, the oldest of the group, an orthopedic surgeon from right here in Chicago, and Dr. Quint. I read so much in their down-nosed expressions as they practically demanded my résumé in the most courteous, yet slightly condescending way.

Finally, my lungs expelled the thick, murky air of discomfort in a long exhale as Callem appeared at the door. "My ride is here," I announced, stepping my foot into a conversation I hadn't really been a part of. "It was wonderful meeting you all. I hope to see you again tomorrow."

"Yes, Dr. Reinbeck. Good to meet you too." Dr. Bayliss took my clammy hand in his. I shook the rest of their hands before I shuffled away.

I smiled widely at Callem. "Dr. Reinbeck, my apologies for the delay," Callem started. "I hope you had a good day." He held the door open for me.

I was starting to dislike his formalities. I'd have to address that. "No need to apologize. And thank you, yes, I did have a nice day," I explained.

"Would you like me to take you back to the hotel?" Callem asked, as he slid into the driver's seat.

"Actually, I really need a drink," I sighed. "Is it unprofessional to invite you to dinner?"

I wish I could have seen Callem's expression before he answered. He kept his eyes out the front windshield. "Not at all, but you're not paying for me this time," he added coyly. "Where to?"

"You know this town. You're behind the wheel. I'm just along for the ride," I said, leaning back.

Callem nodded and we were off. We drove in silence as I sifted through emails on my phone. I made one quick call to my nurse, Amanda, to check in and before I knew it, Callem was parking the car. I stuffed my silenced phone into the front of my bag as the door opened for me and Callem's hand appeared to help me out.

The sun had dipped behind the buildings, but golden rays still cast an orange light

over the city. "We've got to walk a little ways. There wasn't a spot closer than this," Callem explained. "I hope you like Italian."

"Oh, that's perfect. Nothing like a belly full of carbs to end the night," I said as we started down the sidewalk. "Did you get a lot of work done today?"

Callem nodded. "I did. I haven't been on site here in Chicago for a couple of months and it was probably a couple of months too long. Things were a little out of order for my taste so it was a much needed visit."

"Ah, one of those kinds of visits, huh? I'm sure your employees were glad to see you then," I chuckled quietly.

"Um, no. They probably could have done without me or at least had more of a heads-up so they could get things in order before I just dropped in on them. Secretly, I love to catch them off guard like that."

He and I both chuckled lightly. "So what's this place you're taking me to?"

"Renaldi's. It's amazing. I know it well. I eat here nearly every time I come to town. It's phenomenal."

I spotted the large tan sign with the cursive green lettering just ahead, perched on the side of a burgundy canopy over the entrance. As usual, Callem held the door open for me. Just inside the door was the pizza-making station. One man was topping a doughy crust while another was behind him tossing the dough over his head in a theatrical display, spinning it off his fists and sending it in the air above him before catching it.

"Ello, welcome to Renaldi's," the host greeted us in an Italian accent. "Just the two of you this evening?"

"Yes." I nodded before he led us to a booth in the back corner of the restaurant. The dining area had two large round tables in the middle surrounded by a few smaller tables and two rows of booths on either side of the room. The large round tables were so large, they had Lazy Susans in the middle of them, fit for a true and large Italian family.

"My name is Rafe. Would you like to start off with drinks?" the host asked, transforming himself into our waiter.

Callem looked at me. Ladies first I suppose. "I'd love a glass of, um, merlot. Let's just start with the merlot," I said.

"A water will be fine for me," Callem said, turning his attention to his menu.

Rafe turned and walked under a large ornate archway leading to another section of the restaurant, disappearing out of sight. I turned to my menu also. I felt like a bit of a lush drinking on my own, but not only did Callem have a professional image to uphold, he was my driver. I suppose it was best if he didn't indulge, even if only a little.

"What do you usually get here when you come?" I asked Callem, feeling a bit overwhelmed by all of the mouthwatering choices in front of me.

"I try something new every time," he explained. "Let's see, I've had the stuffed shells, both the chicken Angelo and the chicken Monte Carlo. The baked ziti is good. The eggplant parmigiana and spinach ravioli are good too. Their pizza though, that's where it's at."

I looked over my shoulder at the two men still making the pizza pies behind me. "It sure does smell wonderful in here," I noted, turning back to the menu as Rafe returned

with our drinks.

"Would you like to order any appetizers? Baked ravioli, some cheese and garlic bread?" Rafe offered.

Again, Callem looked at me. "No, thank you," I replied.

"Do you need a few more minutes?" Rafe asked.

"Yes please," Callem said, without a consulting gaze this time.

"Not a problem. Take your time. I will check on you in a few minutes," Rafe explained before turning back to the host stand.

I cupped the delicate wine glass in my hand and took a long drink. I could feel Callem watching me for a long second before averting his eyes back to his distracting menu. "Oh, that hit the spot," I mumbled, carefully setting the glass down. "My nerves went a little crazy back there."

"Social anxiety," Callem said, referring back to the topic of conversation over our first meal together.

"Yes, exactly. I didn't think it would bother me so much because I'd be in a room of colleagues rather than coeds, but I guess it's all the same. Everyone still looks at me like a little girl. I don't think they take me seriously. I know I'm just being paranoid, but I can't shake that feeling of insignificance. If it's not that, I'm an attraction. I should have had my own panel at the conference and opened it up to questions. That's what it felt like. Everyone I met wanted to know about my bedside manner and my patient's reactions to my age and my work load and my residency and how I got my foot in the door already. I've never felt so judged before in my life. Sorry, I shouldn't be dumping all of this on you." I picked up the glass again for another pull.

"No need to apologize. I can see why you wanted a drink," Callem said, closing his menu and giving me his full attention.

"I don't even know if I want to go tomorrow. I wish the cancer care team seminar was today. It'd really give me an excuse to duck out early. That particular seminar is the only reason I came to the conference to begin with so I can't miss it."

"I thought you'd been to these sort of things before?" Callem asked.

"I have, but when I'd go to the other ones, I was with Dr. Sladek or with a group of students, people I knew who could shield me or deflect. I've never gone alone. I didn't know so many people knew about me, either. Dr. Sladek must mention me more than I thought."

"That would mean he thinks highly of you, wouldn't you say?"

I shrugged. "I suppose, but just because he mentions me to his colleagues, that doesn't mean it's always a positive conversation."

Callem turned his head sideways slightly. "That's a cheery outlook you have there," he noted.

I smirked with a sigh, shaking my head. "I know, I know. After a lifetime of being held back, even with my accelerated lifestyle, I supposed I've been conditioned to assume it's my destiny to be cast in only one light. I'm doomed to be seen as a child playing doctor."

"You'd think the stereotype would diminish with time. Experience; tenure cures

everything."

I nodded. "It's getting to that point and my patience has been tested on the journey to tenure. I mean, you started young in your business with your father, didn't you? Wasn't that a roadblock for you, too?"

Before Callem could answer, Rafe had returned to take our order. I went with the fettuccini alfredo and Callem got seafood alfredo. "You know," Callem started, picking up where we'd been interrupted. "I don't think it was people's trust in me because of my age. I think it had more to do with who my father was. It was a double-edged sword. Some guys had respect for me because they knew I was getting first-hand knowledge from my father, so what I knew came from him. Others saw me as the snot-nosed son of the boss who didn't really want to be there; was only there because it was expected of me and maybe didn't take it as seriously as my father did. You just have to prove to everyone what you stand for and what you're working for. What's your paradigm?"

"My paradigm?"

"Yeah, what's your driving force? What's your 'why'? Why do you do everything you do? For me, at this point in my life, I feel like every day I'm preparing for a life I'll eventually have. Everything I have, everything I've built, everything I'm working for is a future with a family and stability and security. I'm building an empire, for lack of a better word, meant for people, a wife and children, that I have yet to meet."

"Wow," I managed. "That's deep. How long was it before you realized that was your 'why'?"

Callem shrugged. "I guess I never laid it out like that before. I've never really explained it to anyone like that before. I remember asking myself that question when I bought my first house. I had the company and I had all this money and this big empty house and I asked myself what I was doing. I don't know if I decided that this was the path I wanted to go down or if the path chose me. Either way, I knew I was just preparing myself for a life I wanted to share with someone else. I don't know. Does that make sense?"

I nodded quickly. "Absolutely. That makes perfect sense. You can't really go any further with that dream until the someone you've been waiting for walks into your life, so it's all about preparation until then. I get it."

Callem nodded slowly. "What about you? Why do you do what you do?"

I pursed my lips and shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know. You'd think with a question like that, it would be relatively easy to conjure up an answer, but I'm drawing an absolute blank. When I was younger and people asked me that, I probably said something like I want to save lives. I want to help people. I don't feel like that answer is good enough anymore. Shouldn't there be something more? Shouldn't I have an answer like yours?"

Callem shook his head. "Olivia, you're twenty-one years old. I didn't know which way was up when I was twenty-one and that's why I joined the army. Even if you did know what you were working for, it doesn't mean it's set in stone. It can be changed. There's no shame in not knowing at this point in your life."

Rafe came by and refilled my merlot. I took another sip as soon as he left.

"I hope I didn't offend you," Callem said, after I'd given him no response.

"Oh, no. No. Not at all. I don't usually talk candidly like this. Maybe just with Erin, but she and I are the same age. The only future she thinks about is what she's going to be doing that weekend. Erin and I live in two completely different worlds and sometimes I forget to talk about my big girl problems. This conversation is actually quite refreshing. I'm not talking about blood cell counts or MRI results or even about Erin's newest fling. I'm talking about me. I should do this more often. It's very educational."

Callem smiled. "I'm sure it is. We're both doing something we don't normally do tonight. I don't usually have dinner with clients."

"You know, speaking of clients, I wish you wouldn't see me as that," I started. "I feel like we met on slightly casual circumstances and we've had dinner with each other before. I didn't ask for your services this weekend because we're professional acquaintances. I asked because we know each other better than that, I think, at least a little better than just a client and service provider. You don't have to treat me like one of your clients. Just treat me like Olivia. Loosen the tie, crack a joke or two, and save the formalities for your next client. Don't waste them on me."

Our gazes connected for far too long. Thankfully, Rafe intervened again, presenting the two of us with steaming dishes of food that enticed the senses.

After dinner, Callem drove me back to the hotel and bid me farewell, until tomorrow. Once again, I was left unsatisfied and utterly alone. I was beginning to wonder when I'd buck up and do something about it.

"Well, what did you say to him?"

"I just told him I didn't know where you were and that he needed to leave," Erin explained to me over the phone.

"Did he ask to come in? Was he pushy?"

"No, he didn't ask to come in. He didn't seem angry or anything like that. He just seemed concerned and a little desperate."

"Erin, you were supposed to call me. You weren't even supposed to talk to him."

"What the hell did you want me to do, Liv? My car was in the driveway. He knew I was home. You still haven't told me what you two are fighting about. It can't be that bad. He looked more upset than anything. He's worried about you."

He's playing her just the way he played me. It sort of made me nauseous to hear her defend him. "It doesn't concern you. Honestly, it's better you don't know. Was Red there?"

"Yeah. It was the two of them. He just kept telling me he wanted to talk to you. He said he was really worried about you and wanted to know where you were. I told him I didn't know. He asked if I'd talked to you and I told him I had, but you had been really short and vague and just wanted me to know you were okay."

"Oh, Erin. You shouldn't have told him that."

"He's not an idiot. He knows you and I talk nearly every day. He would never have believed me if I told him I hadn't heard from you in three days."

"That's why I wanted you to call me and not talk to him. Then you wouldn't have to lie. I could have just told him to leave you alone."

"It's fine. He left. He asked me to call him if I heard from you and to try and find out where you are. Have you even left the hotel since you checked in?"

I sighed. "Not really. I took a walk last night just to get some fresh air, but the hotel has a gym and a restaurant so I really don't need to leave."

"Olivia! You've been there for three days! You've got to get out of there. You're probably going crazy. Why don't you come over for dinner or something?"

I shook my head even though she couldn't see me. "I'm sure he didn't believe you at all today. He's probably going to have someone watching your house." I said more than I should have.

"What are you talking about? You're not a fugitive, Liv. You're his wife. Why would he patrol my house? That's a little excessive, wouldn't you say?" Her tone reflected her mounting concern.

I sighed heavily. I shouldn't have even said that. Something like that would just open up a can of worms and another conversation of Erin asking questions I couldn't even answer. "I know, I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have even involved you." I really

shouldn't have. Her repeated nagging was becoming tiresome.

"Well, that's unavoidable. I'm sure the first place he thought to look for you was my house. He was probably just giving you some time to cool down before he came looking for you. He was probably hoping you'd come home on your own. Is it really that bad that you have to hide from him in a hotel room for half a week? How long do you plan on staying there?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. I have so much to, there's just, it's hard to explain. I don't want to get you involved any more than you need to be so I just really can't talk about it," I snapped in frustration.

"That shit freaks me out, Olivia. You've got to give me something so I don't completely lose my mind over here."

My patience was growing thin. "Erin, please. Stop asking or I'm going to stop calling. I'm not going to tell you, I'm sorry. I know you're my sister and I'll tell you everything when it's safe, but take my word for it when I tell you it's better not to know."

There was a silence. "Alright, well when you want to take me up on my offer, let me know. You know where to find me," Erin said shortly.

"Don't be mad at me, okay? I'll call you tomorrow."

"Have a good night," Erin said quickly before hanging up the phone.

I couldn't blame her for being mad. I would be just as frustrated with her if the roles were reversed. It must be killing her to know Callem and I are in such a heated quarrel without knowing the cause.

I didn't worry myself with Erin for too long because my biggest problem was Callem. I'm sure he knew exactly where I was and it was only a matter of time before he came knocking on my door. What was I going to do when that happened? How far was I going to take it? Would he get physical with me? Would he make a scene in the hotel? My stomach turned thinking about it.

One moment at a time. That's how I've been handling this since I left. That's how I'd have to keep handling it. I walked to the door and secured the dead bolt below the door handle as well as the security bar, just in case.

"Welcome back boss," Red said, as I strolled into the office Tuesday morning. "How was Chi-town?"

He followed me into my office. "It was a mess. Those guys do not like me anymore. They're all in an uproar. I want someone back there in a month to check on things again, preferably you because you know how I like it."

"That's not what I was talking about," Red said slyly, slipping into the chair in front of my desk. "I mean how was your doctor friend?"

I paused for a second. "She's in big trouble," I finally said.

"You didn't?"

"No," I spat. "No, Don Juan. I didn't sleep with her. Doesn't mean I didn't want to and I'm pretty sure she was thinking about it. She asked me to dinner both nights which was hard to turn down. You forget the person you're talking to when you're with her. You forget she's just a baby. She's so," I didn't know where to start, but didn't know why I was telling Red all this. I felt like a crushing school girl.

"Holy shit, Cal," Red mumbled. "What are you saying? This doesn't have anything to do with Camilla, does it?"

I inhaled deeply. "It's so weird because all weekend I kept telling myself to keep Camilla out of my mind. She looks so much like Camilla, but doesn't act like or think like her. She's who I would've seen Camilla as now if Camilla was still alive, but looks like a twenty-one year old Camilla. Does that make sense?"

"I think you were wrong when you said she was the one in trouble. I think you're the one in trouble. You should see your face right now," Red mocked. "She may not know what she's getting herself into, but you're the one with the problems here."

"You're blowing this out of proportion. It's not that serious," I corrected him quickly.

Red shook his head. "Just keep telling yourself that. But, look, seriously, if things get real between you two, you've got to pull the trigger and tell her. You know that."

I stared at Red for a moment. He was right. I knew he was right, but I wasn't going to admit it. It was one of the biggest reasons I didn't get involved with women and it was the reason I'd have to stay away from Olivia. Nothing good would come of it.

"Have you gotten any word from Carmine?" I asked, redirecting the conversation back to business. Carmine was the contact for our new business venture in Minneapolis. We were working out the kinks for zoning and permits with the city.

"Yeah, he sent over the paperwork Friday. I told him to expect to hear from you today. We've got some zoning issues to work out with the city, but other than that, it's all in line to get the site up and operational," Red explained.

I nodded. "Well, keep me in the loop with the city. One of us is going to have to make the trip out there to get things started."

Red scoffed a little. "And by one of us, you mean me."

"I've got two senators coming into L.A. next week and they're coughing up a lot of funds for my ugly mug so Minneapolis is all yours. Have Grant fly you out there as soon as the mess with the city is cleared up and I don't want you back until you're comfortable letting those boys run the place by themselves. Make sure everyone knows their shit, the way I like it."

"And what about the overseas bullshit that I've been dealing with for the past couple of weeks?" Red asked.

I shrugged. "I'll take care of it. It wouldn't be a problem if you would have nipped it in the ass three months ago when I told you to."

"My guess is we'll need to make a trip out there soon, too. Once we get all these drop-ins done, we should be set for a while," Red said, ignoring my jab.

"I hate that we've got all these places to check in on all in a row like this. We should have it all spread out more," I groaned. "Let's push that trip out as long as we can. We'll do what we can from here for now. The locals haven't gotten involved as of yet so we shouldn't have any major problems. Simple fixes with a good kick in the ass will do for now."

Red nodded. "Need anything else from me, boss man?"

I shook my head. "The city of Minneapolis and direct all foreign concerns my way."

"Got it." Red stepped out of the office.

I picked up my phone on an impulse, dialing a number. "Rick, I need some work done on Dr. Olivia Reinbeck. R-E-I-N-B-E-C-K. Middle unknown. Send the information directly to me, no one else. How long? Great." I hung up the phone.

I knew if there was anything I needed to know about Olivia, I'd find out from Rick. He's the best at digging up dirt, which is why I'd been working with him for so long. I wasn't expecting to find anything, other than what she'd already told me about herself. I didn't peg her for a liar and she hadn't given me any reason to doubt her. The control-freak in me just liked to have all my ducks in a row, in case anything were to come of this.

Trouble, trouble, trouble.

I found myself pacing around my living room, waiting for a pair of headlights to hit my house. The food was done and getting colder by the minute. I moved back into the kitchen, meticulously turning wine glasses and straightening silverware for the meal when I heard a car door shut.

"It's about time," I snapped as Erin let herself in the front door. She smiled widely and met me for a hug.

"Sorry, you know me, Mrs. Punctual," she said sarcastically. "Smells fantastic in here."

We sat down at the table and dug in to the chili I had whipped up. "You were there for nearly three days and you didn't do any shopping?" Erin asked about my trip to Chicago.

"I was at the conference for nearly eight hours both days. I didn't have much time to shop, but would have loved to. You and I are going to need to take a trip out there. It was actually a lot of fun, just being in an urban jungle like that. Closest to New York City I've ever been. It's completely different from walking downtown L.A., I don't know what it was, but it was fun."

"And how was that Callem guy?" Erin asked before taking a bite of her cornbread. "Did he show you around the town or did he have one of his other guys do it?"

"No, it was him," I explained. "He was really nice," I said simply.

Erin looked at me sideways, not buying it. "What does that mean, 'he was nice'?" she asked mockingly.

I shrugged. I was a horrible liar. I was even worse at being intentionally vague with my details. I knew she'd see right through it. "It just means he did a wonderful job transporting me."

"He's not Jason Statham, and if he were, I'd demand you to introduce me. What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing is sacred when you're around," I said smiling. "I think, I don't know, I might, but I couldn't. It doesn't make any sense. I just, you know, it's one of those things that you, well," I stammered, pushing some beans around my bowl.

Erin stopped eating to watch me struggle. She finally held up her hands, clanking her spoon against the side of her bowl. "What is happening here? Are you trying to tell me you've got a crush on this guy?"

I shifted my weight in my chair uneasily. "I don't know. I just can't stop thinking about him. It's so strange. I've had crushes before, but with those, I just wanted to stare at the guy all day or I just wanted to hear him singing or something. With Callem, it's different. I want to know about him. I want to know where he comes from and what his interests are and what makes him happiest. I think there's something wrong with me."

"So you have to be sick now to be falling for a guy?"

"Erin, he's thirty-six. He's fifteen years older than me. He could be my father."

Erin turned her head. "Oh come on, no he couldn't."

"Teen pregnancy is on the rise. It's not just the mothers who are teens."

"Calm down, Doc. He's not old enough to be your father. Okay, theoretically he is, but that's not important. That's why you think there's something wrong with you. You're working yourself up over this for no reason. There's nothing wrong with an age difference. It's perfectly normal and happens around here all the time."

"Yeah, for women who want to sit on their asses their entire lives and have everything handed to them," I spat.

"That's no true at all. Look at Catherine Zeta-Jones and Michael Douglas. Besides, you're not one of those women. You're independent, making mad loot for a twenty-one year old. You don't need a man to support you. The fact that he's loaded too is just a perk. It's not like you've been searching for a sugar daddy to sweep you off your feet. You just so happened to meet a nice, successful man, who is a little bit older than you. What's the big deal? Are you afraid of what people would think, because I don't think anything of it?"

"I know you wouldn't think anything of it," I said.

"Not unless he was looking for a sugar momma. I would put a stop to that shit real quick," Erin jumped in.

I smiled. "I get it. Thanks."

"So what are you going to do about it? Are you going to wait for him to make the next move or are you going to suck it up and do something about it?" Erin asked.

That was a good question. What was I going to do about it?

A long soak in the warmth of a bath was more refreshing than I had anticipated. My skin felt stripped of the scum I'd been carrying with me for the past week. I was starting to get cabin fever locked up in this hotel room. I needed to get out but I didn't have anywhere else to go. I had to have things finalized and legalized before I'd feel comfortable stepping out into the fresh air again, and not under the cloak of nightfall.

I was about to occupy myself with a personal manicure when there was a knock at my door. A knock said a lot. The knocking of the hotel staff was between four and six quick knocks that were followed up with an identifying call through the door. Erin had only been by once and she knocked with vigor, longer, harder knocks. These ones, they were different. They were hesitant, but audible.

I looked at the clock. It was too late for Erin and I hadn't called down for anything. This was probably the visitor I'd been expecting; the one I knew all along would be coming. The one I'd been dreading.

I slid off the end of the bed, waiting for a reaction to the unanswered knock. I took a few steps closer to the door, my still damp hair sticking to my cheek. The visitor knocked again. "Who is it?" I asked as I approached the door.

"Livy?" Callem's voice spoke from the other side of the door.

My chest seized. It was him. I slowly peaked through the peephole at him. He didn't look aggressive, if that was an emotion translatable through the owl-eye peephole. I could see a pair of feet on the other side of the hallway, but nothing more of the figure, though I didn't have to see all of him to know it was Red.

"Liv, will you let me in?" Callem spoke again when I didn't answer. "Please, honey. I've been worried sick about you."

"Go away," I spat quickly. "I don't want to see you. Just go away."

"Don't be like this. We need to talk. Can't you at least open the door? Huh? Do we have to do this through the door?"

"Please go away and take Red with you," I said, standing my ground.

I watched Callem shift his weight on the other side of the door before looking back at Red for a moment. "Look, Liv, there's a lot you and I need to talk about. I want you back home. If you'd just listen to what I have to say--"

I cut him off. "I have a lawyer," I paused. "I'm filing for divorce, Cal." I waited, letting my words sink in. I didn't know what kind of reaction I'd get out of him. "You and I can talk when your lawyer has the papers. Until then, I have nothing to say to you and I don't want to hear anything you have to say to me."

"Liv," Callem said quietly. "Don't do this. Don't get the lawyers involved. You and I can work this out. Please, just think about what you're doing before anything becomes official." I didn't answer. Callem propped his hands up on the frame of the door and

hung his head. "Olivia, please just open the door. Please, baby."

"Go away, Cal, or I will call security," I barked through the door. "I am not opening this door and I am not having this conversation. Go." The barrier between the two of us gave me a false front of courage.

Through the peephole, I watched Callem fight with himself, pacing lightly. He kept coming back to the door as if he wanted to say something else; as if there were words that escaped him each time he opened his mouth. He rubbed his head impatiently. I could even hear him sigh heavily. "Just think about this long and hard before you do it, Liv. Are you doing what's best? Are you doing the right thing? I still love you more than you..." his voice faded as he hung his head again. "I love you."

With that, he walked away, disappearing out of sight.

I stepped back from the door and my hands were shaking. He hadn't gotten violent or pushy. He hadn't raised his voice. He hadn't threatened me. He was just as Erin had described him; a desperate man, worried about the woman he loved and I hated him for that. It was all a front to lure me back into his trap.

And now, that trap was as deadly as ever.

2006 - Callem

"So these guys kept pushing on the barricades, pushing and pushing," Red explained dramatically, telling me about the events of his last assignment. "And I shouted at them to back up. I called for more assistance right before the barricades all toppled over and the people started rushing the lot. I was about to grab this guy coming right at me when out of nowhere, Tony comes in and sweeps his legs right out from under him, lays him out, I mean like out cold. He was seeing Tweety Bird, okay? The rest of the crowd sees this, and then sees Tony looking like a fucking bull. They all start backing up behind the barricade. They were like, I don't want to fuck around with that guy. I don't want to end up on my back like that idiot. It was nuts."

My cell phone rang, humming against my desk top. I looked at it and silenced the call.

Red saw me ignore a call. "Okay, that's like the fifth call I've seen you ignore this week. Who's the stalkerazzi you're trying to avoid?"

"Olivia," I sighed.

"What's the deal? Didn't you two had lunch together after the Chicago trip? God, that was like a month ago, wasn't it? You're not into it anymore or what?"

"I just can't do it, man. She's great, really she is, but it's just a bad idea all around to start getting caught up in that," I explained, trying to play it off like it was easy for me to be so dismissive when in reality, it took a lot for me to shut her out.

There was a knock at my office door. Tony popped his head in. "Hey Tony, Red was just telling me about your night last night," I said, smiling.

Tony smiled, knowing exactly what I was referring to. "Yeah, it was, uh, quite the night I tell you, but hey, there's someone here to see you."

He pushed the door open all the way to reveal Olivia standing just behind him. She moved into the office gracefully while Red and I stared silently, unsure what to say. "Hi," she said when Tony closed the door behind us.

"Hi," I mumbled. "Um, I don't think you've met Red yet, have you?" I stammered.

Olivia's wide eyes moved from me to Red. "No, I haven't. Nice to meet you. I'm Olivia."

They shook hands and I could see by the expression on Red's face that he too could see Camilla in the doctor's features. "Nice to meet you, too. I've heard a lot about you."

Olivia blushed slightly. "Oh have you?"

"Don't worry, I didn't believe any of the bad stuff he said about you," he said playfully with a cheesy wink, arousing a chorus of chuckles from the three of us. "Well, I've got some things to do, if you'll excuse me. It was nice to finally meet you, Doctor."

"Olivia is fine, thank you and it was nice to meet you, too," she corrected, as usual, as Red headed for the door. "I tried to call you to warn you I was here," she started when it

was just the two of us. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

I stood from my desk and moved around towards her. "No, not at all," I said.

She looked nervous, her eyes moving quickly around the room, almost avoiding mine. It seemed to make her more nervous that I was closer to her. "I just had to see you," she started. "Oh God, that sounds stupid. What I meant was, I've been thinking a lot, mulling over some things and I think, well I really, I'm just assuming," she stammered, looking at her fidgeting hands, "that you feel the same way I'm feeling."

Her eyes took a deep drink of mine now, searching for a reaction to her inquisition. I waited patiently for my turn. I was curious where she was going with this.

"The truth is," she urged on, "I'm terrified to find out that you think about me as much as I think about you. Usually, I'm the kind of person who just lets sleeping dogs lie when it comes to this kind of stuff. I usually don't want to know the answer, so I remain in the dark about the matter, but with you, I have to know. I just need to know one way or another. I don't even care if it's not what I want to hear, as long as I know. I just have to be sure. I need to know if there's something here or not. Because I feel like there is and that's the vibe I've gotten from you as of late, which could of course all be in my head. I just feel like if there is something, we should take a chance on it to see if it's worth our while or not, right? I mean I don't really know how this works. I'm not sure if this is even the way to go about it, but I couldn't help myself. I just..." she rambled on adorably.

I moved towards her with purpose, putting an abrupt end to her confession. I slid my hand between her loose hair and her cheek. She didn't flinch. She didn't pull away. Like a woman under hypnotism, I moved my lips closer to hers without a second thought or a moment of hesitation.

The embrace was exactly how I'd imagined it since I first laid eyes on Olivia; something I'd envisioned many times and something I'd been dying to do. Even though she held on longer than I anticipated, when we parted, I was left wanting more.

"I don't ever want to get used to that," Olivia said, exhaling deeply.

I smiled, still cupping her cheek with my hands. "I hope that clears up lingering suspicions for you," I said.

Olivia chuckled. I could feel her cheek getting hot against my palm. I leaned in and fulfilled my unsatisfied craving.

I knew I shouldn't. I knew I should have stopped myself before things got out of control. With everything she said, I knew she was right. What's it going to hurt to try?

"Hey Erin," I shouted into the quiet house as I let myself in. I dropped my purse on the bench just inside the door, kicking my shoes off before stepping onto the carpet. It had been nearly two weeks since I left Callem and I finally gave in to Erin's pleas. She promised to cook me a homemade supper and she wasn't going to talk about Callem at all.

"Erin, where are you?" I headed for the kitchen. "I'm not staying long, I just want to--"

My words were smothered by the heart-stopping sight of Callem. He stood ominously behind Erin who sat at the kitchen table, eyes wide with fear. Red stood near the back door, arms crossed in front of him, holding a black pistol. Callem had a matching firearm in his hand, resting at his side.

"Hey baby," Callem said. "I've been trying to get a hold of you for a week now. This was the only way I knew how. Please, sit down. We need to talk." He gestured to the chair in front of me with the gun.

"Callem, put the gun away, what the hell are you doing?" I moaned. Erin looked at me with wide, fearful eyes.

"Please, Liv, we have a lot to talk about and I'm not leaving here without you," Callem said.

"No, I'm not going anywhere with you. I've got a lawyer, Cal. You know that. You can't be here right now. You need to leave. You need to leave before--"

"Before what?" Callem snapped, taking the words from my mouth. "Before you call the police? That's not a good idea, Livy, since I've got the police on my side. I promise you. They're not going to help you. The only thing that will help is if you sit down and talk to me; that's all I want. And if you refuse, well, I really hope you don't." His tone was mellow and smooth, contrary to the tension building in the small room. "I only brought Red and the guns because I'm at the end of my rope here, Liv. You've taken all my slack. We can work this out. This is fixable. Please, I'm asking nicely. Just sit down and listen to what I have to say."

I shook my head as the tears emerged. "No, I don't want to hear excuses. You can't excuse what you've done. You can't explain it to me. You can't try to deceive me with more lies and sugar coat this. You can't just sweep it under the rug like it never happened. It happened. It's happening. It's real. It's right in our faces and there's nothing you can do to cover it up. Now, you need to leave." I tried to sound firm. "Get out, Callem. Just get the hell out!" I shouted.

Callem lifted his gun and pointed it at Erin's temple. Erin cringed as she started to sob, squeezing her eyes shut. "No! Callem, no, stop," I screamed, holding my hands out. Red didn't flinch as he watched this scene unfold.

"If you don't sit down now, I'm going to do something you'll regret," Callem's words were short and venomous. "I am not leaving here without you. Don't make me prove that to you."

Red took a step towards me. I shuffled backward as he pulled the chair out in front of me and backed away again. I begged him with my eyes, begged him to stop this; to help us. He was too obedient to Callem. He'd never think of it. Reluctantly, I took a seat as Erin's sobs subsided. "Will you please take the gun away from her?" I pleaded with him. As Callem moved the gun away from Erin's head, I caught her gaze. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

Callem pulled out the chair next to Erin and took a seat, dropping his weapon on the table in front of us with a macabre thud. I sat uneasily as he shifted his weight, breathed in and out deeply, ran his fingers through his hair. Erin's eyes flicked from one gun to the other as she sat stiff as a board. I'd seen Callem like this before. I've seen the fear he could instill in people first hand. He'd never used it on me, until now.

"What do you want, Cal?" I finally whispered.

He looked up at me for a long moment before answering. "I just want you to come home."

"I already told you that's not happening."

"What do I have to do to make it happen?"

I shook my head quickly. "There's nothing you can do. What you could've done, that's a different story and too far gone. You should've done something seven years ago."

Callem's eyes moved to Erin. "How much did you tell her?" he asked me.

"I haven't told her anything. She doesn't know," I mumbled firmly, growing tense.

"Are you sure?" Callem's hand twitched. "I know you, Liv. You tell her everything. This is important. You need to tell me what you told her." There was a professional air in his voice that rubbed me the wrong way.

"I swear." My throat was dry as I choked on my words. "I just told her we were fighting. I told her it wasn't good. She tried to get it out of me, but I knew it would just come back on her if she found out. I'm not stupid. I understand how these things work."

"Is that true?" Callem turned to Erin now. "Did she keep my secret from you?" Erin's chin quivered as she nodded. A large tear trickled from her eye, breaking my heart. Callem looked up at Red and sighed, leaning back in his chair. "You have to understand something, Erin, my secret is very dangerous and things might happen to you, things out of my control, if you knew, if you talk. I might not be able to help you if you decide one day to walk into a police station and tell to an investigator about me."

"I don't know anything!" Erin snapped through clenched teeth, slapping her hand on the table in frustration. Her sobs swelled again as her shoulders shook. Callem watched her cry heartlessly for a moment, studying her state for the validity of her words before turning back to me.

"Thank you for keeping this to yourself," he mumbled to me.

"Fuck you," I grunted. "So now what?"

"Now we can go home."

"I am not going to tell you again. I am not going back to that house."

"You know, there's a problem with your determination, sweetheart. You are coming with me. You just don't know it yet. You don't have a choice, you see, because I have the gun. I have the men. I have the power. I didn't want it to be like this. I didn't want to have to be the bad guy, but you haven't made this easy on me."

"You son of a bitch," I said under my breath. "Made this easy for you? How dare you. You don't deserve easy and you don't deserve me. What makes you think I'm afraid of that gun? You'll never use it on me. That much you can't get by me. So if getting me to go home with you by force of your gun is your big plan, maybe you should call my bluff because I'd rather get shot than go home with you."

Callem scoffed. "You're right, I'd never shoot you," he admitted easily, too easily. "I didn't bring the gun with intentions of threatening you with it. I brought it to use on Erin."

The words came out of his mouth as easily as a cordial greeting. My heart stopped. "Don't," I spat, cocking my head to the side.

"Do you want to call my bluff?" He grabbed the gun, pulling it closer to himself.

I had to force my head to shake. The Callem I knew would never do this. The Callem I knew loved Erin just as much as I did. The Callem sitting in front of me was not that man. "And what do you think is going to happen if I go home with you? You think things are going to go back to the way they were? You think I'll just forget, act like nothing ever happened?"

"Oh no," Callem said, shaking his head. "It'll take some adjusting, but eventually I think you'll come around."

"It's that easy, huh?"

"Liv, I love you, even if you have a hard time understanding that. I love you so much I can't imagine the rest of my life without you in it. I swear to you, we'll work this out, for our sake."

"What happens to your plan when I don't love you anymore? Why would you want someone who doesn't want you? I want a divorce, Cal. I want to put this, and put you, behind me. You will never get my love back, no matter how hard you try." He didn't say anything. "I will keep your secret. I wouldn't dream of telling anyone. I just want to walk away from this, wash my hands of it."

Callem's lips were tight. "There's no walking away now. You're scarred and that doesn't wash away. If you leave me, I can't protect you. It's in your best interest to stay. Once you're in it, there's no getting out. I'm sorry." My stomach turned. His words were as sincere as I'd ever heard from him. Truth was, he's told me so many lies in the past using that same delivery that it could be completely twofaced and I wouldn't know the difference.

"Are you?" I asked through clenched teeth. "Are you really sorry? What did you think would happen? We could go on for the rest of our lives with me completely in the dark? Seriously, did you think you'd get away with it?"

Callem shook his head. "No, I wanted to tell you myself."

"Then why didn't you?"

"How could I? What would you have done if I would have told you when we first met?"

"You and I wouldn't be having this conversation right now if you had told me then. It wouldn't have gotten any further than that."

"Exactly. I couldn't lose you."

"Instead you tricked me. You seduced me until my heart was yours. You wanted me to be in so much love that I'd accept this secret life of yours. You imagined I'd be so blinded and crazy in love with you that I'd be okay with it." Callem didn't answer. I knew him well enough to know that meant I was right. "You're delirious. I am not a gold digger. I'm not a dumb twenty-something with aspirations of being your trophy wife. I don't depend on you to live a certain lifestyle. I can take care of myself. That was your first mistake when you targeted young, innocent me. I don't need you. I needed your love to make me feel complete, but I would have turned away from it if I knew what it came with. I don't want it anymore, any of it."

"That's too bad," Callem said sourly. "You can't get out of it. This is bigger than a marriage certificate and you may think you have a good understanding of what this is, but you don't know the half of it. You haven't even begun to scratch the surface. What I did to you was wrong and it was selfish and I don't want to see you pay for my sins, which is exactly what will happen if you don't stay."

"You're wrong," I grumbled. "I am paying for your sins with my guilt and disgust. Now, I'm forced into a situation I don't want to be a part of. That won't end. I'll forever be in pain because of what you've done to me."

Callem sighed heavily, shaking his head. "Look, let's just go home and we'll take it one step at a time."

My eyes moved to the gun in his hand, still securely clutched in his grip. I shook my head slowly.

"Please don't make me force you," Callem whined. "Please. I really, really don't want to do that. Don't push me to that point."

"You have a choice. You don't have to do it."

"This is your last chance. Are you coming home with me?"

The tension was so thick in the air I could feel the pressure pushing down on my chest. I studied him. He was desperate. I could see that much. With desperation comes unpredictability and that terrified me. Callem shifted his grip on the gun, pulling it off the table and dropping it down to his lap. Strangely, I was able to think clearer with the gun out of sight, even though I knew it was even closer to Erin than before.

"What about Erin? She still doesn't know anything. Do you promise me you won't hurt her in any way?"

Callem nodded. "I promise." There was a hint of hope in his voice.

Erin looked at me with a twisted expression, deducing my intentions. "You can't go with him," she said through clenched teeth. "Olivia, you can't."

"I have to protect you," I whispered. Erin's mouth hung open. "I'll be fine. He's not going to hurt me. This will work out." I was only saying these things for Erin and I hated that Callem had to hear this. Was I filling him with a false sense of hope? "I wouldn't be

able to live with myself if something happened to you because of me. You just have to trust me. You trust me, don't you?"

"I don't trust them," she replied.

"You have to. You have to trust that I'll be fine and so will you."

"Look, I don't give a fuck if you're married. This is illegal! This is kidnapping. You can't seriously be thinking of going along with this. This is crazy," Erin pleaded with me. I could see the frustration bubbly under skin.

"Erin," I glanced at Callem before I continued. It felt strange talking about him like he wasn't right in front of us. I had to keep my voice calm in an effort to calm Erin down a bit. "You don't understand and I can't explain it to you. It'd be useless to go to the police or try to get him in trouble for this. I guarantee you. There isn't anything else we can do."

Erin looked as cornered as I felt. Her mouth became tight with anger as she stared aimlessly at the table top. "If anything happens to her, I kill you," she mumbled to Callem.

"If anything happens to her, you're welcome to try," he enticed Erin while staring at me. "I know it may be hard for you to accept after what's happened here tonight, but I will take care of her. She's the only reason things happened this way. I just want her back."

"How chivalrous of you," Erin mocked. "What am I supposed to do?" she asked me.

"I'll call you every day. We'll get through this, okay?" Erin didn't seem pleased with my response. What else could I say?

"Are we done here?" Callem asked impatiently.

I told my legs to move. I tried to stand, but I was glued to the chair, staring into Erin's troubled expression. My mind was racing in those short seconds, looking for a loop hole in this plan; looking for a way out. Finally, Red took a step closer to me. I was afraid he'd grab my arm or pull me from where I sat. I looked up at him as if setting a dare with my gaze. Something in me was trying to provoke a confrontation, just to have a chance to throw a swing at either one of them. I had to keep it together while we were still with Erin.

Using my hands, I pushed myself up from the table, rising slowly. The seething anger heating my core vaporized my tears before they could break to the surface. I moved to head for the door, escaping the final pleading gazes from Erin. Callem stepped between Red and me. He put his hand on my back, but I shook it off. "Don't touch me," I mumbled as I slipped my shoes on and swept out of the front door.

I stopped on the darkened front walkway. Red sidestepped past me and walked down the street. The Mercedes was parked a few houses down in front of a large SUV. I should have seen it. I shook my head at the carelessness of it. "I'll have Red go to the hotel and collect your things after he drops us off at home. Do you have the room key?"

"I can get my own bags, thank you," I said shortly.

"It's not a request. Until things get as close to normal as they can be, you won't have very much say-so in how things are going to work."

"I'm your prisoner?" I asked, though it seemed more like a statement.

"No, Liv, you're my wife."

"Sounds to me like those terms are interchangeable in your vocabulary."

"Let's not get it twisted. I'm doing this to protect you. Do you know how many of my clients know us on a personal level? Do you know what they'd do if they found out we separated? They'd all assume you knew about my business from the get go. They all assume you know each and every one of them. They'd assume you'd nark on them if we separated. It honestly terrifies me to think of what could happen to you."

He should have thought about that a long time ago. This little pity party he was trying to throw from himself would be celebrated in solitude. "Don't try to convince me for one minute that this intimidation game you just played wasn't completely selfish. The king-pin just wants his queen back by his side to restore order to the empire. Stop me when I've said too much."

He and I looked at each other, his face masked in the dark of night, but still very much alive with the sweet sting of victory, or was that candid relief I saw? "You couldn't be more wrong."

"Sad thing is, I'll never know. You've hidden the truth from me since we first met. I don't expect you to be truthful now and I don't think I'd be able to discern the truth from a lie if I tried. It'll be hard for me not to consider every syllable out of mouth to be a complete and utter lie." I moved to the Mercedes, now waiting for us at the curb, before he could respond.

"Let's not make a big deal out of this," I said to Erin as she helped me set the table.

"I think it's a very big deal," Erin said. "You realize this is the first guy you've ever brought home? I mean you told me about those guys while you were at Berkeley, but I never met any of them. My baby's all grown up," she added, imitating a whiney Southern Bell.

I chuckled, shaking it off. "Really, it's nothing, but at the same time I don't want to jinx it or get myself worked up only to be knocked down, you know?"

"Do Mom and Dad know?" Erin asked, referring to her parents.

"Mom knows I'm seeing someone. She was inquisitive when I told her, of course, but I kind of played it off like it was nothing. I don't think we're at the point in our, well, whatever it is to be talking about meeting the parents. There's no point in me even bringing it up if this thing fizzles or something."

Erin nodded, setting a wine glass at each of the four table settings. "Yeah, but you've known each other for what, nine months now. You've gone out together like a dozen times. You're not strangers anymore. All that time and he's still coming back for more. You can't be upset about that. But what about this Red guy? What's his story? Is he cute?" Erin grinned wickedly.

"Red is really nice. He's a lot like Callem was when I first met him, all business, really professional. But each time I see him, he, you know, buttons down more and more. He's more casual with me now. He and Callem grew up together. Their families were really close. Red's father passed just a couple of years ago, but his mother still takes both of them in for holidays and such."

"What about Callem's parents?"

"His mother died of cancer when he was really young, much like my mother. His father died when he was twenty-eight, which is when he picked up the company and asked Red to be his right-hand man."

"Why do they call him Red? Is that his real name?"

"You know, I asked that too and both Callem and Red laughed. They told me I didn't want to know, whatever that means," I shrugged. "I didn't press them about it."

Erin leaned on one of my dinette chairs. "That's kind of creepy, right? Why won't they tell you? That's weird. You think it's something bad, something gross?"

"I don't know. It doesn't bother me. Maybe his name is Reginald or something he really doesn't like and would rather keep it to himself. It's probably just an inside joke or something that I just wouldn't get. It doesn't matter really."

"Hmm," Erin hummed quizzically. "And you invited him because?"

"He's Callem's Erin. How could I not invite him?" I answered.

"Well, you still didn't answer me. Is he cute?"

I looked at her sideways. "He's, sure, yeah. He's cute. He's older than us. He's the same age as Callem."

"What are you saying? His age shows more than Callem's?"

I huffed and rolled my eyes. "You're reading into everything I'm saying right now. Why don't you just wait until they get here and you can see for yourself," I said, ducking out of this line of questioning. It was conversations like this that made me feel ten years older than Erin. That's all she cared for, knowing about the availability and physicality of the only other single person at the party.

I ran my hands down the skirt of my dress nervously, checking the grey cotton fabric for imperfections or stains. "Do you think I overdid it a little," I asked Erin.

Erin shook her head. "No. You look great. Very sophisticated." Comments like that from someone I was so close with made me feel patronized. I didn't know if she was trying to be condescending or dismissive. "Oh, I think they're here."

She moved from the kitchen to the picture window in the living room, spying on the men as they approached in Callem's Mercedes. I hurried to the door when I heard the knocking. Pulling the door open, my knees nearly buckled. Just the sight of him made me swoon. Seeing Callem in jeans was a rare sight and you didn't hear any complaint from me. They went well with the v-neck t-shirt under his leather jacket, heavy wrist watch, and black military boots.

"Hi," he beamed at me. "Wow, you look great," he added before stepping in and kissing me quickly.

"Thank you. I was about to say the same," I said as he and Red stepped past me into the house. Red was also in a pair of jeans with a sleek button-up shirt. "Callem, this is my sister, Erin," I said, stepping aside so Callem and Erin could shake hands.

"Erin, it's great to finally meet you," Callem said. "Olivia mentions you quite a bit."

"Oh, I'm sure she does," Erin said, smiling widely up at him. "I can't say the same about you, unfortunately. She doesn't just talk about you a bit. She talks about you all the time."

I sighed, shaking my head. Leave it to Erin to embarrass me so soon into the night. "And this is Red. Red, this is Erin." The two of them exchanged quick greetings. "Should we move into the kitchen for supper? It should be ready," I said, ushering the small group out of the crowded entryway.

Dinner was great. Erin was getting along wonderfully with Callem, Callem was getting along wonderfully with Erin. The food was delicious. The wine was complimented by the conversation. I couldn't have asked for a better turn out.

"So you've never really explained to me how this genius thing works for you," Red said.

I chuckled. "I'm not a genius. That's a common misconception I'd like to clear up."

"You've got to be some kind of genius to be the newest Doogie Howser, right?"

I smiled, "I'm just classified as gifted, not genius. There's a difference. People with giftedness display a number of 'symptoms', I guess you could say. With me, it's always been my memory. I've got an accelerated capacity to intake and store information, but I've got an advanced retrieval mechanism too. It's said everything we've ever

experienced is in our minds somewhere. We just don't have the ability to retrieve it. For the most part, I've got that ability. As long as I'm aware and paying attention to what's coming at me, it's in there and I have access to it when I need it."

"It's actually a lot freakier than she's making it out to be," Erin added. "She can see an infomercial for some stupid product and two weeks later, she can tell you the phone number to call, the price of the item, and she could even tell you the shirt color of each person in the infomercial. She does stuff like that all the time and it's so trippy."

Red looked from Erin to me, wide eyed. "No shit?" he gasped.

"Yeah, she can tell you the room number of the hotel we stayed at five years ago in Seattle. She could read Google Maps directions once and have each turn memorized, including exit numbers."

I shrugged. "That's what was able to get me so far so quickly. When I was younger, my problem was I'd take in all this information, but I wouldn't know what to do with it. Thank God the system caught my giftedness early or I would probably be bi-polar or manic, having not had the training to wield my strengths."

"With great power comes great responsibility, right, Spiderman?" Red joked, pointing at me with his fork, getting a chuckle from his audience. "So you can remember every word we've ever said to each other?"

I nodded. "More or less. You'd have to be very specific in order for me to retrieve the right information for regurgitation."

"Watch out, Cal. You're going to lose in every 'he-said-she-said' argument the two of you ever have," Red mocked.

I got up and cleared away plates while Erin started telling Red and Callem about the other times I freaked her out with my memory capabilities. We were all still sitting around the table, finishing up our beverages when there was a knock at the door. Everyone stopped talking and laughing. I looked at the clock. It was pushing 10pm. "Who the hell is that?" Erin asked out loud.

"I'm not sure," I said pushing myself out from the table. At the door, I flicked on the porch light before opening the door. An older man stood slightly hunched on my porch. I spied his face, feeling as if I knew him from somewhere. "Hello?"

He looked at me for a minute, staring hard into my eyes, making me uneasy. "Are you Olivia?" he finally asked.

"Yes," I replied questionably. "Is there something I can help you with?" The man nodded, shifting his weight from one foot to the other as if unsure what to say next. "I'm sorry, you are?"

"Uh, I'm, my name is Michael Drake." He stopped quickly, still just staring at me. He was starting to creep me out and I edged the door closed slightly.

"Okay, Mr. Drake, what can I do for you?"

He fidgeted nervously, rubbing the back of his neck and wiping away some invisible debris from the tip of his nose. "Well, I, uh, I'm sorry for bothering you this late at night. I just, I had to come. I drove here, all the way from Vegas. That's where I live," he nodded. I wasn't really following. "You see, I've been looking for you for a while, and when I did find you, I couldn't help myself. I just had to come introduce myself."

I swallowed hard. This conversation just went from creepy to scary. "Okay," I said quietly. "Why were you looking for me? I don't know you. Are you sure I'm the person you're looking for?"

Mr. Drake nodded fervently. I started to suspect he was under the influence of something, a narcotic most likely. I took half a step back, closing the door even more. "Yes, I'm sure it's you. I can tell it's you. I see it."

"What is it you're here for, Mr. Drake?" I tried to stay calm even though I wanted to slam the door on this creepy old man.

"Well, the thing is," he chuckled lightly. "It's hard to say. The reason I've been looking for you is because I'm your father."

A bomb could have gone off in my kitchen and I wouldn't have heard it. The one that had just been dropped on my head was louder and paralyzed me. I stood staring at this unrecognizable man with my mouth agape. Word escaped me entirely. Is that why I recognized him when I first opened the door? How does he know he's my father? The questions I wanted to ask just weren't coming out of my mouth.

I shook my head after a minute. "No, no I don't have a father. I think you have the wrong person. I'm sorry," I stammered.

"No, I know it's you. You know it's me too, don't you? Listen, I was with your momma for a few years. Jennifer Reinbeck from Jonestown, Mississippi? Yeah, I saw you a few times when you was a baby. You've got her lips and her nose, but there's no mistaking those eyes. I see them every time I look in the mirror. Mine have a few more miles on them than yours do."

I felt my hands getting clammy and my legs getting weak. He knew my mother. He knew her name and where she lived, and it was undeniable the resemblances he too had spotted. "I, uh," I didn't know what to say.

"I know this is hard to take in all at one time and I'm sorry for that. There's no one to blame for that except me. I was blown away when I found out you were so close. I just couldn't help myself."

"I think you need to go," I mumbled, stopping the next words from slipping out of his mouth. "Please, you need to leave."

"I'm sorry if I'm intruding. I wanted to meet you. I wanted to see you," he went on.

"And you did. You can go now," I said shortly. I heard my tone rising as the words came out. "Please just leave."

"Liv, what's going on?" Callem asked, coming up behind me. He put his hand on the door and pulled it open a little.

Mr. Drake looked up at him wide eyed. "Oh, I'm sorry. Are you married?" he asked me.

"No, I'm her boyfriend. Is everything okay here?" Callem asked, looking from me to Michael and back. He could probably see the distress all over my face. I heard Red's footsteps approaching right behind us.

"Everything's fine. Mr. Drake was just leaving," I mumbled.

Mr. Drake sighed. "I can see I've upset you. I apologize. Have a good night," he said before retreating. I pulled the door shut, prompting Callem to release his hold on it.

"Who was that?" Callem asked as I went to the window and watched Michael stride slowly down the drive and slip into an older car parked across the street. "Liv, what just happened," he urged, putting his hand on my back. "Who was that guy?"

"What did he say?" I heard Erin's voice ask from behind me.

"He said he was my father," I mumbled.

The atmosphere in the room shifted drastically. "What?" Erin asked as she and Callem stepped up to the window to sneak a peek before he drove off. "Like your biological father? I thought you didn't know who your father was."

I shook my head. "I don't, but he claims to be him."

"What was his name?" Callem asked.

"He said it was Michael Drake and he drove here from Vegas to see me. I think he was on something too, don't you think?" I asked, turning to Callem.

"He was either on something or coming down hard. Did he say how he knew you were his daughter? What made him think it was you?" Callem asked.

"He knew my mother and where she lived. He didn't say how he found me, but said he'd been looking for me. Honestly, I'm not hard to find. All doctors are part of internet directories, you know, search engines. You don't even have to know I'm a doctor to find me. You only have to know my name."

"Maybe that's why he was so desperate to find you," Red joined in. I looked over my shoulder at him. "Well think about it, he was acting like an addict, he's from Vegas so there's a good chance he's a gambler, could have a problem with that, he drives a shitty car which reinforces the other two facts, and he miraculously found his long lost daughter who just so happens to be an oncologist. I'm just putting the pieces together here, but my money is on yours," he said, pointing at me. "He probably wants a piece of it."

"What proof did he have that he was your father? Paperwork or birth certificate?" Callem asked.

"I have his eyes," I gasped, feeling tears well up. "Did you see that too? Did you see his eyes?" I turned to Callem.

Callem didn't answer. He just stared at me, which gave me all the answer I needed.

"And he knew where I lived. Oh that's so creepy. How did he know where I lived?" I whined. I crossed my arms over my chest.

"It's not hard to find someone's address online, even if they're unlisted," Callem said carefully. "There are plenty of sites that charge twenty bucks or so to search by a name nationwide or something. You can find a lot about someone if you do enough digging."

"Oh that's comforting," Erin scoffed. "Where do you think he's going?"

"Hopefully back to Vegas," I mumbled.

"Are you going to be alright here tonight?" Callem asked, rubbing his palm on my crossed arm. "You can stay over at my place if you want."

I strongly considered it for a moment. "No, I'm on call and I work in the morning. It's best if I just stay here tonight."

"I'd feel better about that if you had beefed up your security around this place when I first offered," Callem pointed out.

I grinned. "I know, but I don't think he'll come back, especially since he's seen you."

He probably thinks you'll be staying here. I'll be fine tonight. I'll call my old social worker, Carolyn, tomorrow and see if she has any information or suggestions as to how to handle this."

"I can stay here tonight, if you want me to," Erin stepped in.

I smiled weakly. "Honestly, I'll be fine. That just really caught me off guard is all. Thank you for offering."

"Okay, well, I hate to be the party pooper, but that buzz kill is my exit cue," Erin said, pulling her purse off the coat rack next to the door. She hugged me goodbye. "It was so great to finally meet you, Callem, and you too, Red. Call me if you need anything tonight," she said, turning to me. "If not, call me after you talk to Carolyn about your mysterious visitor."

"Will do," I mumbled as she stepped out the door.

"I'll meet you out at the car," Red said to Callem, holding the door open. "Thank you so much for dinner, Olivia. Good luck with everything," he said quickly before ducking out. I watched him hurry to Erin's car and stop her before she could drive off.

"Is he really trying to pick up my sister in my driveway?" I grumbled.

Callem spied out the window. "Sure looks like it from here."

I shook my head with a smile. Callem stepped in and wrapped his arms around me from over my shoulders. I wrapped my arms around his midsection, exhaling deeply. "Did that really just happen?" I mumbled, my face pressed up against his chest.

"Are you sure you don't want to come home with me?" Callem asked again.

"Well, I'd love to come over," I said slyly. "But I don't know how much sleep I'll be getting over there."

"How much sleep will you get over here, by yourself, worried about that guy knocking on your door again?"

Touché. "I'll be fine and I'll call you if I'm not."

Callem stepped back. "Alright. Thank you for dinner tonight. It was delicious. I'm sad I have to skip dessert," he cooed in my ear, planting a quick peck on my cheek. "Have a good night and I'm serious, if he comes back, you call the police and then you call me. Do not open your door for him. Don't engage." Callem pointed his finger authoritatively at me.

"Yes sir," I whispered playfully before kissing him farewell. "Thank you for coming. I'll call you tomorrow."

I hung in the doorway as he strolled down my walkway. Red noticed him leaving and hurried from Erin's car to Callem's. When the two vehicles were out of sight, I shut my door, securing all three locks.

After a restless night, I was back in the office. Ana was in for another check-up. She'd been out of the hospital. We had some testing and evaluating to do. Plus, with patients like Ana, the ones I've seen most and grown a relationship with, we usually did a lot of chatting.

When I was at work, I didn't think of anything outside of my work, which was a blessing and a curse. I was so enveloped in my work that morning, I nearly forgot to call Callem, Erin, and Carolyn, not that I had an abundance of time to chat with all of them. I

quickly texted Callem and Erin, just to let them know I was good, I was busy at work, and I'd update them as soon as I talked to Carolyn.

"Carolyn Stephenson please," I said to the receptionist at the DHS office when I finally had a moment to sit down and make a call. I sighed heavily waiting for the call to be transferred. I hoped she wasn't busy, so she and I wouldn't be getting into a giant game of phone tag.

"Carolyn Stephenson," a familiar voice with a thick southern draw answered.

"Carolyn, hello, it's Olivia Reinbeck."

"Olivia! My goodness, what a pleasant surprise! How are you? How have you been?" the woman gushed on the other end.

I smiled widely imagining the sweet woman doing the same from her office. "I'm great. Everything's great, how have you been? I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Goodness no. Not at the moment, at least. I've got an appointment coming in, but some time to spare. I'd gladly spend it on you, my dear," she laughed heartily. "How's the practice? How are things going for you at work?"

"Exhausting and challenging, but wonderful, thank you."

"That's good. That's good."

"Carolyn, the reason I was calling was because a man came to my house last night claiming to be my biological father."

"You're kidding me," Carolyn gasped.

"No. I wish I was. It was very strange and completely caught me off guard. He said he'd been looking for me and was from Vegas so he drove all the way to Huntington to see me."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"Michael Drake."

"Well, you know what, I know I've got your file stored around here somewhere. Back when you were still in foster care, we had all paper files. Now everything's on this stupid computer. I know they didn't convert the old files over to digital so I'm going to look, give me a second."

I heard crackling on the other line and drawers being opened. "Well, look at that," Carolyn said, exhaling deeply. "There's your cute little picture from when you were just a little girl." She giggled lightly. "Okay, let's see, well, your mother never did put your father's name on your birth certificate," she noted.

"Right. She told me she didn't know who my father was," I said.

I listened to papers shuffling on the other end as Carolyn lightly hummed to herself. "I don't see anything in here that would indicate who your father was. The fact is, unless he was denied custody of you and you were turned over to the state that way, he would have been the one who would have raised you. Since we didn't even have a paternal unit in your file when your mother passed, you were automatically put into the system."

"And there isn't anyone else who would have access to that information would there? I mean, it's not public record?"

"Oh goodness, not at all. No, and again, since it's still an actual file and not a link on DHS' system here, I'm the only one who has access to this information."

"So this guy must have known my name all along and he just searched for me one day or something."

"I'm not sure. It's hard telling how people track other people down these days. It's so easy for anyone like you and me to do it since nearly everyone has one of these computers and can get on the internet. He didn't tell you how he found you or how he knew you were his daughter?"

"I didn't really give him the time of day. I was a little freaked out by it all. He just mentioned my mom and that he'd seen me when I was a baby. Are there any rights protecting me from this?"

"Unfortunately no. You're an adult now. Any court order that may have been on you when you were a minor, like a restraining order or a court ruling suspending his parental rights, wouldn't be any good now, but I know you didn't have any, because he never existed back then. Did he threaten you?"

"No, not at all. It's just the principle of it. He came out of nowhere and sprang this on me. He came to my home. He stood in my doorway. That's sending up more flags than one, as far as I'm concerned."

"I hear you. What do you think? We never really talked about it, but would you want a relationship with your biological father? Let's say he hadn't come to your door last night and scared you like that, if the possibility had been there last week, would you have taken it?"

"No. I wouldn't have. I have a father in Downy and two others in Mississippi. This Michael Drake is a complete stranger to me and to be honest, I've got to keep my guard up."

"You're absolutely right. There's not much you can do about him coming to your house. Unless you told him not to come back last night, then he'd be trespassing. He has to be breaking a law in order for the police to get involved and since you're no longer a ward of the state, they're the only authority that can protect you."

"Is that what you'd suggest? Does this happen a lot, parents laying low until the child is older before resurfacing? I have to say, I'm doing well for myself right now and my biggest concern is getting taken advantage of."

"You know, I've heard of it happening, not too often, but it happens. Sometimes it's mutual; both parties accepted the reunion. Sometimes it's a negative experience. And you're right, the only reason he may have surfaced is because he found out about your situation and may only want a piece of it. I don't know the man either and I don't want to pass judgment, but you're right. He could just want money from you. He may want to get access to your home and rob you. As sad as that fact is, it happens, it has happened, and it will continue to happen to unsuspecting people. You just need to be vigilant. Keep your distance and be firm, if that's how you decide to go about this. Did you ask him not to come back last night?"

I shook my head. "No, I just asked him to leave."

"If you happen to run into him again and you're sticking to your guns about the no-contact idea, make sure to tell him you do not want to see him, you do not want him coming around, and you will call the police if need be. If it comes to getting the police

involved, you can file a restraining order. Are you afraid for your safety?"

I smiled lightly. "Not at all. Like I said, it was just a little unexpected. I'm actually seeing someone who's in the business of personal security, so I feel pretty safe."

"Well that's good to hear," Carolyn said. "And listen, I wish I could help you out a little more. I wish I could stay and chat about your job and your new beau, but I have an appointment just outside my office. If you need anything else from me, Darlin, just give me another buzz and I'll see what I can do for you, okay?"

"You've been a great help, Carolyn. Thank you. It was great talking to you," I said before hanging up the phone. I'd spent about three minutes too long on the phone anyway.

The afternoon moved along quickly. I'd texted both Erin and Callem with updates and was going over some test results with one of the lab techs when Amanda informed me there was a gentleman waiting for me in the lobby. "He said he didn't have an appointment, but he was hoping you'd see him."

I smiled. This wasn't the first time Callem had pulled that line. "Thank you, I'll be out in just a minute."

I found myself hurrying to the lobby with excitement. When I pushed the security door open, rather than seeing Callem waiting for me, I found Michael Drake standing near the receptionist's desk, fidgeting as much as he was last night.

My lips got tight and my pace quickened, moving towards him. "Hi, there," he said with a smile as I ushered him over to the corner of the lobby. Thankfully, there was only one young boy and his mother waiting. I would have been more embarrassed if the lobby had been full.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him when we were out of earshot of any eavesdroppers.

"I'm sorry for dropping in like this. I was hoping we could go to lunch?"

"No, no we can't go to lunch. Listen, I don't want to be rude. I don't want to be cruel, but I don't know you and I understand you traveled a long way to see me, but there's a reason why I never came looking for you. There's a reason why we hadn't ever met before last night. Quite frankly, it's very selfish of you to decide when you want to be a part of my life. Where were you the past 20 years when I was bouncing from family to family? Where were you when my mother died? I made it just fine on my own. I'm sorry, but I don't need you in my life. Now I have to ask you to leave. This is my place of business. This is my office. You can't come here again. Please leave."

He looked at me for a long minute. "I hope you'll reconsider. I'm staying at the Pacific View, room 113 if you change your mind," he said.

"Please don't expect me to reach out to you. I won't come looking." I wanted to make sure he understood my intentions, or lack thereof.

With large eyes, he gaped at me speechlessly. He hesitated, gauging whether or not he should retort, but I held my gaze firm until he stepped back and slowly turned. I sighed as he retreated out the door of the office, though my hands were shaking. "Amanda," I whispered, turning to the front desk. "If you see that man again, please ask him to leave and if he doesn't, call the police," I said, working hard to control my

trembling voice.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, looking at me with a twisted brow.

I inhaled deeply before plastering a smile on my face forcibly. “Absolutely. Yes, everything is fine. Just please ask him to leave if he returns and then inform me immediately, please. Thank you,” I managed to say cheerfully before hurrying back to my office.

"You have to understand," I started.

"Don't," Olivia snapped quickly, keeping her eyes out the car window. "I don't want to hear you. Just the sound of your voice makes my skin crawl."

I swallowed hard. I'd have to keep my cool. I knew getting her home would be the hardest part. If I could just do that, give it a few weeks, things should start to turn around. She'd get past the idea and start to remember why we were together in the first place.

"I'm sorry you missed dinner. I'll call out for some delivery," I added, hoping if I kept it casual, she'd start to come down from her rage-filled high.

"How do you plan on paying for that food?" she asked, eyes still out the window.

"With my card," I stammered, wondering why she had asked.

"Then I'm not eating. I don't know where that money came from," she whispered coldly.

"Baby," I cooed, reaching over for her thigh.

She batted my advance away in an instant. "I mean it, Cal," she spat, turning to glare at me, practically baring her teeth. "You wanted this. You want me home? You want me back? It's going to come with a price. Though I haven't put up a fight, you and I both know, hell even Red knows I'm not coming willingly. You painted me into a corner then threw me the only rope I could reach whether it was the one I wanted or not. You make me sick. Do not expect a single thing from me. Nothing. You broke my heart so badly that you've killed the best of me. Now, this is what you get."

There was a fire in her eyes I knew I wouldn't be able to put out. I backed down as she returned to the view out of her window. I looked up at Red, who was eyeing us in the rearview mirror from the driver's seat. I knew what he was thinking. I could almost hear him saying the words though he remained silent.

This was nothing like last time.

I'd let her sulk and sputter for a few more days. Then I'd show her. Then, the games would begin.

2006 - Callem

"Hold on, slow down. What happened?" I plugged my left ear so I could hear Olivia better.

"He was here. He came to the office," she said, enunciating each syllable.

"Who?"

"Michael Drake! He just showed up out of the blue and wanted to go out to lunch," she snapped back. I could hear the panic in her voice.

"Is he still there?"

"No, I told him to leave. I told him I didn't want anything to do with him, but I don't know if I've gotten through to him. He told me where he was staying in case I were to change my mind later and wanted to find him. Good God, he was at my office, Callem."

"Okay, okay, calm down," I said, rubbing my forehead. "Was he threatening? Was he aggressive?"

"No, not at all. He was still a little twitchy, like last night, but he was very non-confrontational."

I nodded. "Good. Alright. Where did he say he was staying?" I asked while she was still a little worked up. I knew she wouldn't question it; she wouldn't wonder why I was asking.

"The Pacific View. Room 113. I told him I wasn't going to come out there. I told him not to expect me."

"That's a good thing," I added.

"I think I'm going to take you up on your offer from last night, if it still stands? Do you mind if I stay with you tonight? He's really starting to freak me out."

I nodded. "Of course. Yeah, I'd feel much better if you did. You know what, I'm going to send one of my guys over to your house and add a few more locks on your doors and windows, that way, if he shows up and tries anything stupid when he realizes you're not there, he won't get very far."

"Callem, you don't have to do that," she said lightly.

"I would feel much better if I did, and trust me, once my guys are done, you'll feel much better, too; more secure. Just do me a favor, call me if he shows up again. I'll meet you outside your office after your shift, in case he's waiting for you, okay? So don't walk out until you see me there."

"Do you think he'd do that? You think he'd be that desperate to see me that he'd follow me or tries to break into my house?"

"I can't say. I don't know the guy, but I'd rather be safe than sorry." I heard her sigh into the phone. "Did you tell your receptionist to kick him out if he comes back?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Good. Just don't think about it. I'm on top of it, okay? I'll do some grilling for

us. We can open some wine and get the fire going. Everything will work out just fine. Alright? Don't let it bother you while you're at work. I'll take care of it."

Olivia sighed. "You're too sweet. Thank you. Thank you so much."

"What time do you think you'll be done tonight?"

"Meet you here at six?"

"Alright, I'll see you then. Bye." I hung up my cell phone. I picked up my desk phone. "Hey Rick, Callem Tate. How's that request going for Drake?" I paused and listened to him talk. "Great. Send it all over. If you get anything else, just let me know. Thanks, man."

I hung up the phone and walked out of my office. I passed through the lobby and over to Red's office. I hung in the open doorway. "Hey, Michael Drake stopped at Olivia's office."

"What?" Red asked, looking away from his computer monitor.

"Yeah, she kicked him out, but it really freaked her out. She's staying with me tonight. I told her I'd beef up security at her house just in case this guy is a fan of BE. Who do we have that can run over to Huntington and install a few more locks?"

"Well you got Tony sitting on his ass up there," Red said, jabbing his thumb towards the lobby of the office. "Other than that, everyone else is on assignment."

"Has he done locks before?"

Red shrugged. "Beats me."

"What have you got going on?"

"Just paperwork, expense reports, travel arrangements, quarterly reviews, you know, nothing much," he joked vaguely.

"I'm going to need you to babysit Tony if he's new to installing locks. Then you and I have a date with Mr. Drake. He's posted up at the Pacific View hotel and I think he needs some company."

"Tonight?"

I shook my head. "Nah, tomorrow morning, real early."

Red nodded. "Meet you there, say one?"

"Let's do two. We want to make sure the majority of the other guests are asleep, including Mr. Drake."

My stomach tightened as I walked into the house. I felt like an inmate moving into her cell; I didn't want to be here, but I didn't have any other choice. I could run, but the warden would surely catch me and throw me into solitary confinement. It was useless.

I stood in the entryway as the front door slammed shut, snapping down on my soul. I felt Callem standing just behind me, but made no acknowledgement of it.

"Are you going to come in?" he finally asked, leaning towards my ear as he spoke.

"After you," I replied sourly.

He sidestepped past me until he was standing in front of me, three steps into the living room. "Are you going to stand there all night?"

"Am I on some sort of timer? Are we in a hurry to hate each other silently through the walls of this house?"

"I don't hate you, Liv," he whispered.

"Well, that makes one of us."

"You can't honestly say you hate me."

"Can't I?" I said sharply. He stood, waiting for me to come into the house, but I stayed glued to my spot. His eyes were heavy and his lips turned down. Was he doing this on purpose? Was he intentionally trying to make me feel bad for him? Of course he was. He knew exactly who I was and he knew the best road to the weakest parts of my heart. He was no stranger to playing all my faults to the tee.

"Just keep reminding yourself that I'm doing this because I love you."

"And you may as well keep telling yourself that I'm a salty bitch because you made me this way," I spat before storming off. I swept past him and up the stairs to the spare room where I closed the door and locked it.

What good was it to lock it? He had keys to all the doors and even if he didn't, he knew exactly how to get in. I was just hoping it'd tell him to give me some space. I dropped down on the bed in the dark, quiet room and inhaled deeply.

My eyes started to fill up. My chin quivered. I held my breath as the silent sobs battled their way out of me. I heard each of his steps as he climbed the stairs and approach the spare room door. I saw the shadow of his feet at the bottom of the door. I watched the knob twitch as he tried to turn it unsuccessfully. I waited for him to say something. I waited for him to pound and demand I allow him entry. I waited for something to come from him.

I waited for a reaction that never came. After a few short seconds, Callem's shadow moved away and didn't return. I lay on my side, crying lightly into the pillow until I drifted off to sleep.

"He showed up at your office?" Erin gasped a week later. I hadn't seen her since dinner at my house. She brought over some take-out for us so I could tell her about the other day's events.

"Yeah and I was really short with him. I told him, 'I don't want you around. I don't want to get to know you'. I'm not sure if he got the hint though because he followed it up with inviting me to his hotel to visit with him."

"You didn't go there, did you?"

"No, not at all!" I said. "He just told me where he was staying in hopes I'd seek him out, but I didn't and I have no intention to."

"I can't believe you didn't call and tell me," Erin said, shaking her head, stuffing a bite of her salad in her mouth.

"Well, I called Callem," I said carefully.

Erin nodded dramatically. "Okay, I see how it is. Bros before hoes, is that it?"

I smiled. "You can't blame me. Personal security is what he does for a living. He had his guys come over to my house that day and add some more locks on my doors and I stayed with him the next couple of nights."

Erin's eyes got wide. "A couple of nights, huh? Wow, you saucy little minx. How was that?"

I couldn't contain the smile that stretched from ear to ear. "It was great," I managed. "He's, he's so wonderful. He's such a gentleman and he's so," I paused to smile bigger, searching for the right word, "I don't even know how to say it. You know, most people look at me and see a girl. When he looks at me, he makes me feel so young, but in a good way. He's intimidating in an intimate way, which is such a sexy quality. It gives me goose bumps. He just makes me feel so protected and so comfortable and so wanted. I can tell when we're together there really isn't anywhere else he'd rather be."

"Olivia, you're in love," Erin gushed quietly.

"No," I replied, shaking my head, letting the monosyllabic word hang on the air.

Erin's eyes widened. She smiled, cocking her head to the side as if urging me to think about it for a second; let the idea sink in before I denied the claim any further.

I stared at her for a second, wanting impulsively to deny her claim again, but something stopped me. "Should I be scared?" I asked after a moment's hesitation.

Erin inhaled deeply. "It's always scary to give someone your whole heart. Are they going to treat it like the precious thing it is or will they take it for granted? I can't answer that for you. I just want you to be careful."

"Why?"

"Something about him," she mumbled. "I'm not saying I don't like him, because I do."

I like him a lot. He seems to genuinely care for you. It's the power that scares me. It's the money that scares me. It's the possibilities that scare me."

"What do you mean?"

"You and I both know you're well off. You can take care of yourself financially and you're not pursuing Callem because of his money and the security it brings. Imagine that things go well for you two. The next step would be to move in with each other. Let's face it, you'd move into his house. You might trade in your car for something more the speed of your new lifestyle, which won't be as modest as it is now. Then you'd get married, maybe even combine finances. Maybe then things turn south, when the romance is over. I'm not saying your relationship is doomed, just imagine the possibility. Now, he has everything and you have nothing. He has the house and the cars and the finances. He has the connections and the power and that, for some reason, really scares me about him."

I nodded slowly. "I see what you're saying, but even if something were to happen, I'm still a working woman. Even if I sold my house to go live with him and then we separate, I could still get another one. I'm not completely giving up everything in my life to be with him. I would never do that."

"I know," Erin mumbled, nodding. "I know, but it's still scary. I suppose I'm just being the paranoid mother-hen for you. I'd kill him if he hurt you. I don't care what kind of Special Forces, ex-army guy he is. I've got a car and it's hard to out run, if you know what I mean."

I chuckled. "Thanks for loving me so much."

"Now, speaking of mother-hens, Mom wants you to confirm Christmas with them. She missed you at Thanksgiving and wants to be sure you're home for the holidays."

"Yes. I will for sure be there. I'll have to call her tomorrow," I said.

"Are you going to invite Callem?"

I sighed. "Do you think I should? I mean, we haven't made anything official yet, well, he did tell Mr. Drake he was my boyfriend, but he could have just said that to prove a point. And I don't want to come off as presumptuous. I don't want him to think I'd assume we're dating and that it's the right time in our relationship to meet the family. Guys get freaked out by stuff like that. I don't want to scare him away."

Erin was grinning from ear to ear as I rambled. "You're so cute. He's not going to take off running just because you invite him to Christmas. Just ask him. Make it sound casual. It'll be fine. If he's really into you the way you describe, I'm sure he won't have any problem accepting your offer."

My cell rang. I picked it up to look at the screen and found a number I didn't recognize. "Hello?" I answered, half expecting to hear a recorded message trying to solicit me something.

"Is this Olivia?" a gruff voice said on the other end.

"Yes it is."

"Olivia, don't hang up. This is Michael Drake."

I wanted to throw the phone across the room. "How did you get this number?" I asked as my heart traveled out of my chest and into my throat.

"Listen, I just had to tell you this. I don't know how well you know that boyfriend of yours, but he came by my hotel and threatened me. He threatened to kill me if I didn't leave you alone."

I paused. Callem sought out Mr. Drake? Why hadn't he told me? Did he really threaten to kill him? That doesn't sound like Callem. I can't trust Mr. Drake. He could just be telling me a story. "How did you get this number?" I asked again, this time more sharply.

"He's dangerous, Olivia. He and his thug tried to intimidate me at about two in the morning; tried to push me around. Do you know what kind of man he is? Look, I may not be a smart guy, but I know a bad guy when I see one. He is very dangerous."

"You listen to me. I don't know how you got this number, but you need to lose it. This is my personal, private cell phone. It's unlisted. You cannot call me. I don't want to talk to you."

"I, I, I understand. You've made that point very clear. I get that. I just had to call you and tell you about your boyfriend. Did he tell you he came to see me?"

That wasn't any of his business. I didn't answer.

"He didn't tell you because he doesn't want you to know that side of him. You need to stay away from him more than you need to stay away from me. If I can't be a part of your life, at least I feel better walking away from you again knowing I warned you. I don't want anything from you. I don't want to mess anything up for you. I just wanted to see you and to have you see me. If you ever want to find me again, you know my name. I will leave you now. I will lose this number. I will never reach out to you again, but I just had to warn you. I couldn't, in good conscious, leave this feeling to myself. Please understand."

"Goodbye, Mr. Drake," I mumbled quickly before hanging up the phone.

"That was him?" Erin squealed when I exhaled deeply. "What did he say? Did he tell you how he got your number?"

I shook my head. "No. He said Callem threatened him. He said he was leaving me alone now, but he just had to tell me that he thinks I should keep away from Callem."

"What? Why would he say that?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. If he's telling the truth, why didn't Callem tell me he talked to Mr. Drake? Why would he keep that from me?"

"You can't believe the antics of a desperate man. He's probably just trying to make you feel bad for him. He's obviously a little crazy. Why would Callem threaten him? I can't see him doing that."

"Do you think I should ask him about it? Ask Callem?"

Erin's brows rose. "That's a slippery slope. On one hand, he could become defensive and get angry that you'd even ask. On the other hand, he could be completely honest and tell you he did the exact crime he's being accused of. Does it really matter if he did? Let's just say, theoretically, he did go to this guy's hotel room, pushed him around, told him to get the hell out of town, Callem would have only done that for you. He would have done it to keep you safe." Erin paused to sigh. "I don't know. Maybe you should just leave it at that. Look at it as a sign of chivalry."

“If that’s the case, then the next question is how serious was he? Would he really kill for me?”

2006 - Callem

My eyes popped open. I wasn't at my home and the constant crash of the ocean coming to shore didn't hum in my ears here. It was unsettlingly quiet. I sighed as I consumed the sight of Olivia, peacefully sleeping next to me, undisturbed by my presence.

A fleck of streetlight peered in between the window blinds, casting a faint orange glow onto her exposed skin. So smooth. So silky. So distracting. If she had been awake too, there would have been no stopping me from having her again. I refrained from breaking her restful slumber, though it was awfully tempting.

Instead, I eased out of her bed. I didn't like being a snob, but I really didn't sleep well unless I was at my own place. With Olivia's demanding schedule and the convenience of being at her house, I either had to see her here or not see her at all, and these days, the latter wasn't an option.

She was like a disease. She infected my mind at all hours of the day. And, unlike the last few women I had casually seen, it wasn't just about the sex. With Olivia, the sex was a perk. It was a bonus to just being in her company. What she was doing to me was unheard of. It wasn't anything I was prepared for and was something I was defenseless against, not that I was putting up too much of a fight.

I was nearly dressed when she stirred and sat up in bed, one of her hands stroking the spot where I had just been lying. "What's wrong?" she whispered sleepily.

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

"Where are you going?"

I sighed, leaning onto the bed. "I'm a bit of an insomniac. I have trouble sleeping."

"Really? You didn't seem to have any trouble sleeping when I was at your place," she said.

I smiled. "Well, that's because you wore me out."

A groggy chuckle filled the room as she fell back onto the pillow. "If that's the case, let me help you back to sleep." She grabbed a handful of my shirt, pulling me onto the bed. When I was close enough, she kissed me softly, releasing her hold on my shirt to wrap her arms around my back.

"You need to sleep," I said when we parted. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I don't want you to leave. I hate waking up without you," she said, pouting slightly.

I sighed heavily. "You're going to be the end of me," I mumbled as I started shedding the layers I had just put on. I crawled back in to bed with her. She nuzzled her way into the Olivia-sized nook between my arm and my chest, resting her cheek and her hand on my pecs.

"I've been meaning to ask you. Do you have plans for the holidays?" Olivia asked.

I smiled lightly. "You know, I've been meaning to ask you the same. I know your

office is closed for the week and I was thinking about the two of us getting out of town, having Christmas in New York. Just the two of us, shacked up over Central Park for a few days, maybe long enough to see the ball drop. What do you think?" I knew she hadn't ever been to NYC and I'd been itching to have her to myself for a couple of days. Between the two of us and our rigorous work schedules, we didn't get near as much time with each other as I'd like.

"You don't have to work? Aren't the holidays busy for you?"

I shrugged. "That's why I've got a fleet of lackeys to do all the work for me. You wouldn't have to pay for a thing. I'll fly us out there, I'll have a car waiting for us, and we'll stay at the apartment. We can go grocery shopping. We can rent movies. We can just hunker down. Can you imagine? We can just do this," I said, referring to our current state, squeezing her tightly.

I heard her chuckle. "That does sound so great. You know, I've never been on a vacation before."

"What?"

She shook her head. "No, I've always been too busy. You know, schooling. I was in school all summer long. And living with foster families, they all barely had the means to support me, let alone treat me to a trip."

"What about when you were in college? Surely you went on spring break trips or Christmas vacation, right? I mean, you celebrated graduating with a trip to Cancun or something, right?"

"No. I usually just hung around here for the holidays, with Erin and her folks, if I even had the time off. When you're an accelerated learner, that's pretty much all you do; learn. If I wasn't behind a book, I was working. And after I graduated, I already had a job so there wasn't any room for me to vacation. I've always been on the go."

"All the more reason to come with me. That trip to Chicago was probably the closest thing you've ever had to a vacation, huh?"

"I suppose, but even there I was working. I didn't have any time to do any vacation type stuff."

"So are you going to come with me or is your family expecting you?"

She hesitated. "I'm sure they'll understand."

I smiled widely. "I can't wait to have you all to myself. No cell phone, no ducking out for an emergency. Just you and I."

"There's one stipulation," she started. "And I don't want to seem presumptuous, but if I go on this trip with you, that's my Christmas present. The trip and the accommodations is all I want. You're not allowed to turn up Christmas morning with a gift for me, deal?" She pointed her finger at me.

"Deal," I agreed.

Olivia slumped back into me. I could feel her body relaxing around me. "Can I ask you another question," she cooed after a few moments of silence.

"Sure," I said.

"Did you go talk to Michael Drake for me at his hotel?"

My mind raced. How did she find out? Had I said something on the phone? Had she

overheard a conversation? Did she hear me leave that night? "Yes. I did."

"What did you say to him?"

I licked my lips and cleared my throat. "I just told him what he needed to hear. I know you told him you didn't want anything to do with him and you weren't interested in letting him into your life. I was just hoping the same thing coming from me would have a bigger affect on him."

There was a pause. "What did he say?"

"He tried to explain his reasoning for coming to Huntington and approaching you, but I told him it didn't matter and that he wasn't welcome. I told him leaving was the best thing for him."

There was another pause. I could feel her breath on my skin as she exhaled deeply. "Why didn't you tell me you did that?" she asked carefully.

"I just didn't want to upset you anymore than you already were. I should have told you. I shouldn't have stuck my nose where it didn't belong."

She wriggled closer to me, tightening her grip on my chest. "It's alright. I appreciate you looking out for me, but you didn't have to."

I rubbed her arm, pushing her shoulder into me so I could kiss her forehead. "Yes, I did. If I had been thinking rationally, I wouldn't have, or I would have consulted you first. Rational thinking seems to have left the building since I met you. I don't know what you've done to me. You've bewitched me body and soul."

She lifted her head off my chest and looked at me. "Don't try to use Jane Austen to seduce me." She smiled slyly. "Not unless you want me to start calling you Mr. Darcy?"

"Not much gets past you, does it?"

Olivia nuzzled back into her comfy nook. "Not usually."

I wanted to ask her how she found out about my little meeting with Mr. Drake, but I didn't want to push it. She'd already caught me in a bit of a lie. I should stop while I'm ahead. I racked my brain, trying to imagine how she would have found out, but came up with nothing. I was quick. That was it. There was nothing more to it; nothing for her to stumble across.

Rick had to work overtime to fill my Michael Drake request. This Drake character had a record longer than my forearm. Possession of an unregistered firearm, possession of a controlled substance, possession with intent, fraud, assault, assault with a deadly weapon, theft, petty theft, and some of those charges were on the list more than once in more than four states. That right there was enough for me to pass judgment on the drifter, let alone the fact that he was harassing Olivia.

"He called me, you know," she mumbled sleepily.

"Who did?"

"Michael Drake."

"When?"

"Tonight. He called my cell phone. He didn't tell me how he got the number, but I told him not to call it again. He was the one who told me you'd sought him out. He called to warn me that you were a bad man. He said you threatened him and he didn't trust you."

"You've got to be kidding me. Was he still in Huntington?"

"Yeah. He was, but said he was leaving and I wouldn't hear from him again. He said if I was interested in knowing him later down the line, I could find him. He said he wouldn't come around anymore and wouldn't bother me, but he couldn't, in good conscious, as he said, leave without warning me about you," she scoffed. "He sounded very desperate if you ask me. Throwing one last line out to see if I'd grab the bait."

"He said I threatened him? Really? I'm glad he's taking off because he's crazier than I thought he was."

"I thought it was pretty farfetched when he told me that."

I was glad she hadn't taken him seriously. Truth was I had threatened him. Told him if he didn't leave, I'd put one between his eyes and toss his body off the pier in high tide so it would never be found. I told him if I saw him near Olivia, heard of him contacting her in anyway, I'd hunt him down and wouldn't stop until his heart stopped beating. My glock had done most of the threatening as it rested on his perspiring temple while I spoke so eloquently of the many ways I could finish him.

I exhaled deeply as the room grew uncomfortably silent again. Looks like Mr. Drake wanted to call my bluff.

2013 - Callem

It had been three days since I brought her home.

It had been three days since I'd seen her.

She has been in the spare room and hasn't left. She hasn't eaten, though I've tried coaxing her morning, noon, and night; she has refused each of my offers, not even opening the door to talk to me. Sometimes, she doesn't even talk to me at all. I've been home all three days, hoping she'd emerge so we could talk.

Truth is I didn't want her to do anything stupid. I didn't want her to leave again. I didn't want her to hurt herself either. Did I think Olivia would really hurt herself, no, but I couldn't take the chance. I don't know what I would do if...

I didn't want to think about it. Three days had come and gone. I was now growing impatient and intolerant of her games. "Olivia," I called, knocking on the spare room door with my knuckle. I waited for a response, but got none. "Olivia, please open up the door. It's been three days. You need to come out." I tried not to sound stern or demanding. I knocked again when I got nothing from her. "Liv?"

I knocked a little harder and waited. I'd at least give her a chance to come out. There wasn't really anything in there she could hurt herself with. I don't think she's left the room since we came home, but I suppose she could have crept out of the room while I was sleeping. When was the last time I heard her? I think yesterday morning. She yelled at me to go away and leave her alone. It's been a whole day since I've heard anything from the other side of the door.

I cupped the knob in my hand and tried to turn it. It was locked. I drove my master key into the lock, feeling a sense of urgency flood over me. I nearly broke the key off in the lock turning it so quickly. When I opened the door, I found a cloudy bit of sunlight painted across the wall and Olivia fast asleep in bed.

Hurrying over to her, I gently put my fingers to her neck and felt a pulse. I sighed heavily as I looked down on her. She was fine. She was okay. I shook her shoulder lightly until her eyes started to slowly open. "Olivia," I whispered.

She took one look at me and scurried away to the other side of the bed. "What are you doing in here?" she asked defensively.

"I had to check on you. I hadn't heard from you since yesterday."

"I don't care. Get out," she barked, pointing at the door. Her eyes were dark and she looked very pale in the murky light of the room.

"You need to eat. You look terrible. You're going to get sick."

"I said get out, Callem," she shouted at me.

"Please, Livy. Just come and have a bite to eat and I'll let you be. I'll leave you alone. I'm worried about you."

"I don't care. I don't want to see you. I want you to leave me alone. Get out of

here. Just go, Callem. Go!" She pointed her finger at the door.

"Enough," I shouted over her. "I'm not asking anymore. I'm telling you that you need to get out of this room before I drag you out. It's your choice. Go on your own or against your will."

Olivia's lips got very thin as she seethed at me, chest rising and falling with anger. "Something tells me that's how life is going to be with you from now on," she said much more calmly. "You're just going to keep pinning me in a corner until I do things the way you want me to. I'm just a fucking puppet now, aren't I?"

"I don't want it to be like this. I just want you to take care of yourself. I just want you to eat. Then you can come back in here for as long as you want. I don't care. I know this isn't easy for you, but I'm not going to let you hurt yourself. I'm not going to lose you over this."

"I hate to break it to you, but you already did. Remember, I signed up to get out of this. I was forced here, not physically, but with threats. You've already lost me, darling, whether you see it that way or not." I had never seen Olivia like this as long as I had known her. I'd never seen the vindictive side of such a sweet person.

I could only nod silently. "Please," I opened my arm, gesturing to the open doorway. "Just come downstairs and have some food. Have a shower, change your clothes, and you can come back in here for as long as you need. I won't bother you, only to eat of course. Don't do it for me. Do it for yourself. You need it."

Slowly, her rigid expression drooped and she sighed, backing down from the fight. "I don't want to talk. I just want to eat and shower and come back to bed. Got it?"

I nodded quickly, knowing I was making progress and I wasn't going to try to entice her into anything else. "That's fine. Can I cook you something?"

"No," she answered quickly. "I can do it myself."

"Alright," I mumbled. I stood and stared at her for a long moment. Though the room was tense, I couldn't have been more ecstatic that she was here. I couldn't be happier that she had spoken to me and that we were moving forward, no matter how slowly it was happening.

"Well, I'll leave you be," I spoke, clearing my throat as I walked out of the room. I had to stop while I was ahead. This was going to work.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Red asked.

"Why do you ask?" I replied with a question of my own.

"Because you hardly know this girl. Look at what you're already willing to do for her. Is your heart really in this or just your dick?"

"I'll leave the dick-thinking to you. It's your specialty and I wouldn't want to steal your thunder." I winked at him. "I've got this under control. Are you with me?"

Red nodded firmly. "Always, boss man."

I knocked with the side of my fist. The door opened, releasing the scent of cheap cigarettes, cheap motel air freshener, and a stinging aroma of foul body odor. It was shady inside, yet I could still make out the grizzly five o'clock shadow wrapped around his face like a bristly mask, thanks to the streetlight across the parking lot and over my left shoulder.

His eyes grew wide when he saw me. His mouth opened, but before he could say anything, I was pushing my way into his hotel room. One gloved hand clapped over his mouth and the other gloved hand was on his chest, giving him a quick shove backward. He stumbled over his own lazy feet and toppled to the floor with a hard grunt.

Red closed the door behind us, locking it. I walked to the dingy bathroom and flicked the light on, filling the small room with white light. Michael gapped up at Red and me from the floor. I walked towards him slowly. Scared, Michael scampered backward until his back was up against the foot of the nearest bed.

Crouching, I rested my elbows on my thighs and bent down to his level. Michael cowered slightly, lifting a hand off the ground to use as a shield. His stench burnt my nostrils as I got closer to him. I saw the track marks on his inner arm as he raised it in defense. I looked into his yellowing eyes. "I thought I made things very clear last time I was here," I started. He didn't say a word. He looked up at me, not defiantly nor in terror. His expression was calm. He'd been expecting us. "How did you get Olivia's number?"

"Dumpster diving," he admitted very easily. "I found one of her business cards in the trash behind her office."

"Did you think she wouldn't tell me you called? Did you think I wouldn't come back?"

He shook his head quickly. "Not at all. I figured I'd see you again."

I smirked. "Then you must not have believed me last time I was here. Honestly, I'm surprised you're stupid enough to stick around. I would have skipped town if I were you."

"I didn't think it'd matter. You said you'd find me one way or another. I was just hoping she'd come to thank me for tipping her off."

"Tipping her off, on what?"

"On you," he said firmly. "I'm not a fool. I've been in the game a lot longer than you,

son, and I've seen a lot of things. I know what you are. I know what you do. I wanted to warn Olivia before she got burned. You and I both know burns scar and I'm sure the flames trailing you will leave one epic scar on anyone who gets too close. And I've seen enough to know Olivia is good. She's smart and she's driven, I can tell without even knowing her. She deserves better than you."

"You're a funny guy." I grinned. "You think you've got me pegged. You don't know jack shit about me, old man, and you certainly don't know the first thing about Olivia. I know more about her than you do, more than you ever will. You didn't scare her, by the way. All you did was push her further away from you and into my arms. She'll never want you, ever."

"If it was the last thing I ever did, I'd say my peace and make my voice heard. I did that so if you're going to kill me, just get on with it. If not, get the fuck out. I'd like to get back to sleep."

I scoffed, looking up at Red. Michael wasn't making this any fun. Standing, I sighed. I nodded, though still looking at Michael. Red knew what I meant. He jumped from his post and tackled Michael, pinning him down. The old man fought weakly. Red twisted Michael's head, pushing his mouth into the carpet to muzzle his cries.

Pulling a syringe out of my pocket, I pulled the cap off the needle and grabbed Michael's arm. I stuck him where the other dots blotted the underside of his elbow. When I had emptied the contents of the syringe into Michael's veins, I stood and covered the needle. I knew it wouldn't take long. This shit was lethal and, in the dose I'd just administered to my patient, it would only be a matter of minutes before he stopped kicking.

We worked like a magician and his assistant, each of us knowing our jobs, seeing the cues, and pulling off the performance without a hitch. Red held Michael down until the slight convulsions stopped. I put my still gloved fingers to his neck. No pulse. I patted Red on the back. When he stood, we carried Michael's body to the bed. I put his finger prints on the syringe, left it on the end table while Red wrapped Michael's arm with the dead man's belt. I planted a few other tell-tale items throughout the disgusting room to point the investigative detectives to an accidental overdose. Case open and shut.

Red and I slipped out of the room as quickly as we'd come.

2007- Olivia

"It was just amazing," I gushed to Erin and her parents. Callem and I had finally found the time to make it over to Downy so I could introduce them. "Callem's apartment was out of this world. It was thirty-plus stories up and one wall was all windows, overlooking Central Park. It was so beautiful. All you could see for miles was city."

"That sounds amazing," Erin's mother, Lauri, said. I had a hard time considering them my parents, even though they had adopted me. I called them mom and dad, but those were more like titles than identities. They were the closest things I had to parents yet, there was still something preventing me from referring to them as my parents. "Christmas and New Years in New York, I can't imagine."

Truth was, I was being modest. New York was by far the best time I'd ever had in my life. The private jet was just a tease for the luxury and extravagance I lived in all week. Callem had made the apartment out to be older from the way he spoke of it. Really, it was something you could only dream of. I felt like an heiress or royalty. Everything was clean and sleek, updated and the highest of quality, from the furniture and fixtures, right down to the linens and flooring. We toured the city, stayed up late. We made love and learned so much about each other. It was a trip I would not soon forget, one that was long overdue, and one I couldn't wait to take again.

"Have you ever been to New York?" Callem asked Lauri.

"No, well, I've been to Albany, but I'm sure it doesn't hold water compared to the Big Apple."

"It's something you have to experience at least once in your life. I'd love to take you all out there. It's not easy for Olivia and me to find much time for ourselves, but if we can all get away this summer, perhaps spring break, I'd be more than happy to have you all. There's plenty of room."

Lauri looked over at her husband, Joe, with a wide grin. "Wouldn't that be lovely? You'll have to keep us updated on your schedule then. You see, Joe and I don't do more than go up to the wine country during the summer. We'd love to do more, but we're both still working. Only a couple more years, the way I see it. Five for me, six for Joe before retirement sets in."

"I hear you. Jobs can be demanding," Callem replied.

"Making plans with the family for the summer. Does this mean you two are dating or is it one of those casual city things?" Joe asked.

I smiled, half because Joe cracked me up with his efforts of keeping 'with-it' and half from blushing. "Yes, we're official now. We talked about it over the winter break and we've labeled ourselves now."

Lauri's smile grew as she giddily tapped the two of us on the knees. "That's so exciting. I'm really happy for the two of you. I only wish we would have met sooner. I

feel like we don't know you well enough to be dating our daughter."

"What does that mean?" Erin asked with a grimace on her face.

"Well, I suppose that means I'd like them to come around more often."

"Ma, this was the first weekend they both had free since they started seeing each other. They've already come as often as they could," Erin explained as if Callem and I weren't in the room.

"But, you're right," Callem stepped in. "We should have come earlier."

"What are your intentions?" Joe asked, starting a new line of questioning. "Do you have plans for this relationship? Have you had a chance to talk about it?"

I looked over at Callem. "We've got a very positive outlook," I started. I used this phrase a lot with my patients and their parents so it felt peculiar using it in this context. "We're just going to see how things go doing what we're doing now. I'm guessing the next step would be to move in with each other, but we haven't really talked about anything officially. It's more just a casual commitment at this point."

Joe nodded. I could tell he had something more to say. I could tell he asked for a reason, but he refrained from continuing. "So tell me about your job, Callem."

Callem went on about his services to the three of them, though Erin already knew most of what he was explaining. Lauri went on to ask him about his family before he did the same. "Well, our folks have both passed, except Joe's mother. That woman has the biggest will to live. She lives in Napa. That's where Joe grew up and that's why we travel there in the summers. We stay with her. We have family in Arizona and in Nebraska, but don't hear from them much," Lauri explained.

"I think I've only met them a handful of times," I added.

"Yeah, we're pretty distant. We don't have any family in the area, which is why we're all so close," Lauri continued.

Callem nodded. "I can see that. I know Olivia can't hardly go a day without talking to Erin at least once." Everyone chuckled.

"They're really close. They're really lucky to have each other. You see, I got sick after I had Erin and I couldn't have any more children, which is why we started taking in foster children. We had our share of kids in and out of here, but none took to us like Olivia, and vice versa. She is just such a joy and we're blessed to have her in our lives."

Lauri was a very sentimental, kind-hearted woman. She was exactly what I would have wanted my own mother to have been. I was blessed to have her, too. I smiled brightly at the woman.

"How's work been for you," Joe asked, changing the subject. He wasn't the softest of men. He was the protector and had a front to uphold.

I sighed at the question. "It's been so busy. Dr. Sladek is set to leave next month. We've got two new oncologists on staff now and another nurse. It's been crazy with all the changes and the work load. I'm just hoping once these two doctors get settled in, I'll start to level out and I'll be able to keep my head above water."

Lauri shook her head. "I'll never understand how you do it and how you do it at such a young age, Olivia. Most kids your age don't know what hard work is and here you are, juggling patients and saving lives."

She was talking me up for Callem, putting on a bit of a show. I grinned. "It just wasn't what I thought it would be, even after all I'd seen and done during my residency, I still wasn't prepared for this."

"Have you talked to Dr. Sladek about it?" Joe asked.

I nodded. "That's why he hired two new oncologists. A competitor's practice closed a few months ago and a lot of her patients moved over to us. We're getting so busy, there's even been talk of relocation to a larger, newer facility. We've even had to turn a few patients away, which is sad, but they wouldn't have gotten the time and attention they would have needed."

"Oh honey, that doesn't sound good," Lauri said.

"It'll all work itself out. I'm not too concerned. I've just got to get over the hump and it'll be smooth sailing."

"I hope so. I'd hate to see you get burnt out. That type of stuff spills over into your personal life and can be detrimental."

"Mom, simmer down," Erin sighed. "She's a big girl. I think she can handle it."

I smiled. Erin was perfectly blunt sometimes, saying the things I couldn't. "I'll be fine," I added.

Callem and I stayed around for another hour or so before bidding my family adieu. We hopped into his car and headed back to Huntington Beach. Callem took me over to his house for the night. "Maybe we should talk about it," he said, leaning against the back of his white leather couch. "Maybe we should talk about moving in together."

My eyes got a little big. "Uh, well, to be honest, I haven't thought of it, not that much at least."

"I think we should think about it. I mean, consider it. You're here most of the time anyway, now that Erin's moved into your place. We're together every night now. I don't see how it could be a bad idea."

"It's a great idea in theory. Don't you think it's too early into things to make that kind of decision?"

Callem shrugged. "That's a matter of opinion. My opinion is no. I just feel like it doesn't matter how long we wait. You and I both know that's exactly where we're headed. We may as well stop delaying the inevitable and get your stuff over here."

"What would I do with the house? I can't just kick Erin out to sell it," I said.

"Why don't you just leave the house to Erin? You don't owe much on it, right? Just pay it off, let her live in it. Keep it in your name and you can still live with me. We can work all this out."

My work phone rang. I stepped away to answer it. "I've got to go in," I said to Callem after hanging up with my nurse, Amanda. "I'm sorry. Can we talk about this when I get back?"

Callem nodded, crossing his arms over his chest.

I sashayed over to him, pecked him quickly on the lips before heading out the door.

He was right. We were delaying the inevitable and I'd always had an inkling that we'd be living together at his house. It was newer, bigger, in a better location. There really wasn't much argument on the side of my little fixer-upper. I guess I just wanted to play

hard to get for a little while, make him squirm.

I could hear him in the kitchen as I stood with the spare room door opened slightly. Cupboards and the fridge opened and closed. Stuff banged on the countertop and scrapped across the gas stovetop. I inhaled deeply, letting it go heavily. Slowly I walked over to the stairs.

It had been two days since he first coaxed me out of the spare room and nearly forced me to eat. I'd avoided him since, but I had some things I needed to get off my chest and I felt I was ready to go there.

I tiptoed over each step until I was on the first floor landing. I turned and faced the kitchen. His back was to me. I moved with grace and purpose until I was standing a few feet away from him. I waited a moment, unsure how to announce my presence. He, instead, moved around to the other side of the island and noticed me standing there.

"Oh, God you scared me. How long have you been standing there?" he asked. He stopped what he was doing to address me. It had been nearly two weeks since all of this started and this was the first time I'd approached him. He wanted to make it count.

"Not very long," I said firmly, shaking my head slightly.

"Are you hungry? I'm making stir-fry."

I shook my head. "No. I'm fine."

"Okay," he nodded. "Well, there will be more than enough so if you're hungry later, I'll just leave the leftovers in the fridge for you." He went back to work cutting the peppers and tossing them into the sizzling wok. The perfume of the ingredients danced around my head, churning my stomach.

"Maybe I will have a bowl," I mumbled as I moved to the chair farthest from him at the counter.

He looked up at me with a smile. "Great," he said. I hated that smile because I loved it so much. It made me want to cry.

You're angry with him. You're angry, but rational. Don't lose your head. Don't let him win. You have demands, too. You have to fight.

A few minutes later, Callem handed me a steaming bowl and a fork. Without asking, he poured me a glass of wine and took the seat next to me with an identical meal. I first reached for my glass, considering how helpful it may be, and downed half of the contents in one drink. I noticed Callem watching me out of the corner of his eye.

Pushing around the snap peas and diced carrots in the bowl, I finally spoke. "I'm ready to talk."

Callem swallowed hard and looked over at me. "Okay. Good, I'm glad. I'm ready to talk, too."

"I've had a lot of time to think," I started. "I can see things so clearly now. It all makes so much sense. The things you did. The way you said things or explained things

to me. You could easily dismiss something to make it seem like nothing when all along, it was, it was something. It was always right in front of me, but I didn't see it. I feel so blind, so dumb. I should have seen it. I should have been smarter. How long were you going to let it go on without telling me?"

"I was going to tell you," Callem said, but I put my hand up to stop him.

"Don't. Don't lie to me anymore. Just, you know what, the cat's out of the bag now. Tell me the truth. Honestly, when were you going to tell me?"

He sat quietly for a moment. "I had gotten away with it for so long, I was starting to become complacent and honestly, I don't know if I ever would have told you." My heart broke a little more, if that was even possible. I had somehow known this would be the answer to my question, but I didn't want it to be. I wanted him to prove me wrong. "I was terrified I'd lose you and couldn't find a way to tell you about it without breaking us apart."

"So instead you just force me into our current situation. Congratulations, now you have the best of both worlds."

"Liv," he cooed, cocking his head to the side.

Just like you rehearsed; say it just like you planned. "I don't want to live like this," I interrupted him. "I don't want to walk around this house hating you, hating everything in it, now that I know where it all came from. I don't want to waste away in a dark room alone. I want more than this."

I had Callem's full attention. "I want more for you, too," he said.

"Good. Because I've decided to go back to work." Callem didn't react at all how I'd expected. I assumed he'd immediately swat away the idea like an annoying gnat. He, in contrast, sat stone faced, waiting for me to finish. "I don't want to live off of your money anymore so I've got to make my own. I'm also going to be staying in the spare room from now on. It's my room now. I'm not moving back into that room with you. These are my stipulations for staying here; for staying with you. The way I see it, I don't have much say in my future, but where I can make a say, I'm going to."

"You're right," Callem said calmly. Now I was getting scared. This was too easy. He wasn't pushing back. He wasn't getting angry. He was agreeing with me and this was completely out of left field. "You're absolutely right. You do have a say so and if you want to get a job, you can get a job, but you're going to clear it with me first."

"What do you mean? You're going to screen my job search?"

He nodded. "I don't want you working too far from home. I don't want you back at the practice either. That was too demanding. You need something easier."

"I'm a doctor. The term 'easy' is a contradiction to my profession."

"I'm hoping you can find something that fits my criteria or you won't be working. Also, you're not staying in the spare room any longer. You're coming back to our room."

Here is the road block I was expecting. I chuckled. "What you're telling me is even though I have a supposed say-so, it's scripted? Are you going to start telling me what to wear now, how to do my hair, what and when to eat?"

"Don't start, Liv," Callem sighed.

"What if I refuse?"

Callem looked down, shaking his head. "Don't refuse. I've been tolerant. I've waited patiently for you to come out of your cocoon and to get back on your feet. I can see you're driven to do exactly that, but you're still going to do things my way. I've got to protect you from doing anything stupid."

"Anything stupid? Stupid like turning you in to the police? Believe me, I've wanted to do that ever since I opened up that treasure trove in your office." I felt the same power surging through me as the day I discovered him. Looking down on all those papers and pictures and documents. My hands shook then, my heart pounded then, my eyes filled with tears then. They were all doing the same now. "Something stupid, huh? I'd love more than anything to do something stupid."

With that, I flung the bowl of stir-fry across the kitchen with a swat of my hand. The bowl hit the cupboard on the other side of the kitchen before crashing to the floor and shattering. I stood from my seat in a flash, heading for the stairs.

Before I could scale them, Callem was behind me, wrapping me in a bear hug. "Let go of me! Let me go!" I screamed, fighting against his hold.

"I'm not hurting you. I'm not hurting you," he kept saying in my ear. "I'm just restraining you. Stop fighting. I'm not hurting you." In the moment, I didn't know if he was saying that to make himself feel better about what he was doing or if it was true. I was so angry I couldn't tell if he was hurting me or if I just so worked up.

My eyes were drowning in tears as my whole body tensed, trying to find an escape. A deep fugitive growl bellowed from my throat as I used all my strength to try to flee. He was too strong. "Callem, let me go," I said, sobbing now. "Please, let me go."

"Just calm down. I'm not hurting you. I'm not going to hurt you. Calm down, Liv. You're fine."

"I'm not fine. I hate you! I fucking hate you. Let me go." I was blinded by my own tears as they flooded over. His strong arms sunk in deeper, making it harder for me to breathe.

"I will let you go when you calm down. I just need you to relax. I'm not hurting you. Take a deep breath." His voice was mellow, low, and placid, almost hypnotic. He knew exactly what he was doing.

I didn't want him to win. I didn't want him to have that effect on me. I didn't want to listen to him. Hell, I didn't want to feel his grubby hands on me. I just wanted to run. Finally, I collapsed. He bent slightly, finding new bearings to hold me up as I sobbed. "Let me go," I whined. "Just let me go." I bent my forearm over his arm to my bowed head and wiped away some of the straggling tears from my cheeks.

Slowly, I could feel the pressure of his arms loosening. When I didn't fight him any longer, he let go of me completely, leaving me standing. Before he could say anything to me, I spun around and slapped him, open handed across the face. It felt so good. It felt so good I nearly started laughing.

My laughter was snuffed out before it even started because Callem grabbed both of my arms and pushed me back up against the nearest wall. My head knocked against the drywall as he held me in place. "Now listen. I was going to let your dramatic charades in the kitchen slide. I didn't hurt you. I have no intentions of hurting you. That doesn't

give you the right to hit me. You provoked this. I hope you got it out of your system because I can see how much you enjoyed that. Don't hit me again, do you understand me? I'm not a fucking punching bag, regardless of what I've done."

With that, he let go of me and stormed up the stairs. I took a deep breath, wiping away the remaining tears and snot until he came back down the stairs. "I can make this very easy on you, Liv," he started towards me. I instinctively backed up into the wall. "This can be so easy if you let it. If you want to make this hard, I can make this harder. I can make this a fucking nightmare. Things can be great. I want them to be great. You have the power to choose. Don't make me choose for you."

He didn't wait for a response. He headed back to the kitchen. I looked around the corner to find him sitting back at the counter, eating his dinner as if nothing had happened. Silently, I climbed the stairs and headed for the spare room. Putting my hand on the knob, I found it locked. He locked me out.

Putting my back against the door, I slid down the length of it until I was sitting on the floor. I looked down the hall into the open bedroom. He was right. Things would be easy if I just let them. I'd have to play his game in order to get ahead in mine. If he was going to play dirty, I would, too.

"What have you got going on this weekend?" I asked Red as we pulled out of the airport parking lot. We'd just returned from a trip to Miami. A large account for a movie production dropped in the Miami offices' lap and we were needed there.

"Sleep, man. I've got to get caught up while I can. Maybe have my old lady come by for a few hours, you know, work out the kinks."

"You still seeing that one chick, what's her name?"

"Rosalita," Red said, pronouncing each syllable with a Hispanic accent. "She's the tight little Mexican number. Muy calienté. She has been attacking my cell with calls all week. She's got a wicked hankering, man. I've got to deliver."

"Don't look so beat up about it," I said, commenting on the sly grin gracing his face.

"What about you?"

"Ah, Liv's been working overtime all week. I'm sure there's still a ton of unpacking to do. She's probably just as exhausted as I am."

"Oh yeah, you missed moving day, huh? So how's this going to go? You and her, shackled up now. You know what this means, right? You're about to take the plunge, my friend."

"Someday, maybe. We'll see how this living arrangement works out for us and then revisit the idea."

"Cal, this is a marriage I'm talking about, not a business transaction. Sounds like you may be confusing the two by way you're talking about it."

"I am not confused about a damn thing, especially not Olivia. I know she's it, man. I know I'm going to marry her. I just want to make sure we're ready before that happens."

Red nodded. "Yeah, I get it. Prepare your relationship for the hardships that come along with marriage. That's a good idea. Good thinking. But, uh, does this preparation process include laying out your dirty laundry, because I assume you haven't even thought about washing it yet."

I bit down, clenching my jaw. "My dirty laundry is going to stay in the closet for now," I responded.

There was a pause in the conversation. "You're not going to wait until after you two get hitched, are you? Because I can already tell you what she'll say. She'll blame you for tricking her into something, for not being honest, for establishing your marriage on false pretenses, all that shit."

"Yeah, I get it, Red. I just have to be sure she's on the same page before I say anything. I have to make sure she's not going to leave me. I have to make sure she's in love with me."

There was another long pause. I heard Red sigh heavily. "Ugh, I don't know, man. That sounds an awful lot like you're setting her up. Are you sure that's what you want to

do?"

"We're too far gone to go back now. I don't have much of a choice. What if I go home and tell her tonight? She takes her shit and leaves. Hell, it's probably still all boxed up back at the new place. Then, she's a liability." I shook my head. "I can't have that either. That's an unintentional death sentence. I just need to wait it out for the right time."

Red didn't rebut, thanks to his phone ringing with a booty call. I dropped him off at his car and hurried home. I could hardly believe it really happened. Five months ago, it was just an idea and now here we were, living together in our very own, brand new house.

"Why do we need a new place," Olivia had asked when we finally decided to move in together.

"New journey, new abode to go with it," I told her. We'd found a spectacular Tuscan-inspired townhouse that was so perfect for us. It was closer to both our offices, closer to the coast, and had so much potential. We upgraded cars, got a joint cell phone account, and we were well on our way to starting a future together.

Having only been to the house a handful of times, I nearly drove right by the drive. Olivia's new Beemer was in the garage when I pulled up next to it. I practically skipped inside. "Honey, I'm home," I called out the cliché to the spacious home as I stepped in. There were cardboard boxes with black chicken-scratch scribbling on the sides scattered in every direction. "Olivia? Where are you?"

I moved into the living room and found Olivia sitting on the couch with her back to me. My footsteps echoed as they slapped the tiled floors. I walked around to the front of the couch to see Olivia curled up in a ball, a closed hand covering her mouth, eyes wide and distant, staring at a blank wall.

"Liv, are you okay?" I asked, sitting down beside her. I put my hand on her shoulder and she barely moved. "Baby, what's going on? You're freaking me out."

She moved her hand away from her mouth and licked her dry lips. "I lost Ana today," she mumbled quietly though it delivered a blow, even to me and I didn't know the girl near as well as Liv did. I just knew who she was to Olivia and understood the weight of this.

"Oh, Liv. Baby, I'm, oh God. I'm so sorry." I nudged up next to her, wrapping my arm over her shoulder as I watched a few tears trickle down her cheeks.

"That makes three. I've lost three patients just this year, Cal." Her words were weak. "I'm a professional. I know there are going to be deaths in my line of work. It's inevitable. But not Ana." Her voice broke and she cupped her mouth with her palm. Her brow furrowed, breaking my heart for her. "I was so optimistic for her. She was one of my oldest patients. I put her in remission twice. Twice. I couldn't do anything for her. I couldn't, I couldn't,"

"Shhh hush, baby. This isn't your fault." I pulled her head into my shoulder. "You worked so hard for her. You know you did. I know you did. Don't do this to yourself."

"She had a fever. That's all. Her parents brought her in two days ago with a fever, and this morning, she had a seizure and her heart stopped. It just stopped. I was with

her. I was right next to her. I had been talking to her, she was just smiling and then she was gone, just like that. I had to tell her parents. They had just run Ana's brother to his grandparent's house. They were only gone for an hour. When they left, their daughter was fine; she was with them. When they came back, I had to tell them. I had to face them and tell them she was gone." Olivia's entire body looked to be crumbling, not just her emotional state. She was wilting into a tiny ball of tears and sobs.

I felt so helpless as I sat and listened to her. I knew what she was doing may not have sounded good, but I wanted her to let it all out. She'd been under so much stress the past couple of months, this must have sent her over the edge. She met her breaking point. She needed to release. I wasn't going to stop her. I would just be here for her.

"Oh God, I got too close. I got so close. She was such a great girl. So strong. So brave. She was just a baby, Cal. She didn't know anything about the world and about life. She was robbed of the best years of her life. You should have seen her mother's face. I broke their hearts. I have given them so much bad news and so much good news since I'd been with them, I never imagined I'd have to tell them this. I had such hopes for her. I can't believe how much this hurts. I can't believe how weak I am. I'm not cut out for this."

"Hang on, slow down. You can't blame yourself. You just have a big heart. That's not something you can control."

"I shouldn't have gotten so close. I shouldn't have gotten so attached. I wouldn't feel like this if I had distanced myself."

"Being close to that girl was probably one of the best things you could have done for her. Why do you think she loved you so much? You didn't treat her like a patient. You treated her like family; like a little sister. She loved you for that. She probably appreciated it more than she ever told you. You made her time in that hospital that much better and you should never regret that."

"I can't do this, Cal," she mumbled, wiping her cheeks clear. "I thought I was prepared for this, but I'm not. Tomorrow, I'm going to go back to work, go back to my insane patient workload, and I'm going to watch more and more children die because I don't have the proper amount of time to dedicate to them. I am stretched so thin, I may not be doing the best for them."

There was a silence as she composed herself. "Why don't you step down?" I offered as easily and humbly as I could manage.

"What?" she snapped.

"Look at what's happened to you. You've been put through the ringer the past couple of months and tomorrow morning, you're going to put yourself through that ringer again. Liv, that's just not right."

"It's my job. It's what I spent the last sixteen-plus years of my life preparing for, and you just want me to walk away from it?" her voice was harsh and defensive now. "If I'm not practicing, what other purpose do I serve? What else am I if I'm not a doctor? I don't know anything else."

"My point exactly. You're so young and you've done nothing but dedicate yourself to something that's slowly killing you, whether you see it that way or not. You haven't even

lived. You haven't even spoiled yourself. I'm not trying to be cruel or insult your life's work. I'm not trying to make you do anything you don't want to do. I'm only trying to present you with a solution to this problem."

"By running? You want me to run away from my problems at work?" Olivia blurted.

I took in a breath. "No, not exactly. Liv, you and I, we have something starting here. Why not take advantage of it while you can? There's plenty of time for you to practice. Take some time for yourself now, let yourself heal, just be young and in love, and later down the line, if you're ready to go back, do it. Don't think you're a prisoner to your own profession if you don't want to be. You have the world at your feet, Olivia. You just have to decide which direction to step from here."

She didn't say anything, but by the way her brow was twisted, I could see she was thinking about it, if not considering what I'd said to hold a lot of water. She shook her head quickly. "I'm going to take a shower. Could you order us some food? I'm starved."

"Yeah, baby, take your time." I rubbed her back before she pushed herself off the couch and headed up the stairs.

Secretly, I'd been wanting so badly to get her away from that office. Selfishly, I'd wanted her all to myself, away from that cage she called work. There was so much more we could do if it hadn't been for her demanding schedule that was slowly edging its way between us. There would be no more interruptions in the middle of sex, or dinner, or a night out. It could just be the two of us and I was hoping more than anything she was seriously considering leaving. If not, I've got my foot in the door already. I'd ease my way in and make the idea sound so much more appealing.

Lord knows, we don't depend on her income to get by. My income alone is enough to keep us more than satisfied in our current lifestyle and the way we're expanding, we were set. And I wasn't lying. If she wanted to go back later, I'd be more than happy to see her return. But for now, I wanted to keep her greedily close.

Confident I'd sparked a fire, I picked up my cell phone and ordered us a meal.

Hushed voices woke me. My eyes popped open and were instantly stung by the brilliant flow of sunlight coming at me from all directions. I had moved from the bedroom to the couch after Callem had fallen asleep last night. I couldn't get comfortable sleeping next to him, which used to be something I could barely live without.

I sat up slowly, twisting a kink out of my neck. Looking over my shoulder, I found Callem standing in the kitchen with another man. I stood up and shuffled into the kitchen. "Good morning," Callem said, obviously annoyed I had awoken from my slumber on the couch, rather than in the bed. "Liv, you remember Nick? He's from the Vegas office. You met him both times we went there."

I nodded. Nick was just a few years older than me, but was already managing the office out of Vegas and had been for a few years. I remembered Callem telling me he used to be a police officer who left the profession because it wasn't what he had expected it to be. Nick had one of those hard faces; the kind you see in a dark bar and instantly know not to mess with that guy. I did, however, remember him having a good sense of humor. Many of the men I had met from Callem's business were much like Nick. Very professional, very rigid, very emotionless, but as soon as you get some food and drink in them, you learn so much about who they really are.

"I've got a problem in Chicago that I need to take care of. I'll only be gone over night so Nick is going to stay with you while I'm away," Callem explained, taking a sip from his coffee cup.

I looked from Callem to Nick and back. "What is this? You got me a fucking babysitter?"

Nick stood unaffected by my comment. Callem eyed me, probably wondering how far I was going to take this. He had to have been prepared for this kind of reaction out of me. "He's just going to look after you, take you around while you do the job search you wanted."

"You've got to be kidding me. This is what we've resorted to?"

"Olivia, please don't start with me. I shouldn't have to keep telling you I'm doing all of this to protect you."

"From doing anything stupid," I stepped in, finishing his sentence for him. "Yeah, I get that. I don't have a PhD or anything. I don't have trouble remembering things. I haven't forgotten. I just choose not to use excuses as explanations. You still aren't telling me the truth. What are you really doing this for?"

"Could you just try to stay out of trouble while I'm away? Nick can get you what you need."

"Can he help me pack up my shit while you're gone? Can he get me a hotel room? Can he take me to my lawyer?"

"Don't make this more difficult than it has to be, please." He spoke to me like a father punishing his daughter. It made my skin crawl. "Perhaps you and I can talk about it tomorrow when I'm home. Right now, I've got a plane to catch." He leaned in to kiss me. I stepped back, dodging his advance. "See you tomorrow," he mumbled angrily before heading for the door.

Nick and I stood sizing each other up. "Did he tell you why you're here?" I asked him after a moment of uncomfortable silence between us.

"To keep an eye on you while Mr. Tate is away," Nick spat out like a robot.

I scoffed under my breath. "Did he tell you if there's anything you're supposed to stop me from doing?"

"Asking a lot of questions was one of them," he said.

Now I scoffed out loud. "I'm taking a shower. I guess you can make yourself at home. Not sure if that was one of your instructions, but then again, I don't make the rules."

My toes dug into the warm sand. The Caribbean sun painted every inch of my skin in a lustrous shroud. I hadn't been this at ease in my entire life. The sound of the ocean lapped in and out only a few feet from where I was lounging. I could hear Callem's breathing had gotten shallow and deep.

I peaked over at him. He was asleep. It had been nearly a year since I stepped down from the practice and this was the first real vacation we had been on. Callem had taken me with him on a number of business trips, because I now had that luxury, but this was the first work-free trip we'd been on. I had to confiscate his phone, though, because he was making calls to the office at all hours of the night when he thought I was sleeping.

"Cal," I said. "Cal, honey." I shook his shoulder until he opened his eyes. He sucked in a deep breath, sitting up in his chaise.

"God, how long was I asleep?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. I only just noticed. I don't want you to burn."

"Oh, this is so nice. I don't think I've been this relaxed in a long time."

"I was just thinking the exact same thing," I mumbled lazily, drowning myself in sun rays.

"You know, this is a private beach," he reached over and started tugging at my bikini strings. "Don't you think tan lines are overrated?"

I smiled. "You just woke up from an impromptu nap and you're already trying to devour me yet again."

"Can you blame me?"

I chuckled as he invaded my chaise, showering me with kisses as his hands fluttered across my nearly nude body. "Not here. Let's go into the water," I said. He stopped and looked down on me like playful prey before hoisting me from the seat, heading for the shoreline.

I stood in the shower a few hours later, scrubbing the sand off of my body. The sun was setting and Callem was taking me to dinner. We'd been here for three days, had three more left, and this was the first time he'd taken me out. We've just been eating in so far, not venturing out too far from our backyard beach. The villa had a fully stocked kitchen and it was just easier for us to cook at our leisure.

"Don't you look nice?" I asked, stepping out of the bathroom to find Callem dressed and ready to go.

"You look amazing," he whispered, taking his eyes on a guided tour of my physique.

"Thank you." I blushed. He still had that effect on me. Sometimes I didn't understand how I could have come from nothing to being with him.

"Shall we?" he asked, holding his hand out for me. He led me to the backdoor and out onto the veranda. He pulled me close to him, squeezing my hand. He led me, not

towards the drive, but towards the beach. "Can I carry your shoes for you?" he asked.

"Where are we going?" I asked curiously.

"To dinner," he said with a smile.

I smiled back, wondering what he was up to. "Alright. My shoes it is." I pulled my sandals off my feet and handed them over. He held them delicately by the straps as he led me across the moonlit sands. We rounded the curving tree line in silence. We kept walking and walking. "Where are you taking me?" I asked anxiously.

"You'll see," he answered mysteriously. As we rounded another bend in the forest that encroached on the beach, I found candles in the sand pointing us in the right direction.

"What did you do?" I gushed, excited by the idea of a romantic beach dinner. As we got closer, I gasped at the scene we'd come across. A single table perched perfectly in the middle of the beach, covered by a grand canopy with elegant linens and exotic greenery hanging from it. The table was set and had a carpet runway leading up to it, like a Hollywood movie premiere. There were flowers and candles and crystals accessorizing every nook of the setting. It was breathtaking and that's exactly the affect it had on me.

"I hope you're hungry," Callem whispered in my ear.

"I can't believe you did this," I said, still awestricken. Callem offered me my sandals when we reached the edge of the carpeting. He ushered me to my seat before taking his. "I just can't believe you right now. This is amazing. This is so romantic. Thank you so much for doing this for me. This is too much."

Callem smiled from the other side of the table. "I'm glad you like it. I've been waiting to bring you here for too long."

"Have you?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I've been planning this for longer than I can recall. It's perfect. You're perfect. I wanted to wait until after we ate, but I think if I wait any longer, I'll..." He sucked in a deep breath. "Olivia, I brought you here to be with you. I find myself waking up every morning and doing everything for you. Everything I have is for you. Everything I am is for you. Everything I've been waiting for is you. Remember when I told you what my 'why' was? We were sitting at a dinner table then, too. We were next to the ocean then, too. You looked just as gorgeous then, too. We've come so far since then. I have to tell you, Liv, you're my why. You're the one I've been waiting for and now that I have you, I don't want to ever let you go."

I took a breath and felt my chest tighten. What was happening? Was this really happening? Now? Here?

Callem slid from his chair and walked next to mine, crouching down on one knee. He took my hand in his. "Marry me. Be my wife." He slid a too-large diamond onto my ring finger.

I lost feeling in my legs and my heart was beating a mile a minute. I just stared down at the ring and I kept reminding myself to breathe.

"Livy?"

I looked at him with wide eyes. I hadn't answered him yet. "Yes, yes." I finally

whispered with a smile. Callem smiled twice as wide before diving in for a kiss. We wrapped our arms around each other. I was his why. I was his. If I had ever been sure of something in my life, it was this.

He was exactly where he wanted to be and so was I.

"So are we doing this?" I said, startling Nick. He was lounging comfortably on the couch in the living room, playing a game on his phone. He perked up at the sound of me approaching. I had been upstairs preparing for a possible job interview. "I need to go downtown to CHLA to see if they have any positions available. I'm guessing you need to chauffeur me around, per my husband's demands."

Nick silently stood and headed for the front door. "You look very nice, Mrs. Tate," he said as he walked past me.

"It's Dr. Reinbeck, actually. And thank you," I mumbled. I unconsciously ran my palms down the length of my pencil skirt, straightening the wrinkles that weren't there. This skirt hadn't failed me yet so I was hoping it'd do the job.

"You're a doctor? I didn't think you worked."

"I don't work, but I've got my PhD and I'm hoping to start putting it to good use again. Why else would we be going to the hospital?" I don't know why I was so short and snotty to Nick. He hadn't done anything wrong. He was just doing his job.

Nick shrugged as he pulled open the back door of his black BMW X5. Why the security vehicle for me, I didn't know. These SUVs were designed to withstand an AK-47 and were usually used for Callem's high-priority clients. "How long have you worked for the company?" I asked Nick as he backed out of the drive.

"About nine years now."

"How long are you going to be working here in LA?"

"As long as I'm needed."

"But aren't you the head honcho in Vegas? Won't you be needed; missed?"

"We've got an excellent staff in our Vegas branch and I'm certain the office will be running like clockwork, even in my absence. They're aware I could be gone for an extended period of time, but are prepared to man the ship while I'm away, no matter how long I'm gone."

"Are you married, Nick?"

"No, ma'am."

"It's just Olivia, Nick. You don't need to call me anything but Olivia. Do you have any children?"

"No I don't."

"So it's just you? No girlfriend, no prospects. Just you and your job?"

There was a pause. "I'm not sure where you're going with this."

"Nowhere fast," I mumbled, turning to look out the window. "Are you a part of it? Does Callem's other business stretch all the way to Vegas? Is that why he asked you to do this, because you get it, you understand? You're a part of the family?"

He sat silently. I figured, if I was going to get myself out of this mess, I'd have to

work from the inside and I'd start with Nick. I didn't know him well enough, which was going to be my biggest obstacle. I'd have to poke around to see which angle of approach would do the most damage and then start to get my hands dirty with his help. I've got to get him on my side and at the moment, the sympathy card was the only one I could think of. Unfortunately, the apparent lack of a female presence in his life to soften his heart could spoil my game plan. Pitching a fit, causing a scene, shouting demands, that just wasn't going to cut it anymore. That wasn't going to get me anywhere.

I could always find a way to blackmail Nick; fight fire with fire. But then I could get him into some serious trouble, fatal trouble. I suppose if he's got his hand in Callem's cookie jar, maybe he's got it coming to him already.

If he couldn't sympathize with me now, maybe I could show him how. Maybe I could get him to fall for me. Maybe I could get him to love me enough to want to save me. I rolled my eyes at the thought of it. I unintentionally gained Callem's love. I wasn't even sure how to genuinely make someone fall in love with me on purpose, let alone trick someone into it.

It didn't matter at this point. If I had been incapable of it before, I'd have to adapt. I couldn't just sit idly by. I had to do something. I had to fight back in the most strategic way I could, starting with Nick. He'd have to be my first victim. Collateral damage.

2009 - Callem

She was so beautiful. I had never seen her so beautiful; so happy. And it wasn't just her smile that gave it away. It was her eyes. We stood facing each other, her trembling hands in mine. "With this ring, I thee wed," I whispered.

I slipped a diamond encrusted wedding band onto her ring finger, coupling it with the solitaire already glistening on her finger. In exchange, she recited the same vow, slipping a wide black band onto my ring finger.

The pastor announced our union to our four witnesses. "You may now kiss your bride."

"Thank you. I will," I smirked, pulling Liv into my lips. We spent the rest of the day sipping on wine on a Venetian terrace with Olivia's family and Red. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I couldn't believe I was sitting here, with my bride, my wife. I was at her mercy and I still didn't understand it. My entire world was unfolding to become wrapped around her.

What have I done? Not even the empty wine bottles spinning on the table could spin my thoughts away from my transgressions. What was once a dark corner of my life was now an overbearing abyss. I shouldn't have let this happen. I was the only one with control in the matter and I hadn't done a thing about it.

Looking at Red in between the laughter and the food, I could see it in his eye. He was taunting me with an I-told-you-so gaze. "You blew it, man. You blew it and now you have to deal with it and I'm not going to say I told you so, but I will silently hang this over your head." I could almost hear him saying the words with that cheap grin on his face.

But he would have been right. I dug a hole and put both Olivia and I in it with no hopes of escape. Shit, I even brought her along with me to conduct my business before our honeymoon officially kicks off. I was walking on the most delicate of egg shells, ushering her on the border of truth and deceit, almost as if I hoped she would discover me. I was being so careless, it was as if I wanted to be caught, although I couldn't bear the thought of it.

And yet there she was, a vision, sitting across from me with playful eyes and a smile that lit up all of Italy. She had no idea and I planned on keeping it that way. It was working for us. It had worked for us up to this point and I hadn't seen any reason to change that. She's convinced of a few facts that I intend on keeping planted firmly in her mind.

To the victor goes the spoils and I had never before felt so spoiled.

"I can tell you this is an impressive résumé and Dr. Sladek had a glowing recommendation for you," Dr. Lindsay Welmore of the Children's Hospital of Los Angeles sat across a grand desk from me. "But, I see here it's been quite a while since you've practiced medicine."

I nodded. "Yes, I was very young when I accepted the position with Dr. Sladek's practice. He'd seen me through medical school and had high hopes for me, as I'm sure he told you. I can assure you, the knowledge, the know-how, it's all still there. The experience alone was worth its weight in gold. The demand of the job was something I was unfamiliar with and completely unprepared for. I knew it was something that would come with time and age. I feel I'm more than ready to get my hands dirty and work as hard as I need."

Dr. Welmore nodded. "He did speak very highly of your potential and of the excellence in care you provided for him before stepping away," she said. "I have to say, I'm skeptical, given the short amount of time you spent in the practice, the short amount of time you spent in the medical field to go on such a long hiatus. Oncology isn't exactly like riding a bike."

We chuckled politely. "And I completely agree. I'm sure Dr. Sladek also told you about my unique circumstances. I have hyperthymesia, which was part of the reason why I was so young when I started in the profession. All of my experiences from my time practicing are all very fresh to me, thanks to my disposition. For me, everything is like riding a bike, whether it's been a few months or a number of years. I have that to my advantage."

"Yes. I was aware of your advantages." I couldn't tell if she was being snarky or if that's just how she came off to people. "My main concern is the stress getting to you again. As stacked as your résumé is, no recommendation from an esteemed oncologist like Dr. Frank Sladek is going to dispute the fact that you're an investment to the hospital. No one wants their investments to flop and that's a big red mark staring me right in the face."

"I can see how that would be a deterrent. All I ask is you see it from my perspective. I was a full time, licensed and practicing physician when I was 21 years old. Most other 21-year-olds with aspirations of becoming a doctor hadn't even made it to med school yet, and still, they'd probably experienced so much more than I had. I selfishly took time off to focus on myself and the life I never had. I wanted to see things. I wanted to go places and I wanted to discover myself. I've done that. I've gotten my fair share of independence and discovery. I'm ready to truly become an adult and a professional and start rediscovering that side of me."

Dr. Welmore was quiet. "You know, this isn't a private practice. You won't have the

benefits you once had."

I smiled. Now we're getting somewhere.

Nick was waiting for me just outside of Dr. Welmore's office when the interview convened. "How did the interview go?" he asked as we stepped into the elevator.

"Fine," I responded.

"Mr. Tate would like to be updated on the outcome."

I scoffed. "I'm sure Mr. Tate would. Why don't you let Mr. Tate know I'm not using his messaging service any longer?" Nick pulled out his cell phone, sighing heavily. "Wait, I'm sorry," I mumbled, putting my hand on his forearm. "I don't want to get you in trouble. This isn't, it's not your fault. I shouldn't be taking it out on you."

"So what would you like me to tell Mr. Tate?" he asked.

"Just tell him we'll talk about it tomorrow night when he gets back."

"Your first day out searching for a job and you've already gotten an offer?" Callem asked over dinner the next night.

I nodded slowly, not making eye contact. "Well, I had spoken to Dr. Welmore a few days ago. She'd had a chance to reach out to Frank since then."

I could feel Callem's disapproving gaze on me. "So you've been planning this for a while?" I nodded. "And you only made it known to me the day before you had the interview?" I nodded again. "Why CHLA?"

I shrugged. "Why not? I wasn't sure who would want me after taking such a long and unexpected hiatus. Dr. Welmore was more than understanding, mostly thanks to Frank, I assume."

Callem sighed. "So what does this mean for you? When do you start? What's your schedule?"

I shrugged again, still not making eye contact. "I haven't formally accepted the position yet. I have another appointment on Friday. I've got to meet the board before they'll actually hire me, but Dr. Welmore seemed very adamant that the position was mine."

"Sounds promising." Callem's voice didn't sound so promising. I wondered if he was expecting anything. I wonder if he could tell I was slowly setting my plan into action.

There was a reason I wanted a position at CHLA. It was closer to downtown, it was further from home, it was a large facility, and it was easy to get lost in. I figured, even if he planned on keeping a shadow on me while I was working, which I suspected he would, he wouldn't be able to follow me everywhere, which would make it easy for me to slip in and out unnoticed. If I couldn't get Nick on my side, I'd have to find a way around him. I had to keep my options open in case I couldn't pull this off as easily as I have planned.

"I hope you know," Callem added, "that once you get your email and your cell phone and an office phone, we'll be monitoring them." This time I did look up at him. "Not to mention your internet usage. I don't see how that would be a problem for our techs to do. I may have agreed to let you get a job again. You had to have known I'd have stipulations."

My cheeks burned. I put my fork down and tried to swallow the sour taste in my mouth. Don't say anything stupid. Don't say anything stupid. "What are you afraid of?"

Do you honestly think I'm going to try something? You've made it very clear that if you go down, I go down right alongside you. Do you really think I'll put myself through that?"

Callem lifted his shoulders arrogantly. "You never know. Desperate people do desperate things and I'd say you're very desperate. I don't think you're stupid which is exactly why I want to keep an eye on you. I know how clever you are and I know what you're capable of and frankly, that's terrifying. Baby, when will you see, I want to be with you? I want us to work. I love you so much; I'm doing all of this for our sakes. If it weren't for me being so stubborn and impossible, we'd both be in a world of trouble."

"When will you see that I don't love you anymore?" My words were like hot lava erupting from my mouth.

"I mean to change that," Callem replied after a short silence between us.

"Try as you might, I don't see it ever being undone."

"You loved me once, there's no denying that. It can happen again."

My lips got tight. "Don't hold your breath. You reap what you sow and you've been doing an awful lot of sowing since you pulled me into this secret life of yours."

Callem shook his head. "I don't want to fight with you. Please, can't we just be civil with each other?" He slipped his hand under the table and slid it to the top of my thigh.

I leaned towards him, looking into his eyes. I hovered my lips next to his ear and whispered, "Get your fucking hand off me. How's that for civil?" Before he could say another word, I shoved my chair away from the table and sprang to my feet.

"This place is unreal," I gasped as I clutched Callem's arm. He led me up the staircase to a grand entryway, Red close behind us. I had to mentally remind myself to close my agape jaw as I marveled at the crystal chandelier that hung just inside the door. It was the size of a small island. The estate was immaculate. Every nook and cranny held so much history and had such ornate architectural details folded into them. Gold filament flecked the very floor we were walking on. The heels of my Jimmy Choo's sounded like an opera echoing throughout the space. Exotic plants perched at the base of each of the six massive pillars, each climbing up to the top of the cathedral-like ceiling. "I didn't know places like this actually existed. I thought they were just in movies," I mumbled as the three of us made our way down the long corridor.

"This used to be home to one of Italy's princes hundreds of years ago," Callem explained. How he knew this, I didn't know. "It was eventually purchased outside of the royal family after the fall of the monarchy in the '40s and has been in Rinaldo's family since."

"You're joking, right?"

Callem shook his head. "No. It's true."

"Royalty used to live here? How do you know all of this?"

"It's important to know these things when working with such full-blooded, true-hearted Italians. Things like this could come up in conversation, maybe as the punch line of a joke. I want to be able to follow along and appear knowledgeable."

I nodded, made sense. "You've got to speak the language of the people," I mumbled.

Callem nodded. "I believe Rinaldo's grandparents still own the property though, this one among many others. These people are insanely wealthy; it's almost lethal. They're very traditional Italians and probably won't stoop so low as to speak English so you may feel a little deaf while we're here. Bear with me. I don't think we'll be here long."

"You know I don't mind," I whispered. "Take your time. I'll just admire the splendor around me. I'm in no hurry to leave." I eyed the large Caravaggio hanging on the wall in an elegant and thick gold frame.

Callem smiled as we entered what looked to be a parlor or sitting room at the end of the long corridor. A fire popped in the foreground as the half-dozen or so men scattered about the room all turned as we stepped over the threshold. The first thing I noticed was there wasn't another female in sight. I was then drawn to the opulence of this room, mirroring the extravagance of the corridor. All of the men were equally as dapper as Callem and Red in their tailor suits that screamed wealth and power.

I inhaled deeply. "Don't be nervous. They can smell fear," Callem joked.

"That's reassuring," I whispered. "I feel like the foolish antelope who unknowingly wandered into the lion's den. They're devouring me with their eyes right now."

"And I can't blame them," he replied with a silver tongue. I stole a glance at him as we approached the first pair of sophisticated gentlemen, amber drinks in hand. They both greeted Red and Callem like old friends, opening their arms, flashing wide pearly smiles, and slapping kisses on each cheek, all while spouting fluent Italian salutations. Callem and Red both rambled off foreign responses as easily as exhaling.

Callem turned to me and introduced me to the two men, whispering translations of their indiscernible words in my ear as they each took turns kissing the back of my hand.

"This is Salvatore, who would like you to call him Sal," Callem translated for me.

I nodded, "Pleasure to meet you, Sal. I'm Olivia."

Callem translated what I said before the other man spoke. "And this is DeAngelo."

"Pleasure to meet you as well, DeAngelo," I replied.

Again, Callem gave them my regards in the beautiful language. The two men said something else to Callem and Red about me before a chorus of deep chuckles erupted among the four of them. I could tell they were commenting about me from their eyes. I may not be able to understand their dialect, but their body language and mannerisms told me a story in a language I could understand.

I met all the other men in the room, all reacting to me the same way. Was it because I was the only woman, or maybe because I was an American woman? It could have just been the way they greet others in this culture or even in this socioeconomic class. Callem, Red, and I were shuffled to the back of the room where Red handed me a wine glass as the small crowd of Italian men crowded around us, all clamoring for Callem's attention.

"What about Rinaldo? Did I miss him?" I asked Callem in a break in conversation.

"Oh, no, he's not coming. Matteo is here on his behalf. Rinaldo was kind enough to allow us the use of the estate for the gathering though," Callem explained before returning to the conversation.

I stood in silence as if I were a fixture in the room to be admired, slowly sipping the delicious nectar in my glass. I listened to the words spinning out of the men's mouths, watching their eyes move here and there, and prospecting the room.

Anxiously, the men started shifting their weight and moving closer to an adjoining room from which I could see the soft glow of another fireplace flickering through an open doorway. Callem exhaled deeply as his hand moved across the small of my back, pulling me into him slightly. "Would you hate me if I told you I needed to step away for a minute?"

"A minute? Is that all? No problem, I'll even time you," I joked.

Callem smiled coyly. "Okay, it'll be a little bit more than a minute. These kind gentlemen want to talk some business over a fresh box of Cubans."

"Sounds delightful. They do know I can't understand them, right?"

"Yes, but it's the principle of it. Business is for the men."

"And I'll kill the mojo if I'm in the room?" I asked, putting the pieces together.

"Yeah something like that," Callem responded easily. "It shouldn't be too long."

I smiled, "It's not a problem, really. When I come with you on a business trip, I can't get grumpy when you have business to do."

"I love when you remind me of just what it is that makes me crazy about you," Callem cooed.

"It's that easy, huh? Just one thing before you go, could I get a refill?" I passed my empty glass towards him. He left me for only a minute, returning with a brimming glass in hand.

"This should keep you busy while I'm away," he commented, passing me the wine.

"Wow, I sense some ulterior motives in this deliciously full glass," I beamed. Callem winked. "Would it be a problem if I looked around the house a bit?"

Callem shook his head. "No, not at all. Just don't go into any rooms with closed doors. You may not want to see what's on the other side," Callem smirked playfully before pecking me on the cheek and sweeping in to the next room with Red close at his side. "I'll come find you when I'm finished," he added before slipping out of sight.

A heavy door closed behind them with a thundering echo. I looked around. I was completely alone. It was kind of eerie. I sashayed slowly out of the room, careful not to dribble red wine onto the oriental rug, which was probably much older than it looked. I returned to that Caravaggio I'd noticed earlier. I studied 17th century painters at Ole Miss. Caravaggio was considered the 'bad boy of baroque'; painting what was considered grotesque and graphic illustrations of historically brutal occurrences. Others, more so today than at the time, saw the brilliance and romance in his dark, defiant pieces.

Even though I could easily recall all of the artists and their masterpieces covered in that one small course at Ole Miss, Caravaggio always stood out to me. The nightmarish beauty was both terrifying and arousing; the power of the image really spoke to the viewer and breathed a strange sort of life into them.

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the sound of the bulky front door flying open nosily, breaking the calm around me abruptly. I turned as an older man strode into the corridor in a hurried pace. He was fiddling with his cell phone as he headed in my direction. He was probably late for the cigar-lighting ceremony. I spun on my heels and returned to the Caravaggio so not to gawk.

The sound of the man's heels slowed as he neared the painting and me. He said something in Italian that I, of course, didn't understand, prompting me to turn back around. He was standing just behind me. He was older than all the other men, maybe even older than Callem. His eyes looked heavy and boozed. He seemed to repeat himself as his eyes lingered down the length of me.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Italian," I apologized, shrugging my shoulders.

"You're American?" he asked in a thick accent.

"Yes, yes I am. You speak English?"

He smiled. "Doesn't everybody?" Not according to Callem, I thought. "Aren't you a lovely little thing? Where did you come from?"

"I'm here with Mr. Tate," I explained. I hadn't heard anyone refer to or address Callem by his first name so I hoped referring to him so formally would suffice.

"Ah, Signore Tate. Si, I know him. He is who I am here to see. I am late, however. Signore Tate traveled a long way and has brought gifts. I do love Americans. I am Ignacio. And you are?"

I smiled. "Olivia. I'm Olivia."

"Olivia," Ignacio hummed, "the name of an angel." He cupped my hand in both of his before slowly lifting it to his lips. "Why has Signore Tate left you here all alone? Shame on him."

I was getting a creepy vibe from Ignacio, but at the same time, felt badly for thinking that way. I'm sure it was just a cultural divide rubbing me the wrong way. I giggled cordially as he relinquished his hold on my hand, but remained uncomfortably close. "Oh, well he's talking business, burning cigars, you know, guy stuff."

Ignacio shook his head quickly. "What is this; 'guy stuff'?"

"Oh, it's uh, it's the kind of activities strapping men, such as yourself, indulge themselves in," I explained.

"And you weren't invited?"

"No girls allowed," I said while shaking my head mildly.

A deep, hearty laugh belted from Ignacio. "I'd say it's their loss." He shifted his weight again, inching closer. "At least they were kind enough to leave you with a drink, and the art. I see you admiring this piece." He pointed over my shoulder to the Caravaggio. "Do you know it?"

I turned to face the canvas yet again, nodding. "Yes. Judith Beheading Holofernes. It's a Caravaggio."

"I am impressed," Ignacio gushed. "You know your art."

I shrugged. "Not too well. I'm just lucky to be standing in front of one of the few I can identify."

"Do you not think it is too, um, come si dice, bloody?"

I kept my eyes on the image. A long sword blade poked from the neck of the shirtless army general, Holofernes. Judith, his beautiful murderer, held tightly to the sword and a tuft of hair on his head as it was severed. An old haggard woman stands behind Judith, as if cheering her on. "I suppose, but it's also very provocative and graceful."

"Si, beauty is found in the heat of the crime."

I smiled, looking away from the painting. "Well said, Ignacio."

"Beauty not compared to yours, I'm afraid," he added.

I couldn't stop myself from blushing. "You're too kind. All of this is just amazing. I've never seen anything like it." I opened my hands, looking up at the structure around us.

"Please, allow me to show you more of the estate." Ignacio offered up his arm with a warm smile.

"Oh, no. I'm keeping you from the other gentlemen and the business you're here for. That's very kind of you, but--"

"Sciocchezza," Ignacio interrupted, pushing his arm closer to me. "It's my pleasure and I am sure there are plenty of cigars for all. I will not be missed. Come, the beauty continues." He pointed to the staircase across the other side of the corridor.

Reluctantly, I accepted Ignacio's gesture and took his outstretched arm. I didn't want to offend him, which could have reflected badly on Callem and whatever business the two of them had with each other. Ignacio led me to the staircase and farther away from Callem.

Ignacio spoke excitedly about the history of the home, confirming Callem's claim of its royal past. At the top landing, we were faced with a long hallway that seemed to stretch for days, lined with a number of closed doors.

"All of the furniture is original," Ignacio went on to explain, reaching for the forbidden doorknob of the nearest room. I would have protested, given that Callem asked me not to enter any rooms with closed doors, but again, I didn't want to offend. Ignacio seemed to know what he was doing. "Ahimè, you see, nothing but the best." He pushed the door open wide for me to see in.

I stepped into the chilly room and was immediately transcended to another time. I felt like an Italian princess from the 17th century. The detail, everything was so lavish and impressively pristine. How much history this one small room held? I ran my finger tip on the polished wood of the canopy bed before me.

I was so distracted with the room and all it had to offer, I didn't even notice Ignacio had closed the door behind us.

"God damn, have I gotten weak in my old age?" I asked Red, stepping away from the smoky room. I wiped my stinging eyes and sucked in a deep breath of unpolluted air. It had been quite a while since I'd sat in a room with so many lit stogies. I choked mine down and found a good exit cue as soon as the business was completed, leaving the others to their cigars and numerous bottles of Galliano and red wine.

Red followed closely beside me. The stench of the smoke flew off of us as we moved through the sitting room towards the corridor. "I've got to find--"

Before the words could escape my lips, I heard a sharp scream in the distance. I slowed my pace before stopping; Red following suit. Both of us had our ears turned out like bloodhounds. "Did you hear that?" I asked him quietly.

"Yeah, it sounded like a scream," Red replied.

"Ah, no!" Olivia's muffled protest rang from the second floor. I didn't even think. My legs carried me in a run up the staircase. All of the doors at the top of the stairs were closed, but I heard a commotion from the closest room.

I barged in, swinging the door open. All of my blood turned to fire when I saw a man pinning Olivia to the bed. Straddling her. Forcing himself on her. Putting his hands on her. She looked up at me, tears streaking her bright red cheeks. The man looked over his shoulder just in time to see me coming.

I put my hands on him. I pulled him off her and he released the hold he had on her wrists. I threw him into an antique dresser next to the door. When he fell to the floor, I couldn't stop myself. So much rage was surging through me that I just started whaling on the man, pounding my fists down on him in a crazed frenzy. My heart was pounding when Red pulled me off him.

I looked back at Olivia, panting for air. She stared at me with wide, terrified eyes. The strap to her dress had broken and she held the fabric up to her chest with her hand. She'd backed herself up against the headboard. I walked over to her as the man started pleading with me in Italian. "Are you okay?" I asked her, still panting. I wiped away the hair from her face. "Did he hurt you? What is this? Are you bleeding?" I looked at her bare legs and saw dark red streaks along the length of them.

"It's wine," Red said, pointing at Olivia's overturned wine glass on the floor.

"I thought she was for us," the man spouted in Italian, blood dripping from his nose and mouth. "I thought she was for us. I meant no harm."

"She is my wife!" I screamed back at him in his native tongue. "This is my wife. How dare you put your hands on her?"

The man, still cowering on the floor, held his hands up in a silent surrender. "My apologies, Mr. Tate. I meant no harm. I thought you were bringing her for us. I didn't know. I was only showing her the house. I would never insult you or your wife like that."

Please forgive me. Forgive me."

I could have killed him. I could have snapped his neck. I couldn't even look at him. I wanted that image of this fat slob on top of my wife out of my head. I wanted to erase it from Olivia's, too. "I come to your country, bring you my very lucrative business, and this is how you repay me? Do you work for Rinaldo?"

"Yes, yes. Please forgive me, Mr. Tate. I meant no harm. Forgive me, sir."

My jaw was tight and my hands trembled. I looked down at the man I had pushed to the brink of tears. I turned my back on him and grabbed Olivia. "Come on, baby. Let me get you out of here." I cradled her arm as she slid off the bed. She huddled herself under my arms, squeezing tightly. "Here, go with Red."

Red reached out for Olivia, pulling her into him as he escorted her out of the room. I moved back to the man, crouching down beside him. "What's your name?" I asked him in Italian.

"Ignacio, sir. Ignacio Bellini," he replied hesitantly.

"Ignacio, you're the luckiest man in the world. If it hadn't been for Olivia standing right behind me, you'd be dead right now. She was the only thing standing between you and your grave. I promise you if I ever see you again, I will kill you. Do you doubt me?" Ignacio shook his head quickly. "Do you believe that I will keep my promise?" He nodded fervently. "Good." I started to stand. "One more thing." I threw a hard right to his temple.

Ignacio's unconscious body tipped over sideways as I wiped the blood from my knuckles.

In the car, Red handed me a towel from the front seat. "Do you need to go to the hospital?" he asked as I tried wiping away the wine that had already stained my flesh. I shook my head.

The passenger door flew open, startling me. Callem fell into the seat next to me. "Go," he barked to Red before turning to me. "Olivia," he sighed. I couldn't stop myself. The tears fell from my eyes as the car pulled away from the estate. He pulled me into his chest. "Liv, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?"

"No," I lied.

"What happened?"

I pulled away. "He came in after we separated; after you went to the other room. He saw me in the foyer and started talking to me. I told him I loved the house and he offered to show me upstairs. I didn't want to say no. I thought that'd be bad for your relationship with him, you know, rude. So I went with him. He took me into that room. He closed the door." I shook my head, remembering the slight panic that rose in my gut when I realized what was about to happen. "He advanced on me and I tried to leave, but he--" I felt the bile rising as more tears blinded me. I blinked them away and Callem wiped them off my cheeks.

"Oh my God, Liv, did he hit you?" With his thumb and forefinger, Callem turned my head to look at my cheek. I could feel the heat from where Ignacio's hand stuck my skin so I figured it was probably bruising.

I pushed his hand away, hiding my face. "He said he knew you. He said he was there to see you. Why would he do that to me if he knew you; if he knew you were only in the other room?" Callem shook his head. His brow was twisted and his mouth was tight. "What did you say to him? What did he say to you?"

Callem sighed. "He was talking out of his ass, trying to act like he wasn't doing anything wrong."

"What gifts did you bring?" I asked abruptly.

"What?"

"What gifts did you bring? When I mentioned you, he said you brought gifts and he loves Americans. What did you bring for them? The cigars?"

Callem licked his lips. "No, I didn't bring the cigars." He looked away from me, eyeing Red in the rear view mirror.

"What aren't you telling me?" I asked calmly. "Please, just tell me the truth. I think I deserve to know."

"He thought," Callem started, hesitating. "He thought you were a prostitute."

"What?! Why would he think that? He thought I was the gift?" I spouted. Callem nodded. "What would make him think that? Have you brought prostitutes before?"

"No."

"Then why would he think that? What would make him think I'm a prostitute? Do I look like a prostitute?"

"No, honey, slow down," Callem hushed me. "Don't take this as an insult. These men are very rich and very powerful. It's not uncommon for them to use the services of a working girl."

"But why me? Why did he think I was a prostitute? Because I mentioned you? Why would you bring a prostitute to a casual business meeting if you haven't ever done it before?"

"I haven't ever brought a prostitute anywhere. That doesn't mean there hasn't been a prostitute at a party like that before. It happens more than you'd think. Women don't usually go to those kinds of affairs unless they're there for a greater purpose." My stomach turned. I groaned, leaning back in the seat. "The other men thought that's why you were there, too. I just didn't tell you. I was able to tell them ahead of time in Italian who you were and what you were to me so they wouldn't upset you. Ignacio came in later. I didn't have a chance to explain your presence."

I felt disgusting. "And I thought that's just how they treated woman, ogling them like that. They really thought I was just a piece of ass, didn't they?"

Callem wrapped his arm around me. "I should have warned you ahead of time. I didn't want to upset you and I figured I'd be able to clue them in before anything happened. I shouldn't have left you alone."

"Have you ever been to a party with a prostitute at it?"

Callem paused. "Yes."

I didn't know if I was asking questions I wanted to know the answer to, but I couldn't stop myself. "Have you ever been with a prostitute?" I asked quietly.

"No."

I sighed heavily, puffing my cheeks out. "I just want to get back to the hotel. Can we just get back please? I don't want to think about this right now."

This is the second time Callem had saved me from a potential assault. That's two too many times to be in that kind of a situation. I fell onto Callem's shoulder as Red drove us through the Italian countryside.

2013 - Callem

I swung the door open slowly. Olivia was lying on her side, hugging the edge of the bed. She couldn't get any farther from my side of the bed if she tried. I was surprised she was even sleeping in here, since she's been sneaking off to the couch in the middle of the night lately. The light from the street lamps seeped into the room, trickling across the bedding, caressing her curves like a vicious tease. I inhaled deeply as I tiptoed in, trying not to wake her.

It had been far too long since she and I had made love. Through all the rage and anger surging through us, I still yearned for her. You'd think all the tension would keep my mind far from those thoughts, but I couldn't stop myself. Even in times like these, I have needs.

Pulling back the covers, I glided underneath. I waited to see if she'd stir, but she remained still. Killing the space between us, I made my way closer to her. Carefully, my wandering fingertips skimmed over her delicate skin. She was wearing a pair of short shorts that were easy enough to deflect with my prying hands. They friskily moved up her body and under her tight tank top, clouding my head.

I started kissing her neck when she finally woke. "What are you doing?" she mumbled, pulling away from me. My arms were already wrapped around her so I could keep a bit of a hold on her. "Cal, let me go," she growled, kicking her feet to the side of the bed.

"Come on, Liv," I murmured in her ear, groping her with more force.

"Callem, get your hands off me," she grunted, fighting me.

Easily, I pulled her back onto the bed and against me. "Olivia, stop," I said through clenched teeth.

"What are you doing, Cal? Stop it. Let go of me. Cal, just stop it." Her voice waned as I kicked my leg over her. As I pulled myself on top of her, she started throwing punches at me. I wrangled her wrists and pushed them to the mattress.

"Why are you fighting me?" I snapped. Her wrists wiggled under my hands forcefully. I wasn't holding her out of lust anymore. I was holding her out of resentment now. "Stop fighting me, Liv."

"Are you really going to do this? Cal, don't." Her face twisted.

I stared down at her. I clenched my teeth in frustration as I squeezed her wrists before shoving off her with a snarl. I sat on the edge of the bed fuming. My fingers dug into the side of the mattress as I heard Olivia's breathing slow down. "This is not going to happen again," I barked over my shoulder. "Next time, you better not fight me."

"Why fight with me when you can pay for someone who's willing, or at least appears willing."

I spun around and slapped her across the face. There was so much swelling through

me that I couldn't stop myself. Her eyes grew wide as she brought her hand to her cheek where I'd just struck her. I didn't mean to hit her. I didn't want to hit her. I shouldn't have hit her, but I did. I had just hit my wife. I just slapped the woman I loved because she denied me sex and insulted me. What was wrong with me?

Instead of apologizing to her, I stormed out of the room. I needed to get it together. I was losing it, and not just because I hadn't had any sex. Everything she'd been saying was true. I was the only one to blame. I should have done something; said something when I had the chance. I could have avoided all of this. I was an idiot if I thought things would so easily change for us. She wanted to fight against me when all I wanted to do was fight for her. I suppose some battles were worth fighting.

"Good morning, Nick," I said kindly as Nick held the back door of the car open for me.

"Good morning, Olivia," he replied before closing the door behind me. He drove me to the hospital in silence. I'd been back to work for nearly two months now. Nick was still following me like a lost puppy, driving me where I needed to go, monitoring my emails and phone calls, blocking me from getting too close to him, as if he knew I would try to make such a maneuver. Or perhaps Callem believed me to be so sly and warned Nick of that fact ahead of time.

So instead of trying to get close to Nick, I was working on my other plan. Even though Callem's techs were able to monitor the internet usage on my office computer, they weren't able to monitor all usage of every computer in the hospital. And since Nick can't follow me around the hospital every day, they've even managed to hack into the security feed so they can play big brother all day long.

I learned of this the hard way. Callem hadn't initially told me that he was watching me from the cameras. One day he caught me making a phone call from the nurse's station. Though I was only calling Erin, he gave me an earful and cracked down on me a little harder, if that's even possible.

It's terrifying to think how much power he has and to know what he's capable of. It kills me to follow his rules and lay in bed next to him every night, but I know if I just do this now, play his game for a little while, I'll get my retribution. I can't mess this up or I won't get another chance. I'm one mistake away from becoming unemployed again.

Nick dropped me off in the parking garage. "Are you doing anything for lunch?" I asked him as I stepped out of the car.

He looked at me for a long moment. "No," he replied uneasily.

"Well, I'm already sick of hospital food and didn't know if you'd be able to pick me up so I can go out and get something. I could always walk, but I figured I should ask first."

"Thank you. Yes, I can pick you up to take you to lunch. What time?"

I shrugged. "I'm not exactly sure. It's always hard telling. I'll call you when I need a ride, is that okay? Are you going to be in the area or in Huntington?"

"I'll be at the office so you'll probably want to give me some time to make my way over here."

I nodded before shutting the door behind me.

Since I was still the new girl, and still the youngest oncologist on the payroll, I hadn't had the time to get to know any of the other doctor's. I'd met them all, just in passing, however. I had a feeling I wouldn't be on staff too long so I wasn't too concerned about building relationships.

As the morning slipped on and I moved from appointment to appointment, I kept watching for the right moment. There were so many places Callem's hand didn't extend

into the hospital. Patient rooms, the OR, and the x-ray rooms, as well as a few other places I didn't frequent. It would have been suspicious if I was seen going into janitor's closets or other offices that weren't mine.

I had my first opportunity for sabotage that afternoon. As my nurse was concluding an appointment with one of my patients, she was called away to another room, leaving her laptop behind. I hopped onto the computer in a flash and scrolled through the internet to get the information I needed before she returned. Since there were no cameras in the room and no one monitoring the internet usage on her computer, I was in the clear. I had gotten what I needed without any inclination from Callem or his dogs. Now, I had to find a way to put it to good use.

"Hi, Liv," I smiled at her as she slid into the back seat of the X5. I could tell she was surprised to see me. "Nick said you wanted to go out for lunch. I thought I'd join you."

She smiled meekly and nodded. Tensions were still high between us. She's been cordial and polite, but still very distant, especially since the night I almost... Even though I told her not to refuse me again, I hadn't made an attempt since that night. I think she really was expecting me to get my jollies elsewhere. I didn't want anyone else. I wanted her and I wanted her to want me.

So I waited all this time, as patiently as I could, for her to come around. It was proving more difficult than I had anticipated. I've been doing everything I could think of to get on her good side. "How has your day been?" I asked her.

"Fine," she replied, looking out the window as Nick drove us through downtown.

"Things have been pretty slow at the office," I added since she hadn't asked me about my day. I didn't get a response from her about that either. It was frustrating and a real test of my patience to have someone blatantly ignore my effort. As much as I was watching her, she was testing me, too, to see how far she could push me before I erupted.

I was confident I could win this battle.

She sifted through her emails on her phone until we arrived. Nick let us out at the door. Olivia was silent as we were escorted through the small restaurant and seated by the host. She didn't actually speak until the waitress came to get our drink orders.

"How long do I have you for?" I asked as she checked her phone again.

"For the rest of my life, I believe," she said coyly, not even looking at me.

I chuckled. "When do you have to be back to work?"

"I don't have another appointment until three."

I nodded. "You've got a pretty open window then, huh?" She didn't respond. "That doesn't happen very often for you. I'm glad I was able to join you. Who knows when we'll be able to do this again, now that you're back to work."

Her eyes, the ones I used to see more often, were now hidden from me as she skimmed the menu. A stream of long brown hair fell from her shoulder and dangled over her face. I wanted to brush it away. I wanted to reach out and touch her cheek.

"Anything look good to you?" I asked.

"Yes," she responded.

I leaned my forearms on the table. "Can't you even look at me?"

Her chest rose with a deep breath. Laying the menu down, she forced herself to look across the table at me. "If that's what you'd like me to do," she mumbled.

I shook my head, clenching my jaw. "I shouldn't have to ask, should I?" She just kept staring at me. "It's been two months. You still won't touch me. You won't talk to me

unless I initiate the conversation. You're distant. I just want you back, and more than just in body."

With a heavy sigh, she kept her stare as well as her silence. I could see in her eyes this was a quarrel I'd be fighting on my own.

"Can you at least give me the courtesy of a response?"

Slowly, she shook her head. "Is that enough of a response for you?"

"You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?"

Again she slowly shook her head. "It's not my job to make it easy for you. Easy is not in our contract. I'm just playing the game to the best of my ability. I've got to level the playing field the best I can and this is the only way I know how. You're frustrated. You're at the end of your rope. You feel helpless. Join the club, sweetheart." She demurely returned to her menu.

My fingers drummed the surface of the table rapidly. I shouldn't have even started this here. I should have waited until the solitude of our house, which would have allowed me the freedom to speak, or yell, my mind. I sighed and surrendered to the well-mannered temperament the restaurant required by fumbling through the menu mindlessly. Needless to say, I'd lost my appetite.

"How do I look?" I asked, stepping out of the bathroom in the elegant red evening gown I was currently putting to shame. Though conceit was not my forte, I felt confident in my self-assessment of my attire.

Callem's eyes smiled as he drank me in. "It suits you," he mumbled.

"It suits me? That's all you have to say about it? I've never worn a more sophisticated dress in my entire life and the first thing that comes to mind when you look at me is that it suits me?" I harped playfully.

A wicked smile took shape. "You're not pleased with my evaluation?"

"Not in the least bit."

He approached me with a heart stopping swagger. "To tell you the truth," he whispered. "This dress does nothing for you. Beautiful as it is, it can't match up to you and your beauty."

I puckered my lips, holding onto his words. "Oh, you've totally redeemed yourself, sir," I cooed, resting my wrists on top of his shoulders. "It's proven to be a relentless task trying to compete with your charm."

"Unless you want to fail miserably, I'd bow out while you've still got your dignity if I were you," he said cheekily.

"Seriously though, do I look alright? Am I overdressed, underdressed? Is this too bold a statement?"

Callem started chuckling as I doted over myself, pulling at the gown and questioning my wardrobe decision. "What are you so worked up about? It's just a dinner party."

"Yeah, with the governor and the mayor and the chief of police and all their wives. I guess the biggest thing is, does this dress make me look older?"

"Why would you want to look older?"

"I guarantee you, as soon as I walk into that room hanging on your arm and wearing this rock on my finger, they're all going to immediately assume I'm some kind of gold-digging, trophy wife. I don't know why that bothers me so much, but my biggest fear is to be seen as a money grubbing whore. I'm better than that."

"You don't have to prove that to anyone. The only person you need to prove that to is me and you've already got me sold. Please, I don't want you to spend your night worrying about what the other trophy wives are thinking of you."

I chuckled. "So, for the last time, does the dress fit the occasion?"

"Absolutely. You look phenomenal, as always."

I kissed him. I still had not gotten over that sensation in my gut when we kissed and I hoped it would never fade. We headed downstairs together. I peeked in my clutch to make sure I had everything I needed while Callem mumbled into his cell phone.

Red stood in the kitchen, clicking the keys on his Blackberry rapidly. "Good God, Liv,

you look amazing," he gasped, peeling himself away from his cell for a moment.

I blushed. "Thank you, Red. You look mighty strapping yourself."

Red bowed dramatically to my compliment. "Ready to go?" Callem asked.

Red nodded. "Dan is waiting outside."

I followed the two strapping men outside to the car waiting in the drive. Red jumped into the front passenger while Callem held the rear door open for me. It took a minute for me to maneuver into the car in the long gown, but I managed gracefully.

Both men busily worked on their phones, sending text messages, reading emails, and making brief phone calls as we headed to downtown Los Angeles. Callem has expanded his empire to three major cities since I'd been with him, not to mention his international ventures were bustling. He may not work as closely with the clients any longer, but all the new work made him twice as busy as he used to be.

The prestige of his business had caught the eye of many of the wealthiest, more powerful entities in the greater Los Angeles area, which prompted a meeting of the minds for this evening's dealings. I was very nervous to meet so many notable people, not to mention having to socialize with them, not my strongest suit. The past couple of dinners I'd been to with Callem, he'd easily move away from me, get distracted with another group of people, and forget he'd left me standing with a handful of men I'd just met. It's unsettling for me and I was hoping he'd be conscious of proximity and discomfort on my behalf.

The sun was already faded beyond the skyline when we pulled up to the club house. I clutched Callem's arm as we moved swiftly into the large and lavish ballroom, already crowded with a number of guests, all dressed to the nines, setting the bar for sophistication.

Immediately, Callem found a group of older men to greet. As usual, most of Callem's clientele were surprised to see me on his arm, and after the debacle in Italy, I've always wondered if anyone else assumed me to be an escort. These men weren't as obvious in their attraction as the Italians were. They were subtle in their stolen glances and their lingering gazes. Here, I wasn't a treasure, I was an inconvenience. I was not a distraction; I was an obstacle that would have to be tackled before they could loosen their ties. They felt that my presence prevented them from saying what they wanted to say and they would have loved nothing more than to shoo me away.

We spent the cocktail hour shaking hands, smiling jovially, and exchanging nuances. When dinner was served, Callem, Red, and I were seated at a large round table with the police chief of Los Angeles, Vern Aggregate, and his wife, Janice, as well as a local news anchor and a business mogul and his wife, Brent and Micki.

The diamond-encrusted bird perched in the chair next to mine, Mrs. Janice Aggregate, spoke rapidly, in a siren's voice that nearly made your ears bleed, especially when she giggled at her own jokes. She and Mr. Aggregate were already familiar with the other faces and had much to talk about among themselves. Her husband spoke in a hushed voice to the news anchor, Craig O'Ryan. They leaned into each other in order to be heard over the hum of the room.

"So, Veronica, what is it that you do?" Janice asked me, scraping her fork and knife

into the flatware as she worked to cut into the slab of meat on her plate.

"Olivia," Callem corrected her, knowing I wouldn't have the heart to. Honestly, I'd go on being known as Veronica to this woman if Callem hadn't been quick to correct her.

"Oh, goodness me. Olivia," she chuckled in her throat before stuffing a bit of food through her rouged lips.

"Well, I don't do anything really," I mumbled, feeling the eyes at the table finding their way to me, wanting to learn more about the fresh meat among them.

"Olivia is an oncologist," Callem said, stepping in to give me my due diligence.

Janice's eyes grew as she looked me over one more time, as if to miraculously find evidence of Callem's claims on my person somewhere. "Really? And you're not working?"

I shook my head. "Nope. We've only been married a few years and we sort of decided to extend that honeymoon phase."

"No children for the two of you?" she asked, waving her now bare fork between Callem and me.

I looked over at Callem quickly. Children have been at the top of Callem's wish list in the past couple of months. Though he and I have done so much together since we've started our relationship, I wasn't quite ready to give that up. I was still so young and have spent my entire life in a hurry to get milestones accomplished. Callem, on the other hand, felt his internal clock ticking away. He had just turned 40 and was more than ready to start a family before it was too late. This was one thing I was hesitant of giving in to. It's been the subject of many discussions at the Tate home as of late.

"Not yet," I replied. I also hated answering that question because I believed it to be none of her business. It wasn't anyone's business how Callem and I chose to grow our family.

"Well, I don't blame you. Ripe little thing like you might want to hold on to your youth as long as possible. Nothing makes you age faster than little babies running around your house." She chuckled again, a noise I was beginning to despise. I nodded, averting my eyes to my plate in hopes she wouldn't see the disgust creeping into my gaze. "So what is it you do to bide all your free time?"

I shrugged. "Oh, I spend a lot of time outside. I've gotten into a lot of little hobbies. Gardening, photography, cooking. Constructive hobbies."

Janice nodded, chomping down on another bite. Thankfully, her husband nudged her, pulling her from our conversation into his. I managed to survive dinner, hiding under Callem's shadow as he and Red dominated any conversation I had the pleasure of being included in.

Another cocktail hour pursued shortly after dessert. Callem and I stood together next to a long window, overlooking the immaculate golf course and grounds, each with a wine glass in our hands. Though he was not a jealous man, Callem always seemed to keep me close during such events, probably because of what happened the last time he left me alone at a party. His hand rested softly on my hip as we rubbed shoulders.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a sweeping young woman in a spectacular gown levitating towards the two of us. I took a half step away from Callem as she neared. My heart nearly stopped as the gorgeous young female slid her arm comfortably across

Callem's shoulder and made herself nice and cozy right up against him.

I'm glad the two of them were staring at each other so they wouldn't have seen the shock and alarm on my face. "Mr. Tate," the woman hummed melodically. "Where have you been? It has been far too long."

I took the time to look over the beauty currently clinging to my husband. She had smooth, bronzed skin, long, lustrous blond hair, and a face that was hard to turn away from. Her gown seemed to be tailored for her slim body, hugging every one of her curves with a peek-a-boo slit revealing most of her toned left leg. Even I was attracted to her, let alone the man she was currently working overtime to seduce.

"It has been quite a while, hasn't it?" Callem asked with a smile, putting some space between him and the goddess with a side step. I saw something in Callem's eyes as he looked sideways at surprise guest. Was that fear or confusion? Maybe more surprise with a hint of annoyance. It had never been so hard to read Callem, but at the same time, I've never seen Callem in this type of situation. Not even the time he got hit on by three sexualized Lebanese cougars while in Vegas. This was a completely different ball game.

"You look great, as usual," she said, stroking the sleeve of his jacket.

"As do you. Uh, have you met my wife?"

I froze as the woman turned her gaze to me. So judgmental, so dismissive was her glare as she clearly forced an unwilling smile on her face, revealing her perfect teeth. "You're married? Good lord, it has been a while, hasn't it?"

"Bianca, this is Dr. Olivia Reinbeck, my wife. Liv, this is Bianca Simmons. She used to work for my company."

Even her name was luxurious. There were a few things that threw me off in an instant. She was clearly more than a former co-worker by the way she quickly and calmly invaded his personal space, as well as mine, without flinching. Secondly, why hadn't I met her before?

I held out my hand for her, hoping it wasn't trembling. Hers was sleek and firm, exactly what I would have expected after seeing the way she moved in for the kill. First Callem, now me. "Nice to meet you," I managed without cracking my voice. I wasn't putting up too much of a fight for her.

"Doctor?" Bianca replied. Callem had done that on purpose. He had obviously seen my discomfort with the interaction. "Wow, hit the jackpot, huh, Cal? Young, beautiful, and successful." False compliments all around.

"I'm not practicing at the moment," I added awkwardly. "So how long did you two work together?" I was more than curious to learn why a woman I'd never met before was at such ease holding onto my husband.

"Oh, gosh. It was for a couple of years a lifetime ago," Bianca said followed up with a seductive giggle and another slouch into Callem. "Obviously it was a while ago because you've gotten married since I last saw you."

Callem nodded. "It was a long time ago," he confirmed, probably to reassure me more than anything.

"And you worked out of the Huntington Beach office?"

Bianca smiled. "No, actually it was the New York office. Callem was staying there for a while before moving headquarters to this area. He brought me out here with him and coincidentally, I was handed another opportunity."

My eyebrows rose in surprise. I knew about Callem's extended stay in New York when he was first transitioning over into the ownership of the company, but he had somehow forgotten to mention the beaming blonde he 'brought' with him to California. 'Brought' with him, like as a lover? How serious had this been? I was starting to get very annoyed that this was all sprung on me at a party, not that it was Callem's fault she was here, but if I had known about it before this moment, I wouldn't feel so attacked. I would have at least had my bearings.

I tried to keep a smile on my face, but all I wanted to do was yank him away from her and curl myself under his arms. I've never been more jealous in my entire life. I was positively broiling. I coxed myself internally to keep it together and not to let her win the battle she'd obviously started.

"How have you been?" Bianca asked Callem, pivoting herself to exclude me from the conversation physically.

"I've been happier than ever," Callem smiled. "Business is better than can be expected and I've been keeping really busy. It's all great."

"Well, that's no surprise. You were always striving for more when we were together." Bianca turned her head away from the conversation, distracted by a group of people across the room. "If you'll excuse me, I see a few more members of this party I have yet to greet." She smiled before bowing away.

Callem nearly yanked me into him as his hand found home on my hip, where it had been before our interruption. "What a brazen woman," I said before Callem could say anything. "She knew exactly what she was doing."

"She really bothered you, didn't she?"

"She did no such thing," I replied, though I could hear the jealousy in the response and I knew Callem could too.

"You're so jealous right now," Callem poked fun.

"I don't see anything funny about this. Let's just say I don't like sharing my things. But, you're not off the hook, sir. You've got an awful lot of explaining to do."

"What? What, are we going to have one of those number talks? You tell me your number, I tell you mine? It's a little late for that, wouldn't you say?"

I shook my head as I stepped into him. I had to get my scent back on him after that viper tried to mark her territory. "No, that's not fair anyway. You already know my number. I just need to know about this particular number since she seemed to have such an effect on you."

Callem chuckled, nuzzling into my neck. "I have never seen you like this before. You're flushed and fired up. Looks like you'd sucker punch the next person who looks at you sideways. Oh, I am so hot for you right now. It's sexy."

"Don't get used to it. I prefer nothing like that ever happens again."

"Oh, Liv. You've got nothing to worry about with that woman. She was terribly high maintenance and clingy. Too much for me to handle, which is why nothing came of it."

“Ah, so she was a fling. I’m sure it was fun while it lasted.”

Callem gazed at me. “That seems like a trap so I’m going to stay away from that comment.”

Bianca peered at me from across the room. I didn’t know much about Callem’s exes and I never had the prerogative to. At least I knew I could hold my own if another one tried to swoop in and cozy up to Callem again. Next time, I’ll have to wave the rock in front of her nose. That’d put a kibosh on her efforts for sure.

2013 - Olivia - The Secret

Sweat dripped down my face as I rounded the block and neared home. The sun was high in the sky, setting the scene for a blistering jog. I spotted Red's car in the driveway as I approached the house. I slowed my pace as Red stepped out of the garage, closing it behind him with the key pad.

I pulled the ear buds out of my ears as he stepped towards me. "Hey, Liv. I just had to come pick up some things for Cal while he's out of town. I hope you don't mind me helping myself."

I shook my head. "Not at all," I said while panting. "Did you find what you needed?"

He nodded quickly, reaching for his car door. I noted the manila folder in his hand. "I got it. Thanks. You doing okay? You need anything before Cal gets home?"

"Oh, I'm doing fine, thanks. Just anxious for him to get home. I feel like he's been gone for so long."

"Tell me. He left a load of work in my lap. I'm just as ready for him to get home as you are." He popped open the driver's door. "Just call me if you need anything, alright?"

Get in the shower, girl. You're looking funky," he joked before dropping into the driver's seat.

I laughed. "Will do. See you later." I waved him off as he pulled out of the drive. I mixed myself up a protein shake before heading upstairs to take a shower. As I passed Callem's office, I noticed the closet door hanging open. I strolled into the room and was about to close the door when I noticed something off. Callem's safe was hanging open.

I'd never had any reason to be suspicious of Callem, even if he'd never divulged the contents of his mysterious safe, but at the opportunity of finding out, I couldn't resist. It was harmless and I was sure I'd find such documents as passports, licenses, maybe some cash or even jewelry, possibly heirlooms.

Feeling the urge to look over my shoulder, I couldn't help but feel guilty for breaking some unwritten privacy Callem had established when bringing the safe into our home. The safe was pretty full as I pulled the door back. I pulled out a few pieces of paper to find a number of emails from people whose names I didn't recognize, some in other languages.

"The packages are ready for travel. We'll reconvene at normal drop points considering the police are now cooperating. Will send word if we divert from the plan. – Gus" one email read. I didn't know what that meant. It was dated almost two years ago.

The next email read, "Disposal of physical and legal evidence was completed by Luca, as requested. There are no longer any traces to link back to your establishment. Please advise."

Disposal of evidence? That has to be code for something. That's not legal, no matter what kind of evidence is being destroyed. That doesn't sound like anything Callem would

be involved in. More cryptic emails, all brief and all mysterious, followed the first two, all were dated at least two years ago, if not older.

Setting them aside, my curiosity was peaked and I was hoping to find something else in the safe that would explain the emails, and possibly ease my concerns. On the bottom shelf was a stack of brochures. They were all the same and in foreign languages. Though I didn't detect the languages or understand what they said, they showed pictures of smiling women, what looked to be dorm rooms, and some kind of grounds, possibly for a school.

In the back of the safe was a small white box. I pulled it out and opened it. Inside, I found a stack of passports. I started becoming concerned. There shouldn't be any reason for someone to have more than one passport because that reason would obviously be illegal.

The most alarming part of this discovery was the fact that none of these passports were Callem's. Each passport belonged to a young woman from a far-off country. Romania, Latvia, Moldova, Ukraine, Lithuania. There were over a dozen of them. Why would Callem have these? Maybe the languages of these countries were the languages on the brochures, but what does that mean? What would Callem be doing with them? What does this have to do with his business? It just didn't make any sense.

At the bottom of the box was a stack of DVDs. None were labeled, but I was sure there'd be something on them or there wouldn't be any need for Callem to be locking them up. I took the DVDs out of the office with me and moved to the bedroom where my laptop was charging.

Popping in the first disc, I drummed my fingers against the laptop impatiently while it loaded. When the video started, it showed a young woman, probably no older than twenty, sitting on a bed in a very depressing location. It was a very dreary image. The girl looked uneasy and avoided looking into the camera. A man off camera, possibly the cameraman, spoke in another language. The young woman nodded in response. This exchange continued. The man would ask something and the woman would respond, either with a nod or shake of her head, or with a short answer.

Then the man said, "Do you speak English?"

The girl nodded before saying, "Yes."

"Very good," the man said. "Do not be scared. We will take care of you."

The girl said something in another language and then started to sob. "Please, no more Romanian. You speak English for the men. They like to hear you speak English. You no more speak in Romanian, yeah?"

"I want to go home. I will send the money I owe. I will do what need be done. Please, just let me go home."

"You no more go home. This is home for you now. Now, you look at the camera and say what I told you to say."

The girl sniffled and wiped a few tears off her cheeks. "My name is Talia. I have 23 years. I come from Deva and I hope to please you."

"Good. You do work for us till your money is paid back. You work at bar until you work off debt. We take care of you. Other girls tell you how to do job. You listen, follow

rules, don't leave, and you will be home soon enough. You have young son, no?"

The girl nodded.

"You want to see young son again?"

She nods again.

"You never leave. No running or we will find your son. We will kill your son if you leave us before debt is paid. You understand?"

The girl now had her face buried in her hands as she sobbed. She spoke behind her hands, in Romanian again, I believe because I couldn't understand her. A man stepped from off camera and slapped the girl on the back of the head before retreating.

I covered my mouth with my hand as I watched the girl plead with the men in the room. I cringed at what was happening to her. It was starting to make sense. Before I could stop it, I, too, was crying as the cameraman continued to taunt Talia, if that was even her real name.

I pulled out the disc and stuffed in the next. Another poor young woman being victimized on camera. I popped in one more DVD and was appalled at the sight before me. Another foreign-speaking man navigated the shaky camera through an atrocious scene. A pair of hands pulled back a piece of wood from a large gaping hole in a wall. Behind the wooden barrier, a crawl space lined with thin, stained mattresses, probably a dozen of them tightly packed in the tiny space. A man walked in ahead of the cameraman. He had to crouch down because the ceiling hung so low.

Aside from the mattresses and tattered blankets, the room was cluttered with piles of clothes, shoes, and make-up. On one bed in the corner, a frail looking body was curled up on one mattress. The man in the room shook the body. A pale, sunken face turned towards the camera and quickly scurried away, off camera. "That's where they keep them?" I whispered, voice cracking as the camera panned around the dismal space. It made my skin crawl to imagine being held prisoner in there.

I ran back to the office and grabbed the stack of brochures. I hurried back to the laptop in hopes of translating the text. Google translate detected the first language as Estonian. The brochure was enticing young women to come to France to work as maids and nannies and they'd be given a proper education in exchange for their work. They wouldn't have to pay for any of the transportation as long as they worked for four months before starting their education, in order to pay off the travel debt.

"Okay, so that's how they got Talia," I mumbled to myself. "That's the debt she has to work off. But why the theatrics? Why was she crying? What's really going on here?"

I went back to the safe to look for more information. I sifted through the passports. I didn't find Talia's in the bunch, but I did find something that nearly made my legs buckle. Bianca's passport. She looked much younger. It was issued nearly a decade ago. Why did Callem have her passport? I can understand if she left it behind when they separated, but why would he have it with all these others? Why wouldn't he just give it back to her?

I grabbed the large stack of papers from the top shelf and started sorting through them. Most everything I put my hands on were emails, all as vague and ambiguous as the first ones I read. Something just wasn't adding up, until I found an email towards the

bottom of the stack that was a very lengthy email and was dated 2004.

"Foot soldiers will seek out women and recruit them for the school," the email started. "The foot will escort the girls to the first stop, which they will be told is the layover. The escort will gather personal information as well as confiscate identification for further travel. The girls will be told they're being enrolled into the program with the information they provide.

"The girls will then be moved to the next check point where they will be placed in a designated group home. There, they will be assessed by the generals in order to establish their worth and value to the particular bar. They may be moved, depending on their condition and the needs of other bars in the area.

"The girls will then be integrated with the other girls and given a job. They'll be warned of the rules and the consequences of disobeying the rules; first by the other girls, then by management. Procedures are in place for disposal of women as well as in the event of a raid."

My hands were shaking. I couldn't read anymore. This couldn't be real. This couldn't be happening. I can't tell you how long I sat on the floor of Callem's office, the email wavering in my hand, my mind processing everything I'd just discovered. My brain, as advanced as it was, just couldn't compute the reality of what I'd just stumbled upon.

All along, this was right under my nose. All along, he'd been running this secret business behind my back. All along, Callem had been some sort of kingpin in a human trafficking ring in Europe.

When my mind finally caught up with the world around me, it was dark outside. I think I had a moment of shock and lost time, literally, lost an entire sunset. When I gained conscious control of my limbs, I slunk downstairs to the kitchen.

I suddenly started panting and shaking. I was having a panic attack. Everything I was touching, the floor, the counter, the clothes clinging to my body, the ring on my finger, the product in my hair, the make-up on my face, the air I was breathing, it was all a lie, provided to me by the blood and tears of those young women. Everything he'd ever given me was bought from human trafficking profits.

Talia's sobs seemed to echo through my empty, dark house, as if she were here with me. I hurried to the powder room and vomited in the toilet. Every molecule in my body told me to flee. Every ounce of my being told me to get as far away from him as I possibly could. I needed someone. I needed Erin. I needed a shoulder. I needed some sort of level-headed thinking to help me through this.

I collapsed on the floor of the powder room and laid there until I could hear logical thoughts surfacing in my mind. Where was I? I was alone. No one knows that I know. Callem doesn't know I've discovered his secret, and he won't be home until late tomorrow. This was the only upper hand I had going for me.

Knowing what Callem was capable of, I had to think like him if I was going to get myself out of this. He had to be stopped. This couldn't go on anymore. I knew I didn't fully understand the depth of his reach, but I couldn't let that slow me down.

I picked myself up. I didn't want to stay here a moment longer, but I had work to do.

Though I was trying to make a true effort to reconstruct my marriage, Olivia's lack of cooperation was tiring. I get it. I get that it's hard for her, but I was hoping she's start to come around soon. I didn't really want to work so late at night, but at this point, the more time I spent away from home, the easier it was for both of us. I just had to keep telling myself it would get easier to help keep the guilt of being away so much at bay.

When I walked into the house, all the lights were off except the overhead light in the kitchen. Nick sat in his usual post, an oversized leather chair near the front door, fiddling with his cell phone. "Hey," he said when I entered. "She's on the patio. She's been over there for about an hour. Had some wine, hasn't said a word, and I'm pretty sure she's been doing some crying," Nick explained.

I nodded, inhaling deeply. "Alright, thank you, Nick. We'll see you in the morning."

I tiptoed my way to her, trying not to startle her. A single candlelight perched on the glass top patio table danced around the darkened space, playfully outlining shadows. I walked around to the front of the couch to find Liv gazing into space with a glass of wine in her hand, a blanket draped around her body. Two empty bottles sat at her feet.

"Liv," I whispered. "You alright?"

Slowly, she shook her head, her eyes transfixed on the dead space in front of her. "I am the farthest from alright," she said with a slight slur.

I watched her for a minute. I was about to walk away when she spoke again.

"Everything makes perfect sense to me now," she started, sounding more lucid than she looked. "It's all so clear, now that I know what you are. The past, I mean. All the trips, Michael Drake's warning, all the company expansions, that time in Italy. I get it, all of it. Even though it disgusts me to imagine it, there's still so much more I want to know. Will you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"What I want to know?"

I hesitated. "What is it that you want to know?"

"Everything and anything. You've done so much lying, don't you think it's time to tell me the truth when I ask for it?"

I swallowed hard and sat down in the chair next to the couch. "Are you sure you want to know?"

She finally looked at me. Her eyes had no light, even with the soft candle casting a flame in them. "How many of these places do you own?" she started. "These brothels, these bars, these whore houses? How many of them do you bank roll from?"

There wasn't anything in my safe connecting me or identifying the locations here in the U.S. so I figured she must have just been asking on a hunch. How else would she have found out about those? "Eight."

"But you have connections overseas, don't you? How many places over there are yours?"

I shook my head. "None. I'm just used for my transportation and security services overseas. I don't hold any ownership in any foreign countries."

"How many girls?"

"I don't know those numbers exactly, but I'd say somewhere close to a hundred stateside and probably three to four times as many internationally."

"Your father passed this on to you?"

"No. I became interested in it in my youth. He had established a relationship with the Italians in hopes of simply expanding the family business. Through their humble hospitality, the Italians introduced me to a darker side of life and, at the time, I was hypnotized by the dollar signs that came along with them. I learned the system and I learned the laws, which helped me branch out to different countries, different rings. Since making the decision to branch, I haven't been able to find an exit."

"Was that even a question, getting out? It was so lucrative for you, you were getting away with it, why would you want out?"

"Because of you."

Liv scoffed, rolling her eyes. For the first time since we started this question-and-answer session, she didn't believe me. She had accepted my other answers as truth, which they were, but she wasn't buying that last line. If I was being completely honest with myself, I don't know if I did either.

"Have you ever," she paused, taking a drink of her wine. "Have you ever participated? In your youth, when you were introduced to the glamorous world of human trafficking, did you ever have sex with one of them?"

I hesitated heavily, knowing this one was going to hurt. "Yes," I whispered.

"More than one?"

"Liv--"

"Is that why you picked me?" she interrupted. Her voice broke and drops of anguish filled the brim of her eyes. "Is that why you liked me so much, because I was young like those girls?"

"Liv--"

"Did you target me like your foot soldiers target those girls? Do you plan on keeping me until I pay off some kind of a debt? Or is that debt revolving, like theirs? They can't ever pay off their debt. That's the truth, isn't it? There isn't any escape for them like there isn't any escape for me."

"Liv, please," I said louder, hoping to get a word in.

"No!" she yelled. "I have to know. You have to tell me everything because it's killing me. Not knowing is the worst feeling and I just have to know it all, no matter how much it hurts. Please, I have to know." She was sobbing behind each of her words. I went to console her, but she pulled away.

"I was so young," I started in a calmer voice, hoping it would soothe her slightly since she wasn't accepting a consoling embrace. "I was dumb and naïve and I stepped into a world that has no exit. I'm just as much a prisoner as you are. If I had known then what

I know now, I would never have," I swallowed hard. "I never would have signed my name on the dotted line."

"I just don't understand how you could see what they were doing to those girls and decide it was something you wanted to be a part of. They do the most heinous things to those poor, poor women and you thought it was something for you."

"It wasn't like that. Remember Italy? They mistook you for one of those women and you were so beautiful and so elegant. That's what I was introduced to. Beautiful, elegant women who didn't seem to be pressured or unwilling in anyway, like a high class escort service. I was under the impression that it was a high-quality, luxurious type of trade that was more acceptable overseas."

"Do you realize how much of an ass you just made yourself out to be?" Liv interrupted, wiping her cheeks with the backs of her hands.

"The deeper I got into it," I continued, not missing a beat. "The longer I worked for them, the harder it was to distance myself, the harder it was to say no, the more I learned about the business. They were smarter than me. They knew exactly what they were getting me into and I didn't have a fucking clue."

"So you follow one bad, detrimental decision up with another? You put my name down right next to yours and then think we can spend our entire lives together with you hiding it from me?"

"I tried, I tried not to fall for you. I tried to keep my distance, you know that. I knew what letting you into my life meant."

"Oh, that's nice," she mumbled condescendingly. "That's real nice."

"I didn't want this for you, but something powerful brought us together; something neither of us could contend with."

"Did that power make you a mute also, selectively I suppose? You did nothing. You had the power to do something, but you did nothing."

"You want to know why I was so attracted to you?" I blurted. "It wasn't because of your age. It was because you were pure. You were innocent in my eyes. You were something so different from the life I had built and I selfishly wanted that for myself. I wanted you to teach me. I only saw you and not what would happen to you if I pulled you into this. I just wanted the happiness everyone else gets."

"You never answered my question." She turned and looked me straight in the eye. "How many girls?"

I exhaled sharply, not breaking from her gaze. My stomach tumbled around in my gut. I cleared my throat. "Too many."

"That's not good enough. Tell me how many?" she asked again.

"Too many for me to count." I closed my eyes, looking away. There was the most wretched silence between us. I had never before said that out loud. I had only allowed myself to mentally linger over that fact a handful of times before banishing to the deepest places of my memory. "Liv, I was so young. You have to believe me, I was someone completely different then."

Her hand was over her mouth as if holding back the vomit. "And Bianca," she finally said after what seemed like a lifetime of the most torturous silence. "How does she play

into this?"

"Bianca?"

"I found her passport in your safe. The night I met her, she said you brought her out here. That was the exact word she used. She was one of them, wasn't she? One of the many?"

I nodded slowly, exhausted by my own fiendish confessions. "She was the last of them. Her and I had an actual relationship while she working. I brought her out here in hopes of saving her, I suppose, but she's been in the business so long, I couldn't do anything for her. There were no other women between Bianca and you."

Olivia turned her head. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

I shook my head slowly, leaning my elbows onto my knees. "No. I can only imagine how you're feeling now."

"We wanted to have kids, Cal. I will never, for the life of me, understand your thought process. What would prompt you to bring children into this world when you have this hanging over your head? It's bad enough that you put me through this, but kids? What if we would have had a girl? A little girl who would have grown up to be just like the women you're hurting? What if we would have had a boy? Would you have passed this business on to him when you got tired of facing yourself? Ugh, it just makes me so sick. So fucking sick, Cal. It's even worse to think that we were trying to have children and you still didn't have the balls to tell me. I had to find out on my own. I've thanked God every day since then that I'm not with child."

She was right. That fact alone made me a monster. "Liv, I love you. I would do anything to have you and to have things back the way they were." I didn't know what else to say at this point except to start digging myself out of my hole as best I could.

"Walk away. End it all. Give everything up. Show me how humble you can be and then maybe, maybe things could turn around for you, but I wouldn't count on it."

"I can't. It's not that easy."

"And neither is this," she mumbled. Setting her wine glass down on the table, she pulled the blanket over her shoulder and leaned over onto the arm of the couch. "I'm done. No more now. I'm going to sleep."

"Let me take you to bed." I stood up.

"Just leave me alone, please. I'm not coming to bed tonight."

"Liv," I started to plead before she interrupted me.

"Haven't we done enough tonight? I'm exhausted by this. I just want to sleep. Please, just go."

I watched her eyes close. I was tempted to pick her up and carry her to the room, but she was right. Some of the things I had said in the past few minutes had never left my lips before. Lies were just so much easier for me in the past, compare to the awful truth. I was honestly surprised at how easy it was for me to be so open about it all with her, having kept it under lock and key for so long.

I wondered how many more questions she would have, how many more confessions I'd be making. How much would I have to tell her? It wasn't that I was ashamed. It was the fact that I knew how it would make Olivia feel. Some of my confessions would break

her even more than I already had. Then what chance would I have of being with her?

I sighed, shaking my head at the idea of it. I didn't have a chance in hell of reconciling our relationship. The one thing she wanted me to do, relinquish my empire, wasn't a possibility. It would die along with me and that was the only way to end it, in death.

The office wasn't at all what I expected it to be. When I think of a private detective, I imagine Bogart in a film noir with a large-brim hat and masked in shadows, donning a cape-like trench coat. That was not at all what I walked into.

A young receptionist typed busily on her keyboard, hardly noticing me as I approached her desk. She was probably my age. I waited patiently, as she appeared to be hurrying to get her thoughts into an email before they passed her. "I'm sorry about that," she smiled when her fingers stopped moving. "How can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Mr. Noel," I said.

"Do you have an appointment?"

I shook my head. "No but I, uh, I couldn't," I hesitated. "I don't. If he's busy now, I can make an appointment for a later time. I thought I'd come in and see if he was free."

The woman smiled kindly and nodded. "Why don't I go see if he's free. He may have time to see you. What's your name?"

Lie. "Uh, Jessica White," I said with conviction.

"If you want to have a seat, Mrs. White, I'll be right back." She rose from her seat and disappeared behind a door a moment later. I fell into the stiff chair nudged up against the wall, suddenly feeling the strong urge to flee.

You can't leave. You've gotten this far. I looked over my shoulder, out the double glass doors of the office, half expecting to see someone watching me on the other side; the tail I've been trying to avoid. Nick thought I was in surgery. Callem didn't know I was here and I hoped to keep it that way. I was running out of plans and chances. Imagine if I was caught in this office now. I'd probably be put on house arrest.

The door opened and rather than the receptionist reappearing, I was greeted by a tall brawny man with rich dark skin and luminous white teeth. He held out his large hand as he approached. "Mrs. White, I'm Conrad Noel."

"Nice to meet you," I replied, standing. My hand was swallowed by his massive palm as we shook hands. "I hope I'm not a bother. If you're busy, I can come back later." At least I hope I can.

"No, no, not a problem," his deep voice resonated through his hand and up my arm. "You actually caught me at a good time. I'm not usually in the office. Today's your lucky day. Come on back, we'll talk."

I smiled weakly and followed him behind the door. "You're going to have to excuse the mess in my office," he said as he led me down a long hallway. "I'm not in much and if I would have known you were coming, I would have done some housekeeping."

"I would have made an appointment earlier but," I trailed off as we turned into his small den of an office. He wasn't lying when he claimed his office to be unkempt. A small suitcase sat open on the chair in the corner with a pair of slacks hanging out of it.

Dust covered a line of thick books on an old bookshelf. There were a few pictures of smiling children and a beautiful woman. A plaque hung on the wall next to a framed certificate. A mess of papers seemed to take life on what I assumed to be his desk, claiming stake to the entire surface and overflowing out of plastic black trays.

"Uh, have a seat." He pointed at the single chair facing his desk as he made his way around the other side and plopped into an exceptionally noisy chair, leaning back a little. "What brings you here today?"

What a loaded question. The things I could tell him, but I had to be sure he was willing to walk into the mess before I really opened up my mouth. I could see by the way he was looking at me that he was already trying to figure me out. That was probably one of the most important traits to have in his line of work; intuition. "Well, I've got a proposition for you." I said, clearing my throat. "I, um, I've found myself in a bit of trouble that I'd like to get out of but I don't think I can do it on my own."

Mr. Noel leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk top. "What kind of trouble?"

I sighed, looking down into my lap. "That's the thing. I can't really tell you, not until you agree to help me. Someone could be following me. Someone has been following me and listening to my phone calls and monitoring my email, which is why I couldn't set up an appointment. I think I was able to get here without a shadow, but I just don't know. I don't want to tell you anything in case they know I'm here. I don't want you to get into any trouble because of me."

This seemed to spike Mr. Noel's interest. He puckered his full lips and inhaled deeply before looking at me again. "Can you at least give me an idea of what you've gotten yourself into?"

"It's my husband. He's a very wealthy and powerful man."

"Mr. White?" He said with an undertone that signaled to me he knew I'd supplied him with a fake name.

"He owns a business and a small private airline," I continued, ignoring his jab. "He's got friends in high places and in the lowest of places. He's the reason I couldn't call you. He's the reason why my email is being monitored. I found out he's got some shady dealings and that's not even the right word. I found out and I tried to leave him, but he threatened my family. He threatened to blackmail me and make it look like I was a part of the whole operation all along, which I don't doubt he has the power to do. Ever since I stumbled onto the whole thing, he's had a man taking me to and from work. He's had my phone tapped. He's monitored my spending. I can't breathe anymore. He won't let me leave. I can't divorce him. I'm trapped and I need to find a way out, but with the amount of eyes and ears I have on me, I don't know how to even start."

Mr. Noel leaned back in his chair, rocking nosily. "What are you trying to get out of this? You want to disappear? You want to get divorced without the consequences?"

"Actually, I want to put a stop to it. I want to make sure he pays for what he's done and to put the whole thing to an end. I need to find a way to bring down the operation without getting myself in trouble."

"Is this about money?"

I shook my head. "I've got a good job, a really good job. I don't necessarily need him

to survive, financially that is. Plus I have a lot to lose, which keeps me in this predicament. I've worked too hard to get where I am and it's selfish of me to say it but I can't," I sighed. "I can't compromise it."

"How old are you?"

I studied him for a second as if I could see him piecing the puzzle together mentally. "I'm 28."

"How long have you been married?"

"A little over four years. My husband and I have been together for almost seven."

"What kind of work do you do?"

I shook my head. "As much trouble as I could be in for being here, I can only imagine what he'd do to you. Unless you're willing to take on my case, I can't give you much more information. It's in your best interest, I assure you."

"What kind of trouble would you be in? Does he get physical with you?"

I felt my chin tremble, but I swallowed that down. "He has, yes. You see, he has much, much more to lose than I do. At this point, despite his declared love for me, he's desperate to keep his secret safe and is forced to do things he wouldn't normally do to protect it."

"Sounds like you're defending him."

I paused for a long moment, trying to pinpoint my exact reasons for protecting his actions. "You asked me my age. I've never given my age to anyone so easily. My husband and I have quite an age gap and for that reason I've always shied away from that question, afraid people would judge me, call me a gold-digger or a trophy wife. I'm none of those things. Like I told you a minute ago, I could do fine off my own income. The money, the cars, the clothes, the luxury, it was all a perk of being with the man I was so blindly and irrevocably in love with. I was so young when I met him. You know what that's like, don't you?"

I turned and looked at the photo of the picturesque family on his bookshelf. His gaze followed mine before I turned back to face him. "You have a family. You know what that feeling is to love someone so much that you can't think straight. You lose words and your breath and suddenly the world starts to orbit around them. You don't see yourself in any other place than in their arms or by their side. I still want all of those things, but I can't, not with what I know. I'm still under his spell and I don't want to be anymore. And it's that spell that drives me to defend him, unconsciously more than anything."

"You're right, I do know that feeling," Mr. Noel started. "I've been married almost 20 years now. I used to have that feeling the way you described. Not so much now, which doesn't mean I don't love my wife. Just means it fades over time. You get older, fatter, more comfortable until one day you look at her, see her smile the way she used to when we were younger and it all comes back to you."

"I wish I could hate him with my whole heart. I wish I could erase it all, knowing now this is what it's come to."

"He must have done a number on you."

He and I peered into each other's eyes for a long silent moment. "Are you going to help me?"

"How much homework have you done on my services?"

"Well, I've read up on professional investigators before. I know there are different areas of specialty. I know you're not a police officer so technically you can't arrest anyone or obtain financial documents, but you can tap or search for other documents, right? You can find a paper trail somewhere to prove he's guilty and not me."

Mr. Noel shrugged. "Well maybe. If your husband is really as powerful as you claim, if you were with him for so many years without knowing, that could make it harder and in this day and age, paper trails sometimes don't even exist."

"Data trails? Emails, text messages, can you get into his PC? I'm fairly certain he has a separate computer for all that stuff. What if I could get a hold of it?"

At this, the man raised his brows playfully. "That would be a good start. Are you saying you have it?" He gestured to my bag, the handle of which I was clutching tightly.

"No, but I think I could get it if you think it would help."

"It certainly wouldn't hurt, not unless you get caught, right? You might be concerned about my safety, which you probably don't need to be, but I'm concerned about yours. If I'm going to work with you, you've got to understand a few things. I am obligated by law, and by my own morals, to report any illegal activities you may or may not decide to make yourself a part of in an effort to frame your husband, if that is in fact what you're trying to accomplish. I will not perform any illegal activities for you, which includes assault, impersonation, making or claiming fraudulent statements, or aiding and abetting. This also means if I think your safety is threatened or jeopardized, I'll have to involve the police."

I sat for a long moment, holding on to his last few words. I swallowed hard. What if we get so close in an investigation and Mr. Noel sees a bruise? He could ruin everything. I can take a few slaps and punches if I get the chance to nail his ass to the wall. It was too risky.

I nodded firmly and then stood from my seat. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Noel." I mumbled, heading for the door.

"Wait, hold on." Even with my back turned, I could tell he had stood up, thanks to the cackling symphony his office chair played. "Just, come back. Have a seat. We can work this out."

Hesitantly, I turned back. "This isn't going to be easy, I know that much," I said, stopping short of the chair. "But once we get started, there's no way for us to just stop. We have to commit. I can't have you backing out just because I turn up one day with a fat lip or a black eye. I'm willing," I paused. "I'm willing to tough it out if it means our hard work will pay off. I have to trust that you'll do the same or I walk now."

Mr. Noel shook his head, shifting his weight. "This isn't how I do things."

I shrugged. "That's fine. Do you know someone who can help me?"

Again, we had an epic stare down, Mr. Noel's eyes much heavier than mine. He was hunched over the desk, leaning on his fisted hands. I could see I'd put him in a predicament. He exhaled heavily, letting a low quake grumble in his throat. Pushing himself upward abruptly, Mr. Noel strode over to me. "You know, I don't much care for what I'm about to do, but I can't let you walk out of here. I can't have you on my

conscience. I'll play by your rules, but you better follow mine and that's not a request."

He held out his hand again. We shook on it, neither of us cracking a victory smirk. "Now, you gonna tell me your real name?"

"Olivia," I mumbled. "Olivia Reinbeck. Thank you for your help, Mr. Noel."

"Please, call me Conrad." He sighed heavily. "Now I think you have some explaining to do."

I nodded firmly. "Yes, quite a bit actually."

I got started telling Conrad the whole twisted story. He didn't flinch at any detail. He sat stoic and unaffected as if his line of work pointed him down these types of heinous paths more often than not. "I haven't figured out how it all works, but I have a good idea. I found these brochures," I dug the pamphlets out of my bag. "They lure girls in this way, promising an education, a home, a future. They're in different languages so they target a number of different countries. They trick them into giving away all their information, handing over their passports and then they put them into this business."

Conrad sifted through the papers daintily with his monstrous mitts. "Is this what set you off to begin with?"

I nodded. "I looked up the organization online. Their web page has the exact same information as the pamphlet. The school is real. It's in London. There are pictures and courses listed online and testimonials. I think he must have an agreement with the school or something, I don't know. Maybe they don't even know he's doing this; using their institution as false advertising."

"And from here, you started becoming more suspicious of him."

I nodded again. "He has this safe in his office that I'd never seen into before. I never had any reason to. I think his assistant, Red, was in there and hadn't secured it before he left. It was open, I went in there and found all emails he'd printed, the passports, the videos I was telling you about, it was all in there. I'm certain he's either moved all of it or torched it by now."

"You left him?"

"Yeah. I went to stay at a hotel. He came looking for me there, Callem did. I told him I didn't want to see him again, that I hadn't told anyone anything, and that I wasn't coming home. He didn't take that very well because when I went to my sister, Erin's house for dinner, he was there with Red, holding a gun at Erin's head."

"Did you call the police?"

I scoffed. "Are you kidding me? Half of his men are former officers. He's got the PD in his back pocket, right next to his fat wallet, two things I can't compete with."

"Your sister kept quiet?"

"Callem warned her of what would happen if the police showed up at our house or his office. She's very concerned about me, but I've just been playing it off like Callem and I are fine and we're going to counseling and that we need some time to ourselves to work out our marital problems."

"And she believes it?"

I shrugged. "She hasn't broached the subject since, but what else can she do? She's scared and confused. She doesn't know, though. I haven't told anyone except you. At

this point, Callem trusts me, well enough when I tell him that I haven't told anyone, he doesn't doubt me. I just don't know how long that will last."

Conrad shifted his weight in his chair. "What about your parents?"

I shook my head. "Erin's parents. I'm adopted. They don't know anything at all. I haven't brought them into it."

"Is there a possibility that you can get your hands on those documents again?"

I shook my head. "It's the computer I really want, but I don't know where he keeps. Most likely at his office, but I don't know for certain. Something that valuable and incriminating, I wouldn't imagine he keeps it too far away."

"I'm not saying I've worked on this kind of case before, but with most underground, backdoor dealings, you find the basic chain of command, okay?" Conrad leaned on his desk with his elbows. "Your husband is the boss. Sounds like your man Red is the underboss, the boss' right-hand man. Under Red, you'll find the generals. There's no telling how many of them there are, but the general would be responsible for owning and managing the brothels and the women. Generals have majors, pimps maybe or just workers at the clubs, you know, getting the word out, wrangling clients, that type of stuff. Then at the very bottom, you find the foot soldiers. You'll find these guys luring the women, moving them from one location to another, transportation. We're going to have to find a way to link the boss to these foot soldiers. If we can find that connection, the other ranks will fall in line. A lot of the time, though, these foot soldiers don't even know who the general is in their area, let alone the boss. If we could identify a general, we might have a shot, but I think our best bet will be to get to Red. He's going to be privy to everything we need to know. Do you know Red's real name?"

I shook my head. "No. No I asked him before and every time he tells me I don't want to know or he doesn't remember or something like that."

"Okay, what about a photograph?"

"At home. He was at our wedding."

"I'll need your husband's social security number, all his contact numbers, addresses, former addresses," he handed me a sheet of paper. "Anything you can think of that might be helpful would be lovely."

I looked at my watch. I'd been here way too long. "I'm going to have to bring this back to you. Here's his business card to get you started." I handed Conrad the sleek card. "I've got to get going or someone's going to come looking for me."

"What about you? Your information? When are you going to be back?"

I shrugged. "It's hard telling. I've had to find shadows in Callem's defenses to get here today so as soon as I find another opening, I'll come back. I can't have you calling me or emailing." I handed him my business card. "Perhaps you can pose as a patient if we get desperate for meetings. I'll try to come back next week."

"You work for the Children's Hospital of Los Angeles?" Conrad asked, studying my card. "You're a nurse?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm an oncologist."

Conrad smirked. "You weren't kidding when you said you had a good job. 28-years old with a PhD. You don't meet one like you every day. Well, I'll do what I can with this

information and I hope to have something when I see you next, Dr. Reinbeck.”

We shook hands again. “Thank you, Conrad.”

It felt like a bolder had been lifted from my shoulders as I walked out of Conrad's office and sneaked back to the hospital the same way I had come. I felt like I was making progress and I could nearly feel freedom again. I was about to set fire to everything.

Set Fire

Coming soon, "**Set Fire**", the stunning sequel to "**Hush**".

Callem's secret is exposed and Olivia has the fuel to set herself free from him. With the help of Conrad Noel, her newly appointed private investigator, the game is on. But when twists and turns bring forth dangerous men, will Olivia's vision of justice prove to be too much for her to handle? Can Olivia continue to bat away her fleeting love for Callem? Will the disgust in her husband's secret life mask her deepest feelings for him? Find out how their story ends in "Set Fire".

* * *

"Where are we?" I mumbled cautiously.

"We are in the Catskills. It's a shame you weren't up a bit earlier. You missed a breathtaking sunset," Ronin replied as he moved about the kitchen, heels clicking on the wooden floors.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Oh." Ronin glanced at his clunky watch. "It's been about fifteen hours, I'd say."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Does anyone know I'm here?"

"I actually just got off the phone with your husband. We had a riveting conversation. He wanted to speak to you, but I told him you couldn't be disturbed. Maybe we'll have a chance to talk to him later." His British accent didn't make him seem as dubious as I imagined him to be.

"And these clothes? This dress and shoes. How did I get into them?"

Ronin stopped what he was doing to flash a wicked smile. "Very carefully, I assure you." He stood beside a beautiful wet bar stocked with a number of bottles, from which Ronin was carefully making a selection. "Oh don't look so startled. One of the girls let you borrow that little number. She put it on you herself. You see, my clumsy, barbaric hired muscle tore right through the shirt you were wearing when he moved you in here. I'm terribly sorry. I hope you weren't overly fond of the garment."

"What am I doing here?" I asked abruptly.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked, leisurely pouring himself an amber liquor into a short glass.

"Why am I here?"

"You're collateral, Dr. Reinbeck. Are you sure I can't get you anything to drink? You look a little on edge," he joked with a smile.

"Collateral? I don't understand. I thought you and Callem were in business together."

"Let's just say things haven't been smooth sailing for a while between Mr. Tate and I, but I don't want to bore you with the details." Ronin moved to one of the arm chairs, urging me to sit in the neighboring one.

"You've obviously done your research," I started as I eased into the chair. "You called

me Dr. Reinbeck and not Mrs. Tate, a mistake commonly made by Callem's other business partners. I'm afraid, however, there were some holes in your research. If you would have looked hard enough, you probably would have seen that it hasn't exactly been smooth sailing for Callem and I as of late either. I'm not sure I'm the collateral that you think I am. He probably doesn't consider me as valuable as he used to."

Cupping his glass in his mitt-like paws, Ronin swirled the liquor arrogantly. "You make the mistake of thinking I give a shit. He may choose to fulfill my request and get you back. He may not. It's up to him. He and I work in a competitive market, Doctor, and I'm in the business of making money. There is another Callem Tate somewhere who would gladly do my bidding. Whether he plays along with my game or not, I'll eventually get what I want; what I need."

"You make it sound fairly easy to find replacement. Why not just do that? Why the theatrics? I'd say cut your losses and move on, keep the money and the women moving."

Ronin smiled. "You know a thing or two about this business, do you?"

I shook my head easily. "I don't claim to be an expert, but yes, I've recently acquired some information from Callem. Up until this point, I wasn't sure what I was going to do with it."

"Finding a replacement, my dear, is exactly what I'm trying to avoid. Sure, there is another Callem out there, but I'd much rather stick with Callem I already have. You see, he has what we like to call 'tenure'. He's experienced, trustworthy, reliable. It's hard finding that these days. Hard, not impossible. I'd rather just duke it out with him, come to an agreement, and continue on. You see. That's why you're here."

"I'm still not sure that's enticing enough for him. What are you going to do to me if he doesn't hold up his end of the deal?" I asked, taking a quick count of the thugs lurking in the corners of the room, not that I could do anything to defend myself against a single one of them. "I don't peg you for a murder, Ronin."

"You're right. Bloodshed is not my normal course of action. That's a fate I don't normal deal out so rest assured, you will not be dying tonight. At least, not by my hand or my order."

"Then what?" I shrugged. "What's the end game here?"

"Well, I have to get my product somehow, right?" He continued to spin his drink around his glass with a flick of his wrist. His gluttonous eyes fluttered over me for too long a moment. "You're a young, beautiful, high class woman, Olivia. Not too worn out, I'll assume. You'd probably fetch me what four girls would normally cost," he said devilishly.

My skin crawled and I felt my chin starting to tremble. I had no reason to doubt him. I inhaled slowly so not to make an audible gasp. "You can't do that. You'd never get away with it."

Tipping his head back, Ronin laughed. "You underestimate me. Oh, that's precious. I may not be a murder, Olivia, but I can hold my own with the worst of them." His smile and laughter were gone as his face turned a cold stone. "You see, I can do that. I can get away with it. I could drop you in the deepest, darkest hole of Europe's underground, somewhere not even the mighty Callem Tate could find you. No, Olivia, I've got the

perfect spot for a little filly like you and they wouldn't treat you as kindly as I have. I'd whore you out to every wagging cock that came knocking. You'd be juggled around by so many men your disease-riddled innards will slowly start spewing out from between your legs. You'll be a lifeless shell so tormented by your experiences you may not even recognize the skin you live in. You'll forget how to fight. You'll forget how to scream. You'll forget who you are. Don't ever think I can't get away with it because I will gladly prove you wrong."

I sucked in a deep breath as a tear fell down my cheek.

Ronin's cell phone rang. "Oh, speak of the devil himself." He answered the phone and put it to his ear. "Callem. Wonderful hearing from you again. I was just having the most lovely conversation with your wife. She is a terribly wonderful little thing, isn't she? Would you like to speak to her?" He held out the phone for me. "It's for you."

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