

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE TELL ME SERIES

CHARLOTTE
BYRD



DANGEROUS

WEDLOCKED TRILOGY BOOK ONE

ENGAGEMENT

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dangerously addictive

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ABOUT DANGEROUS ENGAGEMENT (WEDLOCKED TRILOGY BOOK 1)

Not long ago, there was nothing I couldn't have. Now, I don't even have the choice of whom to marry.

To save my father's life and our family's legacy, I have to marry a cruel man who wants me only as a trophy.

Henry Asher was just supposed to be a summer fling, but we fell in love. We thought we would be together forever, but life got in the way. After we broke up, I vowed to never tell Henry the truth about my engagement.

What happens when the lies that were supposed to save me start to drown me?

Henry Asher

I didn't always have wealth or power. There was even a time when I didn't want any of that.

Then I met her: Aurora Tate is an heiress to a billion-dollar fortune. She grew up on Park Avenue, had a house in the Hamptons, and skied in Aspen. Our first summer together was magical. We were naive enough to think that love was going to be enough.

Now, she's forced to marry a man she hates to save her father's life.

To get her back and to make her my wife, I need to become the man she needs me to be.

Can I do it in time?

Read the FIRST book to the addictive WEDLOCKED series by bestselling author Charlotte Byrd.

What readers are saying about Charlotte Byrd:

"Extremely captivating, sexy, steamy, intriguing, and intense!" ★★★★★

"Addictive and impossible to put down." ★★★★★

"I can't get enough of the turmoil, lust, love, drama and secrets!" ★★★★★

"Fast-paced romantic suspense filled twists and turns, danger, betrayal and so much more." ★★★★★

"Decadent, delicious, & dangerously addictive!" ★★★★★

PRAISE FOR CHARLOTTE BYRD

“BEST AUTHOR YET! Charlotte has done it again! There is a reason she is an amazing author and she continues to prove it! I was definitely not disappointed in this series!!” ★★★★★

“LOVE!!! I loved this book and the whole series!!! I just wish it didn't have to end. I am definitely a fan for life!!! ★★★★★

“Extremely captivating, sexy, steamy, intriguing, and intense!” ★★★★★

“Addictive and impossible to put down.” ★★★★★

“What a magnificent story from the 1st book through book 6 it never slowed down always surprising the reader in one way or the other. Nicholas and Olive's paths crossed in a most unorthodox way and that's how their story begins it's exhilarating with that nail biting suspense that keeps you riding on the edge the whole series. You'll love it!” ★★★★★

“What is Love Worth. This is a great epic ending to this series. Nicholas and Olive have a deep connection and the mystery surrounding the deaths of the people he is accused of murdering is to be read. Olive is one strong woman with deep convictions. The twists, angst, confusion is all put together to make this worthwhile read.” ★★★★★

“Fast-paced romantic suspense filled with twists and turns, danger, betrayal, and so much more.” ★★★★★

“Decadent, delicious, & dangerously addictive!” - Amazon Review ★★★★★

“Titillation so masterfully woven, no reader can resist its pull. A MUST-BUY!” -
Bobbi Koe, Amazon Review ★★★★★

“Captivating!” - Crystal Jones, Amazon Review ★★★★★

“Sexy, secretive, pulsating chemistry...” - Mrs. K, Amazon Reviewer
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She writes a balanced book with brilliant characters. Well done!” -Amazon
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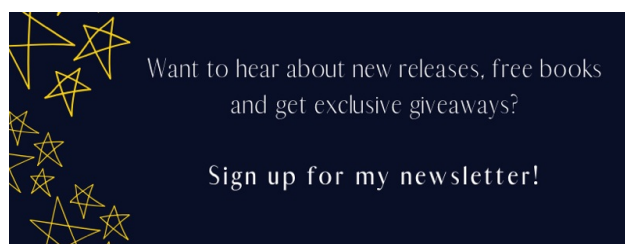
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“My oh my....Charlotte has made me a fan for life.” - JJ, Amazon Reviewer
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“Wow. Just wow. Charlotte Byrd leaves me speechless and humble... It
definitely kept me on the edge of my seat. Once you pick it up, you won't put it
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ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 600,000 books and has been translated into five languages.

She lives near Palm Springs, California with her husband, son, and a toy Australian Shepherd who hates water. Charlotte is addicted to books and Netflix and she loves hot weather and crystal blue water.

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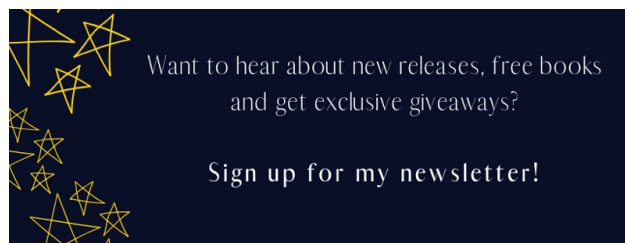
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AURORA

I watch him from afar. I know him even though I don't even know his name. He probably wants everything that's mine. He imagines that my life is wonderful and fun and full of possibilities that he could only dream of. What he doesn't know is how boring it can be or how isolating.

I have my parents, my friends, my parents extended social circle, and even my grandparents. But none of them really know me. I wish they did.

Not even my therapist knows me.

Everywhere I go, I wear a false face and it makes my life a farce.

My makeup and dress are my armor.

Thousand dollar shoes. Two thousand dollar bags. Three thousand dollar dresses.

My closet is as big as most one-bedroom apartments in New York City. I can buy anything and therefore, I want nothing.

My therapist thinks that I'm depressed. She diagnosed me with anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder and prescribed meds that I don't want to take. Maybe I am depressed. But who wouldn't be? I'm in my mid-twenties and I can be anything I want. The only problem is that I don't want to do anything.

During the year I stay busy by going to school. The classes give me some structure to the day.

I take four each semester and between that, studying, the gym, and the weekly spa session, I manage to stay busy enough to forget how bored I am.

On the weekends, my girlfriends, the ones working sixty hours a week at non-paying internships for famous designers, artists, and gallery owners insist that I pull myself away from my books and my boring grad-school “friends” and hang with them instead. Their parties are usually two-day affairs that require helicopter rides and mansions in far-flung places. It’s the stuff of dreams, or in my case, nightmares.

They say *friends* using quotation marks because they know that those people are not really my friends at all. They're just people I know. What my other friends don't know, however, is that they aren't really my friends either. They are just people I have known longer.

This guy with his hazel eyes, casual smile, and cheap clothes probably thinks the same thing of me as everyone else. That I'm just a spoiled little girl who has had everything handed to her, that I have never worked hard for anything, and I will never deserve anything I have.

I don't blame him. A part of me thinks the same way. What else can you think? My father owns a media empire and has dominated New York society ever since he came onto the scene in the 1980s. He owns hundreds of buildings and homes in New York and around the world. He's someone every businessman wants to be but can't because he will never step down.

I'm his oldest child and he wants to groom me to take over, but I know that that will never happen. He is not the type to retire. He's not the type to fade away. Besides, I have no interest in running an empire. I want to carve out my own place in this world, what that is exactly I do not know yet.

Neither of my parents understand this, even though they should. They both came from nothing and they both grew Tate Media into what it is today. My mother was not the type to stay at home. She is Tate's Chief Financial Officer and that's just scratching the surface of what she does there.

My parents are Tate Media. They have built it from scratch, buying up one distressed radio station at a time. They know the ins and outs of the whole business and, despite all of that, they have never made me feel welcome there.

I have spent one long and miserable summer there during my sophomore year with both of them looking over my shoulder and micro-managing my every

move. After that, I said no more and promised myself that I would never work there again.

The guy glances at me. I sit back in the lounge and point my toes. I take a sip of my margarita, pursing my lips just so. I adjust my Chanel sunglasses and oversized floppy hat to both hide my gaze and to get a better look at him.

He's cute enough and probably witty, to a degree, but I wish that people weren't so predictable. I know exactly what he's going to say before he says it. I know exactly what he's going to compliment me on and what he's going to pay attention to. There is no surprise and without that, he will be just like a hundred others I've met who did not hold my interest.

He walks up to me slowly. I brace myself for a boring pick-up line. He looks deep into my eyes, so deeply in fact that I can't look away. I pull my sunglasses to the bridge of my nose and wait for him to open his mouth. His lips curl at the corners, but only slightly.

"Have you ever read Flannery O'Connor?"

I sit back in my seat, taken aback. Hmm...this is interesting.

"Of course," I say, raising one eyebrow.

"She's one of my favorite writers," he says, spreading his shoulders out widely. He holds a mop in one hand and with the other runs his fingers through his hair.

The confidence he exudes is overwhelming, and a little off-putting. "Why are you asking about her?"

"Well, I was just reading one of her stories this morning before work, *Good Country People*. You know it?"

I nod.

"Really?" he asks as if he doesn't believe me.

He is challenging me, which is not something that usually happens. No, let me amend that. That's not something that has *ever* happened.

"It's about Joy, a thirty-two-year-old atheist and a PhD student of philosophy who lives with her small-minded mother," I say, focusing my eyes directly on his. "Joy doesn't have a leg because she lost it in a childhood shooting accident. A Bible salesman comes to see them and her mother believes that he is good

country people, as they say. Then he invites Joy out for a date and that's when things get, let's just say interesting."

He raises his eyebrows and takes a step away from me.

"Are you surprised?" I ask.

"Yes, to tell you the truth I am. Pleasantly."

"Why is that?" I ask.

"It's pretty obscure," he says with a pronounced shrug.

I fold my arms across my chest and raise my chin in the air in defiance.

"Did you bring it up to teach me a lesson?" I ask. "Maybe make me feel bad, or stupid even?"

He shakes his head. When I look into his eyes, I can't look away. There's something in them that pulls me in, even convincing me that he didn't mean it that way at all. It was a genuine attempt to make a connection.

"While they are on their date, the Bible salesman persuades her to go up in the loft and to take off her prosthetic leg," he says. His words come out smoothly, naturally even. "He then shows her the inside of one of his Bibles that contains a bottle of whiskey, condoms, and cards with naked women on them."

"When she says no to his advance," I finish the story for him, "the Bible salesman tells her that he collects fake legs and takes off with hers."

"What do you like about the story?" he asks.

"Who said that I liked it?" I ask him.

He smiles.

"You have to."

"I have to?" I ask.

"You know it so intimately and innately that they must've made an imprint on your soul," he says.

I gaze into his eyes. I have lived for twenty-five years and not once have I ever spoken with another human being about the existence of a soul. Yet here is a stranger, a simple worker on my father's yacht, who speaks of it as if it's second nature, as if it's as real as gravity.

"I think what I like about it, and what I like about Flannery O'Connor's work in general is her sense of irony," I say. "It's comedic. The title of the story is

Good Country People, and that's exactly what her mother thinks the Bible salesman is. And yet he is the furthest thing from that. And even she, with her advanced degree, is someone who should know better, but she doesn't. It's almost funny. But then again, my own mother thinks I have a perverse sense of humor."

"I think we might have that in common," he says.

Our voices die down and all we are left with is a sweet silence that is both comforting and comfortable. I want to stay in this moment forever but we are quickly interrupted.

"Hey, you missed one hell of a lunch! Did you get some of that alone time you wanted?" Ellis Holte asks. She plops down on the lounge next to me and asks the guy who I've been talking to for a refill of her drink.

"No, he doesn't do that," I interject. But he just shrugs his shoulders and says he will get it for her anyway.

"Are you seriously at this point, already?" she asks.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about," she says, pointing to her index finger adorned with a three-carat diamond ring in my face. It's not an engagement ring, it's a *just because* ring. "Are you already messing around with the *help*? I thought we would only be doing that when we are seven years into boring marriages, not while we are still single."

"I'm not messing around with anyone," I say sternly.

I don't even know his name I note to myself. I run my tongue over my lower lip and repress the desire to talk to him again. Why do I even care?

Why am I so interested all of a sudden?

He is one of the only people that, no correct that, he is *the* only person who I have met who hasn't bored me. I couldn't predict anything that was going to come out of his mouth and I want more of that.

Unfortunately, I don't see him again until later that night. His boss is watching his every move to make sure that he is doing a good job cleaning all of the decks of my father's boat. Of course, I could go up and talk to him myself, but I'm not quite ready to go that far out of my comfort zone.

After spending the whole day drinking, talking, and reading magazines, the girls are ready to shower, do their hair, and go out for a night on the town. Begrudgingly, I go through the motions as well. I finish before the rest and take a circle around the yacht, hoping to run into him again.

Him. The guy whose name I don't even know.

Though I don't see him, I do see the manager. Mr. Madsen is in his sixties and has worked on my father's boat, overseeing all personnel, for as long as I can remember.

"Mr. Madsen, do you happen to know where I can find the guy who was cleaning the decks earlier today?" I ask as casually as possible.

If he wants to give me a knowing smile, he doesn't. Mr. Madsen is the epitome of professionalism.

"We had a few people working that position today. Henry Asher, Tom Cedar, and Elliot Dickinson."

"Um, he was about six feet tall with broad shoulders and thick dark hair."

"Oh, yes, you're referring to Henry Asher. He is probably downstairs in the crew quarters."

"Thank you very much," I say, going straight to the staircase.

Appalled, Mr. Madsen rushes over to me and blocks my way.

"I will, of course, get him to come upstairs to see you, Miss Tate," he says quickly. "If you don't mind waiting in the living room."

I don't really want to wait, but I decide to go along with it. The guests are not supposed to go down to the crew quarters. It has been that way since the beginning of time. Besides, I don't really want my friends to see me going down there anyway.

Before I have the chance to glance at my watch for the second time in five minutes, he appears in the doorway. He looks just as tall, dark, and handsome as he did earlier today, only this time the angles in his face and his muscles look even more defined as a result of the tan settling deeper into his skin.

"Hi," he says, hanging his head just a little, before turning his eyes up to mine.

"Hi," I say quietly.

“You wanted to see me?” His hair falls slightly into his face as he leans on the side of the wall like some sort of modern day James Dean.

What the hell do I say now? This is the first time I have ever even made an inkling of a first move on a guy. It feels foreign and unnatural and yet exciting at the same time.

“I was just wondering,” I say slowly, “if you wanted to join me ashore tonight?”

He raises his eyebrows before smiling out of the corner of his mouth.

“Of course,” he says confidently. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I was going to go out with my girlfriends. We’ll probably go dancing or something like that. Nothing is set in stone.”

Henry takes a few steps closer and sits down on the couch right next to me. I turn my body toward his so that our knees are nearly touching.

“Well, if it's not set in stone,” he says, “what do you think about doing something else instead?”

“Like what?”

“How about dinner at one of my favorite taco stands? Followed by a few drinks at a shitty but incredibly fun dive bar?”

Anyone else in his position would try to impress me by taking me to some fancy five-star restaurant and fumble through the wine list. Anyone else would try to pretend that they were a lot more worldly than he is, even though we both know that he works crew on my father’s boat.

But he doesn’t.

I am intrigued and surprised by his audacity. He is a breath of fresh air that’s so intoxicating, it leaves me disoriented.

HENRY

At first, I thought that she was just like the rest of them. Rich, spoiled, and completely disconnected from reality. I had no interest in talking to her. Yes, she is pretty, gorgeous even, but there's more to a woman than beauty, or there should be.

But as I watched her that morning, I saw that she was different from her friends. She didn't laugh as much, it was cursory at best. She smiled even less. It was like she was being forced to be there. It was like she was only complying with them.

But it's her boat, or rather it's her father's yacht. How different could she be? It's hard to explain what came over me that afternoon, when I saw her sitting there on the deck all by herself while her friends were inside nibbling on their salads, getting drunk on rosé, and taking selfies.

Why didn't she join them?

What is she reading on that tablet of hers?

It would have to be something stupid, right? There's no way she could know anything about *real* literature.

That's why I approached her in the first place; as a joke.

I wanted to say something meaningful and being who I am, Flannery O'Connor was the only thing that came to mind. And that's when things got interesting. An obscure 20th century short-story writer somehow opened the door for me to someone I didn't even have an interest in talking to.

After her friends came back, and Mr. Madsen gave me a stern lecture about interacting with the owner's daughter, especially in such a casual manner, he put me on downstairs duty cleaning all the bunk rooms, floors, toilets, and every other dirty job he could think of. I didn't see her again for the rest of the day until she called me upstairs and asked me to go out with her.

She asked me out on a date even though she did it in such a way that it wasn't supposed to look like a date. She asked me to go out with the whole group as if we were friends, and as if I could give a shit about anyone there besides her.

No, she is the only one that I am interested in. She is the only one that I want to get to know.

We take a dinghy over from the yacht to shore, and on the way, Ellis Holte whispers into Aurora's ear, occasionally glancing over at me. I can't really hear what she's saying over the sound of the boat splitting the waves and its roaring motor. I can only hope that she doesn't change her mind. When we get to shore, she takes a step toward me and grabs my hand. I text Lyft, a ride-share app, on my phone and leave Ellis and her other dumbfounded friends alone on the dock.

"So, is this your favorite place to eat?" Aurora asks, looking at the outside of the place with a tilt to her head.

I laugh. "I know that it doesn't look like much but trust me, this is the place for the best fish tacos in the whole of the Hamptons."

She looks around the place, not exactly impressed. I do have to admit that Jack's Crab Shack has seen better days. They used to have a place to sit inside, but one of the big winter storms flooded the place and they never reopened that part to the public.

Now, the restaurant is something of a fast food joint. You order what you want through a glass window and pick up the food at another window. There are about ten wooden picnic tables out front where you can bury your feet in the sand and all of them are occupied. She doesn't know what to order, so I order for her.

By the time our tacos are ready one of the picnic tables clears out. Taking a sip of her Sprite, she looks up at me and shakes her head.

"What?" I ask, shrugging my shoulders. She shakes her head again and bites

into her fish taco.

As soon as she swallows, I can tell that I have converted her to my side.

“Are those delicious?” I ask. She nods vigorously and quickly takes one more bite and then another and another.

Once her taco disappears before my eyes, she reaches for mine. At first, I protest but she shakes her head and puts her index finger up to stop me and I quickly give in.

After she's done, she takes a few more sips of her drink and gets up. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” she says. “I didn’t mean to eat your whole dinner.”

“Yes, you did.” I smile. I nudge her and she nudges me back.

“Come on. Let me make it up to you.”

I follow her to the back of the line, which has grown substantially since the last time we stood in it.

“I can't believe you just ate my dinner,” I say, shaking my head. “What the hell was that about?”

“I was hungry,” she says, tilting her head and smiling widely.

“Still, that's no excuse for lack of manners.”

“Lack of manners?” she asks. “You just took me on a date to one of the dingiest places ever!”

“So what? It’s delicious. You, me, and everyone in this line knows it. You ate both your dinner and mine in five bites.”

“Yes, I'm not arguing with that,” she says.” All that I'm saying is that it’s not the kind of first date that I'm usually used to.”

“Did you ever eat like that on any of your other first dates?” I ask.

She shakes her head from side to side.

“And how many of those first dates resulted in second and third dates?” I ask.

She starts to laugh.

“What's so funny?” I ask.

“Well, you seem to be so certain that there is going to be a second date here.”

“I am.”

“And why is that?”

I don't have an answer. I just look into her eyes and lose myself there. She opens her mouth just a little bit to say something else and I can't help but reach for it.

I touch her lower lip with my thumb, parting her lips slightly. I move an inch closer. My hand runs down her neck and then up toward her hair. I tip my head toward hers and open my mouth.

When our lips touch, my tongue searches for hers. I bury my hands in her hair, tugging slightly.

She opens her mouth wider and kisses me again. I taste the salty air and the warmth of her body all at once. I wrap my arms around her waist and feel her fingers and nails digging into my back. She sends shivers down my spine that make my knees weak.

Who are you? I wonder. And where have you been all of my life?

AURORA

The kiss takes me completely by surprise and yet it feels like the most natural thing in the world. The moment is just right. His lips are soft and effervescent. His hands are deliberate and knowing. Tugging at my hair, he runs his fingers softly down my neck. Each one of his moves makes my breath quicken just a little bit, following the beat of my heart.

“Who are you?” I ask him when we pull away from each other.

My eyes focus deeply on his. There are specks of green and yellow and blue in there and they all twinkle under the harsh fluorescent lights of the taco stand.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“I am Henry Asher. I am twenty-seven. I live in New York City. I grew up in Montauk, not too far from here, in a two-bedroom house with my mother. She still lives there. Montauk is a place that no one ever really leaves so moving to New York a few years ago is one of my proudest accomplishments. That and getting my short story published in the *New Yorker*. Your turn.”

My mouth drops open. I stare at him in disbelief.

No one is this dishonest with a total stranger. Why isn't he trying to impress me like everyone else out there? What kind of game is he playing?

“Are you not gonna tell me who you are?” he asks.

“You already know, don't you?”

“I know some things, I guess.”

“Like what?”

“Like your name is Aurora Penelope Tate and your parents started Tate Media. Your father owns that yacht we were floating on all day and you don't seem to like your friends very much.”

I stare at him, cross my arms, and even take a step away. “What gave you that idea?” I ask, defensively.

He’s not wrong, I’m just embarrassed by how obvious I had been when I thought that no one could know the truth.

“Just the way you were with them. Standoffish. It's like you are just tolerating their presence.”

“They are a little bit too much sometimes, I guess,” I admit. “But that doesn't mean that I don't like them.”

He tilts his head, unconvinced.

What he just said is of course the truth, but he is a stranger and this is going too far.

“So is there anything else about you that I should know?” he asks.

We’re almost at the window but the people in front of us place an order for twenty tacos so we’re not as close as I had thought.

“Well, you seem to know everything already, I'm not sure what else I can share with you.”

“I doubt that,” he says, refusing to take his gaze off me.

His stare is so intense I can barely look away. When I try, I can't.

“Tell me something... True about you,” he says.

This is not how first dates are supposed to go. There's supposed to be a lot of joking and laughing and talking about nothing in particular.

But Henry is so intense, and that intensity is completely disarming. I'm tempted to make light of this, but I don't wanna ruin the moment. He wants to know something about me. He's the first person in a very long time who has not seen me as an heiress, a trophy, or simply an extension of my parents. Why does this scare me so much?

“I know that I want to do something important with my life, but I don't know what that is,” I finally say. “Everyone wants me to be somebody. My parents

want me to be the perfect daughter and the perfect heir to their fortune. My friends want me to be the perfect girlfriend, someone who laughs at their jokes even when they're stupid, and drinks way too much and gossips about what everyone else is wearing. I try to be these things to the people in my life, but most of the time doing that just makes me sick to my stomach. And the more time that passes, the more afraid I get that they're going to find out the truth about me."

"Which is what?"

"That I'm not their perfect daughter or friend, and I'm not interested in running Tate Media."

"Let's say, that they do," Henry says. "What happens then?"

I shrug. He waits.

"I don't know," I whisper. "I just feel this enormous pressure on my shoulders all of the time to be this person for everyone else, this person that I am not really at all. I'm afraid to tell anyone any of this because the truth is that I don't really know who I am except that I'm not *her*."

"How can I help you?" the cashier asks through the glass.

"We're back," I say.

"It happens," she says, completely unfazed and unimpressed.

Henry orders two tacos each this time and refuses to let me pay.

"I may not have much money, Aurora. But I can certainly afford four dinners at Jack's Crab Shack." He smiles and I laugh.

"I wasn't insinuating that you couldn't, I was just trying to be nice."

"Well, you're on a date with me, why don't you let me worry about being nice. Besides, we're going to a bar after this, so you can cover that tab if you want."

He drapes his arm around my shoulder, pulling me closer to him. When I look up, his lips collide with mine. The people behind us have to physically nudge us to get us to move. A part of me is embarrassed at all of these public displays of affection, but another part of me could not care less. I want to kiss him as much as I want to and I want him to kiss me for as long as he wants to.

When our food is ready this time, we are not as lucky with finding a table so

we take our tacos to the beach. The breeze coming off the water is soft and warm and the roaring ocean of only a few months ago is nothing but a memory. We walk past the grasses and bushes that scatter along the coastline and find a quiet dune where we can be alone.

I only manage to eat one taco this time, watching him polish off the other three. After we are both satiated, I lean against his shoulder and watch the waves break in front of us. They aren't very big today, nothing worthy of surfing, but that's what also makes them calm and relaxing.

"What are you doing working on my father's boat if you live in New York City?" I ask.

"Jobs for summer people pay quite well and I'm off anyway during this time. So, I figured I'd come home, spend some time with my mom, and make some money."

"Off from what?"

"I teach high school during the year."

"Why haven't I seen you before? Is this your first summer?"

"The job on your father's boat is temporary. I'm filling in for someone. Normally, I work at the Southampton Yacht Club."

"What do you do there?" I ask.

"A little bit of everything, but mainly bartend. I've been working there since I was fifteen. So I get to bartend as much as I want."

"Is that the best thing to do?"

"Yes." He nods and laughs, probably at my naïveté.

"That's where you get all the tips. And summer people, the good ones anyway, tip pretty well."

Suddenly, I have an overwhelming urge to find out as much as possible about him. I want to know where he was born. I want to know what he was like growing up. I want to know if anyone has hurt him or broken his heart. I want to know about his mother.

But when I turn to face him and open my mouth to speak, he kisses me. The kiss is soft and airy, moving along with the waves. I curl up snugly into his armpit, noticing how nicely my body fits into his.

He wraps his arms around me and I intertwine my legs with his.

His fingers run down my side as his tongue finds mine. I arch my back against his strong lean stomach. I feel the bulge in his pants growing in size as I press my butt against it.

I'm about to say something when his hands start to make their way down my breasts. My nipples perk up as if they have been awakened from a deep sleep. My whole being gets energized. I arch my back again and again as his fingers start to massage me. His hands are soft yet firm and knowing. They're deliberate like the rest of him. He knows his way around my body as if he has done this a million times before. There is a strength in that and the feeling is completely disarming.

The sound of loud laughter interrupts our solace. It comes from the gaggle of teenagers rounding the dune and setting up their blankets right next to ours. All are too drunk to notice or care about our presence. One of them builds a fire and another one blasts house music from a speaker. The rest start to dance by swinging their hips and shoulders from side to side, in the same direction.

“How about we go somewhere else?” Henry asks.

I nod.

He holds out his hand to help me up to my feet. I want to go somewhere private, where we can be alone and together. I want to feel his hands all over me and me all over him, but he doesn't suggest a place like this. Instead he takes my arm and walks me around the corner to a rowdy, loud bar.

“This place makes cocktails as good as any of the ones I had in those craft bars in Manhattan. And they don't cost eighteen dollars a pop,” he says.

I don't want to go inside because I want to keep him to myself. But it's too soon. We have just met. I look at the menu that the bartender hands me and quickly order the first thing I spot, a cucumber margarita.

The bar is busy but we manage to find a seat in a dark corner, somewhat away from the music that's blaring out of the speakers. Everyone else is straining to talk, screaming at the top of their lungs to barely make themselves heard.

But here, in our little space, the music is at just the right level. It sets the ambience without being overpowering or obnoxious. When our drinks arrive, I

watch him take a sip of his Old-Fashioned before trying my margarita.

“Wow, this is really good,” I say, nodding my head and noting that all of the ingredients are fresh. Nothing is prepackaged or processed.

“They make everything from scratch,” he says.

“I am shocked that they have the time to do this given how busy this place is.”

“A little known secret of the restaurant trade is that it's actually much cheaper to make things from scratch,” he says with a shrug. “But it does take a little bit more time. I know the owner of this place, I went to high school with his son, and he's very old-school. That's why this place is as popular as it is.”

We drink our drinks in silence for a few moments and he takes my hand in his. I like the way he runs his thumb over the back of it and I can't help but let my fingers intertwine with his, but our solitude doesn't last.

A guy with a cool haircut approaches and Henry quickly gets up to give him a hug. He quickly calls over three of his friends and they all embrace, exchanging complicated handshakes. Henry introduces me as Aurora Tate, but the name doesn't register. Instead, they ask him about the yacht club. I've never heard anyone talk like this about us before. They think of the rich as others might think of animals at the zoo; something exotic, something worthy of admiration but something completely different from them. The yacht club is the epicenter and they talk about it with a mix of envy, jealousy, and contempt wavering between hating the summer people and wanting to be them.

HENRY

I didn't particularly want to see my friends tonight, but there is no getting around it. At first, I think that they are going to recognize Aurora from the gossip magazines that she is often featured in, but they don't.

Instead, they just talk about themselves. Half an hour is all that I'm going to give them, I decide. That will be enough to not be rude, spend some time with them, and then cut things short since we are on our first date.

Taylor Portman, of course, dominates the conversation. He is tall and attractive and he knows it. He's finishing his last semester at city college and his dream is to make millions on Wall Street.

I met him in the neighborhood, but he is about four years younger than I am. Once, after more than a few drinks, I made a mistake and told him that I wanted to be a writer and ever since then he has been mercilessly making fun of me. The mocking got worse when I got my short story published in the New Yorker, the epitome of success, and got paid \$320 for my efforts. At eight cents a word, the pay is significant for a literary magazine and yet paltry at the same time.

Tonight is no exception. As soon as Taylor has two beers in him, he goes off on me.

"You know what this guy does for a living, right?" he asks. When she doesn't respond, he covers his mouth and laughs. "Oh, shit, did I just blow your secret?"

"I know that he is a writer."

“Wait, is that what you are? Or are you just an *aspiring* writer?” he continues. “‘Cause I think you have to at least pay the rent with your job if you’re doing it for real.”

I hate him for being this way; callous and cruel. I try to remember why we’re friends at all.

“You talk about it like you think that there’s something wrong with it,” Aurora says to Taylor.

“Well, you have to admit it’s a little bit silly. It’s like wanting to be an astronaut.”

“But you would agree,” she challenges him, “that there are people who are astronauts.”

"Yes, of course."

"So, what would be so wrong with wanting to be one?"

“It’s just so...unrealistic. Actually, being an astronaut is probably a lot more realistic than being a writer. In this day and age. I mean, who the hell has time to read anymore? Am I right?”

“No,” she says sternly. “You’re wrong. There are a lot of people who like to read and there are a lot of people who make their living writing. What you don’t know about it could fill the whole ocean out there.”

Taylor narrows his eyes and stares daggers into her. But she doesn’t waver. Instead she broadens her shoulders and sits up.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to make everything so tense. Are you a writer, too?” he asks, taking a sip of his beer.

“No, I’m not,” she says without wavering in her gaze. “I’m Aurora Tate, of the Tate Media empire. Perhaps you’ve heard of us?”

Taylor’s mouth physically drops open. She leans in closer and flicks the bottom of his chin to shut it.

“What’s the matter?” she asks. “Cat got your tongue?”

MY FRIENDS DON’T STICK AROUND LONG after that. A group of attractive local

girls come in and they drift away in search of a warm body to curl up to. Taylor hangs around the longest.

I'm not sure what he's waiting for but it certainly feels like he's waiting for something. Eventually, a pretty girl approaches him and he finally pulls away. Aurora finishes her margarita and asks for another one, with a glass of water.

"I need to stay hydrated," she says, "otherwise, all of this alcohol is going to go straight to my head."

"Of course," I say. "There's no need to explain."

I have already finished two Old-Fashioneds, and I'm working on my third one. I'm not big on alcohol but being here with *her* makes me nervous.

When our next round arrives, I turn to her and raise my glass.

"I want to thank you for something."

"For what?"

"I want to thank you for standing up to Taylor. He has an annoying habit of making fun of me for that. Perhaps I should have never told him the truth, but at one point I thought that we were actually friends. That's the only reason why he knows that I write."

"Do you usually not tell anyone?" she asks, surprised.

I shrug and look down at the table. "It's a difficult thing to talk about," I admit.

"Not everyone understands," I add. "I'm not sure exactly why it's so difficult but somehow, telling people, it's like revealing this secret part of me."

"You had no problem telling me earlier today," Aurora points out. I shrug.

"You're a stranger and frankly, I wasn't sure if we were going to hit it off at all. I guess I didn't think I had anything to lose."

"How very valiant of you," she says with a smile, keenly aware of the fact that what I have just said is a lie.

I pick at a little speck of dirt on the table with my index finger. It doesn't come off. It's just a deformity, so I put my palm flatly against it to feel the indentation.

"So, you don't think I'm stupid for doing what I do?" I ask.

"No, not at all," she says, shaking her head. "In fact, I think you are very

brave.”

“Brave?”

“You're pursuing your dreams, what can be braver than that?”

I take her hand into mine, wondering if she is in fact real.

“Besides, it's actually very refreshing to meet someone who isn't just after money,” Aurora says.

“Yeah,” I say, “I guess it's hard to find a man in New York City who isn't that singularly focused.”

“You don't know how true that is.” She laughs.

“What about your friends?” I ask.

“What about them?”

“What would they think if they had heard this about me?”

“They would think that I am dumber than they even knew,” she says, rolling her eyes and taking another sip. It's meant to be a joke but the delivery falters.

“Is that okay with you?” I ask.

She shrugs and looks away.

“I don't really want to talk about my friends,” she says. “Let's talk about something else.”

HENRY

We don't stay at the bar long because it gets louder and more rowdy with each passing hour. Instead, we go on a walk. I hold her hand as we meander up and down the empty streets of the small summer town where no one walks and everyone drives.

Surprisingly, the streets are welcoming to pedestrians and we enjoy the view of the large expanse of lawns and the weeping willows, along with a few thick oaks.

"Did you grow up in a house like this?" she asks, pointing to an enormous four-bedroom home that sits on two acres.

I stare at her and shake my head from side to side. She tilts hers as if she has no idea what I'm talking about.

"Do you really think I would be poor if I grew up in a house like this?" I ask. She looks at the house again.

"It's probably only three-thousand square feet," she says. "That's not very big. Not for a house in the country."

I want to laugh but I don't want to make her feel bad. Instead, I tell her that my own house is about seven-hundred square feet.

"Wait a second," she says, "but I thought you grew up in a two-bedroom?"

"I did." I nod.

"Well, that's not nearly big enough, right?"

I shrug.

“That's all my mom could afford. My dad left when I was two and I haven't seen him since then. She only has a high school diploma, so she wasn't qualified to get any job besides being a cashier at the local grocery store. That's what she did for years.”

“How much does that pay?” Her asking this takes me by surprise and I shake my head no. I don't want to answer.

“I'm sorry,” she apologizes. “I shouldn't have asked that. I didn't mean to pry. The thing is that I have never really talked to anyone who came from so little.”

I shake my head again.

“That sounds terrible,” she says.

“Yes, it does,” I agree.

“I shouldn't have asked.”

I think about that for a moment. “No, I'm glad you did. How about this? I'll tell you the details of my life and you tell me the details of yours. 'Cause I never really talked to anyone who came from so much either.”

Aurora smiles, pushing her hair behind her ear, and shakes my extended hand.

“My mom made minimum wage for about twenty years.”

“And a minimum wage is what exactly?” Aurora asks.

“It was around \$7.15 when I was little and they raised it to \$11.10.”

“An hour?” she gasps and shakes her head. “And she works forty hours a week?”

“No, she usually works sixty hours a week. And it's still not enough. The rent is \$1300 and then there is food, utilities, and all of the medical bills.”

I look away, suddenly a mountain of guilt covers me as if it were an avalanche. Maybe I should've been a better son. Maybe I should have paid more attention to money and not just been out there pursuing my senseless dreams.

But it was my mother who always encouraged me to go after what I want. She was the one who said it was okay to pursue whatever degree I wanted in college. She was the one I wanted to see my dreams come true.

Hell, that makes me feel even worse. Perhaps, I should've gotten a degree in finance and have spent the last five years working on Wall Street and sending

every penny of that back home to make her life easier, but the truth is that she would never have had it that way.

She always said that the most unfair thing about not having enough is that you have to compromise your dreams. She always wanted better for me. I don't go into all of these details with Aurora, instead I steer the conversation back to her.

“What about you?” I ask. “How much does your father make?”

“Well, it's actually both my father and my mother. She's the CFO there.”

I wait for her to answer my question. “Are you going to tell me how much they make?”

“It's hard to say,” she says with a slight shrug. “But they are both individually featured in Forbes' richest people in the world list.”

“What does that mean exactly?” I press her.

“I don't know what their exact net worth is because there are different ways of calculating that but it's billions. Many, many billions.”

“That is so much money, it's actually difficult to comprehend,” I admit.

“I know exactly what you mean,” she says with a shrug. “It's stupid but I feel like no matter what I will do in my life, it will never be good enough. I will never be able to step from behind their shadow.”

“And what is it that you want to do?” I ask. Shrugging, she looks down at the ground.

“That's the whole problem,” she says. “I have no idea. I know what it is that *they* want me to do, but I'm not exactly sure if I can do that.”

“What's that?”

“They want me to take over the company.”

“You don't want to?”

“It's not that, it's more that I don't know if I can. It's their baby, more than I ever was, and they want me to raise it exactly as they would. They want me to run it exactly as they would run it.”

“That's impossible.”

“Yeah, tell that to them.” Aurora laughs. “On top of that, they don't trust me to make any decisions.”

“Do you even want to?”

“Not under these conditions, but I’m not sure if I’ll have a choice.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. She takes my hand in hers and gives me a weak smile.

“Let's not talk about this anymore. I don't have the energy.”

Her wish is my command. I don't press her for anything more. Instead, I try to make her laugh. I do impressions, the ones that I taught myself how to do through YouTube and the ones that have always worked well on my mother.

President Obama. President Bush. Britney Spears. Cher. Madonna.

Aurora laughs so hard big tears stream down her cheeks. When we get to a quiet corner and she stops laughing so hard, I pull her closer to me and kiss her.

Our mouths now feel comfortable with each other. There was never any awkwardness, but now we belong to each other completely.

I want this moment to last as long as possible. I kiss her harder and harder. She presses her body against mine, kissing me back with the same intensity.

“Let's go somewhere,” she says, pulling away from my mouth only briefly.

“Back to the boat?” I ask.

“No, absolutely not. I want to go somewhere private.”

The only hotels around here are the kind that rent rooms by the hour. They're dark and gross and the sheets are barely changed and that's not where I want my first time with this goddess to be.

“I know this is gonna sound strange,” I say. “But do you want to go to my house?”

“Isn't your mother there?” she asks.

“She's probably sleeping already.”

“Would she mind?” Aurora asks.

“No.” I shake my head. “I'm an adult, remember?”

“Yes, of course. I'm just being stupid,” she says with a nervous laugh.

I open the ride-share app and a driver picks us up five minutes later. Montauk is half an hour away at the edge of Long Island.

“I've never been there,” Aurora says.

“You haven't? Well, you're in for a treat. It's kind of a quaint little town that's

full of charm, at least in the summertime. In the winter, it's pretty dead like the rest of the island.”

When we get to my house, I take her inside through the back door and tell her to be very quiet. The house settles and creaks with each step, but she is careful not to make any noise. She's so committed to it that she even takes off her heels.

“I don't want your mother to wake up,” she explains and follows me to my old room.

If I had known that I would have a visitor tonight, let alone Aurora Tate, I would've at least picked up some of the dirty clothes off the floor and organized the books scattered all over the place. But she doesn't seem to mind.

Instead she just wraps her arms around my neck and stands up on her tiptoes, pressing her lips to mine. I take her into my arms and bury my hands in her hair. Her skin feels soft and full of life, and when I lick her, I taste the salt coming off the ocean.

Her shoulders broaden and contract with each breath as I slowly run my lips down her neck. She tilts her head back enjoying the moment. I linger for a moment around her collarbone before tugging at her dress. When the spaghetti straps slide down her arms, it falls to the floor.

She's not wearing a bra, only a pair of black lace panties. Her body is soft in all of the right places and she has curves that go on for miles. She's not overweight, but she is also not a stick figure.

I can tell that she's a little bit embarrassed by her nudity, but I get down on my knees and kiss her stomach to make up for it. She tries to bring me back up to a standing position, but I refuse. I want to kneel here and worship her.

Slowly, I pull down her panties and she opens her legs. She tucks her hands up by her breasts and waits for me to press my mouth to her.

AURORA

He touches me in every way a woman wants to be touched. His hands are firm and strong and they direct my body to maximize my pleasure. But instead of bending me to his will, he bends to mine. The only issue is that I don't know exactly what I want. I need him to show me.

Being naked in front of him is not like being naked in front of other people. My curves and my lumpy bits seem to only turn him on. In the past, I've had a boyfriend or three tell me that I would be prettier if I were just a little bit thinner.

It is hard to describe what it feels like to have someone say the one thing that you are most terrified of that someone else is thinking.

But Henry revels in my body. He loves it. He buries his tongue and his fingers deep within me and it's all I can do to not scream out his name.

But I have a dirty little secret. I have never had an orgasm. Of course, I have moaned and yelled a guy's name and went through all of the motions to pretend like I was experiencing something epic, but it was all a show. Maybe, my secret is not so dirty after all.

Unfortunately, tonight is no different.

It's not Henry, he is hotter and sexier than any other guy I have ever been with. In addition to his hard as steel body, there's his personality and his way of being that makes me want to just rip off his clothes.

But tonight, I reach a plateau again. It has nothing to do with him.

It's all me. I'm in my head, and I can't get out of it.

Maybe it has something to do with me being self-conscious or just uncomfortable in a new environment, or maybe it's just the fact that I'm not lying on my back the way I do when I touch myself, but I can't let go.

I can't let him take me there, to that space where nothing else exists except for two of us.

He continues to go down on me and my knees start to grow weak. For a moment, I think that it might happen after all but then another one comes and my hopes evaporate.

I pull him up to his knees and lead him to his bed, a comically small twin-size bed, the kind that I have seen little kids have on television. My bed at home has been king-size ever since I can remember.

The smallness of this one brings us even closer together. There's nowhere to go except into each other's arms.

He drapes his body over mine as he climbs on top of me.

He kisses my neck.

He kisses my breasts. He goes all the way down to my stomach and then to my pelvic region. He wants to go south again, but I want something else. I ask him to flip over me. Moving his legs toward my face, he positions his own head in between mine. I wrap my hands around his large, thick cock and run my tongue up and down eventually taking it into my mouth.

Our movements become one as the ebb and flow of our kisses morph together. He starts to moan my name and I start to feel like I'm inching closer to the edge, but the minutes tick along and I don't get there.

Sometime later, he flips me onto my stomach and climbs on top. I push my butt up into the air as he finds that sweet spot in the middle of my core and thrusts himself inside. He opens me as wide as possible and I take him deeper and deeper inside with each thrust. We move in complete unison with even our breaths mimicking one another's.

Suddenly, a strange feeling comes over me. I begin to relax. Every muscle in my body gets infused with oxygen and somehow softens. But then Henry's movements speed up and he whispers my name over and over again into my ear.

When he moans, I moan along with him. I am not faking anything. This

experience has been one of the most exciting and titillating of my life, and yet I know that I have not reached that epic point where I fall off the cliff. He yells my name into the pillow, muffling his voice, and I whisper “shh” over and over again to get him to be quieter.

Afterward, he holds me in his arms and I let myself drift off to sleep. For the first time, in a long time, I am completely at peace.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I wake up before him. I revel in the fact that we actually slept with our bodies intertwined with each other's. I thought that was only possible in the movies. But somehow I slept in the crook of his elbow and neither of us were uncomfortable or even cramped.

There is an old-fashioned alarm clock on the bedside table and it flashes 8 a.m.

Shit, I say to myself. I doubt that my friends are actually worried about me, but I am certain that Mr. Madsen is. We were supposed to come back that night, late, but not this late.

I climb out of bed slowly, quickly wrapping the sheet around my body. When I notice that the sheet is also wrapped tightly around Henry, I decide to let it go and not disturb him. Instead, I scramble around the room looking for my panties and my dress.

I find my phone next to my heels in the far corner of the room. I scroll through the messages as quickly as I can. They're all from Mr. Madsen and I quickly write him back.

Much to my surprise, Ellis has not contacted me and neither have any of the other girls. Mr. Madsen is not satisfied with a simple text and demands that I call him immediately so that he can make sure that I am actually safe.

I dial his number. If this were anyone else, I wouldn't bother. But Mr. Madsen and I have a special relationship, he has been like a favorite uncle of mine ever since I was a little girl. And while I suspect that my own father only pretends to worry about me, I know that Mr. Madsen actually does.

“Hi, I'm here... I'm fine,” I whisper into the phone, trying to be as quiet as possible. “Why am I whispering?” I repeat his question. “I don't want to wake Henry.”

His name escapes my lips before I can catch myself. I'm not sure if I should tell him who I'm with, and normally I wouldn't, but all of those margaritas have gone straight to my head.

“Henry Asher? You are with Henry Asher?” Mr. Madsen asks. I bite my lower lip, unsure what to do with his disapproving tone.

On one hand, it's none of his business who I sleep with. On the other hand, I have known him for so long that he is almost a father figure and someone I definitely don't want to disappoint.

“Henry Asher is an employee of yours,” Mr. Madsen explains. “You have no business spending time with him...recreationally.”

“I know that this is probably inappropriate,” I say quickly. “But we really connected with each other, and he's not actually my employee. He just happens to work on a boat that my father owns.”

“Well, that won't be the case for long,” Mr. Madsen says.

“No, please, please don't take this out on him,” I plead. “He didn't do anything wrong.”

“He knew the rules,” Mr. Madsen says. “He should not have been developing friendly relations with the guests.”

This conversation is getting away from me. No, I need to stand my ground.

“But as you said yourself, I am not just a guest. I am my father's daughter and, as such, I ask you to please look the other way in this particular situation.”

He doesn't answer me one way or another, and I don't push it anymore for now. Instead, I thank him for worrying about me and for checking in on me and apologize again for not telling him about my plans.

I know that his worries are not for no good reason. I am an heir to a huge fortune and if it were anyone else, they would probably only go outside with a bodyguard or two.

But that's just not how I can exist in the world. I can't have anyone following me and tracking my every move. I feel like I am too much of a prisoner already.

When I sit back on the bed, I find Henry awake.

“He's going to fire me, isn't he?” he asks, leaning on one elbow.

“Not if I have anything to do with it,” I insist.

“I think your powers are limited.” He smiles. “This is Mr. Madsen that we're talking about.”

I laugh, but I'm not so sure that I'm right. Mr. Madsen is in charge of all the help and his decisions are final. I worry that this night could have cost Henry his job, one that he so desperately depends on.

“OK, let's just forget about it,” he says, reaching out and grabbing my arm.

He pulls me closer to him and kisses me again and again and again. Somehow my dress comes off again and we press our bodies to each other's, flesh to flesh.

But then he hears something in the hallway, right outside the door.

AURORA

“It’s my mom,” Henry whispers into my ear. “We better get up and join her for breakfast.”

He dresses quickly and I follow him down a very small corridor, which is only three steps across. Seeing this house in the light of day, I am surprised by exactly how small it is.

A long time ago, when my nanny was hit by a car and was taken to the hospital, the housekeeper took me to her house while my parents were out at a party. I’d never seen such a small house before, and it was about five hundred square feet bigger than this one.

Even though Henry’s home is small, it’s quaint and inviting. The decorations are humble but tasteful. The cabinets in the kitchen have a fresh coat of paint and there are beautiful pictures of seascapes on the walls, giving the place the feel of a cottage by the sea.

“Mom, I want you to meet Aurora Tate,” Henry says.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mrs. Asher,” I say, extending my hand. Her skin is warm and soft to the touch.

“Please don’t call me that,” she says with a smile. “I’m Karen.”

“Okay, Karen. It’s very nice to meet you,” I correct myself.

“Did you two have a nice evening?”

Henry nods and tells her that we went to the crab shack for dinner and then Tommy’s.

“I have to tell you, or rather apologize to you for the fact that my son has such terrible taste in places to take a girl out on a date,” Karen says, shaking her head.

“There’s no need,” I say quickly. “I’ve actually had a really good time.”

“Then you must not get out much,” Karen says and we both burst out laughing. I want to tell her that I’m a little tired of those high-end pretentious places that guys usually take me to but I sort of love the fact that she doesn’t know who I really am.

“I made pancakes,” Karen says, “Would you two like to have some?”

Henry and I exchange glances.

“Yes, please,” I say quickly, “but only if I can help you.”

Karen walks with a cane but gets around the kitchen very quickly. The place is so tiny that there is only enough counter space for one.

“No, thank you,” Karen says. “Why don't you guys just sit there in the corner and tell me about your evening?”

Karen is a slight woman with wide hips and short brown hair. There is a kindness in her face that’s difficult to describe. My mother’s friends are all fit and trim and without a single line on their faces and yet they’re not nearly as beautiful as Karen is when you really look at them.

She exudes warmth and softness. It's as if the difficult life that she has led has not made an impact on her at all. It hasn't hardened her, nor has it made her callous and cynical.

I have never met anyone like her before and, frankly, I didn’t even know they existed.

Karen throws a luxurious amount of chocolate chips on top of my pancake and covers Henry's with chopped up strawberries. I steal a strawberry off his plate but he refuses to have any of my chocolate. We devour the pancakes as quickly as she makes them, and this makes her incredibly happy. When the batter starts to run low, she finally puts a few on her own plate to enjoy.

“I'm glad that you like to eat, Aurora,” she says. “That wasn't always the case with the girls that Henry brought home.”

I glance at him and his cheeks get flushed.

Wow, so he is capable of being embarrassed, I say to myself.

I smile and give him a little wink. He shakes his head, looking straight down at his plate.

“Mom, please, can we not talk about that?”

“Why? What's the matter?” she asks innocently, as if she doesn't know exactly what she was saying. “So, Aurora, tell me about yourself.”

“What would you like to know?”

“Well, what do you do with yourself?” My jaw tightens for a moment, but I take a deep breath to center myself and let it out slowly.

“I am actually pursuing my PhD in popular fiction.”

“Oh, really?” she asks, raising her eyebrows. I nod.

“And what is that exactly?”

“Well, it's kind of like a PhD in English Literature except that instead of focusing on classic works, I analyze and try to find meaning in popular works. I'm particularly interested in genre fiction, like romance and thrillers.

“I think that the kind of books that people read says a lot about the culture that they live in. It influences the kind of shows that they watch and affects all aspects of culture, in general.”

“Wow, that sounds fascinating. I actually love reading Danielle Steel and Nora Roberts. I know that Henry would make fun of me, but they can spin a wonderful yarn and that's all I really want at the end of a hard day.”

“I totally agree with you,” I say. “Their novels are fast-paced and easy to read and focus on relationships. There are many romantic elements but there are others as well, parents and children, sisters, brothers, and all sorts of other familiar relationships. We can learn a lot from the characters in the novels and the popularity of their books speaks to that.”

“I'm not sure Henry would agree with you,” Karen says, smiling out of the corner of her mouth.

In that moment, I see him in her face. They are different sexes and ages and yet it's as if he is a carbon copy of her.

“Do you not agree?” I ask him.

“No, I wouldn't say that,” Henry says quickly. “Actually, to tell you the

truth, I've never read a lot of popular fiction. I'm not sure why, maybe I'm a snob? But I have always been drawn to the short story genre and that's mainly what I read."

"Novels don't hold your attention?" I ask.

He shrugs and shakes his head.

"I think what I like most is the succinctness of the short story. All of the events are relayed immediately. Everything is resolved, or maybe not resolved. New characters are introduced and we only get a glimpse of who each of them are."

I smile. I have known many snobs, and a part of me suspects that he might be one of them. But I appreciate his polite comments for the time being.

HENRY

When I go to work the following morning, I'm not entirely sure if I have my old job on Aurora's boat. But at least, at the yacht club, Mr. Madsen has a bit less influence.

The day proceeds pretty much like all of the other ones this summer. The place gets busy around one, when the lunch crowd comes in from their morning on the water or at the golf club. This establishment has been around for at least fifty years, and very few things about it have changed.

The tables still have to be polished every day, and there are white tablecloths adorning each one. I have worked here for many summers, eventually ascending to the job of bartender. Bartenders make the most tips, followed by servers. We usually split a portion of them with the others but keep the majority to ourselves. Mr. Madsen comes in just as I am setting up all of the bottles and making sure that all of the glasses are extra clean for the lunch crowd.

I flinch, but only for a moment. Taking a deep breath, I brace myself for a possible firing. Much to my surprise, he doesn't appear to be as angry as he was earlier, when he was on the phone with Aurora. He's not working today, so he orders a scotch on the rocks. After talking about the weather and briefly discussing the game on TV above our heads, he asks, "What are you doing with her?"

"What do you mean?" I ask him.

"She's a Tate, don't you know that?"

“Of course I do,” I say, polishing a glass that I've been working on for way too long.

“Don't get me wrong, Henry, I love that family and I appreciate everything they have ever done for me. However, her father is not anyone to mess with—”

“I know that he is a big-time CEO—” I interrupt him.

“You know nothing about Mr. Tate—” Mr. Madsen interrupts me, “and you don't want to know anymore than you already do.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

He opens his mouth to say something but then closes it. He's choosing his words carefully. I wait for him to continue.

“Let's just say,” he says after a moment. “Let's just say that what you know about Mr. Tate is only the Disney version of who he is and what he does for a living. He is a very dangerous man and he would not approve of you having any sort of relations with his only daughter.”

A big gulp forms in the back of my throat. I swallow hard. I'm not sure what to say to this or how to react.

Mr. Madsen has never spoken to me in this manner before. He has always been stern but kind and fair. In fact, I know very little about his personal life and he knows very little about mine. He cultivated this distance, not just with me, but all of his employees, and over the years, I have grown to appreciate it.

So, for him to come out and suddenly warn me about dating Aurora is completely out of character.

“Tell me this,” Mr. Madsen says, leaning over the bar top and getting as close to me as possible. “Is this just a one night thing or are you planning on seeing her again?”

I shake my head, not sure how to answer.

“I like her, Mr. Madsen. I like her a lot.”

“Well, that's going to be a problem,” he says and finishes his drink.

MR. MADSEN'S words weigh heavily on my mind long after he leaves and way

into the afternoon. I try to be friendly with all of the guests, but I'm just not here the way I normally am.

It's hard to joke around and talk about nothing in an interesting way when your heart is not in it. After I eat a brief and quick lunch in the kitchen, I go back to work. The afternoons are usually a quiet time, right before the big evening dinner rush, and I enjoy the solitude. Besides the hostess, I'm the only one here, manning the restaurant in case a big party comes in.

And right when I least want to see another person, let alone act friendly, four guys saunter into the place. They are all dressed in the yacht club's unofficial uniform, plaid, pastel colored shirts, dockers or khakis along with dark shoes with tassels. I would be surprised if any of their outfits cost less than five hundred dollars. They are not out of the norm for the clientele here, but what grates on me right now is that they're my age and total assholes.

The guys take seats around the bar, and quickly make themselves at home. They all order beers and make disparaging comments about the women on television.

"Hey," one of them says, "I'm telling you I can totally get three of those girls in bed with me."

"No, you can't." The others laugh.

"Yes, I can."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Look at them. Look at those faces and those hips. You know that no one really wants them. And they're just desperate for any sort of attention."

"You're such an asshole," the tall one with blond hair and pink pants says. "Yes, Connor, I know that already. That's my schtick, don't you know that?"

"And that works for you?" Connor asks. "Yes, you could say that."

I have seen them around before. The self-described asshole has a house not too far away and Connor owns a seventy foot Beneteau. They all work in the city, somewhere near, or right on, Wall Street. They have never been traders, that's kind of a low position, but rather investment bank associates and hedge fund analysts.

They probably make around one-hundred and twenty-thousand a year

without bonuses, and they are just starting out. But all of them come from a lot more money than that, and they will be millionaires by the time they're thirty. On the other hand, I work as a teacher during the year in an underprivileged school district in Harlem and don't clear forty grand after taxes. I probably make another ten in the summer, and I give all of that to my mother to help with her bills.

Watching them, laughing and drinking with their friends, I suddenly wonder if I'm not the stupid one. I want to be a writer, yes, but working as an English teacher is not really getting me any closer to achieving that dream.

I am not a very good teacher. I will be the first one to admit that. I'm not very patient or very interested in teenagers. I find the job tedious and difficult, at best. It is absolutely awful, at worst.

I wish more than anything that I could be one of those inspiring teachers that they make movies about, the ones that change lives, but I just can't put 100% of me into that.

No, my passions lie elsewhere and the reason I got that job is that it was the only one I got offered after graduation. But now I wonder if I have made a mistake. Perhaps these assholes and my friend Taylor, an aspiring asshole, have figured something out about life that I haven't. Also, I wonder if Mr. Madsen would be having his little talk with me and warning me about dating Mr. Tate's daughter if I were one of *these* guys.

When the guys finish two rounds of beer and all of their fries and they are just about to leave, a group of girls comes in.

At first, I don't see her.

She's walking behind her friends, with her head hanging low. They grab a table not too far away from the bar and Ellis Holte, the tall one, waves me over. I hand them each a menu and take their drink orders.

When I try to make eye contact with Aurora, she looks away. I am not sure how much her friends know or don't know about what happened last night. A big part of me wants to tell all of them, but I know better and keep my mouth shut. If Aurora doesn't want anyone to know, that's fine by me.

The guys at the bar are quick to make their move. They grab seats nearby,

pushing the tables together. When I come back with the drinks, Connor has his arm around Aurora. Instead of shoving him away, she lets him rest there. Leaning in, his face is only a few inches away from hers. When he makes a joke, she laughs along with him and I clench my fists.

“Can I take your order?” I ask her, clearing my throat.

When she looks up at me, she pulls away from Connor, but only a little bit, as if she had not let him drape all over her.

I feel like a fool. An idiot! This is probably her boyfriend.

I can't believe that I let myself catch all of these feelings for her when, in reality, we just went out on one date and I know practically nothing about her real life.

Yes, we shared a few jokes and laughs, but so what?

Yes, she slept with me and had breakfast with my mother, but that doesn't have to mean anything, right?

Maybe she just wanted to slum it for a night. I thought they were assholes, but maybe it was me who is the asshole for thinking that I ever stood a chance.

When I take her order, I keep trying to make eye contact, but it's all to no avail. She acts like she doesn't know me. Her demeanor is polite and professional but cold and distant.

We are strangers as far as she is concerned.

And this guy Connor? He is someone who is clearly significant in her life.

After putting in all of their orders, I take my position behind the bar and try to steel myself. I've had plenty of one-night stands and this one should be no different. She's just a girl. Just because you connected with her over some unheard of twentieth century short story writer, doesn't mean that she is actually interested in you.

Twenty minutes later, when the food is ready, I deliver it with a newfound coldness and professionalism.

I don't search her face to meet her eyes.

I'm no longer waiting for an inkling of affection.

And I am certainly not waiting for an introduction to her friends.

If she wants to pretend like she doesn't know me then that's perfectly fine.

The truth is that I don't know her. A few personal nuggets does not make for a connection.

Connor covers the bill and pays the additional twenty percent in tip. They all take off together, leaving me alone in the dining room.

About an hour later, I receive the first text. It's from Aurora.

I am so, so sorry, she writes. I had no idea that we were coming here until after Ellis suggested it and I couldn't get out of it.

You coming here is not the fucking problem, I want to write back.

Connor, the guy that was all over me, is my ex-boyfriend and we have a very complicated relationship. I don't wanna go into it over text, I just want to apologize for being such a dick in there.

I shake my head and put my phone down. I don't have the energy to deal with this. Only a few moments ago, I was so ready to write her off, but now my certainty is wavering.

But her texts keep coming and coming. She apologizes over and over again and then asks where I am.

She says that she knows that I'm still at work because she just called the front desk and asked and wonders why I'm not writing her back.

I guess I can assume that you're really mad at me, but please don't be. Please let me explain. I'm sorry.

I don't write back. This was all a terrible mistake. We live in worlds that are just too different and it's not worth trying to intermingle them.

She continues to blow up my phone.

I pick it up and run my fingers over the screen. I click on the text string. I stare at the blinker.

Please stop, I write.

AURORA

I don't know why I agreed to go to that stupid yacht club, but I regret it as soon as I see him. It wasn't that I was embarrassed that I had gone out with Henry; he is very cute and charming and attractive. But Connor was there and, when Connor is somewhere, everything is a lot more complicated.

Connor is my ex-boyfriend but it's more complicated than that. We were good friends at first. Then we started sleeping together casually then dating then we reversed back to something more casual eventually breaking up without actually breaking up. Ostensibly, we are still good friends except that I can't stand the sight of him.

The reason I ignore Henry? I don't want to give Connor a target.

I text Henry as soon as Connor and his friends leave, but he doesn't get back to me. I know that he is angry. I text him some more. I apologize profusely, but I still hear crickets.

We only had one date.

Yes, it was magical and beautiful, but what the hell does he expect from me? He doesn't know how complicated my life can be.

He doesn't know anything about me, even though he thinks he does. The more time that passes with him not messaging me back, the angrier I get.

No one treats me like this. How dare he not respond?

I have already apologized, what more does he want?

The day fades into night and then becomes the next morning and the one

after that. I send only one more text the following day and then I force myself to let it go. I deserve an answer and if he doesn't think that I do then he doesn't know the first thing about me. If he doesn't want to talk to me then he doesn't have to.

Later that week, Ellis invites me out with a guy she's been seeing. She says that she wants to introduce him to me, one of her best friends but, in reality, it's a blind date. She knows that I don't go out on blind dates but her boyfriend just happens to have a friend in town in need of entertainment on this particular night.

Ellis is almost a foot taller than I am with long lean legs that start somewhere near my shoulders. I'm exaggerating of course, but only a little bit. She spent many years dancing and as a result she knows her way around her body while I am still trying to get comfortable in mine.

She seems to be able to eat anything in the world without gaining a pound while I can barely look at a cheeseburger and gain ten. Still, we have been friends ever since we went to The Chasley School, the kind of elementary school for the elite in Manhattan that you have to get a spot in when you are still in utero.

I meet Ellis at a fancy but casual restaurant right on the water in West Hampton. Her boyfriend is nice enough, but I want to tell him not to get his hopes up since she is not the committing type.

Ellis's mother is a famous New York socialite, who has gone through numerous husbands, six to be exact, and even one wife. She's very forward-thinking in that way, especially for a seventy-year-old woman. She had Ellis when she was forty-five with her fourth husband, but he was never part of Ellis's life growing up. That's one of the reasons why Ellis carries Adele's maiden name of Holte, the same name that Adele kept all of these years.

Mitchell Bishop, Ellis's boyfriend, and Brock Kumparak, my date, joke around and reminisce about their days back at Princeton, even though that was only a few years ago. Now they both work on Wall Street, one in investment banking and the other in a hedge fund, but which one does what work I can't remember.

When the conversation runs a little dry, Ellis interjects and tells them about the new painting that she is responsible for staging at The Oliver Gallery. The Oliver Gallery is one of the most prestigious places to work for a rising art curator, and I am certain that she would not have the internship without her mother's wide connections. Still, art is her passion and who can blame her for taking advantage of every opportunity that comes her way?

Of course, her internship doesn't pay anything and requires almost eighty-hours a week of work, but after having that on her resume she will probably be able to work for any gallery in New York, Paris, London, LA, or Dubai unless she chooses to open her own.

Over a course of fried avocados for appetizers, Brock asks me about my work. I tell him about my PhD and he barely feigns interest. It's not fair, but I find myself comparing him to Henry. He knows very little about literature and has probably not read a book since college. I don't want to hold this against him, but I can't help myself. I don't find anything else about him very interesting so what choice do I have?

After a so-so dinner, the boys insist on showing us a good time by taking us out to a bar. I don't know why we need to go to another bar when there's a perfectly good bar here, but then again, I have never been much into the barhopping culture of New York City. Still, I do have to agree this place feels a little dead and it would be nice to see a few more fresh faces. We pile into Ellis's Maserati and drive the half a mile to the place that Brock suggests. It's more of a local place, not really rolling out the welcome mat to the summer people but it's not as much of a dive as the one that Henry took me to last week.

Walking in, Brock buzzes in my ear about some new financial instrument that his company has developed to make it easier for regular people to invest. It mostly goes over my head because I don't really care. I'm only going to stay for one drink, I say to myself, glancing over at Ellis and Mitchell with their hands all over each other.

And then, suddenly, I see them. Henry is sitting at the bar with a girl draped almost completely around him.

AURORA

I narrow my eyes to make sure that my eyes aren't deceiving me. I watch the girl run her hands up and down his leg. Henry shifts his weight from one side to another, trying to get comfortable.

So I guess this is it. He's over me, that is if he were ever really into me and everything that happened that day was not just an act to get a rich spoiled girl in the bed with him. Ellis sees me staring at him. She knows that I have spent the night with him and that I never do that. Of course, I've had a one-night stand or two, but I have never spent the night, and I definitely never had breakfast with the mother.

Perhaps, I shouldn't have told her, but I was on such a high when I came back that I wanted to share the good news with someone and she is my oldest friend.

"Forget about him," she says, nudging me with her leg.

"He doesn't deserve you."

"I know," I say quietly, looking around to make sure that our guys are still at the bar getting drinks.

"No, I don't think you do. Who does he think he is? I mean, he was cleaning the floors of your yacht and serving us our drinks, and he has the audacity to not call you back?"

"I should have never pretended like I didn't know him," I say, shaking my head. "That was really rude."

“But you apologized! I saw all of those pathetic texts you sent him. And he didn't even have the courtesy to text you back. Who does that?”

“You know that what I did had nothing to do with his job, right?” I ask Ellis. She gives me a knowing smile.

I worry that she suspects that I am as shallow as she is and is just waiting for me to stop pretending to be this way. But I am not.

“He's a teacher.” I continue to explain myself. “It's not like he's *just* a bartender. No, that didn't come out right. Just forget it.”

She smiles again.

“The only reason I ignored him is because of Connor. If Connor knew that I liked him...well, you know how he is.”

“Whatever, they're both assholes,” Ellis says, taking a sip of her martini and throwing her hand up in the air.

“But you know, that may be even worse. I mean, to be a teacher you need to have a college degree and you make less than most servers and bartenders in the city.”

I shake my head and look down at the floor.

“Ellis, there is more to life than money,” I say quietly.

She leans over to me and puts her lips right next to my ear. Then she whispers, “Honey, that's a lie that rich people tell everyone to keep them working so hard for so little.”

Feeling completely disgusted by someone I thought was my friend, I extricate myself from her and head to the bathroom. I want some privacy, but this isn't the place for it. There is a line of about ten women all waiting for the same dirty, dingy bathroom with used toilet paper all over the floor.

I step outside and head around the corner. I press my back against the wall and take three deep breaths.

“What the hell am I doing here?” I ask. “What the hell am I doing with any of these people?”

“What *are* you doing here?” His voice breaks my concentration and startles me a little bit.

Henry is standing less than a foot away from me, almost hovering over me. I

want to step away to create more distance but there's nothing but a brick wall behind me.

"Are you following me?" he asks, crossing his arms and tilting his head to the side.

"No, I'm not."

"So, why are you here?"

"I had no idea we were coming here," I say quietly.

"That often seems to be the case."

"Ellis wanted me to meet her new boyfriend and he brought along a friend. So, I am currently on a blind date, not that I owe you any sort of explanation."

"No, you don't," he says sternly and takes a step away from me.

"I thought that I had explained myself enough," I say when he starts to walk away. The words just escape my lips before I can stop them.

"What are you talking about?" he asks.

"Didn't you get any of my texts?"

"Yes, I did."

"And you didn't think it would be polite to answer?"

"No, I didn't think that they required an answer. After all, you had already said everything you wanted to say with your actions."

I shake my head and cross my arms.

"That was an accident," I insist. He lets out a laugh, sarcastic, of course.

"So, you accidentally ignored me in front of your friends and your ex-boyfriend? You were accidentally embarrassed about being seen with me, a bartender?"

"No, it had nothing to do with that. It was about Connor. My ex-boyfriend. He has a temper and I didn't want him to get jealous and I didn't want him to make fun of you or be mean to you. I was, I thought I was, protecting you."

He doesn't say anything in response and I don't elaborate further. I had groveled and explained myself enough, much more than I ever have to anyone else. And if he's not interested or cannot find it in his heart to forgive me, there is nothing else I can do.

Without saying another word I head back inside. Somehow all of this time in

the fresh air has made me feel even more claustrophobic than I ever felt in that busy, loud bar.

I find Ellis and Mitchell dancing near the front and grab Brock's hand to pull him onto the dance floor. He is clearly surprised but goes with the motions. He is actually a pretty good dancer, and we fall into a nice rhythm.

A few songs later, I see Henry out of the corner of my eye dancing with the girl he was talking to earlier. She rubs her body intensely against his as he presses himself against her. His hands make their way up and down her arms while her back presses against his groin.

As soon as our eyes meet, I do the same thing to my date. His body feels hard against mine. For a moment, I imagine it belongs to Henry but then Brock says something dissipating the illusion.

Glancing over at Henry again, I watch him watching me and I watch her and him together. My jealousy feels like it's going to boil over at any moment and make me explode. But nothing happens. The song comes to an end and we separate.

When Brock excuses himself to go to the bathroom and Henry's date runs into an old girlfriend of hers, Henry looks at me. The next song comes on and he takes a step forward.

The room is crowded and full of people yet it feels like we are the only souls in the place.

"Will you dance with me?" he asks and puts his arm out. I want to say no, but I can't.

Instead, I just put my hand in his and let him lead me.

"Where did you learn how to dance like this?" I ask.

"I used to take classes," he says quietly.

"Really?"

"Like what?"

"Everything you can think of. I know how to do jazz, Latin, ballroom, some hip-hop. Actually, dancing was my mother's passion and she taught me a lot of what I know."

Suddenly, I feel quite embarrassed over my own lackluster dance skills. I've

learned a few things from popular YouTube videos to not embarrass myself at a club, but I don't actually know anything about dancing. My go-to approach was to always try to mimic the girl next to me and hope no one notices.

“In that case, you should dance with Ellis, she's quite good,” I joke.

“No, thank you,” he says, staring deeply into my eyes. “I only want to dance with you.”

The intensity of his voice and his eyes send shivers down my spine. He doesn't blink for a long time, watching me take it all in. Suddenly, I become a moth drawn to a flame.

“Hi,” Brock says. “Do you mind if I cut in?”

AURORA

My heart drops when I see him. I had completely forgotten that I'm still on a date. I don't want to dance with Brock, but it doesn't feel like I have a choice. Luckily, the song comes to an end and I catch Ellis's eye and casually wave her over.

"Aurora, I'm not feeling that well. I think I'm gonna go home," she says.

"Oh, no," I say sympathetically. "I'll head back with you."

"You really don't have to," she says, but I insist.

I give Brock a small hug and wave goodbye to Mitchell. I glance back only briefly to get one last glimpse of Henry.

"You really owe me for this," Ellis says. "That could've been a disaster."

"Yes. I know," I agree. "Thank you very much."

"What the hell were you doing dancing with that guy again?"

"I don't know," I say, shaking my head. "We were talking and then he just asked me to dance. He is such a good dancer."

"Yes," Ellis says begrudgingly, "I'll give him that."

Climbing into Ellis's Maserati, I can't help but look back at the bar one more time.

Maybe he'll be there.

Maybe he'll be waiting for me. But he's not there.

No, just forget about him, I tell myself. That was a good date and a good dance, but that doesn't mean that anything between us is any different.

“He's right over there, you idiot,” Ellis says, shaking her head.

I follow her pointed index finger and see him sitting on the front of an old car that looks like it was made in the 1990s.

“Do you really wanna get into that piece of shit?” Ellis asks.

“I'll talk to you later,” I say, getting out of the car.

When I walk over to Henry, he hops off, opens the passenger door, and shuts it after I get in. After going around to the other side, Henry gets behind the wheel. The car starts out with a roar and we pull out of the parking lot with the tires screeching.

“Where do you want to go?” he asks. Our eyes meet. I swallow hard.

“I don't know,” I say shyly.

“Somewhere private,” he says more like an assertion than a question.

“The yacht club? To my boat?” I suggest.

There is so much to say and yet neither of us speaks. Instead, he puts his hand over mine, interlacing his fingers with mine.

He kisses me for the first time on the dock, just spins me around and presses his lips onto mine. When I kiss him back, we barely manage to get aboard before all of our clothes come off.

His mouth is strong but his kisses are soft. His tongue finds mine quickly and doesn't let it go. He walks backward with his arms around me as I lead him down to the main corridor and then into the master bedroom in the very back.

He pulls away from me for a second to take a closer look at the room, nodding slightly at the bathroom with a large sunken tub, but I shake my head no.

Tonight, I don't have the patience.

I just want him inside of me as quickly as possible.

Henry throws me onto the bed and climbs on top of me. He's no longer wearing a shirt and I run my fingers up and down his chiseled tan body with a protruding six pack. My own body is so much less perfect, and yet he adores it in every way that I adore his.

He kisses my breasts over my bra and then quickly removes it and throws it on the floor. He buries his head in between my breasts and inhales deeply. This is

where I want to live, he mumbles. This is where I want to spend an eternity. I blush and bury my hands in his thick luscious hair.

He quickly moves his lips down my body. I feel my stomach rise and fall with each kiss. The spot in between my legs tenses and relaxes with each movement.

He pulls off my panties with his teeth and tosses them across the room. When he rises above me, all I see is abs. I help him unbuckle his pants and slide them down his legs. He stumbles a bit and knocks his head into mine.

We crack up laughing and then kiss again and again and again. In this moment, nothing else exists. There's only him and me.

He opens my legs slowly, kissing the inside of my thigh. But this time I take control. I flip him over on his back and climb on top of him. I take him into my mouth, but only briefly. He wants me to be on top of him as much as I want him to be inside of me.

When I take him inside of me, we move as one. We are dancing. There isn't one off-note or a misstep. It feels like our bodies have known each other for a great many years, but in a good way.

It's not boring, but there's also no awkwardness of those first few times. I've never experienced this with anyone else before. In fact, it felt more like I was going through the motions rather than letting myself enjoy the moment. But with Henry, he simply fills me up and takes over. When I get tired of being on top, he senses this and flips me over on my back.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar feeling starts to course through me. Tension starts to rise within me, escalating with each thrust.

Could this be it?

I have experienced this on my own, of course, but never with another person.

Perhaps I could never relax enough. With Connor, I had to fake so many orgasms, it was getting exhausting. He wasn't satisfied unless I made a lot of noise and a big production of the whole event. Ever since then, I'd decided that I would no longer lie to please the man in my life.

But with Henry, things are different. The moans come on their own. Just a little bit at first, barely audible. But as that feeling within me starts to rise, the

sighs come faster and faster.

“Are you getting close?” Henry asks.

His question brings me out of a daze.

“This feels amazing,” I say. “But I don't think I can go there right now.”

“Oh, okay,” he says into my ear. “Do you mind if I do? Because I'm not sure if I can hold on for much longer.”

I give him a kiss and a nod.

“I promise I'll take care of you later tonight.”

His words send shivers down my back. It's a promise as much as a declaration.

Henry's movements speed up as I dig my fingers into his shoulders. I feel him getting closer and closer as the intensity between us continues to build.

“Aurora,” he whispers gently into my ear.

“Aurora!” Another voice interrupts us.

It takes me a moment to realize that the voice belongs to a female, and another few moments to realize that it actually belongs to my mother.

My heart jumps into my throat as I grab onto the comforter around me and pull it up to cover my naked body. Henry, a little disoriented, is not as quick, and stumbles a bit.

Someone standing behind my mother giggles. My eyes try to focus but the light from the hallway is too bright for me to actually make out their features.

“I think we need to give them a little privacy,” he says. I immediately recognize my father's voice and wish for the ground to split open and swallow me whole.

The last thing I see before my mother closes the door is the disapproving look on her face.

I realize that I had been holding my breath this whole time and let it out quickly.

We start to get dressed in complete silence and my mind ping-pongs from one thought to another.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

Why the hell are they here?

"Those are my parents," I say, turning to Henry. "Just in case you were wondering."

"They sure did pick a good time to interrupt us," he says quietly.

"They are supposed to be in Albany on some work stuff, not in the Hamptons and definitely not on the boat."

"It's going to be fine," Henry says, taking me into his arms.

"No, it's not," I mumble and push him away from me. "You don't know my parents."

"We're all adults though, right? This is what adults do."

"Not in the master bedrooms of their father's beloved yachts, they don't," I correct him.

I buy as much time as I can getting ready and now it's time to go and face them. I don't really want to, but I also don't want my mother to come and check on us again.

I look at myself one last time in the mirror to make sure that I look as put-together as possible.

"Are you ready?" I ask, turning to him.

Henry shrugs his shoulders and gives me a wink. "Yeah, why not?" he asks casually.

He isn't at all intimidated or thrown off by what just happened but I am sure that my parents will change that attitude quickly.

I take a deep breath before opening the door. I have never been so embarrassed in my whole life except maybe the time that I got my period in the middle of seventh grade biology and got blood all over the nice upholstered white chairs that the teacher had just set up for us.

No, come to think of it, this is worse.

In the living room, I am greeted by my mother who introduces me and Henry to their guests.

I have never met the Hawthornes before, but my mother had mentioned them a few times. Apparently, she met Mrs. Hawthorne at the new Pilates studio that

she has been attending and in addition to philanthropy they are also both very interested in the arts.

Many wealthy women are interested in those things, but Mrs. Hawthorne is into malaria and clean-water related causes, just like my mom, and she also likes the ballet. I think one of my mother's greatest regrets in life is that her daughter does not like the ballet as much as she does.

She put me in classes when I was a little girl and I attended them faithfully for four or five years, I can't exactly remember how long. What I do remember, however, is how much I detested it. When she finally let me quit, she thought that I would at least share her interest in *watching* ballet, but I proved to be a disappointment in that area as well.

Mom invites us to join them and the Hawthornes for drinks. I suspect that they all saw us when my mother was giving them a tour of the yacht but everyone is polite enough to not bring it up.

My parents are both true New Englanders in that they never discuss private matters when they have company. The Hawthornes may be their friends, but they would have to be the closest friends, if not their best friends, for them to talk about what they had just witnessed.

Knowing my parents, they do not have friends like that.

Close to the end of the hour, after my parents have had two full drinks each, I see my opportunity to escape. We wish everyone a good evening, and head toward the door. Before we can make a clean getaway, my mother stops us.

"Aurora," she says. "I would like to invite you to dinner tomorrow night. Are you free?"

"I'm not sure," I say, "I think I have to check my schedule."

"Well, your father and I are very busy and tomorrow night is the only available time. So, please make sure to clear your schedule."

This is the kind of invitation that is impossible to say no to.

"Okay, I'll see what I can do," I say.

"And you, Henry? We would love to get to know you a little better," my mother says.

"Shit," I whisper to myself, just under my breath.

“Did you say something, honey?” she asks me with an innocent expression on her face.

“I’ll be there, Mrs. Tate,” Henry says. “It has been a pleasure to meet you both.”

HENRY

The night at the yacht was magical up until the very end. That was not the ideal way to meet someone's parents, let alone a girl who I am falling in love with.

Did I really just think this?

Did this thought actually cross my mind? I look in my closet, for something decent to wear to tonight's dinner.

Aurora insisted that her parents are not going to bring up what happened last night, not because they are okay with it, but because it would be indecent of them to do so.

I'm not sure if I am supposed to take this as a good thing or a bad thing. For now, I'll just take it as it is.

So far, I have made a terrible first impression, and perhaps tonight's dinner is a way for me to make up for it. I enlist my mother's help in assisting me in choosing my outfit.

It's not much of a choice though. I only own two suits, both of which I wore to funerals. One is too big, because it was on sale and I couldn't afford the alteration fee, and the other is slightly too small.

My mother, who has never been very good with the needle, offers to help me alter the one that is too big. She goes through a few YouTube videos but quickly realizes that the job is too complicated for a novice like her.

"I guess I'll just wear it as it is," I say. "What else can I do?"

“You could wear something else underneath it,” she suggests. “To help fill it out?”

“Yeah,” I say, “I guess I could do that. Though it is a little bit odd to wear a long sleeve shirt underneath a dress shirt. I think I'll just go with how it is and maybe take off the jacket if the evening calls for it.”

“Don't be nervous, sweetie,” my mom says. “I'm sure they're going to love you.”

I give her a faint smile. I am certain that they will not, but I do not want to go into it right now.

Besides, it's not like I can tell her the embarrassing position in which they found both of us. We're very close, but she's still my mother.

“So, what do you think about Aurora?” I ask, taking a sip of a beer to calm my nerves.

“She seems like a very nice girl. But I do worry about the world that she lives in.”

Even though my mom didn't recognize her at first, I have since filled her in on exactly what kind of family Aurora is from.

WHEN I GET TO DINNER, Aurora's mother opens the door and welcomes me inside. Mr. Tate offers me a drink and I opt to have the same thing that he's having, scotch on the rocks.

The scotch is served out of a crystal decanter, so I don't know exactly what brand it is, but by the way it tastes, I can tell that it is very expensive.

The dark brown liquid is smooth to the taste, warming me from the inside out. I take another sip and feel a shot of liquid courage coursing through my veins.

Aurora comes into the room, dressed in a pristine black cocktail dress and high heels. Her hair is pulled up halfway and there are pearl earrings dangling off her ears.

She gives me a brief hug and a chaste peck on the cheek, the kind you give a

cousin. Of course, I don't expect more. Her parents are here and I want to make a better impression than I had before.

A woman in her fifties with her hair in a bun and a thick Spanish accent walks up to us with a plate of hors d'oeuvres. She is dressed in a gray and white frock, clearly delineating her as one of the help.

When I extend my hand to introduce myself, she stares at me with big wide eyes without moving a muscle.

“Why don’t you tell us about what you do for a living?” Mrs. Tate asks, taking an appetizer and leading me back to the sofa.

“I work in a high school in the Bronx, a charter school that focuses on underprivileged children,” I explain.

“Isn't everyone there underprivileged?” Mr. Tate asks.

I'm not sure if he is trying to be funny or ironic and I don't know how to respond.

“Well, almost everyone is in comparison to you,” I point out.

Mrs. Tate glares at me for a moment and then Aurora breaks out laughing.

I'm tempted to apologize, but I don't see why I have to. What I said is the truth. He's a billionaire and compared to him everyone has less privilege.

"Most of the students," I say, "do not grow up in an environment that is particularly conducive to learning. They often live in very cramped apartments, with multiple siblings, sharing one room among many of them. As a result, they do not have a quiet place to study. Also, their parents, if they do have both in the house, work too many hours to help them with homework or any projects. It's an uphill battle for teachers like us."

“So, is this something you plan on doing for a long time?” Mrs. Tate asks.

I swallow hard.

I should lie and nod and tell her that it is something that I want to do for the rest of my life. Partly because it's probably something I'm going to get stuck doing for the rest of my life. However, if this is the only time that I get to interact with Aurora's parents, I don't want that interaction to be false.

So, against my better judgment, I tell her the truth.

“Actually, no,” I say, taking a sip of my drink.

She perks up a little bit and sits on the edge of her seat.

My eyes briefly meet with Aurora's who furrows her eyebrows and looks at me with a confused look on her face.

"The truth is that I want to be a writer," I say slowly. "In fact, I already am. I have recently had a short story published in the New Yorker. I enjoy writing very much and it's a real calling of mine. Unfortunately, up until this point I have not been able to make a living at it so I took the only job that I got offered after college, teaching."

MR. AND MRS. TATE seem to be taken aback by my honesty because they do not say anything in response for a few moments.

Afterward, Mr. Tate offers to refresh my drink and Mrs. Tate asks me more about my teaching position. Aurora mentions that her mom sits on the board of a few charter schools in Manhattan. We talk about that for a while but it does not go unnoticed that they do not ask me anymore about my writing.

Later that evening, after dinner is served, Mr. Tate asks me where I see myself in five years. This is a hard one to answer, and I simply shrug my shoulders and raise my hands in the air.

"You really don't know?" Mr. Tate asks. He wears his thick flowing hair just below his jawline, a little bit longer than you would expect.

He and Aurora's mom look so similar they could practically be related, and yet Aurora looks nothing like them. While they are both tall and broad shouldered, Aurora is short and a lot curvier than her mother.

While they have high cheekbones and thin aristocratic noses, Aurora's face is wider and a bit flatter. Nevertheless, she is one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, but I cannot deny the fact that she looks nothing like her parents.

"No, I really don't have a plan. I mean, there are certain things I want to do like write a novel, but in terms of where I want my life to be, I am not so sure."

Mr. Tate stares at me, shaking his head.

"I know that you did not grow up with a father, son, but let me give you a little piece of advice," Mr. Tate says, after a moment. "You should always have a

five-year plan, a three-year plan, and a one-year plan. Without goals you do not know where your life is going. Without goals, you will just drift along and one of these days you will find yourself at fifty wondering what the hell happened.

“If there are certain things that you want to achieve, you have to go after them. And you have to be willing to take out anyone who stands in your way.”

"Is that what you did?" I ask.

“You can bet on it,” he says sternly. “It's the only way that I would have gotten where I am. I don't know what Aurora has told you about us, but we both come from very humble beginnings.”

“Yes, she mentioned that,” I say.

“I was born on a dirt street and Gwen grew up with her grandparents, because her mother had her at fifteen. Some people would hide these facts, but we are proud of where we came from and how little we had. When we bought our first radio station, we spent our last cent on it and then went into debt for another hundred thousand. Our competitors thought that we were insane, but a year later we bought another one and another one. We knew back then that in order to protect ourselves, we had to spread our risk around. That way when one or two failed, which they almost always did, we would have others that didn't.”

“That sounds like a sound plan,” I agree.

“My daughter here, is a lot like you,” Mr. Tate continues. “She doesn't have much of a plan for the future. She's getting her PhD in popular fiction, whatever the hell that is, and for whatever reason, I do not know. It feels a lot like she's just waiting around for something to happen.”

"You know I'm right here, Daddy," Aurora says. “You don't have to talk about me as if I'm not.”

“I know you're here, honey. I'm just not sure that you ever listen to me.”

She resists the temptation to roll her eyes, finally succumbing but only a little bit.

“But Aurora is my daughter and as a result she has certain advantages that you did not,” Mr. Tate says. “She will always have money and she will always have prospects, even if she chooses not to use them.”

“Just because I am not interested in working for Tate Media at the moment,”

Aurora says, “doesn’t mean that it is not something I might want to do in the future.”

"Wake up, Aurora," Mr. Tate says. "The future is now. You are twenty-five years old. In five years, you will be thirty. Do you know where I was when I was thirty? Do you know where your mother was when she was thirty?"

"Things are different nowadays, Daddy," Aurora says.

"Yes, unfortunately, I have noticed a change. There used to be a time when you were an adult at eighteen. But now days, everyone seems to be a kid until they're forty."

"Anyway," Mr. Tate says, turning his attention back to me. "Whatever may be Aurora's shortcomings, she's my daughter and she will always be well taken care of. You, on the other hand, will have to learn how to stand on your own two feet."

I clench my fists to subdue the anger.

"Well, I do work for a living, fifty hours a week. During the school year, often more than that. I don't get paid much, but that's the reality of being a teacher. And in the summers, I work sixty, often seventy hours a week at the yacht club, bartending, and cleaning boats like yours, doing whatever it takes."

"Don't get me wrong, Henry. I am not saying that you are not a hard worker. I know that you actually work very hard, a lot harder than some people in this room." Mr. Tate winks at Aurora who doesn't find the joke particularly funny.

"All that I am saying is that to succeed in this world you have to be both a hard worker and a smart worker. You don't want to be one of those chumps out there working hard, doing backbreaking labor for twenty years, and then taking opiates to deal with the pain, and cutting your life short. No, you have to think for yourself. Whatever it is that you want, you have to go after it. No one else is going to do it for you. Do you understand?"

I take a deep breath and look deep into his eyes.

"Yes," I say. "I do understand."

AS SOON AS we get outside, Aurora grabs my hand and apologizes profusely over and over again.

“I can't believe that my dad went on that tirade with you,” she says. “I'm so, so sorry.”

“No, that's okay, it was actually very interesting to talk to him.”

“Oh, come on,” she says, waving her hands and rolling her eyes. “You can't be serious?”

I shrug and tilt my head. “I've never talked to anyone about this before. But I think he's right. I mean, maybe I am wasting my time. Teaching is not something I want to do, so why the hell am I even there?”

“It's a good job and an honorable profession.”

“Yes, that's true if you are passionate about it.”

“You're just letting my dad get to you,” Aurora says, tossing her hair. “You can't listen to him.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head, “he is right. I do need a five-year plan, or at least a one-year plan. I mean, looking forward, what are my goals for the year? What do I want to accomplish? Where do I wanna be this time next year? Maybe I need to ask myself these questions so I can finally get what I want.”

AURORA

The following morning, my mother insists on meeting with me again for breakfast. They are going to Montana later today on their private jet for a few weeks, just to get away from everything. They do this every summer, and this is the third one that I have skipped.

I love it out there – the wilderness, the big blue skies, and the solitude - are amazing. But when my parents are in the state, all of the oxygen seems to be sucked out of it.

“So, what did you think of Henry?” I ask when the waiter brings us our croissants. I don’t want to be here but she insists until I don’t have a choice.

Mom is having a mimosa, but it is a little bit too early for a vodka for me.

“I think he's a very nice boy, Aurora. But he's not a very good fit for you.”

I shake my head, averting my eyes.

“What made me think that she would ever give me a different answer?” I wonder.

“I just worry that you do not know your worth,” my mom adds.

I shake my head again and cross my arms.

“Please don't look at me that way,” she continues.

“Like what?”

“Like I am telling you something that you are actually surprised to hear. Is the only reason you are seeing him is to punish us for something?”

I stare at her. She really is the most self-centered person I’ve ever met.

“Are you serious?” I ask.

“Of course not.”

“I am seeing him because I like him,” I say.

“Well, nevertheless, he is not a good match for you.”

“So, you don't like him?” I ask.

“Did I say that?”

“Not in so many words,” I say with a shrug.

“Aurora, I don't have time for your games right now.”

“Well, I don't have time for yours either. I don't understand what it is exactly that you don't like about him except for his lack of money. But, newsflash, Mom, no one has as much money as you do.”

She shakes her head and stirs her coffee, making her diamond bracelet jingle.

“Maybe not everyone is as comfortable as your father and I, but there are plenty of wealthy eligible bachelors that would make for a great boyfriend for you.”

“So are you telling me that I can't date anyone who makes less than, what exactly? Is there some sort of cutoff point? You didn't seem to have a problem with Connor, and he makes \$150,000 a year.”

“Exactly,” Mom points out. “Connor was not rich by any standard, but he had a future in front of him. Henry, on the other hand, told us flat out that he has no idea what he wants to do in the next few years.”

Your father was very disappointed with that fact.

“I don't see why,” I say to myself.

“He wants the best for you, Aurora. As do I. We are just very discouraged by the fact that you don't seem to want that for yourself.”

“You know what, Mom? There is more to life than money,” I say. “I grew up with and around lots of it and I wouldn't say that it made me a particularly happy person. And yet there are people with a lot less who are perfectly content. Maybe they're onto something.”

“You,” my mom says, pointing her finger in my face, “you have no idea what you're talking about.”

She narrows her eyes and stares deeply into mine, with a menace that I don't

remember ever seeing before.

“We have given you everything, and perhaps that was a mistake. You have no idea what it's like to be poor, or how terrible it is. I grew up living in motels that charged by the hour with my grandmother because my mother disappeared. She had one abusive boyfriend after another, not counting her husband, my grandfather.”

“Not everyone who is poor grows up like that,” I say.

“Be that as it may,” she says, “that was my experience. And I never wanted you to go through anything like that. Why do you think your father and I worked so hard to get where we are?”

“Are you serious?” I challenge her. “Are you seriously saying that you did it all for me? I hardly believe that.”

“Well, we did.”

“No, you didn't. You may have sent me to the best schools and gave me the best of everything but you did not do it for me. You two were going after conquering the world way before I came along. You bought your first radio station before you ever contemplated having me. And you and I both know that.”

“Listen, I don't wanna fight with you, Aurora. I don't wanna fight with you about what we did or didn't do. All I want to do is to ask you to stop seeing Henry.”

“I don't understand why you care so much. You never cared who I slept with before,” I point out. “Connor didn't treat me very well, neither did some of my other ex-boyfriends. And yet you said nothing.”

“Connor had prospects,” my mom says, folding her hands in front of her and pursing her lips. “And as for those other ones, I knew that you would eventually figure your way out of those relationships.”

“But don't you care that Henry treats me really well?” I ask.

“Yes, of course I do, but it's not enough. I can see you getting serious with him even after just a few dates. And trust me, he will always be a weight around your shoulders.”

I shake my head.

“Right now, it feels like you can carry him because he feels light,” Mom

continues. “But after a little while, he's going to start to feel like an anchor, and you're going to feel like you're drowning.”

AURORA

Despite my parents' protestations, we spend the rest of our summer together. Henry continues to work at the yacht club and on boats, and practically moves into my parents' home in the Hamptons with me.

It's a large five-bedroom villa situated on ten acres of prime oceanfront real estate. My parents' travels take them to Montana, then Paris, London, and Rome while we stay here by the water and spend every possible minute naked.

This becomes the most blissful summer of my life. We sleep in late, whenever we can, and Henry makes me pancakes and waffles from scratch. Sometimes, we run straight from bed to the pool. Other times, we put on our bathing suits and walk along the beach and bury our feet in the sand.

We do not argue.

We do not fight.

We just lose ourselves in each other's company.

We want to spend every waking minute together because we cannot get enough of each other. Each minute that we spend together is still not enough.

I crave him more and more, the more time that passes. While he's at work, I spend my days waiting and occasionally writing. My PhD work fills the need I have in the pit of my stomach to put together words on paper, but during the long days of summer, my mind starts to wander and I think what if I wrote something else?

Henry is so open with me about his writing, and yet I feel like I'm still in the

closet about mine, not only with him, but also with me. Every day that I have free, I promise that I'm going to write in the afternoon, but when I sit down and stare at the blank screen and that blinking cursor, I lose my concentration.

One day, during the height of the heatwave, when the days are still very long and hot, we sit together by the pool watching the evening sun set over the horizon.

"This is the most beautiful place I have ever been," Henry says.

"Yes, it's pretty wonderful, isn't it?" I confirm, absentmindedly.

"But I'm not just talking about the house, or the Hamptons," he says.

When he turns his body toward mine, his bronzed skin sparkles and glistens.

"I love you, Aurora," he says, looking directly into my eyes.

"I love you, too," I whisper and look back out at the horizon.

I remember the first time that he told he loved me, I was sitting on his lap, checking my email.

When there was nothing in my inbox, I sighed and said, "Oh, no, no one loves me," to which he replied, "I do."

I thought that he was probably joking, but when I looked at him, I saw that he wasn't. In that moment, I realized that I loved him, too. We had only been together for three days and it was way too soon, but none of that mattered. He loved me and I loved him.

"I love you, too," I say, turning to face him. "You know that."

"This summer has been amazing, the best of my life."

"Same here," I whisper, giving him a nod.

"Will you move in with me?" Henry asks.

My chest tightens and my heart skips a few beats. I would love that, but I hesitate to say it out loud.

"How would that work exactly?" I ask. "Your apartment is all the way up in the Bronx and mine is on 116th Street."

I hope that he knows what I am thinking without me actually having to say it. It would be foolish of him to give up his place that is very close to work since affordable apartments are very hard to find.

"You don't think that it is too soon?" I ask.

He shrugs his shoulders and tilts his head so that his hair falls into his eyes.

"We have been living together this whole summer, haven't we?"

"Yes, I guess we have," I say with a smile.

My other hesitation has nothing to do with him; it's my parents. They don't know that he's staying with me here and they would definitely not be pleased if he were to officially move into my place near campus, which they are paying for.

"Do you really think it's not going to work out?" he asks.

"No, of course not. I'm just worried that you're going to get sick of the commute. Right now you are right across the street from your work, in the subsidized housing that they are providing for you. What about, just subletting your place out for the semester? That way you can test out the commute and see how everything goes."

He takes my hand into his and leans over closer. "You know, you are assuming that I was asking to move in with you, instead of *you* moving in with me."

I feel my mouth drop open. Of course, that's exactly what I was thinking. He flicks my chin up to close my mouth.

"God, I know that my apartment is pretty shitty, but you could please do me a courtesy and pretend," he says, laughing.

WE OFFICIALLY MOVE IN TOGETHER two weeks later.

Well, I guess not officially, since my parents don't know that Henry is now living in the apartment that they are paying for, but he sublets his place for the semester and starts commuting to work from mine.

My semester begins and I enjoy being back in the flow of things. It's hard to explain why I like school so much, but I just do.

I like learning new things. I like challenging myself. I like to read and graduate school is nothing if it's not a lot of reading.

What's good about graduate school is that, unlike undergrad, I only take classes that I am interested in. Most of them require a lot of research and writing,

and I like that, too.

This year, I will be mainly focusing on my thesis. I developed my PhD program from scratch, given that there was no PhD in popular fiction available at the department. But with a lot of hard work and cooperation from my professors, I was able to design and put together my own individualized research plan.

Romance and thrillers are the most popular genres and yet critics seem to pay very little attention to them. There is very little analysis and very little interpretation of what the popular genres say about our culture. This is what I am particularly interested in; how they influence culture and how they impact shifts in culture.

For example, the Me Too movement and talking about consent when it comes to sexual harassment and abuse has been a huge cultural shift in 2019. And immediately, these topics have started to appear in the books that have been independently published during the year by some very prolific and very popular self-published writers.

Most romances are written by women and consumed by women and because there are no barriers to what these authors put in their books, besides the market itself, many authors have been incorporating cultural shifts like the Me Too movement into their work. In fact, there are many instances where the Me Too movement is mentioned directly, something that has yet to happen in traditionally published books.

After starting school, I come home every day excited by all of the new things that I'm learning and that are making an impact on me as a researcher.

Henry, unfortunately, is not so lucky.

He is miserable in his job and all he wants to do is quit. Teaching is not his forte. He's not particularly patient and he isn't very interested in it at all.

"What do you want to do today?" I ask him while I make dinner on the stove.

Usually we order takeout, but this afternoon I was eager to make something from scratch. Of course, my enthusiasm wore off halfway through the meal, but at that point, I was already too invested.

Walking over to me, Henry flips me around and presses his body against

mine. Running his hands up and down my hips, he looks at me with hunger in his eyes.

“No, no, no.” I force myself to pull away. “I can't do this now, I'm cooking.”

“Yes, I can see that,” he says, moving my hair off my neck and kissing me.

“What if we just turn down the burner? You can leave it as is and join me in the bedroom for a little bit,” he whispers.

When he runs his hand up my thigh, my legs open for him. I lose myself for a moment, quickly getting to that place where all I want is for him to be inside of me.

AURORA

“C’mon, we still have a few things to work out, don't we?” he asks, tugging on my hand and trying to pull me into the bedroom.

I shake my head, trying to resist him. But his kisses get more forceful and insistent and I can't bring myself to say no.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I whisper, giggling. It's a lie, of course.

“Oh, I think you do,” he mumbles through his kisses. I don't want to admit it, but I know exactly what he's talking about.

I've told him that I can only orgasm on my own so he has made his mission this summer to change that. Every time, it doesn't work out, he doesn't give up and instead just tries harder.

AND WE ARE MAKING PROGRESS. A few days ago, I got there just with his fingers and now he wants to try with him inside of me.

“You know, it's very common,” I say. “Not many women can orgasm while they are actually having sex. I've read about it online.”

Henry pulls away from me for a second and looks at me.

“You know that I don't want you to feel bad about this in any way, right?”

I nod. He lifts up my chin and makes me look at him.

“I'm serious. I know that we're playing this game but I only want to go on as

long as you're into it. If you don't want me to keep trying, that's fine. This is all about you. I just want to give you as much pleasure as possible."

I swallow hard.

I've always thought that I've had this problem I would never be able to overcome. Yet there is a man who is standing before me who wants to help. I've never thought I would find someone who would try so hard and not get his feelings hurt when it didn't work.

I take his head in my hand and press my lips to his.

I kiss him softly at first, but then more forcefully and passionately. Our clothes come off quickly and he leads me into the bedroom. Just when we get there, I remember that the burner is still on, and run back to turn it off. When I get back to the bedroom, I find him sitting completely naked on the bed, his arms draped over the pillows.

Henry flexes his stomach and instead of six protruding muscles I count eight. Shifting his weight, he pulls me onto the bed.

"You are going to come for me today," he says.

"It sounds like a command, and I like it."

"I'll try," I say.

"No, you will."

He brings my hands up to the top of the bed and holds both of them with his.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I have a surprise for you," he says.

Pulling out a green tie with gold accents, he secures it over my wrists and then wraps it around the headboard.

Shivers run down my spine.

I have never done anything like this before, and I feel myself getting more excited with each passing moment.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asks.

I shake my head no.

He takes another tie, blue this time, and puts that one over my eyes.

With my eyes closed, my other senses come alive. With my hands tied up, the rest of me is exposed and overwhelmed with pleasure.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asks.

I shake my head no.

“Keep going,” I whisper.

Henry runs his fingers down my neck and over my breasts. I arch my back when his hands make their way down my torso. My legs seem to open on their own. But he closes them and says, “Not yet.”

He starts kissing my toes then slowly makes his way up my legs.

This time, however, when my legs open to welcome him inside, he takes it a step further. His kisses which are soft at first, get more rushed and powerful with each moment.

He wants me as much as I want him. A warm sensation starts to build somewhere in the center of my core. I flex my toes to release some of the tension, but it doesn't go away.

When his fingers find their way in, I feel myself getting close. With my eyes closed, I am able to let myself go in a way that I could never let go before. It's as if I am suspended in animation. I don't focus on him, and I don't even focus on myself. Suddenly, I am just able to enjoy the moment.

His fingers start to move faster and faster, and I feel myself getting closer to that explosion. But then, he surprises me. Pulling away for a second, he opens my legs wider and pushes himself inside.

My body immediately welcomes him in. I wrap my legs around him and push him deeper inside of me. And then, just as our thrusts and movements become one, my body seems to yearn for his.

My heart rate speeds up and even skips a few beats. I feel myself getting closer. But it's not going to happen, right? It has never happened before. Why would it happen now?

And then, it does. The feeling takes over before I realize what is happening. It overwhelms me and consumes me.

It catches me completely off-guard, and yet I somehow ride the wave all the way to the end.

“Henry!” I yell out.

His thrusts speed up and a moment later he joins me on that impossible high.

When he finally collapses on top of me, he whispers my name over and over again, occasionally adding an *I love you*.

“I love you, too,” I say, letting out a deep sigh of relief.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Her voice sends shivers down my spine.

It’s not her, I say to myself. No, it can’t be her. What the hell is she doing here?

“Aurora?” she asks in her disapproving and disappointed tone of voice.

I try to get up, but only then realize that my hands are tied up and that there’s a blindfold over my eyes.

“Get these things off of me,” I hiss to Henry.

Stunned, he doesn’t move until I kick him. Then he jumps into action.

After my arms are free, I quickly pull down my blindfold.

Whatever mortification I feel doesn’t make my face flush, but instead causes all of my blood to drain and pool in the bottom of my feet.

My breathing slows down, and I can barely feel my heartbeat.

My mother doesn’t turn around to avert her eyes.

Instead, she glares at me and then at Henry then back at me. I tuck the blindfold and the tie from my wrists under the pillow, but it’s too late. She has already seen them.

“So, I see that the two of you are still together,” my mother announces, folding her hands across her chest.

I pull the sheet up around my body to cover myself up and briefly glance over to Henry who is already covered up from the waist down.

“We never talked about it much after you left for Montana,” I inform her. “But, yes, Henry and I have been seeing each other since then.”

“So, that little talk that we had?” she asks. “That just went straight in one ear and out of the other?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I have taken it under consideration, but I feel like I have earned the right to spend time with whomever I choose.”

I’m proud of myself for not causing a scene. I could have cried and yelled, but I remain steadfast.

Yes, she caught me in a terribly embarrassing position, but it's she who walked in on us.

"So, you don't even think you owe me and your father an apology?" my mom asks.

"An apology for what?"

"Well, we thought that we had reached an agreement with you, and we took you at your word."

"We did not reach any agreement," I insist. "You told me that you did not like Henry and I listened to you. But at no point did I promise you anything."

"And at no point, did you inform us that you would be moving in with him."

"And why would I?"

"Because we are paying for this apartment. We are paying for your monthly expenses."

"And that means, what exactly? That you own me?"

She purses her lips and raises her hand in the air to strike me. I shut my eyes and wait for impact. But nothing happens. When I open them again, she takes a deep breath and relaxes her shoulders.

"Don't be such a bitch, Aurora, it won't always look as good on you as it does now," she says.

"GET OUT!" I yell, trying to stay strong. "Get the hell out of here."

I bite my lower lip. My façade starts to break.

"I will. But you better start looking for another place to live," Mom says.

The first crack appeared when she walked in on us. And the longer we talked, the harder it was for me to pretend that I was okay. When the door slams shut behind her, my tears break free and spew out of me as if they are a geyser.

HENRY

When her mother leaves, Aurora lies back down on the bed and stares into space. I want to do something to help, but I don't know what.

“How could that happen?” she asks. “How could they catch us like that *twice*? And my hands were tied up. Why the hell did you put that blindfold on me?”

“I had no idea that your mother was going to be here today,” I say defensively. “I thought that it would be something fun to try. And you seemed to like it.”

She shakes her head. I kneel down before her and take her into my arms.

At first, she resists and then she gives in. Her shoulders move up and down as she sobs into my chest.

I hold her for a long time without saying a word.

Eventually, she pulls away, and wipes her tears off her face.

“I did like it,” she says. “It allowed me to get out of my head and relax. How did you know that was gonna work?”

I look up at her.

“What do you mean *work*?”

“Well, you know...” Her voice trails off.

“Oh, you actually...?” She nods and gives me a wink. “And then she came in and ruined everything.”

I shrug and find my pants in the hallway and my shirt in the living room. When I come back, Aurora hasn't moved. She's still hunched over cradling her legs and resting her head in her hands.

"Do you want to take a shower?" I ask. She shakes her head. I bring her clothes and lie down next to her.

"It's going to be okay," I say. "She'll get over it."

"No, she won't."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

Aurora takes a deep breath and exhales even slower. "I know my mother. She's going to make me pay for this."

"Okay...So, maybe she'll make you give up your apartment, so what? You can always move in with me."

"You know that they are paying for my school, right? And I'm also getting a monthly stipend to live on. I don't have a job. I don't have any way to pay for anything without them."

I take a step away from her, crossing my arms. "Well, you are twenty-five years old, maybe it's as good a time as any to learn to be an adult."

Slowly, she looks away from that spot in the distance that she has been focusing on and turns her gaze to me.

"This has nothing to do with me not wanting to get a job," she says coldly. "It's everything else. It's my whole life. My parents are assholes but they're still my parents. And I'm not ready to give up on them."

"I'm not asking you to," I say.

"It certainly sounds like you are." She shakes her head just as I shake mine. I don't understand where she's coming from and I don't understand her.

I know that we need to talk about this more, but I just can't bring myself to do it right now. Besides, there's something else that is on my mind.

"I thought that your parents knew that we were living together," I say.

She doesn't respond.

"I mean, I knew that they weren't my biggest fans, but I also didn't realize that they hated me."

She looks down at the floor and doesn't respond.

“My mother had a talk with me about it after the boat incident,” she says after a while. “I didn't wanna tell you because I thought that I could change her mind. I thought that we could meet up sometime in the city after they got back from Europe and have a do-over. I didn't expect her to come here today and just blow it all up.”

AURORA

Two days later, in between my morning and afternoon classes, I meet with my mother at her favorite restaurant in Midtown, the one next door to the Ritz-Carlton Spa that she goes to religiously. It takes me forty-five minutes to get there, which she is well aware of. Yet, when she suggests it, I don't complain about the commute.

“How's your day going?” I ask, taking a seat across from her at the clothed table.

This is the kind of place where all of the waiters are old men who know way too much about wine and not enough about cocktails.

“I got my nails done this morning,” my mother says after giving me two air kisses, careful not to mess up her makeup. “As you can see, they did not do a very good job.”

I look down at her nails and don't see a single thing wrong with them.

“Right over here.” She points to her index finger. “Look closer at the cuticle.”

“Oh, yes.” I nod demonstrably even though I have no idea what she's talking about.

After we place our drink orders, she intertwines her fingers, careful not to put her elbows on the table, and peers at me.

“Your father is not well,” she says.

The statement hits me like a blow to the stomach.

“What are you talking about?” I ask. “Did something happen?”

“No, but he is not healthy. He's okay right now, but he has heart issues.”

“I know that already,” I say. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened.” She shrugs. “I just want to create some context for you.”

I take a sip of my martini and wait for a further explanation.

My mother has always been an enigma. I rarely understand where she's coming from or what she means. Ever since I was a little girl, I felt like we have existed on two separate plateaus, seeing each other, hearing each other but not really interacting with one another in any meaningful way.

“I don't know how to tell you this, Aurora, because we don't talk about things that really matter, do we?” Mom says, running her fingers through her perfectly coiffed hair.

“Can you just tell me what's going on?”

I don't know if she's trying to be tactful or just trying to build up anticipation on purpose, but I am running out of patience either way.

“Your father's business is not doing very well. He has been taking a number of shortcuts, the details of which I cannot go into at this point. But I just wanted to tell you that things are not as they seem and your relationship with Henry is not coming at a good time.”

I stare at her, unsure as to how to react at first. But then anger starts to rise up.

“How dare you?” I ask her. “How dare you say that to me? My relationship with Henry does not exist on your timetable. I am sorry that there are problems in the business, problems you never bothered to tell me about before. But I don't understand what my relationship with Henry has to do with Tate Media. Or why you're even so concerned about it.”

“Honey,” my mother says.

And if you know anything about my mother, she does not mean it as a term of endearment.

“Honey, I worry about you. What do you really know about Henry?”

“What is there to know?” I ask her. “He's a teacher and a writer and that's

it.”

“But what if there’s more?” she asks, tilting her head and narrowing her gaze.

“People are complicated, Aurora. You don't seem to know that. You have always buried your head in books where everything works out in the end, one way or another. The characters go through predictable ups and downs, they learn the lessons, or they figure out a crime, or whatever the heck happens but, in the end, everything is resolved. Right?”

“I'm sorry, Mother,” I say. “Is this conversation about Daddy’s health? Your business? My relationship with Henry? Or my poor choices when it comes to my studies? What are we talking about here exactly because you are going all over the place?”

“You are impossible,” she says, taking a sip of her martini and tapping her long nails on the table.

Our food has arrived but neither of us have tried a bite.

“I wanted to meet with you because I wanted to talk to you about all of these things. They are all related because they all concern *you*,” she says.

I sit back in my chair and wait for her to explain.

“Our business has taken a turn and there are certain issues that have to be resolved. I cannot go into it anymore than this here. I probably can't even tell you anymore than this at all because the less you know, the better.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” I say quietly.

“I have already told you my concerns about Henry and seeing what you two were doing did not alleviate them.”

My blood runs cold as she mentions what had just happened.

Being the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant that she is, I did not expect for her to actually bring that up and her statement comes from left field.

I feel my cheeks get flushed and I force myself to take a few deep breaths.

“I know that it is not very tactful of me to bring it up, but I saw what I saw and I am concerned. I am your mother and when I was dating, we never took things that far.”

I take a deep breath, struggling for air. At this rate I will need an oxygen

mask to get enough air.

“Mother, if you wanna talk about my sex life, we should really make an appointment with a therapist. I'm going to need one.”

She shakes her head dismissively.

“I don't want to talk about this anymore than you do. I just had one question for you.”

“Go ahead,” I say cringingly.

“That was consensual, right?”

“Of course it was! What the hell do you think is going on?”

“I don't know anymore,” she says, shaking her head. “All of these women on television talking having been sexually assaulted or made to feel uncomfortable by things that men have done for centuries. And now suddenly it's wrong?”

This is the first time I have ever heard my mother talk like this. My mouth nearly drops open.

“That's the whole problem,” I say when I finally regain the ability to speak. “That's the whole *fucking* problem. They have been doing the same thing for years. And finally someone is calling them on it. Grabbing women's asses when they are just walking past them. Telling a complete stranger to smile so that she will look prettier for him, as if she owes him something. Women have been putting up with these unwanted sexual advances for as long as there have been women in existence, and we are sick of it.”

“If that's the case, then what the hell was going on in that apartment that I walked into?” she asks.

My mother doesn't curse, and the fact that she uses the word hell instead of heck chills me. But she is genuinely confused and as much as it pains me to talk about my sex life with her, I decide that I don't have any other choice.

“That was consensual,” I say. “It was just something we were doing for fun. He thought that the blindfold and the restraints would take me out of my head and relax me a bit, and he was right.”

She shakes her head, finishes her martini, and asks for another round. I don't know what I was expecting. Perhaps some understanding or compassion, but she lives in an entirely different world, one that I could never access, no matter how

much I try.

"Okay, I think we have gotten off track here," she announces.

"Yes, I agree," I say, letting out a sigh of relief.

"But we do we understand each other?" she asks. I look up at her and into her wide green eyes.

"About what?"

"About Henry."

"Well, I know that you don't like him, you've made that perfectly clear."

"So, you will not be seeing him again?" she asks.

I furrow my brows and shake my head. "No, absolutely not."

"So, I guess we have not reached an understanding."

"No, we haven't," I say.

"Okay then, let's put it this way. If you want to keep seeing Henry then you can do so on your own. But your father and I do not want him living in the apartment that we are paying for."

Blood drains away from my face and I look down at the table, picking at a little crumb left by the French baguette.

This is what I have been afraid of, a definitive no.

She has showed her disapproval before, but she has not come out and actually said that I would have to move out.

"I don't understand why," I say. "What do you think Henry is doing? Do you think that he is lying about who he is?"

"No, I don't think that. I think he's telling me the absolute truth and that's what scares me the most."

I shake my head.

She puts her hand over mine, startling me.

The tone of her voice suddenly becomes softer and quieter.

"I know that you have feelings for him, Aurora. And he may be a good person."

"He is," I insist. "He's a good man."

"That doesn't matter," my mother says. "I am very sorry. Perhaps I should have prepared you for this sooner and that's my fault. But you are a Tate, and

though your personal life can be your personal life, that does not mean that you can make any sort of significant commitment like moving in with someone, let alone marrying someone, without our permission.”

“And why is that?” I whisper, pressing my fingernails into my palms as hard as I can.

“You are a Tate. You're not just an Aurora Penelope whomever. And you have certain responsibilities that come with that.”

“Don't you want me to be happy? I mean, how much money do we need to have so that I'm not forced into a marriage of convenience?” I ask.

“I'm not forcing you into anything. Do you see me introducing you to eligible bachelors? No, this has nothing to do with that. All I'm saying is that Henry Asher is not a good match for you and your father and I will not support you living with him.”

“You know, you two came from nothing. I thought you would be a little bit more sympathetic to people who are struggling,” I say, trying to hold back the tears that are building up at the back of my eyes.

“We are sympathetic, but he is not going after anything. He is perfectly content just being a teacher, and his greatest dream in life is to write short stories. How is he going to support you on that? Or is he going to depend on us forever?”

“Is that what you're really concerned about?” I ask. “You have more money than anyone could ever spend in ten lifetimes and you're worried about spending a little bit of that to make sure that your daughter has a comfortable life with the man of her dreams?”

“No, that's not what concerns us. We are worried about you not following the rules. We are worried about you doing whatever the hell you want.”

HENRY

When Aurora shows up that evening after she had lunch with her mother, I took her into my arms and promised her that everything would be okay. I don't renew my weekly sublet and we move back into my apartment. She thought that it would be horrible to live above 120th Street in a fourth floor studio walk-up, but our life is total bliss for the next two months.

My work is right across the street so I never get in late even when I have overtime. Now, it's her turn to do the long commute to Columbia and, at first, I worry about her, not sure how she will handle it.

The whole trip with the bus change and the subway ride and the walking takes almost an hour, but after the first few trips, she stops complaining.

In fact, she even tells me how much she enjoys having that time to think and process everything that has happened. She has never ridden the subway much before, or the bus, and she enjoys the people watching.

Frankly, I thought she would have a much more difficult time adjusting to life as I know it, but she surprises me. She stops using credit cards that her parents pay for, and even gets a job at the Humanities Library to bring in some extra money.

Of course, there are a lot more better paying positions in the city like being a server or waitress, but she seems happy at the library so I keep my thoughts to myself. For now, I'm just happy that she is contributing anything at all and we're

not relying on her parents' money to make ends meet.

The kids in my class relax a bit as the semester wears on and I start to enjoy my job more and more. I don't have time or space to write, but I'm okay with that, too. We are getting our life figured out and starting our life together.

And then, right after Thanksgiving, before the last two weeks of the semester, everything falls apart.

"How was work?" she asks, rifling through the boxes near the closet.

I don't say anything and instead head straight to the mini-fridge.

We live in a small studio apartment with an almost nonexistent closet.

Some of her clothes are laid out on the floor, the others are on the bed and there are more in the boxes.

"How do I look?" she asks, spinning around in her high-heeled shoes to look at me.

"Beautiful. Where are you going?"

"I haven't seen Ellis in a long time and she texted me to catch up."

I shrink and bury my head in the fridge, grabbing a beer and looking for something edible.

"Why don't we ever have any food?" I ask.

"Because you never go and get any," she snaps back.

"Oh, is that how it is now? It's my job to do all the grocery shopping?"

"Do you think it's my job?" she asks.

She slips on a different dress, shimmery and green with a tight, high waist and looks at herself in the full-length mirror that she brought over from her old apartment.

The mirror is enormous, reaching all the way to the ceiling. Of course at her old place, it had fit nicely, but here it makes it look like we live in a matchbox.

"I'm the one who is commuting for two hours a day, you work right around the corner. The least you can do is pick up some food."

"Don't you remember what we talked about?" I ask.

She flips her hair and turns to look at me. She has never looked more beautiful.

Her face flushes red with anger, making a little crinkling spot in between her

eyebrows. I can see the fire in her eyes and it's all I can do to stop myself from throwing her onto the bed.

"No, I don't remember," she says with her hands on her hips.

"There are no good grocery stores anywhere near here," I say. "None that have any fruits or vegetables anyway. Remember, they even did an NPR story about how this area is a food desert."

She rolls her eyes.

"So, just because I happen to go to school in a place with a grocery store, that means that I have to lug all of that stuff back up here, on my commute?"

"I don't see any other way," I say, sitting down on the sofa.

There is barely any room for it, but she had insisted that we get it so that we would have somewhere else to sit beside the bed.

"I don't wanna argue about this," I say after moment. "That's not at all what I wanted to talk about."

"What do you want to talk about?" she asks.

"They fired me," I say quietly.

"What? What are you talking about? I thought you had a contract for this year."

"I did, but they are breaking it. Apparently, the school is losing money and they're cutting back on some teachers."

"But who is going to teach your classes?" she asks.

"I don't know. I guess they'll be combining some classes and sending some of the students to another school. I don't really know what's going on, but they are laying off about five other teachers. There are rumors that the owner has been funneling money to some of his other businesses and the state's attorney might be investigating him. But in the meantime, I'm out of a job."

"I'm so sorry," she says, walking over and wrapping her arms around me.

I breathe her in. Her hair smells like flowers, and I want to stay in this moment forever. But when I exhale, she pulls away.

"So what's going to happen now?" Aurora asks.

"I have no idea," I say.

I know what she's thinking. What's going to happen to this apartment, which

was subsidized by my job?

How are we going to afford another place in a city that's so expensive?

I take a deep breath and drop another bomb.

"We have to be out of here by the end of December," I say quietly.

She stares at me in disbelief.

"No, they can't do that," she says, shaking her head. "We have rights."

I shrug and finish my beer, going to the refrigerator to get another one.

"Yes, we do. But they want us out of here. I don't know what's going on, but it looks like the school is shutting down."

"Well, no, we're *not* moving."

I plop down on the bed and stare at the ceiling. "Of course, we don't necessarily have to move right now, right before Christmas. We can probably stay here for a month or two, maybe three, before they will be able to actually evict us. But that will ruin my credit and what then? I doubt I'll be able to get a job by then, a good paying one anyway."

She looks at the time on her phone and quickly finishes applying her lipstick and some final touches around her eyes.

"You look... magnificent," I say without a hint of irony in my voice.

"Thank you, I hope it's enough."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, I am meeting up with Ellis and I haven't seen her since I've moved up here."

"You know, some people would say that friends are there to support you in your time of need," I suggest.

"You just don't understand. We have been friends since we were kids and this is what it's like to have friends from back in the day," she says with a shrug.

"Yes," I say, "I am familiar with the concept of a long-term friendship. But you and Ellis don't seem to be very close. I mean, why else would you go through all of this trouble to impress her instead of just telling her what you're going through?"

"Okay," she says quickly, waving goodbye. "I don't have time to get into another argument with you. I've got to go."

After the door slams shut, I whisper, “I love you.”

HENRY

Two months later, we get the dreaded eviction notice. We have been expecting it, but it still comes as a surprise.

Aurora's job at the library pays five cents over minimum-wage and she can only do twenty hours a week. Even those hours take her away from her studies, and I can tell that she is falling behind on writing her thesis.

She comes home exhausted both from the commute and the classes as well as the hours at work. The time that she should be writing, she instead spends procrastinating, watching television or scrolling through her phone.

I want to do something to help, but I can't. I fill out application after application after application for every teaching job available, along with about one-hundred other jobs that I'm not particularly qualified for, but no one is hiring.

All teaching jobs in the city are taken until the fall except for some prestigious tutoring centers, that only have a few hours available a week and are located in lower Manhattan.

I get one offer and I brave the long commute for measly pay and teach basic concepts to spoiled rich kids who could not care less about anything that I have to say. When I come home and vent about them to Aurora, she gets defensive.

“You know what,” she says one evening. “I'm really tired of you talking like that. Is that what you think my childhood was like? Is that who you think I was?”

"No, not at all," I say even though that's a lie.

I know that that's exactly how her parents were when she was little and that's probably how they told her to treat her tutors as well, as if they were there to serve her.

"I'm just very tired right now," I say, trying to steer the conversation to something else. "How was your day?"

"I didn't go to class today," she says.

"Really? How come?"

"I don't know," she says, staring absentmindedly at her phone. "I didn't have work and I just didn't feel like going all the way down there."

"Things are going to get better," I say, trying to stay optimistic.

She turns to face me and gives me a blank stare. "How is that exactly? I mean, what's going to happen to make it better?"

I don't have an answer to that. "I think we just need to stay positive and not let this tear us apart."

"Do you want to know what I think?" she asks. I nod.

"I think that we need to ask for help. I think it's about time that I go to my father and ask him to pay for our apartment."

"No, absolutely not."

"Why not?"

"Because they made it very clear that they want nothing to do with us."

"No, they did not. They did not want me to see you. But that doesn't mean that they don't want to have a relationship with *me*."

"So, what are you saying exactly?"

"I don't know what I'm saying. I'm very confused. All I know is that we need help and they are the only ones in a position to help. I mean, why are we doing this to ourselves? They love me and they would be freaking out if they knew the financial position that we are living in. They would have a heart attack if they saw this apartment. It's as small as my mom's shoe closet!"

"But what about what they said about me?" I ask quietly.

"I think that they're going to change their mind," Aurora insists. "I have been absent long enough from their life and I think they're going to be happy just to

hear from you again.”

I shake my head no.

“Why do you have to be so stubborn? Why can't you just give them a chance?”

“They never gave me a chance,” I insist.

She gets off of the sofa and goes to the tea kettle. She runs some water in it from the sink and then stands there and watches as it comes to a boil.

“I wasn't going to tell you this,” she says, pouring the hot water into her favorite blue cup, “but my mom has been giving me money for the last four months.”

“What?” I gasp.

“I should've told you earlier, but I just didn't want to make things more difficult. My mom has been helping us with money for a long time because the truth is... I haven't been working at the library.”

“How could you lie to me about that?” I whisper.

“Henry, they pay minimum-wage. I'm in my last year of the PhD program and I can't spend twenty hours a week working for so little so we can afford this ridiculously shitty apartment. I'm already commuting two hours each day and...”

The voice trails off.

I don't say anything for a while.

“Are you mad?” she asks.

“No, I'm not. I thought I would be, but I am actually disappointed,” I admit.

“Don't you understand that I have to finish my PhD? I've been working on it for years.”

“Yes, I do understand. But I also understand that after all of these years, you have grown accustomed to a certain lifestyle, one that I will never be able to afford. It just makes me a little sad.”

“What are you talking about?” she asks.

“What I'm talking about is that I don't think that we are ever going to be on the same page. You're never going to think that I make enough money. And whatever it is that I do make, you will never be happy with it.”

She shakes her head vigorously and promises that it's not true.

Unfortunately, we both know that it is.

I can't compete with the world in which she was raised in. It's not like her parents were doctors or lawyers. She has had more in this life than most people can ever dream up or even imagine.

How stupid was I to assume that she would be willing to give all of that up for me?

"My mother has invited us to dinner," she says coldly. "I think they want to give it another chance to get to know you better. It's tomorrow night. Please say that you'll go."

AURORA

We arrive at my parents' apartment on Park Avenue, and their doorman lets us in. Edward has been working there ever since I can remember, and I think of him as a friend rather than an acquaintance or an employee.

I ask about his wife who has been battling cancer, which is now in remission, and his children, who my father has employed at Tate Media. They both attended state schools and submitted their resumes through the normal hiring process, but after my mother found out, she streamlined their hiring process.

"So, they're happy in their jobs?" I ask.

"Yes. Very happy. We are both so grateful to your parents."

"Good, I'm glad to hear that," I say, giving him another brief hug.

I haven't seen him for a while and I actually just realized how much I have missed him.

"So, this is the infamous Henry Asher?" Edward says. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Yes, you, too," Henry says, shaking his hand.

"Well, I think we better be going, they're waiting for us," I say, waving goodbye. As we ride up in the elevator, I wonder why my father was perfectly fine with giving Edward's children positions at the company and has not extended the same courtesy to Henry.

I'm not familiar with the woman who answers the door as my mother goes

through servants often. Very few make it longer than six months and a number of them barely survive a month. My father and I used to joke that my mother isn't actually interested in having a servant at home, but only has one because it is something that is expected of her.

“Thank you both for coming,” my mother says, giving me a brief hug and shaking Henry's hand.

She shows us through the sitting room into the living room, where my father is standing next to the built-in bar, putting together a drink menu.

After a brief hello, he asks Henry what he wants to drink and makes two scotches on the rocks. My mother and I opt for glasses of white wine. When I find a seat next to their roaring fireplace, I wonder if this is going to be strong enough.

I come into the dinner not knowing exactly what to expect. They have already expressed concerns about Henry and our relationship, but over these last few months my mother has softened her approach.

I got the sense that she regretted saying what she said the last time we were at lunch together. I haven't seen her again, but we have texted and occasionally spoken on the phone and even video chatted one time.

The few times that I have asked her to send me money, she has been more than generous. I regretted lying to Henry about my library job, but after the interview, they offered me the position and told me about the pay and I couldn't go through with it.

Twenty hours a week for a job that paid minimum-wage was just not something that I could afford to do in my last year. I knew that he wouldn't understand and that's why I kept it from him for as long as I did.

My mother, however, understood very well. Even though she is not entirely on board with my PhD, she is very big on finishing projects that you start. And since I was already enrolled, she did not want me postponing graduation just so I could work hours I couldn't afford to get the \$800 in rent that we needed.

When I talked to her on the phone, I only asked for that month's rent. When I hung up, I saw a text that she had deposited \$10,000 into my bank account. I thanked her politely and considered returning a portion of it, but then decided

against it.

I might need it in the future and I didn't want to have to ask again. In the meantime, I promised myself that I would spend the money wisely and not buy anything extravagant that we didn't need.

Over dinner, we focus mainly on general topics of conversation. We talk about my little brother who is going into seventh grade and who is currently at his fencing lesson. He is heavily involved in musical theater, which my mother loves and my father hates, so I asked her about that along with about a million other things that have nothing to do with Tate Media, my PhD program, or Henry's job. The dinner goes nicely enough and I think that it's actually going to be a success.

But then just as the dessert is served, my father asks Henry about his work.

"Well, as you probably know, the school is shutting down and they have laid off almost all of the teachers."

"No, I didn't hear that part," my father says, tilting his head in a concerned manner.

"Yes, the state's attorney is currently investigating the entire board of trustees. It's an unfortunate situation and a lot of the kids are really suffering," Henry says.

"And the teachers as well, I'm sure," my father says.

"Yes, the teachers are as well," Henry agrees.

I wonder if Henry thinks that my father is being cold and distant. He doesn't know him, but he's actually acting as compassionately as I have ever seen him. I hope that he doesn't make him regret that.

"Henry is looking for a new job," I cut in, "but as you can imagine there are not a lot of teachers being hired in the middle of winter."

"No, I imagine not," Daddy says.

"I am working part-time as a tutor for a few kids in lower Manhattan," Henry says rather defensively.

"And, are you interested in any other opportunities?" my mother asks.

"Yes, of course. I have sent out my resume to a number of research and writing related positions, but I haven't heard anything back yet."

"Well, that's one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you today," my father says. "We are actually starting a new division at Tate Media that's going to be focusing on crime. We will have a television division, and online magazine division as well as podcasts and even programming on various social media networks. We are doing a big hiring spree and I would love for you to send your resume to our HR people for consideration."

"Oh, wow," Henry says slowly, completely surprised. "Yes, of course. That would just be wonderful."

"Good," Daddy says, nodding his head and giving me a wink. "I'm glad to hear that. Send me a resume tomorrow and I'll pass it along to my people. I can't make any promises, of course."

"No, I completely understand. I appreciate the opportunity."

In the cab back, Henry is on cloud nine. Smiling from ear to ear, he gets home and immediately opens his laptop and starts working on his cover letter.

"Are you going to do it right now?" I ask.

"Yes, of course. Your dad wants to see it tomorrow so I want it to show up in his inbox first thing."

"You know, you can take your time," I say.

"No, actually I can't. This is the first time that your father has shown any interest in me and not just that, he actually made me an offer. I don't take that lightly."

Henry works late into the night. He must have rewritten that cover letter and resume a hundred times before finally sending it off. I ask to see it, but he refuses to show it to me. Afterward, he paces around the place, cracking his knuckles. I don't remember him ever being this nervous before.

"I had no idea that you were so interested in the job," I say when he crawls into bed, completely exhausted.

"Actually, I am. I was thinking of all the articles that I could write and this is an amazing opportunity. He's putting together a new network and networks need writers. If I can only get this job..."

"What did you think of the dinner?" I ask.

"I think it went really well, don't you?"

“I do. Shockingly well,” I add.

He laughs. “Maybe they're just coming around? Just accepting the inevitable?”

“Which is, what exactly?” I ask.

“That I love you and you love me and we're going to be together forever.”

I smile and run my fingers up and down his chest. He flexes, pushing my hand up, and making me laugh.

"I love you very much," I say.

“I love you, too.”

“I hate fighting with you,” I say.

“Me, too," he says, leaning over and giving me a wet kiss.

“Let's not fight anymore,” I whisper into his ear.

“I won't if you won't," he says, pressing his lips softly to my neck and moving closer and closer to my collarbone.

With one swift motion, he pushes me down onto the bed and I lose myself in his body.

AURORA

My mother calls me the following morning.

At first, I don't really want to answer, but then I think that it might have something to do with Henry's resume, so I do.

"Glad I was able to catch you," she says in a particularly chipper voice.

"How's your day going?"

"Fine," I mumble.

"Your classes?"

"Actually I don't have any classes today. I'm going to focus on writing my thesis."

"Good, good," she says.

I can hear that she's distracted, or perhaps just waiting for the right opportunity to bring up whatever is on her mind.

"What's going on, Mom?"

"Well, since you asked," she says slowly. "I am calling about a particular issue."

"Okay... does this have something to do with Henry?"

"Oh, sort of, I guess so. Well, no, not really."

I don't say anything.

"Okay, why don't you just come out and say it? I'm all ears," I say.

"Well, I need to ask you a favor."

I wait for her to explain.

“I would like you to accompany one of your father's friends to the Callum Theater Gala this weekend.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, I use that term *friend* loosely, as you know. Your father knows him and he's an acquaintance, and associate, but he's too young to be a close friend. He's closer in age to you actually.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, “but what does this have to do with me? Why can't he get his own date?”

My mother exhales with exasperation. “I don't know why you have to be so difficult.”

“Franklin Parks is going to be taking over the new crime division at Tate Media, the one that Henry has submitted his resume to, if you remember? Anyway, not to be so blunt, but Franklin will be making all final decisions regarding new hires.”

“Is that why you want me to be his date?”

“No, not at all. The thing is that we think that you should start taking a more active role in representing Tate Media at public functions.

“I know that you are not interested in working at the company at this point, but your father and I are both unable to attend this gala and our presence is greatly needed there. We have supported that theater for many years and they do a lot of good work there.

“Anyway, Franklin is going and we would also like you to get to know him a little better, so that you can give us input about the type of person who will be in charge of this new direction in the company.”

I swallow hard. I want to say no, but she has me between a rock and a hard place. “Okay...” I say slowly. “When is it?”

I GO to this gala partly as a favor to my mother and partly as a favor to Henry. The guy that is supposed to be my date will be the one who will be interviewing and hopefully hiring Henry. This is definitely not an official date, but we are

sitting next to each other at the same table.

I am nervous to tell Henry my plans, thinking that he will for certain want to come with me, but he actually has plans with some of his teacher friends. I don't mention the fact that I will be meeting with his possible future boss. I only tell him that this is a favor for my parents.

At the gala, guests wear ten thousand dollar dresses with shoes and purses to match. Luckily, I don't stand out in a bad way because my mother had couriered over one of my old dresses from home.

After getting a drink, I find my assigned table and take a seat. After a few minutes of small talk with the rest of the round table, I see a man walking slightly unevenly and talking a little bit too loudly.

I don't know how many drinks he has had, but he is clearly intoxicated.

Please don't be him, I say to myself over and over again until he takes the seat right next to mine.

"Well, hello there," he says, extending his hand to me. I take his hand reluctantly and he quickly pulls it up to his lips and gives me a big kiss.

"You must be the elusive Aurora Penelope Tate!"

"It's nice to meet you," I say, "Franklin Parks, I presume?"

"Your presumption is 100% correct."

He enunciates each word in that way that drunk people do when they are trying to appear sober. A waiter in a white tuxedo comes around and asks if he can get us another round of drinks.

"No, thank you," I say quickly. "I'm still working on mine."

Franklin motions for the waiter to pour him another glass.

"Well, well, well," he says, sitting back in his chair and propping his hands around his head. "It is a pleasure to meet you. Your father has told me a lot about you."

"I wish I could say the same thing about you," I say and he bursts out laughing.

"Now, I have heard a lot about your sense of humor, and the fact that it does not take any prisoners."

"Well, I say you have to consider the source. The men who have told you

that are probably not used to dealing with strong women.”

I take a sip of my drink, and look around the room, for someone else to talk to. Anyone else.

It's not that Franklin isn't easy on the eyes, it's just that he rubs me the wrong way. He's arrogant and self-absorbed, very self-absorbed.

A few people come up to me to talk about this and that but as soon as Franklin interjects, they leave as quickly as they came.

After dinner is served and I am a little bit drunk and completely bored by the conversation about golf and media station acquisitions, I turn to Franklin and ask him, “So, why exactly am I here? You don't seem like the type who can't get his own date.”

“You're right, I guess my reputation precedes me.”

I toss my head back and laugh.

“What's so funny? Let's just say, I haven't heard a thing about you until a few days ago when my mom asked me to come here but I got the sense of exactly who you are when you showed up.”

He leans a little bit closer to me and then raises his finger, points in my face, and starts to laugh.

“Ha, ha,” he says, “you think you know everything about me, don't you?”

I shrug and adjust my strapless dress.

“Well, you don't know the first thing.”

“So, you haven't dated every eligible bachelorette in the city?” I challenge him.

“Well, I wouldn't say that...”

“Have you ever even been in a serious relationship?” I ask.

“Now, why do women go around asking that? It's like some sort of litmus test with you all. Do you want to be the first woman to plant your flag in me, so to speak?”

“No, absolutely not.” I smile.

He sighs demonstratively and slides down into his chair.

“That's what I'm starting to understand,” he says, shaking his head. “And why is that exactly?”

“Well, you’re what thirty-seven?” I ask, being extremely generous.

“I’m forty,” he says.

I doubt that, but I don't challenge him.

“Here's the thing, we expect that a man who has reached the ripe age of forty, is it? We expect, for you to have experience in at least one serious, monogamous, and preferably quite extensive relationship. Otherwise, we get a little bit suspicious.”

“Why? Why do you get suspicious?”

“Well, to tell you the truth,” I say, putting my elbow on the tip of my knee and getting as close to him as possible, without actually touching him. “It's like a warranty. It means that you are reliable. You can be trusted. If another woman has trusted you and things just didn't work out, well, that happens. But, if you have never been in a marriage before, or, God forbid, a serious relationship, well, red flags are going off all over the place.”

“But what if there isn't anything menacing about it?” he asks. “What if it just means that I didn’t find the right woman?”

A smile starts to form at the corner of my lips and quickly grows into a grin and then a full out laugh.

“What?” he asks innocently. “What's so funny?”

“There is something missing. You have been dating since you were what, fifteen? And you weren't able to find a single woman who could put up with you? Or even worse, you couldn’t find a single woman who *you* could put up with? No, no, no... Danger ahead,” I say, shaking my head.

“So, tell me about you, then.”

“There's nothing to tell,” I say with a shrug. “I have dated a few guys, and finally found someone that I really care about.”

“Oh, really? What's he like?”

Suddenly, my throat closes up. Do I tell him the truth? Do I tell him that he's the guy that he will be interviewing tomorrow morning? Or do I just let that little piece of information slide?

“What's the matter?” Franklin asks. “Cat got your tongue?”

“I met him in the Hamptons,” I say. “We spent a glorious summer together

and now we're living together.”

“And what is it that he does?”

“He's sort of between things right now,” I say as casually as possible. “He’s a very talented writer, but he has been working as a teacher for a few years.”

He doesn't ask me anything more, and I don't volunteer. Tomorrow morning, he will probably make the connection between teacher and writer, but I don't want to sway him one way or another about Henry's position.

The truth is that I'm not really sure if I have any influence.

Yes, I am his employer's daughter, but my father would never make it clear to Franklin that he absolutely has to hire Henry. We would have to be married for at least a decade for that to happen.

I excuse myself and head to the bathroom, angry that the heels that I have chosen for the occasion have given me blisters on the back of my heels.

I don't know how some women can stand to wear heels every single day, but I really hate them. I think that they were invented by some terrible man who hates women and wants to make them suffer. But in truth, it's the women who subject themselves to this punishment just to look tall and hot.

I glance at myself in the tall leaning mirror in the center of the enormous bathroom. It's no longer the holiday season, but the mirror is still decorated in winter-style garland celebrating the season.

I don't want to admit it, but the heels do make me look magnificent. I'm not very tall, only five foot four, but with these heels, my legs look long and flamingo like. They accentuate my hips and minimize my waist and even, somehow, prop up my breasts. If only Henry could see me like this, I say to myself, immediately regretting that it is not him who is my date for tonight.

I hate lying to him. I don't want to, and it always makes me feel like a total shit, and yet I find myself doing it more and more. I lied to him about working at the library. I lied to him about taking money from my mom. And now I'm lying to him about attending this gala.

The truth is that these are all things that I could explain to him, but they aren't things he would understand.

A part of him knows that the only reason why he has an interview with

Franklin Parks tomorrow about the research writing position at Tate Media is that my father owns the company.

He knows that, but if he knew that in return for that favor, I am on a date with Franklin himself, as a favor to my mother, steam would come out of his ears.

And I don't want him to feel like he isn't good enough.

He is.

The problem is that the game is fixed. My father and mother took a lot of shortcuts as opportunities presented themselves to them, and that's why they are where they are.

That's just how the world works. You have to take whatever advantage is presented to you, because it's an uphill battle no matter what.

But for some reason, Henry doesn't understand that. He thinks that there is a noble way to get what he wants. I'm not saying that you have to lie and cheat and be a terrible person and that the only way you can become successful is to be a vile human being, because that's not true. But you do have to grab every opportunity.

This meeting with Franklin Parks is not a date, even though it seems like it is. It's a meet and greet.

It's an opportunity for me to talk to a few people that my parents are friends with and to show up here as the face of Tate Media. Given that Franklin will be heading a large new division within the company, my mother wants me here to get to know him better, in a more casual environment.

What will I report back? Nothing particularly encouraging. I don't know how he is as an employee and a boss, but so far, he has not made the best first impression.

But that's good to know. It's good to be informed.

I'm saying all these things because I'm trying to think of a possible explanation of what I'm doing here, something that I will have to explain to Henry later on tonight.

I'm tired of lying to him, but that doesn't mean that I'm willing to allow him to get less than what he deserves just because of his pride. Henry is a very good

writer and since that is what he wants to do for a living, I will do everything in my power to help him reach his goals.

“Well, hello there.” Franklin comes up to me at the dessert table.

We are at the back of a banquet hall, and this isn't the usual gathering place. It's dark and quiet here and there are a lot of beautiful pastries and cakes to look at, so that's where I had escaped after using the bathroom.

“I thought that maybe I would find you here,” he says, winking at me. He leans against the wall but only slightly and looks me up and down in that way that men do when they are assessing you.

It was sexy when Henry did it, but with Franklin, it's creepy. I take a step away from him.

“No, honey, don't be scared, I didn't mean to frighten you.”

“You didn't,” I lie, trying to appear to be strong.

“So, what are you doing all the way over here, hiding in the shadows?”

“I guess you answered your own question,” I say, crossing my arms.

“You know, you're not very nice, has anyone ever told you that?”

I stare at him but say nothing.

I hate how he expects me to be nice just because he is paying attention to me.

I was polite enough, but when he is pressing me and pressuring me, I don't have to be polite.

Still, I say nothing.

“So, how's your evening going so far?” Franklin asks, taking a step closer to me.

I take a step back, and then hit the wall with my back.

“Fine, I guess.” “You know, you never answered my question.”

“Which was?”

“How come you are here with me instead of a real date?” I ask.

“Well, your parents have asked me to do them a favor.”

What is he talking about?

He takes another step closer to me. I can feel his breath on me and it makes me wanna squirm.

“Do you mind?” I ask, sliding along the wall to try to get away from him.

He grabs my arm and pulls me closer to him. Then he presses his lips onto mine, hard.

“What are you doing?” I ask, pushing him away from me. “I told you that I wasn't interested.”

“Oh, you were serious?”

“Yes, of course I was serious.”

“Ha,” he says in disbelief. “I thought that you were just joking.”

I shake my head, not believing what is actually happening.

“I told you about my boyfriend,” I say.

“Oh, boyfriends come and go, you know how it is.”

“No, I don't. I have a serious boyfriend and I have no interest in anything happening with you.”

“You know, you would be a lot more fun if you weren't such a bitch,” he says, pointing his finger in my face.

He takes a step to the side and trips.

“And you would be a lot more fun if you weren't such a drunk,” I say, walking away from him.

I'm relieved by the fact that I never told him who my boyfriend really is, and I hope that he doesn't remember any of the details when he interviews Henry tomorrow morning.

I walk out of the gala completely disgusted.

I'm angry with my mother for asking me to go there. I'm even more angry with her for setting this whole thing up.

Why did she think that he would be such a great date? Why does a man like that even have a job at Tate Media?

Haven't they been paying attention? The world is changing.

Men like that are going down for doing exactly what he has done to me; made me feel uncomfortable and humiliated at the same time.

And I'm not even someone who works for him. Hiring him, and giving him a position of power, is asking for a lawsuit. Don't they know that?

Sitting in the back of the cab on the way to my apartment, I wonder if my parents just don't see the tide rising. They are so ingrained into the minutiae and

the rhythm of everyday life at the company, they are not seeing the big picture. Men like him should not only *not* be put in charge of new departments, they should be fired from their jobs.

I grab my phone and dial my mom's number. She picks up on the second ring.

"How is everything going?" she asks in an upbeat tone.

"Not very good," I say. I tell her what happened and how rude Franklin was to me. She listens intently and I feel like I'm getting through to her, but then at the end she throws a curve ball.

"That's just how men like him are, Aurora. Don't you know that by now?"

"Of course, I do. But that doesn't mean that they have to work at Tate Media."

"Well, that's a much more complicated situation than you know it to be."

"What are you talking about?" I ask. "What's so complicated about that? He threw himself at me and even kissed me without my consent and that's not good enough for you to get rid of him? Do you want him to be another Harvey Weinstein or Matt Lauer? How much more do you want him to do before you think it's reasonable to get rid of him?"

"Aurora, please don't blow all of this out of proportion. He asked you out, you were probably flirting with him, I'm sure that you looked beautiful. Just take it as a compliment."

I shake my head, at the same time shocked and completely surprised by the words that are coming out of her mouth. It's not that she doesn't believe what I just said, it's more that she thinks that it's okay.

"The thing that you just have to understand, Aurora, is that boys will be boys. It has been this way for centuries if not since the beginning of time, and it's not gonna change anytime soon."

"It will if women in positions of power and women everywhere say that it's unacceptable."

"Well," she says, "that's not gonna happen anytime soon, is it?"

I shake my head and stare at the phone.

"You know that you have the opportunity to change this. He came on to me

and when I pushed him away, he came on to me again. I'm your daughter. He works for you, my parents. What could be more simple than that?"

"Aurora, what you don't know about our business could fill volumes," Mom says. "It's very complicated and, no, we cannot just fire him over something like this. And if you are smart, you won't tell Henry about this either."

I bite my tongue. I want to tell him, of course I do, but if Franklin will still be his boss tomorrow morning, I don't think I can.

"I have to go," I say and hang up.

Taking a deep breath, I look out of the window trying to decide what to do.

HENRY

She comes home late at night in a strange mood. I can tell that there's something on her mind, but instead of talking about it, she just wraps her arms around me and kisses me as hard as she can.

Once my lips drift down her neck and further down her body, we no longer talk. Instead, I take her to the bedroom and show her how I feel about her. It has taken a long time, but she finally relaxes enough to actually reach that point where she lets go.

When we first met, I didn't think that I would be able to get her there, but as long as she was okay with me trying, I kept at it. It doesn't sound very romantic, because in romantic stories, things like this are supposed to happen spontaneously. But that's not real life.

Our attraction for each other is innate and comes from some deeper place. But something like this, taking her out of her head, required some work, work that I am completely willing to do.

Tonight, our bodies move as one. She lets me into the most private part of her being and I appreciate the invitation. Again, I tie up her hands and again she lets me blindfold her.

This time, however, I make sure that the front door is dead bolted so that we do not have any interruptions. I spread her legs to each side carefully, taking my time as I kiss the inside of her thighs. She tastes like heaven.

If it were up to me, I would live in this place between her legs. But as my

fingers speed up, her body tenses and I feel her getting close. This time, however, despite how much I want to thrust myself inside of her, I do not.

Patience is a virtue for a reason.

Anticipation takes time to build up, but it is worth it in the end. It's Christmas morning again and I have been watching the presents piling up under the tree for two weeks straight. I have touched them and rattled them, trying to figure out what is inside and finally it is time for me to rip into that beautiful wrapping paper and tear it apart as quickly as possible.

As soon as she reaches climax and yells my name at the top of her lungs I push myself inside of her. She moans again and again but I keep my movements slow and deliberate to take her there again. I'm not sure if it will work, but I give it my best shot. I feel her body relaxing again. I know that this is the first step.

I have learned to appreciate and love her body, not just for how beautiful it is but for everything that it can do. I press my hands over her breasts and pinch her nipples in between my fingers. She arches her back and raises her chin into the air.

Another breath and she presses her back into the sheets.

"Come for me," I whisper through my moans. "Come with me."

With the blindfold still on her face, she moves her head up off the pillow as if she were opening her eyes and giving me a wink. I can feel what she is feeling. Her body is tensing up again, building up steam.

My movements become even stronger and more deliberate. With each thrust I go deeper and deeper inside of her, and she takes me further and further into herself. And then, when my heart rate speeds up, so does the movement of her hips. We grind against one another until I finally feel gravity pull away from me.

"Aurora!" I yell.

"Henry!" she screams back.

WE STAYED up way too late the night before, and I feel it this morning. When the alarm clock goes off, my head throbs.

I haven't gotten up this early since I was a teacher, but this is one meeting that I cannot miss. Aurora is still in bed when I leave at eight o'clock sharp.

Luckily, I had ironed and prepared my outfit the day before, I even ironed my tie. The suit had cost me a fortune, but it is not very expensive.

My only hope is that it doesn't look cheap. I know that I'm not applying for a position at an investment bank or some customer facing job that requires me to look like a million bucks.

It's a writing job and writers should have a certain sense of realness to them, right? Kind of like a man of the people?

Walking through the marble tiled lobby and taking the elevator to the 16th floor of a glass office that looks over Manhattan, I'm not so sure.

After a brief wait, a man by the name of Franklin Parks invites me into his office. He is tall and broad shouldered with good looking features but has an effect to him that makes me feel off.

His eyes are bloodshot with dark circles, indicating that he either stayed up all night working or partying. I'm not entirely sure which.

He looks at my resume as if it is the first time he has ever seen it.

"So, it looks as if you have spent quite a little bit of time teaching," he says. "What was that like?"

"It was very rewarding," I say. This is my standard explanation.

"And why is it that you are applying at a job here?"

"Well, to be honest, teaching has never been a big passion of mine. I mean, I enjoy spending time with children, but I have always wanted to be a writer. Teaching just happened to be the job that I got right after college and something that I just kept doing."

"So, what's different now?" he asks.

"Well, I heard about this new division starting up and I saw that there were a lot of research writing positions, which I think I will be perfect for."

"Have you ever done anything like that before?"

"No, I haven't, but I have a lot of experience writing research papers and conducting research in college. I did my thesis on—."

"What sort of writing have you had published?" Mr. Parks asks me,

appearing completely uninterested in my exaggerated research experience.

"I have attached a few short stories there. One of them was published by the New Yorker."

"Wow, The New Yorker. Isn't that like the Holy Grail for a short story writer?"

"Yes, actually it is."

"Given all of your experience, you think you'll be okay with writing *just* true crime?"

"Yes, of course," I say, nodding my head. "Those are important stories to tell, especially the unsolved ones. The public has a lot of interest in them as well so I see it as a win-win."

Franklin skims my resume again and then gets up from behind the table and walks over to the elegant wooden sideboard with glass cut outs. Glass bottles of liquor crowd the top shelf and he pours himself a tumbler of vodka.

"Would you like anything?" he asks.

I don't want to remind him of the fact that it's not even ten o'clock in the morning, but I politely decline.

"Suit yourself," he says with a shrug. "But you would be joining me if you had the kind of night that I had last night."

"Oh, yeah?" I ask. "Do I dare ask?"

"Well, I went out with this girl."

"Did it go well?"

"Not exactly," he says, tossing his head back and laughing. "I've had an eye on her for quite some time. She's one of those girls who happened to say no to me and as you probably know, those are the ones that stick in your mind the most."

I give him a slight knowing nod.

"The thing that's really fucked up is that I have a somewhat complicated relationship with her parents. Let's just say that her father owes me a favor, a big favor. Things are not looking so well for him and it looks like everything that he has worked for will be going up in flames really soon."

"That's too bad."

"I really shouldn't be talking about this," Franklin says, waving his hand.

"I'm all ears," I say, sitting back in the chair, trying to make him feel comfortable.

"You know, of course, that this is the booze talking, right?"

He's asking me this because he's trying to look for a way out. He has already said too much and he's full of regret. Act as if none of that really matters.

I don't particularly want to hear anymore, but it's the only way that I think I'm going to land this job.

"Anyway," Franklin says, "Cutting this very long story short, let me just say that I wanted to go out with her for a very long time and last night I finally got my wish."

"Was it everything that you had wished for?"

"No, and yes."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, it's hard to explain exactly. She shot me down and it was quite a sight to see, but it just made me want her even more. This may sound like I'm bragging, but I haven't had many experiences with women saying no to me. And I found it utterly irresistible."

"Really? I've had a few women turn me down and I found it to be mostly embarrassing and humiliating."

He looks at me, and then laughs from the pit of his stomach. "You know what? You're funny," he says.

"Hey, I'm only telling it like it is."

"Hmm, maybe that's what I was experiencing all along," Franklin pauses. "What did you call it, a little bit of humiliation and a lot of embarrassment? Is that what it is? When they say no to you and it's all you can do to try to convince them that they're wrong?"

"The thing is that sometimes they're just not interested," I say, feeling our conversation drifting.

"No," Franklin says, definitively. "That's where you're wrong. They may not want you right *now*, but that doesn't mean that they won't change their mind. Besides, you know how it is in the movies. The guy that they have the most

tension with, the one that they claim to hate, that's the one that they always end up with."

I clench my jaw and look away.

"That's just what happens in the movies," I say. "That's not really what they want."

Franklin finishes his drink and puts it down on the table, making a loud clicking sound.

"I am very glad that you came here to see me, Henry Asher. I wasn't sure what you could bring to the table really, but now I know that we have been brought together for a reason."

"Really?" I asked.

"Really. The thing is that you have a lot to learn from me. A lot."

My hands form into fists, but I don't say anything in response.

"The thing is that in this life, Henry, you have to go after whatever it is that you want. Be it a job or a woman. You can't take no for an answer. Otherwise you'll never get what you want."

THE NEXT DAY, I find out that I got the job. I'm glad, of course, but a part of me is concerned. He is the last person that I'm interested in working for and yet he's the only one who is giving me a chance to do what I want.

I decide not to tell Aurora about what really happened at the interview and simply celebrate the fact that I have a job that pays over forty grand a year with benefits.

"I knew that you would get this job, I just knew it." Aurora gushes over dinner at a swanky midtown restaurant that we avoided like the plague before tonight.

"Well, I wasn't so sure. It was really helpful that you had gone over some of those popular true crime stories that all the podcasts are covering," I reassure her. "He really liked the pitch that I put forth."

This part is true, even though the rest of what I told her is not. When our

wine arrives, I promise myself that this is going to be the last time that I'm going to lie to her about anything. From this point forward, I'm only going to tell her the truth. Little did I know how difficult keeping that promise would turn out to be.

AURORA

Henry got the job. It's hard to believe. In fact, I'm still in shock over it. Why would Franklin hire *my* boyfriend to work for him? The only possible explanation is that he doesn't actually know that I am Henry's girlfriend.

I search my mind for everything that I told him and then for anything that my mother could have. No, I'm certain that if Franklin knew that Henry is my boyfriend, he would not have hired him. But then again...

What if he did?

I ask Henry for details of what happened in the interview and he becomes evasive. There is something that he's not telling me, but I have no choice but to let it go.

I'm happy for him. And after all, it's not just Franklin who made the decision to hire him. I'm certain that my father has had some amount of influence. Maybe, that's why. Maybe despite what Franklin wanted, my father had insisted that they give Henry the position to help *me*.

Despite the fact that I am happy that Henry's now doing what he loves, and he really does love it, I miss our days off doing nothing. Well, not completely nothing. I'm still going to classes and working on my thesis, but I miss having him at home to hang out with.

After we were evicted from his apartment, my parents let us move into my old one, which they of course have not rented out like they said they would.

They sent their assistant over to help us get settled, and the moving guys lugged all of our stuff from one place to another.

“I can't believe that you don't actually move when you move,” Henry said with a wide grin on his face.

I rolled my eyes. Honestly, the perks of being upper class have still not gotten old.

When we first make the move, everything is great. Henry works long hours, but we're trying to carve out whatever time we can in our schedules.

I miss him and he misses me and we make up for it with intense love-making sessions in the shower and in the kitchen and everywhere else, just like we did when we first moved in together.

But then, as the weeks turn into months, something changes. His hours get longer and longer as he works on one deadline after another. He starts to travel. At first, it's someplace local like Long Island or Albany or Rhode Island. But then his travels take him to Chicago and Iowa and even Nevada, and I don't see him for weeks on end.

When he does return, things are different. We spend time together, but we are out of sync. There are things that I do around the house that are in complete contrast to what he thinks I should be doing, and there are things that he does that annoy the hell out of me.

I keep telling him that we should reconnect and we promise to try.

We go on dates. At first, we go to the movies, dinner, and after a while, when we get really tired, we just Netflix and chill. The only problem is that after all this time apart the chill part is no longer a metaphor for sex. We curl up on the couch, each taking a separate side, and fall sleep, like old friends, or even worse, distant roommates.

Still, we stay together. We are going through what I assume is just a dry spell. It's bound to get better. People have been through a lot worse and have made it to the other side. But the more weeks that pass, the harder it becomes. With each trip, he gets further and further away from me until one day, I've had enough.

“I don't think that we should live together anymore,” I say when he gets

home from his trip to Nebraska.

“What are you talking about?” he asks.

“I don't know, but I don't feel like we're a couple anymore. Do you?”

“Listen, I'm really tired,” he says, shaking his head. “I just took the red-eye home and I can't talk to you about this right now.”

I know that this is the wrong time to bring it up, but I've been thinking about this ever since he's been gone and I didn't want to talk about it over FaceTime.

“Can we get back to this tomorrow?” he asks.

I give him a slight nod and open my computer back up. I have so much work to do on my thesis, and yet I can't seem to focus. I haven't written a word in two weeks.

The following morning, he sleeps in late, and I go to class. When I get back, he's no longer there. Franklin has asked him to cover a breaking story.

“THAT'S the gist of the text message that I got,” I tell Ellis over dinner.

I've called three other friends, but no one was available to talk. Ellis who had just broken up with her boyfriend was more than happy to go out on a girls' night and have a few drinks and rag on some guys.

“He's an asshole,” she says quickly.

I shrug. “He's just working too hard and this job is taking over his life.”

Ellis shakes her head. “All the guys in this city are the same,” she insists. “I used to date a hedge fund manager, and he only came over to fuck. Actually, come to think of it, it was probably one of my most honest relationships.”

I laugh nervously, too embarrassed to tell her that it has been months since Henry and I have done it. At first, it was just the one thing that kept us together and gave our relationship some spice and then it was the thing that drove us apart.

I had so many resentments toward him for being away, the last thing I wanted to do was to have sex with him when he got back.

“I'm sure it will get better,” Ellis says, not very convincingly. “Either that, or

maybe you should just dump him and find someone without a high-powered job.”

“That's the whole problem,” I say. “I'm glad that he is pursuing his dreams, but I just wish that he had a little bit more time for me in the process.”

“What can I say?” Ellis asks. “You know how I feel about guys, what one man can do another can as well.”

It's a cynical way of thinking about relationships but then again, Ellis doesn't get hurt easily, so maybe she's on to something.

Still, I don't want to give up. Not this easily and not without a fight. My phone vibrates and I look down at the screen.

“I need to talk to you,” Henry texts and I pay my bar tab.

When I get home, I brace myself for another fight disguised as a disagreement, but he surprises me. He takes me into his arms and kisses me and tells me that he's going to be better and that he will make it all good again. I take him back and our bodies fall into that familiar dance.

He runs his fingers up and down my sides and makes me feel alive. I try to protest, but my legs open up for him on their own.

This time, we don't make it to the bedroom. Our clothes come off only halfway and he presses me against the kitchen counter, bending me in half.

Still wearing the stilettos I wore to dinner I am the perfect height for him to come at me from behind. His hands search hungrily for my breasts and his lips kiss mine in that sloppy way that only two people completely overwhelmed by their senses can.

This time I don't need the blindfold or the tie around my wrists.

This time I just let myself go and I take off immediately.

I want him so much that I can't even stop if I had wanted to.

He moans my name soon after I scream his. Afterward we lie in each other's arms on the hard tile for a few minutes, catching our breath. When he reaches over, he kisses me and we go again.

AURORA

I had hoped that night would have changed things, but two days later he is sent on a story to Kentucky and the distance engulfs me like a tsunami.

We text and FaceTime, but only occasionally, when he has a few minutes here and there. I know that couples in previous decades have endured longer separations with less technological connections, but this relationship is too new and I need more reassurance.

In addition to writing articles, Henry is now hosting a True Crime podcast that he researches and records himself, having only nominal producing help. This is a great opportunity for him. His following is growing and he is really making a name for himself in the space, but that doesn't change the fact that we continue to drift further and further apart.

Finishing my thesis is an uphill battle. I waste time on Instagram and real brick and mortar bookstores reading books for pleasure rather than for analysis. Eventually, during the last two months of the semester, I really force myself to focus and finish it.

My presentation is scheduled for May fifth at two in the afternoon. I have to summarize all the research and the findings that I have done and take questions from the public. Technically, anyone can attend a PhD defense, including students, teaching assistants, professors, and even deans at the university.

I am not big on public speaking, meaning that I actually despise it, so I hope that my time slot does not prove to be particularly enticing for the university

community.

When I show up to the empty lecture hall, I let out a brief sigh of relief, only to be unpleasantly surprised to discover that I'm in the wrong room. When it's almost time for me to present, and there's still no one here, I double check the room number, and realize that mine is across the hall.

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

Peering through the little window in the door, I see that the room is packed. I take a deep breath and try to block out every negative thought that creeps into my subconscious.

They are not going to laugh at me.

They are not going to make fun of me.

Everything is going to be fine.

I'm not going to embarrass myself.

When I open my mouth and start to talk, slowly but surely, my anxiety begins to dissipate.

I have practiced my presentation about a hundred times, and after a shaky start, the words flow out of me. When I lose myself and what I'm saying, all of those other people stop mattering as much. I don't care what they say because I know that the work that I have done is important and meaningful.

A professor who focuses on pop-culture asks about what impact I think that a book like *Fifty Shades of Grey* had on the modern female experience and a crotchety old English literature professor wonders why the focus should be so much on sexuality versus other things.

My responses are thoughtful prompting more discussion, this time from students and other faculty in the auditorium. After a little while, I lose control of the room as the focus shifts away from me, and I couldn't be happier.

THAT FRIDAY, I wear a cap and gown and walk across the stage to get my

diploma. Henry is supposed to be there, but he's not. He didn't make it to my defense either. There are major developments in the case that he's working on and he's even doing interviews with NBC News and Dateline. Plus, Franklin had scheduled him for an impromptu live recording of his podcast at the Louisville Theater that sold out within twenty-four hours.

It's not that I am not happy for Henry and all of his success, it's just that I feel like we're not on the same page. Even though we still have the occasional moments when we are in-sync, there are more and more where it feels like there is an ocean separating us.

I don't know exactly how to deal with it or what I can do to change it. I'm here for him and I wait for him, but there's only so much I can take. Of course, now that I'm done with my PhD, I can theoretically join him on his travels, but I'm not sure if there's a place for me there.

He works twelve hours a day and what would I do in Kentucky? Just sit in the hotel room and wait for him? I can do the same thing here in New York.

These are the thoughts that spin around in my head as I walk out with the rest of my class. My parents wait for me out on the lawn, along with hundreds of other graduates' parents and grandparents and children.

This is a happy day in my life. I have worked really hard to get to this point and I'm not going to let thinking about Henry ruin it for me.

My parents give me a warm hug, practically at the same time. They have brought a few of their friends and after a few customary congratulations, they go back to the work on their phones.

Thomas is here as well, probably on my mother's insistence. He is twelve years old and not particularly interested in attending family functions, but when I give him a brief hug, he hugs me back.

Later that night, after dinner and after Thomas goes back home, my parents tell me that they have something to discuss with me. I've had a few drinks, and I'm still feeling a little bit in a celebratory mood, so I ask if it can wait until tomorrow.

"No," Mom says. "This is very important. We have to talk about this now."

They are guests in my apartment and I can't quite make them leave so I

figure the best thing to do is to just hear them out.

“I know that this is your big night, honey,” my dad says. “And I want you to know that we are very proud of you.”

“Thank you very much,” I say, nodding my head.

“The thing is that...The justice department is investigating Tate Media.”

I hear what he has just said but the words don’t make any sense.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“I can't go into it here,” he says, looking around the room.

I furrow my brow.

“What are you talking about?” I ask him again.

“Without saying too much,” Mom interjects. “We are fighting against a case that the people in the justice department are building against your father.”

I still don’t understand. My mother motions for me to follow them outside.

AURORA

The cold fresh air feels nice against my warm skin. I tighten the collar of my coat and walk in between them. My parents are not the type to take walks at nine o'clock at night, but tonight is an exception.

“Your father doesn't want to tell you this,” my mother says. “But he is in a lot of trouble. It's very serious.”

My mouth drops open.

Despite whatever issues I've ever had with either of them, they have been these God-like creatures in my life, untouchable by anyone or anything.

Looking at them now, I find it hard to believe that things have changed. My hands tremble a bit, but I force myself to focus and to remain calm. I can't freak out before I know what is really going on and I can't let them see how worried I really am.

I have to stay strong.

We walk down one block, and then another. I wait for them to start talking, but they don't. Finally, when we reach the bodega three blocks away, I turn to face my father and ask him flat out, “What is really going on?”

My father looks down at the ground but says nothing.

“The company has been losing money for a long time,” Mom steps in. “We have gotten involved in a lot of investments that did not go as well as we thought they would. A number of the companies went bankrupt, and there were a few financial irregularities with some of the other ones that we had invested in.”

I nod, nudging her to continue.

“We have been trying our best to figure out what to do, and so far, we have not been particularly successful. The best thing to do would be to find a buyer, but it is important to make sure that we can get a good price. And as you know, we can't get a good price if people don't think that Tate Media is worth very much.”

I give her another slight nod just to show her that I'm paying attention.

“We have had a few buyers fall through,” Dad interjects. “We thought that they were going to go for it, but at the very last minute they pulled out.”

“Why didn't you tell me about any of this?” I ask.

“We didn't really wanna bother you with everything that has been going on,” he says.

I shake my head and walk in place to stay warm.

Everything within me tells me to run back to my apartment and just climb under the covers, but I can't. This is very serious and I have to face it head on.

“Here's the thing, Aurora,” my mother says, putting her arm on my shoulder.

“We did find one buyer, and he's very interested.”

“Good,” I say with a forced smile. “So what's wrong?”

“The only way that he will go along with the sale, given how poorly the company has been doing, is if... *you* are part of it.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Well, you have apparently made quite an impression and he wants you to...” Her voice trails off.

My gaze goes back-and-forth between her and my father.

My father is looking down at the ground, and she is looking somewhere past me.

“What is going on here?” I ask both of them.

“The thing is...” Mom starts to say, but then her voice trails off.

“Just tell me,” I insist.

“Okay,” she says, taking a deep breath.

Mom starts again, but again she is unable to come out with it.

“He wants you to marry him,” my father says, cutting her off. “He wants you

to be his wife.”

“What? No,” I say, shaking my head. “Absolutely not.”

“See,” Dad says, turning to my mom. “What did I tell you? There's no way she'll do it.”

“Why would he want to marry me? Who is he?” I ask, tugging at his overcoat to get him to turn around. “Tell me everything.”

“It's Franklin Parks,” my mother says softly.

I stare at her.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Franklin is the buyer.”

“No, no,” I say, shaking my head. “He works for you.”

“It's more complicated than that,” my father says, taking a step away from me.

His eyes won't meet mine.

I have never seen him so defeated looking.

I shake my head and tap my foot on the ground.

“What is going on?” I ask both of them over and over again.

“Franklin is running the crime division because he wanted to get some experience and learn a little bit more about the culture of the company and how we do things here,” Dad says. “He also wanted to be involved in the hiring process of all new employees. It's a test case for him. But in reality, he's a very wealthy man who is ready to buy Tate Media, for the right price.”

“So, why doesn't he just buy it?” I ask.

My mother raises her chin a little bit into the air, focusing her eyes directly on mine.

“He has heard a lot about you,” she says after a long pause. “Saw pictures of you, watched you on social media.”

“And he's very interested in what he has seen,” my father adds.

My skin starts to crawl.

I hate the way that they talk about me as if I'm some sort of commodity.

“Wait a second,” I say, shaking my head. “Is that why you asked me to go to that gala with him?”

“Yes, of course,” she says. “He wanted to get to know you a little better and, apparently, he liked what he saw.”

“How could he?” I ask. “I rejected him. I told him to go fuck himself, in so many words.”

“I don’t know,” Mom says.

“Why is he even interested? He told me that he didn't care about dating anyone in particular, let alone marrying someone. Why the hell does he want to *marry me*?”

“I don't know,” my mother says. “We don't know. He has his reasons, I'm sure. The one thing that we know is that the only way that he will purchase the company and make this justice department investigation go away is if you agree to marry him.”

We can't talk inside in case the place is bugged so I talk to my parents for a long time standing on that street corner.

I keep asking them why, why, why, but they keep repeating the same thing over and over again without giving me anymore information.

Eventually, I give up and go home. I tell them that I'm going to consider it but, in reality, I have no interest in doing anything like that.

There must be another way for them to sell the company, if that's even what they want to do.

I still don't know if that's the right decision.

They have spent their whole lives building it from scratch, so why sell it now?

All of the things that I don't know about this deal could fill the contents of the New York Library.

When I ask them to explain more about what's going on with the company itself, they decline. They argue that it's for my own safety because the less that I know, the less that the justice department can accuse me of knowing.

But where does that leave me?

When I get home and curl up in bed, for the first time in a long time I'm actually happy that Henry's not here. I was angry at him for missing my graduation, but given this bomb that my parents have thrown into my lap, I'm

glad that I don't have to pretend that everything is all right.

AURORA

The following morning I wake up with a throbbing headache and it only gets worse with every passing hour. I drink lots of water, and a few cups of coffee, but nothing makes it go away. Perhaps the coffee makes it even worse? Last night was difficult to handle.

I keep trying to process what has happened, and it's all to no avail. Did they really ask me to do what I think they did?

Did they really ask me to consider marrying Franklin Parks?

Do they even know who he is?

Besides, what century are we living in that this is a realistic proposition?

Still, I know my parents well enough to know that they did not do this with an easy heart. They love me and care about me, even if it's not as much as I would want them to.

Deep in my heart, I know that they would never ask me to do this if they thought that they had another choice.

But why? Thoughts keep spinning around in my mind until I feel dizzy.

I had asked that question over and over again last night, but they couldn't give me an answer that was any better than that which they had already given me.

No, I need to go to the source.

I need to talk to Franklin.

My phone rings and it's Henry. I consider ignoring it and telling him that I'm

busy, but another part of me can't bring myself to lie to him about one more thing.

No, it's better to talk to him now because he will probably be busy later.

"Hi," I say, putting him on speaker phone. "How are you?"

He tells me about his day and about the investigation that he's working on.

I only half listen, waiting for my turn to speak.

"So, can you believe that that happened?" he asks excitedly.

"Wait, what?" I ask absentmindedly.

I had apparently spaced out for a little too long.

"Are you even listening to me?" Henry asks.

The irritation in his voice is difficult to ignore.

"Yes, of course," I say. "It's just that, well, you know that I graduated yesterday?"

It comes out more like a question than a statement.

"Oh my God, yes, of course! I'm so sorry. I can't believe that I forgot. I mean, I didn't forget but—"

"You didn't even text me last night," I point out, bitterly.

"I'm really sorry," he says.

"It's okay. I know that you're busy."

"Still, it's no excuse. I'm such an asshole," he admits.

Yes, you are, I say silently to myself.

"Anyway, I went out to dinner with my parents and Taylor and it was nice enough," I say with a shrug.

"Listen," he says, cutting me short. "I'm sorry, but I really can't talk right now."

"Weren't you the one that called me?" I ask.

"Yes, but I'm sorry. There's someone on the other end and I really have to take this call."

I shake my head in disbelief.

I wasn't going to tell him about Franklin, but I at least wanted to talk to him, have a real conversation for once.

"I'm tired of this," I say quietly.

“Okay, give me a second,” he says and puts me on hold. When he comes back, he asks, “What do you mean you’re tired of this?”

“I just don't understand what we're doing here,” I admit. “We are so great together when we are actually together, but things have felt off for a long time. Do you agree?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Henry says distractedly.

“It's like we're not on the same page and we haven't been for a long time. What are we gonna do about it?”

“I don't know, Aurora. I just can't talk about this right now. I have a lot of things going on.”

“That's the problem!” I say loudly. “That's the whole fucking problem.”

I hang up the phone and throw it on the bed. This was not what I wanted to happen today and yet suddenly my life seems to be filled with things that I don't want.

A few moments later, Henry calls me back via FaceTime.

I glance at myself briefly in the mirror. I'm not wearing any makeup. My face is puffy and my hair is out of control.

I don't want to, but I answer anyway.

“What do you want?” I ask, fully expecting him to apologize.

“I think we need to talk,” he says.

“I thought that you didn't have time to talk,” I say.

“I don't, but I'll make time.”

I don't know what to say so I just wait.

He looks down at the floor and then slowly back at me. He takes a deep breath.

“I agree with you,” he says quietly. “We have been drifting apart, for a while now.”

“I know,” I say.

“I keep thinking that it is going to get better but it's not happening. I was hoping that you would be interested in coming out here after graduation. I was going to ask you today, before we got into this ridiculously stupid fight.”

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly.

“And what am I gonna do there?” I ask. “Just sit around in the hotel room and wait for you like I do here?”

He shakes his head, uncertain as to how to answer.

I'm lost as well. I feel like we have reached an impasse. I want to spend more time with him but all of his time is consumed by his job, which I'm not even sure that he will have for much longer.

I want to tell him this and everything else that has happened, just like I used to when we were first together.

But something is holding me back. I don't know what's going on with my parents and I'm afraid of telling him too much.

I don't know what's going on with the justice department or the investigation or why they are so certain that Franklin is the only way that they can save their company. I'm afraid to tell Henry about any of it in case I can't protect them or him if it all goes to shit, even more than it has already.

Henry and I talk for a long time, going in circles for most of it. He keeps insisting that it's just one more project, but that's the same thing I've heard for the last few months.

A big part of me feels ridiculous asking him to take time off work just to be with me, but another part of me thinks that I deserve a boyfriend who wants to spend time with me.

When I feel our conversation coming to an end, we are no closer to resolving what we have been talking about.

“So, what do you think?” he asks. “Will you come live with me here?”

“In Kentucky?” I ask.

“Yes, of course. Just for the time being. I mean, it's not like you're working right now.”

“Yeah, no, I can't,” I say.

“Why not?”

Because I have to figure out what is going on with my parents' business and why they're asking me to marry your boss, I want to say. But of course, I don't.

“The thing is that Tate Media is having a few issues,” I say slowly.

“Okay. But what does that have to do with you? I thought that you had no

interest in running it?"

"That doesn't mean that it doesn't concern me. And it doesn't mean that I don't want to help my parents."

"It's something that we're all going through," I say. "I thought that you would understand that."

"No, I do understand that. I understand that I have waited for you to finish your PhD so that you could have some time off and actually spend it with me. But instead, you're going to stay in New York and do who knows what."

"Why are you getting so angry?" I ask.

"Because I don't understand what's going on with us," Henry snaps. "I love you and you don't seem to care at all."

"Of course," I say. "Of course I care. I love you, too. But they have reached out to me and told me that they're having a lot of problems and they have never said that to me before. And I can't just ignore it."

"Whatever," Henry says, shaking his head.

He puts the phone down so that all that I can see is the ceiling.

"Henry! Henry? Please, come back to me."

"What?" he asks after a little bit. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

"No, you don't," he says, picking up the phone and staring straight at me. "I want to spend time with you and I want you to be here with me. What do you want?"

I want to be there with you, too, I say silently to myself.

"I need you to give me some time," I say out loud. "I just found out that they're having problems. Last night, in fact."

"It's just their way of manipulating you, Aurora. Can't you see that? They don't want you to be with me and they gave me this job to drive us apart. I'm thankful for it, but I know exactly what they're doing. They're just pretending to be okay with us and hoping that the distance will break us."

"Well, don't let it!"

"I'm trying not to, but you're not trying hard enough," he says.

This makes me angry. My cheeks get flushed and my hands form into fists.

“You have no idea what you're talking about,” I say, furrowing my brows.
“You don't know the first thing about what’s going on here.”

“So why don't you tell me?” he asks.

“I can't. I don't even know what's going on here. But if you want to know, I suggest that you come back here and stand by my side.”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I'm done.”

My blood runs cold.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

He looks dead into my eyes and doesn't blink.

“I'm done,” he says coldly.

“No...” I whisper.

“I can't handle this anymore,” he says. “I'm just so tired of fighting and arguing and everything else that we have been doing besides just enjoying one another. Relationships are not supposed to be this hard.”

“Sometimes,” I say with my voice breaking. “Sometimes, you have to fight for them. You have to go through the hard bits to get to the good parts.”

“Well, I've been doing that enough and I don't have the energy anymore, Aurora.”

AURORA

At first, I don't hear back from Henry for the whole day. It's as the longest day of my life and time feels like it's completely standing still. I keep waiting for him to call me, to apologize for what he said, but he doesn't. The following day, I give up on waiting and call him instead. He doesn't answer and again I wait. I wait until the third day, when I can't wait any longer and I pick up the phone again and text him. Once, twice, and a third time. It's stupid and pathetic and ridiculous and I feel dumb doing it, and yet I can't stop myself. I need to hear from him. I need to know where we stand. I need to know if this is a real breakup. But the more time that passes, the more I realize that of course it is. He broke up with me and now he doesn't wanna hear from me. And I am just a stupid little girl who doesn't understand when I don't get my way.

By Friday, I give up. I know that he doesn't want me contacting him anymore so I don't. I promise myself that I will never contact him again. When Ellis calls and invites me to go out for a drink, I don't want to, but I force myself to do it. I need the distraction. I need to get out of my head and do something productive. Drinking is not productive, but at least it's cathartic.

"I can't believe that you did that," Ellis says, shaking her head when I tell her how pathetic I have been. "You deserve so much more than him. You deserve someone who at least fucking answers the phone."

"I know," I say nothing. "I'm so stupid."

“YES, YOU ARE,” she says. “You should not have ever gone out with him in the first place. You should have listened to me right from the beginning, but of course you haven't. Of course you had to go out and make your own mistakes.”

“OKAY,” I say, waving my hand. “I've had enough with the lecture. Can we just move on to the parting portion of the evening?”

She laughs, tossing her head back as she takes another shot and follows it up with yet another one. I follow along with her, knowing that I'm going to regret drinking all of this tomorrow and not giving a shit one bit.

She congratulates me on my PhD and then asks me what I intend to do with such a useless degree.

“AREN'T ALL PHDs USELESS?” I ask. “Well, no, not really. There are those who get them in chemistry or biology or math even.”

I was joking, of course. I was just referring to the fact that research doesn't pay much in comparison to industry and so by their nature all PhDs seem a little bit out of touch, let's put it that way.

“WELL,” she says, “you'll have to admit that yours is particularly useless.”

I SHRUG and look down into my glass as the liquid rolls over the ice. “I like reading and I like reading popular fiction and I like studying, so it was a good combination of the three. A lot better than going out there and trying to figure out what the hell is going on with Tate Media.” I look up at her to gauge her reaction and see her bite her lower lip.

“Oh shit,” I say. “What do you know?”

“WELL, I didn't wanna bring it up...”

“Come on, you have to tell me. God knows, my parents don't tell me much.”

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?” she asks.

“Well,” I sigh deeply. “They told me that the company is in trouble, but they are refusing to elaborate on it to any degree whatsoever. So I'm just left here worrying without the ability to find any solutions.”

“As you probably know,” Ellis says, “it's all over the news. All the analysts on CNBC and other places are predicting that the company isn't worth as much as your parents say it is.” I roll my eyes.

“THE ANALYSTS ARE ALWAYS full of shit,” I say.

“BE THAT AS IT MAY,” she says, “that doesn't change the fact that Tate Media is important as much as your parents say, is it?”

“I don't know,” I say. “That's the whole problem. They keep me in the dark and then just cherry-pick what they tell me.”

“WELL, you don't officially work there,” Ellis points out. “Maybe they just don't want you to worry.”

“THAT'S THE WHOLE PROBLEM,” I say, shrugging my shoulders. “That's the whole fucking problem! They don't want me to worry? I'm worried now.

“On the day of my graduation, they throw this bomb at me saying that they're trying to sell the company, a fact that I had no idea about, and then they tell me not to worry. Well, I am worried. And I don't work there now, but maybe I

should. Maybe then this sort of thing wouldn't be happening."

"Yeah, maybe," Ellis says.

We talk about this for a long time until last call. Sometimes Ellis isn't a very good friend, but tonight she is. And I really appreciate that. The only problem is that I wish I could tell her more. I wish I could tell her what my parents told me about Franklin and I wish I could tell her that tomorrow I have a meeting with him to talk about whatever the hell all of this is. I wish I could tell her the truth because someone should know. Someone besides me.

AURORA

I arrive at his penthouse at seven the following evening. He has invited me here, I said no, and then my mother called me and begged me to hear him out. Somehow, she has persuaded me that by taking this meeting I could convince him to simply purchase Tate Media and not include me in the process. Not knowing what else to do and wanting to help my parents, I reluctantly agree.

Franklin's home is beautiful and extravagant and modern. But mostly, it looks like it belongs to a bachelor.

It doesn't matter that it is a five-thousand square-foot apartment in one of the most prestigious areas of the town, all I see is the pool table in the middle of the dining room and the obnoxious black rug underneath.

His tailored suits and the location of this place made me think that he may have some style and fashion sense, but this atrocity reveals the truth; he's just an overgrown fraternity brother.

Still, I'm pleasantly surprised when he meets me at the door and is not intoxicated.

After inviting me inside, Franklin offers me a drink. I decline and he pours each of us a glass of water, showing me to the sitting room.

The view from up here is magnificent. There are floor-to-ceiling windows lining the entire south facing wall of his apartment, looking out at the twinkling lights outside.

"You have quite a beautiful apartment," I say, looking around.

"I'm glad you like it," he says, leaning back against the couch.

The statement is a bit off-putting.

I watch him run his fingers through his thick hair and take a sip of his water.

"Are you not drinking today?" I ask him.

"Actually, I'm doing a cleanse. If you can believe that."

"I can believe many things," I say.

"Well, you don't know me very well. Actually, that reminds me. I wanted to apologize for what happened at the gala. I acted like a total asshole and... I'm sorry about that."

I sit up a little in my seat and tilt my head.

"Thank you," I say after a moment.

"I appreciate you saying that." He gives me a knowing nod and finishes his water.

"Can I get you another one?" he asks, heading back to the bar.

"No." I point to the nearly full glass in my hand. "I'm good."

"I wanted to congratulate you on finishing your PhD program. That's quite an achievement," Franklin says, taking the seat next to me this time.

Our knees are almost touching, but he's careful to avoid actual contact.

"Thank you," I say with a slight smile. "It was a lot of work and it has been very rewarding."

"What are your plans now?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but I'm considering my options at Tate Media," I say. I've had enough of the small talk and want to wind this conversation toward what I'm here for.

"And what kind of options are you considering?" Franklin asks, leaning back against the couch.

"I'm not really sure right now. But my father has informed me that you are actually interested in purchasing the company. Is that correct?"

"Yes, it is."

"So, if that is the case, I guess I don't really have a future there, right?"

"That depends on you," Franklin says.

Our conversation is going in circles and I'm getting tired of it.

“Okay, let me put it this way,” I say, placing the glass carefully on his coffee table. “My parents have informed me that in order to complete the sale of the company, you are interested in marrying me. Is that correct?”

I wait for him to apologize and make amends or at least explain himself. But instead, he just says, “Yes, I am interested in marrying you.”

“Why?”

“Why am I interested in marrying you?”

“Yes, of course. We hardly even know each other. Besides, you told me that you are not interested in marriage at all, not to anyone.”

“Well, let's just say that you have changed my mind.”

“You don't know me,” I insist. “You would hate me.”

“Why don't you just leave that to me?” he asks.

“Because it's not gonna happen,” I say, shrugging my shoulders.

I get up and walk away quickly. Before reaching the door, I spin around on my heels and find him only a few steps away from me.

“I'm not going to marry you,” I say, staring straight into his eyes. “You can't ask for me as part of some business deal. I'm not for sale.”

He laughs, tossing his head back.

“Everybody is for sale.”

“No, they're not,” I say. “And definitely not me.”

He doesn't say anything in response and I'm about to spin back around and head toward the door when something else hits me.

“Is that why you gave him the job?” I ask.

“Who?”

“Henry Asher, my boyfriend.”

“Oh, yes.” He laughs. “I heard the unfortunate news. I'm really sorry to hear that you two have broken up. Henry mentioned something alluding to that.”

“No, you're not,” I correct him.

“No, I'm not.” He laughs.

“So, is that why you offered him the position? And is that why you have been keeping him in Kentucky and West Virginia and God knows where else all of his time?”

“Of course,” Franklin admits. “What’s the easiest way to break up two people who are very wrong for each other? Add a little pressure and a little distance and poof, the relationship evaporates.”

“Why don’t you just go to hell?” I say and walk away from him.

“I will, don’t worry!” he yells after me. “But you’re going to be right there with me.”

At the door, I turn around one last time and say, “And just in case you are wondering, no, I won’t marry you. I will never marry you.”

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, my doorbell rings and I am greeted by my mother, who is completely distraught and in tears.

I haven’t seen her like this in... I have never seen her like this.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, pulling her close to me.

She sobs and cries and mumbles something that I can’t make out.

I ask her to calm down and to tell me what’s going on.

“They have arrested your father,” she finally manages to say. “They showed up this morning at six and pointed a gun in his face. And when they were taking him out to the car, he had a heart attack.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper, putting my hand over my mouth. “No, no!”

“I told you,” she snaps, pointing her finger in my face. “I warned you about this. I told you that he is not well and that the justice department was closing in.”

“I’m really sorry,” I mumble.

She buries her head in her hands and cries. When I put my arm around her shoulders, she lifts her eyes up and glares at me.

“This is all *your* fault!” she hisses.

“What? Why?”

“You were the one that went over there and told him that you would never marry him.”

“Franklin?”

“Yes, Franklin,” Mom barks. “He’s the most powerful man that you’ve never

heard of. This is all happening because of *him*. This is all happening because *you* said no."

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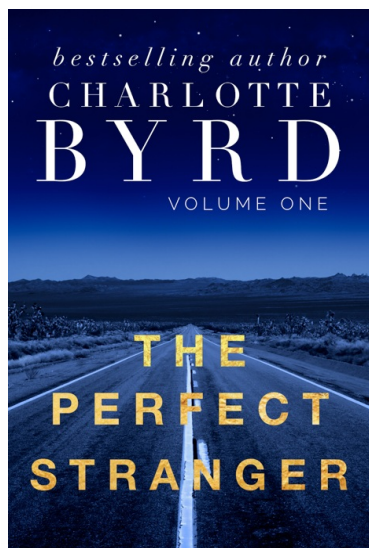
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He doesn't ask for help and I don't offer.

His hair falls into his face and a strand brushes along his chiseled jaw. His vulnerability is disarming.

We both know that he shouldn't be here, but when I stare into his piercing, intense eyes, I can't look away.

I want to tell him to leave, but then he leans over and runs his finger over my lower lip.

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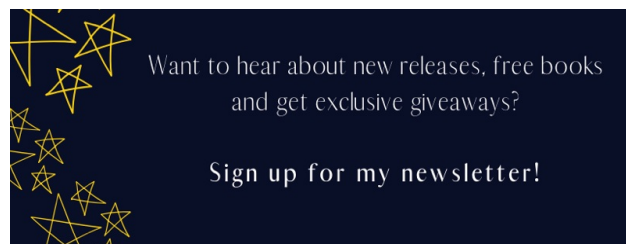
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ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 600,000 books and has been translated into five languages.

She lives near Palm Springs, California with her husband, son, and a toy Australian Shepherd. Charlotte is addicted to books and Netflix and she loves hot weather and crystal blue water.

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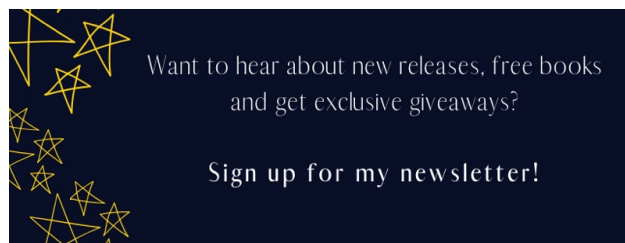
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