



THE ^{oo}
RIGHT

SIGN



NIA ARTHURS

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about this book

When he falls in love with her at first sight, but he doesn't know she's deaf. .

.

I have one rule and one rule only—never date a hearing man.

But does *fake* dating a hearing man count?

When a case of mistaken car-identity leaves me indebted to Richard 'Dare' Sullivan, I have no choice but to play the role of his doting girlfriend.

Technically, our kisses are fake so they don't count... right?

Our contract ends in three months and I'll forget the billionaire ever existed.

Sure, I may be a teeny-bit curious about that princess watch he wears. And... okay, I *may* have been tempted to tear his shirt off when he learned ASL for me.

But none of that means I'll let him into my heart.

Because I've got one rule and one rule only.

Even rain kisses and dreamy chocolate eyes can't convince me to change my mind.

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CHAPTER 1

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the mistake

YAYA

I can smell love.

It's one of my superpowers.

This wedding is *teeming* with it. The fragrance. The scent.

It's freshly cut-flowers, the earth after a rain and the heavy cinnamon tones of my sister's chai latte curling through the air like a beckoning finger.

Watching yet *another* billionaire fall for someone in DeeJ's friend group was not on my bingo card this year, but I'm happy to be on the peripherals of so many happily ever afters—even if I somewhat disagree with the capitalist values that produce billionaires in the first place.

My eyes trail the fresh flower bouquets on either side of the aisle. The pillars are wrapped in a romantic white cloth.

Must cost a fortune.

Not that Cody Bolton's pockets are hurting for cash.

I glance at the front where DeeJ and her friends are sitting with their husbands, cheering the couple on.

Sazuki stands out, being the only Asian guy in the group, but all the husbands share similar qualities.

Tall. Handsome.

Rich.

How many billionaires even *exist* in this city?

Or more importantly, how many billionaires are left?

The farmhouse ladies are snagging them up one after another.

A domino effect.

I hope the last domino stops before reaching me.

Clarissa and Cody kiss, and the officiant turns red. He's yelling something. I can tell by the veins straining in his neck. Other wedding guests start shuffling around in their purses or on their seats.

Henry taps me on the shoulder and shoves bubbles at me.

I forgot I'd given him mine. There was no way I was stuffing that bottle into my Chanel.

Not that the purse would fit anything but a tube of lipstick anyway. Dee is always teasing me about my impractical fashion choices but, in my life, style trumps function. Always.

I reach for the bubbles. Unscrewing the wand, I blow in the newlywed's direction. The delicate little bubbles catch the sunlight. Glinting diamonds. Translucent circles made more beautiful because they're fragile.

Around me, people are clapping. My hearing aids amplify the noise almost painfully, but my joy in the moment makes the discomfort easier to bear.

There's so much energy in the room.

Hands clasped together. Big smiles.

I can feel it.

The happiness. The excitement.

Cody and Clarissa get further down the aisle.

I add my applause as they pass me by.

The air is alive with celebration. Delighted guests, grins stretching wide. Sweat glistening on their shiny foreheads.

I notice the way the women all lean a little more into their partners. I can tell which of the men plan on popping the question soon by the way their eyes soften. I see which guys are definitely never getting married by the way they gulp and face the ground.

Nothing escapes me.

Like I said, I have superpowers.

The wedding party disappears and Henry gives me a mournful expression as he signs, "Cute couple. Now where's the bar?"

I roll my eyes.

Henry stares expectantly at me, waiting for me to sign back.

I don't, instead looking around for my target tonight.

Two rows ahead, I see a pair of girls watching us.

Well, mostly Henry.

My bestie is tall and painfully skinny, although he spent most of his teenage years trying to bulk up. That lankiness came in handy when he was booked for a photoshoot on the street at fifteen years old.

He wears his hair in a ponytail which every girlfriend he's ever had has complained about. However, coupled with his cheekbones and undeniably sharp jawline, he's been able to calm all dissatisfaction.

I see the shorter chick sneaking glances and realize she's not scared away by the atrocious ponytail.

"Look at that girl over there." I slide my eyes in the direction of his admirers and make the sign for 'girl' quickly. Like a butterfly flapping its wings and then disappearing, the instruction is gone in a blink.

Henry doesn't even glance her way.

"You promised me an open bar." He makes a fist and extends his thumb to his mouth. I take note of the slight desperation in his gaze.

"Just look," I sign insistently, not deterred in the least.

In fact, I like a challenge.

How do you think I got him here?

Henry was at home, wallowing over his ex-girlfriend before I invited him to Cody and Clarissa's wedding. I'm hoping to drag him on the dance floor and introduce him to someone new tonight.

Weddings are a great place to meet a significant other. Or so I've been informed.

I jut my chin at a blonde in a blue dress. "Her? She has that European look you like."

"Not. Interested." Henry shakes his head as he signs.

I narrow my eyes.

He scoffs and flops back into the chair, causing it to teeter on its hind legs.

I keep scouting on his behalf as we're ushered into a reception hall that looks like it was designed by the organizers of the Met Gala. Candles flicker on round tables covered in white cloth and the most stunning centerpieces known to man.

Guests are finding their seats and swiping champagne off the waiters bobbing in and out of the crowd. Friends greet each other with smiles.

“Who’s the groom again?”

“Bolton,” I finger spell. “Cody Bolton.”

Henry makes an impressed face and signs, “You should ask him for an investment.”

“No.”

“You didn’t ask Sazuki—”

“And I won’t.”

He scowls at me.

I scowl back.

“Let’s make a deal.” I swipe a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and sign with one hand, “I won’t push you at girls and you won’t pull out the business proposals.”

Henry studies me, weighing the cost. Finally, he nods and stalks across the room to the bar.

An instinctive urge to grab his bicep and steer him toward any willing female takes over, but I know I can’t bulldoze my way into a matter as sensitive as a breakup.

Poor thing.

I will find him a girlfriend tonight.

As I’m about to drink the champagne, my stomach clenches in discomfort. I realize I haven’t eaten all day and set the glass down.

To attend this wedding, I caught a three-hour flight back to the city after a grueling photoshoot. There was no time to fuel up.

I better eat before I pass out.

Eyes roaming, I locate the snack table and head that way. I’m stuffing my face with the rich folk’s version of a cheese puff when the air around me shifts.

It’s a change in the temperature, a shadow that wasn’t there before, a smell of strong cologne, and the way the people around me start paying attention.

I look back. There’s a guy standing behind me. A hint of sheepishness adorns his gaze, and a tinge of annoyance curls his lips. He’s good at hiding it though. The irritation flashes in and out of his face before his smile transforms into a flirty, practiced grin.

His mouth is flapping fast. Nerves, maybe?

Goodness. He’s a chatterbox.

I'm really good at bluffing when a hearing person starts talking to me, but this...

It would be difficult even in a brightly lit room. Tonight, the beautiful crystal chandeliers are dim, tempting me to step closer.

But I don't.

Poor guy is still chatting up a storm.

I guess he didn't notice my hearing aid.

When I say nothing, he visibly reddens. From the veins bulging in his neck, he's probably gone the route of talking louder.

I keep staring at his hand gestures, playing the guessing game. Hm... is he complaining about me not responding to him?

A hint of censure enters his gaze, confirming my guess.

He's now standing way too close and throwing his hands around. This is a lecture.

I bristle. *Who the hell does he think he is?*

He tries to soften the scolding because his eyes droop. His hands flag his chest. *Break my heart?* Is that what he's saying? It's close enough to the sign I would use.

The song in the banquet hall changes. The vibrations are thicker, deeper and more chaotic. I love music with a lot of bass, and I wish I could dance instead of endure... whatever *this* is right now. It's so uncomfortable.

The guy takes my lack of response personally. His angry body language matches his angry expression.

A waste of a pretty face.

He's tall, muscular. A typical gym bro from the way he's wearing a workout shirt under his blazer. Some girls would be flattered. Most would admit he's not bad to look at.

Unfortunately for him, I work in an industry where being *not bad to look at* is kind of the point.

Should I teach him a lesson before this gets any more awkward?

Brightly, I smile.

He smiles back with a hint of relief.

I lift my hands, showing off my manicure. Bright orange acrylic nails. The type I wasn't allowed to wear in ASL class.

"Are you aware that your cologne is causing my eyes to water?" I sign.

Confusion.

It hits him first.

Horror is next.

His smile slips all the way off. He blinks several times, staring at my hands like he's never seen a manicure this good.

"What's wrong?" I blink innocently as I sign, knowing he doesn't understand ASL.

Mouth open, he steps back and speaks what I guess is an apology.

"Sorry. I didn't know you were deaf."

Or maybe he says something else.

But I doubt it.

I've done this song and dance so many times I can safely assume his response, even if I can't hear it. His mouth moves in exaggerated circles. He's speaking slower, but talking unnaturally makes it even harder to lipread. I wish people knew that.

I start to sign again, but my admirer shakes his head and waves his arms back and forth, gesturing 'no'. Then he backpedals like he forgot he left the stove on at home.

He's so eager to get away from me, he steps right into the path of a frazzled waiter.

The two collide.

Wine stems tumble. Glass shatters everywhere.

All eyes shift to us.

The stranger's cheeks turn a screaming shade of red. He runs off, leaving the waiter to clean up the mess. I shoot a dark look at the runaway before dropping to my haunches and helping.

Henry appears at my side faster than lightning. His fingers grope my wrist, stopping me.

I look up.

He frowns.

"I'm fine," I sign and clack my acrylic nails together to show him why. These bad boys are long enough that I won't do my fingers any damage.

He releases my hand because he's smart enough to know that I'll do what I want.

Unfortunately, Henry's human handcuffs are replaced by another darker and more feminine model.

I know exactly who's beside me before I smell her perfume.

"Don't," DeeJ says, waiting until I look up so I can read her lips.

I let out a giant exhale.

My sister is only a year older than me, but she acts like we have a difference of a decade. If she wasn't my favorite person in the world, usurped only an inch by Coco Chanel, I wouldn't tolerate all her hovering.

I climb to my feet while more waiters rush over. The shards of glass are soon swept into a dust bin and the party continues without a blip.

Dejonae drops my hand and pierces me with a scolding look. I have at least five inches on her, but nobody told my sister that she should be intimidated.

"What are you doing trying to pick up glass with your bare hands? You could have gotten hurt. You need to be more careful." Her hands are expanding, taking up more space to show she's yelling.

I make eye contact with her husband. Thanks to his stunning almond-shaped eyes and cheekbones that could kill, Sazuki reminds me of a silent assassin. Thankfully, this assassin is DeeJ's protector and not her enemy.

At least, not anymore.

Sazuki takes his much younger wife by the arms and calms her down by speaking in her ear. My sister's shoulders start relaxing and she bobs her head, giving in.

Watching them, something sharp and painful strikes me. It lingers even when Sazuki shares an understanding look with me and steers DeeJ away.

"Jealous?" Henry signs.

I shrug. I'm happy my sister found someone who adores her. But I also thought we'd be single together. Forever.

At this point, it seems more plausible that my manager will finally book me a Versace gig at Fashion Week than that I'll find a decent guy.

I shake my head to rid myself of my moodiness. "I blame doofus."

"Doofus?"

"Earlier." I roll my eyes, signing faster as my irritation surges. "The one who crashed into the waiter."

"Did you push him?"

"Really?"

"Just asking."

"He hit on me, saw I'm deaf, and ran away."

Henry scowls. He's aware of how brutal hearing people can be when they find someone even remotely different to them.

"You okay?" he signs.

I shrug. "He's not worth it."

Henry roughly sips his drink, eyes surfing around the room like he's looking for the culprit.

I take his glass from him and taste it. It's disgustingly bitter so I hand it back and sign, "This is why I will *never*," I emphasize the sign for 'never', "date a hearing person. They're too much trouble. It won't work."

Henry signs with one hand while holding the drink in the other. "Can't argue with that. My ex was hearing."

I stiffen, realizing what I've done. All this talk about dating hearing people led us right back to his ex.

Crap.

I blink rapidly, unnerved when Henry drains the rest of his drink and tries to swipe another glass off a waiter.

"Want to dance?" I do a little shimmy.

He shakes his head.

I tug him and he reluctantly trails me to the dance floor.

On the way, I spot a familiar face.

No.

It can't be...

Henry notices my frightened expression and twists his neck to see what stalled me. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

Henry quirks an eyebrow in disbelief and looks around until he makes direct eye contact with Lexi. Then he freezes.

Uh-oh.

Unease bleeds through my stomach as Henry's ex-girlfriend—the one who had him wallowing in self-pity and B.O. for weeks—makes a move in our direction.

It's an instinctive reaction to step in front of Henry. How far should I go for my best friend's honor? Slapping his ex at a wedding this fancy might not be the best call. I can drag her outside by her hair and maybe we can brawl there?

Or, you know, it can be a short, polite conversation that ends amicably.

I'm ready for anything...

Until a man joins Lexi's side. She smiles up at him, accepting the champagne and the kiss he offers.

Okay... I was not expecting *that*.

The moment they touch lips, I know this won't end well.

What do we do now?

I doubt the new boyfriend is deaf. That adds an extra level of strain to navigating this complicated situation.

My eyes meet Henry's and I arch an eyebrow in a silent inquiry. *Stay?*

He juts his chin down.

Great.

My heart is about to drill right out of my ribs. Fingers coiling into fists, I scowl when Lexi nears us.

She doesn't deserve my polite smile.

Not that she's even looking at me.

Her eyes are locked on Henry. I can't tell what she's feeling. Guilt? Relief? The fact that her smile is kind irritates me. Who does she think she is pretending to be nice after breaking my best friend's heart?

Lexi signs hello.

I keep my hands at my sides.

Henry does too.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Lexi signs. Her eyes are expectant. She's got that innocent, doe-eyed look that makes her a shoe-in for a Disney princess. "Are you here for the bride or the groom?"

Henry juts his chin at her date. "Who's this?" he signs.

Henry, don't ask.

"Boyfriend." Lexi seems a bit sheepish. At least she has the decency to realize how weird it is that she jumped into another relationship so quickly.

The tension rises as Henry and the new boyfriend stare at each other. The stench of testosterone threatens to turn the wedding hall into a boxing ring.

New Boyfriend points at Henry and snickers. I immediately despise him. I've been on the receiving end of bullying enough times to recognize when it's about to go down.

Hearing people tend to believe the world revolves around them. The very thought that people with differences exist is mind-boggling. Most approach those differences somewhere between apathy and mild curiosity. But there are others who get downright nasty for no reason other than that differences scare them.

New Boyfriend stinks of the last category.

Lexi calls her boyfriend off. "I'm sorry. He's being a jerk."

"Why did you leave me for a jerk?"

“Henry, please.”

“Were you talking to him when you were with me?”

Lexi’s eyes widen. “No.”

New Boyfriend looks back and forth between all of us. He doesn’t understand ASL and his fragile ego can’t take being left out. The fact that we’re all having our own conversation is clearly annoying him.

He glances at Lexi, waiting for her to interpret. When she doesn’t, he reaches into his pocket and brandishes a single key. He starts swinging it around on his index finger, acting like a child fidgeting in silent protest.

Light glints against the key fob, temporarily distracting me. I don’t know jack about vehicles, but I recognize that logo thanks to one of my modeling gigs. The car on set was so exclusive that we had to sign liability contracts.

I’m not surprised an idiot like Lexi’s new boyfriend would swing that key fob in our face as some kind of emotional punchline. He seems like the type who thinks throwing money around is a statement.

Fart-wad.

“I’m sorry,” Lexi signs to Henry. Wrapping her hands around her boyfriend’s bicep, she drags him across the room.

It’s for the best. Her boyfriend and Henry were about to engage in a pissing contest via baby-level sign language on one side and the ASL equivalent of dirty-mouthed sailor language from Henry.

I’m glad I don’t have to see that.

Henry stalks to the exits and I follow, ready to be an amazingly supportive best friend by taking him to a bar where we can drink our sorrows away and insult Lexi’s new boyfriend together.

Unfortunately, the crowd seems to have tripled in size. The way to the door is cluttered with guests.

I try to weave past politely.

Henry, uh... doesn’t.

He’s like a bull seeing red. People who notice him coming skitter out of the way. The others who don’t get bounced to the side. He bucks into someone’s shoulders, and they throw their hands up in warning. I mouth a quick ‘I’m sorry’ and dip my head in apology before scurrying after him.

We finally make it outside, and the faint vibrations from the music go dead completely.

My heels sink into soft grass.

My ankles wobble.

I'm pretty close to Henry's towering height, but *ugh*. His pace is brutal. These killer heels were not meant for trekking through a dark parking lot with a broken-hearted former model.

At least we're heading in the direction of his car.

That's good.

It means I'll be off my feet soon.

It also means I can take the keys from Henry, sync my phone to his speakers, turn my break-up playlist up to volume one hundred and sign our hearts out to the lyrics we memorized in the past.

Unfortunately, my hopes are dashed when Henry opens his trunk.

I stop beside him, noticing the determination in his eyes.

"What are you doing?" I sign. He keeps acting like a possessed zombie as he searches his trunk, so I roll up my sleeves and sign with bigger movements. "Henry, *answer* me."

He ignores me and keeps raking through the junk in his car until, finally, his eyes light up. Wrapping his fingers around an object, he brandishes it in front of me.

My jaw drops. *Why does he need a baseball bat?*

Turning so sharply, I feel the wind he creates like a commercial fan blowing in my direction, Henry storms through the parking lot. His head is bent down and he's scanning every vehicle there.

Pressing two fingers to my throbbing temple, I shuffle behind him. Maybe he just has to stalk up and down the parking lot a bit. Let off some steam.

You know that's not what he's doing.

Okay, fine.

Even if he's looking for Fart-wad's car, he won't find it. There are so many fancy vehicles here. Cody Bolton has an impressive friend group. It's highly unlikely Henry will be able to locate...

Henry freezes.

I do too.

The car's right there. Shiny platinum rims. Tinted windows. Custom paint. The logo is mounted proudly on the hood, telling everyone in the world this is money on wheels.

We found it. We confirmed that jerk of a boyfriend is stupid but loaded.

Good for him.

I hope he loses all his money in a bad investment.

I hope he has to sell his car for parts.

I'm about to tug on Henry's shirt and insist we go home when my best friend swings the bat over his head. A tear drips down his face and his mouth opens in what must be a roar of pain as he drives the bat down over the windshield.

I cower instinctively, lifting my hands over my face in case glass goes flying. The bat makes impact. A giant dent expands into tiny spiderwebs of damage. The lights on the car flash on and off.

My hearing aids pick up a mishmash of painful chaos. I yank them out so they dangle to my shoulder and, thankfully, everything goes silent.

Henry.

I wrap my arms around my best friend's bicep, squeezing tight. He raises his hand, lifting my fingers with it, and drives the bat down over the hood this time.

A scream balls in my throat, but I swallow it down.

Henry's chest is heaving. Giant pumps.

Up and down.

His eyes are almost completely shut from how hard he's crying.

Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.

I have to stop him.

Neither of us have the money to pay for the damages. This car is probably worth more than our lungs and kidneys.

Both of them.

Combined.

Plus Henry has a sick grandmother to take care of. He borrowed from everyone just to afford her surgery last month.

Wrapping my arms around his back, I squeeze as hard as I can.

Please, Henry. Stop. Please. Please.

Something wet plops against the wrist that's locked around his stomach. It's followed by another. Another.

Is it tears or sweat?

I don't know.

But at last, Henry's shoulders slump and he takes a drunken step back. The baseball bat slips from his fingers and clatters to the ground. He sobs, his face muscles crumpling and his shoulders caving in. It breaks my heart.

A plaintive hope that it's over, that this crazy situation will end here and not get any worse flits through my head.

And then the hair on the back of my neck stands to attention. After so many years, I've come to understand my body's gut reaction to a shift in environment.

Sometimes, it takes my other senses a second to catch up with my brain.
But tonight, I'm on high alert.

There.

A shadow.

A big one.

Turning slowly, I make eye-contact with the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. And I've seen plenty of good-looking men, so that's saying something.

He's in a black tuxedo. His hair is brushed back dashing, revealing a strong forehead. Unlike the trendy, giant-neck gym bro from earlier, he's relatively lean. Like a swimmer. Broad shoulders taper to a slim waist and long legs highlighted by perfectly tailored trousers.

DaNici slacks?

I'd recognize that handiwork anywhere.

This man has money and good taste.

Gorgeous chocolate eyes fix on me.

Time stops for a second.

I feel a very distinctive stomach flutter until I look down and realize he's holding a key fob.

The key fob.

The one with the logo of the car behind us.

My eyes whip down. Back up. Down again.

I glance at Henry, who is now aware of the tuxedo guy. His eyebrow jumps and fear traces a line in his forehead.

We both turn to look at each other.

A thin, foreboding feeling winds through my stomach.

The man with the key is still giving me his undivided attention, and if I wasn't about to hyperventilate from the fact that—

(a) Henry just destroyed an expensive car and,

(b) This guy is now a main witness,

I'd probably smile and flirt a bit just to see if, by any miracle, this gorgeous stranger is deaf.

But we're not in a dream world.

We're in a nightmare.

One that gets ten times worse when Dream Boat finally takes his eyes off me and looks at the car.

His eyes widen and then narrow in quick succession. He walks over urgently and presses the fob. The lights blink once and then die completely.

I slip my hearing aids back in and realize the noise is gone.

At first, I feel relief.

And then my stomach drops to my toes.

The truth hits me like a bowling ball to the chest.

Tuxedo Guy can control the alarm.

That means...

Henry destroyed the wrong car.

The handsome stranger assesses the damage and turns cold in a snap. His jawline tightens, sharpening to granite. He pierces Henry with a look that sends a shiver down my spine. It's been a long time since I've felt fearful of anything, but right now, with Henry on the opposite end of a gorgeous pair of spear-like eyeballs, panic creeps in.

I nudge my best friend in the back and sign covertly, "Go."

"No."

"Think of your grandmother. She needs you."

Henry's eyes tighten in conflict.

"I'll handle this. Go. Hurry."

He takes a hesitant step backward, still unsure.

I make a shooing gesture.

Finally, he starts jogging and flees across the lot.

Tuxedo Guy starts to chase him, but I block his path. He could easily mow me down, but he stops as if he doesn't want to hurt me. Aggravatedly, he points in Henry's direction.

What is he saying?

My eyes snag on his lips and it momentarily stuns my brain. How can a man's lips be that full and pretty on a face that masculine?

Get a grip, Yaya.

Now is *not* the time to drool over this stranger. This... victim of Henry's heartbreak.

I blink, concentrating as hard as I can. Lipreading requires so much mental and physical strain and leaves me with terrible headaches, but I'm

willing to endure a thousand migraines to make out what he's saying.

Come on, speak naturally please.

His mouth forms too many words. I don't recognize any of them.

It's too dark out here, dammit.

I hold up a hand and shake my head, trying to communicate—first in sign and then gesturing to my hearing aids.

I'm deaf.

He stops and watches me curiously again.

That bought me some time.

Heart pounding, I take out my phone and send DeeJ an emergency text. I need my sister here. I then open my notes app to write out an apology when I see him whip out his phone too. He dials a number and keeps pointing in the direction of the highway where Henry is just driving out.

My protective instincts surge.

No matter what, I can't let him go after Henry.

Desperate, I glance around for a solution and notice Henry's bat is still lying on the ground.

It's a terrible idea.

Truly atrocious.

My fingers tingle.

But to fix this mess, I'm going to have to do something bad.

CHAPTER 2

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the cliché

DARE

I don't believe in love clichés.

When you know you know.

I saw her and time stopped.

No.

Just... no.

There's no such thing as love at first sight.

How the hell can you *love* someone before you've even met properly?

I know what real love looks like. My parents were together for thirty years. Spent every single moment of their lives together and loved every minute of it.

They died right after each other. Mom, to cancer. And then dad, a year later to heartbreak.

The most important lesson dad taught me about love is that it's a choice. Not a feeling. Not the world moving in slow motion. Not my pants getting tight at a single look across the room.

It's deciding one day.

And the next day.

And the day after that.

Until twenty years have passed and you're still choosing her because love is choosing even when it sucks. But if you chose the right one, well, then... even when it sucks it's worth it.

I believe my dad.

Believe in the gravity of love.

Because of that weight, I can't imagine having to choose someone—and only one—for half a decade.

Which is why I'm still single at an age when most of my friends have gotten hitched and divorced already. A few are even on their second marriages.

I haven't found a woman I want to choose yet.

And I sure as hell have never found a woman who made time stop.

Until tonight.

Until the woman in the red pantsuit stood in front of a pool of shattered glass and bent down immediately to clean it up with her bare hands.

Her beauty caught my eye first.

Her kindness kept my attention.

In two seconds flat, I knew—despite her looking like a pampered princess, she wasn't the type who considered herself better than the help.

Then something strange happened.

My eyes revolted from my body. Swept over her. Fused to her like they'd belonged to her before time began.

When another man joined her, I—strangely—found myself clutching my beer so hard it almost shattered.

When she walked off with her date, I followed.

Made no sense.

Hell, I *wanted* to stop.

Business associates kept getting in my way.

To chat.

To talk.

I got rid of them as fast as I could.

By the time I got outside...

Well, the world went slow again.

But for a different reason.

"Dare. *Dare?*" Mosely croaks from the phone. "What do you mean someone put a bat through your Rolls?"

I rip my eyes off the woman and strain to see in the darkness. The culprit's already taken off, but I have a near photographic memory.

I rattle off the license plate. "I need you to track that for me."

"Now?"

“Yes, now.” I take another step.

“I’ll get in touch with Clay Bolton.”

“Not Clay.” I don’t want to drag him away from his brother’s wedding.
“I have another contact at Clay’s company.”

“Done.” Mosely mutters under his breath, “I can’t believe those hooligans. How did they even get into Cody Bolton’s wedding?”

“Mosely—”

“Riff-raff. Disgusting. Do they have any idea how expensive that car is?”

“I have comprehensive insurance,” I growl, already uncomfortable with how he’s talking about *them*. Because *them* includes that woman.

Her and ‘disgusting’ should never be in the same sentence. It’s imperative.

And I don’t know why I feel so strongly about that.

“The car will get fixed,” I say quietly.

“Then why...?”

“I promised Talia a ride tomorrow and because of this mess I won’t—”

The rest of my words are drowned out by a loud *crack*.

I turn slowly.

Blink.

Blink again.

Her slim brown fingers wrap around the baseball bat. Two of the five are encased in delicate gold rings that sit above her knuckles. She’s standing slightly bent over, drawing my eyes to the curve of her hips.

The zebra-print stilettos meant for sin stand proudly in a sea of scattered glass.

“Dare? I heard a noise. What happened?”

“I’ll call you back.” I slip the phone into my pocket, eyes locked on her.

The twitch under my skin should be from anger. After all, this girl just smashed my car with a bat *right in front of me*.

I don’t know her.

I don’t know why they targeted me.

I don’t know what I’ve done to them.

And I certainly don’t know why I want to pin this woman against the car she just added an extra dent to.

The movement down south is almost violently painful.

What the hell is going on?

Her chest heaves from how hard she's breathing. Long black hair swings over cheeks the color of brown maple leaves in autumn.

Time slows again.

Makes me extra-aware of her.

Collar dipping way too far in the front, enough to drive a man wild. Dark lashes thick over light brown eyes. Curves that would make a winding mountain road jealous. Everything about her is perfect.

I already know she's going to ruin me.

And I already know I'd let her.

What's wrong with me?

I'm a businessman.

I need to see the money to believe, but I also made my biggest returns when investing on a gut instinct. Venture capitalism is all about taking calculated risks.

The bigger the risk, the bigger the gain.

But this...

This is too much.

Maybe I'm experiencing some kind of delusion.

An early sign of a heart condition.

A warning from my body that I should get a physical at the nearest hospital ASAP.

Behind us, pounding footsteps scatter on the ground and a woman screams, "Yaya!"

Two people enter my line of sight. A woman with an afro tipped blonde at the ends and a man in an all-black suit.

I recognize the man on sight. Ryotaro Sazuki. A musical prodigy from the renowned Sazuki clan. The rumors of how deep the Sazukis' pockets go is something of a legend.

Dad revered that family. He had all their albums and was one of the few benefactors chosen to fly to Japan for an in-person concert hosted by the very secretive celebrities.

It was the highlight of his life.

Because of dad's love for their music, I was one of the first investors begging to buy into Sazuki's foundation. The pianist played hardball and kept his foundation closed to investors. Now that I've moved to the city, I'm hoping I can pry those doors open.

“Yaya,” the woman with the afro moves her hands as she speaks, “what happened here? Are you alright?”

Yaya?

The name suits her.

Strong. Lyrical. Different.

Yaya signs back to the woman. Is she... deaf? The gestures she was making earlier suddenly make sense.

I notice the hearing aid in her right ear. It knocks me off-balance.

I stare in wonder as they communicate with their hands. It's... strange. Foreign. Despite wanting to invest in Sazuki's foundation for the deaf, I've had zero interactions with the deaf community.

I wait for my interest in Yaya to dim as it always does with women.

It doesn't.

As the shock wears off, my intrigue sharpens.

Acute.

Insistent.

This is a new arena. A new world.

But it doesn't scare me.

“Why would you hit his car?” the woman with the afro shrieks.

Yaya frowns at me and I see a bit of resemblance between the two women.

Sisters, maybe?

Sazuki stands near the two with a sober expression. If I wasn't so focused on Yaya, I would engage him in a conversation. This is the closest I've been to the reclusive man.

“I...” the sister swallows so hard I hear it like a crack of thunder, “I'm Dejonae. This is my sister Yaya. First, I want to say how sorry I am about your car. This must be very upsetting.”

“I'm more confused than anything,” I drawl, sure that I don't look half as angry as they all expect me to be.

Dejonae signs to her sister. Then she speaks to me. “We're really sorry. I'm sure this is all one big misunderstanding.”

There's no misunderstanding the damage, the bat, or the severe dents in my limited-edition Rolls Royce.

“Yaya will take responsibility for all the damages.”

“Why would she do that? She's not the one who caused this.” I point to the dent on my windshield.

“She says...” Dejonae pauses, “that no one else touched your car. It was only her.”

Sazuki sets a hand on his wife’s waist. It’s a touch of comfort and support. It’s clear she’s absolutely bewildered.

Frankly, so am I.

Yaya is covering for that guy. Her... boyfriend. Is she so in love with him that she would take the fall like this?

A totally unwarranted hatred seethes in my chest. That guy doesn’t deserve someone like her. At the very least, he shouldn’t have run when he got caught.

He should have stayed.

Covered her.

She’s someone who should be protected at all costs.

Annoyed, I insist, “There was a young man with her. I saw him.”

“Henry?”

Ugh. *Henry*.

I hate him already.

Dejonae stutters, “You’re saying... Henry did this?” She signs a question to Yaya who shakes her head emphatically.

“I understand that Yaya is covering for her boyfriend, but I know what I saw and I hold him responsible—”

Yaya watches her sister. A few seconds later, she steps closer to me and signs. Her eyes are wide, compelling. I have a feeling I’d do anything she told me to if I could understand what she wanted.

Dejonae interprets, “Henry didn’t touch your car. And also...”

“Also?”

“He’s not her boyfriend.”

My lips curl up.

I can’t help it.

Sazuki catches my grin and I try to wipe it off my face, but it’s too late. I see the musician sizing me up, eyes narrowing slightly.

Looking flustered, Dejonae adds, “Yaya’s willing to go to the police station and make a statement. If you press charges, she won’t contest. She...” Dejonae turns fully to her sister. “Come on, Yaya. We’ll pay for it. I’d never let you go to jail.”

Sazuki nods resolutely.

“No,” Yaya opens her mouth and a slurred but confident voice speaks.
“I won’t let you pay for me.”

My eyes widen in surprise.

“I’m sorry.” Yaya’s voice is strong, clear, even if it’s heavily accented.

Can she speak? Why didn’t she talk to me from the beginning?

My curiosity spikes to an all-time high.

“I’ll repay you no matter what. So you do business with me. Only me.
Okay?”

Intrigued, I stare at her.

My heart keeps squeezing in an alarming way.

Before I can get control of myself, my phone rings.

I glance down, thinking it’s Mosely calling back.

It’s not.

The name on screen is my sister’s.

Tense, I slip two fingers in my blazer, remove my wallet and slip out a business card. Dejonae lifts her hand to receive it, but I don’t give it to her. Instead, I brandish it in front of Yaya.

She looks stunned.

Because she thought I’d start yelling or because she’s used to people ignoring her after finding out she’s deaf?

I don’t know.

But I want to find out.

If I didn’t have to go, I’d probably spend the rest of tonight learning everything about her.

“Here,” I say when she doesn’t move.

Slowly, her fingers enclose over the card.

“We’ll discuss the details of repayment later.”

Her eyes slip past me to her sister who is interpreting for me.

My phone rings again.

Lucy.

Something’s wrong.

I grit my teeth and turn swiftly. Hurrying to the roadside to catch a cab, I answer the phone with an abrupt, “What did you do now?”

“Dare,” my sister’s voice gurgles over the line, “it’s... bad this time.”

My jaw clenches.

An invisible vice tightens on my temple.

“I’ll be right there.”

* * *

I stare at the cherry red convertible sticking out of the beauty shop window.

The vice grip on my head turns murderous.

There's something in the air tonight. Two strangers smashed the windows of my car for reasons that I still can't figure out. And my sister crashed her cherry convertible straight into a building.

Maybe someone put a curse on all the Sullivan vehicles tonight.

"Daaare!" My older sister wails, looking up at me with mascara running down her face. She's clutching a can of ginger water. Her very own hangover cure. "I swear I saw a baby deer. I swerved so I didn't hit it."

"A baby deer." I frown. "In the middle of the city?"

"I swear it was there. It was..." Her bottom lip trembles.

"What?"

"Beautiful." She starts crying again. Big, fat tears roll down cheeks flushed pink.

Lucy throws her arms around my waist and my own eyes water from the stench of alcohol pouring out of her.

I let out a giant, pained exhale and pat Lucy's hair awkwardly. Her tears sink into my shirt and I'm sure she's leaving black mascara stains all over me.

"I'm just glad you're not hurt," I mumble.

I'm also glad dad went to college with the city's chief of police.

Glad the chief picked up my call when I rang this late for a favor.

Glad we could hire more lawyers than there are police officers out working this case tonight.

Glad I could call the city's biggest news outlets and promise them an exclusive interview about my move to the city along with an eyebrow-raising advertising contract with my subsidiaries.

Glad we have the money to pay off all eyewitnesses and quietly sweep this under the rug.

But maybe having the money to do whatever we want is exactly why my sister felt comfortable enough to *ram her car into a damn building*.

"Where's Talia?" I ask, prying my sister off me so I can look at her splotchy face.

"At home."

"Alone?"

“Yes, *alone*. I wasn’t planning on bringing my seven-year-old to a speakeasy welcome party, Dare.” Her eyebrows tighten into a deep V. “What? Do you think I’m a bad mother too?”

“You did this because someone called you a bad mother?”

“No!” She pops to her feet and the towel the paramedics slipped around her drips to the ground. “I told you.” She takes a step forward and almost drops on her face. I reach out to steady her, but she manages to regain balance on her own and lifts her chin. “I saw a deer.”

I groan softly under my breath.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” She curls slender hands into fists and punches my chest. “You think I’m a liar, don’t you?”

I let out another sigh. Lucy takes after dad in her looks—blonde, tan and blue-eyed. I took after mom, who had fairer skin, dark eyes and brown hair.

But while she’s her father’s daughter in looks, Lucy got *all* of mom’s crazy temper.

Fortunately, I got all of dad’s patience.

It usually balances things out.

But tonight...

Even if I managed to have the patience of a saint, Lucy is pushing it.

“What happened to Talia’s nanny, Luce?”

My sister reels away from me. “Gone.”

“Gone where?” My voice climbs in alarm. She didn’t... murder the woman, did she?

“Well,” Lucy taps large lips that are the product of her favorite surgeon, “after she found her panties on fire—”

“I’m sorry. *What?*”

“She packed up, yelled ‘your child is evil incarnate’ and left.”

“I...” Blinking fast, I shake my head. There are so many things wrong with that story, I don’t know where to start. “Maybe we’ll talk when you’re not this buzzed.”

“I’m telling the truth!” Lucy yells indignantly. “And I’m not drunk anymore. Mosely brought my ginger ale. I’ve had, like, seven.”

My nerves wearing thin, I look around for my assistant. The crowd is thinning out. A few cop cars have already left the scene. Still, there’s a decent number of onlookers.

Mosely left earlier to collect phones from eyewitnesses. I doubt he had any trouble taking possession of those videos. Most people would trade

their entire devices for our compensation.

"I'll call Talia to check on her. It's late and she must be worried about you." I reach into my pocket.

Lucy sticks the pointed toe of her stilettos into the ground. "You can't."

"Why not?"

"I took away her phone."

"Lucy!"

"What?"

"You took her phone and left her at home by herself?"

"In my defense, she can make calls off the damn TV now. And the property has an excellent concierge service."

"I can't believe you."

"I did it for good reason."

"Yeah, I'm sure." The sarcasm in my voice is thick.

"Dare, I'm going to shoot straight with you, okay?" My sister taps manicured fingers against her chest. "I love my daughter. I do, but she's..." Lucy curls her hand, beckoning me closer.

"What?" I groan.

She pins her lips together.

"Just say it."

"Com'ere." She makes the gesture again.

I'm already suffering from being in the center of her alcohol-scented breath. It takes everything in me not to plug my nose when I lean closer to my sister.

"She's a little tyrant," Lucy whispers. Her spit flies on my face.

I gag and wipe it off with the handkerchief in my suit pocket.

"It's true." Lucy wheels back. "Do you know how many nannies she ran off back home? We just got here and she's scared off three—" My sister holds up four fingers—"professional nannies already. They were all crying when they quit. All of them. I had to pay so much money I... if I hear the word 'emotional distress' one more time, I'll scream."

I add an eyebrow raise to my frown. I approved those cash compensations, but I thought the emotional distress claims was because of Lucy. Not Talia.

"I don't believe that," I say stubbornly.

Talia is a little... headstrong, but she's not mean-spirited. She's the perfect mixture of strength, intelligence, and cuteness. Sure, she might be

quick-witted, which could make other people uncomfortable. A few folks still believe children should be seen and not heard. But I think my little niece is a genius.

Geniuses have to be rejected a bit. It's how they find their stride.

"She's only sweet to you," Lucy warns. "Even with me, she's a," my sister makes a face, "gremlin."

"Enough about Talia." I lift a hand. "My niece isn't the one who got behind the wheel while drunk tonight. She's not the one who drove her car into a building."

Lucy chews on her bottom lip and stares at the ground.

I exhale again. "Get in the car. I'll take you home."

"Home?"

I glance away.

"I can... I can really go home, Dare?" Hope makes her voice as light as a flute.

I swallow hard.

Suddenly, my sister throws her arms around me.

"Luce, get off." I try to push her away.

"I knew it. You can do anything, Dare. You're *amazing*."

Mosely appears in front of me. The flashing cop cars reflect blue and red on his tan skin which is a crisp contrast to his silver hair. Black eyes glint with discomfort.

I clear my throat and pat Lucy's back. "You're going to a really nice home, Luce. It's different than the condo, but it's just as comfortable. You're really going to like it there."

Lucy takes a step back. "What?"

"Luce..."

Betrayal flashes in her eyes. "You're—you're taking me to rehab?"

I don't respond, but she sees the answer on my face.

"No. The check in wasn't until Monday. You promised! You promised I'd have at least the weekend."

I grab her shoulders before she can whirl away from me.

"Let me go!"

"Luce." I hold firm and lower my voice so the officers milling about can't hear. "It's just a few days earlier."

"That wasn't the deal."

"It was always the deal!" I snap.

She goes still.

“You know why we moved to this city,” I hiss.

“Because of your new investment—”

“Lucy.”

Her eyes droop.

“It’s the best rehabilitation center in the country. Remember what you promised me. You would try. For Talia’s sake.”

Stark emotions play over her face.

First, defiance.

Then acceptance.

“I’m sorry, Dare. I am.” Her eyes fill with tears again and my heart tightens painfully. “I’ll go. I’ll do it like I promised. But can’t I wait until Monday? At least give me tomorrow to spend with my daughter.”

“I already promised the chief. If I take you straight to rehab, they won’t press criminal charges.”

“But...”

“Be grateful they’re not taking you in handcuffs, Luce. You could have killed someone tonight. *You* could have been killed...” I snap my mouth shut because the very thought scares the hell out of me.

Lucy and Talia are the only family I have left in this world.

“I worked it out with the owner of the building too. He’s not going to press charges. This matter ends here.” I stab a finger down. “But it all falls apart if you don’t go to rehab tonight.”

Her bottom lip trembles.

I think she’s going to cry again.

Instead, Lucy smacks her head with an open palm. “Stupid.” *Smack.* “Stupid. Stupid.”

“Luce. Stop.” I snatch her hand before she leaves a bruise on her forehead.

“It was only supposed to be one drink. One last drink before I get locked up. How did it turn into this?”

“Locked up? Luce, you and I both toured the grounds. You couldn’t find a five-star hotel that looked better than that place.”

“Of course I could find a better five-star hotel. Do you know who I am?”

I chuckle.

She smiles reluctantly.

"I'm... sorry, Dare."

I shake my head. "Enough with the apologies."

"You must hate me."

"Sometimes."

She gives me the side-eye.

"But we're family."

"We're burdens." She rubs her elbow.

"You're my world. You and Talia."

She frowns. "I... I'll call Talia's father. Since we're in-between nannies, it's best if she stays with him."

"Whoa. Whoa. The bastard who can't be bothered to call Talia more than once a year? You want to leave her with that guy?"

"Do you have a better alternative?"

"Yeah. Me." I hook a thumb in my jacket.

My sister stares blankly. Then she tilts her head back and laughs.

Offended, I fold my arms over my chest. "What's wrong with me?"

"Mosely? Mosely?" Lucy yells.

My executive assistant darts around the corner. "Yes, Ms. Sullivan."

"Did my brother drink tonight? Let him take that breathalyzer test too."

"You're pushing it, Luce."

"And so are you."

I grunt.

"Well, that sobered me all the way up," Lucy says, wiping at her eyes. She motions to the car and Mosely runs around to open the door for her.

I stomp to the other side and slide into the backseat.

Mosely starts driving.

In the silence, Lucy covers her face and chuckles.

Freaking siblings.

My sister caused a giant mess that *I* cleaned up, and she thinks I'm not qualified to look after Talia for a few months?

"What are your objections?" I demand.

"This isn't a boardroom." Lucy taps her phone and dials a number. "I'm calling her dad."

I glare at her.

She frowns and pulls the phone away. "He's not answering."

"It's a sign."

"I have friends back home. Maybe we can fly her back to—"

“What. Is. Wrong. With. Me?”

“Really?” She flits her eyes up to mine. “You really want to know?”

I make a ‘get on with it’ gesture.

“I wouldn’t trust you with a plant.”

Oof. That hurts.

“You work all hours of the day.”

“I have international clients,” I grunt.

“You’re gone on trips more than you’re home.”

“I can—”

“Hire a nanny?” She finishes for me. “And when Natalia sets *her* panties on fire and you’re halfway around the world inspecting a nano-bot sunscreen lab in Nicaragua, my daughter will be alone and vulnerable and sad.”

“I don’t think...”

“No, you don’t think. Not about anything but the company. You live like a nomad. You’re not even worthy enough to be called a bachelor. At least bachelors party.”

“Not everything in life is a game, Luce,” I grumble. She can talk this way because my sister has the luxury of living life exactly the way she wants to.

Ever since dad stepped down from the company to spend more time with mom, I took up the mantle. Now that they’re gone, I take care of my sister and niece’s every need.

I’m not complaining. I wouldn’t have it any other way. But my responsibilities leave no time for anything else.

There’s no way I’m letting dad’s company be anything but great, and if I’m not looking out for Luce and Talia, who will?

“When was the last time you dated, brother?”

A sudden image imprints in my mind. Yaya. Red pantsuit gliding against her skin. Long ponytail, black and full. Eyes like a siren’s.

I shake my head to clear it.

“Have you ever really let yourself be vulnerable with one person? Have you ever *wanted* to?”

I wear my poker face, hoping like crazy she can’t tell how I jumped a little inside my skin. It feels like she caught me thinking about a woman I met precisely once. A woman who bashed my car just to prove she deserved all the heat for a crime.

"I date." I undo the button in my shirt cuff.

"Who was your last girlfriend?"

"There was that girl from Switzerland."

"Ah. The one who *followed you halfway around the world* so you could take her out precisely *once* and then decide it was too much for you to maintain a relationship?"

I clench my jaw.

I knew I shouldn't have told Luce about that.

"Admit it, Dare. You're a great uncle. You're perfect for dipping in and out of someone's life, but for the long term—"

"I have a girlfriend," I blurt.

Lucy's eyes widen.

In business, the power of the bluff is more important than anywhere else.

Never let them see you sweat.

Unfortunately, my sister has hawk eyes and can pick out a sheen above my upper lip like she's half-microscope.

"*You* have a girlfriend?" The way she emphasizes the *you* is highly offensive.

"Yes." I crank my chin a tad higher. "Me."

Mosely meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. He's usually a silent observer in these sibling squabbles, but he's not hiding his panic tonight.

I look back at my sister. "She's very nice."

"Oh. 'Very nice', huh?"

"It hasn't been long since we started dating. That's why you haven't met her yet."

"Mm. That's convenient."

I can feel Mosely's eyes drilling into my face.

He should really be focused on driving.

"How much longer until we get there, Mosely?"

His eyes swerve back to the road. "Not long."

"You're changing the subject and reminding me that I'm going to rehab. Points off for you, Dare."

"What will it take for you to believe me?"

"A name, maybe? A picture?"

"I said it was recent."

"You should at least have a name, Dare."

The silence stretches. I've clashed with some of the fiercest business negotiators in the world, but none of them have a thing on my slightly tipsy, car-crashing, rehab-rejecting sister.

Her eyes train on me.

The car gets hot.

I tug on my tie.

"See?" Lucy sounds smug. "I'm sure this imaginary girlfriend of yours is nice and all, but I'd feel way more comfortable if we contacted someone who had the time to look after Talia. I know you love her, Dare, but you have not seen Talia in her monster mode. She's really a handful and used to things going her way—"

"Yaya."

Lucy chokes. "I'm sorry. Did you just... was that another language?"

Inside, my heart is beating against my ribs like a roof ripped off by a hurricane.

Outside, I'm calm.

Steady.

My voice doesn't waver once.

"My girlfriend's name is Yaya."

Lucy pops an eyebrow.

At that moment, my phone buzzes.

Glad for the distraction, I check the new message.

Unknown number: This is Yaya.

Unknown number: I'd like to meet as soon as possible to discuss repayment. I'll do whatever it takes to fix your car.

My fingers tighten over the phone.

Love being a choice was the main lesson dad taught me about relationships.

But there was one more lesson.

The power of destiny.

And I have a feeling... I met my destiny tonight.

CHAPTER 3

OceanofPDF.com

the deal

YAYA

My smartwatch buzzes on my wrist as I pose in front of the mirror hanging behind a chipped, white wardrobe.

I ignore the vibration and continue applying lip gloss.

Sunshine falls on me, catching the golden highlights I painted liberally on my nose, the tip of my forehead, and along my cheekbones.

Princess-themed curtains flutter with a sudden gust of wind. I twist my head around, observing the large oak that mom and dad planted when they first moved in.

I don't clearly remember many of the sounds I heard before I went deaf, but I remember the sound those trees made. Something like applause. Something like an invitation to fly.

I used to sneak out through that window, shimmy down the large trunk and go running late at night.

Just to feel the wind on my face.

Just to feel a little less smothered.

Being back in my childhood bedroom as an adult, I'm grateful that I always came back home.

Since I've been modeling, I've met all kinds of people—truly beautiful humans from broken homes, horror stories tattooed on their skin, hands so firmly on the self-destruct button not even a crowbar could pry them off.

I realized how good I had it.

My parents' brand of smothering was all love.

I shouldn't complain...

But I will because I'm their youngest daughter and how boring would life be if I were perfect?

I set the lipstick down on the rickety dresser. This room *really* is a throwback. Since I moved out, mom and dad haven't changed a thing. That includes childhood artifacts like my fading poster of Tyra Banks, another poster of the amazing all-deaf band *Beethoven's Nightmare*, and the medals from my days of track and field hanging from hooks on the wall.

Not gonna lie.

Tween and teenager Yaya had excellent taste.

Picking up my sea breeze perfume, I spray liberally on my sweat points—behind my ears, my elbows, my knees. Then I spray enough to choke a horse and step under the fragrant rain, turning in a circle.

Wherever I go, I plan to fill the room.

I cap the perfume, grab my hand-crafted tote bag, and snag my phone.

There are a million texts from Henry.

And a million and one from DeeJ.

I sent Henry a text last night, telling him to lay low for now and also not to freak out.

Everything went well.

I mean, as well as can be expected.

The fact that I wasn't dragged away in handcuffs is definitely a better scenario than anyone could have hoped for.

I'll contact Henry as soon as I'm done with my meeting this morning.

Deej too.

My sister wants me to meet with Sazuki's lawyers. She and Sazuki were talking about negotiations and strategies last night in the car.

I have a feeling DeeJ learned all those fancy business signs thanks to her husband. Back when she first started learning sign, all she talked about was music composition.

"*We just want to help,*" DeeJ told me as they sat outside the house signing to me for hours.

Unfortunately for her, I know how Sazuki 'helps'.

He's a bulldozer.

A force of nature.

I've read the magazines and seen the business articles.

What Sazuki wants, Sazuki gets.

That included my sister.

The deaf foundation.

And anything else he puts his mind to.

Since he considers me family, Sazuki will try to get a more lenient punishment. The problem is, if my debtor doesn't feel like he's gotten what he's due, he's going after Henry.

My best friend.

Someone who doesn't have an Asian billionaire brother-in-law who worships the ground his sister walks on.

I dig my fingers into the tote and nod resolutely.

It has to be me.

I have to do this on my own.

The tell-tale fragrance of bacon lures me downstairs in a hurry. Mom is at the stove, her hair hidden in a golden bonnet. It looks like a crown on her head. When she turns and smiles at me, the light hits her pretty brown eyes.

My eyes.

Deej is the one who inherited most of mom's dainty facial features—her finely arched eyebrows and perfect, Cupid's bow lips, but I got mom's eyes. I call that a win.

Mom drops the spoon so she can sign. "Where are you going this early?"

"It's a secret." I finish signing with a smirk and grab an apple.

Mom places a plate of eggs and bacon in front of me. I inhale all the fragrances of the bacon and keep chomping on an apple. I have a few casting calls, so I can't afford to gain weight.

Someone stomps the floor. I recognize that vibration immediately.

I turn and greet my father with a wave.

He grins at me, chubby cheeks bunching under his eyes. His gaze holds a world of affection when he signs, "You look nice."

"Thank you."

"Are you in town for a while this time?"

I begin to shake my head and then freeze. If my meeting with Mr. Rolls Royce goes south, I may be spending a lot of time doing community service or working at Sazuki's foundation to pay back my debt.

A big grin spreads on dad's face. He signs excitedly. "Seems like you might."

I give him a nervous smile in return.

Mom waves to get my attention. "How was the wedding?"

I lift my hands and then let them sink back to the counter. How do I tell my parents what happened last night?

The wedding? It was great. Beautiful. At the end, Henry destroyed someone's car. Ended things on a high note.

I slip a hand into the pocket of my pretty-in-pink skirt and trace the indented card I received from the car owner.

Richard Sullivan.

Mr. Rolls Royce.

Mom leans forward, a furrow in her brows. She recognizes the guilt in my silence.

She's always been like that.

Intuitive.

"It was... fine," I sign, not looking at either of them.

Mom's eyes narrow.

"We had a good time. Henry got drunk..." I laugh it off.

Dad smiles. He buys everything I'm selling.

"And after," I sign hesitantly, "we came home. It wasn't that interesting."

Unless you count the fact that I intentionally swung a bat into the most expensive car in the world right in front of the owner's face.

I bite into the apple to keep from exposing anything more.

At once, my parents swerve their attention to the windows. I pick up on their cue and glance in that direction too.

Mom and dad look equally puzzled. I wonder what they heard?

Dad stomps to the window. Since my father is heavy-set, it's easier for me to sense when he's entered or exited a room. I can also gauge his emotions by the vibration.

Heavy thuds? Dad's angry.

Hesitant thumps means he wants to say something I won't like to hear.

But this...

I don't think I've felt this kind of thump before.

Dad faces me. He signs 'limo' and then raises both eyebrows.

Mom signs, "Why is there a limo outside our house?"

I draw near to the window and my mouth drops. A gleaming black limousine takes up most of the street. There's a man in a chauffeur's

uniform, complete with white gloves, waiting outside in the heat.

Dad arches an eyebrow at me.

I shake my head, totally lost.

My parents whip their heads up again. This time, their eyes are on the door.

I look that way too.

Did someone knock?

Dad stalks over to the front door and spies through the peephole.

Mom comes up to me. She pockets her phone and signs, "I asked Sazuki if he sent a limo."

Right.

Sazuki.

He's the only guy crazy enough to send a limo to our house. But why didn't he let us know first?

Just then, my watch buzzes.

There's a new message icon.

I pull out my phone and read the text.

Rolls Royce: I thought you might need a ride.

I read and re-read that message.

Fear seizes my heart.

I take a step back.

Am I about to get kidnapped?

I sense movement at the corner of my eye. Mom and dad are waving to me. There's a woman standing in the doorway. She's wearing a sharp pantsuit and glasses. Her hair is swept back in a black bun.

"Hi, my name is Jenny." She signs deftly. "Is Yaya here?"

Dad swings around and pins me with a *what is going on* stare.

Mom signs, "Yaya, do you have something you want to tell us?"

What exactly can I tell them when I have no idea what's going on myself?

* * *

Jenny escorts me to the limo and the driver opens the door for me. He smiles when I get near and I smile back, but I'm only half-paying attention to him. My mind is busy thinking about mom and dad who *barely* let me

leave the house after I made up an excuse about getting a ride from my modeling agency.

Now, my parents will think I'm a big shot model when, in truth, I still haven't convinced my manager to book me in a serious fashion show.

I feel someone looking at me.

It's the driver.

My heart leaps out of my chest when he lifts those beautiful crisp gloves and signs, "Nice to meet you. I'm José."

I don't realize I'm sinking until Jenny wraps an arm around my bicep. José lurches forward and grabs my other side. Shakily, I catch my bearings and signal to them that I'm okay.

José releases me, but Jenny still holds on as if she doesn't believe I'll be able to walk.

"You both know ASL?" I sign, incredulous.

José nods.

With the strength of someone twice her size, Jenny hustles me into the limo. I'm scooting in when I see it.

A breakfast bar.

Trays of daintily rolled sandwiches, cut strawberries and a tumbler of orange juice wait on the interior table.

I freeze, half my bum sticking out of the car while I'm bent over the seat.

Immediately, I back out.

He's trying to poison me.

Jenny taps my shoulder to get my attention.

I twist around.

Her eyes are filled with concern. She signs worriedly, "Is something wrong?"

Yes! I'm being attacked with... kindness?

I inhale a deep breath, close my eyes, and find my emotional center.

Yaya, you're being ridiculous.

If Mr. Sullivan wanted me dead, he could have found a less flashy way than sending a limo, a driver, and an interpreter.

I slide into the limo, and Jenny joins me. As soon as she shuts the door, José takes off.

The air conditioner is blasting, and the windows are tinted. I can see the city blurring past, but no one can see me here, sitting in the lap of luxury.

A luxury I don't deserve.

Jenny offers me a plate of strawberries.

Facing her with a serious expression, I demand, "What is all this?" Rather than sign the word for 'all', I motion to the breakfast bar and the general layout of the limo. "What does Mr. Rolls Royce..." I cringe, "Mr. Sullivan want by doing this?"

She sets the strawberries down so her hands are free. "I don't know what you mean."

Honestly, I don't know what I mean either.

My brain feels like it's misfiring.

"I don't want this."

"If you're not pleased with José's service or mine, there are other interpreters waiting for—"

"Other interpreters? As in plural?"

"Mr. Sullivan hired five interpreters from our company."

"Who even *is* this guy?" I mash my lips together. "What does he want? Why is he going overboard?"

"Can I ask what you're unhappy with?"

I rub my temples, not even sure what to sign to her.

This is...

I don't...

Everywhere I go, I'm always the one who has to accommodate people.

I lipread.

I use hearing aids.

I do everything I can to make sure the hearing folks around me don't feel like I'm any less capable than they are.

But now...

My driver can sign.

I have an interpreter inside a *limo with a breakfast bar*.

And it's just... overwhelming.

Why?

Why me?

Especially when Mr. Rolls Royce should have sent a police car instead of a five-star catering service.

I type out a text to him but change my mind before sending it and turn the phone face-down. Tapping over the back, I take a few more calming breaths. Maybe this is a set up. Richard Sullivan wants to throw me off my

game. Lure me into a false sense of comfort before demanding I reveal Henry's name and address.

That's it!

He wants to appear like a good guy to me so I'll betray Henry.

What a scheming, manipulative...

This is why I don't trust billionaires unless they're married to my friends.

I read about Richard Sullivan II last night. His family's famous in the tech space. There were tons of articles about his father's contribution to major Silicone Valley All-Stars.

After his father died, Richard Sullivan became the king of the empire. Rather than taking his family's money and playing around for the rest of his life—which he totally could have done—he quadrupled their net worth, sending them into the official 'billionaire' category.

One journalist called him 'Midas Sullivan' because of his knack for finding cash cows in their infancy. I'm sure a genius investor like Richard Sullivan knows how to wine and dine his clients before breaking them completely.

Not gonna happen with me.

I sit in determined silence, arms folded over my chest. When the limo finally stops in front of a famous hiking spot, I climb out and adjust my pink blazer.

The sun glints against a high mountain.

"Up there?" I sign, arching an eyebrow at Jenny.

She nods.

My heart trips over itself, but my determination doesn't wane. Okay. So my nude kitty heels with the transparent straps were not the best choice for mountain-climbing.

So what?

I once did a charity show wearing twelve-inch astronaut heels. In the rain.

I head for the entrance to the hiking trail, but Jenny waves me down. She points to a tram that's waiting around the side of the hill. Heat blazes in my cheeks and I duck my head, scrambling over to her.

As I mount the tram, I notice the velvet ropes partitioning the ride from the rest of the general public.

Did Richard Sullivan... *rent out the mountain?*

Nerves bubble in my stomach.

I've been around billionaires. Plenty of them. All the ones I know don't flaunt their wealth. They don't act any differently than regular people, except for their extravagant vacations, catered parties, expensive clothes, giant houses, chauffeurs, live-in housekeepers, cooks, and nannies.

Fine.

So they do live differently.

But they don't... do... *this*.

I squirm as I notice the crowd of hikers who have all stopped to watch me and Jenny board a giant tram. Some shoot us hateful looks.

Of course they do.

We're two people taking a ride that could seat at least sixteen.

As the machine inches up the mountain, I fish out my phone and research Richard Sullivan again.

The first image Google presents is a close-up of a man with salt-and-pepper hair and lots of freckles.

Must be Richard Sullivan I.

I scroll down until I find images of Richard Sullivan II.

Skin fairer than porcelain. Dark hair that curls at the ends. His face is interesting. Not the rugged, square-jawed, bulging muscles of a sports model. More editorial. Like someone who'd be on the cover of *Vogue* wearing an oversized tuxedo jacket with no undershirt.

Sharp brown eyes pierce the camera. Even in a photo, he bears a lethal charisma.

I scroll away.

Every image is of him in some kind of tweed. I wonder if that's intentional or if he can't be bothered to choose a different style of clothes.

Another picture.

He smiles a lot more than men of his net worth usually do in these articles. Seems like someone who's at ease with himself. With laughter.

Would he offer mercy if I asked?

The tram is almost to the top of the mountain.

Jenny waves to me. She waits until I look at her before signing, "Are you okay?"

I lift a thumb, trying to stay calm.

The tram stops abruptly, almost hurtling me out of my seat.

We're here.

It's time to meet my debtor.

* * *

Richard Sullivan II is a work of art.

There. I said it.

Yesterday, in the darkness and the chaos and my panic-fueled, bat-swinging haze, I couldn't fully appreciate it.

But here I am.

And here he is.

And the man is beautiful.

Albeit, he's that untouchable kind of beautiful. The kind that makes you want to turn your eyes away because looking at something that exquisite feels like you snuck into a fancy museum without an invitation.

And just like priceless artwork, Richard Sullivan *looks* expensive.

Staring at him, I finally get why his particular brand of 'rich' feels different to me. Most of the wealthy men I know, except for a few, worked for their place in the top. Rags to riches. A real underdog story.

But Richard Sullivan isn't just rich. He's *rich-rich*. The kind that receives a deed to a private island in the Bahamas for his sixteenth birthday. Who rides in his grandfather's horse stable and plays non-competitive polo. Who casually talks about sitting frontside at Paris Fashion Week when he was ten like it's a jaunt to summer camp.

He's the exact kind of posh, old money, better-than-thou hearing person I despise.

But that's good news.

A guy like him wouldn't be a serial killer.

I imagine Richard Sullivan lifting me to the sky and hurtling me down the mountain as a sacrifice.

An eye for an eye.

A human for a priceless car.

I shake my head to clear it and approach the table at the center of the mountain.

Beyond us, the view is breathtaking. Clouds brushed with golden sunlight. Lush trees like a waterfall of green. An oasis in the middle of the city.

If only my knees weren't knocking together like a newborn deer, I could appreciate this experience.

I walk unsteadily forward and hold my breath when I grip the back of the chair. My rings dig into my flesh, sure to leave indents.

Rather than retreat, I soak in the pain.

Richard Sullivan is staring me down. Unwavering.

But, just like last night when he saw me with the bat, it's not anger I see in his gaze.

It's... something else.

I can't really define it, except it reminds me of the way I look at a new collection from my favorite designer. Like I can't believe something so beautiful, something so inspired, can exist on this earth.

He sobers when he notices I'm watching him. His eyes shift from me to Jenny and the two seem to have some kind of unspoken communication.

His mouth moves. I'm too far away to lipread, but I assume he's telling me to sit when his hand juts out and he points to the chair.

Richard Sullivan has a team of people standing around his end of the table. One of his men comes up and pulls out the chair closest to him, indicating I should sit next to the boss. I proceed to sit at the seat farthest away.

Sullivan's lips quirk up.

Amusement.

Does he think I'm funny?

I can't get a read on this man.

A few seconds tick by while we size each other up.

Like in the pictures, he's wearing tweed again. It should age him. There's a time and a place for such a heavy fabric. Instead, it makes him look more sophisticated. A touch of class to his rather mischievous brand of elegance.

I slide my gaze down to his arm and freeze.

There's a garish pink princess watch on his left wrist.

What on earth?

Before I can figure out why a billionaire like Richard Sullivan is wearing such a girly watch, I notice a device being placed in front of me.

Jenny comes into my line of sight and signs, "Mr. Sullivan recently bought a research facility focused on technological advancements for the

hearing impaired. This is a wired glove that can transmit sign language to a computer...”

I’m normally not impatient. One of the lessons I aced when learning ASL was keeping my eyes on the speaker. But today my eyes drop from Jenny to the gizmos on the table. They look like sci-fi rubbish.

“I’m no one’s guinea pig.” I whip my head up and stare at Richard Sullivan. He needs to know, right here, right now, that I use sign language to communicate with strangers. “Is that why you called me here? To turn me into your lab rat?”

Richard Sullivan tilts his head to the side. His eyes shift to Jenny who’s standing just beside me, blushing heavily. I hope she’s conveying my words with the right tone. If not, my body language should give it away.

I’ve gotten offers to be the representative for shady products before, but I refuse to exploit my community for a company’s gain. These products are so often pushed to market without proper research or they’re priced so high that the average folks can’t afford them. It’s ridiculous!

“You realize you’re in no position to be hostile,” Sullivan’s interpreter says. The woman’s hands move confidently. She looks as cutthroat as a lioness. “I was hoping this could be a friendly chat.”

I almost scoff.

“I’m deaf not stupid.” I crinkle my eyes at him. “I destroyed your car. I deserve to be punished. Let’s get to business so I can leave.”

He leans forward, erasing just a bit of space between us.

Immediately, the air feels charged.

“I’m really curious,” his interpreter signs, “if you’re this arrogant because of your family connections or if your attitude is a defense mechanism.”

“What. Do. You. Want?” I scrunch both hands like I’m squeezing a ball at chest-level.

His mouth moves, eyes glinting.

“Answers,” his interpreter signs.

I hold my breath.

“Are you single?”

The world flickers out of focus for a second. I blink rapidly, sure I understood wrong. Maybe his interpreter went rogue?

My eyes shoot up to Jenny.

She pulls her lips into her mouth, looking uncomfortable.

Finally, I sign, “Why is that any of your business?”

Richard Sullivan *must* be listening to Jenny interpret, and yet his eyes don’t leave mine for a second. I’ve always been taught it’s impolite to stare, but I guess that lesson wasn’t conveyed to Mr. Sullivan. Perhaps it got lost in all the millions he inherited.

Prickles of heat billow under my skin as he assesses me.

I swallow.

He smirks.

I swallow harder.

His smile gets a little wider.

I swallow again and hope he doesn’t unleash a centimeter more of his roguish grin because then I’ll be out of saliva.

Richard Sullivan speaks.

“The ruffian you brought to the wedding,” his interpreter signs, “do you have any sort of romantic relationship with him?”

Ruffian?

An undercurrent of tension sweeps through the table.

Beside me, Jenny shuffles her feet.

Behind him, his team of professionals all look down at the ground. The one at his right hand, a man with tan skin and wavy silver hair, seems especially concerned.

Sullivan turns his head slightly to the side and moves his lips.

“Everyone leave,” his interpreter signs.

The crowd moves on command. In less than a minute, we’re alone except for his assistant and the interpreters. Sullivan nods to the man who stayed behind. The assistant walks over to my side of the table and drops a binder.

Fingers trembling, I open the folder.

It’s a business proposal.

The words ‘*girlfriend*’ and ‘*services as a romantic partner*’ jumps out at me.

I whip my eyes up and find Sullivan drinking coffee calmly.

The knot in the pit of my stomach twists.

Am I being recruited for some kind of weird sexual fantasy?

My fingers ball into fists and I shoot to my feet. Sullivan remains calm and sets the coffee cup down. The wind picks up, blowing against my cheeks, but even that can’t cool me down.

“What the hell?” I sign. A finger stabs down at the binder before I rant with both hands. “I don’t care how rich you are or how much power you have. I will never trade my body for money. Never. If you want a prostitute,” I sign, my mouth pursing angrily, “look elsewhere.”

Jenny’s cheeks are two red suns when she interprets for me.

His interpreter signs, “I don’t want sex.”

“Then what?”

“I want a girlfriend.”

I stare at the interpreter’s hands for a long moment before turning my gaze back to Sullivan. His body language confuses me. His shoulders are relaxed. One leg thrown over the other. Fingers looped in the handle of his coffee cup.

Coiffed.

Statuesque.

The only sign of nerves is the tapping of his left ring finger on the back of the cup. The slight twitch in the middle of his eyebrows.

He wants something.

Badly.

Me? Or is it something else?

My heart flops against my ribs.

I slide my gaze from Sullivan’s fancy leather shoes to his fitted trousers, tweed vest, and pressed button-down.

Suspicious, I sign, “Why?”

He speaks and the woman interprets, “Why do I need a girlfriend? Or why did I choose you?”

“Both,” I sign. My eyes burn fiercely.

His soften.

“Because you owe me.”

I lift my chin, aghast and insulted. “Read my lips.” I point to my mouth. “I.” I silently form the word. “Refuse.” Throwing my thumb over my shoulder, I glare at him. “Pervert.”

Jenny cringes as she interprets.

I rip my purse from where I’d set it on the table.

“If you refuse,” his interpreter signs, “I don’t need you.”

I freeze in my tracks. Feeling like ice is sliding down my neck, I face Richard Sullivan.

He looks conflicted. His posture's straight as a pin. Chin up. Hands folded together. A man used to getting what he wants. And yet his eyes are tortured, lips pursed as if what he's doing at this very moment is detestable to him.

Not that he'll stop.

Not that he'll let the guilt, the internal battle, consume him.

His mouth opens.

The interpreter signs, "I have evidence of your dear friend destroying my car."

Richard Sullivan nods to his assistant. A moment later, an envelope slides across the table. I open it and horror floods me when I see a picture of Henry, mid-swing.

It's suddenly hard to breathe.

His interpreter signs, "Like I said, this is a business deal. I'm in need of the appearance of a girlfriend."

"For what?"

He arches a brow. I glance at his interpreter who signs, "You have to agree before I can give you the details."

"A girlfriend. That's all?" I eye him suspiciously. "This isn't... a sexual relationship?"

Amusement again.

I can't look at him anymore and I'm glad to look at the interpreter's hands.

"I don't want sex," Jenny interprets this time. Her cheeks are bright. "Not unless you want it."

"That'll never happen."

His lips hitch up. Jenny's hands move deftly. Her expression still has that slight look of discomfort as she signs, "Draw whatever lines you want. I won't cross them. I promise I'll respect you."

"You already aren't respecting me."

A line forms in his forehead. I'm stunned that he looks genuinely troubled.

Damn him.

I have no other options.

He has me backed into a corner. There's nowhere to run. Not if I want to protect Henry.

Inhaling, I make a choice I know I'll regret. "Fine."

His eyebrows lift.

“But I want a contract.” I tap two fingers into the middle of my hand. “I will stipulate everything. Define my boundaries. If you so much as breathe too hard on me, I want this agreement annulled.”

He watches Jenny for a moment and chuckles.

“I want in writing that you will not pursue Henry if things go south.” I narrow my gaze. A not-so-subtle hint that I won’t be trifled with. “No loopholes. No fine print. You let Henry go scotch-free.”

He nods.

A stillness fills the air as we size each other up again. I break the staredown first and pick up my pen, scribbling my name on the dotted line.

Why does it feel like I just made a deal with the devil?

I stuff my unease deep inside and push the contract forward. “There. You got yourself a contract girlfriend. What’s my first assignment? A gala? An interview?”

I imagine he’ll want me hanging from his arm for the public. Perhaps a PR stunt? To increase his diversity quota by dating a black, deaf woman? Or perhaps to hide a lover that his family wouldn’t accept?

Sullivan leans forward and moves his mouth.

Jenny interprets words I’d never expect.

“We’re going to rehab.”

CHAPTER 4

OceanofPDF.com

the plan

DARE

She's doing it again.

That thing where she takes my breath away without even trying.

My fingers tighten over the contract we both signed and I pretend to peruse it when, in truth, I'm trying to regain my bearings.

I don't screw up business meetings.

Inside or outside of the boardroom, I'm in control.

Once a contract is on the table or on a pool chair or a damn hospital cot, wherever I'm negotiating, it's my territory.

My domain.

Except for today.

Because one look into Yaya's deep brown eyes and I just can't keep a single train of thought.

She caps the fountain pen and wraps slim fingers around a coffee mug. I watch her bend her head slightly to sip the coffee, perfect, maroon-toned lips pursing over the cup.

Sensual without even trying.

My blood runs hot.

She pushes back a lock of her long, straight brown hair that's been curled into loose waves. Her jacket sits over a simple white blouse. Slender legs go on forever beneath a short skirt that's just begging to be ripped off her luscious body.

She's... magnificent.

The human embodiment of elegance. A perfect song. A sweet dream, one where—if you were ever woken, you'd immediately close your eyes again, desperate to revisit it.

Yaya glances past her interpreter and finds me watching her. Just like earlier, her throat bobs, a nervous swallow. She's uncomfortable with my scrutiny.

But I don't know how to do anything but look at her.

Study her.

Want her.

My body aches so hard when she licks her lips, I have to adjust the way I'm sitting.

Two hundred push-ups.

And maybe sky-diving off the mountain to get to the car.

That's what I'll need to get my sweeping, irrational lust under control.

Since those aren't options, I inhale a deep breath.

"Mr. Sullivan."

I glance up.

Jenny, one of the interpreters, clears her throat.

I immediately shift my attention back to Yaya, watching the way her hands move. It's lyrical, almost poetic, like she's privy to a rhythm, a piece of music, that belongs to her alone. Every so often, her fingers will brush her blouse and rustle the fabric. I lean closer, eager to tap into that frequency, to study her song, her language.

"You promised you would give more details when the papers were signed," Jenny says.

"Yes," I answer, keeping my eyes on the woman across the table. "Yaya and I will discuss in my car. Alone."

I wait for Jenny to interpret, excitement—no, near giddiness—rising in me as I anticipate Yaya's response.

Having an interpreter is a necessary step until I can learn ASL. I'm impatient for Yaya and I to communicate without another person present but, until that day, there is one benefit to the delay in translation.

I get to observe every expression that flicks across her face.

Like now.

Dark brows heft to the center of her forehead. A cute nose wrinkles as her vibrant eyes simmer in disdain. She looks at me and her frown grows,

inclining downward by the slowest of degrees.

She doesn't like me.

Which is unfortunate.

But temporary.

I have no plans of remaining on her bad side.

Yaya signs and, though I don't understand ASL, her face reveals her disagreement.

She's very animated. Her expressions communicate for her, almost as loudly as if she spoke. Which is something I should have expected. During my research last night, I read that ASL includes body language as well as facial expressions.

I wonder... what was it like growing up deaf? Why does she use ASL when she has the ability to speak? How did she decide to become a model?

The folder under my hands has every scrap of information on her, from the day she drew her first breath to her first parking ticket to her first lover. But the words parading on that page don't tell her real story.

I want to know everything about her. All that makes her tick.

"Are we leaving here... alone?" Jenny interprets.

Horror is written on Yaya's face.

Adorable.

Did she think we would fake a relationship and yet never be alone together?

One corner of my lips hitches up. I stand, button my jacket and motion to Mosely.

"I don't think this is a good idea," my assistant says.

"Hm."

"You've just met her. She..." Mosely glances across the table at the fuming Yaya, "doesn't seem like the cuddly type."

If she was, she probably wouldn't have caught my eye.

"I understand you like a challenge, sir. She is certainly *different* from other girls."

I arch an eyebrow at that.

"But I don't think meeting Lucy this soon is wise. Your sister will see right through you."

"Let me worry about that." I hold a hand out. "Tablet."

Mosely sighs with his whole chest and slips the device into my hand.

I beckon Yaya.

Her fingers curl into fists on the table and she remains seated. Her head tilts up in challenge.

Interesting.

She's at my mercy. Where does her confidence come from? It delights me.

I lift my fingers. With calm movements, I sign the word for 'please'.

Her eyes widen. She pulls her lower lip between her teeth and I stow it away as an expression I want to see, to be the cause of, again. Her eyes close for a second. Is she coaching herself, reminding herself what's at stake?

I memorize the way sunlight plays on her skin. The way the wind blows her hair back and forth. The way her forehead smooths out as she comes to some kind of conclusion.

The signed contract is safely in the binder Mosely's gripping.

She's mine. On paper.

There's a long way to go until she's mine completely, but even this tiny step forward feels electrifying, exciting.

Yaya pushes herself up as if she's carrying a great weight on her back and steps toward me.

I speak to Mosely without taking my eyes off her. "Tell José to take Jenny first. I'll escort Miss Williams to the car."

"I'm assuming I'm not to join."

"If you see my head smash into the window, it would probably be a good time to intervene."

Mosely snorts.

I gesture for Yaya to walk beside me. She moves stiffly, clearly uncomfortable, and yet her stride remains confident. Perhaps a by-product of her occupation.

We get into the tram together and Yaya stares straight ahead, ignoring me.

Mosely's warning whispers through my head.

Lucy will see right through you.

I can't have that.

For many reasons.

Taking out my tablet, I write:

Are you comfortable?

Her eyes flick over the words and then snap to me. A glimmer of a frown taints her soft lips. She nods tightly.

I return my attention to the view. The city glints in the distance, spotless after being washed down by a heavy rain a few days ago. Puffy clouds taint an azure sky.

I'm surprised when that sky is disrupted by a phone screen being shoved in my face.

Who's in rehab?

I glance at Yaya and then at her cell phone.

Ah.

So her curiosity forced her to speak to me.

I type and show her my screen.

My sister. She was in a car accident last night.

A glint of surprise fills her eyes and then it's gone. She pulls her phone close. Her thumbs move quickly over the keyboard. The line of concentration between her brows is going to be one of my favorite things.

Yaya shows me the phone.

What happened? Is she okay?

There it is. The kindness she showed last night.

Silence falls, but it's not unpleasant. She studies me while I'm studying her. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say I'm admiring her.

Investing is a ruthless affair. Business is about serving people, while also serving the bottom line, and empathy is a piece that never quite fits in the puzzle. Not unless it's for publicity. Or tax breaks.

True compassion has been beaten out of me, forged away in the fire of indifference.

The world is a hard place. A cold place.

But, in Yaya, her kindness is a fire burning through her skin.

There was a part of me hoping the connection I felt with her last night was a fluke. A biological response to the weather, to the stars passing over the moon or some other astrological nonsense.

If no proper explanation could be found then, at the very least, I was hoping that her effect on me would be faint at minimum and eventually wane until it became non-existent.

Unfortunately, the more time I spend around her, the more these strange feelings seem to grow.

Perhaps I should get myself admitted along with my sister.

Yaya shows me her phone again.

You don't have to tell me if it's private.

It is private. I paid an insane amount of money to keep it private. But I suddenly don't want to keep secrets from her.

My sister drove drunk and rammed her car into a building.

Yaya's eyes widen as she makes an audible gasp.

Was anyone hurt?

No. Not unless you count the salon window.

That's good.

I don't want to lose my momentum, so I type another question.

Is Yaya short for something?

She shakes her head, types and shows me the message.

It's African. It means strength.

Interesting.

She gives me a prim, uncomfortable smile and follows me to the parked car where she stares steadily out the window again.

I'm debating how to attempt another conversation when my watch begins to blink red.

That's happened twice today. Should I be concerned?

Yaya taps on her phone.

What's with the watch?

My niece won two of them from a technology fair at school. She asked me to wear one while she wears the other.

Like a friendship bracelet?

Yaya seems amused.

I guess you can say that.

She cuts eye contact again, but this time she doesn't stare through the window like she's plotting an escape.

To my surprise, she shows me her notes app.

Yaya wasn't the name my parents chose. I changed it when I decided to model.

I knew that already, but I'm pleased that she'd tell me. So pleased that I want to know the designer she's wearing right now so I can buy her the entire spring catalogue.

I type instead:

Dare.

She looks up inquiringly.

I add:

My friends call me Dare.

Yaya laughs. It's silent, breathy. But it's glorious.

How do I make her laugh again?

A shadow appears at the window before I can solve that problem. Mosely. He's peeking in, eyebrows knitted.

Ignore him, I type.

Your friend seems to think I'll hurt you.

I chuckle softly. Would you?

I haven't decided yet.

Her cheekiness brings another smile to my lips.

Even if you decide to hurt me, I'd let you.

I pull back before she reads the note, realizing I need to tread lightly before I scare her. Deleting all the words I've written so far, I start fresh.

We don't have much time left. Let's talk about how we met.

She skims my words quickly and, when she faces me again, I see a hint of sheepishness. It's but a glimmer, quickly cloaked by a defensive frown.

I'm assuming you don't want to tell your sister we were strangers until less than twenty hours ago.

No.

And that I destroyed your car.

On the contrary, I want you to tell her exactly that.

Her mouth opens. Another gasp of surprise.

I type: But we'll adjust the timeline a bit.

The timeline. Not the circumstances?

Exactly.

You are a very strange man.

If she knew how obsessed I already am with her, she would find a darker description than ‘strange’.

Wouldn't it be better if we met the normal way?

And what is the normal way?

She shrugs. Pauses. Starts typing again. Her reply takes so long I find myself craning my neck to see over her phone screen. Her eyes jut up sharply and I revert back in my seat like a scolded schoolboy.

The air conditioner is turning cold. Is she warm enough? I adjust the dials.

Mosely is back. He's peeking into Yaya's window this time. The silence must be concerning to my assistant. That and the time we're taking. Since we're going back and forth exchanging messages on our devices, the length of my discussion with Yaya is twice as long.

Again, I remind myself that this method won't last. I'm determined to learn Yaya's language.

She finally shows her phone screen to me.

Normal people meet when they run into each other in a coffee shop. The girl spills coffee on the guy and offers to pay for dry cleaning. The guy nervously asks for her number instead. They go on dates. They start texting. Eventually, they share their first kiss in his car after he drives her home. He asks her to be his girlfriend. She says yes. See? Normal.

Interesting. Spilled coffee? A fumbling, nervous suitor? Texting?
Wholesome dates?

She's a romantic.

I like it.

It sounds nothing like the situation that applies to us, but it's as sweet as she is.

Her message continues.

Or, you know, we can say we met on a dating app.

I smile at that one.

Okay. We met online. But my sister, Lucy, is very sharp. She won't believe if it's too much of a lie.

There it is. Two lines in her forehead. Like clockwork.

I take advantage of her thoughtful pause and type my own message.

How many dates?

She gives me a confused look.

How many dates before the coffee shop couple had their first kiss?

The moment she reads my message, her lips revert into her mouth and her eyelashes flutter.

So easily flustered.

If Yaya has any experience with dating and intimacy, it seems rather limited. A kiss is hardly anything to get so shy about.

Or perhaps I'm the one making her shy?

The thought pleases me.

I have a question.

I notice she completely ignored my note about the kiss and, before I can point that out, Mosely knocks on the window.

"Sir, we should get moving."

"Just a minute, Mosely," I say.

He retreats immediately.

Yaya's eyes narrow, and I wonder if I've upset her.

She erases everything she's written and types again. Waiting for her to reveal her phone to me is an exercise in patience.

You don't seem like a man who asks for things. Why did you memorize the sign for 'please'?

I could tell her that I also memorized 'hello', 'goodbye' and 'nice to meet you', but this isn't what she's asking.

The phone clacks with each tap of my thumb on the screen.

Because I'd like to try.

Try what?

She's leaning forward, waiting with lips slightly parted to read my response. I shorten the distance between us, offering my phone for her perusal.

Asking nicely for what I want before I have it.

Her head lifts and she realizes how close we are. For one, exhilarating moment, our breaths mingle as we both inhale.

She scoots back first.

Enough, Dare.

I wind the window down.

Mosely pounces as if he'd been waiting for any sign of life.

"Is everything alright?" His gaze trounces, not so subtly, to Yaya.

"Let's head out now."

Yaya keeps her eyes on the passing scenery as we take off. She's staring with so much concentration, I suspect she's trying to phase through the window. At the very least, she's eager to get away from me. If she flattens herself any closer to the door, she'll be part human, part pancake.

I let her be, content to simply sit beside her.

Everything is going better than expected.

She signed the contract, although I had to blackmail her just a tiny bit. An unpleasant moment all around. But despite our rocky start, I sense she's curious about me too. She even observed enough about me to guess I rarely need to say 'please'.

I don't.

But I also meant it when I told her I'd ask first.

This feeling is different. It's precious. Delicate. Important.

My approach has to be different to protect it.

Yaya waves her phone at me.

Before we meet your sister, can we stop somewhere first?

Does she have any idea how much I want to please her?

I say what I will always say from now on when she asks for something.
“Yes.”

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CHAPTER 5

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the challenge

DARE

The Whispering Meadows Rehabilitation Center is a lightly cloaked five-star resort.

Albeit, one that offers top-tier psychological treatment.

Forbids its guests from using their cell phones without permission.

And forces everyone to dress in the same drab white robes or thick jumpers.

So... not exactly a five-star resort in function.

But the view rivals the most luxurious hotels, boasting a splendid display of the ocean that ripples in glassy, blue delight.

"I'm glad you're here." The nurse in the smart grey uniform walks briskly. Her thick white pumps clack on the floor, a steady percussion. "Miss Richards was not particularly cooperative with her session today."

"Lucy only believes she needs help when she's facing the immediate consequences of her actions. Give her a day to sleep on it, and she'll forget all the trouble she caused."

I wish my sister wasn't so predictable. It's tiring see-sawing between her feigned repentance and her next-day memory erasure. Her ability to invent excuses for why she doesn't need help is legendary. It's a family curse, and one I'd probably wrestle with more if I had an addiction to anything other than work.

We turn a corner and step into a large sunroom with a garden that probably costs thousands to maintain.

“We’re only at the start line,” the nurse says. “With your sister, I mean.”

“It’s the hardest part. Starting. You’ll have to convince her she has a problem before she’ll fix it.”

The nurse clears her throat, eyes glinting in excitement.

I guess she likes a challenge.

On that we can relate.

We continue across the room until I realize I’m walking alone. Yaya has drawn back to absorb herself into my team—Mosely, a trusted bodyguard from Clay Bolton’s security firm, and Jenny.

“Is something wrong?” I ask when Yaya gets closer.

Yaya shakes her head before Jenny can complete the interpretation.

I set my fingers against the small of her back, noticing her little flinch.

Something *is* wrong.

I remove my hand and study her. There are no lines between her forehead. Instead, she’s got her mouth open and she’s breathing deeply.

Nerves.

But why, when she was so confident before?

I glance at Jenny, decide I want this moment to remain between me and Yaya and whip out my cell phone.

Typing, I show her the message.

Would you like a minute before we meet Lucy?

She gives me a grateful look and nods enthusiastically.

“This way.” I gesture to one of the hallways off-shooting from the sunroom.

The entire team starts to follow, but I flick my fingers.

Mosely nods and gestures to Jenny. The two stay behind. My security follows from a respectful distance.

Once we’re in the brightly lit hallway, Yaya steps away from me and continues to take deep breaths.

I give her the space she needs.

A few minutes later, she starts signing.

I stare in total confusion.

She only gets a couple words in before she realizes I don't understand and fishes for her phone.

My lips inch up as she types furiously.

Trust shimmers in the air between us.

Not a lot, but at least it's not as frigid as before. I don't know what made her thaw. The princess watch? Admitting I need her to meet my sister in rehab? The fact that I haven't backed her up against a wall and pushed her skirt up like I so desperately want to?

Hold your horses, Dare.

Yaya not seeing me as the villain in her story is a good thing. Right now, we're partners. We're on the same side... ish.

Are you sure this is going to work?

Of course. I type back. Lucy is going to love you.

I'm not worried about that.

Then what are you worried about?

The hand gripping her cell phone falls limply to her side. She opens her mouth like she's trying to decide if she should use her voice or not.

The truth is there.

Right on her face.

I see it because I'm looking.

Because I *want* to know.

I want to know *her*.

And I always get what I want.

Slowly, I wrap a hand around her wrist. Her skin is soft to the touch.
Warm. Her pulse hammers against my fingertips.

Yaya pulls her arm away, but I've gotten what I came for.
Her cell phone is in my grip now.

You don't have to use your voice.

Her eyes are wide. Gleaming with shock. Then her whole body starts to deflate.

I can't stop watching her. She's like an open book. My fingers itch to skim down the spine, inhaling the words, sliding my thumb under the slit of the pages. Turning. Turning. Turning.

But I never want to reach the end.

I can speak. If I have to.

Do you want to?

She looks away.

I type firmly.

You don't have to. You don't have to be anything other than what you are.

Her eyelashes flicker.

A beat passes as I think about how to ease her fear.

Jenny will interpret. I can handle everything else.

Yaya takes the phone from me.

Will your sister believe?

Of course she'll believe...

Before I can finish, Yaya snatches the phone again.

Will she believe you're in love with a deaf person?

I read the message and then look at her. Eyebrows slashed over light brown eyes. Fingers tightened into fists. Jaw so tense her profile looks carved from black diamonds.

The Yaya I remember from last night would have found a bat and beaten in my sister's window to prove a point, not stand immobile in fear at the mere thought of this challenge.

She's tightly-held anxiety. Stiff limbs. Shaken confidence.

Will she believe you're in love with a deaf person?

As I study Yaya, I get the feeling that I'm missing something. Since I've met her, she's shown no indication that her deafness causes her frustration. If anything, she seems to thrive on the difference. On her uniqueness.

So then...

Is this all because she truly believes a deaf person and a hearing person can't be in love? Beyond the ruse. In real life. Is the concept so unbelievable, so distasteful to her that it's causing a nervous breakdown?

Lips going firm, I step forward.

She skitters back like I'm danger personified.

Back.

Back.

Until she slams against the wall and lets loose a breath of shock.

I press one hand to the left of her and the other slightly above her head. Leaning down until I'm close enough to feel the swell of her chest against my ribs and the warmth of her thigh against my leg, I close my eyes. Breathe her in.

Her chest keeps beating into mine.

One pump.

Two.

The tension in the air snaps tight, a fishing line about to snap.

I trap her, but I don't touch her. I promised her I wouldn't, even if my self-restraint is flying out the window. Even if her lips are close enough to steal a kiss. Even if hormones that I haven't felt since my teenage years are buzzing like a glitching computer program.

Now, the suddenly insatiable beast ticking under my skin gloats, *push up her skirt, touch her, feel her, make her beg.*

I open my eyes before that voice can get any louder.

Yaya is peering at me, observing.

And I realize, just as I've been watching her closely, she's been watching me.

I stare at her, silently communicating my thoughts. *Lucy will believe.*

Inching back, I reach for the phone in my pocket so I can type the sentiment. Yaya suddenly grabs my hand. The feel of her delicate fingers in mine makes my chest rearrange.

The air... glitters.

Holy crap.

Did Yaya slip drugs in my water when I wasn't looking?

She guides my hand to her face and smiles, knocking my heart out of my body and sending a flush of heat straight up my neck. The very neck that she wraps her hands around. With a surprising amount of urgency, she pulls me down until our foreheads touch.

I'm wide-eyed. Spellbound.

But she's primly calculating when she darts her eyes to the very corners, indicating something to the left of us.

One twist of my head and I notice the reason. My sister is hunkering in the mouth of the hallway.

Yaya grabs my chin between her long, painted fingernails and urges my face to hers *look at ME*.

And I obey.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Lucy’s voice chimes.

Yaya releases my neck, but I keep a hold of her hand. I promised I wouldn’t initiate the touching, but since she initiated this one first, I’m not letting go. She doesn’t seem uncomfortable with the handholding at all as she graces Lucy with another bright smile.

My sister, sans-makeup, looks unusually pale. She points. “Is this your...” At my chin-dip, Lucy pounces on Yaya. “Oh my goodness. You’re so *beautiful!*”

Yaya maintains her smile, nodding along as if she hears every word. I wonder how often she has to bluff her way through conversations. Has she ever found herself agreeing to things just because she wants the conversation to end?

Thankfully, Mosely—drawn by the sound of Lucy’s voice—rushes into the hallway with our interpreters in tow.

My sister draws both of Yaya’s hands into her own—earning a dark look from me. How dare Lucy steal that precious hand?

Pulling Yaya’s fists up to her chin, she coos, “You must be an actress. Oh! Or a model. Are you a model? Is she a model, Dare?”

“Geez, Luce. Take a breath,” I mutter, still annoyed about her hand thievery.

“Oh shoo!” Lucy bats me away when I try to steal Yaya’s hand back. “She looks younger than you. Much younger, Dare.”

“Really? I didn’t notice.”

“How scandalous.” Lucy flaps eyelashes that were at least two times thicker last night. “You’re so stodgy. I didn’t think you were capable.”

I’m still deciding whether to be offended by that when Yaya slips her hand out of Lucy’s.

My sister’s jaw drops when Yaya signs to her.

Jenny moves forward. “Sorry. I was standing behind, so I didn’t see that.” She signs to Yaya. “Can you repeat?”

Lucy clutches the top of her robe. “D-Dare,” she whispers loudly, “what’s going on?”

“Luce, I’d like to formally introduce you to my girlfriend Yaya.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Jenny interprets, her tight, uncomfortable smile the complete opposite of Yaya’s confident smirk.

Yaya hands my sister the bouquet we stopped to purchase earlier. I’d handed it to Mosely for safekeeping when we left the car.

“T-thank you.” Lucy’s head swivels between Yaya and the interpreter. “I’m sorry. Who am I to address?”

“You look at Yaya. Or wherever you would normally look when you’re speaking to someone. Just act normally, Luce. Jenny is Yaya’s interpreter.”

Yaya signs.

Jenny interprets, “Mr. Sullivan has mentioned nothing but good things about you.”

“Oh, well...” Lucy stammers. “That’s a lie if I’ve ever heard one.”

A nurse pushes a tray along the hallway and bucks into our group. She watches us like we’re re-enacting the season finale of her favorite reality TV show.

“Luce, how about you show us your room?” I suggest.

“Yes, yes.” My sister gulps.

I spread my arm, encompassing Yaya into my side so we can walk together. She’s a little stiff and I’m not sure if it’s because she’s uncomfortable acting like a couple or if she’s offended by Lucy’s reaction.

I wish I could ask her if she’s okay, but I doubt I’d be able to whip out my phone right now. My sister would extend her neck and read every word.

“Right this way.” Lucy ushers us into a room that’s the size of a penthouse suite with a richly decorated salon. She motions to me. “Dare, can you help me select the tea? I don’t know which Yaya would like.”

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Yaya.

Jenny interprets for me and I wait for my new—I’m somehow reluctant to think of her as fake—girlfriend to nod.

When she does, I give her an encouraging smile and follow my sister to the kitchenette.

“Okay.” Lucy leans over the counter, a hand to her head, as if I’m the one stressing her out. “Okay, Dare...”

I fold my arms over my chest, waiting for her grand speech.

“Look,” her eyes burst open and latch onto me, “I know you love Talia. I know you want to keep her with you while I’m in this hellhole.” She gestures to the gold-rimmed fan above and the expensive coffee lining the

shelves behind her. “And, honestly, I *wish* you were ready to watch my daughter. I really do. It would have been the best option.”

“Then it’s agreed. Talia will stay with me.”

“Wait.” She hooks her fingers in the crook of my elbow. “Dare, what I’m saying is...” She licks her lips and darts a look at Yaya. “Hiring a deaf person just so I won’t be able to talk to her and find out if she’s really your girlfriend—”

I bark out a laugh. “Come on, Luce.”

“You don’t have to be this devious!”

“First of all, I did not ‘hire a deaf girl so she couldn’t talk to you’. Yaya is more than capable of communicating. That way might be different than ours, but it’s still a language.”

“Dare.”

“And second,” I shake my head, perplexed, “I don’t understand how it happened, but there is no pretense on my end. I have never felt this way about a woman in my life. Ever.”

Lucy studies me, her eyes shifting between mine like a treasure hunter scouring the remains of a pirate ship.

When my sister opens her mouth next, questions pour out, rapid-fire.

“How long have you been dating?”

“Not long. We connected online at first. We met in person recently.”

“Who made the first move?”

“I did.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

“Do you know sign language?”

“For now, we talk like we did online. Through text. I’m learning sign language in my spare time.”

“You are?”

“I am.”

“Since when do you meet people online?”

“I’m a man. I get lonely.” I shuffle my feet. “Do you have to ask?”

“I’m just saying... there are thousands of women who would love to spend time with you. You didn’t have to—”

“To what?” I dare her to say anything negative about Yaya.

She tries to smile and fails. “Find *companionship* online.”

“Online, no one knows who I am. I can lose my last name. Lose our family shadow. Be myself. It’s the best place to meet someone.”

“How do you know she doesn’t just like you for your money?”

I recall Yaya calling me a pervert on the mountain and insisting she’d never sell her body for money. “She’s not that kind of woman.”

“What kind of woman is she?”

I rub my bottom lip with my forefinger, my stare thoughtful. “The kind of woman who knows her worth, her value. Who doesn’t apologize for who she is. Someone who puts others before themselves. Kind. Beautiful.”

My sister stares at me in horror.

“What?”

“Oh my gosh.”

“Whaaat?”

“You like her more than she likes you.”

I frown.

“You’re so... obvious.”

“I like obvious.”

“Obvious is desperate.”

“Desperate? I prefer the term ‘focused’.”

“Is that why you sent the limo?”

“You know I sent a limo?”

Lucy opens her mouth and snaps it shut.

“Were you spying on me, Big Sis?”

“Double-checking,” Lucy sputters.

“I’m hurt.” I’m not.

I knew Lucy would be watching my every move to see if I really had a girlfriend. My sister might act ditzy, but she’s got the same Sullivan blood running through her veins as I do. We’re highly suspicious people who research heavily before investing in anything.

It’s why I sent the limo to Yaya’s apartment and made the effort to meet Yaya on a mountain top.

Lucy has her people in the company.

I wanted her to see it all from their perspective and be convinced.

“Did you move to this city for her?” Lucy questions.

“I’d call it fate that I moved to her city. But she’s a model so she’s rarely in town. It’s unlikely we would have crossed paths.”

She bobs her head, digesting my words.

“As you can see,” I lean against the counter and cross one ankle in front of the other, “I have a reason to stay put. I have a girlfriend I want to spend all my time with. A relationship that I don’t want to lose. I’m not jet setting for months at a time anymore. I’m reliable enough to watch Talia until you’re better.”

“I’m better.”

“Until they let you out of jail then.”

“We’ll see about that. I have my own ways of confirming what I want to know.” After spitting those ominous words, Lucy strides back to Yaya.

Jenny jumps to her feet when she sees us coming.

Yaya tilts her face up, smiling uncertainly. Her outward look of calm is starting to crack at the edges. I can see the tense line of her shoulders and the way she digs her fingers into her purse.

Should I run away with her? Make an excuse and drag her out of here before Lucy can sink her claws in?

It was probably too ambitious of me to sweep Yaya straight into a meeting with my sister.

It’s *the* most important meeting on my docket.

Because this meeting determines whether I can keep Talia for three months.

And all Yaya had in preparation was a rushed contract on a mountain, a five-minute exchange of texts, and the threat of her best friend getting crushed with debt if she fails.

I lengthen my steps in the hopes of overtaking Lucy and getting to Yaya first.

Unfortunately, my watch decides now is the time to start blinking.

“The hell?” I grunt.

Lucy tilts her head in confusion.

Yaya glances at the watch and smirks.

I smack the darn thing to shut it off.

“Why does it keep doing that?” I growl at Lucy.

“I don’t know.” She reels back, nose pinched like I stepped in dung. “Did Talia give you that ugly thing?”

I shrug.

My niece spent the night in my condo, and I couldn’t exactly tell her no when she offered me this gift. Especially since she wasn’t reacting at all to the news that her mom would be gone for three months.

“Anyway,” Lucy sings and tosses her hair over her shoulder. “Back to the matter. Yaya was it?” My sister’s smile is as sharp as a predator’s.

A foreboding feeling slips through me.

“So...” Lucy drapes herself into a chair and rests an elbow on the couch back. “Are you really dating my brother?”

Yaya waits for Jenny’s interpretation and nods.

“Is it serious?”

Yaya signs and Jenny speaks. “It is.”

“Then,” Lucy drops her lounging facade and leans forward, a shark that smells blood, “tell me one thing about Dare that only the people closest to him would know.”

My eyes bug.

Yaya’s eyebrows twitch in surprise.

Jenny swallows hard.

Mosely wrings his hands.

And I get the same tightness in my throat as the day my first business deal crashed and burned.

We. Are. Screwed.

CHAPTER 6

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chai interventions

YAYA

People with power have this uncanny ability to make others feel small. Through no fault of their own. By merely existing. They emit waves of confidence that seem to debilitate everyone. Like a bomb cutting you at the knees with every pulse.

I saw it in Richard Sullivan. Dripping elegance. Blinding charisma.

Something so arresting.

Shiny.

Calling.

Dangerous.

Because the rich, this class, this highest of the one percent, what they have is poison.

It's pretty so we want to be close to it even if it harms us.

It's seductive, so we keep drinking even if we choke.

I have friends from that class now, thanks to my sister. And I've been able to separate their money, their power, their privilege, from who they are as people. An inventor. A businessman. A father. A husband.

But here, in this hospital room that looks like an HGTV house reveal, there's no separating the power from the person. Especially when I stare into Lucy Sullivan's pretty blue eyes and see the firmness behind her gentle, coached smile.

That stare is expectant. Eyebrows raised. Head cocked slightly to the side. She's so... pretty, her skin primped and tucked. *I* have more wrinkles than she does. When she folds her arms over her chest, the silk of her robe ripples like a wave on a still lake.

This is a woman who ran her car into the side of a building. Something that should have made the local paper at least. Possibly the statewide news.

She should be in handcuffs.

A courtroom. A jury. A sentence.

Three months in prison.

Not three months in a fancy rehab with a five-star buffet and a room the size of my entire apartment.

This is the difference between us and the people with power.

Not that they don't make the same mistakes.

But that the consequences of their mistakes and ours are different.

On this principle alone, I want to hate Lucy Sullivan.

I want to despise her and ridicule her and possibly report her to a gossip blog that would happily slurp up the news of a billionaire's sister carelessly destroying public property.

But I can't.

Because this is a job.

And impressing her, getting her to believe me, to *fawn* over me, is my first challenge as Richard Sullivan's fake girlfriend.

I refuse to fail.

If I do, Henry pays the price.

Lucy turns her head to Jenny, a question in her gaze.

Why isn't she answering?

Did you inform her of what I said?

Is she really dating my brother or am I being conned?

I paste a smile on my lips, square my shoulders and sign, "I can do it."

Jenny voices and then shoots me an 'are you going to be okay?' look.

Richard Sullivan strides across the room. His jacket flutters handsomely with every swing of his arms, as if he's creating his own wind. He really should consider modeling. I bet he'd get booked by a couture designer in a quarter of the time it took me to get my first Macy's catalogue.

He leans toward his sister.

Jenny interprets their conversation.

"Lucy, this is insulting."

“I’m getting to know her.”

“You’re challenging me.”

“What are you so afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid. I’m offended.”

“By what?”

“The fact that you don’t trust me.”

“Of course I don’t trust you. You think you can announce a relationship out of nowhere and expect me not to ask questions?”

“Didn’t your spying earlier convince you? These questions are a waste of time.”

“I’m going to have a chat with your ‘girlfriend’? Butt out or leave the room.”

The expression Jenny makes along with the sign for ‘girlfriend’ explains what kind of tone Lucy was using when she spoke.

That’s not good.

I place a hand on Richard Sullivan’s arm. He twists to look at me and I shake my head imperceptibly.

Lucy’s lips curl up and she rattles off something.

I look to Jenny.

“Are you finally ready to tell me the truth, young lady?”

“The truth is... Richard,” I falter and then finger spell ‘Dare’ as Richard had mentioned this was his nickname, “and I have nothing to hide.”

While Jenny interprets, I glance up at Dare. He’s got a calm, non-plussed expression. Our gazes meet and his eyes shift to that softly intense look from earlier.

A shiver runs down my spine.

The tension between us is...

Unexpected.

But I need to focus.

He is a job and whatever point he was trying to prove in the hallway has nothing to do with reality.

Do I think hearing and deaf people can have chemistry?

Of course I do.

That was never a question and, even if it was, we’re proof, aren’t we?

But chemistry can be manufactured.

I’ve done my share of sexy shoots with male models. Co-workers. Strangers. I touched their bodies, all slicked with oil. I curled over them in

lingerie and breathed out into their lips like I would die if they didn't touch me.

Chemistry.

It's easy.

But for the long haul? Chemistry putters out. I've seen it happen across the modeling world. Two beautiful people who explore their insane sexual tension only to find out they're toxic as people, toxic as a couple and maybe it was better if they'd left all that crackling tension for the cameras.

Sullivan and I, well...

There is no 'Sullivan and I' beyond this contractual agreement.

Dragging in a deep breath, I tap my nails against my leg and let the steady drumming calm me.

What is one thing only the people closest to Dare would know?

"Dare is very kind." Does handcuffing me to his life via a contract count as 'kind'? "He loves the little girl who gave him that watch." Come to think of it, I never found out that girl's name. "And he likes cars. Rolls Royce in particular."

After my words are interpreted, Lucy starts to laugh.

Dare stands a little straighter.

There is a ton of anxious energy shooting from Mosely's body.

I guess I gave the wrong answer.

Lucy shakes her head.

Jenny interprets, "Everyone who's read a simple magazine would know that Dare is kind. He gives so much to charity. And Talia? Well, everything he's doing right now is for her."

My left eye twitches.

Talia? What exactly does she mean that he's doing everything for Talia?

Dare frowns and says something to Lucy that has her rolling her eyes.

"I won't stop," Jenny signs, "Dare, the girl you hired obviously read the bio-profile you provided her. I'm sure she could rattle off your birthday, your favorite drink, your star sign. Just like your entire harem of female fans could do. This proves nothing."

I shift in my seat. Richard was right when he said his sister was too sharp to believe a lie. I need to give her more.

"I wasn't finished," I sign.

The interpreter voices for me and everyone in the room pins me down with their stare.

“What I mentioned was what the world would think of Dare.” I give Sullivan a loving look, perfected by many hours spent in the mirror researching how to flirt with a camera. “But that’s the surface level.”

“*What are you doing?*” Dare’s widening eyes seem to say.

“*Relax. I got this.*” I try to communicate in return.

He nods as if he heard my thoughts and then falls into the chair beside me, an arm over the back of it. His calm acceptance stuns me. I thought he’d be gripping me to his side to still my hands or changing the subject desperately. I’d thought he’d try to control me, bark at me, act entitled to my thoughts and actions. Instead, he seems to... I don’t know... trust me.

Who exactly is this man?

Putting that thought away for later, I focus on Lucy. She tilts her chin up, an eyebrow arched. Her forehead shows no signs that it’s made a movement. It’s almost unnatural the way she doesn’t wrinkle at all.

Focus.

What have I observed of Richard Sullivan that can convince this woman I know him intimately? It’s not like I’ve seen Richard without his clothes off to check for hidden tattoos.

If only we’d spent that ‘get to know you’ time in the car naked.

My body flushes with heat, my mind flooding with unbidden images of him whipping his shirt off and dragging me into his lap in the backseat.

Whoa!

I shift in discomfort and face Sullivan again. He welcomes my perusal, examining me back with obvious interest. The way he looks at me, it really doesn’t seem like we met for the first time last night.

What are you hiding, Sullivan?

It’s annoying that he’s so attractive. His laugh lines, though faint, add a touch of worldly wisdom to his hewn features. There’s not a strand of grey in his hair. Does he dye it? I get the feeling he wouldn’t.

A small dot on his ear catches my attention.

Lightbulb.

I sign, “To be frank, I could tell you more... *private* things about Dare —” I make sure my expression is like a purr, “but that feels inappropriate. Given the audience.” Smiling coquettishly, I stroke my hand over Dare’s chest, getting into character.

He captures my hand and then releases it after a squeeze. I sense that he would have held on if I didn’t use my hands to speak.

Lucy gets red after my interpreter voices for me. Her mouth opens and then snaps shut.

Batting my eyelashes, I sign, “So instead of giving you the dirty details, I’ll tell you an embarrassing secret about Dare’s childhood. Something Dare doesn’t share with many people. Not even his closest friends.”

Dare tilts his head, amused.

Mosely is chomping on a pen like it’s a candy bar.

“Dare...” I finger spell and pause for the interpreter to voice so I can draw out the suspense, “used to...” I wait again, “be an emo kid.”

There.

It’s done.

Dare’s expression turns proud.

Lucy speaks.

“How did you know about that?” Jenny signs. “It’s not in any online articles.”

I shrug, trying not to look as smug as I feel.

“Oh, Dare. Do you remember?” Jenny’s hands move in time with Lucy’s rambling. “Back then, you cut your hair without mom and dad’s permission. They were *livid*.”

Lucy’s joy at the memory is kind of cute.

Kind of.

For a spoiled heiress.

“You pierced your ears at the mall too. Both of them. And then you bought these obnoxious stud earrings. Mom got the credit card alert on her phone and nearly fainted.”

Dare chuckles beside me.

My smartwatch buzzes.

I open my phone and find a text from him.

Well done.

I text back:

Thank your earholes for not healing properly.

Dare massages his earlobes quizzically. I swallow the giggles that bubble in my chest. His ears weren’t the only clue. When we were exchanging messages in the car, I accidentally swiped to his music app and saw a bunch of classic rock bands. That, coupled with the earring holes made me take a stab in the dark.

I'm glad, for once, that the childhood version of Dare was a rocker kid stereotype.

Dare climbs to his feet and gestures for me to follow. The amused grin is gone from his face, and he looks especially serious when he speaks to his sister.

I want to pay attention, but my smartwatch vibrates three times.

The special alert for DeeJ.

DeeJ: Where are you?

Yaya: Out.

DeeJ: Mom and dad said your agency sent a limo. Did you book something huge without telling me?

I wish.

Yaya: I'll explain later.

By the time I look up again, the serious conversation seems to have ended. Dare has one side of his lips curling up as if he won an argument. Lucy is begrudgingly smiling back at him too.

Whatever she lost, she doesn't seem that upset about it.

As Lucy approaches me, I pocket my phone so I can give her my full attention. She takes my hand and then drops it like it's hot to the touch. Her mouth moves in a funny way. She's slowing down her words, making it impossible to lipread even if I wanted to.

Since I have an interpreter, I wait patiently for Lucy to finish talking—which takes twice as long thanks to her slow speed.

"Sorry. Holding your hand while we're talking is like clipping someone else's mouth shut, huh?" Jenny signs. "Welcome to the family, Yaya."

Lucy moves her mouth around unnaturally again, and I get the impression she wants me to lipread without any interpreting help. She points to her lips and nods, proving my theory right.

Can you hear me?

Did you read my lips?

Can we have a conversation without any interpreters?

I lift my hand, gesturing for her to stop. "Slowing your words doesn't help me lipread. It makes it more difficult."

Lucy waits for my interpreter. Her eyes narrow when she hears my words.

Jenny signs, "How do you know I was slowing my words. Can you hear me? Are you even deaf?"

Dare frowns at his sister.

Frustration gnaws at my patience.

“I know because I can *see* you,” I sign, my hand movements getting bigger to show my annoyance. “And you don’t need to do that with your mouth. Just talk normally.”

She continues to do the exaggerated mouth thing.

Jenny looks embarrassed for her when she signs, “I just want to talk to you. Without interpreters. It’s so much fuss for nothing. I mean, not that being deaf is *nothing*. I know you have your limitations.”

I sigh deep in my spirit.

These hands are for signing, not slapping, but I might give them a new purpose today.

“*Limitations?* Being deaf is not a handicap. The only thing you can do that a deaf person can’t is hear,” I sign.

Dare addresses his sister, a muscle working in his jaw.

Lucy frowns as the interpreter signs, “Excuse me for trying to help,”

Now she’s offended.

Of course she is.

Whenever a deaf person shares what would make *them* more comfortable, what would make basic experiences and commodities more accessible, hearing people always act insulted. Because the entire world doesn’t *already* revolve around them. Because it’ll take such a big effort just to listen.

Why do hearing people never *listen*?

I firm my jaw, recalling—once again—why I will never date a hearing person. The gap between their world and mine, their way of thinking and mine, their *culture* and mine, is totally different.

Dare slips a hand on my waist and turns me around. He says something to his sister. I’m assuming it’s along the lines of ‘*we’re done here*’.

Either way, I’m annoyed with *all* hearing people right now and I push his hands away the moment we’re out of Lucy’s sight.

His chin whips down as if he didn’t expect me to brush him off. His expression is inquisitive rather than angry.

Pulling out my phone, I type a message.

Do you have any more work scheduled for me today?

His chocolate eyes read my message and then dart up to read my face. I don't bother hiding my attitude.

I should.

It would be the mature thing to do.

Richard Sullivan is my boss and if he asks me to fly to Timbuktu to build him a well in the middle of a drought, I have to do it.

Happily.

While signing how much I love him.

He tries to take my phone to type, but I'm feeling petty so I tighten my grip. He gives me another solemn look and then takes out his own phone.

I apologize for Lucy. She means well.

Of course she does. All hearing people are well-meaning until they actually have to sacrifice something. Until they have to be uncomfortable for one minute. One measly second.

You don't need to apologize.

Honestly, this comes with the territory. When I'm on a modeling job, I'm prepared for all the nonsense hearing people throw at me.

But today I wasn't.

Maybe that kind of acting will come in time.

Right now, I've barely known this man for a day and I don't quite feel like pretending otherwise anymore.

Is there anything else? I add to my message.

He purses his lips and inspects me with a sigh.

I glare in return. *What? What?*

I can't tell if he's angry at me, disappointed, or maybe regretting his choice of girlfriend.

Oh? Did you think I'd be a shy, insecure, demure little puppet you could push around because I'm deaf? Think again, bucko. I'm far stronger than you think I am. I'm only doing this because my friends mean the world to me. If not for Henry, you'd have gotten a swift kick between the legs on that mountain.

José is waiting downstairs. He and Jenny will accompany you home.

Sullivan angles the phone towards me, waits for me to read and then turns the phone off. With abrupt movements, he gestures to his team.

Mosely and the bodyguard peel away from the wall and follow Richard Sullivan as he stalks out of sight.

"This way," Jenny signs to me.

I swivel on my heels and follow the interpreters in the opposite direction.

As I walk, I feel a little pinch in the tiniest corner of my soul. Was it right to lash out on Sullivan when he apologized for his sister and made an effort to accommodate me today?

I bite down on my bottom lip, conflicted.

No, don't get soft now, Yaya.

This is not the time to waver. Richard Sullivan has three months to woo me, court me, and treat me like I'm the most important person in the world to him...

When it's the farthest thing from the truth.

If I let my guard down and fall for him, well, I might end up breaking something more important than a personal preference.

And I definitely can't have that.

* * *

Jenny joins me in the backseat of the limo. Fortunately, she senses my mood and doesn't try to chat me up. Every so often, she'll take a sip of water then massage her throat and wrists.

Many ASL interpreters suffer from carpal tunnel since signing is extremely taxing on the hands. Jenny looks a little young to be in pain. How long has she been doing this?

I want to ask, but I also want to sulk so I keep my hands down until the limo stops.

"Are you sure you don't want me to take you back home?" Jenny signs. "That was Mr. Sullivan's exact instruction."

"Just tell him you took me home," I reply, gathering my things.

Jenny scoots out and stands on the sidewalk with me. "Do you mind... telling him yourself?"

I arch an eyebrow at her nervous body language.

A faint red flush spreads over her cheeks, "He's a little intimidating."

"Intimidating how?" I sign, tilting my head. That isn't the first word that would come to mind when I think of Sullivan. I've seen Holland Alistair on a telephone conference once. *That* man is grumpy personified.

Richard Sullivan is definitely more 'carefree, easy-going heir' than 'terrifying billionaire dictator'.

She blushes again. "He's a little too handsome."

I snicker. Hands moving more delicately now, I sign, "Thank you. That cheered me up."

Movement in a window on the fourth floor grabs my attention. Henry must be freaking out after seeing me climb out of a limo. Or more likely he's been freaking out all day. I've kept him in the dark about the entire Richard Sullivan situation.

"See you later," I sign to Jenny.

"Remember to inform Mr. Sullivan of the change of plans."

I don't want to report my every move to him, but I also don't want to get Jenny in trouble. She's a sweet person and I enjoyed having her as one of my interpreters today.

Henry's waiting at the door before I've fully entered the hallway. His eyes look bloodshot, his hair is a mess and his skin is almost translucent.

"Dude, your eyes. Did someone punch you?"

“Are you being sued?”

“Answer the question.”

“You first.”

“No, I wasn’t sued.” I grab his head to pull him closer. Upon inspection, I realize the ‘bruises’ are dark circles. Has he even slept?

Henry pushes me away. “What happened last night? Why didn’t you pick up my calls? What did the cops say?” His body language is janky, urgent. His eyes dart from side to side.

“Let’s talk inside.”

He inhales a big breath, blows it out between lips that look like they’ve been in a freezer and shuffles behind me into the dingy apartment.

It’s only a few steps to the living room. I can see the kitchen from here. The counter is stacked with medication. There’s a giant calendar on the fridge, marking all the pills his grandmother needs to take.

To my right is a short hallway.

I keep my eyes there when I sign, “How is she?”

“The same.”

I walk past him and peek into the first bedroom. Henry’s grandmother is lying in a cot, her hands folded and her body still. The peaceful motion of her chest is the only indication that she’s alive. There’s a home IV drip standing next to her bed and a makeshift heart monitor that Henry bought from a shady dealer he met under a bridge. I’m pretty sure that device was stolen.

Beside her hand is a giant button that she can press to vibrate Henry’s smartwatch. It’s how they communicate.

“She looks good,” I sign with an encouraging smile.

His Adam’s apple bobs.

I gesture for us to leave and he follows me to the living room. Since I know my way around his apartment, I head to the fridge and pour myself a glass of water. Even though I didn’t use my voice today, my throat is still itchy.

Henry stops in front of me. He looks at the ground.

I wave so he’s looking at me before signing, “You okay?”

“I feel so stupid. How could I have gotten the wrong car?” His eyes flash angrily. “There was only one type of car like that in the parking lot. Lexi’s ex bought that keychain just to show off and I fell for it.”

I’m not going to argue with him there.

“Your sister. How much did she have to pay?”

“Not much.”

“Not much? Yeah right.” He squeezes his eyes shut. “She must hate me. Your entire family must hate me. This is my fault. To make it worse, I left you there and ran like a coward.”

Since he’s not looking at me, I have to wait until he opens his eyes.

“I told you to run,” I sign.

“And I shouldn’t have listened.”

“You did the right thing. Your grandmother.” I point to the hallway. “What would she have done without you?”

“I’m sorry.” Henry looks like he’s on the verge of tears.

“It’s okay.”

“I’ll do anything to make it up to you.”

I smile gently. “The best way to repay me is to keep that anger in check. I can’t be there all the time when you fly off the handle.”

“I know.” He takes out his wallet.

If I could laser-eye that thing to death I would. “What are you doing?”

“I made the mistake. I need to pay you back somehow. There’s no way that rich-looking guppy let you go without taking something from you.”

“Maybe I’m more persuasive than you think I am.”

“No, you’re not.”

I’m about to be offended, but Henry power-walks to the door and distracts me.

I scramble to get in front of him. “Where are you going?”

“To talk to your sister. If you won’t give me a number, she will.”

“Henry, slow down. Take a breath.” I inhale and exhale in demonstration.

“Don’t. Don’t be nice to me. I’d rather you just hit me.”

“Why would I hit you?”

“Because I want to hit myself!” His hand motions get bigger and bigger. Thick eyebrows hunker over guilt-ridden eyes.

“No one is hitting anyone. And relax. My sister didn’t have to pay for anything. The guy has comprehensive insurance. You think he’d drive something so expensive without a killer insurance package?”

“Even if he has insurance, he could still have you arrested. At any minute, he could call the cops.”

“Sullivan? He won’t.” A part of me thinks it would be better if he had. At least then, I could pay my dues in prison rather than prancing around pretending to date him.

Right now, I’m in Sullivan’s prison.

He’s the warden and the judge.

Henry’s eyes double in size. He finger-spells, “Sullivan? Is that his name?”

“Richard Sullivan II.” I return my glass to the kitchen and run it under the faucet. When I’m done, I dry my hands and sign, “He’s the owner of the car we destroyed.”

“We?” Henry stumbles back. “What do you mean ‘we’? You didn’t do anything.”

My gaze drifts guiltily away.

“No.” Henry’s mouth spreads into a grim line. “Tell me you didn’t.”

“I had to distract him.”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was thinking my best friend needed me and I had to do something.”

Henry backpedals. I didn’t believe his face could get any paler, but he manages it. His long, lean body folds and he sinks into a crouch.

I set a hand on his shoulder.

“I can’t breathe,” he signs with one hand.

I hurry to get him some water. He takes it from me, his arm shaking so much most of the water leaves the cup.

My phone buzzes while I’m trying to keep my best friend from hyperventilating.

Deej: When you’re free, meet me at the cafe. We need to talk.

I pocket my phone and help Henry stand.

“Feel better now?”

“Not particularly.”

His shoulders are slumped so he looks like an old man. Guilt is torturing Henry the way Richard Sullivan is torturing me. I’m not sure which of us is in the more precarious position.

Oh wait.

Yes, I do.

It’s me.

Henry will learn to deal with his guilt. He can control it eventually. But me? There’s no telling what Richard Sullivan will ask me to do as his

girlfriend. No telling whether or not my traitorous body will like it.

He's hearing. Therefore, a non-option. If he wasn't so attractive, it would have been easier to ignore him.

"I have to go," I sign. "Deej wants to talk to me."

Henry nods.

I wait until he looks at me to sign intently, "I'm handling the situation. Don't do anything crazy, okay?"

He doesn't respond.

"Okay?" I insist.

He gives me the sign I'm looking for. "Okay."

Satisfied, I slip out the door and head to the café. There are two burly Asian security guards waiting outside. Sazuki's security team.

Inside, people sit in booths, sipping caffeine like it's their life blood. The scent of chai fills the air. My sister is flitting back and forth from the customers to the espresso machine.

I tap my hand on the counter to get her attention.

She turns, sees it's me and smiles brightly. I love it when Dejonae smiles. Her cheeks bunch up and her eyes get cute and 'crinkly'. Funny enough, that expression reminds me of her husband. They're starting to resemble each other.

Oh, the power of love.

"Trouble in paradise?" I sign. Some people pace up and down or go hiking when they need an outlet. My sister... panic-brews.

"No, this is boredom. Not anxiety."

"You sure?" I sign.

"Who do you think sent these customers?" She gestures to the chairs.

I glance around, noticing how everyone is obnoxiously happy. That's when I see the little cardboard sign at the counter that reads 'FREE DRINKS'.

I roll my eyes. Only billionaires like Sazuki would waste money on nonsense.

It's not a waste if it makes Deej happy.

Okay.

I retract my earlier statement. My sister taking a trip down memory lane and pretending to be the broke, college-student barista she was pre-Sazuki is a perfectly sound use of money, time and resources.

"Mom texted this morning. She mentioned a limo," Dejonae signs.

“Oh, yes, that.”

“Oh, yes, that?” Her smile is joyous. She makes bigger signs to show her excitement. “What’s going on? What haven’t you told me?”

I blink rapidly, a thousand thoughts flying through my mind at once. There is no magazine photoshoot, and there won’t be, unfortunately, because my manager thinks I’m ‘a lot’. Every opportunity I’ve had in the modeling business was what I earned for myself.

“Nothing,” I sign.

She wrinkles her nose in disbelief.

Oh no. Should I have gone with the modeling job story? What if she asks more questions?

“Are you lying to me?” DeeJ signs, her gaze stern. “Or did you lie to mom and dad this morning?”

I feel ill, but it’s too late to turn back now. I chose this road. I gotta keep walking forward.

“I lied to them. If I told them who I was *really* with today, then I’d have to explain what happened after the wedding last night.”

Her entire body stiffens. I see the moment it happens. First relaxed and then, like a current of electricity, she’s straight as a board.

“You mean... Richard Sullivan sent that limo?”

I blink and blink and blink.

What have I done? What do I DO?

I feel my face pinch as I admit the truth. “Yes.”

“Why?”

I open my mouth and start gulping air.

Why?

Her eyes are as hard as marbles. She’s watching my every move.

What do I say?

If I tell Dejonae I’m being blackmailed by Richard Sullivan in exchange for Henry’s freedom, she’ll waterboard him in a bucket of chai and then chop his neck off. And that’s before Sazuki unleashes Akira and his army of scary bodyguards.

I’d have no problem with them going after Sullivan except that it’ll break our contract.

And that means Henry will have to bear the consequences alone, leaving his grandmother in a critical state.

Dejonae steps forward. She’s far too threatening for someone that small.

“Yaya, why did Richard Sullivan want to talk to you?”

“Because we made a deal,” I sign.

“What kind of deal?”

I square my shoulders, look my sister dead in the eye and lie straight to her face, “I’ve agreed to be a spokesmodel for his company.”

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CHAPTER 7

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sweet but not easy

DARE

I lean on my car, one foot flat against the rims. Mosely's in front of me, my cell phone propped between his hands.

"Did I do it right this time?" I ask.

He gives me a long-suffering expression. "No, sir."

"Dammit."

"I believe your hands are supposed to rotate in the opposite direction."

"No, I'm pretty sure it's this direction." I make the sign again.

"It's supposed to be left."

"This way?"

"My left. Not your left."

"This *is* your left."

He sighs again. "No, sir. It's not."

"Play the video." I gesture to the cell phone. Once his thumb taps the center, the lesson resumes. A woman appears on screen. She's grinning from ear to ear like her dying company just got an angel investor.

"*Would you like to watch a movie?*" The camera changes to get the side angle. Her cheerful voice intones, "*Movie.*" The camera zooms in on her hands. "*Movie.*"

"Movie." I mimic the way she moves her fingers. "Mosely, this is definitely my left."

“Sir,” Mosely shuts the phone off and steps closer to me, “as much as I enjoy being your human tripod, don’t you think it would be better to learn from an *actual* ASL teacher instead of videos on the internet?”

“I have a class with the CEO of the interpreter agency tomorrow evening.”

“Then...”

I snatch the phone from his hand. “I’m learning the basics, so I have a foundation to build on.” Eyes sliding to the obnoxious pink watch wrapped around my wrist, I check the time. “It’s three o’clock.”

The bell rings at that moment, signaling the end of a school day. Kids come rushing out, piling into flashy black SUVs that take off with zero respect for the speed limit.

Interesting. I recognize a few of the faces in the driver’s seat. The city’s most influential and prominent families send their kids here. Now, the security guards and extravagant security check at the gate make sense.

“Why isn’t she coming out?” I assess the children running through the doors, eager to get home.

“Perhaps she’s being given an after-school orientation?” Mosely mumbles.

“You think? Ah. There she is.”

I perk up when I see my niece bopping along. Her tiny shoulders are slumped and she kicks forlornly at a rock in her path.

“Talial!” I call her name and wave.

Her head whips up. At once, the solemn expression shifts into a sunshine smile. She grips her backpack straps and crosses the distance between us at a brisk run. Blonde hair streams behind her, reminding me of a field of wheat dancing in the breeze.

I drop to one knee and accept the arms she flings around me. “Uncle Dare!”

“Hey, kiddo.”

She leans back, blue eyes sparkling brighter than fireworks in the sky. “What are you doing here? Mom said dad would pick me up while she’s in rehab.”

I cringe at the way she casually refers to her mother’s addiction. Sometimes, I wish she wasn’t so aware of the world.

“Well,” I tuck her hair behind her ear, “your dad is a little busy. But the good news is, you’ll be staying with me until your mom is better.”

“Cool!” She beams.

“You remember Mosely?” I gesture to my assistant.

She barely spares him a glance. “Uncle Dare, can I have ice cream?”

“That depends.” I take her bag from her and offer my hand.

She slips her little fingers in mine. “On what?”

I shove my watch at her. “Explain why this kept going off all day.”

“Oh...” Her smile becomes a shadow on her face.

“I checked.” I open the door for her and watch as she scrambles into the backseat. She’s so small that not even the running board is enough help. Hefting her in the rest of the way, I add, “There’s nothing wrong with the battery or the internal mechanics.” The technician at the mall took one look at it and told me I had a perfectly functioning princess watch. “He said the flashes were from a receiver.”

She tilts her pretty little face up.

I snap her seatbelt in place and pause. “Like a walkie-talkie.”

“Oh.”

“Were you trying to call me, Talia?”

She chews on her bottom lip.

I see her struggling and press, “Did something happen at school today?”

“No.”

“Talia.” My voice has a hint of a warning.

“I told you. Everything’s fine.”

Huh. I don’t buy that. Being the new kid sucks, especially for someone as proud as Talia. Settling in. Finding her place in already established cliques. It can’t be easy.

“I know it’s tough being the new kid—”

“It’s not tough.” She tilts her head up proudly. “I already rule this dump.”

“Oh? Okay.” I smile at her confidence.

“It’s true. Everyone knows my name now.”

“Did you make any friends?”

She scoffs and rolls her eyes. “These idiots are too stupid to be my friends.”

“Hey,” I set my leg on the running board and rest an elbow on my knee, “that can’t be true for them all. Sazuki’s daughter goes here. She should be around your age. Maybe you can make friends with her.”

“I don’t think so.” When she sees my concerned frown, she smiles sweetly. “I don’t need anyone but you, Uncle Dare.”

“Sweet talker.”

“Are we getting ice cream now?”

I ruffle her hair and wink. “I’ve got something even better.”

While Mosely drives to the surprise I arranged, I make small talk with Talia who is a never-ending rush of words.

“Sounds like you had an interesting day,” I muse when she finishes the drawn-out tale about her fourth period teacher’s hairy mole. “Kiddo, you’re talkative today.”

She shrugs nonchalantly.

“I hope you weren’t this chatty during class.”

“Why would I be?” She flops back into her seat. “That school is lame.”

“What’s lame about it?”

“I don’t know.” She picks at the tag on her school bag. “The other kids. The food. Everything.”

“Should I talk to the principal? We can’t have the queen of the school thinking everything is lame, can we?” I tickle her side.

She giggles. “Uncle Dare.” Her eyes catch on something outside the window and she freezes. “Are we getting ice cream here?”

I twist around and smile when I see the arcade.

“Even better.” I help her out of the car and hold her hand, walking inside. “I rented the place.”

“Sweet!” With a dazzled look in her eyes, my niece turns in a circle.

The arcade is a kid’s wonderland with neon lights blinking, cartoon graffiti on the turquoise and orange walls, and the smell of popcorn filling the air.

“What do you want to play?”

“I don’t know. Everything?” Her voice is a high-pitched, excited shriek.

I laugh. “Let’s start with basketball, maybe? And then work our way around.”

Mosely gives me a frightened look.

Ignoring him for the moment, I kneel in front of Talia who is vibrating with excitement. “Tals, why don’t you get us set up with the cards? I already asked for limitless coins. Just go to that lady behind the desk. Remember to say please.”

She skips off without answering me. The munchkin.

Mosely shuffles forward and raises his voice to be heard over the tinny music from the arcade games. “Sir, have you forgotten your meeting with the acquisition team at four thirty?”

“Shoot. Can we reschedule?”

“No.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Tell them we’ll do a teleconference instead of a live meeting. Have them email the proposal. Talia and I will run around for an hour. That should be more than enough time to tire her.”

He nods.

Talia returns with the cards that hold our virtual coins.

“Ready for me to kick your butt, munchkin?”

“Bring it on, Uncle Dare.”

For the next hour, we give it our best shot, but we’re only halfway through the entire arcade when Mosely gets my attention from the background and taps his watch.

I sigh and take my finger off the trigger.

“Come on!” Talia shrieks and points to the screen like a man who blew his entire lifesavings on fantasy football. “You *gave* me that last hit.”

“Sorry, Tals. I’ve got a quick meeting.”

“Now?” Her eyebrows scrunch together.

“Yes, now.”

“But we haven’t gotten to the fish tank game yet.”

“I know, kiddo. I’ll do my best to keep it short.” Glancing around, I see the food court attached to the arcade. “How about you ask one of the workers to bring you a snack? I heard they make a killer slushie here.”

“Okay,” she mumbles grumpily.

“I promise it won’t take long.”

She slumps off without replying.

Mosely is right there on my heels when I stride into a quiet area outside the arcade. He hands me a tablet with the material already opened.

I thank him with a nod and keep my attention on the proposal, skimming through the information. It doesn’t take me long to make my decision.

“We’re going with Cullen Tech,” I say into the phone.

“But sir,” a board member whines, “their profit share has seen a remarkable downward trend this year. Plus Cullen is sick with cancer—”

“Which is why we need to move now. This investment might renew his energy. Give him a way to pay off his medical bills.”

“With all due respect,” another board member scoffs, “we’re not running a charity.”

I stiffen.

“It isn’t lost on us that all your investments have a sob story, Sullivan. That might work if you’re a judge on a network TV talent show, but—”

My teeth grind together. “Have I lost this company one red cent? Have any of my decisions ever put our bottom line in jeopardy? I know where my priorities lie, gentlemen. I’m all about the almighty dollar and I am telling you that Cullen Tech is young, but their infrastructure is prime for take-off. And I can personally vouch for Cullen’s genius. He’s a hidden gem.”

“Sullivan—”

“I understand why you felt the need to put me on time out, but I haven’t heard an argument that will change my mind.”

The board goes silent.

My princess watch flashes. Talia must be tired of waiting.

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I’m in the middle of a date.”

Pandemonium breaks out from my board members. I end the call to cut off their squawking and hand the tablet back to Mosely. He slips it into its case and gives me a tired look.

“Did you have to do that?”

“Was I lying?”

He rolls his eyes.

Chuckling, I return to the arcade. When I get close to the door, I hear a loud crash and a pained cry.

“Talia!” Heart screaming, I burst through the glass doors and run pell-mell into the neon lights.

Up ahead, Talia’s sitting primly in one of the empty booths in the dining area. A woman in a white top, black slacks, and an apron is on her knees, gathering an upended slushie cup. Green ice and juice ooze into the carpet.

An exhale of relief freezes in my throat until my eyes catch on the smirk etched into my niece’s face.

Is she...

That isn’t...

There’s no way that’s *laughter*, is it?

“Do you need help?” Mosely rushes past me to assist the worker.

Talia notices our presence and her head whips up, shoulders snapping back. A flash of guilt passes through her expression before she smiles sweetly at me.

“Uncle Dare.”

I walk forward slowly. “What happened here?”

“She tripped,” Talia says, pointing a dainty finger at the worker who pulls her lips into her mouth and stares at the ground. The floor isn’t the only thing that sopped up a green slushie. The waitress’s shirt looks like an impressionist art painting. Or a nasty pee stain glowing under a black UV light.

Talia looks at the employee too and her bottom lip starts trembling. She bites down on it, but there’s no hiding the intention of a giggle.

A strange, dark feeling takes root in my stomach.

‘She’s a gremlin’.

Lucy’s words echo back to me.

No.

There’s no way that’s true.

“I’m sorry,” the worker says shakily. She holds the slushie cup to her chest to hide her bra that’s beginning to show through the damp shirt. Her head is bent down in shame.

With decisive movements, I shrug out of my jacket and shroud it around her shoulders. She looks up in surprise.

I step back and slip a hand into my pocket. “Mosely, call the manager. Tell them to send a cleaning crew. Also, this young lady will need a change of clothes.” My stare is intentional. “See to it that she gets what she needs.”

He nods, knowing what to do. It’s not uncommon for us to make amends after one of Lucy’s drinking binges, but I never expected to do the same for my niece.

Uneasy, I gesture for Talia to leave the booth.

As I walk, my shoulders are stiff and my gaze is straight ahead.

“Uncle Dare,” Talia whispers, slipping her fingers around mine, “are you angry?”

“No.”

“You look angry.”

“I’m not angry, Natalia.”

Pretty blue eyes narrow. She looks so much like Lucy I could believe my sister walked out of a time machine.

“I didn’t trip that lady.”

“I never said you did, Tals.”

Her chest pumps hard. “It’s not my fault.”

I dip my head, staring at the sidewalk and struggling within myself. How do I address this? A huge part of me believes it was all an accident. Maybe the employee really did fall on her own. If not, she would have mentioned Talia tripping her.

But why did Talia laugh?

Because...

Because kids laugh at stupid things. Hell, I spent most of my formative years parked in front of the television watching *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. A show that was, arguably, filled with the misfortune and pain of others, synced to light, comical music.

Kids at that age laugh when someone sneezes loudly.

It’s fine.

I’m overthinking.

But I can’t quite form a smile and I’m quiet on the way home.

When we get there, Talia storms up the stairs. A second later, her room door slams shut.

Mosely enters behind me. “If you don’t need anything else, I’ll head home now.”

“Mosely.”

He stops, eyes heavy on me.

I swallow hard. Guilt is sloshing around in my stomach and I’m not sure where it’s coming from. “The employee. Did you—”

“Yes.”

“Enough?”

“More than enough to cover dry cleaning, a new blouse and...”

“And?”

“Distress.”

The uneasiness rattles through my chest again.

I open my mouth. Snap it shut. Shake my head. “You’ve worked hard today.”

“That’s my job.”

“Right.” I tap my fingers against the side of my leg. “Your job.”

“Is that all, sir?”

I face the man my father trusted more than anyone. The man who should have retired but came back to the company after I begged him. It was torment enough that I didn't have dad to bounce ideas off of, I needed Mosely there to support.

"Yes."

He dips his chin once, his face strangely clear of expression. That's not the Mosely I know. He's jittery, nervous, over-analytic. But right now, he's doing his best to not show his emotions on his face.

I should call him back, ask him to verify what I'm already suspicious of. But I don't.

I believe in my niece.

Talia is not a gremlin.

She's the sweet, misunderstood daughter I never had and what happened today is never going to happen again.

* * *

My week gets busy at the office. In the evenings, I make time for Talia, picking her up from school everyday and giving her my undivided attention.

I could get a nanny. Mosely's already hinted as much.

It's a sacrifice giving so much time to my niece, but I refuse to hire help.

Part of the reason is because I promised Lucy. My sister was worried I'd be too focused on work to give Talia what she deserves. The other reason is the one I don't acknowledge because admitting it might tarnish the view I have of my niece.

It's not until the following week that I have time in my schedule for a proper ASL lesson.

"I'm sorry it took so long to get back to you," I say, giving Athena a pair of slippers to walk in the house. "We're in the middle of business negotiations for a tech company and my niece is staying with me, so we've both been adjusting. My schedule's all over the place. Oh, watch out." I point to the drone that Athena was about to step on.

"What's that?"

“One of the perks of investing in a government tech facility.” I wink and open the door to my office. She steps past me, her heels clicking on the ground. I open the window, letting in the waning sunlight. “Do you want tea, water, coffee?”

“I’m fine.” She dips her chin once.

I open the mini fridge and select a water bottle for myself. While I drink, I notice Athena gazing around my office.

She doesn’t look impressed.

Not that I expect someone like her to be impressed easily.

Athena Armstrong is the embodiment of a career woman. The CEO of one of the largest ASL interpreter agencies in this part of the Americas, she has a presence in major cities with plans to expand into AI.

I paid handsomely for her to be my personal interpreter that day on the mountain, and that contract included fees for private lessons.

“You said you only have an hour?” She checks her watch.

“My niece is at school doing a group project. She’ll text me when she’s ready.”

Athena nestles her purse beside her as she takes a seat. “Then let me make this quick. Mr. Sullivan—”

“Please. Call me Dare.”

“Dare.” Her tone is severe. She’s laser-beaming me with eyes of disapproval. “I’ve been an interpreter for many years. It wasn’t until carpal tunnel took out my wrist,” she lifts her hands, revealing paper-thin skin and veins running beneath like streams, “that I stopped. And it was only because signing for a prolonged period brought me incapacitating pain that pills could no longer manage.”

“That’s when you started the agency.” I lean against the desk and cross my ankles.

“You did your research.”

“I like to know where my money is going.” I smirk as I cap my water and set it on the desk. “You opened three facilities without additional investment rounds. Ambitious.”

Her lips twitch.

“You’re a gambler.”

“I prefer the term dreamer.”

“I’ll give you that.”

“Like most dreamers, I have a vision of the future.”

I gesture for her to share it. "What kind of world do you envision?"

"One where people like my son can go to the doctor and receive proper care without being told to 'lipread', as if lipreading is an expectation rather than a headache-inducing and barely accurate form of communication. It's a world where people like Yaya can dominate in entertainment spaces, acting, singing, modeling without having to feel isolated or forced into voicing. It's a world where deaf culture is acknowledged *as* a culture and not just a shadow in the corner of society."

This speech would be moving if Athena wasn't looking at me like I'm a threat.

"You're very passionate about the deaf community. It's personal. I understand."

She tilts her head. "Do you?"

"Where you're coming from? Yes. Why you're giving me the rousing graduation speech? No."

She crosses one leg over the other. "I knew your father."

I stiffen.

"Richard checked to see if the bucket was stolen before he built his sandcastles."

"Dad was a good man," I say quietly.

"For his sake, I took a gamble on you. I signed your NDA. Until I realized that wasn't the only questionable contract on the table."

"You're referring to my arrangement with Yaya. Is there a problem?"

"If there was, I already signed on the dotted line. Accepted the cash. This isn't me here to lecture you. You'll get your money's worth, and I won't say a word."

"I'm guessing that's not on your own merit."

Her eyes turn sharp. "That NDA was a noose."

"My lawyers are thorough."

"Before you get cocky, I'm not afraid."

"This isn't a threat." I lift both hands. "Ask me what you want. You know everything already." I hid nothing from the interpreters who were present the day Yaya agreed to our arrangement.

Frankly, I'm surprised Athena waited this long to confront me.

Sometimes, people put things off because they want to believe the best of someone. Even if it's unwise.

I shake that thought.

“My question is simple. Are you genuine?”

“With Yaya?”

“With the purpose behind your relationship.” Athena dips her eyes to my watch. “Once it’s over, you’ll let her go?”

“No.”

“I see.”

“Is this the part where you give me a warning?”

“It’s more of a clarification. One that should have happened before I signed. That’s my fault.”

Rather than answer, I round the desk and take a seat in the chair. “She intrigues me. I want to spend more time with her. The reason I haven’t met her since that day is because I want to have a better grip on her language the next time I see her.”

“I suspected.”

“You approve?”

“I’m observing. It’s really not up to me anyway.” She unfolds her legs and rises. “Okay then.”

I tilt my head up to maintain eye contact. “Had I said something you didn’t want to hear, what would you have done?”

“Walked out and told you to find another teacher.”

“It wouldn’t be that simple.” I smirk, sensing Athena is the type that likes revenge.

“I’d have you blacklisted so you wouldn’t be able to find a credible, reliable ASL instructor in the entire country.”

My eyebrows hike along with my amusement. “The entire country. You have that much influence?”

She smiles secretly.

I swing my chair back and forth. “There’s a lot of doors I can open with a cheque.”

“Money is only powerful until it meets conviction.”

I press my feet on the ground to stop swaying. My smile turns a little warmer. “Passionate and dangerous.”

“Another compliment.”

“You realize how endearing you are. Going to great lengths to protect the woman I’m interested in.”

“I’m a part of the team that blackmailed her. It’s the least I can do to show support.”

“‘Blackmail’ is a strong word.”

“Words are meant to be strong. That’s how we decide if something’s right or wrong.”

“Or somewhere in between.”

“Matters are rarely that complicated. We just call things grey because we can’t commit to a side.” She arches an eyebrow. “You’re the one who made the contract. Don’t sound so uncomfortable now.”

But I am uncomfortable.

Strong-arming, threatening and backing people into corners to get what I want isn’t my style. Even in business.

It’s alarming how smitten I am with Yaya Williams. I’m willing to overlook my own convictions to get what I want.

“Fifty minutes left.” Athena glances at her watch.

I check the time and murmur, “Huh. So what happens now?”

“Now, I come out of retirement.”

“I’m honored,” I say, leaning back in my chair and considering how much money I’m going to deposit in her bank account. I tend to get loose with cash when I’m pleased.

“Stick with me, Dare. I’ll have you talking in her language in the speed of light.”

* * *

While Athena is impressed with how many signs I memorized, I’m insulted that she didn’t believe me when I told her I study every day.

I felt quite cocky going into the lesson, armed with my foundational knowledge and my photographic memory.

But Athena made sure to bring with her a giant pin.

You know, to burst my ego.

After she leaves, I’m mentally wrung out.

There’s so much more to learn than just sign language. Things like deaf culture, facial expressions and gestures holding different meanings—it’s a lifetime’s worth of lessons.

And here I thought I made a difference learning the alphabet and a thousand most common words.

Strangely, even if the task feels more daunting now than before, I'm excited. With the lessons I've learned, I'm one step closer to Yaya.

My alarm chimes.

Time to pick up Talia from school.

I drive myself, since Mosely remained at the office while I met Athena for my lesson. The moment I park, I send Talia a text.

There's no response.

I press my watch, knowing that hers will light up.

Huh. No response there either.

She must not be finished with her group project yet.

Taking out my phone, I check Yaya's social media. I managed to hold out from stalking her socials for about three days.

Well, two and a half.

But after I completed a very thorough internet search about whether religiously perusing a woman's public posts counts as stalking (general consensus is that it's public, so it doesn't count), I realized that I had to see her even if it was just in a photo.

I was delighted to find that Yaya posts daily.

Today's picture is of her in the sunshine, a scarf wrapped around her neck and a coffee cup in her hand. Her long, orange nails are a sharp contrast against the light brown of the cup. Thick hair falls down her shoulders, a few tendrils teasing at the mischievous smile on her lips.

The caption says '*want a cuppa?*'.

How amusing.

I smile and press the like button.

At once, a flood of notifications rain down on my phone. This frantic activity happens every time I heart one of Yaya's posts.

Social media isn't my strength. I only created a profile to look at Yaya's photos. What I *have* noticed is that, since I started following Yaya, she's gained thousands of new followers. There's a side of me that hopes I played a hand in her gaining popularity.

Movement outside the school door gets my attention. Talia's walking out.

But she's not alone.

There's a teacher standing right beside her. The woman has pecan-colored skin and dreadlocks with brown beads at the end. She's carrying herself stiffly and her frown deepens when I get closer.

“Mr. Sullivan?”

“Yes?” I draw to a stop in front of Talia who’s staring at her shoes.

“You’re Talia’s guardian while her mother is away, correct?”

“Yes.”

She holds out a hand and gives me a firm handshake. “I’m Miss Abbot, Talia’s homeroom teacher.”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Abbot. Is,” I give Talia another worried look, “something wrong?”

The teacher’s sigh sounds like a tire leaking air. “Mr. Sullivan, were you aware that Talia was called to the principal’s office today?”

My eyes widen. “The principal’s office?”

Talia stiffens.

“From that response, I assume Talia’s excuse that you were out of the country and couldn’t be reached was also not true.”

“She said... I was out of the country?”

My phone rings.

I ignore it. “Miss Abbot, I don’t know what this is about, but I can assure you that Talia would not intentionally lie.”

“That’s unfortunate, Mr. Sullivan, because I can assure you that she did in fact lie. Among other things.”

I shoot Talia a sharp look and then I turn on the charm, trying to cajole her teacher out of her anger. “Our family’s going through a bit of a... situation lately. Also, Talia just moved to the city and is adjusting to—”

“Mr. Sullivan, do you know what Talia did to get called to the principal’s office?”

My phone rings again. It’s piercingly loud in the awkward and uncomfortable silence.

“Excuse me,” I answer the call with a little more bite in my voice than is necessary, “Mosely, this better be good.”

“Bad news, sir.”

Dammit. “Do you understand the definition of ‘good’?”

“Footage of the car crash leaked,” Mosely hisses.

“What car crash?” I ask, feeling a tug on my jacket.

Talia looks up at me with her big blue eyes, tears gathering in them. “Uncle Dare.”

I look back and notice Miss Abbot staring with her arms folded over her chest and a scowl on her face.

Well, she must be fun to be around.

“Sir,” Mosely is saying in my ear, “the footage of Ms. Sullivan’s... incident. It’s been leaked.”

My head feels like it’s about to explode, but those words snap me into a single-minded focus.

“What?” I growl.

Talia flinches.

The teacher looks alarmed.

I give them both a strained smile and walk a few paces away. “What do you mean the footage got out?”

“It came from a car’s dash cam. The driver had already left the scene, so we didn’t catch it in our sweep.”

I grip the cell phone tighter. “How far has it spread?”

“Right now, it’s mostly being used as a meme. No articles have been printed yet, but it’s only a matter of time before someone digs into the origins of the video and finds out.”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Mr. Sullivan, is everything alright?” Miss Abbot asks. She sounds a lot nicer now. I’m starting to think the snark she gave me earlier was more of a response to the situation rather than a miserable personality.

Too bad the world won’t be that kind when they assess my sister and her viral car stunt.

“We need to get on top of this story,” I tell Mosely. “And I’m fine,” I tell Abbot.

“Uncle Dare, I’m really sorry.” Talia’s crying. Her tears make my heart twist like an invisible hand is pinching a nerve, but my head is spinning too fast. One thing at a time. I’ll focus on this PR emergency first.

“Talia, get in the car.” My voice is stern. “Miss Abbot, I promise I’ll come and discuss Talia’s behavior another time. Unfortunately, I really need to go.”

“But...” The teacher gives me a wide-eyed look.

“Talia.” I gesture for my niece to precede me down the walkway. She shuffles with her head down and her backpack dragging on the ground.

Mosely talks fast. “I can announce our intentions to partner with Cullen Tech.”

“No. That won’t be sensational enough to bury this. I need something that will totally distract from any articles that start popping up with Lucy’s

name.”

“The only way to do that is to leak something personal.” He clears his throat. “Her rehab story, maybe?”

“No. My niece is having a hard time as it is. We don’t need to add her mom being ridiculed on social media to the dumpster fire.”

“I can dig up some gossip on your competitors. I’m sure I can find enough dirt in someone’s closet to cover up our own casket.”

Massaging the bridge of my nose, I shake my head. “No, we’re not going that route.”

“What other option do we have? The only thing people are interested in is scandal and romance.”

Romance? I brighten. “Mosely, book me an interview on a morning show. The most popular one in the city.”

“Do you have an idea?”

I slide behind the wheel. “I think it’s time I announce my relationship to the world.”

CHAPTER 8

OceanofPDF.com

the best fake

YAYA

The camera flash is insanely bright, but I keep my eyes wide open and maintain my cheerful leg kick until Henry nods and steps back.

“How did it turn out?” I sign, hurrying over to him to check the camera screen.

“I think you could show off the bag more.”

“But I’m not advertising the bag. I’m advertising the pants.” I tug at the exaggerated trouser leg that a fashion brand sent us. Sponsorship deals are how Henry and I make a living until we can start our own brand.

Henry screws his lips in a thoughtful expression. “Let’s try again. How about those stairs?”

I trot over to the steps leading up to a charming brick townhome. A car honks and a grizzly man winds down the window. Whatever catcall he makes is lost to the wind.

One of the perks of being deaf—I don’t have to listen to stupidity.

Henry snaps a few more shots and I make sure to incorporate the bag this time. It’s strange that he’s insisting on spotlighting different pieces, but I let it pass. He’s the creative director.

“These are good,” Henry signs and then gives me a thumbs-up gesture.

I swing my hair over my shoulder. “It’s me. Of course they look fly.”

He smiles.

I'm glad to see his mood improving. Everything with the car, his ex, and Sullivan seemed to be dragging him down into an emotional hell. If not for his grandmother, Henry would probably live the rest of his life in an alcohol stupor.

Thankfully, things are getting back to normal.

And for me, normal means not hearing from my modeling agency for days at a time until they decide to throw me a bone.

But I'm not the type who waits around for a fashion show or catalogue shoot to drop at my feet. Social media is my own personal runway, at least until I can get Chanel to accept my lookbook.

Movement at the corner of my eye catches my attention.

Henry is waving. He turns his phone over and signs, "You got another like."

Stunned, I open the app and notice my follower count has blown up by another couple thousand.

Insane.

"Do you think he's doing that on purpose?" Henry signs.

I blink rapidly, not sure how to respond to that. Why does Sullivan keep liking my pictures when he doesn't even talk to me?

It's been a week since I signed the fake girlfriend contract. I thought my evil overlord would be hounding me every day, sending me on errands as his 'significant other'.

Instead, it's been radio-silent.

You'd think I'd be happy to get away from him.

It's the opposite.

I was so uncomfortable that I couldn't sleep. It felt like I was waiting for the other boot to drop. Got so bad, I considered contacting Sullivan first, asking if he needed me to do something.

It took a while for the unease to settle down, but it eventually did. If Richard Sullivan was willing to write off my debt for one meeting with his sister in rehab well, I wasn't going to complain.

Then, four days ago, Sullivan made an account and entered my world. Just like that, with one push of a button, he was *there*. Breathing over me without being physically near.

"You're the only account he follows," Henry signs. His face scrunches in annoyance. "What do you think he's trying to do?"

"I have no idea."

“You think it’s a threat?”

“As far as threats go, he has bigger guns to shoot with.” I fill my cheeks with air and let it out. “Let’s just be grateful he’s not posting a video of you bashing his car.”

“That would be petty.”

“You think rich people aren’t petty? They’re the pettiest.”

A crowd of teenagers walking home from school pass by. They smile when they see the camera set up and the equipment for our photoshoot. But when they notice me and Henry signing, their expressions shift to mocking laughter. They start waving wildly to each other and gesturing nonsense.

Frustration rolls through me, but they’re gone before I can commit to the hassle of scolding them.

Henry puts the camera back in the bag and joins me as I change from heels into sneakers. His eyes are narrowed. “This world is so screwed up.”

“Forget those kids,” I sign. “It’s not the first time.”

“You think I care about them? Screw the kids.”

Okay then.

“I’m talking about Sullivan.”

“What about Sullivan?”

Henry clenches his jaw. “Here we are, busting our butts trying to take the perfect photo at the perfect angle at golden hour. With all that, we have to beg for sponsorships and follows. But one rich guy sets up an account and—on day one, before he even makes a single post—he has fifty thousand followers.”

“He has a couple posts now,” I point out.

“A sunset photo from his mansion and what else?” Henry scrolls. “Oh look. This is new. A photo from a magazine talking about how rich he is.”

The content of the magazine may be suspect, but it’s a really nice photo. Sullivan has his hair styled in a side part and he’s dressed in all black, making him look lean and dangerous. He’s lounging in a chair, legs spread in a ‘come sit on my lap’ invitation.

And I won’t lie.

I’m slightly tempted to recreate my childhood Christmas photos, exchanging a frazzled mall Santa for a blackmailing billionaire.

Pushing the cell phone away, I sign to Henry, “Look at the bright side. His followers are following me now.”

“They’re only following you to spam your account with dating questions.” Henry frowns. “As if that guy would ever date someone like you.”

My heart trips over itself. Which is weird because I totally agree with that statement so I’m not sure why it bothers me.

Henry misunderstands my expression and looks contrite. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know what you meant. And, honestly, Sullivan can keep liking my photos. It’ll only help our career. Once our account ticks over ten thousand, we’ll get the attention of some major brands and make more money.”

“Maybe it’s better if we ditch your personal account and start a new one. One that has nothing to do with him.”

I scrunch my nose. That feels like doing things the hard way.

While Henry angrily leaves to stow our equipment in his grandmother’s minivan, my smartwatch vibrates.

Evil Overlord.

I changed Sullivan’s name in my phone after our meeting on the mountain. Why is he calling me? Does he know we were talking about him? Is he spying on me?

Evil Overlord: Miss Williams, I need a favor.

My eyebrows pull together. Why is he asking? We both know I have to do whatever he says. He has all the power here.

Yaya: What favor?

Evil Overlord: Do you have time tomorrow morning?

* * *

Thanks to Richard Sullivan’s cryptic text message, I’m on edge for the rest of the night and can barely eat dinner. Thankfully, Dejonae brings Niko—Sazuki’s daughter and my newly minted niece—over to visit.

Niko’s an absolute delight and my parents are beside themselves now that they have a granddaughter. She takes most of the attention off me so I can slink away after the meal with the excuse that I have an early photoshoot the next morning.

My bed vibrates at five a.m., shaking me hard enough to yank me out of my dreams. Eyes cracking open, I yawn. Each of my limbs are heavy and

my body is craving more sleep, but I force myself to a sitting position and slump to the bathroom.

Sullivan wasn't clear with his request, so I can only assume this favor is why he's been liking all my photos.

The lack of information is killing me, but it's not my first time booking a gig with no idea what to expect. Being a model is far from glamorous, especially if you're not a big name. Designers are rude. The conditions are poor. And no one cares because all you are is an interchangeable human clothing rack.

Not to mention the rampant sexual assault crisis that plagues this industry like a disease.

I can't control perverts who promise to 'open doors' if only I'd visit their penthouse suite after-hours. But I *can* control whether or not I'm immaculately dressed.

For one thing, being put-together immediately tells everyone at the shoot that I'm someone to be taken seriously (even if I'm not quite a household name yet or even close to it). For another, it gives me a needed confidence boost.

Patting my face with cold water wakes me up and I go through my shower and makeup routine. I do my hair next, which doesn't take long thanks to the expensive sew-in.

My watch buzzes.

Sullivan must be here.

I tiptoe out of my bedroom. The air is peaceful. Warm. The dawn is my favorite time of day. The sun sprays a golden path on everything, giving it a magical glow.

Mom and dad's bedroom door is closed. They're tired after doting on Niko yesterday. Smiling, I grab an apple and slip it into my sea-foam green Chanel purse before skating out the door.

Instead of a limo, there's a town car parked on the curb.

José is there again.

So is Jenny.

Excitement makes my smile grander, but they both return my enthusiastic wave with a stilted nod.

Weird. I thought we had a co-worker, 'talk bad about the boss behind his back' connection.

"Good morning, Yaya," Jenny signs, standing formally.

José dips his head like I'm some kind of princess.

Which is totally wrong. If anything, I'm more rocker chic today. Short black vinyl mini skirt, thigh-high boots, and a leather jacket over a lace camisole with a peek-a-boo bra. I finished it off with a black beret to add a Parisian vibe.

José stares straight ahead with the concentration of a London guard outside the British royal palace.

Huh.

Maybe they're not morning people.

Movement around the side of the vehicle catches my eye. I stiffen when I see Richard Sullivan. He sees me too and stops abruptly.

I wait for him to say something, already inclining my head toward Jenny. Her slight eyebrow raise in Sullivan's direction has me returning my attention to him.

He's so tall I can see most of his torso above the town car. A living sculpture. And, like a sculpture, he's frozen. Staring at me.

I fiddle with my purse strap as his gaze lowers by several degrees, taking in my face, my outfit, my shoes and back up again.

A muscle ticks in his jaw. He seems to be displeased.

That's not good, right? Or is it? Ugh, why do I care if he's pleased or not?

I remain on the sidewalk.

Sullivan also remains motionless.

Our gazes meet over the hood of the car.

His eyes are dark. Like spilled ink on a white page. His mouth slightly opens and then snaps shut as he swallows hard enough I see the movement of his Adam's apple.

I lift my chin, steadying myself even as my heart wobbles.

Finally, he rounds the car.

Richard is in tweed today. Surprise, surprise. The crisp button-down looks luxurious. As does the trousers perfectly tailored to his height. Pink gemstones catch the sunlight and lure my attention to his wrist. I'm starting to get used to that garish watch. Especially now that I know it's from his niece.

He extends his phone to me.

Can I speak to you? Privately?

I nod and follow him down the sidewalk.

Footage of my sister's crash leaked yesterday. I'll need to make our relationship public to bury it. Is that okay with you?

Again, I'm at a loss for words. The man who held Henry's freedom over my head last week is not the same guy standing here, asking if I'm comfortable going public with our fake relationship.

Isn't that what I agreed to do?

This is more than a private visit with my sister. Your name will be in the press. People will drag your past to the light and dissect it for the world to see. From now on, you'll forever be associated with me.

That sounds dire. But it's not the public that scares me. It's my family finding out on an interview that I'm dating Richard Sullivan.

Dejonaë will kill me.

I shudder at the thought.

Sullivan is waiting for an answer, so I bury my unease as deep in my subconscious as I can and focus on the matter at hand.

Okay.

He gives me an assessing look, like I should be more fearful of my name being exposed to the world, but what does he expect? I'm a model and a social media influencer. I'm already in the public eye and I'm used to the trolls who clamor out of their parents' basements to hate on me.

I type on my phone. Don't worry. I'll earn my keep.

He frowns.

I smile.

He frowns harder.

I tilt my head, my smile slipping.

What does he want me to say?

He's my boss, and I'm glad he's started making demands.

In fact, I now understand why I've been so on edge since Sullivan went radio-silent last week. What Henry and I did in the parking lot at the wedding was wrong. Sullivan threatening Henry so I could sign his contract was objectively wrong too, but I agreed to it. I gave my word and, for all this while, it felt like I still *owed* him. Like I left something unfinished.

I always pay my debts. When people realize I'm deaf and insist on giving me free stuff, I go back and settle the tab.

It's who I am.

Are we keeping the same story?

He nods.

What's the name of the show?

He types it and I cringe. It's the biggest network TV morning show, not just in the city but in the entire state.

I thought we were doing a casual interview, but if it's that grand of a statement, should I run upstairs and wear something different?

His eyes slide over my outfit in this slow, sensual way that makes my heart thrum between my ears and throat. I take stock of the alarming symptoms. Fluttering pulse. Flushing cheeks. An insane need to avert my gaze.

I think... Richard Sullivan is making me shy.

And I'm not shy at all. Growing up, I participated in talent shows every year, humiliating myself with poorly timed baton dances and poetry readings. Not to mention my ill-advised karate routine, now memorialized in a home video that will haunt me for life.

I *loved* standing in the spotlight, even as a kid.

As an adult, I'm used to being admired. Gawked at. Scrutinized by a camera.

Shy? Shy *where*?

And yet, in front of Richard Sullivan, my nerves twist into knots. The way he watches me isn't normal. Those eyes consume me like I'm intoxicating. The raw admiration, the way he doesn't bother to hide it, feels equal parts exhilarating and imposing.

To hide my growing awkwardness, I add,

I can wear something more conservative.

He shakes his head before typing:

Wear what you want. I pay my lawyers enough to bail me out if I get into a fight.

I don't know how to respond to that. Thankfully, I don't have to because Sullivan's watch flashes and he points his attention to the car.

That reminds me. There's someone I want you to meet.

Curious, I follow him to the town car. Inside the vehicle sits a pretty little girl with blonde hair and frosty blue eyes.

I wave hello.

She scowls.

Sullivan says something to her and the scowl gets even darker. He gestures for me to get in and I do. He closes the door behind me and climbs in on the other side so the little girl is in the middle seat.

Her hiked shoulders, scrunched nose, and the little scoot to get away from me all point to her disapproval. I try to ease the tension by creating a new note on my phone and showing her the screen.

You must be Sullivan's niece. Hi, I'm Yaya.

She glances at the note and then says something to her uncle. With her face turned away, I can't even try to lipread. However, that quick and guilty look Sullivan gives me right before his eyebrows tighten is enough of a clue.

She's not a fan.

First impressions really do matter and I aim to make the best ones.

Except for the one I made with Richard Sullivan, of course. His impression was of an unhinged woman who goes around smashing expensive cars with baseball bats.

But I love children and I really don't mind their questions about why I sign or why I wear hearing aids.

The little girl whirls to me, brows knotted in displeasure. She takes out her phone and grudgingly types in her notes app.

Talia.

I recognize the name immediately. At the rehab center, Lucy said that everything her brother was doing was for Talia.

So this is the most important girl in Sullivan's life.

She's something close to what I expected.

Blonde. Blue-eyed.

She's certainly pretty. And dripping in designer brands.

Those shoes on her tiny feet are from an Italian luxury line and so is the belt around her skirt. My eyes bug when I see her bag. The subtle logo dangling from the keychain is like catnip.

Is it wrong of me to feel jealous of a child?

Sullivan reaches over Talia to offer his phone to me, but the little girl swats at his hand. Her girlish pout screams annoyance. I guess she doesn't appreciate being the middleman in our pass-the-phone conversation.

I'm already anticipating that this will be a long, awkward drive when Sullivan lifts his hands and signs, "Sorry about my niece."

My heart nearly stops.

The last thing he signed to me was 'please', so I knew he was *aware* of sign language. Still, the fact that he nailed that sentence makes me unnaturally happy.

"You sign so well." I give him a pleased look.

"Not good yet."

That's objectively true. He's not using proper ASL grammar and it's clear he's uncomfortable using his hands to communicate, but I still think it's incredible.

"How long have you been learning?" I sign.

His movements are slow. He pauses and readjusts his fingers clumsily. "The day we met."

What does he mean by that? Why would he learn ASL after one encounter with me? Even if he planned on blackmailing me from the start,

it's an extra step and a lot of effort to learn another language.

Sullivan is staring at me, watching every muscle twitch in my face. I'm pretty sure all he sees is a cloud of confusion.

Talia tugs on his hand to get his attention. She swings his arm back and forth, telling him something. I put together that she's hungry when Sullivan pats his stomach and gives her a nod of assurance.

When his eyes meet mine, I'm ready for the question and I laugh a little when he makes a motion to his mouth.

Are you hungry?

That is *not* the sign for eat, but I have no problem with his use of gestures.

I shake my head.

Sullivan stops at a nearby McDonald's and orders. The smell of fried sausage and egg fills the car and my stomach grumbles. I pull out the apple I took from the fruit basket. It tastes like health and misery.

The *worst* part of modeling is watching my weight. I'm already considered 'plus sized' in the world of couture because of the muscle definition in my legs. After years of running track, my body looks nothing close to the size zero that designers favor.

Fast food is a big no-no. If I want carbs and animal fat, it's better to make it from home where I can control the ingredients.

Ugh. But that bacon is *calling* to me!

It doesn't help that Talia is going to town on her breakfast sandwich and shooting me snooty looks, rubbing my face in the fact that she has bacon and I don't.

I'm staring longingly at the sandwich that José is snacking on—per Sullivan's insistence—when Talia shakes a paper bag in front of me. Her sharp expression warns she's about to drop the food in my lap, so I quickly accept the offering.

Sullivan looks at me and mimics dipping a spoon into a bowl. I open the bag and notice that there's half a sandwich. Sullivan has the other half in his hand. He makes a 'breaking in half' motion and acts out 'eat' again.

My heart starts beating erratically.

The symptoms from earlier are back. Fluttering pulse. Flushed face. But this time, I blame it on the breakfast sandwich.

Talia finishes her meal while I nibble on mine after convincing myself that I'll only eat one quarter of the biscuit and a pinch of the bacon. I watch

as Sullivan cracks open a bottle of water for her and then hands her a napkin.

She tilts her face up to his, swinging her legs. He obliges, patiently wiping her face free of all crumbs. The gentle way he takes care of her shows another side to him. One that's unquestionably humane.

And attractive.

His eyes connect with mine and, for one dangerous second, I imagine what it would be like if he was looking at me all the time because he actually liked me.

But that's ridiculous.

Richard Sullivan does not like me.

He may think I'm hot.

He may want a night or two with me.

But *liking me* as a person? No way.

I am his prisoner. A means to an end. A diversity shield to cover the sins of his rich, entitled family.

It's ludicrous to even imagine that he might *care* for me.

And even if—by some slim chance—he does, there is no way I would be interested.

He's hearing.

I'm deaf.

It's simple, really.

But he keeps looking.

And, despite my best attempts, I keep looking at him too.

* * *

The network TV studio is more chaotic than what I'm used to for photoshoots. Frazzled crew members rush back and forth in the shadows. Up ahead is a giant platform with harsh lights and a bunch of windows where sightseers, fans and tourists are already gathered to watch.

A woman trots toward me in a sharp grey pantsuit and red heels. I recognize her from that day at the contract signing. Her eyes are much warmer today than they were last week.

"Hello, I'm Athena," she signs.

"I'm Yaya." I smile. "I remember you."

“Good. I don’t have time for a proper introduction. Come. We have a lot to do.”

I glance over my shoulder.

Sullivan is chatting with his assistant Mosely but, as if he can feel my eyes on him, he turns and gives me a little nod.

My heart thumps hard. I spin around, cutting off our contact, and follow Athena who’s power walking into another room.

“Are we late for something?” I sign.

“You have hair and makeup. Not because you don’t look lovely. You do. But makeup for TV requires a different application. Dare believed you’d need the prep.”

“Mr. Sullivan set this up?”

“Why do you look so surprised?” Athena doesn’t wait for me to sign a response. “Hurry. This way. We’re already late.”

I’m introduced to a makeup artist who doesn’t know sign but makes an effort to introduce herself via scribbles on a notebook.

“Do you want some water? Snacks?” Athena points to the corner where a spread lies. “Dare wanted the fridge stocked just in case.”

I notice all my favorite brands and wonder how Dare knew my preferences. Would someone who’s just using me go to so much trouble?

Don’t get soft, Yaya. He’s only being nice because he’s going to introduce you to the world as his girlfriend.

Right.

Exactly.

I need to remember that everything Sullivan does is for his own selfish gain. Even if it seems kind.

Jenny joins us while the makeup artist is working on me. She’s not alone. There’s a thick man with a balding head and twinkling eyes walking with her.

The makeup artist stops for a moment and Athena signs, “Yaya, this is Hassan Patel, your translator for today’s interview. He’ll be on stage with you to interpret in real time.”

My eyes widen. “I thought you or Jenny would be translating.”

“I’m not that comfortable on camera,” Jenny signs, blushing slightly.

“Patel has years of experience. He recently did TV interpretations for an actress in a very famous movie.”

My mouth forms an ‘O’.

“Don’t worry,” he signs with a smile, “my specialty is conveying a client’s unique personality and tone.”

I blink.

“Voicing is an art, especially in show business,” Athena signs. “Patel’s the best.”

“Did the TV network call him or did Mr. Sullivan...?”

“What do you think?” She shakes her head. “The TV network didn’t lift a finger. Dare did all the negotiations and it was chaos right until the very last moment. Patel almost didn’t make his flight. Dare had to send a private jet. Anyway... I won’t bore you with the details. The show must go on.” Her grin is strained, hinting at her exhaustion. Athena checks her watch and makes a pained face. “Alright, you need to finish your makeup and get out there.”

The makeup artist completes her work in a whirlwind, and I’m led back to the studio. The hosts are in place, but Sullivan is standing just beyond the lights.

He hands me his phone when I get closer.

This interview is about our relationship, but once the announcement has been made, you can discuss whatever you like.

What if I want to talk about you renting out a mountain to sign a contract with me?

His lips twitch. You can do that.

You trust that I won’t?

For better or for worse.

Marriage vows. You're not trying to change the contract on me, are you?
Turn this into a fake fiancée situation.

He smiles. Leans a little closer to me. His cologne swirls around me and makes it hard to concentrate on the phone,

Would you say yes?

Fluttering pulse.

Stop it.

Flushing cheeks.

For the love of... stop it.

Shyness.

Stupid, stupid shyness.

I deflect, which is cowardly, but necessary.

Isn't it time for our interview?

Before that, we need to discuss one more thing.

What? I type back.

Is it okay if I touch you?

My gaze shoots to Sullivan who is studying me with a throat-clenching intensity. He pulls in his bottom lip in a move that's both boyishly charming

and unwittingly sexy.

I gulp when he inches closer. The way he's looking at me, he might as well be touching me already. My body trembles in anticipation of whatever contact he wants to make.

This odd chemistry is raging out of control. I shouldn't risk getting physical.

Sullivan arches an eyebrow in a silent *well?*

Where would you like to touch me?

A feral glint enters his eyes. It's so heavy, so thick, so seductive that I have to turn away. But Sullivan places two fingers on my chin and guides my head back to look at him, obliterating my half-baked coping strategy.

He's close enough that I can lipread.

"There," he says.

I feel the heat in his gaze and try to control myself, but my breathing goes erratic when he drops his hand to my waist and jerks me into him.

"There."

The hardness of his body is shockingly intimate. His fingers are firm on my hip, marking me through the vinyl to my skin.

This proximity is nothing unfamiliar. I've been up close and personal, posing against strangers with far less clothes on.

And yet, I feel like a depraved mess, like someone about to be ravished.

It doesn't help that Sullivan looks ten times hotter with his face almost on top of mine. His dumb tweed jacket fits him way too well and his hands, well, they just *had* to be long and elegant and beautiful.

Why does a man have such big, beautiful hands?

He lowers his forehead to mine and the puff of breath that hits my lips feels like a kiss. Those chocolate eyes are almost glowing, an earthy brown swallowed up by black pupils.

The moment is too charged.

My heart is about to slam a hole in my ribs but, thankfully, Sullivan's attention is called away.

It's time for our interview.

Heat is running through every one of my veins and I'm sure my skin is smoking when I step on stage.

"You look nervous," Patel signs as he sits in the chair across from me.

I give him a tight-lipped smile. "It's my first time on network television."

That's a big fat *lie*.

I have no problems being in front of the camera, whether it's for a photoshoot, commercial work or an interview. The lights and the attention have never scared me.

No, my racing pulse has *everything* to do with the man sitting calmly beside me on the giant purple couch, phone screen tilted my way so only I can see the question mark typed there.

He's still waiting for consent.

I take the phone from him and type:

Go for it.

He looks at me and smiles dangerously.

Uh-oh. What did I just agree to?

Sullivan is close. Too close.

His knee is pressing into mine and, since I'm wearing a short skirt, there's only one layer of fabric between his skin and mine.

Focus, Yaya.

To give my brain something else to gnaw on, I make eye contact with the hosts. There's a blonde woman wearing red lipstick and a dark-skinned man with the shoulders of a pro football player. They introduce themselves through Patel and their smiles are kind.

This will be a pleasant interview.

The cameras start rolling and the hosts turn 'on'. I observe their overly wide smiles, rigid backs, and the little vein in their neck that pops out as they speak. Whatever they're saying and however they're saying it, isn't natural. But I'm sure that's show business.

The camera swings to me and Sullivan. I focus on what Patel signs and realize that Dare is taking the lead on the questions about our relationship.

I'm glad because it gives me time to get myself together.

"So, Yaya," Patel signs, and I divert my attention between him and the female host in as natural a way as possible, "how does it feel to have snatched a man like Richard Sullivan off the market?"

I laugh, giving myself time to come up with an answer.

Patel signs, "Oh trust me. She's the catch."

I look over at Sullivan and he winks. Calm, in control. He makes this farce of a relationship seem so effortless.

Not to be outdone, I sign with an adoring smile in his direction, "I'd say we complement each other well. I'm the more high-strung one. I always need to know what's going on. He's the one who takes care of things in the background and tells me to relax. He makes me feel like it's all going to be okay."

Sullivan slides a hand over my shoulder, his thumb grazing the curve of my sleeve. His touch chases away what was left of my nerves but leaves behind something equally hot and perplexing.

We hold eye contact for too long because he eventually jerks his attention away from me and laughs with a hint of sheepishness. The host says something and he laughs again. This time, his hand lands on my thigh.

My eyes flicker to his pale fingers wrapping possessively around my leg and I can't bring myself to hate it. In fact, I... the *opposite of hate* it.

I *the opposite of hate* it a lot.

But that's as far as I'll go. I'm human, and having a physical reaction to a handsome man—whether that man is hearing or not—is all biology. Out of my control.

Then Sullivan sweeps his thumb back and forth on my inner thigh and my stomach does a somersault while my heart reveals its half-woodpecker as it jackhammers against my ribs.

I'm going to combust. I will burst into flames if that man brings his hands any higher up my leg.

Desperately, I tangle our fingers together, placing our joined hands on his knee where it's safe.

That's when Patel motions to me.

"Yaya, have you dated a hearing person before?"

"This is my first time," I sign.

"Was it difficult to communicate?" Patel's hands move swiftly.

I keep my eyes on the interviewers. “At first. But humans are extremely adaptable. If there’s a will, there’s a way. We both want to be close to each other, so we both find ways to communicate.”

Sullivan surprises me by signing, “I’m still learning ASL, but every time I learn something new, I feel closer to her.”

Flustered, I lick my lips.

It’s unfair, really. Every time I build a defense against my attraction to Richard Sullivan, he signs and it destroys everything. Watching his clunky ASL, I begin to understand how that little piggy in the fable felt. When Mr. Pig built his straw mansion, he was probably very sure of himself, never expecting that a Big Bad Wolf would huff and puff and sign the word ‘blow’ until his house fell down.

“Say something else in ASL,” Patel signs on behalf of the eager hosts. “It’s such a beautiful language. Because that’s what it is, isn’t it? It’s a language.”

I smile for the camera and hope to Chanel and Gucci and Valentino that my makeup isn’t sweating off.

Sullivan lifts both hands in an ‘alright, alright’ gesture. He angles his body on the couch so I see him better. I feel dizzy while I wait. What is he going to say? I really hope it’s nothing as over-the-top as ‘I love you’.

“I’ve learned in studying ASL,” Sullivan signs in a slow, determined manner, as if he really wants to get the sentence right, “that you should always be facing the person you’re signing with...”

I hold my breath and my pulse becomes a stabbing rhythm in my wrist.

“... if you don’t, they won’t see you and then they won’t understand you. Words will get lost. Meaning will die.”

Will die? I don’t think that’s the right sign, but I don’t correct him.

He’s leaning closer. Only a few inches separate us.

I inhale the notes of his cologne—something smoky with a hint of cinnamon.

The disloyal organ in my chest stutters dangerously.

“Yaya.” He finger spells my name fluently, easily, as if he’s practiced how to sign my name a hundred times. “Even when you’re not looking at me, I will always be facing you.”

I can feel the underlying promise, something solid, something unexpectedly vulnerable.

And it’s that vulnerability that calls to me.

That makes me press one hand into the couch and lean over.

That makes me brush my fingers across his jaw and along the back of his neck.

That makes me close my eyes...

And kiss him.

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CHAPTER 9

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who i am

DARE

I was still trying to understand why I felt the things I did for Yaya when it happened.

The kiss.

I knew some things. A few things, actually.

That she was a vision, a timeless and unquestionable beauty. Full of passion and soul and intellect.

I knew that learning sign language was going to be paramount to turning this fake relationship into a real one.

I knew she would play her part well for the camera, even if her feelings for me are decidedly not romantic.

What I did not know, what I was completely unprepared for, was how... humbled, yes, *humbled* is the only word that comes close—I felt when her lips brushed mine.

It wasn't a long kiss or a particularly passionate one.

Her lips were gentle as they touched my shocked mouth, her bottom lip making an upward and cupping motion that showed far more tenderness than expected.

I didn't have time to kiss her back.

Frozen.

Dazed.

Awed.

Like a man who spent all his life studying the skies, suddenly given a chance to walk on the moon. When falling amongst the stars, well, there's really no way to be anything but moved.

Yaya retreats and flashes a smile that clothing brands and makeup companies should be lining up for. Swinging one leg over the other, her eyes turn cool. Body language, all languid confidence. She seems to dismiss the kiss that rocked my world with every flap of those eyelids.

And yet, I'm the one sitting there with my body still turned to hers and my heart racing on national television.

"Richard," the host laughingly waves her card in front of my face, "you still with us?"

Her male co-host makes a joke about how in love I am.

Yaya laughs.

"... Sullivan... businesses... family legacy..."

The hosts are talking.

The words fly over my head.

Patel keeps looking at me. I'm being prompted to say something witty and light-hearted, but the composure I pride myself on is gone, trapped somewhere in the back of my throat.

Yaya flips her hair over her shoulder and bats those pretty brown eyes at me.

Damned hypnotic.

She comes from sirens, I'm sure of it. I imagine her ancestors, part human-part fish, luring sailors to their untimely deaths. There's some of it in her now. Some magic.

Yaya scoots closer to me and runs dark fingers down my arm in a move probably meant to be soothing, but it turns my blood to fire instead. Her eyebrows rise in inquiry. She squeezes my shoulder in a subtle but clear instruction. *What are you doing? Get your head in the game.*

I snap back to myself.

Eager.

Obedient.

I live for her commands.

So dangerous.

Who the hell have I become?

The interview continues without a hitch. Yaya seems more comfortable after the kiss and, through Patel, contributes more to the conversation.

I'm hoping the hosts will ask more substantial questions about her work as a model and her experience as a deaf social media influencer, but the topic stays locked around my family and my relationship. It's clear they're here for me, not for Yaya.

It annoys me, but Yaya takes it in stride. She holds herself well, answers questions charmingly, and tilts her head, listening keenly with her eyes flitting between the interpreter and whoever is speaking.

By the time the interview is finished, she's won over both hosts with her beautiful smile and genuine personality. They shake her hand and promise to follow her on social media.

"The internet loves you." Mosely approaches us when we leave the stage, eyes brighter than I've ever seen. "Look at this." He turns the tablet around so Yaya can read the comments.

@druigforlvfe: She looks so stunning! I wish I was so pretty!

@crissy53e433: Her facial expressions thoooo! So adorable!!! Even I can't make that many facial expressions in a minute.

@sylviestan70: the way she expresses her emotions through her facials is INTOXICATING

@savemetonight89934: for someone deaf her expression is lively and adorable

"Patel was voicing, but all the people at home could look at was you," Athena says, coming to stand with us. She signs, "Even I believed you two were star-crossed lovers."

Yaya does a little curtsy.

The excitement I felt turns to ash in my stomach. Everyone is celebrating how well we lied, how impressive our performance was. The truth is harsh. Yaya might have kissed me, but it wasn't because I've made any progress gaining her trust.

Disappointment delivers a swift kick between the legs and, like that man on the moon hurtling back to earth, I get dragged back to reality.

"Where's Talia?" I ask Mosely, hoping to change the subject. Beside me, I notice both Patel and Athena lifting their hands to interpret.

The two laugh and Patel proceeds to interpret for Yaya.

"As per your instruction, I personally escorted her through the school doors."

"Did she give you any trouble?"

"Uh," his eyes cast to the ground, "not more than usual."

Great.

“Is something wrong?” Yaya signs.

I stop Athena before she interprets for me. I recognized the motion for ‘wrong’ and guessed Yaya’s meaning by the context.

“No,” I sign. “Later. Talk.”

I’m not the best at ASL, but Yaya nods. At least I got the message across.

Athena observes my pitiful ASL prowess and gives me a secret smile.

Patel looks amused.

I ignore all of them and make a walking away gesture to Yaya. She signs her response—which I don’t understand and then waves goodbye—a gesture which I do understand.

Mosely walks with me, knowing what I want to ask before I ask it. “It worked, sir,” he says in a low voice. “The interview is trending online, and it buried our PR statement regarding Lucy’s... current activities.”

“And Lucy’s video?”

“Nothing can be truly scrubbed from the internet,” Mosely whispers, “but I can assure you that everyone is more interested in your mysterious girlfriend than in your sister’s rocky path to sobriety.” He shows me his phone. “And on that note, I’ve just received an invitation from the Social Hum Magazine.”

“They want a spread?” My eyebrows arch.

“Yes, I was surprised as well. I believe whoever they had scheduled was kicked off to accommodate a much bigger story. Do you want to take it? Photoshoot only. Their photographer is in the city. The PR team can type up an approved information packet. You wouldn’t need to do a personal interview.”

It won’t hurt to hammer in our story with a magazine shoot.

I check my watch. “When’s my meeting with Cullen Tech?”

“They’re... uh... flexible.”

There’s a small beat of discomfort for both of us.

“Can we move it to this afternoon?”

“I’ll see it done.” Mosely walks off.

When I turn around, Yaya and Patel are gone, but Athena is waiting for me.

“Well done, Dare,” she says, a twinkle in her eye. “I think you made her waver.”

“Not enough that she’ll admit it.”

“Be patient.” She pats my shoulder in a motherly fashion. “Pushing too hard might cause more damage than help.”

“It’s hard to be patient when she’s kissing me on national television,” I murmur.

“Take it as a good sign.”

Laughter rings out. Yaya and Patel are in the hallway that leads to the bathrooms. She’s smiling at him and, even if I know it’s harmless, I still feel jealous.

Athena’s voice pierces my focus. “Dare?”

“You have any more advice for me?”

“Don’t over-coddle her. She’s a normal person. Treat her like one.”

“She’s more than just a ‘normal’ person to me. I want to spoil her.”

“Not yet,” Athena says firmly. “No matter how strong she is, she’s still sensitive about the differences between you. It won’t take much to step on a nerve and you don’t know her well enough to avoid those triggers yet.”

“Got anything more concrete? Something I can actually *do*?”

Yaya and Patel walk in our direction.

“I think you’re already doing that. Learning sign language was the right call.” Athena tilts her head up at me and smirks. “It doesn’t hurt that you’re rich and handsome.”

Patel and Yaya arrive, cutting our conversation short.

“What are you two whispering about?” Patel signs as he speaks.

“The weather,” I sign.

Athena laughs.

Yaya leaks the same quietly pleased smile she did in the car when I signed to ask if she was hungry.

Unfortunately, I can’t say all I need to with the limited sign language I know. Taking out my phone, I shake it back and forth.

She rolls her eyes but takes out her phone and waves it back.

“I guess we should let you two talk then,” Athena says.

Athena and Patel leave while I type my message to Yaya.

Do you have time tomorrow? Mosely scheduled a magazine photoshoot.

Sounds fun.

Glad you think so. Good job on the interview by the way.

I watch Yaya closely but all she does is nod and type, Where's Talia?

School.

Is she okay? I got the vibe that she didn't like me.

I start to type and then erase it, not sure what to say.

It's not you. She's upset with me.

Talia didn't speak to me last night and sniffled all through breakfast. I would have caved to her like I usually do, but I called Miss Abbot, her teacher, to get more information about her infraction at school. Turns out, my niece violated their zero-bullying policy.

I haven't decided how I'm going to punish her yet and I think the wait affects her as much as if I'd grounded her for a week.

Talia got in trouble yesterday. Someone accidentally spilled juice on her sneakers, so she pushed them down and called them a 'waste of oxygen'.

Yaya flinches.

I type, I requested a meeting at her school to discuss.

Do you want me to come with you?

The offer stuns me and it must show on my face because she adds,

You needed a fake girlfriend to convince your sister to leave Talia with you, right? That means I'm half responsible for your niece now.

It's a refreshingly mature and selfless take. She might as well have put those lips on my heart this time.

"Thank you," I sign.

She smiles.

I smile back.

Mosely appears, huffing and puffing. Jenny is beside him. "José brought the car around. Jenny will take Yaya home. Sir, we need to get moving before we're late."

Yaya's eyebrows twitch.

I frown in displeasure too.

"Sir," Mosely motions to me, "traffic's already clogged. We need to go."

I don't want to leave, but I force myself to turn to Yaya and sign, "Text you. Night?"

Her smile looks unsure, but then she nods.

Baby steps.

* * *

Cancer patients shouldn't be in boardroom meetings, but no one told Cullen that. Or maybe they did and he didn't listen. The coding genius is sitting across from me, an IV drip dragging behind him.

A warm cap covers his bald head and he's wearing fleece in ninety-degree weather.

Guy's seven years my junior. Too young to have been through so much.

"Why are we back to this argument? Mr. Cullen and I ran through the projections with the R&D team. The gap in the market for aerospace satellite data is ripe for the taking."

"It's too risky," Carmichael whines. He's the one dad put on the board for the sole purpose of rejecting all my proposals. At least, that's what I tell myself when the temptation to make an executive decision and kick him off the board becomes too great.

"Life is a risk," Cullen says, his eyes glinting darkly. Sickness hasn't knocked out that cocky Irish determination. Another reason why I like him. "No risks, no reward."

"Big risks. Big consequences."

"You can't live your life being afraid," Cullen snaps back.

I laugh silently.

Carmichael 0, Cullen 1.

I should buy this guy a beer when he's better.

Clearly frazzled, Carmichael scoffs and pins me with an accusing look. "I don't understand why he's *in* this meeting." The old man digs his talons into the hand rests. "Cullen Tech is gone. I saw the acquisition documents myself." His evil eyes land on me. "You got your toy, Sullivan. Why don't you just play quietly in the corner?"

My back stiffens. If dad didn't tell me to respect these old men around the table, I'd have security pick Carmichael up by his collar and toss him to the street.

Cullen grits his teeth, a muscle in his jaw locking.

I notice and try my best to ease the tension. "Correction, Cullen Tech and I are partners."

"I don't know of any *partner* who paid as much as you did for a lousy company like that," Carmichael mutters. "The board hasn't agreed to greenlight this project. And say we do, by some miracle, you still need to pass this proposal to the National Defense Committee, and there's no way they'll say yes."

"There's always a way," Cullen hisses.

"But is it the *right* way?" Carmichael fires back. "There are easier paths to making money."

"You know what's on the road to making easy money, Carmichael?"

He stares at me.

I wait.

His eyes narrow into a chilly glare. “What?”

“A crowd.” I drum my fingers on the desk. “I don’t like crowds. They’re loud. Abrasive. They lack innovation. A crowd wants to be told what to think. But me? Not much of a rule follower.”

Leaning back in my chair, I meet Carmichael’s challenging stare with a calm one. “This isn’t a meeting to discuss whether we go forward or not. This is a meeting to brainstorm ways in which the company we have *partnered with* has a better chance at success.”

My phone pings while Carmichael starts whining again. Glad for an excuse to tune out, I check the notification.

YayaOnDemand follows you back.

I sit straight up so fast my chair creaks.

“Yes!” I pump my fist.

At once, a dozen pairs of eyes shoot at me.

Cullen blinks in confusion.

Carmichael snorts.

Mosely gives me a *what’s going on?* look.

I clear my throat. “Gentlemen, this conversation is not going anywhere, and Mr. Cullen needs to return to the hospital. Since you’re all reluctant to discuss, Cullen Tech and I will continue to run point on this project. If I need the board’s opinion, I’ll ask for it.”

Carmichael’s eyes darken. He hears the dismissal.

Cullen nods at me.

“Mosely,” I turn, “please see to it that Cullen reaches the hospital safely?”

“Yes, sir.”

The room clears out, but Cullen walks over, pushing his IV bag. “I’ve got a new angle. I’ll try coding the blocked infrastructure for a fresh response.”

“Don’t overtax yourself.” I reach out to give him a handshake.

“Death isn’t ready for me yet. I’m eager to put in some real work.” He gives my hand a dark look before offering the kind of squeeze a germaphobe would give to a bacteria-infested toilet.

Like most of the coding geniuses I’ve met, Cullen is withdrawn and socially awkward. It doesn’t help that he’s on edge because of the disease

that ravaged his body. But he's a brilliant mind. Stubborn too. He refused to give up his company completely and I respected that fight.

I pull back the hand Cullen barely touched. "Let me know if there's anything you need."

Mosely gives me another curious look before he sees Cullen out. The moment I'm alone, I lean back in my chair, lift the phone in the air and stare at the notification.

Finally.

A victorious grin spreads on my face as I tap on Yaya's profile. She posted a photo of us at the TV studio. I'm staring at her like if I look away she might disappear. In contrast, she's sitting confidently, shoulders back and hands lifted mid-sign.

I press the heart beneath it.

There's a knock on the door.

"Mr. Sullivan?" My secretary pokes her head in.

"Call me Dare. Mr. Sullivan was my father," I murmur by rote, still looking at Yaya's profile.

"You have a visitor."

I snap to attention. "A visitor?"

"Yes, sir. I-I told him you were busy, but he said you'd want to speak to him."

My secretary is new and still unsure about how things work around here. It doesn't surprise me that she let someone in. Instead, I'm stunned that my bodyguard didn't keep him out.

"Who is he?"

"Um," she nibbles on her bottom lip, "he says his name is Sazuki."

* * *

Family legacy is both a blessing and a curse.

Nothing can lock a chain around your neck faster than living life under the shadow of—not only your father, but your father's father and the fathers who came before him.

I know what it's like to walk into a room and realize the eyes on me are seeing someone else. The last name. The empire. The person I should be.

I've always rebelled against that.

In little ways.

Going by 'Dare' instead of 'Mr. Sullivan'.

Choosing investments I truly believe in rather than the expected Silicon Valley cash grabs.

Staying away from the tabloids, dating rumors, and scandals that so often come with the territory of being an heir.

Every word, every action, every choice since I was eighteen years old was carefully selected to send one message: 'I speak for me. Not for the dead'.

But the man standing in the center of my office doesn't share that struggle.

I can see it. The rigid lines of his shoulders, the hand draped casually in his coat pocket. The way he turns, just barely, as if this is his office and I'm the one who needs to knock before I enter.

Ryotaro Sazuki did not spend the majority of his existence trying to throw off the weight of his family's legacy. He wears it like armor. Like royal clothes, draped over his skin. Like a sword.

It's sad that he came here to fight.

I would love to learn how he does it.

"Mr. Sazuki." My voice is welcoming, but there's no smile on my face. "What a nice surprise."

"You don't seem surprised."

"No, I suppose not." I walk over to the coffee bar. Mosely makes a terrible brew so I do it myself. "There are only two reasons a recluse like you would show up in my office." I snap in the coffee packet and push the tab. The mechanic whirr of the espresso machine fills the room. "And something tells me this has nothing to do with my offer to invest in the Sazuki Foundation."

"No, we do not need your investment," he says. His voice is crisp. The accent hovering just beneath makes him ten times scarier. His all-black get-up helps in the intimidation factor.

Not that he needed much help to look like a mercenary.

Sazuki's tall and sharp-looking with skin so pale I want to share my sunscreen routine. I doubt he'd accept my help, but I know a little something about sunburn.

"You don't need *any* investments? Or just *my* investment in particular?" I'd take the time to make a little foam art, but I don't think Sazuki would

allow me the concentration. Calmly, I lift the cup and take a sip.

One corner of his lips hikes up. It's a barely-there smirk. And something tells me it's not really a smile of approval either.

He walks over to the desk and picks up a picture of Talia.

I stiffen immediately.

"If you were anyone else," Sazuki says crisply, "I would offer you money to go away quietly and quickly." He sets the photo down and faces me, his jacket whipping behind him. "But unfortunately, people who have more money than they need make discussions like this quite difficult."

I set my coffee down, most of it untouched. "And what kind of discussion is this exactly?"

"Perhaps 'discussion' was the wrong word choice. Think of it more," he waves a hand casually, "as a warning."

My smile turns dark. "I'm honored that you would come all the way here to warn me, but you're wasting your breath."

"I waste nothing, Mr. Sullivan. It's not how I was raised."

If this were another conversation, I'd tell him to at least drop the 'Mr.', but I doubt he'd oblige. "Then let me answer the question before you ask. I don't plan on leaving Yaya's side."

"Like I said," he sighs heavily, "I expected this to be difficult."

"Glad we're on the same page."

"What exactly are you after?" Sazuki folds his arms over his chest languidly. On anyone else, it would be a defensive move. A sign that he's been rattled. On him, it seems more like a parent interrogating a child who stole money.

"Would you believe it if I said 'her heart'?"

His expression remains blank. "You can be honest now, Mr. Sullivan. The cameras are gone."

I chuckle.

He doesn't.

I curb my amusement. "Someday, and I know this seems hard to believe in the moment, we're going to laugh about this."

"I doubt it."

"Lucky for you, I love when people doubt me. Fuel to the fire."

Sazuki looks at me like I'm detestable. "You're toying with her."

"And you're overstepping your bounds. I don't know how they do things in Japan," I lean against the desk because something tells me I don't

need to be sitting while he's standing, that power imbalance would only give him the edge, "but here in this country, people are free to make their own choices without interference."

"Family interference."

I stare into his expressionless face and realize I might be playing checkers while this guy is playing professional-level chess.

Sazuki's eyes are blade-like. Totally devoid of emotion but sharp as hell. "I'm well aware, Mr. Sullivan, of how you've chosen to bind my sister-in-law to you."

Guilt strikes hard and fast, but I keep it from my face. Sazuki is a fox who'll sniff out any sign of weakness. "Whatever agreement I've made is between me and Yaya alone."

"That is where you are wrong." He takes a step forward, stealthy and dangerous. "There is nothing that she does alone. There is nothing she endures alone. She is, by definition, *not* alone, Mr. Sullivan."

He glares.

I hold his stare.

Sazuki shifts his weight and turns to the door, but him breaking our staredown first doesn't feel like a win.

"If you want to punish her for what happened with your car, go through the proper means."

"Who said—"

"I know how people like us think." Inky black hair falls into eyes that see a memory, not me. I wonder if he's remembering—and regretting—what he did to his now wife. I heard he wasn't... gentle when he pursued her.

"I'll be watching you," Sazuki adds.

My smirk is lethal. "Enjoy the view."

Sazuki walks out, more of an enemy than ever before. I should have been nicer. If I have my way, he'll be my brother-in-law someday.

But what should I have done?

He declared war first.

"Sir, there's a scary ninja lady standing outside your—" Mosely bursts through the door almost barreling into Sazuki. He side-steps by pure instinct and pastes himself flat to the door so the piano prodigy can pass.

When Sazuki's gone, Mosely scrambles toward me. "Was that...?"

"Yep."

“You mean...”

“Yes.”

Mosely’s jaw drops and he stares at Sazuki’s retreating back. “Your father loved their music. He died listening to Sazuki’s song.”

“Yeah, well, I might die doing the same,” I mumble.

Mosely frowns at me. “That visit was about Yaya?”

I pick up my coffee, but it’s cold now. “I didn’t expect to take her without a fight. Sazuki knows how we met. And, unlike Lucy, he knows we never met before then. Fooling him and his wife wasn’t an option.”

“He didn’t look like he was ready to give his blessing.”

“I told him to mind his business.”

“I strongly encourage you not to make Sazuki an enemy.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” I say, rounding the desk.

“Alistair. Hastings. Stinton. Those names ring any bells?”

“Of course they do.” I wake my computer and pull up a file. Alistair is a well-known tech billionaire with a bit more people skills than Cullen, which isn’t saying much. Hastings is military royalty and Stinton comes from a long line of loaded jerks. I can only assume he’s equally loaded and equally a jerk.

“Sazuki’s close. To all of them. They’re like a mean girl clique. You want to break into that group. You don’t want them turning on you.”

“I hated cliques in high school.”

“Sir...”

“Dare.”

“Mr. Sullivan.”

“Call me ‘Dare’, Mosely.”

“You *are* not Dare. Not when you sit in that chair. Not when you head the company your father sweated and bled to establish.”

“I am not my father.”

“No, you are not.” Mosely’s voice is tight. “He looked at the bigger picture. He would never risk it over some...”

“Some what?” I arch a brow. “Some girl?”

Mosely inhales deeply. “You have no connections with the real power in this city. I’m sorry for speaking out of turn, but I don’t want to see you ruined before you begin.”

“Don’t apologize for being honest, Mosely. I prefer that to fake smiles and ‘yes, sir’s.”

Mosely steps closer to my desk. “You’re already taking a big risk with Cullen Tech. Sinking millions into a project that big with a timeframe so out of reach puts all your subsidiaries at risk.”

I drum my fingers on the desk, letting his words sink in. Mosely thinks like dad. It’s why I respect him.

“Cullen Tech is a calculated risk. I believe Cullen has the capacity to make aerial AI happen in two years rather than six.”

“That’s if he lives for two years,” he mutters under his breath.

I slant Mosely a sharp look.

There’s a soft, feeble knock at the door.

“Come in!” Mosely calls irritably.

“Uh, Mr. Sull—Dare,” my receptionist pokes her head in and gives me a wide-eyed look, “we have a problem.”

“What now?” I grumble. Pushing myself up, I stalk around the desk.

Mosely shuffles along. “It must be Sazuki.”

“No, it’s not.”

“We’re getting sued.”

“For what?”

“Do you think they need a reason? If he wants a problem, he can make one.”

“This isn’t Sazuki.”

“How are you so sure?”

“He gave me a warning.”

“So?”

“He’s smart. Too smart to make a move this fast. He plans on giving me time to do what he asked me.”

I’m certain there was a part of him that didn’t want to start a war. Or maybe that was me projecting since I really do plan to be his family someday and I’d hate to turn this romance into a Romeo and Juliet thing.

“Sir.” The receptionist points to her tablet. It shows footage from a security camera. A familiar man with a ponytail is picketing on the sidewalk. He’s wearing a placard that says ‘EXPLAIN YOUR CRIMES’. In his hand is a hoisted sign that reads ‘SULLIVAN EXPLOITS WOMEN’.

“If not Sazuki then, who is this?” Mosely cries.

I smirk, my eyes sharpening with interest. “That’s the guy who gave me the opportunity to exploit a woman.”

The receptionist’s expression turns horrified.

Mosely chokes.

Chuckling softly, I pat my assistant on the back. “Get Jenny here and then send him up.”

“Up? As in... you want to talk to him?”

“I won’t repeat myself, Mosely.”

Once I’m alone in my office, I get to work on the espresso machine. The air is filled with the fragrant scent of coffee by the time Jenny arrives. When my security team drags Henry into my office, there are already three cups on the coffee table.

Jenny squirms as Henry enters—well, ‘enters’ is the polite way to describe it. He tries to lunge at me, but my bodyguard is right there to stop him. With two fingers, I gesture for security to back away.

“You can’t do this,” Henry says. His voice is similar to Yaya’s in cadence with a slur around his vowels. “I have rights.”

“Jenny.” I gesture to the interpreter. “This is Henry. Yaya’s friend. Would the both of you like coffee? I just made a brew.”

She signs to Henry.

The moment Henry sees that an interpreter is present, his shoulders drop a smidge. He faces her fully, his eyebrows tightening and then tightening even more.

“Have a seat, Henry. Can I call you Henry?”

Jenny interprets and Henry hesitantly leans his placard against the chair before folding himself into it. He starts signing. His body language, as well as his angry gaze, tells me he’s not singing my praises.

Jenny stands slightly behind him, eyes trained on what he’s signing. I wait without rushing them, knowing from my experience with Yaya that Jenny will relay his words to me as accurately and professionally as possible.

“I’m going to repay you for what you did,” Jenny interprets.

“Ah. Threats.” I slide the coffee over, realize they’ll need their hands to sign, and ask, “Do either of you want a straw?”

Jenny conveys my offer to Henry who glowers at me. I’m guessing that’s a no.

I jut my chin at her *you*?

Jenny shakes her head nervously. At any moment, she might faint. Athena really should have sent someone with more gumption. Or at least someone who didn’t wear her emotions on her sleeve. Though I guess,

that's what makes Jenny so effective as an interpreter. She somehow manages to come across as both competent and emotionally invested.

Henry signs, his eyes piercing me with fury.

"I'm the one who destroyed your car and if anyone should pay for it, it's me." Jenny pauses to watch Henry again. "Yaya would never date a hearing person. I know you threatened her, and I'll make sure the world knows what kind of man you are."

What kind of man I am.

After dad died, there was a period where I asked myself that very question. Who was I without my rock?

A workaholic.

Someone desperate to make a name for himself and failing.

Someone who couldn't stop working, traveling, *going* for a second or the loneliness would engulf him.

My phone buzzes.

Yaya: If you cancel the contract, you're dead.

Something electric snaps through my heart and I set the phone down calmly.

"You want to know who I am, Henry?"

Henry frowns at me.

"I." I sign what Athena taught me. "Am. Yaya's. Boyfriend."

Nostrils flaring, Henry shoots to his feet.

My bodyguard steps forward threateningly.

I hold a hand to stall him.

Facing Henry again, I smile. "Now," I gesture to the chair, indicating he should sit, "let me show you what that means."

CHAPTER 10

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a galaxy away

YAYA

Mom's head volleys back and forth as DeeJ and I argue. She's not as fluent as dad, and they've both been getting rusty since I moved away.

DeeJ's new daughter is deaf, so she's had plenty of opportunities to brush up on her sign language.

Sadly, my sister is mistaking me for Niko.

"You don't get to decide what I do and do not agree to," I sign. "I know what I'm doing."

"Obviously not if you thought selling your body was the right call."

"I did not 'sell my body'."

"You think Richard Sullivan wanted a 'fake' girlfriend without the benefits? Don't be naive, Yaya."

"Oh? I'm 'naive' now. Just because I didn't do things your way?"

"This is about doing things with common sense." DeeJ's eyes are wide. "He used you."

"We used each other. It's not like he put a gun to my head."

"Why are you taking up for him? Did he threaten you with something else? Something we don't know about?"

"No, he didn't."

"Tell us the truth, Yaya."

"I am! Why won't you believe me?"

"Because you lied to me! And we don't lie to each other. Ever."

“I didn’t lie. I just... didn’t share all the information. It’s different.”

The tension in the air thickens.

Dejonae’s chest heaves with every tortured breath.

My own chest feels like it will explode.

I hate fighting with my sister.

The same is true for Dejonae, I’m sure.

But we’re too stubborn to stop.

Dad shuffles into my line of sight. His smile is tinged in awkwardness as he signs, “Yaya, Dejonae, why don’t we all calm down?”

Dejonae speaks and I can only guess what she’s saying.

Don’t bother, dad. She’s obviously made up her mind.

Don’t interrupt, dad. I’m not done fighting yet.

My eyes snap past dad to attack my sister. Dejonae knows I hate it when we’re in the middle of an argument and she voices. It’s the equivalent of me looking away from her when she’s signing.

It’s rude.

But my sister doesn’t care that she’s breaking the rules. She’s pissed. Her eyes are spitting the kind of heat you’d find in hell. I have no doubt she’s already made a power move to intimidate Sullivan. More than likely, Sazuki is doing her dirty work since she’s here fighting with me.

Earlier, I sent Sullivan a text warning him not to make a decision without me. It’s bad enough that my sister wants to control me. I won’t have anyone else speaking for me. If the contract gets cancelled, it’ll be by my own hands, dammit!

“Dad, mom. Talk to her please,” DeeJ signs.

Mom gives dad a strained look.

Dad pulls his lips into his mouth and rests his hands on his stomach.

DeeJ rolls her eyes in a sarcastic *great*. Her honey-tinged curls swing as she turns her head.

I hold myself perfectly still when everything inside me wants to pace. “You know why I didn’t say anything?”

DeeJ tips her chin up in defiance. She won’t ask me why, but I’m going to tell her anyway.

“Because I knew you’d do this.”

“Do what?”

“Freak out.”

“Then stop doing things that cause me to freak out and I won’t freak out.”

“I can’t live my life for you. I can’t live for anyone but myself.” I tap my chest twice to emphasize the statement.

Dejonae closes her eyes, takes another visible breath and approaches me like I’m a glowing bomb. “I am not the enemy here. And if Sullivan is the one who made you think you have to turn against your family to have him, then he’s a really bad guy.”

For the love of Chanel.

“Dare is not turning me against anyone,” I sign. “He’s not the reason we’re arguing right now.”

“Fine then. You tell me why we’re arguing right now.”

“Because the first thing you did when you saw my interview this morning was assume I was getting blackmailed.”

“Aren’t you?”

Yes, but that’s not the point. “Being deaf doesn’t automatically make me the victim. Assuming I’m the damsel in distress shouldn’t be your default setting. I’m an adult. I can go to jail if I commit a crime.”

“I know that.”

“Then you should trust me.”

“I do trust you.”

“If you did, you would have come talk to me instead of bringing mom and dad to ambush me.”

Dejonae glances away, her lips pursed.

I wait until she’s looking at me again. “You did the same thing when I told you I was leaving to go model.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.” I sign. “Mom and dad were more supportive than you were.”

“Moving halfway across the country, far from family and friends was a risky move. I was looking out for you.”

“You were coddling me.”

Dejonae’s eyes glisten with angry tears. “I would die for you. It’s what family does. You think Richard Sullivan would die for you?”

A painful twinge hits my chest.

Deej insists, “This is different than when you moved away. Someone is intentionally trying to threaten my sister. I’m not going to let that happen.”

Ugh!

I turn around because she's not listening to me.

No one is listening to me.

I huff out a breath.

Dad walks up and signs, "I'll let you ladies work this out." He squeezes my shoulder and leans over to kiss my forehead. "If you're really interested in that man, bring him over for dinner and let us meet him."

"Meet him or grill him?" I sign.

"A little of both." He makes a so-so gesture. "But if DeeJ is right and he's threatening you..." my father pauses and a dark expression that we rarely ever see, crosses his jovial face, "I'll deal with him."

I know he will.

Dad goes around kissing DeJona's head and then giving mom a kiss on the lips.

When we're alone, mom signs, "Let's talk in the kitchen. Yaya, you're on vegetable duty. DeJona, you're assembling."

"I'm not hungry," I sign.

Mom gives me a sharp look and I immediately get in line behind my sister.

In the kitchen, mom shoves a package of lettuce in my hands. DeJona gets the bread from the cupboard.

Mom fires up the stove and, soon, the smell of frying meat fills the air.

I crack the lettuce, my back turned to both of them. The repetitive motion of tearing and washing calms me.

When I'm done, mom takes the bowl and sets it in front of DeJona who already has the bread loaves slathered in condiments.

Mom's beautiful face is calm, not a hint of her true thoughts shining through. I watch her, sensing she's about to say something.

Finally, she does.

"Why didn't you tell us?" she signs.

"I wanted to solve it myself." My heart is beating fast. Now that the adrenaline spike is gone, all that's left is this awful, sludgy feeling. Like the mud left after a hurricane.

"So it was pride?"

"Protection." I choose my words carefully. "I didn't think stepping aside would turn out well for Henry. He doesn't have a family that would die for him." My eyes meet DeJona's and soften. "Not the way I do."

My sister's lips twitch in a small, reluctant smile.

"So you solved the problem with your wits and kept Henry safe. Why didn't you come to us after the threat had passed?"

I blink rapidly. "The thought didn't cross my mind."

Dejonaë's smile flattens.

"What kind of," mom hesitates, looking for the right term, "work did you do for Mr. Sullivan?"

"I met his family," I sign. "And then the interview this morning."

"Where you kissed him," Dejonaë points out.

I massage my throat to avoid signing a response.

"So," mom looks thoughtful, "this isn't fully about Henry. If you thought that man was a danger, a threat to you, you wouldn't have kissed him. You wouldn't have continued to work for him. You would have come to us."

I blink rapidly and nod.

"So there was some part of you that believed he was good."

Dejonaë's expression turns curious.

Mom keeps staring at me, trying to unearth things I haven't given myself room to dig up. Her eyebrow raise is a subtle nudge.

"I don't know if I'd call him 'good'. But he's not 'bad'." I think back to the princess watch, Sullivan doting on his niece, and the way he looked out for his sister. He made an effort to learn sign language. He was patient whenever he waited for me to type a response.

We use two different languages to communicate, which can be incredibly frustrating, but he's never lashed out at me because we can't understand each other.

"Do you think," mom watches my face carefully, "you would be interested in him if he was deaf?"

Dejonaë explodes out of the bar stool. "Mom, are you forgetting he *blackmailed* her into signing that contract? Are we just going to overlook that?"

"Didn't Sazuki blackmail you into working for him?" I sign.

Dejonaë sinks back into her seat. "That's different."

Mom places a finger to her lips.

Deej huffs.

"Yaya, answer my question," mom signs.

My arms turn heavy.

I stall for time.
Mom's smart. Too smart. The way she worded that question is a trap.
But I won't fall for it.
All my life, I've been adamant about my dating preferences.
Hearing men have always been a turn-off.
Always.
And then Dare...
It's not like I *want* to date him.
Maybe I want to kiss him again.
But that's different.
That's... not serious.
I could never be truly, deeply committed to someone hearing. If I ever have a future with someone, it'll be with a man who shares my experience.
"He's not deaf, so it doesn't matter anyway," I sign.
Mom gives me a knowing look.
Squirming, I sign to Deej. "I appreciate you looking out for me. I didn't mean to get angry."
"It's okay. I overreacted thinking Sullivan was taking advantage of you. I should have talked to you first instead of asking Ryo to—" Dejonae stalls, "Oh no. You don't think they fought?"
My smile grows. "I wonder who would win?"
A smirk grows on her pretty face. "That's not funny."
"It's a little funny."
We hold eye contact.
And then we both laugh.

* * *

Henry's being weird.
Well, he's always weird.
So correction—Henry's being weirder than usual.
He keeps looking over his shoulder as if we're being watched. Every so often, he'll check his phone and tap his thumb against the back of it.
"Everything okay?" I sign.
I'm moving carefully since this is an area I'm not familiar with. Walking and signing takes a lot of focus and there have been a few times

where I ran into benches on the sidewalk because I was so into a conversation.

He signs, "I think it's up here."

"Are you sure this won't take long? I have a meeting."

I promised Dare I'd be at the magazine shoot by ten thirty. He offered to pick me up, but I don't want him and Henry locking eyes.

So far, my best friend hasn't mentioned the interview, but it seems like *everyone* is talking about it.

Overnight, my follower count blew through the roof.

The modeling agency sent a long-winded email about how much they appreciate having me 'on the team'.

I was even recognized in the grocery store yesterday.

If strangers know about me and Richard Sullivan, Henry will find out soon enough. I need a way to bring it up so he stays calm and doesn't do anything stupid.

"What exactly is the big surprise?" I sign.

Henry leads me into an abandoned warehouse. There's camera equipment in the center of a graffiti-themed room. The place looks... grungy. But when Henry turns off the light, the room comes alive. Neon decorations hover in 3-D over the walls. Striking pink and purple hues. Another world.

I suck in a breath, impressed.

Time to get to work.

Since it's so dark, it's difficult to sign which means there's very little talking between me and Henry while I pose. That works for me, and I find a nice rhythm.

Time as a concept doesn't affect me when I'm modeling. This is my happy place. I move fluidly in front of the camera, adjusting the various items that Henry brings me. After a while, I notice the accessories I'm modeling are far beyond our usual sponsored product quota.

I walk under the lights and sign, "Did we make a new brand deal?" Wrapping my fingers around the sunshades I just had on top of my head, I wiggle it toward him.

Henry grips the camera and a little tick appears in the muscles of his jaw. Slowly, he releases the camera and signs, "When were you going to tell me you were dating that billionaire guy?"

My breath freezes in my chest.

Guilt rolls over me like a persistent fog.
Shoving the glasses back on my head, I squirm, "I can explain."
Before I can come up with an excuse, something lands on my shoulder.
I react wildly, shooing it off me. Was that a bug?
Henry bends down and picks something off the ground.
I peer at it.
It's the sunglasses.
How cheap are these gifts that they fell apart without much use?
Henry flicks the broken stem to the ground and stomps off to take down
the lights. His shoulders, slumped. His stride, heavy.
So much for beating around the bush.
I touch his arm until he's facing me. "Let's talk for a minute."
"I thought you had a meeting?"
I check my watch anxiously.
Twenty minutes left.
"It's with *him*, isn't it?"
"Coffee." I give my best friend a shaky smile. "Let's talk over some
chai."

He looks anything but appeased, but at least he follows me out of the
warehouse and into the sunshine. I'm hoping the natural light will improve
his mood. I'm hoping the chai will too. He can't erupt on me if he's
slurping sweet, caffeinated goodness, can he?

Henry reaches for the door when we get to the café, but I dart ahead and
open it for him. Dipping into an 'after you' gesture, I look up with a smile.

He rolls his eyes, but I see a little grin tweaking the corner of his lips.

Yes!

Progress.

Once we get our lattes, I lead Henry to a table. He slides into the seat
across from me and that slightly judgmental look is back on his face.

"I know what you're going to say," I sign. "But it was the only way to
stop Sullivan from coming after you. If there was another path, I would
have taken it."

He starts to sign, but I sign over him.

"I'm the one who agreed to do it. I'm the one who made that choice. It's
only three months. After three months, he and I will never see each other
again."

Henry sits forward.

“And before you go crazy on me, this isn’t something I need to be rescued from. Dare might *think* he has the upper hand, but I fully intend to use all the attention he’s bringing me for my own gain.” I ease to the edge of my seat and plead, “We can turn this into gold. We can use Dare to build our empire. As long as we’re not hasty...”

He glares at me.

I arch a brow.

He arches one right back. “Are you done interrupting?”

I lick my lips guiltily.

“Yaya...” Henry hesitates, “do you know what kind of man you’re dealing with?”

I blink rapidly, surprised by that calm response. Why isn’t Henry throwing his latte at the window and storming out while vowing to have Sullivan’s head? Why isn’t he redder than a chili pepper with twice the kick? Why is he so... civil?

“This is our world,” Henry pushes the salt forward, “this is where normal people live. And this,” he pushes the pepper far away, “is where Sullivan exists. He has different rules. He *makes* the rules. Why would someone who makes the rules want something difficult?”

“You’re calling me ‘difficult’?”

“I’m saying he has to *work* for you and that guy has probably never worked hard for a single thing in his life. Why would he start now? Why would he start for *you*? Think about it. Don’t let his money blind you. Think about why he would be doing this.”

I’m caught off guard when Henry adds, “Did you know someone was following us today?”

My eyes widen.

“Who else could it be but your new boyfriend?” Henry examines me, looking for a reaction. “That guy has people watching you, reporting your every move, making sure his ‘purchase’ doesn’t act up.”

I direct my gaze to the window and then back to Henry. Throat tightening, I squeeze my fingers around the coffee cup.

“You’re a challenge, but that’s it. You don’t mean anything to him. Not seriously. The moment you give him something to exploit, he’ll exploit it. And then he’ll be gone. That’s how the rich work.”

“I’m going to pay him back.” Henry signs with resolution in his eyes. “Every damn cent. You won’t have to suffer for long, but until then...” He

leans forward. “Remember that none of it is real. You’re not a person to him. You’re his property. A rental. A toy.”

Each description is a slap to the face.

A toy?

“I don’t want to see you get caught up with a jerk like him. I don’t want to see you hurt the way I was hurt.” Henry’s sullen expression makes my heart thud. “Because I know what that’s like. Thinking someone was actually interested in you when all they had was curiosity.”

An itch starts in my throat. It feels so much like tears.

But *why?*

Why is the thought of Richard Sullivan only seeing me as a challenge so painful?

My brain is grappling for a distraction and, as if Fate is on my side, I notice a disturbance at the counter. A woman is holding up the front of the line. Even from behind, she looks terrified. The barista’s billowing nostrils and dark scowl probably isn’t easing her fear.

I notice something in the customer’s ears.

Hearing aids.

Immediately, a surge of protectiveness wells inside me. I pop out of my seat and run over before I’ve truly decided what I want to do.

The barista is throwing her arms around and making a scene. She’s pointing to the back of the line.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

Chest burning like a thousand fire ants are crawling under my skin, I stop in front of the counter. Grabbing my phone out of my purse like it’s a police badge, I type in all caps:

ENOUGH

The barista looks at me with big, stunned eyes.

Turning to the woman with the hearing aids, I wave to get her attention, “Are you okay?”

Her entire demeanor shifts. A pretty smile tugs her lips upward and she nods enthusiastically.

“I was trying to order,” she signs. Her jerky movements and the sweat on her upper lip betray her nerves. “But I guess my handwriting wasn’t clear enough.”

A sense of camaraderie forms between us. I have my own memories of holding up a line at a coffee shop. It’s why I write my orders down to the detail whenever I go out to eat. Baristas tend to assume everyone is hearing, and they’ll come back with clarifying questions for an order they don’t understand. It can be extremely stressful, especially when you’re in a hurry.

“Tell me what you want,” I sign.

I help my new friend with her order, type it down in detail and hand it to the barista—who gives me the stink eye of all stinky eyes.

Henry joins us when we move to the pickup line.

“Thank you so much,” my new friend says. “I’m June.”

“Hi, June. I’m Yaya and this is my best friend Henry.”

June’s smile widens just a tad when she looks at Henry. She touches her hearing aid nervously and signs, “We’re all wearing aids.”

“And we all sign. Doesn’t it feel good to meet your people?” I grin.

Relief seeps through her expression and it makes me want to give her a hug.

I’ve been there. It’s challenging to sign boldly in public without an interpreter. People stare. They’re impatient, sometimes even aggressive.

It’s hard living in a world that caters to everyone else. Poor June got yelled at for something that wasn’t even her fault. And Henry got dumped after his girlfriend had enough of him. It would make anyone want to shrink into themselves.

It’s why community is so, so important. Meeting Henry inside the modeling industry was a small miracle. We’ve been through so much together. Supported each other. Uplifted each other. I can’t help but treasure him.

“Do you both identify as deaf?”

“Henry does,” I sign. “I identify as small-d deaf or hard of hearing. It depends on who I’m talking to.”

My watch buzzes.

I take out my phone.

Sullivan: Enjoying your coffee?

I frown.

Yaya: Stalking much?

Sullivan: Not stalking. Someone uploaded a video of you and tagged me in it.

He sends the link to the video.

And he's right. Someone filmed us and published it already.

The internet truly can be frightening.

Sullivan: I'm heading to the shoot from a meeting. Do you need a ride?

I check the time on my phone. It would be more convenient to ride with Sullivan but, after Henry's warnings, I think it's better I keep a professional distance.

Yaya: I'll find my own way.

Pocketing my phone, I turn to June, "I have to go." I feel Henry's eyes on me, but I don't meet his gaze when I sign, "I have a meeting now. But June, you should give Henry your phone number. We should all meet up sometime."

"I'd like that," June signs, looking at Henry again.

My best friend glares at me.

I give him a little wave and dart out of the coffee shop.

As I walk into the sunshine, my thoughts drift back to Henry's speech.

'There's some part of you that believes he's good' was what mom told me earlier, but I'd rather go with Henry on this one.

I haven't known Richard Sullivan long enough to call him 'good'.

Nor do I want to.

Hearing people have their own world, but hearing people like Sullivan?

They exist in their own galaxy.

I inhale a deep breath of the balmy air, recognizing the earthy tones rising from the ground. It's going to rain soon.

I'll get dunked.

Quickening my steps, I let the exertion push away all thoughts of Richard Sullivan except one—he can't be allowed any closer to me.

I know who I am.

Yaya Williams.

Daughter.

Sister.

Model.

Deaf.

It's all me. Ingrained. Immutable.

I wouldn't want to change those things even if I could.

As a hearing person, Dare can never really understand me.
It just... is what it is.

A black object blurs in the corner of my eye and I turn my head slightly. A car is slowing down next to the sidewalk. The back window winds down and the man in the center of my thoughts is there, eyes glinting with mischief as he rocks his phone in invitation.

Slowing down my stride, I send a text.

Yaya: Have you never heard the words 'breathing room'?

Dare: We're going to the same place.

Yaya: But we're not going in the same direction.

Dare: Then I'll change directions.

I keep my eyes on my phone and my legs propelling me forward.

Yaya: I'd rather you didn't.

'You're his property.' Henry's warning echoes back to me.

Dare: It's going to rain.

I quicken my steps.

Yaya: I know. Go away.

Dare: I will once you get in the car.

Yaya: Are we both using the English language right now? What part of go away do you not under...

Before I can type the rest of my angry message, my head slaps against something warm and soft. My body jolts at the sudden, and unexpected, break in movement.

Eyes slowly lifting to the metal pole I was about to walk into, I choke. *That would have been painful.* The hand that stopped me from getting an egg-sized lump on the forehead is attached to a long, lean body covered in expensive tweed.

Dare?

My gaze tangles with his, becoming oddly fixated on his melted chocolate eyes. My heart beats at a million miles per minute. Dare looks devastatingly handsome with the storm clouds as a background, which makes it ten times more difficult to catch my bearings.

I step back. Face burning with the heat of a thousand suns, I lift my hands to sign that I'm fine. But Dare doesn't give me a chance.

He takes a step forward, bending his knees slightly.

A second later, I'm airborne.

My mouth falls open. I squirm, trying to wiggle my way out of his embrace, but it's no use. He's got a good hold on me and walks determinedly to the car.

Mosely is on the sidewalk. He opens the back door so Dare has a smooth entry. I'm placed delicately in the backseat, but the jarring effect of being dropped into a car I *just* said I didn't want to enter stirs me out of my Dare-induced stupor.

Eyebrows twitching, I glare at him and sign, "What are you doing?"

"Walk. Rain. Car," he signs.

I can't make sense of that broken ASL, but Dare doesn't particularly care to expound. He slides in next to me, slams the door shut and motions to Mosley who somehow slid back into the front seat when I wasn't looking.

I jerk my phone to eye level and type.

This is called kidnapping.

Then you should probably use that phone to call the police.

I glare at him.

He gives me a smug little smile.

The jerk.

Dare sways his body toward me. It's raining cats and dogs outside, but I swear I see sunshine behind his head. The world swirls with heightened gold and yellow colors. Like I'm on some kind of acid trip.

He comes closer.

Closer still.

Until he's practically hovering on top of me.

I hate the way my heart picks up speed, but his is equally pounding, which is something I discover when I set my hand on his chest to push him away. He pauses and looks down at me.

We share a breath. And then two breaths. His eyes narrow on my mouth before flickering back up my face.

Thum. Thum. Thum.

I feel the vibration of his heart like I'm sitting in front of a giant speaker, the bass pushing waves of energy against my skin.

Shove him off.

I can't.

Why not?

I don't know.

Did you already forget what Henry warned you about?

No, I haven't.

My eyes sync to Dare's mouth like a homing pigeon. Another thing I haven't forgotten? Our kiss. The softness of his lips, the little breath he exhaled against me, the way it felt so right even though I knew it meant nothing.

Dare slowly leans toward me, erasing the distance between us. I inch my face upward, my hair falling back and off my shoulders. My eyes sweep closed in throat-clenching anticipation.

Something tight straps me to my seat and I gasp.

My eyes pop open.

And I writhe in abject horror.

Richard Sullivan II was not about to kiss me.

Frazzled, I dig my nails into the seatbelt that's suddenly crossing my chest.

He retreats calmly to his side of the car where he fastens his seatbelt too. His gaze lands on me, an eyebrow arched in knowing amusement.

Sweet Gucci.

I jerk my eyes to the ground. Cheeks burning, I sink lower into my seat.

Idiot. Weren't you JUST angry with him? Let's go back to that!

I reach for my irritation again. Unfortunately, it's been dulled by my earlier breathlessness and I can't seem to remember why I should be angry that he picked me up. I can't even remember why I didn't want him to pick me up in the first place.

Dare's reflection in the glass catches my eye. He's got his phone balanced on one leg and a tablet on the other.

For a brief moment, I wish *I* was the one sitting in his lap.

And then I brush that thought away like it's diseased.

Ugh.

There's something about Dare Sullivan that gets under my skin. The way he pushes and then retreats makes me curious. Makes me competitive.

What game is he playing? What are the rules? I want to get closer and find out if he's for real.

He has all the power to order me around.

And then he does.

But once he has me, there's no further movement.

As if the ball is in my court.

As if I can do what I want as long as I do it in his line of sight.

It's weird.

Puzzling as hell.

And I won't fall for it.

Settling for folding my arms over my chest and staring moodily out the window, I ignore Sullivan for the rest of the ride. Once we arrive, Mosely offers an umbrella and I flounce out of the car, immediately being ushered into a whirlwind of hair and makeup.

The world momentarily goes back to normal...

Until I step onto the magazine set and see Dare looking like a bespoke tailor's walking fantasy. The breath in my lungs shrivels up until it's the size of a peanut.

Who gave him permission to look that tall and elegant?

Who gave him permission to style his hair like that? Like a... freaking Clark Kent without the nerdy glasses?

Who gave him permission to wear that easy, debonair smile that convinces people he could be their friend even if they're street vendors and he's a billionaire?

The light around him does that ridiculous thing again, turning extra bright and extra golden. I blink and it doesn't change. I want to rub my eyes, but that would mess up my makeup. Should I go see an eye doctor?

Dare starts to sign to me and I turn away abruptly.

It's rude.

Incredibly rude.

If I'd done that to a deaf person, I...

Dishonor.

Shame.

It's the biggest insult.

But Dare is hearing.

Hearing.

And thus, I can be rude if I want.

I stomp wordlessly to the set. A luxurious green couch with a textured wallpaper background serves as our props.

The photographer has us standing at first. Jenny signs out his instructions.

“Closer,” she signs, mimicking the director’s frazzled expressions. “You need to stand closer.”

I move an inch toward Sullivan, stiff as a rock.

The director shakes his head.

Dare sets his hand on my waist.

The thrumming heat of his fingers sears through to my skin. I need to be professional. I *can* be professional.

I’ve done this before.

This is nothing.

He is nothing.

I mean, not as a person.

Everyone is something to somebody.

And Dare Sullivan has worth as a human being. Sure. Even if he is a cocky billionaire with eyes like smoky quartz, large, beautiful hands, a million-dollar smile...

But still. He’s nothing *to me*.

Nothing to get so frantic about.

Dare grips my arm, an eyebrow arched. *Are you okay?*

I wrench my wrist away.

No, I’m not okay.

His face is annoying.

And is he wearing lip tint?

Why did the makeup artist make his mouth so distracting? As if it wasn’t plump enough before she applied it.

Men like Dare should not wear makeup, even if it *is* totally necessary for a photoshoot.

And my goodness—*who!* WHO decided to leave that crisp white shirt under his blazer unbuttoned? Honestly!

Have some shame.

I’m debating whether I should have a word with the wardrobe team when Dare suddenly lifts a hand and says two words without ever taking his eyes off me.

Just like that day on the mountain when everyone scattered at his command, the room empties out.

And this time, Jenny doesn't stay.

I gulp, realizing we are totally alone.

Dare's not smiling anymore. His lips a thinning slash in his face he signs, "We. Talk."

It's broken ASL.

Totally grammatically incorrect.

But I get the gist.

We need to talk.

And from his tense body language, whatever he says, I'm not going to like it.

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CHAPTER 11

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a heart matter

DARE

I can feel her pulse racing under my fingertips.

Should probably let her go, but I won't.

She might run away from me.

And I need her here.

Need her present.

All she has to do is turn her eyes away and I won't be able to talk, so sure... she can control whether she pays attention to me or not, but I'm not releasing my grip until I get some eye contact.

Finally, she glances at me. Her eyelashes flicker and there's a glint of fear in her expression. She looks away again and it's gone, hidden behind the curtain of black waves that someone in hair and wardrobe should be paid extra for executing.

I've never met a woman who looked beautiful from every angle the way Yaya Williams does.

Every bat of her eyelashes is torture.

Every time her teeth sink into her bottom lip, I want to kiss her.

Not that she wants to be kissed.

Or touched.

Or maybe even spoken to.

Her eyes dart up again.

And I see it.

Nerves.

Because she's scared *of* me?

No, that didn't look like the kind of fear that makes women pull their purses closer to their bodies or skitter to the other side of the road.

It seemed like...

The kind of nerves you feel before a big presentation. The kind where you want everything to go right because it matters. Because you wish it didn't matter so much.

She jerks her elbow and frees herself from me. Her eyes are cold. I know I'm responsible for how awkward she's feeling. In the car, I couldn't help myself and almost kissed her again. I held myself back. *Barely*. But maybe that was the wrong choice. Since then, Yaya's seemed more short-tempered than usual.

"This is rude," she signs. "To the photographer. The staff. We're wasting time."

"They can wait."

A line of annoyance stretches across her forehead. Or maybe it's a line of concentration because my sign language is so basic. I'm trying my hand at ASL without an interpreter. It's the only way to grow faster. By failing. Making mistakes. Being corrected.

"Did I do something to upset you?" I sign.

It's an obvious question. I *did* lug her into my car earlier, but it was for a good cause. She doesn't strike me as the type who likes romantic strolls in the rain. Plus, walking into lampposts is generally unpleasant. And having a bump in the head wouldn't translate well on camera.

Her stare gets sharper. "Why do you care if I'm upset?"

Yaya's facial expressions are biting. There's no mistaking her tone, even if she's not using her voice.

"I care. So let's talk about it," I sign.

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

"We have things to do."

"Nothing is more important to me than this."

Her mouth plops open. And then she shuts it. Swallows. "You're impossible." She throws her arms up in a reluctant surrender. "You really want to know why I'm upset?"

I nod, waiting.

Her eyes dart back and forth as if she's looking for a proper excuse. Finally, she stills. "You were following me today."

"Following you?"

"From the warehouse to the café. Henry saw you. Or..." She grapples for the sign. "One of your...."

Her last few signs are indecipherable to me.

I ask her to repeat. "What was that?"

She finger spells.

G-o-o-n-s

My goons? I shake my head. "I didn't have you followed."

"Like you would admit it."

"Yaya, I swear to you that I don't have anyone following you."

I do have Clay Bolton interviewing female bodyguards as I plan to offer Yaya her own protection team now that our relationship is public, but no one has been chosen yet since I need someone who knows ASL.

"Well, if it wasn't you then who was it?" Yaya rocks her neck, both eyebrows arched with an extra dose of sass.

I don't know, but I plan on finding out.

It's upsetting to me that someone might be following her. I need Clay to find me a suitable protection team ASAP.

"Could you have been mistaken?" I ask hopefully.

"You think I'm lying?" Yaya's on the defensive. Her eyes dart back and forth between mine in frustration, as if she's looking for anything to throw at me.

Calmly, I respond, "No, I don't think you're lying. I think the world is a dangerous place and I don't want you to get hurt."

Yaya's popularity has skyrocketed. She's undeniably beautiful, talented and charismatic. Gaining fame overnight drew a lot of attention to her and the deaf community, which is good. But it might also draw out the mentally unstable folks.

Which is bad.

"If you notice anyone following you or see anything strange, no matter what it is, text me."

Her eyes narrow.

"Yaya." I say it out loud and then I remember that I need to sign. Lifting my hands, I order, "I need to know you're safe. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you."

She tenses, and I wonder if I've offended her. It's a suspicion that solidifies when she suddenly raises her chin and fillets me with a look that could peel dead skin straight off the bone.

"We have a photoshoot to finish. Let's get it over with."

I remain in place. "We can end it here."

There. A tweak of her perfect eyebrow. "End what?"

"The photoshoot. You seemed uncomfortable," I sign. "With me. Or the romantic theme."

"I'm not."

"Have you modeled with a partner before?"

She makes a motion like the shape of underwear.

I haven't learned the word in ASL, but I understand the shape she's making. Jealousy consumes me like an exploding bomb. I imagine other men getting to view Yaya's supple skin, touching her curves, inching their way over her body for a camera.

Nerves wound tight, I drag in some much needed air. "How often did you do underwear shoots?"

Yaya glances at my pinched mouth and a slow, teasing smile tugs at her lips. She signs with loose shoulders, "Often enough to make me really good at it."

"It?" I sign back, trembling slightly.

Her eyes crinkle.

Mosely enters the room, his footsteps thudding loud.

"Sir, what's the holdup? The director is asking if there's something wrong."

There's something wrong, alright.

Yaya gives Mosely a thumbs-up, her smile far more cheerful than it has a right to be.

"I'm going to take that as an 'I'm ready'," Mosely says, returning a hesitant thumbs-up in our direction.

Yaya gestures for me to follow her back to the tape that marks our spot.

I stomp behind her, unwilling to let go of our conversation. When she looks up at me, I sign, "Are you still talking to any of those male models?"

She tilts her head up, eyes feigning innocence.

I know she understands me.

"Yaya."

She shakes her head and motions for me to come closer.

Gruffly, I draw near.

She presses a hand to me, right above the undone button of my shirt. Her nails scrape the hair sprinkled over my chest and I forget how to breathe.

Pulling her eyes from my chest to my face, Yaya signs, “Is it okay if I touch you?”

My heart decides now would be a good time to drop-kick all twelve of my ribs.

I cinch my fingers into fists quickly. I don’t trust myself to respond in a polite manner. I’m ravenous for this woman and I doubt she understands how much I want her. Where I want her. How filthy my mind is.

That stupid contract.

It’s got me bound to keep my distance.

But she’s free to do what she likes.

You can touch me anywhere, sweetheart. What do I need to take off first?

I hear the distinct sound of footsteps and voices as the door to the studio opens and the entire crew comes pouring back in.

My heart isn’t slowing down.

Yaya glances down at my pants and looks pleased.

Naughty girl. Is this revenge for teasing her in the car?

I take deep breaths. Long, soul-deep breaths.

And think about baseball, Cullen Tech and Carmichael’s wrinkly face. It’s enough—just barely enough—to keep the entire room from knowing how much one little question from Yaya Williams affected me.

The lights turn back on and the crew members fix our makeup and make slight adjustments to the set. We’re drawn away from each other by our individual glam team, but I keep turning back to stare at Yaya.

“Mr. Sullivan, please,” the tall, green-haired makeup artist rasps at me, “your girlfriend won’t fly away when you’re not looking.”

I scowl at him but remain still until they’re done.

“Ready!” the director yells.

Yaya glides back to me, her dress swaying behind her. Her eyes glint with an icy kind of fire, and I know that—whatever happens in the next few minutes—I’m going to adore her ten times more than I already do.

The camera starts flashing.

The shift in Yaya is immediate.

Earlier, we'd been steeped in awkwardness. Stilted tension. A distance that could fit a small whale between us.

Now, she's electric.

Thrumming brilliance, her hips loose and her body near liquid, flowing. She's on me.

An arm to my shoulder and her face peering up at mine in sensual thought, as if she knows all the ways she's going to please me tonight.

Click.

Head slightly turned, eyes on the camera, chin on my arm.

Click.

"Yes!" The photographer screams in exhilaration. "Yeees! That's it!"

I can tell she's keeping one eye on his response because she starts leaning more into the sensual poses. Her arms drape over me. One leg bent. Eyes on the camera. Then eyes on me. Then a slight shift of her head so her face takes in more of the light.

Her motions are fluid. A dance.

"This is it! This is amazing."

I start to get comfortable too.

My job is easy enough. Look at Yaya Williams like I want to pin her against the wall and suck her soul out of her body?

Easy.

I can do that all day.

The looking and the actual sucking.

Damn. I want her against the wall so badly.

"Let's get some couch shots," the photographer says.

Yaya peers at Jenny, who's standing nearby, and then she walks confidently to the couch.

I sit, expecting her to join me. She stands instead and crouches down, both arms around my neck. Almost a chokehold. Or maybe I feel like I'm choking because she's got those pretty fingers wrapped so tightly around my heart that I can't think.

Her perfume is a sweet, vanilla essence that makes my mouth water.

It takes so much not to lick her skin.

Keep it together, Dare.

She sinks her hand *into my shirt*.

Yaya's hand.

Inside my clothes.

Touching skin.

Carmichael's wrinkly face. Carmichael's wrinkly face.

Damn it.

"Take her hand," the photographer guides me. "Kiss it."

Kiss it? Kiss her hand?

And not those perfect brown lips?

Not her chest?

Not each of her thighs?

Keep it together, Dare.

My lips hit her knuckles. Soft brown skin. The scent of cocoa butter.

I lick my lips. There. The faint taste of Yaya.

Not enough. Not nearly enough.

She sits next to me. Legs extend out on the couch, glossy and lean and going on for days.

I've never been a leg guy.

But damn, if I can only spread one pair of legs for the rest of my life—it would be Yaya's.

"Look at her," the photographer yells. "Yes, like that."

My eyes slam into hers.

Or, more accurately, hers barrel into mine like a linebacker with a grudge. Those twin black galaxies trapped inside a light, honey brown drag me into them. Alice in Wonderland. No, the male version. Allen in Wonderland.

And she's the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat.

The Queen of Hearts.

Off with my head.

"Kiss her."

I hesitate first. Just in case.

Yaya might feel pressured and I want her to feel safe with me...

She kisses me.

The heat growing in the depths of my stomach billows. Roars. Devours.

I don't make the same mistake I did at the interview.

In a heartbeat, I kiss her back.

Her full lips part on a sigh. An exhale of surprise? I don't know. I just know that I need more.

So I take it.

My trembling hand falls on her face. Brushes her cheek. Scrapes around the back of her neck.

I grip her there and pull her up, inhaling the quick huff of breath that escapes her when I do. She adjusts to the new angle, her kiss a punishment more than a caress. Warring. Passionate. A neon sign that says ‘I don’t want to like this but I do’.

An unfamiliar hunger wells, pouring out of a place I never knew existed. It doesn’t trickle to the surface. Nothing that slow and languid.

It snaps.

Breaks.

A critical injury that can never heal.

Everything between us is fake.

But this moment is real. It’s mine.

Her oxygen is mine.

Her little shudder of pleasure.

Her fingers clutching my collar and her chest scraping my tux.

A switch has been flicked and I don’t know how to flick it off. Wouldn’t even try to.

Until something odd tugs at my brain.

Some annoying sense of propriety.

I hear the awkward silence in the room.

Hear the squeaking, hesitant voice of the director whispering, “E-excuse me? Yoo-hoo.”

I disconnect my mouth from Yaya’s—just a smidge, see the string of saliva between our lips catch the light, and blink like I’m coming out of another world.

“T-that’s enough,” the photographer says. “I-I think we got it.”

I hear him.

Yaya... uh... doesn’t.

She surges forward again, her passionate kisses making it extremely difficult not to force her legs apart right here in front of an audience.

I tap her waist in a silent time-out and she stills.

Light brown eyes burst open. Hands up, like someone pointed a gun at her head. Like she got caught doing something she shouldn’t.

She’s smart. Way too aware of her surroundings. It doesn’t take her long to figure out what’s going on. How everyone’s staring. Why I tapped her.

A moment later, her entire body goes rigid, every muscle taut. She scrambles off me, heels almost skidding to the ground in her haste. She catches her balance and shoots straight to her feet.

If she were wearing a crown, it would be crooked.

Yaya's eyes dart to the corner. I don't know what Jenny signs to her, but it makes Yaya swallow hard, lick her lips and ask for a break.

"Great job, everyone. Let's call it a day," the director says, fanning himself. "Can someone turn the air conditioner up? It's hot in here!"

Yaya makes a point not to look at me when she stalks off with Jenny.

Mosely steps onto the set with a handkerchief.

"Sir," he says awkwardly, handing it to me.

"Don't think this little cloth can hide anything," I mumble, setting it over my pants.

"It's for your face," Mosely says. He lifts his phone and takes a picture. I accept it from him and chuckle when I see the lipstick smeared all over my mouth.

The makeup artist put something on my lips earlier, but this is definitely not the look they were going for.

After I've made myself presentable, I walk over to the director.

He shakes my hand.

"Good work today," I say.

"My pleasure. I haven't enjoyed a photoshoot this much in a long time. The camera loves her, Mr. Sullivan. And you too, of course. Look at that." He points to the monitor that's showing a photo of Yaya leaning into my side while my chin is on top of her head. "The way your skin tones play off each other. How tall you both are. You make such a good-looking couple. Really."

"Hm."

I'm not paying attention to the conversation. I'm waiting for Yaya to reappear.

How long until I can see her again?

"At the beginning of the shoot, I wondered if you two were about to break up. By the end, well, there was no doubt how in love you are."

I return my gaze to his and smile calmly. "I hope you'll choose the best shots."

"Of course. You'll be one of the first to receive a copy of next month's issue."

“Mosely,” I gesture and we walk away from the director, “I’m going to wash my face and change out of these clothes. Make sure Yaya doesn’t slip away while I’m gone.”

He salutes.

I glance down at my fingertips, stained with the lipstick Yaya rubbed off on me and smile softly.

She feels something for me. That much is clear.

But whatever that feeling is, Yaya would rather jump into an active volcano than admit it.

* * *

I don’t like awkward.

Awkward silences. Awkward interactions. Awkward functions.

It’s why Lucy was the one who did all the schmoozing and I shrank my world down to the company, the numbers, the acquisitions.

It’s more than just social anxiety. Empty space and empty talk annoy me. I attended one charity ball with dad a few years before he died. By the end of the night, I was ready to choke someone with my tie.

And yet, here I am.

Sitting beside the woman I’m obsessed with.

Awkward as a pimply teenager going to his first prom.

Yaya’s pressed against the door, creating as much distance as she can from me. I’m on my tablet, staring at words that amount to mush.

I never read in the car. Gives me a killer of a headache. But since I’ve been driving around with Yaya, it’s become my habit to act like I’m busy. I’ve noticed that her shoulders relax and she breathes a little easier when I’m focused on something other than her.

Which is near impossible to do, by the way.

Especially after that kiss.

They say Adam and Eve got kicked out of the garden after they knew they were naked. I get it. There’s no going back after you discover something forbidden. Once you know, it can never be *unknown*. It can only be buried. Suppressed. Chained in the darkest caverns of your desire.

And now *I* know.

I know what Yaya’s skin feels like—soft, sweet, inviting.

I've inhaled her perfume.

And now that very fragrance is filling the car, trapping me in a euphoric gas chamber.

She's changed back to what she was wearing earlier. Light blue jeans that hug her waist and flare at the bottom. A vintage T-shirt tied into a knot just above her belly button.

Don't get caught looking, Dare.

Just one more peek.

The soft flutter of her eyelashes nudges at me.

I swallow down another 'wow'. This woman is so beautiful it's almost terrifying.

My timer buzzes.

Time to swipe the page.

Gotta look busy so Yaya thinks I'm really working.

"Sir," Mosely says, "are you sure it's the best idea to bring Miss Williams to Talia's parent-teacher meeting?"

The fact that he's asking right in front of Yaya annoys me for some reason that I can't put my finger on.

"I asked Jenny to be there. She should be able to communicate effectively," I answer.

"You know as well as I do that Ms. Talia... has been in a mood."

My lips clamp together.

I glance at Yaya.

She was watching me intently but, when she notices me looking her way, she quickly glances back at the window.

A sigh builds in my chest. From the moment we got into the car, she was observing me. Watching to see if I'd be all over her after that kiss. Watching to see if I'd be different. Make it weird. Make her uncomfortable.

I haven't done a thing.

I've just been staring at the tablet and trying to act like everything is normal.

It's not.

And with my brain all scrambled, I can't even think about how to handle Talia and this school meeting.

"Mosely, can you play some music?"

His eyebrows hike and he flicks me a concerned look via the rearview mirror. "Sir?"

I don't repeat myself.

He plays a rock station.

Yaya swings one leg over the other. Her feet start tapping. It's moving in time to the rhythm.

Awed, I stare more openly at her. Can her hearing aids pick up the music? Based on my research, Yaya's hearing aids only help her with lower range frequencies.

I look closer and notice she's leaning forward slightly with a hand pressed against the speaker at the bottom of the door.

Ah.

"Mosley, turn the music up," I request.

He cranks it up.

"More."

He does.

"More."

The windows start rattling.

Yaya's smile grows the louder the music gets. She's enjoying this.

Sitting here, watching her, feels like I'm standing on the edge of something grand.

As a child, I never knew what I wanted to be. I didn't have any dreams or ambitions. I was the son of Richard Sullivan. Of course I would study at an Ivy League as a legacy student. Of course I would join the chapter my great-grandfather founded. Of course I would get an MBA and intern at one of our companies.

Dreams? Who has time for dreams when your entire life is already planned out?

But right now...

In this moment...

My dream is her.

My purpose in life is to find more ways to make this woman happy.

"Sir!" Mosley bellows. "Should we turn it down?"

"No!" I yell back, basking in the beauty of Yaya Williams thumping her head to the music.

The song ends.

Her eyes open.

She catches me staring.

At once, she removes her hand from the speaker and returns to sitting stiffly.

I hate to see her shrink into herself.

And yet, I also like the shyness I'm beginning to sense in her.

Our kiss broke something, a wall, a defense, a line between us. But I won't storm the city. Something tells me that the next step I take will determine the fate of my future and the future of my children—who will hopefully, be Yaya's children too.

As a show of surrender, I return to my tablet.

The car slows down at the curb.

Mosely is rubbing his ears and I feel almost guilty. I should probably get him some earplugs for the future.

I'm about to climb out of the car so I can open Yaya's door when I feel a soft touch on my arm. There's hesitance in her eyes, but she tips her chin up bravely.

"Before we go in, I think we should talk about something," she signs.

I hold my breath, wondering if she'll bring up the kiss.

"About Talia."

"Oh." I shift gears. "Go ahead."

"Have you heard of 'good cop, bad cop'?"

I ask her to repeat more slowly and concentrate on her finger spelling. When she's done, I nod in understanding and repeat the sign.

"Good cop, bad cop."

"I know Talia might feel a bit territorial over her uncle," Yaya signs. "Would you be okay if we try something?"

I consider it hesitantly.

"Bad cop?" I point to my chest.

"Good cop." She points to herself.

I rub the back of my neck. Talia's been spoiled by everyone since the day she was born, and I'm the biggest culprit. She rarely hears no from me. As evidenced by the giant princess watch I wear everyday just because she asked.

"If you don't want to..."

"No." I give her an assuring smile, despite the way my heart is squeezing. "Let's give it a try."

Yaya looks touched and I tell myself it's worth it, even if it fails.

We walk into the school together.

Mosely is behind, carrying a giant gift basket that I ordered early this morning.

Yaya glances at the gift that's bigger than my assistant. "Bribery?"

"Peace offering."

She laughs.

The anxiety currently pressing through my veins is carried away by her smile.

The bell rings and classroom doors fly open. A sea of students rush the hallway all at once. A little kid charges at us, gunning toward the bathrooms. I slip a hand around Yaya's waist and tug her closer to me, out of harm's way.

The kid breezes past, nary a glance in our direction.

My nose softly brushes her temple as I shift my head to check if there are any other incoming mini-human missiles.

Nope. We're clear.

I look down to check if she's okay.

Yaya's breathing shakily. Her eyes meet mine and soften for just a second before she pushes me away. Nervously, she flattens her hair.

I sign, "Are you okay?"

She nods and takes off like a rocket.

"Sir." Mosley calls. When I look back, he's precariously carrying the basket in one hand and has his phone up with the other. "I just received a message from Jenny. She's having some vehicle trouble and will be a little late."

"Noted."

He nods and returns to carrying the basket with two hands.

I don't move.

He pauses. "Is there something else?"

"Buy her a new car."

"What?"

"And going forward, have José drive all of Yaya's interpreters to her events."

"Sir?"

"I can't have Yaya's interpreters not showing up in the future. Please ensure this doesn't happen again."

"Y-yes sir."

Slipping a hand in my pocket, I catch up to Yaya.

As we pass Talia's classroom, I look in and notice my niece sitting alone at her desk. Sunlight forms a little halo over her golden hair and pink shirt.

But she's a lone angel.

Big blue eyes stare longingly at the other girls who are pooling their tables together and forming their own cliques. Her despondent expression rips my heart out of my chest.

Yaya's waving hand steers my attention away.

She signs. "Come on. We're be late."

I leave Talia behind and walk into the administration office with Yaya beside me.

The secretary gives me a starry-eyed look as she ushers us inside.

Like the rest of the school, the principal's office leans cold and clinical. The color scheme is all beiges and dark woods. It reminds me of a boarding school. Or maybe a cold Catholic orphanage. Certificates line the walls. Pictures of the principal with wealthy parents and donors crowd the surface above her cabinet and desk.

Principal Morris shoots to her feet and extends her hand to me. "Mr. Sullivan, what an honor. Truly, what an honor. Do have a seat. Oh! Is that basket for me? Here, Miss Abbot. Put that somewhere everyone can see it." She plops the basket unceremoniously into the arms of Talia's homeroom teacher.

I give Miss Abbot a nod of acknowledgement.

She gives me a pained grimace in return.

"You must be the famous Yaya Williams. I watched that interview with you and Mr. Sullivan. Splendid! Did you know we have a deaf student here as well? Niko Sazuki. Do you know the Sazukis? Very famous family. It's such an honor to have her enrolled here."

Yaya smiles politely, nodding along as if she understands.

A prick of misgiving hits me. Before I can ask for us to pause the meeting and wait for Jenny, the principal makes another high-pitched exclamation.

"Mr. Sullivan, you've met Miss Abbott, yes?"

"We met last week regarding Talia's... uh... incident."

"Oh, yes, well," the principal squirms, "a gross misunderstanding. Truly."

A misunderstanding?

Miss Abbot pulls her lips into her mouth and stares down like she wants to murder the carpet.

“Miss Abbot?” The principal nudges her.

Bending her head so her neat dreadlocks skate down her shoulder, Miss Abbot mumbles, “Even though Talia *did* push another student and call them a waste of space and even though that student was very hurt and embarrassed, I shouldn’t have bothered you with such a small matter.”

The principal coughs loudly.

“I apologize.”

Her eyes burn, and I get the feeling that Miss Abbot would skewer all of us in the room if she had a choice.

“Is the other student okay now?”

“Oh, she’s a part of our welfare program.” The principal waves a dismissive hand. “It’s because of generous patrons like *you*, Mr. Sullivan, that people from all walks of life can even *think* of sending their children here. I assure you, this matter is closed. Done. *Finito*.”

She brushes her hands like she’s wiping off dirt.

I watch her and something feels... off. This is how I prefer for matters to end and yet, it makes me uneasy.

“I’ll talk to Talia. Make sure this doesn’t happen again,” I say.

“No need. Talia’s a brilliant child. And very, uh, opinionated. All qualities we want to foster here. Not stomp out.” The line is punctuated by an evil eye in Miss Abbot’s direction. “I assure you that we do not believe in punishing children for such small matters. I’m truly sorry if Talia was negatively affected by all this—”

I lift a hand, indicating the principal should stop. I’m afraid if I don’t, she’ll just go on and on and my unease will worsen.

Turning so I’m in Yaya’s sight, I bring her up to speed. “Talia did nothing wrong. Her teacher apologized for punishing her.”

Her expression sobers. “Didn’t Talia call someone a ‘waste of space’?”

“They say it doesn’t matter.”

“Let me guess. The victim wasn’t the child of a billionaire or politician, so this doesn’t need to be a big deal?”

“‘Victim’ seems a bit much for the situation.”

“Would you like it if anyone put their hands on Talia or called her a waste of space?”

“Of course not.”

“So why is it okay for her to do that to someone else?”

Guilt is an unfamiliar feeling, but it’s crawling all over me like black sludge.

Yaya shakes her head. “We should treat everyone with kindness and respect, no matter where they come from.”

I agree.

But I also don’t want Talia to get any flack from school when, by the looks of her a few minutes ago, she’s already having a hard time.

“Mr. Sullivan, you’re pleased with this outcome, yes?”

Yaya arches an eyebrow in a silent ‘*what are you going to do*’?

Helplessness is another unfamiliar feeling.

At this point, the new-to-me sensations are stacking up one after another.

Before I met Yaya, before her opinion mattered to me, I knew the answer to that question. Protect my family. Hide anything that could hurt them. Brush all Sullivan mistakes under the rug.

But dad did that to Lucy and my sister ended up drunk driving and being forced into rehab.

Do I want that for Talia?

I just don’t know.

CHAPTER 12

OceanofPDF.com

the surprise scam

YAYA

Anger froths in the center of my stomach. It's not irrational—at least I don't think it is. But maybe it's a tiny bit exaggerated because I'm still recovering from 'the incident'.

You know... the one where my lips met Dare's face. Again.

The moment we walked into this room, the principal's body language was one of servitude. Exaggerated smiles. Batting eyelashes. Nervous hand twitches. They were paired with quick glances at Dare's face, scanning him intently, checking for his approval.

Am I missing something? Dare made it seem like Talia was in trouble. I don't get that vibe. It seems like the principal is apologizing, down on her knees, begging him to forgive *her*.

Power imbalance.

Pure and simple.

It irks me.

Maybe because that power imbalance is affecting me on a far more personal level.

Dare has been talking with the principal for almost five minutes now. Jenny isn't here, so I can only read their body language to follow the conversation.

Lipreading is out of the question. The principal talks so fast, I can't even tell if she's speaking English. Dare has his back to me, so even if I

wanted to, I couldn't make out his words.

When he turns and fills me in, I feel a tug of displeasure. I am completely dependent on his interpretation of what's going on. There's no way to confirm that he's telling the truth. They could be talking about an alien invasion for all I know, but if Dare says it's about cream cheese and hors d'oeuvres, I have to believe him.

The itchy, uncomfortable feeling gets worse.

Did he tell Jenny not to come on purpose? I noticed back at the photoshoot that he sent everyone away and signed in his base-level ASL. As much as he's growing, I need an interpreter—or two—to understand a conversation with this many people.

If I'd known he'd kick Jenny out, I would have arranged for an interpreter myself.

The anger churns and morphs into a tidal wave.

I've spent my entire life building a foundation of independence. But in moments like this, when I'm at the mercy of a hearing person, I'm reminded of how unfairly the scales tip in their favor.

This is why I can't let him get to me.

I'll admit, for a moment during 'the incident', my defenses wobbled. I considered letting that warm, addictive feeling grow. Thought maybe it wouldn't be so bad to... possibly *like* Dare.

Ridiculous.

Me? Attracted to a hearing person?

Now I realize, it was a moment of insanity. Temporary. Gone with the wind.

Dare suddenly faces the door and I glance that way too. Jenny is there, breathing heavily. Sweat dots her forehead and, from the way her purse is askew, she was running.

"Sorry I'm late," she signs, straightening tiredly.

I give her a small nod.

Dare gestures to Jenny. I assume he's making an introduction. The principal's eyes slide to me and then tighten in barely concealed irritation. Her body language screams '*she needs an interpreter? How cute?*'.

I ignore her.

"It's not like you to be late. Is everything okay?" I sign to Jenny.

"My car broke down and I had to get it towed."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

She hesitates. “Mr. Sullivan bought me a new car, but I don’t think I can accept that.”

My eyebrows twitch. Dare bought Jenny a new car? Why?

Because she’s my interpreter?

Something in my chest flutters.

No. Don’t you dare start again, you stupid butterflies.

Now that Jenny’s here, I can finally be more involved in the conversation and that’s all that matters.

“How is Talia doing in her classes?” I sign.

The principal paints another giant, butt-kissing smile on her face and I know immediately that whatever she’s about to say is total crap.

“I was asking her teacher.” I jut my chin at the beautiful woman with the thin, neat dreadlocks and big brown eyes.

The principal scowls.

The teacher looks surprised.

“It hasn’t been long, but Talia has had trouble concentrating in class and when she’s called on, she’s always got a snappy comment.”

The principal starts yapping again and I try not to tune out while Jenny interprets.

The teacher bites her lip and shrinks back. Despite her surrender, her eyes burn with determination. There’s something about that expression that speaks to my soul. Some kind of fight. Some kind of passion for justice.

Dare speaks, but he’s still facing the principal, so I wait for Jenny.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. I’ll speak to Talia and make sure there are no more issues.”

I assume the conversation is over until Jenny interprets for Dare again.

“I’d appreciate if you could keep this quiet.”

My emotions surge.

Shock. Frustration. Annoyance.

They fly through me like over-eager adventurers on a zip line.

I guess we’re going with the ‘bury this under the rug’ option.

I don’t know why I feel so disappointed. This is Sullivan’s world. He’s used to people bowing to him, playing by his rules. He’s accustomed to living life with zero consequences.

Our fake relationship is yet another ploy for his family to dodge the ramifications of their misdeeds. But shouldn’t he be more concerned? Talia

is so young, so impressionable. What kind of lesson is he teaching her by cleaning up this mess?

The teacher walks us out of the room and Dare puts his hand on the small of my back. I jerk away from him, and I sense—rather than see—his eyes burrow questioningly into me.

Lunch is almost over because the hallway is packed with kids. I don't see Talia anywhere, and I wonder if I'll get a chance to chat with her before we leave.

A streak of purple and white streams down the hallway. I have two seconds max to brace myself for a collision before a child barrels into my body. She fits perfectly into my arms and smells like DeeJ's favorite jasmine lotion.

"Niko!" I sign. Looking at her adorable face, joy breathes life back into my withering smile and all my anxieties melt away.

"Yaya." Her little fingers move sprightly and confidently.

Niko was born deaf while I was partially hearing for most of my childhood. Since ASL is her primary language, Niko is far more fluent than I am.

"What are you doing here?" Her almond-shaped eyes, so much like her father's, shift to Dare. "Is that your boyfriend?"

I glance behind me and notice Dare watching the both of us with an amused little smile.

Humph.

He shouldn't be smiling like that. I'm still not happy with him.

Dare takes one knee so he's at Niko's eye level. He signs a hello and asks her name.

"I'm Niko. Are you dating my aunt?"

"I am," Dare answers.

"Cool." Niko grabs his shoulder with one hand and signs with the other. Her expression turns severe and she reminds me of her cold, ruthless father when she threatens, "Be nice to her or I'll tell my dad on you."

Dare nods gravely. It's clear he's humoring her, but his choice not to laugh at her threat speaks volumes about his ability to be considerate.

Niko glances at the teacher standing behind us and her eyes brighten again. She signs, "Hi, Miss Abbot!"

Miss Abbot signs back clumsily.

I grin. "You know sign?"

“Little. Art class. Niko student.”

Seeing that atrocious grammar, I realize I’ve been judging Dare’s ASL harshly.

My hearing aids pick up a piercing sound. Niko glances up when she sees all her classmates rushing toward their classrooms.

She signs to me, “Gotta go.”

“Have a great day, Picasso.”

She rolls her eyes at our inside joke, waves to Dare, and scurries off with Miss Abbot. Her interpreter, a tall, thin, older woman with a pleasant smile, trails them.

It’s just me, Dare, Mosely and Jenny in the hallway now.

I fix my frown back into place before looking at Dare. “If we’re done here, I have things to do.”

That’s not a lie. I need to edit my pictures for social media and thumb through the casting calls my agency sent. Thanks to all the publicity surrounding my relationship with Dare, I’m no longer invisible. I’m getting offers from some huge and exciting fashion brands. I plan on sitting down with Henry to choose the brands that best fit the vision for our future fashion empire.

Dare catches up to me in three easy steps. He raises both arms in a show of surrender and then, as if he remembers he needs those hands to sign, he drops them.

“Let me give you a ride.”

“Unnecessary.”

“Necessary. We need to talk.”

“Is this about work?”

“Work-adjacent.”

I frown.

He gives me an imploring look.

I don’t trust him.

I don’t trust *me*.

It would be easier if I could control myself but, clearly, I can’t keep my hands off him.

I’m the one who initiated ‘the incident’ this morning.

And I was the one who kept the ‘incident’ going long after the director called ‘cut’.

It's better if we're not alone anymore. Just in case I make a move like that again when there are no cameras, no excuses to hide behind.

"Please," he signs.

I grudgingly glance away.

Five minutes ago, this man walked into a room and made the principal of an elite prep school cower. And now he's begging me.

Me.

If I have power over someone powerful, does that make me powerful too? Or am I just being manipulated?

I don't even know.

But when Dare gently takes my hand and leads me to his car, I tell myself it's okay to be manipulated just this once.

* * *

"You have thoughts," Dare signs. He's still not perfect at ASL, but I'm filling in the blanks using context clues.

"Yes, even deaf people have thoughts," I sign defensively. Since I grew up hearing, I can hear my inner voice, but Henry has more visual inner thoughts. It just depends on the deaf or hard of hearing person.

His smile is quick before he tucks it away in favor of nodding gravely. I guess he read the sass in my body language.

We're sitting in a cafe because, apparently, being the head of a giant enterprise means Dare has all the time in the world to take a random afternoon off and pump me with chai lattes.

"You think I should have let them punish her." When he stops signing, he scrubs his bottom lip with his forefinger, his gaze thoughtful.

"It's none of my business," I sign.

"I'm making it your business."

"Are you ordering me to share my thoughts?"

"It's more like an invitation."

"To get involved in your business?"

"You're repeating yourself," he points out.

"I'm clarifying."

He bunches his mouth into a teasing wad. "Tell me what it is you've been dying to say since we left the principal's office."

I wrap my fingers around the cup in front of me and glance around the café. It's empty. Like... totally. And I have a feeling it's not because a café in the heart of the city suddenly has zero customers.

The shop is a wide, open space. Zero noise. Nothing seeping into my hearing aids and mucking up the clarity.

We're sitting next to the window, drowning in sunlight.

It's the perfect environment for me. Did he choose it intentionally?

My gaze flickers over him, this mysterious enigma that I can't figure out.

"You love your niece. You didn't want the school to make a big deal over it. I understand."

"But you don't agree." He tilts his head, watching me. Always watching me.

"I worry about the child who got embarrassed."

"I instructed Mosely to send the family a check. That child's education will be paid through to college."

"I worry that you actually think that's a solution."

"You had a better proposal?"

"An actual apology."

"Can't pay bills with that."

"That's obnoxious."

"You don't like money?"

"I don't like when people think money can solve everything." I gesture to the space between us. "Or that people can be bought."

"I didn't buy you. I bought your time."

"You bought a service. And this isn't about me."

"It's about *me*." He leans back in his chair. Even while lounging, there's a charisma about him. Some unspoken authority.

I've long observed that the most powerful people in the room are never the loudest, never the ones with all the attention. They're the ones in the corner, watching, taking notes, making moves where there are no eyes.

"There's some misunderstanding here about who I am," he adds.

I shake my head. "Not a misunderstanding."

His eyes meet mine and a little zip goes down my spine. I wish I could explain where it came from or why it happened.

So I could stop it.

He signs, "Who do you think I am?"

I glance up at the ceiling. There are exposed beams crisscrossing each other. That, along with the exposed walls, gives the cafe a modern, hipster vibe.

“You are...” I sign, “a stereotypical, rich playboy.”

“I understood ‘rich’.”

I finger spell ‘playboy’.

His stare moves from my fingers to my face. “Definitely not a compliment.”

“Who cares what I think? You have money, right? That’s everything.”

“Money is boring.”

“Spoken like someone who has too much of it.”

There. That smile. The handsome one that softens his beautiful face and makes a certain area of my body light up like a Christmas tree.

“I meant, money is a convenience. It’s not a personality.”

Rather than answer, I take a sip of my drink.

Dare’s stare is heavy.

I decide to share more since he seems open to it. “I think there should be consequences.”

“Suggestions?” he signs.

I purse my lips in thought. “Some kind of community service. Exposure to the disenfranchised would be ideal, but maybe not safe. A beach clean-up is fine. As long as it’s clear what the punishment is for.”

“A lesson and a punishment,” he signs.

“‘We don’t speak to people that way. We don’t push our friends. We don’t hurt others because we’re upset’. It’ll get the point across.”

He rubs his chin, clearly torn. When he glances at me, he signs, “She won’t be happy.”

“No one’s happy with a punishment.” I lean forward. “Spoiling your niece is not loving her. You want her to avoid getting into trouble in the future. You’re not helping her with that by over-sheltering her. I find that kind of coddling to be disrespectful to her intelligence.”

I expect him to get defensive, angry.

Instead, his lips twitch.

“You’re really not holding back, are you?” he signs.

“It’s your choice, but I want you to think of more than right now. The lesson you teach your niece today, how will it shape her in the next ten years? What happens when she’s a more developed teenager with this kind

of attitude?” I add a little attitude of my own when I sign, “Unless you’re saying that nothing is wrong with what she did.”

“I know better than to answer that,” he signs with a laugh.

I take a sip of my latte and release the straw. “Pretend you don’t know better and answer anyway.”

He doesn’t reply for a long time, but the longer he waits, the more endearing he becomes. His hesitation is about what signs he’ll choose, not about the truth. I can tell, and that’s another thing I begrudgingly admire about him. He’s not perfect, but he’s also not pretending to be. He’s honest. A straight shooter. What you see is what you get.

“I know there’s an issue here, but it’s one I need to solve. Talia is my niece. My responsibility. I couldn’t pass that responsibility over to the school. Even if I did, they can’t teach her how to treat people. They can’t show her what she did was wrong. Once isn’t enough to break a cycle. It needs to come from home.”

“From you?” I remember how he winced when I suggested he be the ‘bad cop’. I got the feeling he would have botched that job if we’d gotten to speak to Talia at school.

“And you, I hope.”

I jerk back in surprise. “Come again?”

“Y-o-u.” He fingerspells.

“Me? Why do you need me?”

“Good cop.” He points at me. “Bad cop, remember?”

“That was...”

“Your idea.”

“Then.”

“Now.”

“No thanks.”

“Didn’t you say you’d take responsibility to the end?”

“I don’t remember it quite like that.”

“Tonight.” The tilt of his lips inches up a bit. This is a familiar smile. The mischievous one.

He really is used to getting his way. An argument is fun for him.

“Why would I say yes? I’m not ready to raise a child.”

“See? All talk and no action.” His eyes twinkle. He knows he’s backing me into a corner and he likes it too much. “I’m giving you an opportunity to train the next generation. Really make a difference.”

He's got a point.

I purse my lips thoughtfully. "Train up a child in the way they should go..."

"And when they're old, they won't throw money at people to solve their issues."

A smile blooms even though I didn't give it permission to. "I need another reason."

"How about... because you want to rehabilitate this sad, rich playboy?"

"Rehabilitate." I correct him.

He mimics the sign. Does it a few times as if he's storing it away in his memory.

I look him up and down and pretend I don't like everything I'm seeing. "Might be more effort than it's worth."

He leans forward and his cologne fills my air. Addictive. Tantalizing.

"I'll make it worth your while," he signs.

My heart beats way too fast and I inch back so I'm almost disappearing into my chair.

"I'll think about it. For Talia," I concede.

"I'll send a car. Do you like pizza?"

I give him a stink eye.

He laughs and stirs his coffee.

My watch buzzes, preventing me from bringing him down a peg or two. Not that his peg can be moved. I bet nothing can make this man second-guess himself.

I check the notification on my phone and see that there were several missed calls from my agency.

That's weird. My agency knows that I can't receive calls. They've always communicated with me via emails and text messages. An intern must have taken over for their regular secretary.

I pocket my phone and get up, glad for an excuse to make an exit. "I should go."

His eyes catch on Mosely who's been waiting at a table farther out. A bodyguard has been standing watch at the door since we walked in.

"I should too," Dare signs. "Before Mosely has a heart attack."

I notice Dare's assistant gesturing wildly. A panicked sheen brightens his eyes. His forehead is ridged with two extra wrinkles. Something must have happened at Dare's company.

Rising stiffly, I give Dare a head nod and walk toward the exits. It's a cold way to leave and I know I should probably be more friendly, but I don't have it in me to get too close to him. The one thing I've learned is... give Dare Sullivan an inch and he'll take a mile.

I'm thankful when he lets me leave without protest.

But I guess he doesn't need to protest at all.

A billionaire's arm stretches far, and José is right downstairs in front of a shiny black car that looks like it rolled off the lot two seconds ago.

"You were waiting for me?" I sigh with a defeated sigh.

He nods.

Rather than argue, I get into the car. José is nice and I don't want him to lose his job over my stubbornness.

My back melts into leather seats.

Yup.

That's a new car smell.

My watch buzzes again, warning me of an incoming call. I should really take Sazuki's advice and program an automatic 'text me please' message when people try to call this number. It's frustrating to have to guess what the caller could want.

I wait until the phone stops vibrating to respond.

Yaya: I saw your missed call. Gentle reminder to send a text or an email for all future communications.

Cameron Modeling Agency Rep: www.onthenosenews.se

I scrunch my nose and stare suspiciously at the link. My mama taught me not to go around clicking random links on the internet.

Cameron Modeling Agency Rep: did you accept brand deals from Ru-Carpsel?

My fingers tighten on the phone.

Yaya: Of course not.

Ru-Carpsel is a greedy fast fashion brand that uses harmful chemicals in their products. They also make sub-par mass-produced clothing. Not only that, but there are rumors that they employ atrocious child labor practices and basically run sweat shops in vulnerable communities.

Cameron Modeling Agency Rep: This is bad, Yaya. You've been outed as a Ru-Carpsel brand ambassador. All the new clients that were interested in signing you are backing out. People are raising a stink. The agency is thinking of dropping you altogether.

What? Dropping me?

I clawed my way into this agency. It took years of one-time contracts and going over and beyond at base-level modeling jobs before I was considered a represented model.

I even moved halfway across the country to have a shot at a better agency since the one in our city didn't believe in me.

And they're going to throw it all away?

Over what? I haven't done anything wrong!

Cameron Modeling Agency Rep: did you check the link?

I abandon my thoughts that are quickly spiraling and press the link. The headline sends my heart into a panic.

Richard Sullivan's New Girlfriend Endorses Ru-Carpsel, Scams Fans Out of Thousands

Beneath it is a picture of me. I remember taking that photo. It was recent. Henry and I were in front of the historic townhouses. It was the day those teenagers walked past and made fun of us.

But wait...

I peer closer at the picture. Henry's the creative director on set, but I'm the one who chooses the photo that gets posted, since I'm the name on the contract for brand deals. I also do a little photo editing—which involves upgrading the lighting and clearing unwanted objects like passersby or stop signs from the background.

I did take a picture in this outfit, but this picture isn't the one I posted. It has none of my usual editing.

Thumbs tapping frantically, I log into social media, and the red notification icon stops me cold.

2000 comments?

A quick scroll shows that my posts have been hate-bombed. There's only one persistent fan who keeps defending me. *June-bug84*. Apart from that, it's all negative.

A horrified gasp balls in my throat when I realize I'm *trending*.

#Yayascam

I've always wanted my own hashtag but not like this.

I blink against the tide of rapid-fire mortification, wishing the words away, but the hashtag remains.

What do I do now? The hashtag's been gaining momentum. It's already been a few hours since the trend started. That's partly my fault. Because I

rely on vibrations to know when someone is contacting me, I have my social media apps on mute. If I'd seen these notifications earlier, I would have known something was going on.

Heart bursting, I tap on one of the comments.

Yaya is a scam.

Is she even deaf?

I can't believe she'd support a company like Ru-Carpsel.

CANCELLED!

My mouth falls open.

The air tastes of ice and despair.

I know I shouldn't, but I keep scrolling.

This shirt is not even CLOSE to what I ordered.

My sunshades fell apart after three seconds of use!! :((

Eyes widening, I tap on that last comment and see the photo evidence. The pieces of her sunglasses look exactly like the sunshades from our latest photoshoot. The one that fell apart on my head.

My brain collapses into a single frantic string of 'oh no, oh no, oh no'.

What am I going to do? Will I really get dropped from the agency? Am I going to get sued? What if this affects Dare too?

I don't realize I'm voicing until the car stops moving.

José rips my door open. He signs the word 'breathe' and offers me a bottle of water. I ignore him and bend my head down, sucking in giant gulps of air. My closed fists are pressed against my chest, and I can feel my racing heartbeat.

Slowly, I straighten back up.

José gives me a concerned look. His gloved hands are pristine when he signs, "Are you okay?"

I nod. And then I shake my head.

"Would you like me to call Mr. Sullivan?"

I pounce on his hand before he can reach for the phone. Shaking my head desperately, I sign, "I'll figure this out. Just... take me home. Please."

He agrees and slips back into the driver's seat.

As the car starts again, I scroll through my profile. There. A tight shot of me, smiling brightly. My hand is touching the scarf I got from a brand we're working with and, beneath the photo, I tagged the company and gave details on where the scarf could be purchased.

Everyone is saying that the purse was Ru-Carpsel, but I didn't even highlight the purse in this shot.

Am I missing something?

Bracing myself for the vitriol waiting in my comments, I scroll through all the hate until I find a review that tags the account where I endorsed Ru-Carpsel.

The picture fills my screen in an instant.

It's real. That's my face.

Except it's not really me. At least, not my official account.

Yaya Fashion Brand

What?

I have no idea who this is. Have I been scammed?

I scroll through the Yaya Fashion Brand account. I so badly want this to be a Photoshop copy or illegal AI usage of my pictures, but I recognize each of those settings and outfits. I remember all those accessories—the ones I now know were Ru-Carpsel.

A sinking feeling floods my stomach.

I wish I'd been scammed.

I wish hackers had gotten into my social media and played this sick, cruel trick on me.

But the truth is so much worse.

* * *

José stops the car in front of Henry's apartment, but I don't immediately climb out. I just sit there, wishing I didn't have to climb up those steps. Wishing I was anywhere but here.

I notice José eyeing me in the rearview mirror, but he doesn't try to quicken me out of the car. Maybe he can tell that my world is crashing around me.

Maybe he can feel my pain.

Oh, this hurts.

My ribs are caving in, smothering my heart.

My legs are heavy.

Come on, Yaya. Maybe Henry has a good explanation.

I know that's a lie. I know there's nothing Henry could say that would make this betrayal sting any less, but it's what I need to believe right now. Or else I won't ever leave this car.

José sees me scooting to the door and he hops out. In a flash, he's opening my door for me.

If I were in my right mind, I'd probably ask if he used to run track. He's so fast that I barely see him moving around the car.

"Thank you," I sign, but my eyes aren't on him as they usually would be. They're on the ground, dragging my heart behind me.

Every step I take toward Henry's apartment feels like death. Like a black cloud gathering above my head, descending in a thick plague. Choking out every inch of light.

Is it afternoon? I can't tell. Feels like it's two a.m. Feels like the time when evil happens.

I knock on the door.

It opens and my best friend is there, staring at me with mournful eyes.

There was a tiny, stupid part of me that hoped I'd be wrong. The way wives who've been gathering their husband's hotel stubs, checking his phone every night and tracking his car movements still have a foolish hope that when they talk to their partner, there will be an explanation that makes everything go away.

But Henry doesn't give me the opportunity to foolishly believe in him.

Doesn't even try.

Guilt is all over his face, making his eyes look sunken in, making his shoulders slouch, making his steps sluggish.

A lump of pain fills my throat.

"Why?" I sign as my eyes prickle with tears.

His bottom lip trembles. The red veins in his eyes stand out against the glassy coat of tears. His Adam's apple bobs with every harsh, tortured swallow.

"Why would you do that to me?" My heart thunders as I sign with bigger and bigger movements, hands taking up all the space in the doorway. "I'm trying to help you. I'm doing everything I can *for you* and you're just hurting me more."

The first tear slips out of his eyes. It tortures me to see him in so much pain. Even after what he's done. Why do I have to be such an idiot? Why do

I have to love people so fiercely that, even when they impale me with their swords, I still feel loyal to them?

My chest pumps up and down.

The current of anger streaming through the air rises the longer he takes to answer. The silence gives room for resentment to grow. For anger to gain a foothold.

I wave aggressively so he looks up. "Answer me!"

"I swear, I didn't mean for this to happen," Henry signs. His movements are broken, defeated. He still can't look straight at me.

A bewildered snort builds in my head. I've been blindsided. This plot twist is so ridiculous, so painful, that I want to shake my fist at the skies. It could be anyone, *anyone*, but it can't be Henry. Not my best friend.

It takes a couple breaths before I'm back in control of myself.

Resigned, I sign to Henry, "What do you want?"

His eyebrows twitch upward.

"What could you possibly want to have stabbed me in the back like this?"

"I was just trying to help you fix it."

That stops me in my tracks. I stare at him, disbelieving.

With a shaky exhale, I take out my phone and show him some of the comments that people are leaving online.

You are a scam. Are you even deaf? Being deaf is not an excuse to hurt people.

Henry flinches as he reads.

"That's what people are saying about me." I step closer, my lips so stiff I could probably break a concrete wall if I kiss it. "If this is the way you fix things, I don't want to see what happens when you try to break something." I smile darkly. "Oh wait. I've seen that already."

Henry flares his nostrils. I notice his fingers digging into the doorway. He's not going to sign.

Okay then.

I turn away, finished.

He grabs my hand and I look back.

"I can explain. Just give me a chance."

I break his hold on me. "Don't contact me for a while."

His eyes are imploring, and a part of me wants to stay and forgive him. Instead, I leave.

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CHAPTER 13

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the farmhouse ladies

DARE

My PR Team is made up of the most creative, highly educated, and ridiculously well-compensated people in the world.

And I'm about to fire all of them.

"Repeat that," I say smoothly. "I dare you."

The pipsqueak that spoke those atrocious words—Conner—turns red.

"S-sir?" He looks to Mosely as if waiting for some kind of guidance on where he went wrong.

Mosely just pulls his lips into his mouth in silent respect for the dead. Or the soon-to-be dead.

"Go ahead." I flick my fingers. The sparkly plastic gemstones on my watch catch the light and disperse it over the five worried faces seated around the desk.

Conner swallows hard enough to make the glass walls rattle. It sounds like an amplifier got stuck in his throat. He might need to get that checked.

Along with his brain.

I arch an eyebrow. "Did you not hear me, Conner? Because, if necessary, I can sign that instruction. I know ASL."

Behind me, Mosely makes a pinched face and does a shooing gesture.

"I-I said," Conner stutters, eyes darting back and forth, "right now, Yaya Williams is a bomb and you need to throw it far away from you and the company."

I hear Mosely smack his forehead in disappointment.

“What else?”

“We should immediately send out a press release stating that you and the company had no knowledge of her involvement with Ru-Carpsel. We need to tell the public you two are taking a break. I suggest we word the press release so you seem just as betrayed and heartbroken as her followers.”

Tensely, I press my fingers together and rest it on the desk. “You’re new here, Conner?”

“Um, yes.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty.”

“Where did you get your MBA?”

“Harvard.”

“Ah, Harvard.” I bob my head. “They must be so proud of you.”

His eyes bulge as if he can sense my sarcasm, but he doesn’t know what that sarcasm means for him and his job stability.

“I assume that if you were smart enough or, at least, well-connected enough to get into Harvard, you have some sort of ability to comprehend basic English.”

It’s no longer his face that’s red. It’s his face *and* his neck.

“For Harvard’s sake, I’m going to give you a second chance.”

He blinks rapidly.

“I believe in you, Conner. That’s the only reason you’re not packing your things and putting them in your car, do you understand?”

“Sir?” His voice is a panicked squeak.

I glance at each of the nervous faces. “I asked for solutions. I asked for a campaign to quiet the online dissent in a way that doesn’t hurt me or the company.” I lift the binders in front of me and let them slam on the table. “Why do all of these involve distancing myself from my girlfriend?”

Terry, the PR Team leader, raises a hand timidly. The flat of her palm is balanced under her elbow as if she needs the extra support to keep her hands hoisted beneath my scrutiny.

“Sir, your relationship with Ms. Williams is relatively new.”

“I’m aware of the timeline.”

“You’ve only recently announced your relationship to the press.”

“You’re just repeating the same thing in different words, Terry.”

Terry was one of the original team members who moved to our new headquarters. I approved the transfer myself.

“Don’t bother hiding your question. I don’t like thinly veiled words, so come right out and ask.”

“Your relationship is your business, sir, but since it’s now in the public spotlight, I need to understand how serious you are about Ms. Williams. That will help us,” she glances at the trembling Conner, “to tailor our proposals.”

I rise to my feet and button my jacket. “I was clear in my initial instruction. We’re going to solve this in a way that won’t hurt me or the company.”

“But—”

“Breaking up with Yaya Williams will hurt *me*.”

A startled silence falls on the room.

“I want new proposals.” My gaze slices darkly through each of them. “If I have to come up with the solutions myself, that would mean I don’t need any of you and thus, you would no longer need to work here.” I walk toward the door and stop at Conner’s chair. When my hand descends on his shoulder, he jumps as if I put a gun to his head. “Good luck.”

Mosely follows me to my office where I strip out of my jacket and wrench my tie loose. Pressing my fists on the surface of the desk, I lean over and suck in a sharp breath.

I hate that I’m here, battling things out at the company when I should be with Yaya. She must be devastated.

“That was the coldest I’ve ever seen you,” Mosely says quietly. The door shuts behind him with a muted click, as if even the furniture is afraid of setting me off.

“How can the only solution be to throw Yaya to the wolves?”

Mosely approaches me the way a vet would corner a rabid animal. “Right now, the company’s in a tenuous position. Because of the Cullen Tech partnership, we need to be on our best behavior. Publicity matters when you’re vying for government contracts. Reputation matters. It’s a tight race and any mistake you make can and will be used against you.”

“Yaya’s innocent.”

“Have you confirmed that with her?”

I scoff. “I don’t need to.”

Yaya Williams has a heart as big as my bank account. I know for a fact that she would never intentionally harm her fans or endorse a company that preyed on the disenfranchised. The woman is passionate about justice. Hell, she was gung-ho against me and Talia today. Her heart went out to the scholarship student instead of the people she actually knew.

"I admire your trust in her, sir. I really do, but—"

"I hate when you use the word 'but', Mosely."

"*However*," he arches an eyebrow as if to say *better?*—the cheeky bastard—"the damage inflicted on us by association is severe. You went on national television and presented this woman to the world. She gained excessive fame and acknowledgement due to your personal interest. Now the very same ones who praised you are turning around and crucifying you. People are saying—"

"I know what they're saying."

"That you two are in cahoots."

"Idiots."

"That you're profiting from Ru-Carpsel's heinous practices."

"I have nothing to do with Ru-Carpsel..." Something clicks in my head and the words drift into silence.

Mosely wiggles a finger. "I know that look. Your father had the same one."

"Was it when he had a brilliant idea?"

"A crazy one. Usually didn't end well."

"You have such faith in me, Mosely." I grin and tap the desk twice, drumming a beat in excitement. "Call my lawyers."

"For?"

"We're going to make a purchase."

"Oy." Mosely rubs his temple. "I'm already getting a headache."

* * *

I text Yaya before and after my afternoon meetings, but there's no response. Rather than hound her, which is my instinct, I set the phone away and focus on my preparations with the lawyers.

When it's time to pick up Talia from school, I check my phone again.

Still no messages from Yaya.

I turn the phone around and around on my knee, toying with the idea of calling her. How is it that I miss her so much when I saw her this morning?

My heart keeps rattling around in my chest like a dog without an owner.

I've never felt this way in my life. This longing. This *need*.

It's foreign on every level.

When I want something, it's always there. Easy. No challenge, no work involved. Money can slick the wheels of even the crankiest machine. Even without explaining who I am and how much I'm worth, my charm can grease a few wheels on its own. People fall over themselves to be with me. All I do is breathe and I'm surrounded by options.

I didn't realize until her.

Until Yaya.

She's making me work for her. *Toil* for her.

And I love it.

But I also hate it.

Can't we skip to the part where she admits she loves me? Because that ending is inevitable. I cannot exist in a world where Yaya Williams isn't the love of my life.

"Need a stress ball?" Mosely leans over and pops open the glove compartment. To my surprise, he has enough stress balls in there to fill a small ball pit.

"Is that what you'll do after retirement? Open a children's playground?"

"Very funny, sir." He does not look amused when he tosses the ball at me. "Give your phone a break."

I squeeze the ball tight. The squishy thing does nothing to calm my nerves.

"I'm guessing Ms. Williams hasn't called."

"No." I leave the 'and it kills me' along with the 'what are your thoughts on stalking' comments out of my answer. I don't need any more reasons for Mosely to give me that fatherly look of disappointment.

Trading the stress ball for the phone once more, I raise the device to the car roof in case I'm not getting enough bars.

Is Yaya okay? Did she eat? Did she cry? The comments online have been horrible. It drove me insane seeing people make such terrible and untrue remarks about her.

Which is why I have a team assigned to tracking down the malicious spammers by their IP addresses. I plan on suing them to hell and back.

Since I can't call her, and showing up at her place right now might be too much as well, my brain immediately gets to problem-solving.

An idea hits.

"Mosely, park for a second."

"What?"

"Park the car."

With a befuddled look, Mosely pulls over.

"Now scoot to the side."

He does, but I can sense his confusion as he moves.

"Okay..." I set my cell phone on the headrest and let it lean against his ear.

"Sir—"

"Don't move!" I yelp.

Mosely freezes.

With his head as a balancing board, I press the record button and make a video.

"Just checking on you," I sign. "Text me if you need anything."

I send the video of me signing and remove the phone from Mosely's head. "Thank you."

He gives me the side-eye. "And you wonder why I store so many stress balls."

I smirk.

At that moment, my cell phone lights up.

It's an unfamiliar number, but I pick up anyway in case it's Yaya in an emergency.

"Hey, Dare. Is now a good time?"

I straighten and give the phone a stunned look. "Luce? How are you calling me? I thought rehab didn't allow cell phones."

"I found my emergency credit card."

Dammit. I thought I'd gone over her purse with a fine-toothed comb.

"You realize that whoever owns this number is about to get fired, don't you?"

"Eh. Didn't like her anyway."

I pause. "Did you buy booze with that card?"

"Come on, Dare."

"Answer the question, Luce."

"I'm not going to ruin things this time. I told you... I'll try."

“Good.” I release a breath. Luce could be lying to my face—or to my ear—but I choose to believe the accident that night scared her into looking seriously at her life and making better decisions.

“I called to see if you were okay. Your girlfriend’s name was trending online. She’s in the middle of getting cancelled.”

“We’re handling it.”

“How?”

“The way we always do. It’s not like this family is a stranger to bad press.”

“Yeah, but this is different. People are saying...”

“I know what they’re saying, Luce.”

“So I’ve been thinking...”

“And that’s where you made your first mistake.”

“If she’s a scam artist—”

“She’s not.”

“But if she is—”

“It’s a ridiculous hypothetical.”

“All I’m saying is, if lying is her job, then she might have scammed you too.”

“You’re wasting your precious cell phone minutes on this?”

“I know you like her, Dare. The timeline of your relationship was sketchy, but I saw the way you looked at her. It’s real for you. But her? She was harder to read. And now this scandal... Have you checked her medical records? Are you sure she is who she says she is?”

“Yaya is not pretending to be deaf so she can steal my money, Luce. I am one hundred percent certain of that.”

“Since you’re so sure, I’ll believe you. Just... be careful.”

“I love you too,” I grumble.

She laughs softly. “How’s Talia?”

I hesitate, not sure if I should bring up the trouble we’ve been having. Mostly because Luce will say ‘I told you so’ in that smug, older-sister way that drives me nuts.

Thankfully, Mosely slows the car in front of Talia’s school and I get to hand the phone over to my perturbed niece.

“How about you ask her yourself?”

Talia is reluctant to take the phone. No doubt, she’s trying to find the angle. Maybe I’m passing over the punishing stick to her mom? Maybe me

and Luce will gang up on her?

When she finally takes the cell, Lucy's shriek of adoration erupts through the car. My sister might as well be on speaker phone.

"How's my little bundle of Giovanni Erona Tulle?"

Talia's lips, that had been pursed, ease into a tiny smile. It does my heart good to see that expression after all the strain we've been under.

Since I have nothing better to do and we're stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic, I listen in on Talia's one-sided conversation.

I wonder what Lucy's asking her.

Does Uncle Dare feed you on time every day?

Yes.

Have you burned anyone's underwear since you got there?

No.

Are you enjoying your classes?

Yes.

Do you have any friends?

Yes.

Do you miss me?

No.

Eventually, Talia passes the phone back. "She wants to talk to you."

"Hey, Luce," I say into the phone.

"I feel so relieved to hear that Talia is doing well. She really enjoys staying with you."

"She said that?" I arch an eyebrow in surprise. All I heard was a couple one syllable yes-no responses.

"I was wrong about you, Dare. I didn't think you'd be able to give her so much of your time, but you're really stepping up."

"Yes, well, I told you so." I lift my chin because I'm not above being a bratty younger brother every now and then.

"About you and Yaya, I hope everything works out."

"Thanks."

Luce's voice drops to a startled whisper. "Oop. Gotta go. The warden's making her rounds."

"Bye, Luce."

"Muah!" She kisses into the phone and then it clicks off.

As silence settles, I turn to Talia and notice that she's putting in headphones.

“Ah-ah.” I plug one out of her ears. “You’re too young to be an emo teenager.”

“I just want to listen to some music.”

“We need to talk.”

“Do we have to?” she pouts.

“Yes.” She’s stuck in a car with me and can’t lock her room door or slink away from the living room with her tablet. “How was school today?”

“Fine.” She folds her arms over her chest. “What did you talk about with Miss Abbot?”

Should I have this conversation now? With everything that’s going on, I doubt Yaya will have time to come over and be good cop with me.

Okay, Dare. You can do this. Parenting is easy. Everyone does it. You’re just shaping a whole human being, pretty much influencing the world and the future. No big deal.

“Talia, about what you did in the cafeteria...”

My phone chirps.

Saved by the bell.

I hold up a finger, indicating she should wait a moment. Talia rolls her eyes. She’s way too astute, this kid. She can smell that I’m stalling.

My attention fastens on the text I got from Yaya.

It’s an address.

If we were in a different kind of relationship, I’d assume we were meeting for a sexy rendezvous, but this doesn’t feel like an invitation to a hotel room. What could it be?

“Uncle Dare, why are you smiling at your phone?”

Because Yaya invited me over. For the first time, she’s the one opening the door to her world.

“Tals, do you have a lot of homework today?”

“Not really.”

“Good. We’ll be making a short detour before we go home.”

* * *

The exact address Yaya sent is not recognized on our GPS, so I have to call in a favor with Cullen to create a quick navigation route for me.

“You don’t have to if you’re not feeling well.”

“Are you kidding,” he mumbles in that grumpy voice of his. “I’ve been bored out of my mind waiting for these test results.”

In three minutes flat, the coding whizz has a GPS up and running.

Turns out, the address Yaya gave is to Darrel Hastings farmhouse. It sits on an impressive orchard and is an architectural homage to all things wood, stone, and metal.

“Finally.” Mosely sighs and parks the car.

I silently mirror the sentiment. I don’t even want to know how much Darrel Hastings paid to hide that location from every satellite and navigation agency in the country. Something tells me it’s a service only someone like Clay Bolton could offer.

“What is this place?” Talia asks, her nose flat against the window.

I tilt my head to the side. “Huh, I don’t know.”

Some impressive cars are parked out front and, as a car buff myself, I know for a fact that those vehicles, collectively, could purchase a small island nation. Bodyguards are stationed around the lawn, looking tough and alert.

Music is pumping loud enough to shatter glass and the car mat trembles beneath my feet as it absorbs the sound.

The front door is slightly open and I can see a figure dancing enthusiastically. Someone else joins the dance. This one is shorter and wearing a flouncy pink tutu that flaps like bird’s wings every time she jumps.

It looks like a party, but not any kind of party that I’m used to.

“Uncle Dare, mom says I’m not old enough to go clubbing,” Talia squeaks.

“This isn’t a club,” I say, climbing out of the car. “I don’t think.”

Mosely joins us on the sidewalk. So does my bodyguard who’d been following from behind.

“Dare, are you sure this isn’t a trap? Maybe Yaya’s phone was hacked.”

The thought crossed my mind, but it’s not like I can call and demand to hear Yaya’s voice so I can confirm.

My eyes sweep the lawn.

“I recognize that BMW.” I point to the vehicle gleaming in the late evening sunlight. “Only one person in this town would drive that.”

Max Stinton, head of the Stinton empire. His company has a luxury vehicle division. I took a tour when I came to town.

“Even so, you should probably let us go in with you.” He motions to himself and the guard.

I debate it when a familiar face appears in the doorway.

Dejonae gives me a tight nod.

When she waves me forward, I tell Mosely, “You two can go. I’ll drive us back.”

“But sir, the Ru-Carpsel crisis hasn’t been resolved—”

“And it won’t be resolved in a night.” I set a hand on his shoulder. “You and I both know we have a long road ahead of us. We won’t have a second to breathe once the sun rises and the chaos may never end. So let me have tonight.”

He blinks slowly.

My bodyguard gives me a questioning look, as if he also disagrees with my decision.

“We’ll be fine.” I shoo him away. There’s enough security here to make me comfortable. Plus if Clay Bolton is inside—and I have a feeling he is—we have more than enough protection.

Mosely reluctantly drives off with my bodyguard while I approach Dejonae. It doesn’t hit me how short she is until she’s standing next to Talia. Huh. Yaya’s sister seemed much bigger in my memory. Like a stick of dynamite, she packs a punch in a small package.

“Hi,” I climb the stairs and yell to be heard over the thumping bass, “Yaya sent me a text—”

“I was the one who sent the text,” Dejonae says abruptly.

My eyebrow twitches.

Before I can ask why she summoned me, Talia starts to fuss.

“Uncle Dare!” she presses her hands to her ears. “The music’s too loud. Can’t you tell them to turn it down?”

“Here.” Dejonae pushes ear plugs into my hands. “You’ll need these.”

I lift the case and hear the distinct rattle. “What are these for?”

“To give us Yaya’s superpowers.”

I hesitantly tap the ear plugs into my palm and help fit them into Talia’s ear. Next, I do the same. The mush of noise, electric guitars and thumping bass turns to a muted hush.

Talia looks up at me and says something but, with the ear plugs, I don’t hear it. Plucking one out, I gesture for her to speak again.

“How are we supposed to hear each other now?” my niece screams. I don’t think she’s enjoying herself. The words ‘Uncle Dare, I want to go home’ are building on the tip of her tongue. It’s right there in her scrunched nose and knotted eyebrows.

Dejonaë looks at my niece. Her eyes soften in a way that tells me she’s really good with children. She takes out her phone and taps a sentence.

We write or we sign.

Talia looks confused, but I feel a zip of warmth in my chest.

After diving into my research of ASL and Deaf culture, I’ve begun to understand how little of the world caters to the deaf community. The lack of understanding, the lack of infrastructure, the lack of basic knowledge from outsiders must be isolating. Especially if, like Yaya, so much of your life is built around hearing people and in hearing industries.

There must be no escaping it.

That feeling of being on the outside.

Of not being understood.

Of having to work extra hard just to be treated equally.

I look past Dejonaë, easy enough to do since she’s no obstruction, and notice all the people in the farmhouse are wearing ear plugs.

Yaya’s in the center of the living room, dancing along with the little girl in the tutu that I spotted outside. An elderly woman in a flouncing embroidered skirt is moving along with them. She dances up to a young boy with window glasses and tugs his hand. He reluctantly joins her in the center of the room.

Another boy, who bears a striking resemblance to the first, whips out his cell phone and starts filming.

I stare at Yaya’s smiling face and my heart rearranges.

She’s... okay.

In all the scenarios I ran through my head, this was the one I was hoping for and the one that felt the most out of reach.

“I’ll tell her you’re here,” Dejonaë signs.

“Let her have her moment.”

A corner of her lips inches up in approval, and I know I've gained some points with her. But that's not why I did it. I mean every word.

We walk deeper into the house, skirting past a young lady in a mechanic wrench T-shirt sitting next to a small, dark-skinned woman in a pair of oil-stained overalls. Their garage-wear is a startling contrast to the thick woman in an iridescent ball gown and long black hair, holding a tawny-colored baby in her arms.

The two women wave at me and Talia when I pass by. They seem like they want to chat, but Dejonae is still on the move so all I can do is nod and walk past.

As we near the kitchen, I glance through the open balcony doors and see the most influential men in the city gathered around a barbecue grill. And I mean *all* of them. Alistair, Hastings, Stinton, Mulliez, both Boltons—I guess Clay came back from his honeymoon already. Sazuki's there too and, on his knee signing enthusiastically, is the little girl who hugged Yaya at school today. Niko.

For months, I've been trying to network with these men and here they are. I feel like I entered a secret society without having to knock on the door and say a password.

Talia tugs on my hand. She'd taken scared, little steps behind me this entire time, but now her nose is flaring in interest. She points to her face as if to say *do you smell that?* I inhale a deep breath and pick up on the delicious scent.

Three women are in the kitchen. The first has curly hair and is rubbing her pregnant belly. The second has long black hair and dark black eyes. The last woman has long white hair that contrasts her brown skin. She's flipping crescent-shaped dough with a long fork.

Whatever she was trying to extract plops back into the hot oil. She opens her mouth in a yelp and the other two yell as well. They all jump back at the same time, huddling away from the pan.

Finally, someone braves the stove and takes out the... what is that? Some kind of fried bread?

Dejonae waves at Talia and gestures to her belly. *Hungry?*

Talia shakes her head no and folds her arms over her chest.

I want to apologize for her stand-offish behavior, but Dejonae doesn't give me the chance. She gestures something to the three ladies, sweeps a

plate with the strange fried dough and motions for Talia to mount the bar stool on the opposite side of the island counter.

I help Talia to sit on the tall stool. She gingerly picks up the fried dough that was given to her. After one nibble, her eyes brighten and she stuffs the whole thing into her mouth, crumbs flying everywhere.

The other children must have noticed that food is being handed out because they gather like moths to a flame. The girl in the wrench-themed shirt takes the seat beside Talia. She slides her cell phone over, initiating a conversation.

Talia gives her a snobby look and I inwardly cringe.

Please behave while we're here, Talia.

A waving hand catches my eye and I turn to find the woman with the pregnant belly typing in her notes:

I don't think we've been introduced. I'm Kenya. That's Sunny and that's Island.

Those two names together sound like she's describing a café in the Caribbean.

I'm Richard Sullivan

Sunny types to me:

We know. We saw your interview.

Super romantic.

That last note was from Island. The woman with the stylish white hair has extremely long nails and I'm astonished at the speed that she types with them.

"Daughter?" Kenya signs and then she points to Talia.

I take a beat longer than necessary to answer because these women are fascinating to me. The way they switch between signing and writing notes is effortless.

"My niece," I sign. "But she's staying with me for a few months."

She's shy, huh? Island types.

I think about how to respond to that and can't find a better word for it, so I shrug and nod.

A second later, I point to the bucket of golden dough.

Fry jacks, Kenya types.

It's a Belizean breakfast food, Sunny adds, but these people want it for lunch and dinner. Addicts. All of them.

A pale hand pops over the bucket of fried jacks and Sunny smacks it without checking who the hand belongs to.

I glance over at the kids and, to my surprise, it's Talia nursing her hand. She looks shocked and, frankly, so am I.

But Sunny's eyes are on her phone as she types. She flashes a message at the crowd of kids.

We ask before we take, understood?

Talia looks at me.

I look back at her.

Someone taps my niece on the shoulder. The girl in the wrench T-shirt slides over her phone. Talia's expression clears and her lips inch up a bit. She glances at one of the boys knowingly and it seems like they're all plotting something.

I'm proven right.

When Sunny turns her back, one of the boys tries to nab a fry jack and he gets smacked too.

That makes Talia laugh.

My stomach clenches weirdly. I haven't seen her laugh like that since she came to stay with me. Not once.

Sunny threatens the kids via her notes app again and I start to relax. The women roll right along, taking out plates and adding the fried jacks to them.

Holland Alistair trudges in from outside, carrying a platter of meat that deserves its own episode on the Food Network.

I shake his hand and sign in excitement, "You're a hard man to get a hold of."

He pulls out his phone.

Huh. I never thought that I'd be better at something than the legendary contactless real estate king.

Knowing Yaya, and thus knowing ASL, is coming in handy. I can see that Alistair's already got a level of respect for me.

I heard about your takeover of Cullen Tech. You beat me to it. I had my eye on Cullen.

I type, Back off. He's mine.

Alistair barely cracks a smile and yet, he seems amused.

I'd love a first option if you decide to license his tech.

We'll see.

I feel someone thumping the counter and both Alistair and I draw our attention to Kenya. At once, Alistair's back straightens and he rushes over to his wife.

She pushes him slightly away with a roll of her eyes. When he continues to fuss over her, she gestures to her stomach and then juts her chin at the barbecue outside. Alistair nods, probably telling her that the rest of the meat is almost done and they'll be able to eat soon.

A burst of movement to my left gets my attention. The little girl in the tutu is dragging the girl in the wrench T-shirt to the living room to dance. Talia is being dragged along with them, but she doesn't seem to mind.

Heart swelling, I watch her have fun. The energy in the air is contagious. The warmth. The love. It's like I'm surrounded by light and it's seeping into my skin. It's affecting Talia too. She's coming alive playing with the other kids.

All this love... it's for Yaya. No one says it, but it's implicitly understood. They support her. They care for her. They're here, telling her to forget Ru-Carsel, to forget the bad press, to remember that the only opinions that matter are those of the people in this room.

I should buy them all cars. Or jewelry. Loving Yaya, treating her well, I'm starting to realize that's the easiest way to earn my favor.

I keep my distance from Yaya for most of the night, staying away from the living room and mingling with the other men. But that doesn't mean I'm not watching her. Sneaking peeks at Yaya is the same as breathing air. I can't help that my eyes are drawn to her like clockwork.

I'm deep in conversation with Adam Harrison about the future of AI in tech, but it's been a few minutes (or has it been seconds?) since I checked on Yaya, so I scan the room to locate her.

And I'm startled to find that, this time, she's looking back at me. Her expression is inscrutable. I can't tell if she's upset or shocked or happy to see me here.

She frowns.

Okay, definitely not happy.

I lift my lips in a slow smile. She wasn't the one who invited me into her world tonight, but now that I'm here, I plan on sticking around.

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CHAPTER 14

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don't hold back

YAYA

My world is ending.

My best friend betrayed me.

Everyone online hates me.

My reputation is in shambles and I'm about to be blacklisted by my—no, by *every* fashion agency in the country.

It's been a rollercoaster kind of day, which is why I didn't question when DeeJ told me to come to the farmhouse instead of flying back home to sort things out with my agency.

It can wait a day. What can you solve by flying out now? At least stay here until the heat dies down.

The moment I arrived, no one mentioned anything about the online drama or Ru-Carpsel. Rather than tiptoe around me, they turned the music up and danced with me. I was able to forget for just a moment.

Until I saw him.

Until his chocolate brown eyes looked at me with so much concern that I instantly remembered all the bad things I was trying to forget.

I have no idea why he's here. Who invited him? It wasn't me.

DeeJ walks into my line of vision and steals my attention away from Dare.

"It was me," my sister signs.

I scowl at her. Grabbing her hand, I drag her to the verandah. The sun set a long time ago, but there are enough porch lights to illuminate us.

“What are you talking about?”

“I was holding onto your phone earlier, remember?”

I nod. DeeJ confiscated my phone so I wasn’t tempted to read more hate comments or watch the counter for my hashtag climb.

“I saw a video message from him.” She gives me a ‘you know better than that’ look. “It wasn’t the first message he’d sent. He was worried about you.”

“I know. I was going to answer, but I was...”

“Dodging him,” she signs.

“You had no right.”

“Nope. Not a one.”

“So why?” My chin wobbles with emotion. “Why did you bring him here?”

This farmhouse is... it’s sacred to me. Not everyone speaks or understands sign language, but even when I don’t understand or they can’t fully communicate, there’s still so much love. It permeates everything they do, everything they are.

Dare being here is like... giving him a VIP pass to my heart. I’ve been trying so hard to keep him at arm’s length. Put up barbed wires and electric fences. And now my sister snuck him in through the back door.

“Do you remember when you pushed me to invite Niko and Ryo to go bowling with us? It was long before I could even admit that I was interested in my boss.”

I frown. Is now really the time to go traipsing down memory lane?

“How are you suddenly Team Dare? Didn’t you send Sazuki to his office to break us up a few days ago?”

“Things change.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“If you knew what he did for you, Yaya—”

The porch lights flash on and off. I glance over and see Niko skipping onto the verandah. She’s got Beth, Dawn and Max Stinton’s daughter, in tow. Talia is right behind them.

“Auntie, can we play Gestures?” Niko signs with a giant smile. “Talia’s never played.”

Talia gives me a suspicious look. Her arms are over her chest and she's standing stiffly, like she's above this request, like she would never ask for anything, but I can tell she really wants to be a part of the group.

I know the feeling of being the outsider and wanting so badly to be included. It's easier to pretend to be tough than admit you want community and possibly get rejected.

Deej speaks to the kids and, from Niko's look of triumph, she gave them the answer they wanted to hear.

Turning to me, my sister signs, "Everyone will be inside playing Gestures. They'll be too busy to notice you two are gone."

I crinkle my nose, not getting it.

"You should talk to him."

"Who?" I sign. I'm playing dumb because now I *do* get it, but I don't want her to know that.

She gives me a *don't be an idiot* look before ushering the kids back inside.

I stay on the porch alone, trying to collect my thoughts. After a minute, I peer in through the window. Dare is standing with Sazuki. My brother-in-law is saying something to him, something that makes Dare very grave.

His eyes slide to the window. Me? Are they talking about me?

I turn away.

My heart is beating super fast and I don't know what scares me more, figuring out how to fix the Ru-Carpsel mess or talking with Dare?

Oh.

Nope. It's definitely Dare.

Because he's opening the door and now he's coming onto the porch.

And I'm about to die.

"Hey," he signs.

"Hey." I lick my lips nervously. "What did you and Ryo talk about?"

"The usual things a big brother would say about his little sister."

"Like?"

"Hurt her and die." As he signs, he makes the same cold expression that Ryo does. I call it the 'resting Sazuki face'. It's designed to instill fear in all warm-blooded creatures.

I scowl. "Who says you have the power to hurt me?"

"Who says I'd ever want to?"

I glance away.

Dare shuffles forward so he's back in my line of vision.

"Want to take a walk?"

I should say no. There is no reason for me to go frolicking in the woods with Richard Sullivan. But I nod. Hopefully, Dare isn't at the stage where he can walk and sign yet. As long as I keep him moving, we won't actually have to communicate.

The bodyguards standing on the lawn barely spare us a glance. I lead the way since I've been hiking the trails behind Darrel and Sunny's house before.

Damp earth fills my nostrils with the scent of life. Trees hang low over our heads, leaning close to our warmth. The path is lit up by golden lamps embedded in the ground and there are signs all over the woods that the kids painted.

To the right is a sign that says 'Beth planted daisies here'. Another one that says 'Rowan got stung by a bee here'. These happy, silly and painful moments are the markers that guide us along.

The path gets narrow and we're forced to walk closer together. Dare's knuckles brush mine and I feel an electric jolt. He moves a little ahead to push aside a low-hanging branch out of my path and I realize I miss walking beside him.

My head is scrambled.

It must be the moonlight.

Finally, Dare points to a bench. He sits first and I sit far from him, but it doesn't help. The bench is small and his broad shoulders are wide enough that they nudge mine slightly. When I turn so I can face him, the front of my sandals hit the back of his dress shoes.

He doesn't pull away.

I don't either.

Maybe it's because of the day I've had or the thought that my world will never be the same going forward that makes me say 'what the hell'.

Or maybe it really is the moonlight.

But I'm tired of holding him at arms' length, especially when my heart is tugging me to be closer.

"Why did you come?" I sign, feeling oddly vulnerable.

"You know why," he signs back.

Yes, I do.

I think I've known since the day at the interview.

But he hasn't acted on it. Dare Sullivan is a man of his word. He's never done anything I didn't want to do. Never initiated anything first.

To prove I can trust him.

To prove that he's not going to take advantage of me.

We have our differences. Clearly. How he handled things in the principal's office was one example. We don't see eye-to-eye on everything, but we're in step where it counts. Respect. Kindness. Being considerate and patient. When I brought up my concerns on how he handled Talia's punishment, he didn't get defensive or argumentative. He shared his point of view, listened to mine, and made me feel like he valued my advice.

The truth is, questionable girlfriend contract aside, Richard Sullivan is a good man.

And I want to be okay with what I'm feeling for him. I want to be okay with how close we're becoming, but I don't want to go so far that I forget where my future lies. Despite how magnetic Richard Sullivan is, my future can't be with him.

I twist my body fully towards his. Our knees are touching. The heat of his leg is burning my skin.

"I don't date hearing people. I'm not attracted to them on a serious level. I think I should make that clear before this goes any further."

His gaze barely dips to my hands. He's staring into my eyes as if he can read my mind, as if he knows what I'm signing is total BS.

"Are you admitting you're attracted to me?"

Abruptly, I start sweating. "I didn't admit anything."

"Are you attracted to me, Yaya?"

I gulp. "I'm attracted to a lot of people."

"What other people?" His eyes narrow.

"Currently?"

He tilts his head, waiting.

"No one else at the moment." I realize what I've told him and quickly backpedal, "But attraction is no big deal. It's purely biological. For the purpose of procreation."

An image of Dare shrugging out of his shirt and climbing on top of me fills my head, totally unprompted. A spike of adrenaline lights me up inside. My body has no problems with that idea, whether it be for procreation or for pleasure.

His hot gaze drops to my mouth. He repeats the sign. “You lost me. What was this?”

“Biological.” I finger spell.

“And this?”

“Procreation.” I blink rapidly, my cheeks on fire.

“You mean sex.”

Someone as gorgeous as Dare should never sign that word while staring at a girl with those dreamy chocolate eyes. It should be illegal. I need to head to the mayor of the city tomorrow and start a petition.

“Was there a point to this?”

“You’re the one who brought up procreation first,” he points out.

He’s still not signing ‘procreation’ correctly, but I’m not going to fix it. Nope. Not touching that with a ten-foot pole.

Hoping to cool off, I tilt my head to the sky. The wind is blowing harder for some reason. And is it just me or is the forest darker than it was a minute ago?

Dare gets my attention. “Have you dated a hearing person before?”

“You.” I squint to look at him.

I was right about it getting darker. The moonlight is gone. A candle blown-out. I lean closer to him to make out what he’s signing. But closing that distance puts me a couple inches away from his lips. I dig my fingers into the bench to keep them from touching him.

“No, this doesn’t count at all.” He gestures to the distance between us. “This is barely scratching the surface.”

“What do you mean? You’re my boyfriend according to the law. It counts.” There’s an eight-page agreement with both our signatures on it backing me up.

“You think, if you were my girlfriend, you’d be sitting over there and not in my lap?” His eyes are tight and narrowed. “I’m holding myself back with every inch of my willpower. Every time you look at me, every time you smile, there’s so much I want to do for you. With you.” His gaze holds me captive. “To you.”

My hands are shaking as I sign, “What... do you want to do to me?”

I hold my breath as he eases so close that I get dizzy. “What do you think?”

“I think...” My hands falter, “that you need more ASL lessons.” My tongue darts out to meet my lips.

Dare's eyes, that had been sparkling and reflecting the silver moon, turn dark as the sky. Absorbing the light. Burning shadows.

"I'm afraid for you," he signs, his stare singeing me.

"Afraid? Why?"

"You're getting a little too close to admitting you feel something for me too. And when you do, Yaya, I am never letting you go."

My heart isn't just beating fast. It's found its way into my throat and it's throbbing like a stubbed toe. I blink rapidly, scrambling to gain back control of this conversation. I've got to change the subject before I decide his lap does, indeed, look like a comfortable place to set my backside.

Ugh! I'm losing it.

No more swoony Dare staring into my eyes and promising to never let me go. *Please and thank you!*

That's when I remember DeeJ's sudden jump from Team Yaya to Team Dare. I take hold of that curiosity and cling to it like it's my last shred of sanity.

"I was told my sister texted you to come over."

"She did."

"Deej mentioned you did something for me."

"Did she?" He acts nonchalant.

"What was it?"

His eyes flicker up to the heavens, noting the grey clouds gathering in an ominous formation. There's no hint of the flirty, dangerous Dare who was teasing me about making babies with him. It's like a mask fell over his face.

I lean forward, sensing this is big. "Please tell me it has nothing to do with my PR crisis."

Still no response.

"What did you do?"

"We should head back. It's going to rain."

I grab his arm to stay him.

He looks into my eyes, sees how serious I am and gives in.

"I bought..." He finger spells the company name and I know where he's going before he finishes.

The truth flings me back like a punch to the stomach and I almost drop off the bench. It doesn't register that I'm actually sinking until Dare grabs

my hand and yanks me forward. But he over-calculates, and I end up half-splurged in his lap.

It's ironic that I ended up right where he wanted me to be, but I'm too shocked to make sense of my new seating arrangements.

My eyes are peeled open and my signs come out rapid fire. "Are you serious? You bought Ru-Carpsel? You bought the *entire* company?"

He nods.

I can't breathe.

"We'll send a..." He makes a sign that's totally wrong and that I would normally correct if I were in my right mind, "tomorrow."

Press release, my brain fills in.

"We're going to totally revamp the company. Gut it out. Build it back from the ground up and..."

Revitalize. I find the word from the context of our conversation.

"It's going to be a lot of work and I don't see it all happening overnight, but I believe it can be done."

My head is spinning. I struggle to make sense of everything. "But... but what about..."

"The workers who were...?"

"*Taken advantage of*." I correct him by habit.

He copies my sign and moves on without skipping a beat. "I thought you'd be concerned about that. Yes, we did pay the CEOs of Ru-Carpsel a lot of money, but they're not going to see a penny of it because we're *also* suing them on behalf of the workers. They won't get a dime of that buy-out. It'll go to the workers and their families."

Lightning flashes.

My hearing aids pick up a roaring sound. The clap of thunder.

I don't move, but the world around me is shifting fast. Gloomy clouds. Whipping tree leaves. Scurrying forest animals heading for cover.

Oh no, oh no, oh no.

Before this, I was an iceberg. A perfect, giant iceberg that the Titanic movie would have been proud of.

Now I'm melting. And so is the sky.

I don't know if it's rain or my own tears that are starting to drip down my face.

Maybe it's both.

All I know is that the moonlight is gone and so is the last shred of my Dare-immunity.

I sniff. "I don't know what to..."

"I didn't do it so you could say anything."

"Paying for lawyers, rebuilding Ru-Carpsel. You're going to lose a lot of money. That was such a bad business decision." I wipe away a wet plop that was definitely the rain.

Dare swipes his thumb gently over my cheek. I think he caught a tear. When he pulls back to sign, the tear is still shimmering on the tip of his finger. "Money is boring. But you, Yaya Williams, you are not."

The wind picks up speed and I can feel it lashing my hair into my face. I tuck an unruly strand behind my ear as I stare at him. The panic that usually enters my head when this feeling of vulnerability hits is noticeably absent.

I don't date hearing people.

Ever.

But when human beings hit rock bottom, they usually do the craziest things. Rob a bank. Join a gang. Betray their best friend by accepting shady brand deals behind their back.

And sometimes, when people hit rock bottom, they sign really stupid contracts with older billionaires who only wear tweed and rock pink, girly watches.

The rain falls harder now.

Dare lifts his arm over my head to act as an umbrella and says something. Not that I could lipread in a storm like this.

I fish in my pocket for my phone and see a bunch of messages from DeeJ asking if Dare and I have found shelter.

I swipe away from her texts and open my notes app.

Hesitation stalls my fingers.

If I do this...

If I open this door...

Is Dare right? He warned me that he won't let me go, but what if that no longer feels like a threat?

I've never been the type to hesitate when I want something. I've never allowed anyone to tell me that I can't have or do what I wish because I'm deaf.

So why should that stop me now?

I type confidently.

You said you were holding back.

Dare reads the message. His eyes jump from me to the phone and back.

Can you not hold back anymore?

His eyebrows knit as he studies my face.
I spell it out for him.

Let's do this for real.

His arm slowly falls and he looks at me like I'm a painting come to life.
Like I'm too precious to hold.

I blink away the rain falling into my eyes. Tapping my lips, I speak the words, "Sign... here."

His eyes cloud with confusion.

I pucker my lips, making my meaning clear. *Kiss me!*

A smile flashes across his face, as quick and as bright as lightning. He grabs me by the back of the neck and surges forward. Our lips collide in a near-painful crash. It's not a kiss so much as it is a stamp of approval.

Laughter builds in my chest. Did he think I'd take the words back if he let the moment pass?

Dare eases away and, in his eyes, I see a hint of dismay.

He definitely acted on pure, driven instinct.

"Sorry," he signs. I see the rest of his words in a flash of lightning.
"This time will be better."

"I know," I sign back. "You're a good kisser."

The lines in his forehead smooths out as he smiles. Holy Chanel, that smile. We're sitting in the rain, but I might as well be staring directly at the sun. The five o'clock shadow, the straight edge of his white teeth, his lips—lips that I really want to taste. He's utter perfection.

Delicious.

Yummy.

I want to kiss him again.

But he just keeps looking at me.

The promise of forever lingers in the air between us. Sticky, sweet, thick with tension and possibility.

No, it can't be *forever*.

This is...

Something else. Something powerful, but I won't let it get that far.

His dark hair is pitch black and plastered to his temple. I gently brush my fingers under one of the strands, pushing it back toward his ear. He captures my hand and brings it to his lips. Softly, he presses a kiss there. What does the rain on my skin taste like? What does the rain on *his* skin taste like?

Curious, I pick up his hand, the dominant one. Dare has the kind of hands that DeeJ would say were made for piano. Long, elegant. Beautiful. I press my mouth to his wrist, right above the skin where his hair thickens. Right above his pulse point.

My kiss is open-mouthed. Soft. A light flicker of my tongue to taste.

Licking the raindrops off my top lip, I close my eyes. His skin doesn't taste like smoke and cinnamon. Disappointing. I thought he was made of the stuff.

I'm still analyzing the taste of Dare and the rain when I feel the air around me shifting. There's less rain and wind hitting my face now. He must be leaning over me. The fragrance of smoky cinnamon grows stronger.

I tilt my face up without having to open my eyes. Feel his breath. Feel his hands cradle my face. The tip of his middle finger and thumb are calloused. He holds pens often. It's his power. So many lives, jobs, and families are affected with one swipe of ink across a page.

Those powerful hands now caress me like I'm a gift bestowed from the heavens.

I hold my breath, waiting, *knowing*.

And then it happens.

Dare gently brushes my lips with his and I yield completely, inhaling the scent of damp earth and salty raindrops. I wrap my arms around his neck, getting so lost in him I'd need a compass and a North star to find my way out.

He kisses me deeply. A passionate, demanding, urgent kiss that tastes like annihilated doubt and hard-won victory.

His strong arms hold me tight, his fingers digging into the skin of my back as he pulls me so close to him I can feel his heart beating right against mine. His mouth consumes me as if he'd waited all his life for this moment. Like maybe the kisses we shared before didn't count.

Like this is the first one that does.

Inside, I'm crackling with light.

But the rain won't let up and I start shivering.

My clothes are soaked straight through and, as romantic as it is to kiss in the rain, it's *freezing* out here.

I'm a stubborn girl, and I keep sucking on Dare's mouth, so hungry for him that grabbing fistfuls of his shirt isn't enough. The wind batters me harder, a mother screaming '*girl, wake up! he's hearing!*', but I refuse to let nature win over my own carnal instincts.

Eyes closed. Mouth open.

Too much water in my mouth. The rain is about to drown me.

With his lips still attached to mine, I feel Dare's hand sliding down my back and under my knees. Just like earlier, he has me airborne in an instant.

My eyes pop open.

His are open already.

I pull back just enough to arch a questioning eyebrow.

One corner of his lips inches higher in amusement. He presses another quick kiss to my mouth and hurries with me through the forest.

I pout in disapproval even as I cuddle into his broad chest.

More kissing, my body throbs. *More. More. More.*

Alas, the newly-unleashed kissing maniac inside me will have to wait.

In the distance, flashlights are bouncing around. I recognize my sister's gait immediately. She's holding an umbrella and moving briskly down the trail. The tall man beside her keeping a secure grip on her hand must be Sazuki. He spots us first and waves.

I tap Dare's shoulder, indicating he should put me down. He understands and does so immediately. It's nice that I don't need to sign for

him to get me.

Dejonae scurries over and lifts her umbrella over my head. In my peripheral, I notice Sazuki handing Dare an umbrella. My sister's mouth is moving. She's voicing while signing, but I can't make out either because it's too dark and my eyelids are so burdened with water that I can't even see straight.

Sazuki shrugs out of his jacket and swipes it over me. I huddle into the warmth that my brother-in-law's body left. But relief doesn't last long as my drenched clothes seep into the lining of the jacket.

I don't realize I'm shivering violently until Dejonae wraps her arms around my body and rubs up and down.

We're close to the porch lights and I notice everyone is lined up on the verandah, braving the strong winds and the splatter of wayward raindrops.

This is embarrassing.

I look back at Dare, but he's not paying attention to our audience. He's looking at me with eyes so filled with concern, you'd think someone died.

Frowning, I shake my head. *I'm okay.*

His lips flatten into a severe line. *I should have taken you out of the rain sooner.*

I roll my eyes. If it had been up to me, we would have made out on that bench until I got pneumonia.

His burrowing gaze tightens. *You really might have pneumonia now.*

Or at least that's what I imagine he's thinking.

Niko is the first to approach me as I trudge up the steps, safe in my older sister's grasp.

"Did you get lost?" my niece signs.

Lost in Dare Sullivan's eyes.

"I'm fine." I sign the words for her but my shaky smile is for my tribe of loved ones.

They don't buy it because I'm immediately dragged into the house by Sunny.

Vanya, my supermodel idol and my fashion mentor, hands her baby over to her husband Hadyn like she was a pro football player in her previous life and joins us inside.

Kenya's pregnant-woman waddle to the linen closet would be funny if she didn't deliver a towel to Nova who's trying to strangle me with it.

Dawn peels me out of my clothes in the firm, matter-of-fact way that she probably overhauls an engine.

"I'm okay," I keep signing.

That doesn't stop Island from staring at my hair like it broke her heart in the third grade and she never got over it. With a dismal head shake, she busts out a hairdryer from who knows where.

The women descend like an army of worker ants, and I'm absorbed into a cloud of chaos that smells like perfume, cocoa butter and natural hair creams.

By the time they're finished with me, I've changed into dry clothes, my hair's been restored, and I'm dressed in an embroidered Mayan shirt along with a pair of Sunny's sweatpants.

"You are *never* getting this shirt back," I sign, admiring the stitchwork on the collar.

Sunny smirks and makes a 'go ahead' gesture.

Deej walks up to me. Thanks to the humidity and the winds from outside, her hair is an even bigger afro than usual. The honey-tipped coils spring up to the ceiling like a halo.

I wish I could snap a picture. She looks stunning.

As if she can read my mind, Deej offers my phone.

Dare: Can you come out for a minute?

I glance up at the women. Sunny and Kenya are standing guard at the door, arms crossed and daring me to try them. I'm not getting out of here without a fight.

My eyes drop to Kenya's belly.

And I'm not fighting a pregnant woman.

Yaya: I don't think I can.

Dare: Talia wants to go home.

Yaya: Understandable. It's past her bedtime.

Dare: I wanted to see you before I left. Make sure you're okay.

I type out a response and then erase it and lift the phone high. Letting my fingers play in the hem of my shirt, I make my trademark bedroom eyes expression. Snapping a selfie, I send it to Dare with a cheeky grin.

Yaya: I'm okay.

His incoming text is instant.

Dare: You're lucky Sazuki is guarding your bedroom door.

I laugh and then notice the lack of movement in my peripheral vision. Glancing up, I gulp when I see the farmhouse ladies staring at me like mad scientists before they inspect someone's brain.

Explain that, Kenya types. She looks like a kid on Christmas morning.

Nova sits on the bed and types out a message. She waves to get my attention and shows us the note on her phone.

Isn't it obvious?

Someone flashes the lamp and I turn my attention over there next.

"Love," Island signs. She's got long, colorful nails and the smallest ASL vocabulary, but I've come to understand her signs like they're her own particular penmanship.

Sunny, who's standing right beside Island, makes hand puppets to mimic kissing.

Heat invades my cheeks and I'm careful not to look at my sister.

"Since when have you guys been so nosy?" I sign.

Dawn who is usually the most level-headed and, oh, well I'll just say it... *not crazy* of the bunch is who I turn to for support. But she just gives me a secret little smile as if she's enjoying watching me squirm.

More waving comes from my left.

Kenya types, Were you two really lost?

I push out my lips as I think about how to answer that. Finally, I settle for a 'half-half' gesture.

The women fling their hands up like sports fanatics screaming at the TV after a fumbled pass.

“Am I missing something?” I sign. This feels way too exaggerated for such a vague response.

Deej signs, “They had a bet.”

Sunny flashes her phone at me.

Were you kissing in the rain? Yes or no.

I cover my face with my hands, wishing I could melt through the floor. Escape isn’t a possibility. Not unless I crash through the window and roll to the grass two stories below.

Before I can convince myself I’ll survive the fall, all the ladies shift their attention to the door.

Someone must have knocked.

I let out a grateful sigh.

Hurrying to answer the door myself, I yank it open and then jerk it nearly-closed when I see that it’s Dare standing outside. If the ladies see him, they’ll grill him too and they won’t all use sign language, so I won’t be able to defend myself or change the conversation.

The back of my neck prickles with awareness. It usually happens when DeeJ or mom and dad talk to me. It’s like I recognize their voices even if I don’t quite hear those voices anymore.

I yank out my hearing aids.

There. That should give me a few seconds of peace.

Dare notices and flashes a secret little smile. His hair is drying and the natural texture is loosely curled. He’s ditched his tweed jacket and is just wearing a long-sleeved shirt with the top buttons undone.

My fingers itch to undo a few more.

Why is he so dang handsome?

No. That’s not it. When it comes to Dare, ‘handsome’ is an understatement.

Sexy would define him better. Magnificent, maybe? Glorious?

He hands over a cup of tea and I half expect him to sign ‘*you look thirsty*’.

“Sunny’s mom made this. She said it’s a recipe from her village in Belize.”

I quickly offer the tea to DeeJ who’s behind me and reclaim my hold of the door. Dare glances over his shoulder where Sazuki is just about breathing down his neck.

When he turns back to me, his eyes are less amused. “We’ve got an audience,” he signs.

“I’m aware.”

That *audience* is currently trying to grab the doorknob from me. Did these women turn into zombies when I wasn’t looking? Their nails are like claws.

“You should have left when you had the chance,” I sign, straining to maintain my grip on the door with only one hand.

“I wanted to see you for myself.”

“The picture wasn’t enough?” I tilt my head coquettishly.

Someone tickles my side.

I cave inward and fling a dark look over my shoulder. *Super immature, ladies! I’m trying to flirt here!*

“You should go,” I sign. My hold on the door is slipping. It won’t be long until the full power of the farmhouse ladies unleashes on Dare.

He makes an ‘I’ll call you’ gesture.

I nod.

The door is yawning wider.

Dare isn’t moving fast enough.

Go! Go away!

Instead, he takes a step forward and places a kiss on my forehead. My heart flails and then turns to mush. I didn’t know forehead kisses were a thing for me, but now I’m being emotionally attacked.

My grip on the door slacks and it’s a good thing that all the farmhouse ladies are equally stunned by Dare’s tender gesture.

The door widens, but no one charges.

Dare gives the faces behind me a confident nod and a smile before turning and taking Talia’s hand. He waves goodbye to the other kids and then he’s out the door.

I blink and blink as I watch him. This warm, bubbly feeling in my stomach is a first. We were fake-dating, but now we're real-kissing, and... I don't know *what* we are.

I just know I like it.

I like it a lot.

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CHAPTER 15

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the emoji line

DARE

I open the front door and usher Talia into our cold, quiet and aching empty condo. After being immersed in the cheerful chaos that is Sunny and Darrel's farmhouse, it's almost jarring to be...

Home?

Is that what this is?

The tidy bookshelves, tiled floors, and bare white walls feel more like a coffin.

Maybe I should hire a professional decorator like Sunny to liven this place up. I keep saying I'll do it myself, but that's a long shot. I moved into the condo as is, even after telling Lucy I'd get around to decorating.

In my defense, work took precedence. Plus, homemaking has never been a skill of mine. For me, 'home' always meant a rest-stop between trips. A place where I send my certified mail.

I haven't been in one place for this long since...

Huh.

Probably since I started working with dad.

Just then, my phone buzzes.

I read the sweetest text I've ever received in my life.

10:07 YAYA: *Did you get home safely?*

A smile stretches over my face. Talia is at the edge of my vision, staring up at me like she's surprised by what she's seeing.

"What?" I ask her.

"Nothing," she says. The words are muffled by a giant yawn. "Can I have ice cream?"

I check my princess watch and balk. "At this time? Go brush your teeth, Tals. It's late and you have school tomorrow."

I hear the pitter-patter of her feet scurrying away, but my eyes are on my phone.

10:08 DARE: *Just got in. Talia asked when we can go back to the farmhouse.*

I set the phone in my pocket and kick off my shoes, moving through the house like a shadow. I don't bother turning on the lights in my bedroom and head straight for the closet.

After setting my shoes down neatly and returning my princess watch to the velvet cushion that came with my Rolex, I check my phone again.

Still no message.

Guess it can't be helped. If Yaya's still at the farmhouse, she's having a good time with her friends. Family, really. They're overtly protective of her.

Especially her brother-in-law.

"I still don't like you, but my wife thinks we should give you a shot. So that's enough for me."

"If you're giving me a chance, why is your handshake cutting off my blood circulation?"

"I want you to remember this, Sullivan. You can lose this chance as quickly as you got it. My warning still stands."

By the time he released my hand, I had a Sazuki-sized palm print wrapped around my skin.

I'll think of it like an autograph.

One more glance at the phone says Yaya's probably not texting me back tonight.

I remain in my outside clothes just in case she contacts me and wants a ride home. Heading to my office, I almost run over my niece.

She's standing in the dark like a ghost, glaring at me through a fringe of her long blonde hair.

"Is something wrong, Tals?"

"Do you like that lady?"

"What lady?"

"The deaf one."

Something in her hard tone catches me off guard so I drop to one knee. "She's not 'the deaf one'. Her name is Yaya. And yes, I do." I bop my niece on the nose. "I like her a whole lot."

"More than me?"

I blink a couple times. "I like her in a different way than I like you."

"What different way?"

I rub the back of my neck. How do I explain this in a way that won't hurt Talia? "You like ice cream, right?"

She nods.

"And you like Ms. Murtle, our next-door neighbor's dog, right?"

Talia squints at me, undoubtedly trying to figure out where I'm going before I get there.

"You can eat ice cream, but you can't eat Ms. Murtle. One is cute and cuddly and one is your favorite snack. You can pet one and you can uh..." I'm about to say lick and realize I probably shouldn't, "share the other with your friends."

"Which one am I?"

I blink rapidly.

"Am I the ice cream or the dog?" Talia asks.

She's way too smart of a kid and I have no idea how to answer that. Tugging my collar away from my neck, I give it a few seconds of contemplation and decide my best course of action is to avoid the matter.

I scoop her into my arms. "I think you need a bedtime story."

"Ice cream."

I laugh. "No ice cream tonight, Tals."

"No, I mean I want to be ice cream." She pushes out her bottom lip and says resolutely, "let her be the dog."

* * *

10: 20 YAYA: *Sorry. I was lecturing the ladies on why betting on people's love lives is bad.*

I'm in my office, re-reading the Ru-Carpsel takeover documents when I get the text. I immediately pounce on my phone.

10:21 YAYA: *By the way, you can bring Talia over anytime. These guys love a crowd.*

10:45 DARE: *Talia's asleep now. Just got her to settle down. What was the bet?*

10:55 YAYA: *You don't want to know.*

10:56 DARE: *Now I'm even more curious.*

10:57 YAYA: *You know what they say. Curiosity killed the cat.*

10:59 DARE: *We had a cat once. Cynthia. She regrettably perished after not getting the answers to her questions.*

11:10 YAYA: **laughing emoji* You made me choke on toothpaste. Lmbo*

11:15 DARE: *Lambo?*

11:16 YAYA: *Huh?*

11:17 DARE: *Would you like a lambo?*

11:18 YAYA: *That's so random. And no I do not want a lambo.*

11:19 DARE: *I'll have it delivered tomorrow.*

11:18 YAYA: *I DO NOT WANT A LAMBO. DON'T YOU DARE BRING A LAMBO TO MY HOUSE OR I SWEAR I WILL STRANGLE YOU.*

I imagine her panicking as she types. I know her enough to predict how she'll respond to things like this. Those light brown eyes that turn to liquid honey in the sunshine, would narrow in annoyance. Her plump mouth that tastes like paradise—would scrunch to the side. One faint line between her

eyebrows if she's more amused than irritated. Two deep lines if she's more irritated than amused.

Just imagining her face has me grinning in the middle of the night.

My insides are melting.

Damn, she's perfect.

Does she have any idea how much I want to spoil her? I don't think she's prepared for all the ways I'm going to sweep her off her feet.

11:20 DARE: *I like when you threaten me. It's sexy.*

11:21 YAYA: *Freak! Where did that lambo reference even come from?*

11:23 DARE: *You mentioned it.*

11:23 YAYA: ???

11:24 DARE: *lmbo*

11:25 YAYA: **laughing emoji**

11:25 YAYA: *that stands for Laughing My Butt Off*

11:26 DARE: *Does it?*

Embarrassed, I type in the acronym and the search engine spits out a billion results.

Well, damn.

It does mean laugh my butt off.

Since Yaya doesn't immediately respond to my message, I scroll through the urban dictionary to read up on a few more acronyms.

I've never been much of a text guy, preferring to call if I need to speak to someone, but this is a new day and Yaya is not only a text-er, but she also favors emojis—a mode of digital communication that I found utterly tacky before I met her.

Talk about a new world.

I want to understand every word she says, even if those words are from her generation's atrociously confusing vernacular.

Five minutes pass.

I'm too restless to keep working and the faux pas I made with the lambo thing gnaws at my mind. There's no way I can go to sleep tonight with that thought playing on repeat in my head.

I undo my button-down and change into an old college T-shirt and sweatpants. Settling into bed with my arm behind my head, I stare at the ceiling.

A smile climbs my face again and there's no wiping it off.

It's been a while since I've felt this excited.

Hell, have I ever felt this excited in my life?

Taking this one, giant step toward Yaya made everything worth it. Every ounce of frustration, every second spent poring over ASL books, taking ASL lessons, waiting patiently rather than pouncing on her at every opportunity.

All. Worth. It.

* * *

12:01 YAYA: *I was washing off my makeup. Still here?*

12:01 DARE: *still here.*

12:02 YAYA: *Genuine question. Do I need to enroll you in one of those classes that teach the elderly how to type on a computer?*

12:03 DARE: *I barely survived the asteroids hitting earth and killing all my dinosaur friends. I don't think my old, tired brain can handle the internet.*

12:05 YAYA: *I'll buy some of my dad's vitamins for you. It's good for brain health.*

12:07 DARE: *Liquid medication only. Solid pills get stuck in my dentures.*

12:09 YAYA: *:D I like that you're not sensitive to teasing. Some people get offended for EVERYTHING.*

12:10 DARE: *I think intentions matter.*

12:11 YAYA: *Hold on a sec.*

I leave the phone in my room as a test for my self-restraint.

Three steps.

That's all I get before I run back to the bed, swipe the phone and move into the kitchen. I make myself a pot of coffee and wait.

When ten minutes go by without a response from Yaya, I pull my laptop out of my office and work around the table.

Time ticks by.

I'm just about to give up and assume the conversation is over for the night, when my phone lights up.

1:03 YAYA: *I'm back.*

1:04 DARE: *Everything okay?*

1:05 YAYA: *Mom wanted to discuss the whole Ru-Carpsel thing. I don't want to talk or think about it anymore. You were saying you trust my intentions?*

1:06 DARE: *Since the moment I met you.*

1:07 YAYA: *Can't say the same for you.*

1:08 DARE: *Ouch.*

1:10 YAYA: *Kidding. I really like the way you are with Talia. You're so gentle. And the princess watch is a nice touch.*

1:14 DARE: *The peak of fashion.*

1:15 YAYA: *I genuinely think you'll be less attractive if you take it off.*

I smile and return to my bedroom to continue our conversation.

* * *

3:20 YAYA: *Oh my gosh, Dare. It's three in the morning. How is it three o'clock already?*

3:21 DARE: *Are you asking me to explain the concept of time or...*

3:22 YAYA: *Yes, go ahead and explain the concept of time to me, Dare.*

3:23 DARE: *I better not. That sounded like a threat.*

3:24 YAYA: *It was sarcasm.*

3:25 DARE: *Hard to tell a tone of voice over text. Have I mentioned I like yours?*

3:25 YAYA: *My voice?*

3:27 DARE: *Does that upset you? That I liked hearing it?*

3:28 YAYA: *I've been told I have an accent.*

3:29 DARE: *Is that why you don't speak often?*

3:30 YAYA: *why are you so curious? you'd prefer I voiced rather than sign?*

3:31 DARE: *No, I love talking to you in your language.*

3:32 YAYA: *Relax, Dare. I was joking.*

3:33 DARE: *I'm not taking any chances in case that wasn't sarcasm.*

3:34 YAYA: *you're off the hook. And to answer your question, I CAN voice, but I CHOOSE not to. Hearing people build a different set of expectations when I voice. Plus, I'm more comfortable signing.*

Intriguing.

I want to ask more but she shifts the conversation topic again.

* * *

4:10 YAYA: *Dare, it's almost dawn.*

4:11 DARE: *I didn't feel the time.*

4:12 YAYA: *Me either. I won't be able to move my thumbs tomorrow.*

4:13: DARE: *I can come over. Massage them for you.*

4:14 YAYA: *Unless you plan on climbing through my bedroom window, you won't even get a toe in the door.*

4:15 DARE: *Seems like you'll have to massage your own thumbs.*

4:16 YAYA: *Sadly.*

4:17 DARE: *What are you doing tomorrow?*

4:18 YAYA: *You mean later today?*

4:19 YAYA: *I have a meeting with my agency. I didn't book a flight so I'll probably have to catch a bus.*

4:20 DARE: *What time's your meeting?*

4:21 YAYA: *I'm not telling you.*

4:21 DARE: *It's an innocent question.*

4:22 YAYA: *I'm not falling for that. The next thing I know, you'll be buying me a plane ticket.*

4:23 DARE: *I was thinking more of chartering my private jet.*

4:24 YAYA: *show off*

4:25 DARE: *You told me I didn't have to hold back anymore. I like taking care of you.*

4:26 YAYA: *And I like taking care of myself. One of us will have to give and it won't be me.*

4:27 DARE: *Go to sleep, Yaya. We can argue about this later.*

4:28 YAYA: *I WANT to go to sleep. But someone keeps texting me back.*

4:29 DARE: *call me then. I'll listen to you breathe for a bit and you won't have to text back*

4:30 YAYA: *you sound like a psycho*

4:30 YAYA: *goodnight, Dare.*

4:31 DARE: *goodnight, Yaya.*

4:32 YAYA: *sleep tight*

4:32 YAYA: **kissy face with heart emoji**

I scrub my hand over the emoji. Try to stifle a smile. Fail hard.

That little yellow blob is winking. Plus there's a heart and a kiss?

Did I say I didn't like emojis?

I freaking love them.

* * *

I make 'mummy-coming-back-from-the-dead' noises when Talia jumps on the mattress and tells me she wants waffles. My eyes feel like someone scraped them with sandpaper. Didn't I *just* fall asleep two seconds ago? It isn't time to be a functional human being yet.

"Uncle Dare," Talia tugs my arm and waves it around, "I want waffles."

"We'll pick it up on the way like we normally do," I grumble in what I hope is a clear coherent sentence.

"No, I want you to make them."

Coffee. My pounding head demands.

"Gimme a sec, Tals."

"No. Now," she insists.

I peer at her with my sleep-deprived eyes. She's sitting primly on my bed, her legs tucked underneath her and her hands clasped in her lap. The smug little grin on her face puts me on high alert.

“What did you do?”

“Nuh-*thiing*,” she sings.

My eyes narrow. “Tals. Spit it out.”

“Uncle Dare...”

“Yes?” I draw out the word, bracing myself.

“I’ve decided to let you date Yaya.”

I’m sure my eyebrows are twitching when I answer, “Oh? You’ll *let* me?”

“Yes, but in exchange you have to do everything I say.”

“Mm-hm?”

She hands over a crumpled paper that’s filled in with markers and pretty colorings. The words read:

Uncle Dare must listen to everything Talia says or else.

Sign here

There’s a line provided and it’s decorated with sparkles.

“Tals,” I hold the paper between my fingers and tread lightly, “I can’t sign this.”

“Why not?”

“Well for one thing,” I pull her to sit close by my side and swing an arm over her shoulder, “I already signed a similar contract with someone else yesterday.” I smile when I think about Yaya asking me to ‘sign’ by kissing her. “And signing your contract will put me in conflict with that one. Also,” I plant a little peck on her temple, “we can’t force people to do what we want by making them sign contracts.”

Didn’t you do that with Yaya?

I ignore that tiny voice.

Talia huffs in displeasure, and I almost budge. I want to give my niece the world, but I remember Yaya’s warning about the kind of person she’ll be if she continues down this road.

It’s been gnawing at me, sobering every interaction with Talia. I can no longer pretend her behavior isn’t a problem. This is an opportunity to correct the issue before it gets worse.

I speak softly, “Tals, we haven’t settled that incident that you had at school.”

Her body stiffens and she tries to roll away from me, but I hold firm. “You’re a sweet, kind, and brilliant girl. I know that and I love you very much, but what you did to your friend at school wasn’t okay.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “We don’t treat people like objects. We don’t push them down because we’re upset, and we don’t yell at them like they work for us. Talking down to people, more than anything else, can embarrass and hurt them.”

“He ruined my shoes.”

“It was an accident.”

“I don’t care.”

“Everyone deserves respect.”

“What if they don’t respect me first?”

I cringe inside. “Then... you come to me and we’ll handle it together.”

She folds her arms over her chest.

My instincts are screaming ‘insert punishment here’, but it’s so difficult.

“Uncle Dare, Miss Abbot already made a big deal about it. Are you on her side more than mine?”

“I’m always on your side.” My voice trembles with how much I mean that. “*Always*. That’s why,” I take a deep breath, “for the next two weeks, I’m taking your tablet.”

“WHAT?” She springs to her feet. “You can’t do that!”

“Yes, I can.”

“I’m not a little kid anymore. You can’t force me to do anything!”

Talia’s right. She’s not a little kid anymore. I should stop treating her like she doesn’t know what she’s doing.

Firmly, I tell her, “You’re living under my roof, so you’re going to follow my rules.”

“Uncle Dare!”

I lift a hand. “In the evenings, you’ll be going to Mr. Sazuki’s foundation to help the janitorial crew.”

“Janitors—as in, you want me to clean? Like touch garbage?” Her jaw drops. She looks absolutely mortified.

“Yes.” It’s mostly light work. Cleaning instruments, tidying up after their free music classes for the deaf. Maybe learning some sign language by sheer proximity. “I’ve already arranged it with Mosely. He’ll take you straight there after school.”

I mentioned it to Sazuki last night and he assured me he’d bring it up with his wife. Talia will be under Dejonae’s close watch while she’s volunteering at their music foundation.

Tears shine in Talia's eyes and it feels like someone's scraping my heart on a grater. "Why are you being like this? Is it because of Miss Abbot? Or is it *her*?"

"No. This is all me, Tals." I take her hand and gently pull her toward me.

She looks away, her bottom lip trembling hard. I don't force her to look into my eyes, but I keep my solid grip on her.

"You're so important to me. So, so important. That means I can't only worry about your present but about your future too. I want you to be someone who cares about people and about the world. You have so much to offer, but if you keep pushing people away and being mean, you'll be so lonely."

"I don't care if I'm lonely."

"Well, I do." I swipe my thumb under her eyes to comfort her. "I care so much that I'm willing to do anything to help you. Even if it hurts me. I'd rather you hurt me than you hurt other people."

She sniffs and hangs her head. "You think I'm evil. Just like mom."

"What? No." Pain gushes through my chest. "No, I think you're the most incredible little girl. I want everyone to see what I see too. That's all."

I try to hug her, but Talia pushes me away and runs crying out of the room.

* * *

The car ride to school is particularly frigid. Talia doesn't look at me the entire time and jumps out of the car before I've fully parked.

We normally have a whole thing where she kisses my cheek and we bump princess watches.

Today, her matching pink watch is noticeably absent.

I'm exhausted by the time I drag myself into the office.

Kids are complicated.

Parenting is *hard*.

Why are so many people eager to have those little adorable molds of human flesh and responsibility?

I've just shrugged out of my jacket when there's a knock on the door. Mosely approaches with a foreboding expression. Lips in a thin line. Eyes

stern. Fingers clutching his tablet like he's about to hurl it through the window.

I lift a staying hand. "Just give me a second. Let me breathe before my day gets worse."

"I think you'll need more than a second, sir."

Oh boy. "Then give me five minutes. I'll need coffee."

Mosely checks his watch. "I can give you two."

"Instant coffee it is." I prefer a drip roast, but desperate times and all that.

My metal spoon clinks around the cup as I stir the packet. The quiet is so awkward that I whirl around and glare at Mosely.

"The silence is killing me. Is there any good news?"

"The good news? Sure." He flips open a folder. "We traced the online profile that collected money under Yaya's name. The creator was as you suspected—"

"Henry," I growl.

"Yes."

That kind of betrayal would kill someone like Yaya, who values her close friends and family so highly.

"How is that good news?" I give him the stink eye.

"Because of this." Mosely hands me a folder.

I skim the bank transfer. "What am I looking at?"

"This is a high interest savings account at Eronxx Bank. It's one of their unique services."

"A trust fund?" I arch an eyebrow.

"In a sense."

"For Yaya?" I clarify.

"No, sir." Mosely's eyes meet mine and there's a hint of amusement on his face. "For you."

"For me?" The sound of rustling paper is all that can be heard as I pore over the information with new eyes. Pieces click together one by one in my mind. "He wasn't betraying Yaya."

"Henry struck that deal with Ru-Carpsel to save her." Mosely tilts his head. "From you."

A vise-like squeeze tortures my heart. I scowl at my assistant and shove the folder back in his arms.

I'm happy that Yaya's friends are so loyal.

But on the other hand...

Henry doing all this just to 'save' Yaya from me is irritating. The fact that he even thinks she needs saving is an insult to what I'm trying to build.

But maybe that's the point.

I remember the line he dropped the day he protested outside my building.

"You think you can ever be the man Yaya needs? You can't. And it's not just because you're hearing. It's because you will never understand her the way I can, no matter how much ASL you learn."

That didn't sound like a man who wanted to be just friends.

I turn to face the window. The sky is a crystal-clear blue. So clear it almost looks unreal. The sun bounces brilliantly against skyscrapers clustered in a jagged line.

"Would you like to hear the bad news now? I have it categorized by 'bad', 'horrible', and 'the absolute worst'."

I sigh heavily and make a *go on* gesture. "Start from the bottom and work your way up."

"Our stocks hit an all-time low yesterday and we're seeing an aggressive sell-rate."

"Nothing I didn't know before."

"Someone is buying out those stocks just as aggressively. They're purchasing under paper companies, but the owners of those companies are family members of someone on the board..."

My fingers form a fist. "Carmichael."

This is a power grab, undoubtedly, to get the majority shares so he can have control of dad's company. And because my authority is under question thanks to the recent Ru-Carpsel takeover, he finally has a crack he can exploit.

The weasel.

"Ready for the horrible?"

I whirl around, flabbergasted. "That wasn't the 'horrible'?"

Mosely shakes his head solemnly. "We're hitting a snag with the local government. Ru-Carpsel is under their territory, and they don't want foreigners coming in and taking over without some kind of agreement."

"I guess all the money we paid out so we could skip over this song and dance wasn't enough."

"We'll need to fly there."

I straighten and grab my jacket. “Of course.” I check my watch. “We’ll need to leave now if I’ll be able to make it back in time for Talia’s—”

“That’s ‘the absolute worst’ part.” Mosely gives me a pitying look. “This is politics, not business. It can’t be solved in one meeting.”

I freeze.

My jacket flutters off my shoulder. The gravity of his words settle in and push me down like an anchor into the chair.

“How long?”

“At least two months. Maybe more if the government pushes us around.”

“Two months? Mosely, I can’t pack up and leave for two months. I have Talia to take care of. I have a girlfr—” My heart pounds. “I have people I love. Dropping everything and disappearing for weeks at a time is no longer an option.”

“Why do you think I placed it in the worst category?” His voice is quiet but resolute. “I’m sorry, sir, but even with the jet, the international flight alone will take hours going back and forth. By the time you come home, it’ll be time to leave again. It’s more efficient for us to rent a house there until negotiations are over.”

“I can’t,” I croak.

Mosely shakes his head slowly. “If you want to save this company, you don’t have a choice.”

* * *

9:30 DARE: *Did you make it to your agency okay?*

9:45 YAYA: *It’s been an hour. I think they’re intentionally keeping me waiting.*

9:46 DARE: *The imbeciles.*

9:48 YAYA: *The buffoons.*

9:49 DARE: *The nincompoops.*

9:50 YAYA: **laughing emoji* that felt good, but I probably shouldn’t be giggling when I’m in trouble.*

9:51 DARE: *Should I buy over the company? Put you in charge so they’re the ones sweating?*

9:52 YAYA: *You’re joking, right?*

9:53 DARE: *Absolutely not.*

9:54 YAYA: *You still have money after that insane Ru-Carpsel buy-out?*

9:55 DARE: *I won't discuss money with you, Yaya.*

9:56 YAYA: *Because you're embarrassed?*

9:57 DARE: *Because it's unnecessary. Only tell me what you want and it's yours. You will never again have to worry about a price tag.*

9:58 YAYA: *The price tag matters. It matters very much.*

9:59 DARE: *I'll call my lawyers. What was the name of your agency again?*

10:01 YAYA: *Noooo! Dare! Wait! Let's keep our grand gestures to something that costs less than a company, okay?*

10:02 DARE: *No promises.*

10:02 YAYA: **angry emoji**

10:03 YAYA: *They're finally ready to see me. Wish me luck.*

10:05 DARE: *good luck*

* * *

11:30 YAYA: *I'm done.*

11:51 DARE: *At the company? Good riddance. They were awful, incompetent leaders anyway.*

11:52 YAYA: *No, with the meeting. I got off with a warning, but they're not dropping me.*

11:53 DARE: *Have I mentioned how much I love their leadership skills? They're a fine company with amazing vision and exquisite taste in models. I've always liked them.*

11:54 YAYA: **laughing emoji**

11:55 YAYA: *You didn't have anything to do with them going easy on me, right?*

11:56 DARE: *Of course I did.*

11:57 YAYA: *Dare, what did you do?*

11:58 DARE: *I wished on a shooting star last night. Prayed you would get everything your heart desires.*

11:59 YAYA: *You're so annoying.*

12:00 DARE: *Whatever you accomplished at your agency, you did on your own. I didn't meddle.*

12:01 YAYA: *You know it's bad when I'm thanking you for not doing anything nice for me.*

12:02 DARE: *Have you eaten? I'll send a car service to pick you up.*

12:03 YAYA: *Deej flew me out in Sazuki's jet this morning. We're heading somewhere to celebrate as we speak.*

12:04 DARE: *So you did end up taking a jet.*

12:05 YAYA: *My sister had to drag me onboard. Do you know how awful private jets are for the environment?*

12:06 DARE: *Do you know how harmful fashion is for the environment?*

12:07 YAYA: *Touché*

12:08 DARE: *Are you coming back today?*

12:09 YAYA: *I wasn't planning on it, but I can be convinced.*

12:10 DARE: *This is me convincing. Please come back, Yaya.*

12:11 YAYA: *Only because you said please.*

12:12 DARE: *I'm on a business trip right now, but I'll do everything in my power to make it back tonight. If not, I'll send José with my apologies. Have a good time with your sister.*

* * *

6:30 YAYA: *Richard Sullivan the Second!!!*

6:40 DARE: *Am I in trouble?*

6:41 YAYA: *Is this what you meant by sending an apology or are you just trying to give me a heart attack?*

6:42 DARE: *The first option. I never want to see you get hurt.*

6:43 YAYA: **angry emojis**

6:44 DARE: *That's a very long line of angry emojis. Did you not like my apology?*

6:45 YAYA: *Why did José give me this piece of plastic?*

6:46 DARE: *What kind of plastic are we referring to here? If it was the kind used to prevent pregnancies, he's fired.*

6:47 YAYA: *You know exactly what I'm talking about.*

6:48 DARE: *I wanted to give you myself, but it seems like this will be an extended business trip. I don't know when I'll be able to see you again.*

6:49 YAYA: *Dare, I don't need you to apologize for being busy. And even if you want to apologize, you can't just GIVE me a credit card.*

6:50 DARE: *Why not?*

6:51 YAYA: *I don't want your money. What kind of person do you think I am?*

6:52 DARE: *The most important person outside of my family.*

6:53 YAYA: *I appreciate the gesture, but I'm not going to use it.*

6:52 DARE: *Yaya, I won't be back for a while, and I can't stand the thought of you having a need and me not being around to take care of it. This way, at least I can take care of you from afar.*

6:53 YAYA: *I already told you. I don't need you to take care of me.*

6:54 DARE: *But I want to. One of us will have to give, sweetheart. This time, it won't be me.*

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CHAPTER 16

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new roommate

YAYA

The fridge door opens and closes urgently and I look up from my phone. Morning light pours over mom's gorgeous face. Trim eyebrows lift daintily and she gives my cell phone a surveying look.

"Who's got you smiling so early?" Mom signs.

"No one," I sign, trying not to look guilty. In quick movements, I shove the phone into my pocket and wrap my hands around the banana smoothie I made. The condensation seeps into my palm and makes my fingers slippery.

I'm still stumped by Dare. Most guys give teddy bears, flowers, or a Hallmark card to commemorate a relationship. Not a credit card with no limit.

Talk about going overboard.

Mom waves to get my attention and signs, "Dare?"

Shyness burns through my belly but, this time, it's mixed with a hint of giddiness.

"He makes you happy."

"He's... a dork." I sign while my grin widens. "He's overwhelming. Ridiculous, really."

She tilts her chin up, still wearing that studious, observant expression. "You like him a lot."

I glance down because it's hard to admit that to myself.

Mom knocks on the counter, so I look up again.

She signs, "He's hearing."

"And that's unfortunate." My lips flatten. "I've been trying not to think too hard about that."

"It can work. He knows ASL, right?"

"Yeah, but I wanted my partner to know more than just ASL."

"Well, he can learn. Even two hearing people have things to learn about each other. What makes the other person tick. What makes them happy or sad. What's touchy territory and what's not."

She's right, but I've always had this dream of what my life was supposed to look like. I didn't know the face of the man I'd fall in love with, but I knew he'd be deaf. I knew it with all my heart.

This feels like... a betrayal to that dream.

"It's different than what I pictured. The perfect man for me would come ready-built. I wouldn't need to teach him every little thing from the ground up."

"Yeah, but what's the fun in that?" Mom gives me a *think about it* look.

"This isn't about fun."

"Then is it about marriage? Are you two that serious?"

"No. I mean... I don't know." My movements get bigger as I try to communicate my frantic thoughts. "I know how Dare makes me feel, but I keep thinking that I shouldn't take a detour with someone who isn't going in the same direction that I am."

"You think Dare doesn't want to marry you?"

I lick my lips nervously. "No, I get the sense that he's thinking of us long-term."

"And that bothers you." Her expression is one of understanding.

"We're so different. Maybe for a short time we can date. Have fun. I like him more than I ever thought I'd like a hearing person. But he's so..."

Mom waits, her head tilted.

"*Serious* about me. I can feel it. His intentionality. And I wonder if I should stop now before he gets hurt."

"Or you do?" Her eyes narrow with a challenge.

I keep my hands still. There's no way I'm admitting to that.

"Two individuals, whether they're different races and religions or whether they grew up in the same town, with the same beliefs, still have to go through this. Everyone has their own life experiences, their own values, their own world views."

“It would be easier for a deaf person and a hearing person who love each other to come together if they share the same values and worldviews than it would be for two people with different values and worldviews to come together, no matter how much love they have.” Mom pushes two fists toward each other. “So you have to decide if what he values is what you value too. And then decide if you value him enough to give it a proper try.”

Dad’s footsteps spare me from having to answer a question I’m not even sure I understand. He gets closer and the vibration of his steps gets a little more intense. I’m leaning my head toward him to accept his temple kiss before he even puckers his lips.

“Morning, baby girl,” dad signs after kissing me on the head and kissing mom on the lips. “What were you talking about? Moving back home permanently?” He wiggles his eyebrows. “Because I’m all for that plan.”

Hopping out of the chair, I sign, “Sorry, dad. I’m not switching my career to stay home and be your secretary.”

“Offer’s there whenever you change your mind.” He winks.

“Why *did* you come back home? I thought DeeJ would fly back alone after dropping you off at your agency?” Mom studies me carefully. “Don’t you need to be on stand-by? Especially right now?”

“The agency told me to lay low for the time being.” I try to sign the words with a smile, but the grin falters. My unwanted ‘break from activities’ is a punishment, but what can I do?

My watch vibrates.

I head to my bedroom, check my phone and see a new message from Henry.

Can we talk?

I delete it like I have all the messages he’s sent me since the truth was revealed. I should block him completely, but I can’t find the courage. We have too much history for me to take that final, cruel step.

Another text comes in.

Deej: I heard Talia’s leaving the country to stay with Dare. You’re not going with them, are you?

Yaya: What? Who did you hear that from?

Deej: Your boyfriend arranged for her to do community service at the foundation, but his assistant just texted and said she’ll be joining them overseas.

I'm distracted by the fact that she called Dare my boyfriend. It takes me a second to catch up with what she's saying.

Talia's going overseas?

Why? If Dare's yanking Talia out of school, that means his 'business trip' is more than meets the eye. Did he lie to me?

I text Dare to ask what's going on. Usually, he answers right away, as if he's standing by his phone waiting to hear from me. This time, there's no text back.

Accounting for the time difference, he might be sleeping.

Or maybe not.

Maybe he's avoiding me so he can be spared a hard conversation.

I'm feeling a little panicked when I get ready for my day, and I check my phone often to see if Dare responded. The longer he goes without texting, the more uneasy I feel.

Dare once told me that he likes a challenge, but now that he's won the battle—maybe it's no longer interesting to him. Maybe the urge to 'be with' a deaf girl passed.

You're being ridiculous.

But I can't run from the fear.

Is this what dating a hearing person is like? All the insecurities I would have in a relationship are magnified because, not only is my boyfriend hearing, but he's busy and rich and *older*. He's so many worlds apart from me and now the distance, the silence, it's building into a mountain.

A frightening thought hits when I'm at the gym later that afternoon and Dare still hasn't responded.

What if that credit card wasn't an apology? What if it was a goodbye gift?

* * *

I'm changing out of my sweaty sports bra in the gym's bathroom when my watch vibrates. I pounce on my phone, but it's an unknown number.

I've been getting random calls from reporters, news stations and social media exposé sites and I usually send them straight to voicemail. This time, I text the caller back just in case it might be Dare with a new phone.

Unknown: This is Talia.

My eyes widen.

Talia?

Another text comes in with an address and time.

A switch flips in my brain and I jump to panic mode. Is Talia okay? Has she been kidnapped?

It's not like I can text Dare and ask. He's not answering his phone at all.

My next text is to DeeJ, begging her to call the school and check if Talia left with a stranger. As I wait, I chew on my nail, drenched in more sweat than when I was on the deadlift machine.

DeeJ: I called the school. Talia left with a trusted bodyguard. As far as we know, she's safe.

I breathe out in relief.

So then... if Talia's safe... what is this text about?

Curiosity builds like a rickety Jenga tower. I shower and change into a T-shirt and yoga pants. Sprinting out of the gym, I stop short when I see José standing in the parking lot, waiting.

I frown as I sign, "I told you to go home. I can get to places on my own."

"My job is to accompany you everywhere." He gestures to the door he's holding open.

I roll my eyes and slide into the backseat.

After giving José the coordinates, I send Dare another text.

Still nothing back.

His sudden silence after we've been texting non-stop is alarming. Plus, the cloak and dagger-ness of Talia's message makes me antsy. It doesn't help that, when I glance through the back window, I notice a black car shadowing us.

What on earth is going on?

Nervously, I tap José on the shoulder. He glances at me in the rearview mirror and I jerk my chin to the side, indicating he should pull over.

He does.

When I check behind me, I see the black car stopped too.

"Is something wrong?" José signs.

"Someone is following us." I point behind me.

José looks way too unbothered by that fact.

"We should call the police," I sign. So far no reporters have come to my home, but I always felt it was a matter of time before they harassed me.

He shakes his head. "No need."

"Why not? Who are they?"

"Your security team."

Tiny, spiky flares of surprise mixed with frustration erupt all over my body.

"Mr. Sullivan arranged it yesterday."

"He hired bodyguards and didn't tell me?"

"He felt that you might react... negatively." José gives me a *like you're doing right now* look. "Their instructions were to remain out of sight, but if you'd like I can arrange a meeting."

I fling myself back into my seat. This might be for the greater good. If I'm walking into a trap and Talia really is in danger, it would be best to have back up.

José continues driving and I expect us to head into a seedy area with lots of abandoned warehouses and bars but, instead, we arrive at an arcade. The parking lot is so crowded we drive around twice before we can find a spot.

"This is the place?" I sign when José parks and turns to face me.

He nods.

Hesitantly, I scoot out of the car and walk into the crowded, bustling arcade. It's so noisy and shrieky in here that I have to yank out my hearing aids.

With all the chaos, I assume it will be difficult to find Talia.

I'm wrong.

The little girl is sitting poised on top of an empty merry-go-round. Three burly security guards are standing in front of the attraction, gaining both curious and frightened gazes from parents and kids.

Talia spots me and her little chin lifts higher. She beckons me to approach her stage, a queen atop her ceramic, slightly creepy steed.

I blink rapidly and inch my purse strap higher on my shoulder.

What in Chanel...

Security lets me through, and I recognize the burliest guy among them. Dare's personal guard. He must have left his most trusted to escort Talia to the airport.

Speaking of... why are they here and not on a plane?

The metal floor of the merry-go-round feels hollow and I grip the railing to keep my balance. It's been ages since I've been on one of these

things.

I wave to Talia. She voices something, but she's too far away for me to even *try* and lipread. Her little hands gesture to the pony parallel to hers.

Oh? She wants... she wants us to talk *here*?

I glance at the crowd that's watching us like animals at the zoo. I don't mind being the center of attention. It's why I love modeling, but this is not a catwalk, nor am I trying to show off a cute outfit.

There's a right time and place.

This seems like neither.

Talia seems unbothered, so I humor her. Thankfully, my yoga pants are comfy so it's not difficult to throw my legs over the horse and mount it. The ceramic pony is smooth beneath my hands, but I feel ten times more ridiculous up here than when I was just standing on the platform.

Talia speaks again and I lift a hand to stop her. Pulling my phone out of my purse, I type in my note app.

Let's talk like this.

Her cute nose scrunches when she reads my message. I see the struggle behind her blue eyes. The flare of annoyance. The disgruntlement. Adults, on a whole, are much better at accommodating differences than kids are. Or perhaps they're more polite about it. Either way, Talia doesn't hide her expressions.

Finally, she picks up her phone and spends a long time typing.

Ok.

I almost laugh. All that for two measly letters?

Why did you want to meet?

I show her my message and she immediately ducks her head to type her own. Her fingers fly over the keyboard and it's like watching a machine.

I want to make a deal.

Before that, how did you get my number? And why are you here by yourself? Didn't your uncle send someone to help you pack and get ready to leave?

Her expression when she reads my message can only be described as 'mad science-y'. An eyebrow pops and she carefully types a reply.

Uncle Dare isn't coming back. He always does this. He's never in one place for long.

My heart burns like it stepped off a volcano and straight into lava.

So it's true. Dare is packing up and leaving without even telling me.

I shake my head and type something, erase it and type again.

How can I help you?

I don't want to move. I'm supposed to go to the farmhouse next week.

My eyes meet hers and, for the first time, I see beyond the ruffles, designer shoes, and fluffed blonde hair to the little girl underneath.

Why don't you talk to your uncle and tell him that? My smile, when I show her the note, is kind. He adores you.

He won't listen to me. But he'll listen to you.

That's not exactly true.

Talia motions to one of the guards. He stomps up the platform, approaches our chosen merry-go-round and drops a bag at my feet.

I almost fall off the horse when I see the jewels glittering within the bag.

What on earth?

Talia, where did you get all that jewelry?

They're my mom's. Now they're yours if you let me stay here with you.

I blink and blink. My eyes roam her face. Those big blue eyes. That button nose. The appearance of a child and the mind of a mafia don.

I don't want your jewelry.

What do you want then?

She looks so serious, so earnest, that it feels like I'm staring at the female version of Dare Sullivan. Her thumbs move quickly as she types:

Let me stay with you and I'll make sure Uncle Dare never forgets you. I'll mention you every time he calls me.

Her little head bob is endearing.

I smile.

I appreciate that, but your uncle is your guardian and if he's moving away permanently, then you should go with him. Your mom would want that.

My mom wants me to be happy. This will make me happy.

I glance at the jewels again and an amused grin tweaks my lips. The Sullivan method of negotiation must be hereditary. Both Dare and Talia think buying gifts is enough to grant favor.

Talia, if you stay with me and this is a BIG if, you live by my and my parents' rules. You don't have a maid to clean up after you. You don't get to demand what you want. It will be very different from what you're used to.

Are you saying I can stay with you?

We still have to get your uncle's permission first.

Dare's not texting me back, so that will be a challenge in itself.

Let me handle that. She gives me a victorious little smile.

If I had this much confidence, I'd probably be way further along in my career.

How old are you again? I type.

She rolls her eyes like a thirty-year-old woman and hops off the merry-go-round. The bodyguards all cluster around her as she speaks and... I really think I'm looking at the next president.

Of a biker gang.

Talia catches my eye and voices to me, but she freezes mid-word and whips out her cell phone.

My bags are in the car. They're already packed.

You're coming over now?

Uncle Dare isn't answering his phone.

What about your mom? Or a nanny? We should let someone know.

My mom is in rehab and my nanny is...

Her eyes widen like she said something wrong. She erases the nanny line quickly and tries to act like it never existed. But I'm too good at reading body language and I pick up on her guilt right away.

Talia, where is your nanny?

She glances away, but I kneel in front of her and show my phone, keeping my expression firm.

If you don't tell me, the deal is off.

Her mouth purses, pure annoyance. She doesn't like that I'm threatening her, but finally, she types on her phone.

I locked her in the closet.

* * *

I never thought my first act as guardian of Talia Sullivan would be freeing an au pair from the linen closet.

But here we are.

Veins protrude from the pretty thirty-something's neck as she yells obscenities I'm glad I can't hear. The way Talia sits calm as a peacock on the stool in Dare's fancy kitchen makes it seem like the things that are happening have nothing to do with her.

The nanny is flanked by two guards and escorted out of the room where, I'm sure, she'll receive a hefty compensation package, an NDA, and not one single apology.

I stop the burly men by lifting a hand at them and, to my surprise, they actually listen. I beckon Talia over. She tilts her head as if to say *me*?

I nod.

She hops off the stool and approaches. As Talia gets closer, the nanny starts huffing and puffing like the Big Bad Wolf after three attempts on the brick house.

I type a note and show it to Talia.

Apologize.

The little girl reads my message, and her mouth opens in a laugh.

I hold her gaze, my eyes narrowing. *Do it. Now.*

The arrogance disappears from her eyes like a candle blown in the wind. She turns to the nanny and voices, but I know whatever apology she gave was mere lip service. Her body language is stiff—arms crossed, eyes on the ceiling, shoulders rigid.

When she's done, her gaze shoots to mine with an attitude. *Happy?*

Do it again. Sincerely.

Her little nostrils flare and I can tell she wants to lash out at me, but I'm the one who holds the power here—unlike her guards and caretakers who do everything she says.

Talia drops her arms, loosens her shoulders and even dips her chin on the second round of the apology. I pat her shoulder in encouragement and the nanny seems a little less enraged when she leaves to collect her hush money.

On the other hand, Talia seems very annoyed as José drives us to my place.

Too bad.

This is just a taste of what's to come.

Mom and dad are both home when I step in, although dad was just on his way out from the fact that the door is open and his truck is loaded with supplies.

Mom freezes at the sight of Talia.

Dad frowns.

"I brought a guest," I sign to my parents.

Mom's eyes widen a smidge. "Who is this?"

"It can't be a secret daughter," dad signs with a laugh. He observes Talia's pale skin and blonde hair. "For obvious reasons."

"This is Dare's niece. Is it alright if she stays with us for a bit?"

"How long is a bit?" mom asks.

I honestly have no idea. Earlier, Talia revealed that Dare's business trips last for weeks on end. I don't want to share that bit of news with mom yet. Baby steps.

Talia nervously digs her fingers into her suitcase. Poor thing is trying so hard to act tough, but her gaze bounces between me, mom and dad. No one is voicing, so she has no idea what's being said. That must scare her more than being amid strangers.

Is she starting to regret it?

After a beat of awkwardness, my parents glance at each other. They do that thing where they communicate without using words, calling on the power of decades of marriage to read each other's minds.

They come to some kind of conclusion because they both suddenly spring into action. Dad takes Talia's bags while mom waves Talia in. She even invites the bodyguards. Soon our house is crowded with six foot four men and women and a frightened little girl.

I'm flitting around, helping mom pour out freshly squeezed orange juice, when my watch buzzes on my wrist.

I check my phone, and every nerve in my heart lights up when I see who it is.

Unknown: Hey, Yaya. I'm using Mosely's phone. My phone got stolen between all the meetings, and I never got a chance to reply to you. I have some bad news. This trip is taking longer than I expected.

Yaya: How much longer?

Unknown: At least a few weeks. Maybe more. I don't know when I'll be back home.

Just then, Talia runs up to me.

She points to her phone, wiggling it in victory. I guess Dare responded to her too.

We share a smile, bonding in our excitement over the man we both lo—I mean... like.

Ahem.

Call him.

I show Talia my note and she video calls her uncle.

Dare's face and upper body fill the screen and my heart jumps out of my chest. He looks handsome as usual, but his hair is mussed, like he aggressively ran his hands through it on multiple occasions. Those warm brown eyes struggle to sparkle thanks to the thick, under-eye shadows. Whatever he's doing on this trip, it's exhausting.

"What's going on?" Dare signs. "How are you two together?"

Talia voices, but her back is to me so I can only guess that she's updating him on our deal.

Dare blinks so slowly, I wonder if our internet is lagging. Finally, his pixelated face looks up at me and he signs, "No, absolutely not."

He must have voiced it too because Talia gives me a panicked look.

I keep my wits about me. Dare might be hesitant because he thinks Talia will walk all over us the way she does everyone else. That is *not* going to happen.

Patting Talia on the shoulder, I make a 'walking away' gesture and continue the conversation with Dare alone in my room.

Setting the phone on my vanity dresser so he can see me signing clearly, I frown at him.

“Talía’s just settling into school and making friends. Plus, her mom is only a drive away, and we can take her to visit when it’s convenient.”

“Yaya, I can’t let you do this.”

“Are you moving overseas permanently? Is that why you sent for her?” This time, my hands shake a bit, and I can’t hide the worry creeping into my expression.

“Of course not.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. Now that I know Dare’s coming back and he’s not running away from us, everything else feels like gravy.

Dare keeps signing, “I sent for her because no one but me can handle her.”

“That’s not true!”

“I heard what she did to the nanny.”

My eyes dart to the side because I was hoping he wouldn’t have gotten that update.

“And that isn’t the first time. She’s a handful. More than a handful. I don’t want her to hurt you or your family. For her sake and for yours.”

“Dare, look at this.” I lift my hand and point to my dark skin. “We don’t play those games in a black household. Have you ever seen the show ‘*World’s Strictest Parents*’?” I know he hasn’t so I don’t even wait for him to shake his head no. “There’s a reason most of those ‘strict parents’ are from the Caribbean or Africa. Talía will straighten up. Trust me. Besides, there’s nothing else on my schedule. I don’t have a problem taking care of her until you return.”

“Still, I don’t think it’s right.”

“What’s not right,” I make the sign firmly, “is you buying an entire company just to help me. Ru-Carpsel is the reason you’re having such a hard time, isn’t it?”

He pulls his lips into his mouth. It’s a tell.

Hands in his pockets—he’s trying to hide. Dare fidgets when he’s anxious and he consciously dunks his hands out of sight to disguise that. But since he can’t hide his hands when he’s signing, he hides his mouth.

I wait for him to admit it, but he doesn’t. Instead, he signs, “It’s just work.”

“And I’m Oprah Winfrey.”

“I’ve always had a thing for Oprah.”

I smile. “That explains a lot.”

He chuckles.

For a beat, we just stare at each other, soaking each other in. As peace sweeps over me, I realize I’d been restless all day without him. It’s incredible how much I’ve craved seeing him, speaking to him. Going one day without communication left me feeling so empty.

Is this what having a crush is like?

If so, I think I might have a teeny-tiny... okay *giant* crush on Dare.

“You’ve helped me so much. Let me help you. Please.”

His facial muscles relax. One by one. As if some giant load’s been taken off his shoulders. He closes his eyes and exhales.

When he opens them again, his gaze is affectionate. “I miss you so much,” he signs.

“I miss you too.”

“I wish I could hold you.”

My stomach clenches. “Where did you learn that sign? Athena?”

“Did I do it wrong?” He gives me a dangerously flirty smirk.

Heat blazes through my entire body. Nope. He did it way too right.

Mosely’s hand enters the frame behind Dare’s head, reaching for a file on the desk. I know our time together is up when a distracted look replaces the heat in Dare’s eyes, and I wave to get his attention.

“You should say bye to Talia before you go,” I sign.

He agrees and I give the phone to Talia so she can say her goodbyes to her uncle.

As they talk, I notice the living room is empty.

I get mom’s attention. “Where’s dad?”

“He got a call so he left.”

“And everyone else?”

“The bodyguards are checking things out outside.” She scrunches her nose as if to say *I have no idea what that means and I don’t want to know*.

I peek out the window and notice the security team flocking our lawn. It reminds me of how the bodyguards act outside the farmhouse.

Unfortunately, we don’t have acres of land like Sunny and Darrel Hastings and our neighbors look totally unnerved by all the suits.

I make a mental note to ask Dare to call off his people. Between my security team *and* Talia’s, our neighbors won’t have anywhere to park.

Mom touches my shoulder gently. “Talía can take Dejonae’s room.”

I give her a hug. “Thank you for letting her stay here, mom.”

“Why exactly is she staying here?”

“Dare’s under a lot of pressure right now and it means a lot that we can be there for his family.”

“I see.” She arches a brow. “You know, it’s strange that I’m meeting his niece before I meet this mysterious Mr. Sullivan.”

“You and dad will get to grill him as soon as he gets back, okay? Promise.”

I wave to Talía to get her attention and gesture for her to follow me. She’s sullen when I show her around Dejonae’s old room and shrugs when I write a note asking if she’d like my help to unpack.

She seems withdrawn, and I assume that’s a result of being thrust into a new environment.

But that shyness doesn’t last long.

Tyrant Talía rears her villainous head when mom instructs her to help with dinner that evening.

It happens again later that night when Talía’s ‘forced’ to eat around the dining room table instead of around the TV ‘like she does with Uncle Dare’.

It happens the next morning when she refuses to get up for school after her alarm rings.

And again when mom tells her we’re having cereal for breakfast —‘Uncle Dare always buys me breakfast’. To which mom unleashes her eyeball of doom and responds in a way that has Talía sinking her spoon into a bowl of cereal and milk.

José and I escort her to school. She sits in the backseat with her arms folded, mumbling what I can only assume are curses against my mother. I get offended by her body language and write a long-winded note about her attitude, an essay that takes me the entire car ride to complete.

As the days pass, Talía’s stubbornness remains, and it doesn’t help that Dare and I barely text anymore.

‘I’ll wrap this up as soon as I can.’

‘It won’t be long now.’

‘I’ll be back before you know it.’

More days pass and, still, he makes the promise. *‘I’ll be home soon’.*

But ‘soon’ in Dare Land is two weeks and counting.

And eventually the words stop coming and he can't even be bothered to make the promise.

I assume it's because he doesn't want to repeat himself.

But I was wrong.

Exactly three weeks, five days, and four hours after Dare left (not that I'm counting), I get a text from him.

I stare at my phone in abject horror, my gym bag falling off my shoulder and smattering to the concrete in the parking lot.

Dare: *I don't know when this will be over. I think we should stop texting for a while.*

Stop texting?

As in break up?

My stomach flips anxiously.

This was inevitable. You never should have gotten with a hearing person.

That tiny voice is back. The one I thought I'd vanquished when I decided to give Dare a shot. But I guess I hadn't exterminated the little rat. It was living in my heart, buried under the flooring, biding its time.

I'm clenching my cell phone, unable to breathe and having what I think is a mild version of a panic attack, when two strong arms close around me.

I shake the person off angrily, whipping my head up to give them an angry *I have a boyfriend* glare. And then I stop mid-chin lift. Do I have a boyfriend? Am I in-between boyfriends? Is Dare trying to let me down easy because he won't be able to come back for months? Years? What then?

The rude stranger who hugged me is still standing there. I put a pause on my mental breakdown and remember who I am. Boyfriend or not, no man has the right to put his hands on me or touch me without my permission.

I look up and see a tweed jacket.

My heart stops mid-thump.

Loose black trousers, designer Oxfords, princess-pink watch, big hands and chocolate brown eyes. The very eyes I'd dreamed about last night when I cuddled my pillow and wished he were with me. Maybe I'm still dreaming? Maybe I'm in bed right now, drooling into my satin sheets. I rip my gaze over the rest of him. Lean, athletic body, broad shoulders, square jaw, wavy brown hair.

“Are you okay?” Dare signs. My brain malfunctions when he steps closer to me, filling my air with his cologne.

He’s here.

He’s here.

He’s here.

I curl my fingers into fists...

And I punch him.

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CHAPTER 17

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wear his heart

DARE

I guess I deserve that.

My feisty girlfriend fumes at me, those honey-brown eyes on fire.

And I can't help it.

I smile.

"You think this is funny?" Yaya signs. Her nostrils flare to twice their size and her lips screw up into a wad of annoyance.

How is she so beautiful when she's angry? She's wearing one of those tight-fitting gym jackets, zipped down halfway to show a pink sports bra. Hot yoga pants cling to her curves like saran wrap. Her long, dark hair is swinging high up in a ponytail.

That ponytail swishes back and forth when she shakes her head at me, brows tightening until they meet in the center of her forehead. I know she wants to scold me more, so I choose a fitting distraction.

I kiss her, groaning when our lips collide. The ache in my chest intensifies and I have the sudden sensation of being filled to the brim, like a well at the end of a drought, a dried-up spring finally tasting rain.

She wasn't expecting the kiss and the shock leaves her standing still while my mouth moves over hers. In point-five seconds, Yaya gets over the shock and kisses me back.

The heat of her fingers skating into my hair burns my scalp and makes me stagger forward. I can't breathe. Not that I need to. She's my oxygen.

My saving grace. I'd gladly drown in her arms, holding her like a life raft dangling on the edge of a waterfall.

Her response is passionate, greedy. She opens her mouth, searching for my tongue. I groan again, stroking the inner lining of her lip before I let our tongues meet. She sucks on it, desperate for the taste of me.

But not as desperate as I am.

Claiming her sexy-as-sin mouth isn't enough. I dive further into the dizzying euphoria, placing my hands on those tempting curves filling out her yoga pants, grasping, feeling, and then I remember we're in broad daylight and I should probably show some restraint.

Reluctantly, I pull my lips away and raise my hands to her waist. Drawing her closer to me, I trap her against my chest. Her skin is hot, and her body is melting into mine, like one touch from me was enough to break her.

Holy crap, I missed this woman.

I sink my forehead against Yaya's, closing my eyes and sighing in ecstasy. When I open them a few seconds later, I notice that her expression has shifted from lust-filled to worried.

An eyebrow arches in concern, and Yaya presses her hands flat against my chest. The warmth of her fingers seeps through my jacket and the thin dress shirt that I've been wearing for the past three days. Or has it been a week? It's been tough to find a second to even shower and the days are mushed together in my head.

Eyes widening, she looks up again. Her gaze is full of inquiry. She pats my chest twice.

I nod. *That's right, sweetheart. My heart's beating fast because of you.*

It happens every time I'm around her. It's like my body is plugged into her circuit, surging with the kind of electricity no human body can contain. I'm so locked in. Willing to be electrocuted if it means I can have all of her.

Yaya steps back—just a smidge because there's no way I'm letting her get too far—and signs to me, “Did you run here?”

I laugh at the question.

She cracks a smile and then it widens and widens until it fills her entire, gorgeous face. It's like staring directly at a sunrise. Like hope and beauty and new beginnings became a human being.

I brush my fingers against her cheek. “I missed you so much.”

The words are whispered and I rectify that immediately. The last place my hands want to be is away from her, but I raise them so I can sign.

Yaya snatches my pointer finger before I can communicate and dips her head down once. Her eyes sparkle. *I understood.*

She read my lips.

Before I can fully grasp the magnitude of that, Yaya tugs on my hand and returns it to her waist. She steps into me in one fluid motion, her arms tightening around me. I lean down to hug her properly, absorbing her into my arms.

She's tall. Slender. The perfect height for me. Her chin nestles on my shoulder like we were built as a set. Like two puzzle pieces finding each other.

All the strain from my trip, the negotiations with the government, the shady politicians, and the headache of wading through red tape while meeting with my own company shareholders remotely from my hotel room—it melts away.

I nuzzle her hair with my cheek and then press a kiss against her neck, right below her ear.

She steps away and I want to snap her back against me like a child with his toy. *Mine!*

Her nose is scrunched and I know why before she signs it out.

"You came straight here from the airport, didn't you?"

Translation: *You stink.*

"I wanted to come home first," I sign back.

An eyebrow arches. "So you never went home?"

"I did."

"You went home and didn't..." Her hands stall and she looks into the air to find the right sign, "change?"

Translation: *you didn't shower?*

"No, I came straight here."

She frowns in confusion. "But you said you went home first."

I cradle her face and kiss her forehead, glad that at least I brushed my teeth. "I did."

Her mouth slackens.

Her eyelashes flutter.

She understands.

I watch her struggle to act unaffected, finding it amusing. Every muscle twitch in her brows, her mouth, every swipe of her tongue across her bottom lip. They all give her away. Finally, she collects herself and tips her chin high.

“Did you drive?”

Twisting sideways so she has a proper view of the parking lot, I point out Mosely. He’s just as tired as I am but insisted on driving me here to meet Yaya. Something I’m sure he regrets now that he’s witnessed our very public make-out session.

If Yaya’s embarrassed about Mosely seeing us kissing, she’s not showing it. She wiggles her fingers at Mosely and signs to me, “He’s still on the clock?”

“I couldn’t have wrapped things up this fast without him. The man needs to sleep for at least twelve hours.”

“What makes you think I won’t order you to do the same?” She takes a half-step toward me, her lips inching up in a smirk.

“I’m only going to bed if you’re coming with me.”

Her eyes light up and I notice that she doesn’t seem at all against that idea.

“All you want to do is sleep?” Yaya signs. Her coyness is enough to send adrenaline firing through my entire body.

However, I didn’t fly all the way back home on two hours of sleep and four cups of coffee to take her to bed and conk out for two days.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” I tease her. “At least buy me dinner first.”

She laughs, but it’s cut short by a concerned look. “You haven’t eaten?”

My stomach chooses that time to grumble and I make the mistake of setting my hand there to hide it. Yaya is far too sharp, and she wastes no time shoving me into her car where José is waiting.

“Morning, sir,” José says. “Good to have you back.”

“Thank you for taking care of her while I was gone,” I tell him out loud.

My phone buzzes while José and Yaya start signing.

Mosely: *Sir, have you been kidnapped?*

Dare: *Slight change of plans. You’ll have to carry out the next phase without me.*

I feel Yaya’s stare and pocket my phone. “That was Mosely.”

“He’s going home now?” I check to see if her eyebrows lift. Her expression confirms that it’s a question.

It's a little difficult to ascertain emphasis sometimes. I'm getting better at ASL, but there's still so much to learn about the structure, grammar, and especially the body language. Facial expressions and body movements are as important in signing as intonations are in speaking conversations.

I give Yaya a tight-lipped smile and side-step the question. "Has Talia given you and your family any trouble?"

"She's been an angel."

Funny. "What did she do?"

"I'm no snitch."

I chuckle. "And I'm not the police."

"You know that snitches get stitches, don't you?"

"What 'stitches' can a middle schooler give you?"

Yaya laughs, making her eyes sparkle even harder. She stops joking around to explain, "It's been rocky, but she's settling into our way of doing things. Plus, she's been faithful in attending community service."

"Really?"

I'm surprised to hear that. Talia didn't mention it. Which means she's probably enjoying herself and doesn't want to admit it.

She's not the type to hold back her complaints. I've received several long texts detailing all the infractions the Williams family have on her roster. My niece's complaint letters would make any home association queen weep with pride.

"She's a lot more curious about the deaf community now."

"You're kidding."

Yaya shows me a notes app exchange between her and Talia. It makes me smile seeing those notes. Reminds me of when Yaya and I just met and all I could do to communicate was type on my cell.

* * *

If you're deaf, does that mean you can't speak?

You use your voice to speak, not your ears. I can speak.

Then why don't you speak?

Signing is the way I speak.

What are those things in your ears?

Hearing aids.

So you can hear with them on?

Not really.

But you're wearing something to help you hear.

It helps me hear a few sounds more clearly, but I can't hear words or higher frequencies.

Do your hands ever get tired?

Do your lips ever get tired?

No.

My hands don't get tired either.

I chuckle and start to drag my eyes away from her phone when I see a message pop up.

Henry: Yaya, I know you're seeing my messages. Please. I need to talk. There's something I need to tell you.

My fingers stiffen on the cellphone. I've been so busy, I forgot about Henry. How long has he been texting Yaya? And what does he want to tell her? Is it about the fact that he's been paying me off with the Ru-Carpsel money? Should I tell Yaya about it first?

And then what? She'll want to see Henry. They might patch things up. He'll start hanging around again, being the guy who's there for her when I'm not. Him and his questionable motives will be the other angel on her shoulder, whispering that she should run from me at the slightest sign of conflict.

Would I be pushing him back into her life if I admit he's a good guy who did a bad thing for the right reasons?

I swipe my thumb across the message, fighting the urge to delete the text.

It would be irrational. Selfish.

Immature.

But it would be worth it.

Sweat starts beading on my forehead as I have an internal debate.

Delete it. Don't delete it.

I imagine Yaya laughing with Henry, smiling at him, having their own inside jokes. I imagine him wiggling his way closer and closer into her life.

The text has to go.

I never considered myself to be an immature, impulsive man. Haven't been that way even as a teenager. But the love I feel for Yaya has warped my own moral code.

I tap 'delete'.

The '*are you sure you want to delete this*' box pops up.

I snap back to myself and cancel the request. Shame is quick and slimy, and the sensation crawls over me like goo. I quickly offer the phone back to Yaya, my eyes slightly dipped.

"Are you okay?" She reaches out and wipes the side of my mouth. Her thumb comes back with a lipstick smear. "You seem nervous."

I shake my head, glad that we've arrived at the restaurant and she has to pocket her phone rather than investigate further.

José drives off and we're absorbed into the classy café with exposed brick, tinted glass tables and an outdoor platform with women sipping mimosas under giant red umbrellas.

I greet the hostess with a smile. "Hello, I—"

Her answering smile is a tad too wide when she interrupts me. "Table for one?"

I do a quick glance at Yaya who is right beside me, so close her arm is brushing mine. Am I the only one seeing her? Or does the host have some kind of visibility impediment? Since meeting Yaya, I've found myself being a lot more sympathetic to everyone.

The woman blinks and keeps smiling.

Huh. I don't think she's blind. So she *meant* to ask me that?

My brain trips over itself because the question makes no sense. Can't she see the gorgeous woman beside me? Why does the hostess assume I'm alone?

Before I can correct her, Yaya wraps her hands around my arm.

I look down, attentive.

She puckers her lips. One dark finger taps her mouth exactly once, a silent, flirtatious instruction.

I grin and lean down to press a long, satisfying kiss against her mouth. Nuzzling her nose with my own before I pull back, I face the hostess again. The woman's cheeks are red and she's looking at anything but us.

"Table for two," I say firmly. Normally, I'd throw in a 'please'. Dad taught me the importance of respecting women and being polite.

But mom taught me that respect is earned.

I go with my mom on this one.

Yaya slips her hand naturally into mine and holds on while the hostess shows us to the table. After, the woman runs off like we're radioactive. Smart move. I would have asked for another waitress to take our orders anyway.

I keep Yaya's hand in mine, and it feels so natural to both of us that we don't realize we're still connected until I make a move to sign. We laugh together and I kiss her knuckles lightly before I release her.

"Did you read that woman's lips?" I sign.

She shakes her head.

"Why did you kiss me in front of her?"

"She was looking at you like you were meat on a stick."

Warmth fills me. "You were jealous."

"Nope."

I smirk. "You... weren't jealous?"

"Absolutely not."

"So that was..." I gesture in the direction of the hostess podium.

Yaya tilts her chin up. "I don't believe women should be objectified and neither should men."

"Ah. So you were defending my rights as a man."

"That's correct."

"You weren't jealous."

"That's right."

"Okay then," I sign.

She's cute when she lies.

My phone rings and I glance down to see that Mosely is calling.

"I'll be right back," I sign just as the waiter arrives.

“I’ll order for you,” Yaya says, waving me away. I wait there for a beat, staring at her in adoration.

“What?” she signs.

I shake my head to indicate it’s nothing. Well, it’s something, but I don’t think I can explain it.

In the past, I’ve taken calls during dates and got rained down with hellfire by the women sitting across the table. But rather than throwing a fit and getting upset, Yaya is taking it in stride. Really, she goes a step farther, still finding ways to take care of me.

I love her.

The thought is so right, so perfectly fit.

I need to tell her soon.

“Hello? Sir?” Mosely’s voice squawks from my phone. I don’t even remember hitting the answer button.

“Yeah?” I put the phone to my ear and walk away as Yaya starts tapping in her notes app to communicate with the waitress. “Can’t talk long, Mosely. I’m doing something important.”

“I understand, sir. But we have a problem.”

“Those are four words I never want to hear.”

“Remember our after-hours project?”

“Of course.” Cleaning up the Ru-Carpsel mess was what Mosely and I dubbed our ‘eight to five’. The ‘after hours’ work was finding a way to get rid of Carmichael.

“He got wind of our plans.”

“We knew that was a possibility when we froze his secret offshore bank accounts.”

“I just got a letter from Carmichael’s lawyer. He’s claiming your dad evaded taxes, committed corporate espionage and all kinds of crazy things. And he says he has proof.”

My teeth clench. “Dad never did that.”

“We both know that. But Carmichael’s diabolical. Even if all he does is make noise in the press, it’s enough to cause damage. There will be an investigation. Projects will halt under all the scrutiny.”

“Projects like the one we have with Cullen Tech.” I pull my hand into a fist and pound the wall. “Call our lawyers.”

“Already done. They’re working on it as we speak.”

“So what’s the issue?”

“We’ll need you at the PR meeting.”

“PR?”

“Sometimes, it’s worse to get prosecuted by the public than in court. Especially now that you’re looking at that government contract with Cullen Tech. We need to get ahead of this.”

“Dammit.” Carmichael is like a stinking, ugly Christmas sweater of a gift that keeps on giving. I let out a breath of frustration and turn to watch Yaya from where I’m out of sight in the hallway.

The waitress brings over our appetizers, but she barely glances up. She’s on her phone, her brows furrowed and two lines between her eyebrows.

What is she...

The truth strikes.

Henry’s message. She must be reading it.

My heart beats hard against my ribs and I urgently stride to the table. “Mosely, I’ll call you back.”

“Sir?”

I cut off the phone and drop into my seat. Straightening my jacket, I give Yaya what I hope is a light, ‘everything’s okay’ smile and sign, “What are you looking at?”

She looks up at me, analyzing my face. To hide my nerves, I start picking at the appetizer.

“Why are you asking me that when you already know?” Yaya signs.

I freeze, a chip burdened with salsa halfway to my mouth. *Busted.*

Who came up with that stereotype of models being dumb? That is the opposite of true. Yaya’s sharp as a tack.

She slides the phone over to me. “Is this why you were being weird in the car?”

I drop the chip and blink several times, studying her. Her face is carefully impassive. A perfect mask. I can’t tell if I’m in trouble or not.

But what would I be in trouble for? There’s no way she’ll know I wanted to delete it.

“You wanted to delete it, didn’t you?” Yaya signs.

Busted again.

I look her up and down. “Tell me the truth. You’re not just deaf, are you? You’re a mind reader too.”

“I don’t have to be a mind reader to know that, Dare. I’d feel the same way.”

She finally smiles and I finally breathe.

“Why didn’t you?” Yaya signs.

“I couldn’t.”

Her eyes turn slightly suspicious. “I wouldn’t have known.”

“But *I* would.” I lean my shoulders back. Eyes on her. “Honestly, I almost deleted it. Got really close. But I thought to myself, ‘the man that Yaya needs, the one she deserves, is honest. If I manipulate her in the small things, how will she know I won’t manipulate her in the big things?’”

“You went that deep?” She leans forward slightly, those light brown eyes piercing me.

“Trust is built. It’s earned. I want you to believe me when I tell you that the person on the phone was really just Mosely with an update on work. I want you to believe me when I come home late or leave on a trip for days or weeks at a time. I want you to believe me when we’re at a parent-teacher conference for our kid and the teacher doesn’t know ASL so you have to rely on me.”

She lifts a hand. “You want kids?”

“No.”

“No, you don’t want kids?”

“No, I don’t *just* want kids.” My heart patters harder. “I want kids with you.”

Eyelashes flutter.

Mouth agape.

I seem to put that shocked expression on her face often.

The pause stretches. This is definitely coming on too strong. Athena would scold me. Remind me to go at Yaya’s pace.

But thankfully, Yaya inhales, nods and moves on.

“How many?” she signs.

“How many kids?” I pretend to think about it, but really, I have an answer. It’s not the one I think she wants to hear so I say instead, “Pregnancy puts a strain on a woman’s body, so... that should be a discussion we have together—”

She raises a hand. “The truth, Dare.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You’re omitting something.”

“Am I?”

“You know you have a tell?”

“What’s my tell?”

“I’m not spilling my secrets.” The should-be-famous smile flits over her face again. The one that can knock me right off my feet. “Now tell me how many kids you want.”

Baby, I’ll have you pregnant as often as possible.

That’s a little too honest. I don’t need Athena in my head to know I better not say that.

“As many as I can.”

“With me?” she signs. Her expression is neither excited nor turned off. It’s like she’s clarifying.

“Yes.”

She shakes her head and sucks in a deep breath. Is she reacting like this because she doesn’t want kids? It’ll be a huge blow. It’s right up there with my ‘shouldn’t smoke’ and ‘must know cars’ dealbreakers. To be fair, I ignored one of those for Yaya and I have a feeling I would have ignored the smoking too because I was so enamored by her from the start.

But kids...

I brace myself, already trying to talk myself out of wanting kids because I would definitely want Yaya more than biological offspring anyway.

“Okay,” she signs.

That’s it?

Is it the end of my interrogation? Did I pass the test?

Yaya sits up straight, her back so tense it’s like someone strapped a steel pipe to it. She wears a quietly determined look. One I imagine she’s probably worn when making her case as a model.

“One more question.”

I gesture for her to go ahead.

“Are you prepared to raise a child who’d, culturally, be a part of both the deaf and hearing world?”

“You mean CODA?” I’ve done my research. I know that CODA means Child of a Deaf Adult and that 90% of CODAs are hearing.

“I mean,” Yaya keeps observing me, “I want my future children to feel at home in my community. I want them to know sign. I don’t want them interpreting for me,” she does a proud little head toss that makes me want to kiss her, “but it’s important that they understand both languages and experience both worlds.” Her hands tremble as if she’s getting emotional. After a deep breath, she adds, “What are your thoughts on that?”

The question hits me right between the ribs. Is raising our child in a bilingual home something I should be scared of? Because I'm not. Not one bit.

After being with Yaya, it's become clearer to me how important accessibility is. I wish I'd learned ASL sooner. Wish I'd had more knowledge before I met her. That feeling isn't something I can contain. Even now, it's extending to initiatives I'd like to implement at work and in Talia's school.

"The honest answer?" I sign back.

"No." She rolls her eyes. "I want you to lie to me. Yes, the honest answer."

I almost laugh but, from the intense look in her eyes, I figure I shouldn't.

"Honestly... I want to have kids with *you*. Full stop."

There's a pause where neither of us moves.

"And," I continue, "I want those kids to be secure and happy in who they are as people. That's important to me whether they're deaf or hearing."

She blinks slowly, absorbing everything I'm signing.

"I don't fully understand your culture or your experiences, but I respect it and I want to learn. And that's how I wish to raise our children. I value our child being bilingual and bicultural, fully secure in their sense of purpose and self-worth. I want them to communicate, make friends, learn, study and do whatever they want in life. I want to support them to pursue their dreams. I want them to know that they can achieve it, even if they fail at first. And above all," I pause, "I want to do that with you."

She sits there, working through something in her mind.

Then, to my surprise, she plants both hands on the table and leans completely over. Her ponytail swings over her left shoulder as she pushes over the nachos and plants a soft kiss on my lips.

It's different from the kiss in front of the hostess. She was possessive there. A tad annoyed even.

Now her soft lips press to mine. Gentle. Sweet. Tender.

A whisper of a caress and yet it communicates her feelings more loudly than if she'd signed 'I like you too'.

Yaya pulls back, brackets my face with both hands and goes in to give me a quick, playful kiss. To my surprise, she voices between kisses.

"You. Are. A. Sweetheart."

When she reclaims her seat, I quickly peek outside to make sure the sun is in the sky because, right now, it feels like the sun is glowing out of my chest.

Calmly, Yaya flips her hair over her shoulder and signs, “Eat. You said you were hungry.”

Eat? I’m supposed to eat after that? My belly’s full. I could unbutton my pants from how full I am. Her pants don’t have buttons though. Hers would be very easy to roll off, being that they’re yoga pants. And it wouldn’t take much for my pants to be off either.

And then I could see what other pieces of her clothes I could get rid of...

Yaya waves her hands in front of my face, laughing and shaking her head. She signs, “Ease up, tiger. I’m not on the menu today.”

I grin and dig into the food the waitress brings.

She really is a mind reader.

* * *

Talia screams in delight for what feels like five minutes straight when we pick her up from school. She buckles in right between me and Yaya and chats my ear off.

I don’t know what it is, but there’s something different about my niece today. Something lighter. Something that makes her eyes shine. Maybe it’s because she’s connecting with the farmhouse kids and finally fitting in with a group at school.

Maybe it’s the fact that she’s staying with a tight-knit, cozy family like the Williams and not with her socialite mom, her workaholic uncle, and a rotating door of nannies.

Maybe it’s all the above.

And yet, it only takes three minutes to remind me that Talia is Lucy’s daughter. While Yaya was much more polite about my hygiene choices, Talia plucks her nose and bullies me right in my face, telling me how much I reek.

We decide to stop in at the condo so I can take a proper shower and change before we head to the park for some fun and ice cream.

Once I'm done making myself presentable, I head outside and find Talia and Yaya in deep conversation.

I lean against the wall, arms crossed over my chest. Fascinating. They clearly don't communicate in the same language, but that's not stopping either one. Sometimes, they pass notes. Sometimes, Yaya lip reads. Other times, Talia will use a sign.

The last one is not a sign I recognize.

"Talia, what was that?" I ask, walking closer to them.

Talia looks up first and Yaya notices the direction of her gaze, following suit.

I try to imitate what my niece was signing. "This. I don't recognize it."

"This means that you want something really badly," Talia says. She makes the sign again.

"That's not right," I sign to Yaya, roping her into the conversation. "Who taught her that?"

Yaya gives me a pretty but sheepish smile. "Me. Sort of. At home, we make up our own signs. It's like a lazy form of sign language that's just for us." She gestures to my niece. "Talia picked up on it."

Talia's eyes dart between us. Her voice is eager when she asks, "What did she say?"

"That you're very smart." Pleased, I lift my niece into my arms. "And that you're kind and easy to talk to."

Talia scrunches her nose. "Yaya doesn't talk like that."

"How does she talk?" I sign first and then I speak it.

I'm not good at doing both simultaneously the way I've seen Dejonae and Sazuki do. Something else I need to work on.

"Like that," Talia says and she captures my hand.

I set her back on her feet and turn to Yaya who makes a 'walking' gesture.

Talia nods.

Huh. Looks like they have their own little language.

I escort my girls to the park where we romp over every inch of the playground. Talia even ropes in Yaya's bodyguard to compete with the girls in a game of hopscotch.

My niece's laughter rings out more than I've ever heard it. She looks at Yaya with adoring eyes. It's the first time she's taken to anyone this fast.

Then again, who *wouldn't* fall for Yaya? She's charismatic, sweet, and a dangerous level of lovable.

I smile sleepily to myself. My eyes slide shut and I catch myself dozing off when my head lurches.

Stay up, Sullivan.

"Dare," Yaya signs, leaving Talia on the monkey bars to stand in front of me, "that's the third time I've seen you shutting down since we got here."

"I'm fine." The moment I finish signing, I curl my fingers into a fist and hide the sight of my cavernous mouth opening wide in a yawn.

Yaya gives me a scolding look. I'm sure she's going to cut this date short and order me to bed. An instruction I wouldn't mind if she'd be there with me.

Just then, Talia runs up to us.

"Uncle Dare, take a picture of me on the monkey bars. I want to send it to mom."

"Alright." I take out my phone and snap a photo.

"We should do a close-up," Yaya suggests.

Talia makes a squinty face for the camera. I laugh. "What's that?"

"Smizing." My niece finger spells the word instead of speaking it.

I'm shocked to see her using sign language so comfortably. Spending almost a month with the Williams, hanging around Niko at school, and volunteering at the music foundation for the deaf caused an acute transformation.

"Smizing?" I sign. "What's that?"

"Tyra Banks." Yaya looks at me like that's supposed to clear everything up.

"Right."

She points between herself and Talia and makes a beckoning gesture. Talia seems to immediately know what she wants and the two start posing together.

I fall into place, snapping picture after picture.

There's a particular one of Yaya that makes me pause. The sun is in her face. Eyes sparkling. White teeth flashing in a broad, gum-revealing smile. It's candid. Relaxed. Captures the mischievous, feminine woman beneath the perfect model.

I make the picture my phone screensaver.

“I’m surrounded by beauties.” I sign it first and then say it out loud for Talia.

Both girls roll their eyes.

We head over to the ice cream kiosk next. My niece runs ahead to buy her favorite treat while Yaya declines. I stay back to talk to her, noticing a strange expression on her face.

“You don’t want ice cream?”

“I’m on a diet. I gained five pounds since my last gig.”

“I think you look beautiful no matter what you weigh. Eat the ice cream if you want to.”

“It’s fine.”

“You’re not fine.”

“How do you know?”

I touch the line between her brow. “You have a tell too.”

She sighs. “It’s just...” She points to my phone. “I miss it.”

“What? Taking pictures?”

She nods.

“It’s been a while, right? Our photoshoot for the magazine was your last time in front of the camera.”

“I didn’t think this break would take as long as it has. I’m starting to wonder if my agency is soft firing me. They can’t be accused of kicking out the deaf, black girl, so they’re just slowly phasing me out.”

“We should find another agency.”

“Maybe.” Her brows knot tighter in concern. “Or maybe I’m jumping the gun and hurting myself more by being impatient.”

I pick up on what she’s not saying. Yaya doesn’t *want* another agency. She wants to prove her worth *there*.

“How about a side-job?”

“Doing what?”

“Come model for me.”

“In what? Lingerie?” She gives me an indulgent little smile.

“Yes. Definitely yes. But that’s not what I meant.”

Her amusement is replaced by curiosity. “What did you mean then?”

“Ru-Carpsel is due a re-brand. We’ve got new designers. New facilities. We’re changing the name and giving the entire business a facelift. My team was floating around the idea of a pop-up show—”

“Yes,” she signs. Her eyes are bright and her body almost zings off the ground.

“I haven’t even asked you yet...”

“Whatever it is, even if it’s working backstage, I want to be around fashion again. I’m in.”

I smile and kiss her forehead. “Alright then. I’ll let my team discuss the details with you.”

Yaya is grinning from ear to ear and it feels like I just won a million bucks. Who knew it would be so easy to please her?

“Uncle Dare!” Talia runs back to us, smiling and munching happily on ice cream.

Yaya types on her phone and shows it to Talia.

Ready to pick up your stuff and go home with your uncle?

Talia nods enthusiastically.

Yaya’s smile is fond as she pinches Talia’s cheeks.

We pile into the car and José drives to Yaya’s house. Talia flies out first, eagerly disappearing through the front door.

Well okay then.

I turn to Yaya. “Since we’re here, should I head in and meet your parents?”

She pauses and thinks it over for so long, I wonder if she’s not ready to take that step. But finally, she offers a sober nod. “Yeah, I want you to meet my parents.”

Am I glad I showered before this.

I climb out of the car and wait for Yaya to join me. We’re walking up to the porch when a car door slams. I turn slightly, expecting to see Dejonae, Sazuki, or one of the other farmhouse people dropping in to visit Yaya.

My smile sharpens to a weapon when the intruder hustles over to us.

It’s Henry.

CHAPTER 18

OceanofPDF.com

coffee confession

YAYA

I expected to feel anger when I locked eyes with my backstabbing best friend. Heart on fire. Smoke coming out of my ears. I expected to grab the nearest sharp object and whack him with it. I thought it would be there. That urge for revenge. For vengeance.

But it's not.

Instead, I see the dark circles under Henry's eyes, deep shadows of depression and despair. I see the once vibrant gaze reduced to a nervous, twitching mess. I see the thin set of his lips and his Adam's apple that protrudes a little more because his face is so gaunt and worn.

I should be happy that he's so torn up.

He lied to me.

Used me.

And the thing is... he didn't have to.

I would have done it, anything he wanted—accept dirty money, align myself with a crappy company, ignore my beliefs about fairness and justice.

For him, I would.

Because we were best friends.

And even if he'd come to me with a body to hide, I probably would have dug first and asked questions later.

So why betray?

Why take a crap on the trust, the love, the bond we had?

That's the part that hurts.

I stiffen and Dare's at my back, tensing up right alongside me. Henry moves forward. His steps are strong, determined. A little unhinged. He has no intentions of stopping before he gets to me.

In the corner of my eye, I notice Dare gesturing to his security team. The stern ex-military woman who's been watching over me and Talia while Dare's been gone is far ahead of them. I meet her eyes. She nods and lifts a hand, stopping Dare's beefy suits from accosting Henry.

One of the first discussions my bodyguard and I had was about who was and wasn't allowed to approach me. I showed her Henry's picture, anticipating that this day would come.

But I didn't think Dare would be here to view it also.

Shifting towards Dare until I'm crowding his personal bubble, I lift my eyes to his. No words pass between us, but my expression is pleading.

He refuses to look at me, probably sensing that I'll ask him to show mercy. The severely beautiful lines of his face shift as his expression hardens. I wait, watching the way he winces. And then he closes his eyes. And then he exhales.

Finally, he nods at me and lifts a hand to his guards.

They stand down.

Henry's in front of us now. His gaze darts to Dare before he dismisses him and focuses on me. My heart is pounding and for some reason, I just want to give Henry a hug. Is his grandmother okay? Did he use the Ru-Carsel money to pay for her surgery? What did the hospital say about her illness?

The truth is that I still care. It was so much easier to pretend I didn't from afar. To curse at him from a virtual screen. Dip into the lake of bitterness that seemed to flood me overnight and destroy every scrap of affection I had for him.

But now, seeing him in person, it's different.

He's a human being. Flawed. Frail. Forgiven.

Whoa. Do I forgive him?

Maybe not yet. Maybe not ever. Or maybe I already have.

I don't know.

My feelings are all jumbled like an impossible-to-solve Rubik's cube.

Henry breathes hard, his chest pumping. He's wearing a stained T-shirt under a Henley button-down. From what I can see of the grey shirt, it's

stained in sweat. How long has he been waiting out here to see me?

We stand there staring at each other for a few seconds until I break the stand-off. "What are you doing here, Henry?"

"You weren't answering my messages." His eyes slink to me and then away as if he can barely make himself look at my face. "I didn't know what else to do."

I wait until he gains the courage to look at me so I can sign, "If you're here to apologize, don't bother."

His head whips up and he advances desperately. "I wouldn't. I would never ask you for forgiveness, Yaya. I'm not that selfish."

Dare places a protective hand in front of me when Henry gets too close, but I push his arm down. *I'm okay. I don't need to stand behind you.*

As much as Dare likes to tease me, neither of us are mind readers. I don't expect Dare to see inside my head, but I'm grateful when he doesn't try to drag me away.

Not that he'll give me *too* much space.

He's right there, practically breathing down my neck and watching Henry like a hawk.

The security team is still on high alert too. Tension thickens the air and I wish we didn't have an audience. I can't think. Can't focus. There are too many distractions. Too many people, emotions, and conversations to keep track of.

"Please. Five minutes. Just give me five minutes," Henry begs.

I gesture for him to go ahead.

"Somewhere private." His eyes dart to Dare again and, this time, they narrow ever so slightly.

Dare puts a hand on my shoulder, a silent indication that he's not going anywhere.

"Whatever you want to explain, you can do it in front of him," I sign.

Nostrils flaring, Henry blows out a breath and dips his chin once.

I wait for him to explain himself.

He doesn't. Instead, his eyes fix on me and trace every inch of my face.

"Are you just going to stare at me?"

Henry jerks awake like a man rising from a long nap. "Sorry. I just... I missed you so much. It's been so long since I've seen your face."

Dare shuffles angrily.

I grab his hand and squeeze.

“What did you come here to tell me, Henry?”

“The truth.” He lifts his chin. “When I saw your interview with Sullivan that day,” Henry flashes a challenging look Dare’s way, “I knew something was off. I knew you’d never willingly date someone like him.”

He’s not wrong.

“I traced it back in my head. This chaos all started that night of the wedding. The night I trashed the wrong car. The night you ran into Sullivan for the first time. That’s the only reason he even spoke to you. That’s when things started to fall apart.”

Dare’s got his arms folded over his chest, standing off with Henry as if he’s waiting for any indication that I’m ready for my best friend to be escorted off the property.

Henry blinks rapidly, looking for some sign of encouragement from me. I don’t give him one. Did he think our friendship could be restored with a measly stab at Dare and a walk down memory lane?

“I know guys like Sullivan. The only language they speak is money. But with my gran’s situation... I couldn’t do anything at all. I felt helpless.”

The reminder of his grandmother is a stab to the heart.

“I wanted to help you, but I thought begging your sister for cash was too much. It had to be on my own terms.”

“So you took money from a trash company like Ru-Carpsel?” I sign. It ticks me off to hear his excuses. “To compete with a rich guy?”

“Of course not!”

“Why Ru-Carpsel, Henry? Even if you’d gone with another company, I wouldn’t have been so upset.”

“Your channel was growing, but it wasn’t at the place where we could leverage your followers for cash yet. You know that. We were so focused on building a brand and going the long route that we didn’t have anything of value. But Ru-Carpsel saw the potential in you. They offered the biggest paycheck.”

“That’s because no one wants to work with them. All they have to offer is bad products and a ruined reputation.”

“You’re right. I wasn’t thinking clearly,” Henry signs. “I was too desperate.”

“To do what?”

“Save you.”

“Save me?”

“I didn’t use the money for my grandmother’s surgery, Yaya. I didn’t spend it on a new car or a new house or anything like that.” He keeps his eyes on Dare. “I put it in a trust so I could pay him off and cancel your contract.”

Shock splits me in two. Did he just sign what I think he did?

I twist to face Dare. The wind ruffles his dark hair and makes his tweed jacket flap back and forth. Despite the movement of his clothes, his body is a statue. Stately. Rigid. His jaw is tight and his eyes are hard as granite.

Waiting until he fixes his attention on me, I lean my head slightly forward and jut my chin at Henry. *Is he telling the truth?*

Dare hesitates as if the last thing he wants is to admit anything. His eyes dart to me and back to Henry, weighing the cost. A true businessman.

Given how he’s acting, I know immediately that Henry is telling the truth.

Dare finally confirms it with a sharp nod.

So that’s it then. Henry didn’t take care of his grandmother with that money. He was doing it for me.

Well, that’s even worse.

Why would he ruin everything and not even get his grandmother the help she needed? It was easier to wrap my brain around his betrayal when I thought that someone we both loved was getting help. It didn’t excuse the treachery, but at least it wasn’t for nothing.

But now...

The more I think about it, the angrier I get.

“You...” I falter, my head spinning. “Save me? I never asked you to do that! I never asked you to be my hero, Henry. I just wanted you to be someone I could trust. Someone I could lean on. Just like when we were newbies at the agency and everyone thought we were diversity hires. I wanted you to be my best friend.”

He flinches with every sign. Anyone would think I was lashing him with a whip. Impaling him with poisoned darts. Ripping off his toenails.

I keep going even though I see he’s in turmoil.

“Why couldn’t you have been my best friend to the end?”

“Because I didn’t want to be!”

My heart sinks. *What?*

“I wanted more,” Henry adds, his eyes clouding in pain.

Dare’s hand tightens on my shoulder.

My pulse picks up speed.

My brain misfires.

The truth is written all over Henry's face, and I quickly glance away.

No, this can't be right.

I wish I was mistaken. Wish I didn't have the superpower I did. Wish I could turn a blind eye to it the way, it seems, I've been turning a blind eye for months.

My best friend is in love with me.

Henry gives me a look full of emotions. Raw. Vulnerable.

In the chaos of my melting brain, I pick up the sound of my mother's voice. I grew up hearing her, and it's almost like my brain can lock into her frequency. Instinctively, I turn to find her standing in the doorway, staring at everyone with a perplexed look. Her light brown eyes jump from Henry to me and then to Dare. Her hands remain fixed on the doorknob, but her gaze is screaming 'what's going on?'

I have no idea.

Panic is crowding out every other thought and I can't find my bearings. It feels like the ground just shifted from under me.

Talia appears next. She's waving to her uncle, beckoning him inside. From the way she's smiling, mom probably offered to make brownies. Talia is a chocolate addict and her favorite activity is baking with mom, although she despises the clean up afterward.

Mom points at Dare and arches an eyebrow in another silent question. *Is that your boyfriend?*

I hesitate to nod.

My heart is about to explode.

The chaos is too much.

I raise a hand to my throat and squeeze.

Henry is still looking at me earnestly, like his entire world is about to shatter if I don't answer.

How long has he felt this way? Since before his ex-girlfriend Lacey? Or just recently when I started dating Dare?

The history Henry and I share is now under a microscope, everything called into question.

Why didn't he tell me sooner? What would I have done if he had?

So many questions. So many lies.

“Please,” Henry signs, eyes collapsing in agony and desperation, “please. Can we go?”

Dare is behind me, upset. I don’t need to turn around to feel that. The energy coming off his body is thick, crowding me.

I swivel, equally flustered and confused. Dare is neither of those things. He’s looking at me calmly, confidently, as if he knows I’ll choose him. As if there’s no world that exists where we wouldn’t choose each other.

My hands tremble when I press them against his chest. The warmth of his skin beneath his shirt is calming. I close my eyes and take a breath.

He’s the man who made me feel cared for, protected, valued...

And heard.

Dare takes hold of my upper arms, ready to pull me into him. Ready to steer me away from Henry and firmly close this chapter of my life.

But I think of that moment when Henry and I first met, the day we promised to be best friends and take over the fashion world. All the nights in his apartment, receiving his encouragement and care after yet another designer passed on me. All the laughter we shared after small triumphs ballooned into tiny successes in our careers.

If he had feelings for me since the beginning, he kept it to himself. He’s never once made me feel uncomfortable, pressured or unsafe. In fact, I made it through those tough times being away from my family because *he* became my family.

“I’ll go with him,” I sign.

Dare’s chin plummets. Confusion enters his eyes like a storm in the desert. I feel the way his body recoils. It’s like I shot him.

The moment of hurt is blinked away. Like a robot with a memory wipe, Dare’s face goes blank. He says something to Talia that makes the little girl scrunch her nose. He says something to mom next and then he’s stalking away with his niece.

A tormented, twisted feeling climbs my chest. I reach out to Dare, but he’s already turned away from me.

A hand touches my arm. I jerk around.

Henry.

“This way,” he signs.

I remain frozen, my head swiveling toward Dare. The sight of his broad back inspires a long wave of regret. His disappointment is smothering me.

It feels like someone clawed my heart out of my chest and tacked it on a dartboard.

Mom waves to get my attention. "Where are you going?" she signs. "What's going on? Why did Talia leave without her suitcases?"

Rather than answer, I seek Dare out again, but he's gone. José is already speeding down the street and Dare's bodyguards are tailing him.

Mine is still here though.

She dips her chin.

I nod back, blinking away tears.

What have I done? What have I done?

Henry's shadow falls over me and the puff of his exhale is enough to lift my bangs.

"Thank you," Henry signs.

"What am I doing?" I sign brokenly.

"You're choosing yourself," Henry signs. "You showed him that he doesn't control you, that with all his money and power, you can still make your own decisions. You did the right thing."

My chest rises and falls. I'm gasping for air.

And then mom is there.

She's grabbing my face in her hands and rubbing my cheeks. Her smell of jasmine and chamomile tea is a life raft in the storm. I cling to her for all I'm worth.

When I've got myself back under control, she meets my eyes. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to," mom says.

It doesn't matter that she's giving me permission to break down.

I can't. I won't.

It's scary that the mere thought of losing Dare made my mind crack like a clay jar. What kind of sick, twisted addiction is this?

Later. I'll deal with Dare later.

I already promised Henry. Since I started down this road, I might as well see this conversation through.

"I'm okay," I sign.

Henry greets mom with a wave.

She frowns at him.

I let go of my mother's hand and follow Henry to the car. As we take off, I keep telling myself that Dare is overreacting. He'll understand that

I'm leaving with Henry for the sake of our friendship. Henry's been with me through so much. I owe him at least a conversation.

But with every mile I go in the opposite direction, it all feels like a giant mistake.

* * *

"He was going to meet your parents. Is it that serious?" Henry signs.

We're sitting in a familiar coffee shop. The one we visited after our last photoshoot in the Neon Room. I still remember how excited I'd been to shoot in that location. I remember the smell of drying paint, the scent of damp earth and some not-so-legal substances. I remember the odd feeling I got when Henry handed me that pair of shades and it fell apart in my hands.

It feels like it happened years ago and yesterday at the same time.

Henry's in the seat across from me. We've taken up our usual positions around a booth that's directly next to the window, letting in lots of late evening sunlight.

His ponytail is dangling over one shoulder. He seems a lot more relaxed. Eyes crinkling. A half smile on his face. The shadows under his eyes have magically disappeared.

"I just..." He swallows hard as he signs, "I didn't think you'd introduce your parents to someone who's paying you to date him."

My shoulders hike all the way to my ears.

Henry notices he's touched a nerve because he quickly backtracks. "I know you did it to protect me. I'm not judging you for faking things with him. I'm just sorry it's become such a mess. And I promise you, Yaya, that from now on I'm going to be honest with you. All this happened because I kept denying that I have real feelings for you."

"Henry, wait. I don't—"

I see movement in the corner of my vision. Someone's approaching, but she's not dressed like a waitress and, from the smile on her face, she recognizes one of us. The intruder bounces up to our booth, her happy gait a sharp contrast to the awkwardness around the table.

She seems familiar. Something about her niggles my memory, but for the life of me I can't place her.

Not until Henry signs, "June?"

I snap my fingers in recognition. She's the girl who was having trouble giving her order a while back.

"It's so good to see you," June signs. "I've been wanting to meet you again."

I faintly remember pushing her and Henry together, but her eyes are on me, not Henry. Her warm smile feels like it's for me too. I squirm, wondering if I'd made *that* good of a first impression.

"You said we would all hang out, but we never did," June signs. "So I've been coming here regularly hoping we could run into each other again."

I have no idea what to reply to that.

"Can you excuse us?" Henry signs. He does not look amused. "We're kind of busy."

Her smile drips away.

I shoot Henry a scolding look. Things are tense between us, but that's no reason to take it out on someone as sweet as June.

"Why are you being rude?" I sign.

"Ask her." Henry points up.

June licks her lips, guilt stamped over her face.

"What does he mean, June?"

Her shoulders cave in. "I..." She hesitates, "that time at the coffee shop wasn't the first time we'd met."

I squint, trying to understand.

"You did a photoshoot at the Sun-Kissed Towers Mall around last year. I was on the crew working the shoot. My boss was being a total jerk and I was running all over the place. I dropped my clipboard full of prints and you were the only one who stopped to help me pick it up."

My lips tense because I really don't remember that.

"It's okay if you don't remember," June signs. "But I never forgot. I looked you up and I've been your fan ever since."

The moment she signs 'fan', a lightbulb goes off in my head.

"*Junebug84?*" I finger spell.

She nods enthusiastically. "That was me! I was so upset when I saw what people were saying about you. You're so kind and talented. I knew you'd never work with Ru-Carpsel on purpose."

Henry rolls his eyes.

"What happened between you two?" I point between him and June.

“Someone named *Junebug84* came after me online and kept harassing me,” Henry signs. “It was her.”

“I knew the Ru-Carpsel deal had to be your fault.” June turns accusing eyes on him. “You were with her that day of the photoshoot. I saw you giving her those sunglasses.”

She saw?

Another lightbulb.

“June, were you the one following us that day?”

Heat blooms in her cheeks. Fingers hooking around the loop of her jeans, she nods again.

I slump back in massive shock. After the photoshoot, Henry insisted someone was following us. At the time, we thought it was Dare. I even accused him when we were posing for our magazine spread.

I had no idea I had a stalker fan.

“I’m not a stalker,” June signs, as if she can see my thoughts.

“You followed me everywhere without my permission.”

She cringes. “Okay. I may have been stalking *a little*. But it was only that day.”

“You said you came here to this café often hoping to see me,” I point out.

“Well, yes.” She tilts her head to the side and signs sheepishly. “But I’m not someone who wants to invade your privacy or anything like that. Apart from following you online, I haven’t done anything else. I swear. I’m just someone rooting for you in the background. Well, rooting for you and Richard Sullivan.”

Something sharp pierces me at the mention of Dare’s name.

“You two are couple goals.” June grins so hard her cheeks might burst.

“I wouldn’t say they’re couple goals,” Henry signs, his eyebrows forming a deep V.

“He bought Ru-Carpsel just to protect her.” June rocks back on her heels. “He sued everyone who was badmouthing her online and got them to take down their comments. Honestly, he’s a bigger stalker fan than I could ever be.”

I swallow and stiffen.

Henry glances at me and probably sees something on my face that he doesn’t like. He clamors to his feet and signs, “You shouldn’t have been following her even for a day. You’re lucky Yaya doesn’t have you arrested.”

Flustered, June blinks at me. "I'm sorry. He's right. I shouldn't have done that."

"It's okay." I give her a soft smile. "Thank you for defending me when no one else did. It gave me a lot of strength seeing your positive comments online."

Her smile slowly regains its shine as if it was an inflatable balloon that got a fresh pump of air.

"But," I add, "following me in person is not okay. The next time you want to hang out," I wave my phone, "let's set it up. The non-creepy way."

Her eyes fill with hope. "Really?"

"Really. Next time, okay?"

She reads between the lines and backs away, waving and signing goodbye.

"You shouldn't entertain sick-os like her," Henry warns.

I take a sip of my latte. "She's harmless."

"You're too trusting. That's exactly how you got caught by a wolf like Sullivan. He saw a crack in your armor, and he went in for the kill."

"What exactly did he kill?"

"Your standards. Obviously. There's a reason you said you'd never date a hearing person. He didn't listen. He practically forced himself on you."

"That's not how it happened."

"Even worse, he has you thinking this was all your idea." Henry shakes his head. "You have no clue how much I've been beating myself up. If I could go back in time, I'd stop myself from losing my temper the night of the wedding. I'd stop all this from happening."

"Sadly, time machines haven't been invented yet," I sign. Deep inside, my stomach is in knots, and I can't quite look at Henry.

Not because he's right.

It's because I'm annoyed about the way he's badmouthing Dare.

"If we can't get a time machine, then how about we make our own?" He leans forward. Eyes eager. Smile affectionate. "Can't we forget everything that's happened and start over?"

"That's impossible."

"The past is the past. But what matters is the future. I can take you there, Yaya. To the future you always dreamed of. The one where you're married to someone who truly understands you in every way."

I wince, my heart tightening.

“You and I are best friends. I know everything about you and you know everything about me. I’m sure I can make you happy in a way that he can’t.”

My nails dig into the grout of the table.

Henry slides something over.

My eyes bug when I recognize the logo on the tickets. Snatching them up so fast the wind almost knocks Henry out of his seat, I gasp.

Beethoven’s Nightmare.

Gaze zooming to Henry, I sign with one hand. “How did you get these?”

“I pulled every favor I could,” he signs, his grin mirroring my own. “And this.” He slides his phone over to show me a picture of his grandmother’s van. It’s a shot of speakers in the door. When I look up again, he signs, “These speakers are guaranteed to never blow no matter how hard you turn up the bass. If they do, the guys at the shop have a three year warranty. They cover everything.”

“They’ll wish they never gave you a warranty,” I sign, laughing.

Shyly, he strokes the side of his cup and then lifts both hands to sign, “I missed that smile.”

My grin immediately disappears. “This is all really great, Henry.” I shove the phone back in his direction. “But you shouldn’t have bought those tickets.”

“I needed to. I had to.”

“No, you—”

“I love you, Yaya.”

I flinch.

“It’s true. I do.”

“How do you know the love you feel is romantic?”

“Because when I saw you with Sullivan, I wanted to puke and then I wanted to punch something.”

I frown. “A few months ago, you were crying over your ex-girlfriend.”

“That’s because I didn’t realize my feelings until it was too late. You’ve always been by my side, and it wasn’t until you were getting serious about someone else that I woke up and saw the truth.”

It’s hard to look Henry in the eyes when he’s watching me so desperately. I wish I could run away and not touch this topic at all, pretend it never happened.

I lick my lips instead, choosing my next words carefully. “I grew up in a family that always had my back. I’ve never doubted that for a single second. Leaving them to pursue modeling was the hardest decision I’ve ever made. You know that.”

He nods slowly.

“I’ve always been the minority in the room. Always. And it’s a really lonely and exhausting position to be in, so when I met you and we clicked so well, it felt like I was building myself a new family.”

“I felt that way too. Yaya, you’re my family. I can’t exist in a world where you’re not beside me.”

Henry places his hand on mine and I slide my fingers out from under his, shaking my head slightly.

“No, Henry. You don’t understand. You’re family... like a brother.”

His eyebrows crease and he repeats the sign in disbelief. “Brother?”

“I’ve never had romantic feelings for you. And I can’t pretend to understand how you feel, but I don’t really think you have those feelings for me either.”

Henry’s face goes pale and he slowly pulls his hands back to hide them under the table.

“I’m sorry,” I sign.

Neither of us move for a few seconds.

“Then why did you come with me?” His signs get bigger, more agitated. “Why did you walk off with me if you don’t care for me too?”

“I didn’t want to embarrass you. You’re my friend, my brother. Because of our history, I wanted to sit with you and clarify things. You deserve that much, even after everything.”

Henry blinks rapidly.

“I don’t know how it happened. I... I’m still sitting here wracking my brain trying to figure out *when* it happened—”

Henry starts shaking his head as if he already knows where I’m going.

“But I fell in love with Dare.” Signing it feels right. “And I didn’t figure that out until today when I saw him leaving.”

“No.”

“You want to know why I don’t hate you, Henry? It’s because of him. He’s made me so happy, so satisfied, made me feel so perfectly loved and protected, that hating you would take away from loving him. And I’d rather spend all my time and energy loving him back than doing anything else.”

Henry rakes his fingers down the side of his neck in agitation. “He’s going to hurt you, Yaya. And I’m not just saying that because I’ve got skin in the game. We both know hearing people can’t be trusted. Especially not ones as powerful as him. He’s not a part of our community. He will *never* understand what it’s like to be deaf. No matter how much you explain. No matter how well he learns ASL. You’ll find yourself in a situation where you need someone who gets it and he won’t be able to help. He might even make it worse.”

It’s strange. I’ve thought those same thoughts myself. A hundred times over, but it doesn’t scare me anymore.

“I still love him,” I sign, my heart racing.

Henry balks. “I’m not talking about love, Yaya. I’m talking about trust. What happens when some moron at a hospital or a law office or a cop needs your authorization over the phone and you’ve explained a million times that you’re deaf, but they still won’t give you an accessible way to get information? Will he get that frustration? Will he get that anger you feel?”

“No, he won’t.”

“Exactly. Exactly.” Henry signs so fast it’s like watching a movie on fast-forward. “And what if you have deaf kids and he wants to force them into speaking. What then? You think he’ll understand then?”

“I don’t know.”

“And still?” Henry looks exasperated.

“You’re right. You’re right about everything. But...” I breath hard. “I’m more scared of being without him than facing a world filled with difficulties.”

An intrinsic rightness underlines my confession, eclipsing the fear that’s always paired with doing something as risky as falling in love.

“I never believed I could love a hearing person. Never. You know that better than anyone. But I love him. I love him so much.”

Henry tilts his chin up and stands coldly. “Then you shouldn’t have left with me.”

I watch as he stomps out the door.

A tear slips free—not because Henry left upset, but because I recall the shattered look in Dare’s expression earlier.

My throat chokes up and I clutch my chest, bowling over.

Henry’s right.

I left with the wrong man.

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CHAPTER 19

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snitches get stitches

DARE

Talia is not happy about missing a chance to have brownies, and I'm not in the best of moods either, so the both of us are sulking when we visit Lucy.

My sister stares hard at me and I really wish I didn't promise Talia that we'd say hi to her mother the minute I got back. To be fair, when I made that offer, I didn't think my girlfriend would be waltzing off with her male best friend who happens to be in love with her.

But no one can foresee the future.

"Okay, someone better start explaining," Lucy says. "Because I didn't go cold turkey and endure that awful, know-it-all therapist with the giant mole telling me all the ways I went wrong in life so I could earn a visit from the Grim Reaper and his child assistant."

Talia huffs, folds her arms over her chest and gives me her back. If I were in a better mood, I'd find it funny that my niece seems more irked now than she did when I was coming up with her punishment for the infraction at school.

Didn't take long for her to build a loyalty to the Williams family. Guess there's something about us Sullivans that make us greedy for Yaya and her folks.

"Rich-urd," Lucy puts emphasis on the last half of my name, "start talking."

"I have nothing to say."

“Uncle Dare got into a fight with Yaya and now he’s mad at everyone,” Talia tattles.

I glare at her and sign, “Snitches get stitches.”

Her mouth drops open and she turns to Lucy. “Mom, Uncle Dare just said snitches get stitches!”

Lucy gasps.

I let out a disbelieving cough. “Yaya taught you that?”

“Niko did,” my niece says proudly.

“Dare don’t threaten my daughter and you,” Lucy stabs a finger at Talia, “since when did you know sign language?”

Talia shrugs.

Lucy wiggles her pointer finger in my direction. “And what’s this about you and Yaya fighting?”

“We didn’t fight.”

“Yes you did,” Talia taunts. “Uncle Dare’s miserable and now he wants everyone to be miserable!”

“Cut it out,” I sign.

Talia sticks her tongue out at me and uses one of the ‘lazy signs’ Yaya taught her. I don’t recognize it, but her body language tells me everything I need to know.

“Hey,” Lucy snaps her fingers, “use words I can understand.”

Talia slumps in her seat.

I stare frigidly at the window. Night has fallen and the moon is bright in the sky. Stars twinkle overhead. If things had gone to plan, Yaya and I would be heading out on my yacht, enjoying that night view from the lake. I’d have the bass speakers so loud the fish would probably write complaint letters. I’d be pouring her wine and holding her close and kissing her until she couldn’t breathe.

Just thinking about it makes it feel like someone’s cracking each of my ribs individually.

Snap. Snap. Snap.

Lucy’s annoyed expression flickers away, replaced by concern. “Dare, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

My sister grunts and motions to her daughter. “Talia, sweetie. Can you do mommy a favor and watch TV in the other room? And turn the volume up really high, okay?”

"I don't want to watch TV. I want to play on my tablet."

"How about I call the kitchen and ask them to make you brownies?"

"They won't taste like the ones I want."

"You don't know that. What if they taste better?"

Talia considers it. Finally, she gives in. "I'll take that deal."

"That's my girl." Lucy rubs Talia's head as the little girl passes in front of her and disappears behind a door.

Once we're alone, my sister does a sharp turn. "Did you and Yaya break up?"

"No." I recall the way Yaya chose Henry without hesitation. "Maybe? I don't know." I run my hands over my face. "It's complicated."

My sister scrunches her nose. "You're not going to start crying, are you?"

"Very funny."

"It is pretty funny."

I clamor to my feet and walk wordlessly to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To tell the director your treatment should be longer than three months."

Lucy's footsteps thud behind me. She throws herself in front of the door like a soldier on a grenade. "Don't you dare." Her eyes widen in terror. "In three days, I'm free of this place."

"Three days?"

"They're letting me out early." She wiggles her eyebrows.

"Did you pay them off?"

"How could I when you froze my card?" From the way she scowls, I'll never be forgiven for that.

"So this is legit?"

"I told you I've been going to therapy."

I smile. "That's good, sis."

"I'm determined to *not* fall off the wagon this time. I never want to end up back here again. Going without alcohol is one thing, but going without my phone for this long? I thought I'd die."

"Glad you didn't." I return to the couch.

Lucy sits on the edge of the sofa and crosses her legs. Letting the left one dangle back and forth, she sings, "So back to you and your breakup..."

"Shouldn't you be asking how Talia's been doing lately?"

“The Williams came out clean in my background check, and she said she had a great time—minus the chores and the getting up early. Now, tell me about Yaya. The relationship drama in this place is so boring. Everyone signed a prenup. The amateurs.” She rolls her eyes. “I need some good gossip.”

“Glad my life is entertaining to you,” I say dryly.

“Come on, Dare. You have to know how crazy your situation is.” She leaks a mischievous smile. “It’s not every day you fall in love with your fake girlfriend.”

A shock of surprise slaps me clean across the face and I sit up straighter. “What?”

“You think I didn’t know?” Lucy preens. “‘I met her online’.” She does a bad impression of my voice and laughs. “You? You, the most suspicious guy on the planet. The guy who doubles and triple checks every contract even after his lawyers have already approved it, blindly fell in love with a girl you met online? For real?”

“Since when did you know?”

“That you didn’t meet her online or that you hired her to be your girlfriend?”

I squirm. “Both.”

“Since the beginning.”

“But how? I thought Yaya passed your test. She told you something about me that only a girlfriend would know.”

“And that *did* manage to confuse me for a bit,” Lucy says. “How did she know that? Mom hid all those pictures of you in your emo outfits because you were going around burning them.”

“To hide the evidence from *you*. I knew you’d torture me with them.”

“Oh, 100%.” She checks her nails and grimaces. “I’d kill for a mani pedi, right now.”

“Luce, focus.”

“Right. What was I saying again? Oh, you and Yaya being fake.”

I frown. Considering that my sister could see right through us, was I kidding myself all this time? Has it always been a ruse for Yaya, even when it got more serious for me? Was this her plan all along? To bide her time until she could run off and be with Henry?

My shoulders cave and I stare at the rug. Persian, from the looks of it. Must have cost a fortune.

“You’re likely feeling a little stupid.” She chuckles. “But love always makes you stupid. That’s why you have to be careful who you fall in love with. Not everyone should be engaged with when you’re only functioning on half your brain cells.”

Lucy places a gentle hand on my shoulder, showing a rare glimpse of the older sister who used to look out for me, rather than the ditzy sister who’s always getting into trouble.

“I don’t think you were wrong to choose her, Dare. The chemistry between you two? It’s not something you can fake.”

“You saw the interview?”

“I’m talking about the day you introduced her. You were looking out for her, taking care of her, and she was watching you, curious and amazed. I could tell.” Lucy smiles. “That’s why I didn’t say anything even after I confirmed you were faking it. You finally had someone who made you stop hustling and grinding. You finally had someone who made you smile.”

“I didn’t have her,” I mumble. “I had a contract.”

“A contract?” Lucy shrugs. “What’s wrong with that? Marriage is a contract, no?” Suddenly, she gasps. “Don’t tell me you fought because of that?”

“No, it was—”

“It doesn’t matter.” She waves her hand. “I know just the way to any girl’s heart. Here’s what you should do. You buy her the biggest ring you can find. Something so heavy she won’t be able to lift her hands.”

That’s not helpful when she uses those hands to sign.

“And then you buy her a building.” She rubs her chin. “Something close to downtown. Then you put her name on the front of it and ask her to be your girlfriend for real.”

“A building?”

“Is that too much?” Lucy paces in front of me. “How about an all-expenses paid shopping spree in Paris then?”

“I don’t think—”

“A private island in Morocco? The one mom took dad to after he retired?”

“Money isn’t going to fix this,” I tell her.

“Money fixes everything.”

Not with Yaya.

Controlling her with a contract, with money, it's what started this mess. My threats were hanging over her head, a shadow staining our entire relationship, towering over every interaction. And now it's a monster that's raging out of control.

My way of pursuing her removed her ability to choose right from the start. And without that choice, without that clear and undisputable beginning, we have no foundation.

I want to believe her feelings for me are genuine, but I'm not dumb enough to think they always were. Was she just playing along for the contract?

Sure.

But it turned into more. For both of us.

The question is... is what we have enough to compete with what Henry, her best friend, the exact type of man she wants, can offer?

I thought I knew all the answers, but after seeing her walk away with Henry I realized something startling. Those two might have a bond that I can't sever, a connection money can't compete with.

While Yaya was trying to save Henry, he was trying to save her too.

And maybe I was the fool for thinking I could come between that.

* * *

With my personal life in turmoil, I happily leave Talia with her mother for the night and meet Mosely at the office.

He's sleeping when I walk in and I tiptoe past his desk. Unfortunately, he has the ears of a hawk and snaps to attention.

"I'm up," he blurts.

"There's a little something on your cheek." I scratch at the corner of my lip to indicate it.

Mosely swipes and an entire document goes fluttering.

His lips stretch into a thin line. "Thanks." I walk into my office and he follows me, his footsteps thudding. "Did Yaya not enjoy the yacht?"

"I didn't take her," I grumble, grabbing a folder.

"Perhaps the live percussion band was a bit much. I did warn you that having real instruments on a boat is reminiscent of that scene in *The Titanic* —"

“Let’s focus on work, Mosely.” My words escape cutting, sharp. I instantly regret my tone and sigh. “Please.”

He nods slowly, his eyes assessing.

“Where are we on Carmichael?”

We discuss our plan to get rid of the most troublesome member of the board.

“We have to do this quietly,” Mosely reminds me. “If Carmichael makes a stink in the public, it won’t reflect well on you.”

I nod absently and check my phone.

Still no message from Yaya.

That’s confirmation enough, isn’t it? She definitely spent the night with Henry.

My heart pains me, but I push that feeling deep down.

Work. That’s the only thing I can wrap my head around right now.

“He’s going to attack the Ru-Carpsel takeover first. It’s our most tenuous contract and the perfect place to send an arrow. We need to re-brand fast. What did the PR team suggest?”

Mosely yawns as he says, “They loved your idea of having a fashion show. We’re contacting new designers as we speak. The venue will be the easiest to sort out since we can use one of the company buildings. In terms of models, we’ve already placed Ms. Williams as the face of all our advertising campaigns and the casting crew will work around her.”

My eyebrows jump. “How did you know I asked Yaya to model in the fashion show?”

“We didn’t. The team took your, ahem, criticism to heart. They’re aware this isn’t just a rebrand for the company but for Miss Williams as well.”

I rub the back of my neck. Will Yaya *want* to participate in this fashion show now that she’s run off with Henry? Something tells me she would. The way she lit up when she talked about missing modeling couldn’t be faked.

But will *I* want to work with Yaya if she’s with someone else?

My eyes slide to my blank cellphone again.

Still no new messages.

Mosely slides something across the desk. “Here’s a mock flyer.”

My pulse stops for a full second when I see a stunning picture of Yaya. She’s in a power pose, long, slender legs on display and eyes piercing

through the camera. A mock date and time for the show is on display. The graphic design team did an impeccable job.

Mosely's phone rings and I'm left alone with the flyer while he steps out to answer the call.

In the silence, I drape my fingers over Yaya's face. "Why do you make loving you so difficult? How much longer do I keep fighting?"

Mosely huffs back into the room. "Sorry, sir."

I wrench away from the photo before Mosely thinks I've gone crazy. But my assistant isn't looking at me. He's wringing his hands and staring off to the side.

"Something wrong?" I ask, noticing the extra wrinkles above his eyebrows.

"Everything's fine."

I rise steadily to my feet and look him over. "Mosely, do you know that sign language isn't just about hand movements?" His mouth bunches into a confused pucker, but I keep walking toward him. "It's also about body language. Your expressions. The ticks of your face. It's all part of the language."

His 'everything is okay' smile dissolves.

I sling an arm across his shoulders. "You have a woman, don't you?"

He gapes. "What?"

"Good for you, man."

Dad was always trying to set Mosely up with someone, but he kept refusing. Said his late wife was his soulmate and he wasn't interested in anyone else. "Who is she? Someone you met on our business trip?"

"No, sir." He coughs. "It's not a woman."

"Oh. Is it a—"

"It's a cat."

"A cat?" My eyebrows fly all the way up. "You have a cat?"

"It's more like the cat has me." He cracks a smile. "I found it slinking around my garden. It was the night before our trip. Since we didn't have time to sort things out, I left it with a neighbor, but she's complaining that the cat keeps hissing at her."

"Huh."

"It's not an urgent issue." Mosely shakes his head. "Work is more important."

“For me,” I argue. “Not for you. You should head home. It’s been a long day.”

“What about you?”

“I still have some work to finish up.”

Translation: if I go home, I’ll miss Yaya to the point of physical agony. My thoughts will drive me crazy either way, so I’d rather be productive.

“You’re aware of the time, sir?”

I cringe when I check my watch. “I am. I should have sent you home a long time ago.”

Mosely has been up and working for as long as I have. And while my tumultuous emotions and giant worries can power me through another week without sleep, he’s a different story.

“Go.”

“I can’t. We still have to go over Cullen Tech’s,” the rest of his words disappear on a yawn, “latest data pull.”

“Go. Home.” I turn him around and give him a little shove out the door.

He doesn’t resist, thankfully.

Through my window, I see Mosely rummaging around his desk. I remember something and jog to my doorway. “Mosely?”

He turns with his book bag already slung over his shoulder.

“What’s the cat’s name?”

My assistant gives me a blank look. “Cat.”

Should have expected nothing less. “You tell Cat I said goodnight.”

His lips twitch and he disappears.

I’m alone.

With my work.

And my phone.

Where there are no messages from Yaya.

Maybe I should get a cat too.

* * *

Yaya: Can we talk?

My phone is the first thing I reach for when I crack my eyes open.

My brain takes a second to register Yaya's message but, when it does, my heart lodges in my ribs. I shoot out of my chair like a rocket. Something flutters close to my eyes. Two sticky notes stuck on either cheek. I wrench them off and stare at the phone screen.

All last night, I was hoping that Yaya would text to say that she sent Henry away and she's decided she wants to spend the rest of her life with me.

I love you, Dare. That's the sign I want her hands to form.

I. Love. You.

But those joyous words are rarely predicated by the term 'can we talk'. In fact, 'can we talk' is just a more polite version of 'we need to talk', which is the official pre-break up text. It's practically the kiss of death to any relationship.

I need to respond, but my eyes feel like sandpaper and my head is pounding. It reminds me of that one time I went overboard at a frat party. I was still in control of my faculties, but all my senses were dulled. Nothing felt important or meaningful. I could have jumped off a roof just for the hell of it.

I know if I answer in this exhausted state, I'll beg Yaya to leave Henry and stay with me in any way I can. I'd probably dangle every cent in my bank account, not leaving out any of the many, *many* zeroes. I'd buy her agency and force her to work with me via an iron-clad modeling contract. I'd buy a castle and lock her in there like the wicked witch and Rapunzel.

Even my thoughts are jumping off the deep end.

Coffee. Yup.

I make myself a cup and sip the hot brew. At this point, I'm running on java and fumes. I bet if someone were to cut me open, black sludge would fall out of my veins.

Every part of me aches.

How many hours has it been since Yaya left with Henry? I haven't felt like a human being since that moment.

After brewing a second cup, I return to my table and pick up my cell phone. The coffee makes my hands jittery. At this point, I'm considering checking *myself* into the room next to my sister.

Hi, I'm Dare Sullivan. My addiction is coffee and Yaya Williams.

I don't think that counts as a dangerous addiction, but I bet they'd exchange my money for a strait jacket anyway.

After three deep breaths, I'm ready to answer Yaya. We arrange a time and place, and it's all quite stilted. Nothing like our usual texts where we're cracking jokes, flirting and firing out light-hearted banter.

I used to be a 'call only, don't text' guy. Now that Yaya's being so brusque over text, I realize how wrong I was. It wasn't the mode of communication that was important to me. It was the person.

With Yaya, we can communicate over text or video calls or via carrier pigeon. Doesn't matter. I crave talking to her.

I really am addicted.

I'm grateful when Mosely arrives in the office for a new workday and catches me moping over my phone in the same clothes I was in last night. He flips a switch all the way past 'concerned executive assistant' into 'pushy family friend'. I'm getting dragged out of my office chair and separated from my phone. The next thing I know, my car is downstairs and Mosely's driving me to my condo.

He whips an arm to the bathroom with a stiff finger that would make my dad proud.

I obey on autopilot, showering, shaving, and turning back into a decently-dressed and well-groomed human being.

Mosely stands and approaches me when I walk out. Resolutely, he fiddles with the buttons at my cuffs. He does the best thing in the world—acts like he didn't just rescue me from a raging pity party and dives right back into business.

"Cullen would like a meeting. He's asking when you're free."

A line Talia likes to say erupts in my head. *How about neh-to-da-ver?* Yaya has rendered me absolutely useless and I need to throw myself back into spreadsheets, contracts, and summaries to numb the pain. Talking to Cullen—to anyone, really—will take more energy than I have.

"I told him you're free now," Mosely says.

"I guess I'm free now," I agree.

Back in the car, my assistant doesn't ask me why he walked in to work this morning to see me looking like something scraped off the floor. We don't talk about Yaya or anything other than our plans for the next quarter.

I make a mental note to give this man a pay raise.

Mosely slows the car in the hospital parking lot and I peer through the window. "Why are we here? Isn't Cullen coming to the office?"

"Not possible, sir."

“Did something happen last night? Did he get worse?”

“He said it wasn’t anything to be concerned about, but he asked if you could meet him here.”

Nothing to be concerned about? Generally, people don’t have business meetings in a hospital unless things are dire.

I’m worried when I knock on the sliding room door. I had Cullen upgraded to a VIP room so he could work in peace and not disturb the other patients. He was spending all night on his computer even after multiple complaints. I don’t think Cullen is ill-intended, but whatever screws are supposed to keep his social filter in place are kind of loose.

I stalk into the hospital room on high alert and find Cullen hooked up to IV drips and giant monitors. The psycho blandly tosses a greeting at me before diving into a monotone explanation of the data leak solution he came up with.

I lift a hand to stop him. “Who said you could take off your oxygen mask?” I point to the contraption that’s leaning on the edge of the bed like a forgotten toy.

“Oh that?”

“Oh that?” I mock. “Mosely.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Get the nurse. And tell them they might have to strap Mr. Cullen’s hands down while he’s receiving treatment.”

Cullen gives me the stink eye.

I return it. I never had a little brother, but this guy is so clueless I can’t help but think of him as one.

Mosely leaves to find a nurse and I march toward the bed.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” I snap.

“If I wanted death, I would have worked on the data leak at home rather than coming here.” He gives me a blank stare.

“Life isn’t a game, kid. You should be focused on getting better. That’s the most important thing.”

“Not in my books. I have two equally important things to do.”

“Two important...” I let out a disbelieving laugh. “What’s more important than your health?”

“This project.”

His words trigger something in me. Maybe it’s my situation with Yaya. Maybe it’s my own turmoil projecting on him.

But I snap.

“You can’t have two. You have to choose one.”

He considers it. “Then I choose the project.”

“Why?” I ask, horrified.

“Because medicine will always be there, but this project won’t.”

My vision turns red. “The medicine shouldn’t be the only one fighting. It’s doing everything it can. *Everything*. You have to be in it too, dammit!”

Face totally void of expression, Cullen stares at me. “Why are you yelling?”

Yeah, why *am* I yelling? “Because this is important.”

He blinks slowly. “I don’t think we know each other that well for you to be upset.”

Dammit, he’s right.

And annoying.

“Most people wouldn’t point that out,” I say in a more normal tone.

He bobs his head as if he can’t refute that statement.

The nurse returns and I back away, watching numbly as she scolds Cullen who, from her words, is ‘the worst patient ever’ and proceeds to return his oxygen mask where it belongs. She then shoos us away, claiming her patient needs rest.

I leave Cullen with his laptop because I get the feeling that wrenching the device away from him would be akin to cutting off a limb.

Given my outburst earlier, I’m clearly in no state to work, so I head straight to my meeting point with Yaya. I’m a little over an hour early.

“Are you just going to wait here?” Mosely asks as the vehicle idles.

I sigh heavily. “I need to think.”

He climbs out of the car and returns with a bagel and a coffee. “You should eat something.”

His phone rings.

“It’s the PR team,” Mosely tells me after a one-sided ‘yeah, uh-huh’ conversation. He slants the phone a worried look then gives me one that’s twice as concerned. It’s like he can’t decide between saving the company or saving me.

I make the decision for him. “Do what we discussed last night. You can bring me up to speed later.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

Having a breakup conversation with the woman I love? “I’m going to be fine.”

Translation: I’m going to be a mess and I don’t want witnesses.

He nods and starts to open his door.

“Mosely.”

He stops.

“Do you still keep a copy of the company’s most important files in your briefcase?” It was a habit he had when he was working with dad.

“Of course. You never know when you’ll need to prove ownership of something.”

Prove ownership. I almost laugh.

In this case, ‘ownership’ never belonged to me. And even if it did, it’s changing hands now.

“I need you to give me something.”

“What?”

I reach out. “Yaya’s contract.”

* * *

She’s early.

The car drives up and José rushes around to open her door for her. She signs a ‘thank you’ and he dips his head.

She swings around, brown skin glowing from the inside out. She’s wearing a black dress that clings to her frame. Perfect for a funeral. My happiness in a casket. The dress is short, stopping right at mid-thigh, and it shows off every inch of her glorious legs. She probably wore that to taunt me with a taste of what I can’t have.

The sidewalk becomes a catwalk as she saunters toward the café. I feel the same pull as the night I first saw her. I didn’t care that she was a stranger, that she seemed young...

No, that’s a lie. I cared. I just didn’t let either fact stop me.

She takes a seat by the window. At first, I thought it was because she liked the sunshine. Now I know it’s because she can read lips better in the light.

Those dark eyes scan the street and then drop to her phone. A second later, I get a text.

Yaya: I'm here.

The thought of driving off and not having this conversation swirls in my mind, but I force myself to leave the car and walk up to the cafe.

Yaya spots me when I'm near the window and her eyes light up. She gives me a hungry, head-to-toe look and, for a moment, it feels like nothing's wrong. Like yesterday didn't happen. Like Henry isn't even a thing.

But when I walk inside the café, her face is somber and her hands are folded in front of her, heavy on the table. That's not normal. Yaya rarely puts her hands together. They're always loose. Always ready to sign a joke or a greeting paired with a perfect, sunshine smile.

I slide into the booth across from her, drinking in her face. The waitress arrives to ask for my order and I don't even know what I tell her. Must be something cohesive because she walks off to fulfill it.

Neither one of us starts the conversation.

A second turns into two.

My heart is pounding like I'm about to jump out of a plane. *Ridiculous.*

A few days ago, I was negotiating with the highest-ranking politicians in a foreign country and didn't break a sweat, but now I'm shaking in my boots before the only woman who can destroy me.

I start signing first. "You look good."

"Thank you."

Another round of awkward silence.

Why didn't you text me?

I waited for you. Like an idiot.

Forget Henry. Come to me. I'll give you everything you could ever dream of.

But I don't say any of those words. My brain is crowded with my sister's advice of 'give her money', Athena's advice of 'give her room' and Cullen's obvious disregard for the *safe* option. 'Medicine will fight'. No. The medicine won't always fight. Life isn't always that fucking kind.

"So... yesterday," Yaya signs, "with Henry, I know how that looked, but I had to go with him."

"There's no need to explain," I sign.

She stops and assesses me.

"This was a temporary arrangement anyway and you are free to speak to whomever you want to."

Her eyes widen a bit. “A temporary arrangement. What does that mean?”

I hesitate. Those pretty honey-brown eyes are looking at me like she doesn’t recognize me. Familiar wrinkles appear between her eyebrows. She’s annoyed. By what? That I’m the one calling it off instead of her?

It’s over.

I’m not going to play second fiddle to anyone, no matter how much I love Yaya. Why should I keep fighting when every step has been met with resistance?

She’s with Henry now. I’m sure he’s wasting no time laying out his case for why she should choose him instead of me. It wouldn’t be hard. He’s everything Yaya wants—someone who knows her in and out, someone who’s deaf and can understand the world in the way she does.

I had to fight and claw my way into her heart. I thought I made it, limping and bleeding, over the finish line.

But Henry?

One hop and a skip and he’s already there.

Should I stay in this battle when the stakes are rigged against me?

It’s not in my DNA to quit when I want something, but I also believe that too many doors closing means it’s not meant to be.

And maybe that’s the truth I haven’t been able to accept with Yaya.

Maybe I wasn’t meant for love. Maybe all I can do is work and build my father’s legacy in the company, rather than build a family of my own.

“My sister is getting out of rehab early,” I sign.

Yaya blinks once. Twice. She’s trying to process what I’m telling her underneath it all.

“Talía’s moving in with her.”

She blinks more rapidly.

“I’ll transfer the money to your account as outlined in the contract.”

Her mouth falls slightly open and then she scoffs, disgust pooling in her eyes. I harden my heart and do what needs to be done. Pulling out the contract from my pocket, I tear it into two pieces and then four.

Yaya flinches in time to the rips.

Slowly, I let the papers flutter to the table and sign, “There’s no more contract, Yaya. No more reason for us to fake this.”

Still, some part of me is hoping. *Tell me this stopped being fake a long time ago. Tell me you don’t need a contract to be with me.*

I won't force her to say it. Won't push her. The contract is no longer binding her to me. She has a choice now.

A frustrated look pinches her face and she rummages in her purse. Pulling out the black card I gave her, she smacks it on the table. Nostrils flaring, she signs, "Keep your money, Dare. I don't want it. Any of it."

The walls close in on me.

I hear the finality in her words. Yaya storms to the exits and the doors crash shut behind her.

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CHAPTER 20

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the group chat

YAYA

“He really said that?” DeeJ signs. Her eyes narrow to slits and her mouth slants at an unforgiving angle. In moments like this, she looks so much like her husband that it’s almost creepy.

“He tore up the contract right in front of me,” I sign. “He said his sister was out of rehab so he didn’t need me anymore.”

DeeJ voices a couple choice words.

“He wanted to pay me. *Pay me.*” I shake my head. “As if I’m a prostitute he had on call for a few months and now he wants to square up.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have given him a shot. This is my fault.” DeeJ massages her forehead. “I’m the one who sent him that text so he could meet you at the farmhouse. I’m the one who brought him into our inner circle.”

“No, this is on me. I stupidly forgot that I’m just an employee. I got caught up in this fairytale, thinking he cared about me.”

From the corner of my eye, I see my sister angrily yanking on the lever for the coffee machine. I knew this conversation would be upsetting for both of us, so I asked DeeJ to meet me at her café.

I’m glad I did. My sister is hate-brewing so hard right now, we’ll have lattes to give to the whole city.

She tops another cup and slides it down the row to meet the others. “What are you going to do now?”

Cry? Block him on social media? Listen to a soulful singer croon about rolling in the deep? All the above?

"I don't know."

"We should destroy him." DeeJ picks up a cup and grips it so hard the entire thing crumples in.

"No."

"No?"

"I don't want to hurt him."

"Why not?"

I close my eyes and imagine Dare in pain. I picture him haphazardly answering phone calls, running around trying to patch up whatever I destroyed. It pains me so terribly that tears well in my eyes.

DeeJ trots around the counter and throws her arms around me. She pats my back and voices something.

"I feel like an idiot," I sign, sniffing. "I don't know why I'm crying."

She waits for me to look up and then signs, "Me either."

I frown at her.

"I just mean, I've never seen you so broken up about a guy. Ever."

"It feels like..." my shoulders slump, "I lost something important, you know? I keep looking at my phone waiting for Dare to text me. I keep snapping pictures before I remember I can't send them to him anymore. I didn't realize it until now, but while we were together, he became my best friend."

She gnaws on her bottom lip. "Did you tell him?"

"That he's my best friend?"

"That you love him."

I shake my head. "Maybe this is for the better."

"Why is it better?"

"I never dreamed of being serious with someone hearing anyway."

"So get with Henry then."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't like Henry."

"Isn't it more important that he's deaf?"

"Yeah, but..." I stop signing and glare at her. "I know what you're doing."

"What am I doing?"

“Playing mind games.”

“I’m being serious.” DeeJ’s mouth collapses into a more severe frown. “I’m trying to figure out what you want so I can help you. If you want to ruin him, I can call Ryo right now. Dare might be a billionaire, but I know a few billionaires of my own. With all the guys together, we can run the Sullivans out of town.” My sister places her hand on mine. “If you want to get back with him, I can drive you over there right now.”

I shudder as I read her lips. “I don’t want to talk to him.”

“Then what do you want?” she signs.

“I don’t know!” I throw my hands up.

She gives me a thoughtful look. “How about we talk to the other ladies? Maybe an outside perspective would help.”

I expect DeeJ to grab her car keys and head to the farmhouse, but she starts tapping away on her phone. I peer over her shoulder, stunned.

She sends the message and looks up.

“You guys have a group chat?” I sign.

“Of course we have a group chat. Why would we not have a group chat?”

“Why didn’t you add me?”

“Because you didn’t ask.” She gives me a *you should have known better* look.

I scowl. DeeJ is small and bubbly, so people often mistake her as the younger sister, but it’s times like these that remind me she’s every bit the annoying older sibling.

“Just let me in,” I sign belligerently.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Because what?”

“Because I don’t wanna.”

Glad for a distraction, I badger DeeJ into letting me into the group chat.

My phone pings five minutes later.

I’m in.

CLARISSA: *Everyone take a breath and let’s break this story down in a calm manner.*

DEEJ: *I see someone is using their degree in social work.*

KENYA: *Clarissa, I know you're new, but we don't do 'calm' here.*

I read all the messages and look up at my sister.
She rolls her eyes.

CLARISSA: *You're hilarious.*

DAWN: *I agree with Ris. We should diagnose this situation piece by piece.*

SUNNY: *Everyone listen to the mechanic. She knows how to solve problems.*

"Is it always this chaotic?"

"They're chaotic in person. Did you think the group chat would be any different?"

I scroll up and see that I have *thousands* of messages to catch up on.
"How often do you guys talk?"

"It depends. The emergency chat is for emergencies. Obviously. There's also the meme chat and the childcare chat..."

"Why are there so many groups?"

"Right? I have to mute them half the time or my phone will ring all day." DeeJ glances at her phone and then motions to me. "They're getting serious now. We should tune back in."

I scroll through all the jokes until I get to the real advice.

CLARISSA: *Deej, if I was your friend, I'd have one more conversation with the guy she broke up with.*

VANYA: *She's right. It sounds like your friend isn't settled about the breakup.*

DAWN: *I agree. You shouldn't ignore the noise in a car. Why should you ignore the noise in your heart?*

SUNNY: *But what will she get after crawling back to him? He'll think she still has feelings for him. No way should she have another conversation with someone who doesn't want her.*

KENYA: *I second that. No one can flip their feelings off so quick after a breakup. It's better to keep a distance until you're really over him.*

VANYA: *It's worth the risk to talk to him. You need to get closure now or you'll always wonder 'what if'.*

I frown at my sister. "No one is agreeing on anything."

"I didn't think they would."

I flounce back in my seat. "Then why ask?"

"The group chat isn't so they can tell you what to do. It's so you can get clarity on what *you* want to do."

"I don't understand."

She picks up her phone again. Sets it down. Signs to me. "Nova suggested that you sue for emotional damages. Do you want to do that?"

"That's such a Nova thing to say."

"She's the only female in the guy's group chat. You know how good she is at business." DeeJ smiles proudly. "Now focus. Do you want to sue Dare?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

I narrow my eyes. "Yes."

"See? Clarity."

"How is that clarity?"

"Because knowing what you don't want is just as powerful as knowing what you do. Sometimes, we can't express what it is we're looking for, but we know what we're *not* looking for. And even if we don't end up exactly where we want to be, it's better to avoid ending up where we *don't*."

I scrunch my nose. "Thanks. I'll be back next week for another therapy session."

She laughs.

I smile and it feels like the knot in my heart loosens just a bit.

My sister walks me through the group chat, picking out suggestion after suggestion.

Toilet papering Dare's house is a straight *nope*.

So is breaking into his phone to unleash all his embarrassing photos (of which he has zero because that man does not have a bad angle).

Someone suggests kidnapping him, and Clarissa is the first to shut that down stating that kidnapping is unacceptable.

The group chat continues for a few, feral minutes. And then it stops. Like a swarm of fish converging in chaos and then dissipating into the sea without warning.

“By process of elimination,” my sister signs, “do you have a bit of clarity on what you want to do now?”

“Move on.” It’s hard to admit it and I feel a weight on my body as I sign, but it’s the truth.

“If you want to move on, then what does that mean?”

“Ending things on my terms. I need a real conversation with him.”

“About what?”

About the fact that I didn’t walk off with Henry because I like him. About the fact that I fell in love with him instead. About the fact that I miss him so much I can’t breathe.

“I don’t know,” I sign. Peering over my sister’s phone, I point at it. “Should we ask the group chat?”

* * *

Despite deciding that I *do* want to talk to Dare, it takes me a few days to gather my courage. All I can think about is that cold look on his face when he tore up our contract. I never want to see him looking at me like that again.

I spend a few days moping around and putting things off.

Until I get a magazine in the mail.

It’s the issue that Dare and I posed for.

My emotions explode like hail from the sky and I spend every night looking at those pictures and bawling my eyes out.

A few days later, I wake up to toilet paper rolling around my room like tumbleweeds, the headache equivalent of a wild weekend chugging shots off male strippers, and my eyes caked with so many dried tears and mascara, I can barely blink.

That's when I realize that running from the conversation with Dare was a half-hearted effort to appear 'strong' and 'independent' and 'over him'. But it's not going to work. If I keep going like this, I might just drown myself in tears and never wake up.

Nervous about seeing him on my own, I text DeeJ and ask her to come with me.

I'm in a sheer red mini dress paired with knee-high boots and a motorcycle jacket, waiting for my sister to text me that she's outside, when my mom walks in, swinging her car keys.

"Let's go," she says.

I'm shocked, but I follow her out of the house like an obedient puppy.

On the drive over, I notice a text from DeeJ.

DeeJ: I'm sorry. Ryo surprised me with a trip to Paris this morning. I had no idea or I would have told you earlier. I asked mom to take you instead.

Yaya: :(

DeeJ: Are you angry?

Yaya: It's fine. Go be all cute and romantic with my brother-in-law.

DeeJ: I'll expect all the details when I get back.

Yaya: Ditto.

Putting the phone away, I glance at mom's side profile. She looks so pretty with the sun glowing on her skin.

But why is she here? What did DeeJ tell her?

As if she can sense that I'm staring, mom turns up the music until the bass is thumping so hard I can feel it in my bones. I can't tell what she's thinking. She hasn't said a thing about Talia or Dare since that day on the front lawn. It's never been her style to push me into talking about things until I'm ready, but there's something off about her silence.

Mom parks the car and turns to me.

I brace myself.

"Is Talia going to be here?" Mom asks.

My eyebrows jump. "You... came with me to see Talia?"

She lifts her chin, but not answering is an answer.

The pieces click together in my head. "You miss her."

I should have noticed sooner. Mom lit up when Niko joined the family. It doesn't surprise me that she would feel the same toward Talia.

"Why didn't you ask me for Talia's phone number or something?"

“You were walking around like a corpse. I was afraid you’d have a breakdown if I even mentioned that family.”

I wish she was wrong.

“Whatever happened between you and Dare is your business and I’ll give you all the space in the world to process that.” Mom’s bob sways forward as she gives me the mama-bear ‘eye of doom’. “But Talia disappeared as quickly as she appeared and that is not okay with me.”

My bottom lip trembles. To be honest, I miss Talia too.

The stinker.

“On the other hand, you’re my baby,” she signs. “Do you know how hard it was for me and your father to hear you crying every night? It was all we could do to pretend everything was normal.”

I cringe. “On a scale of one to humiliating, how much of those crying sessions did you overhear?”

“Enough to buy stocks in toilet paper.”

Huh.

After an embarrassing beat, I sign, “I don’t know if Talia’s here or not... and I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Not talking to you and dad about everything.”

She pats my back the way DeeJ did at the café. “We’re on your side.” She pushes the car door open. “But from the fleeting glimpse I got of Dare and what Talia said about him, I liked him. So if you’re doing all this just because he’s hearing, I might swap teams.”

* * *

Mom follows me into the giant building where there’s a doorman who takes our ID cards and hands us lanyards. It’s my first time actually being *inside* Dare’s building and my hands are sweating as we ride the elevator.

“You knock on the door,” I sign to mom, chickening out at the last minute.

She gives me a royal side eye and presses the doorbell.

I roll and unroll my fingers. *Hello, Dare. I know I should have texted first, but I need to talk to you face to face. You were right. We were a temporary arrangement and I was with you because of the contract, but*

things started changing for me. I went with Henry that day because he was my best friend but now you're my best friend and I don't like having this misunderstanding.

The door swings open and my heart almost skitters out of my body.

But it's not Dare facing us.

My hopeful expression falls as Lucy leans against the door with her arms folded. She doesn't look happy to see me.

Thankfully, Talia comes streaming into the hallway. The little girl more than makes up for Lucy's chilly welcome by throwing herself at my mother, who hugs her back like they're long-lost sisters reunited after war.

Talia grabs mom's hand and drags her inside the condo, chattering a mile a minute.

Now it's just me and Lucy in the hallway. She makes a reluctant 'do you want to come in' gesture that tells me she had no plans on allowing us to step a foot inside.

I walk in anyway.

Dare's place is *huge* with tons of windows letting in all the sunshine. I'm stunned when I see boxes all over the place.

Lucy waggles her fingers in the space between us and makes a talking gesture. *How do we communicate?*

Hiking out my phone, I type in my notes.

Is Dare moving?

Lucy eases closer to my phone and reads the message. She looks up at me, down at the phone, and then taps beneath my line.

You didn't know?

My heart starts beating fast.

Know what?

Before Lucy can type an answer, Talia gallops over. She signs ‘nice to meet you’, which seems a little out of place given our history, but I muster up a smile of encouragement. She’s learning more ASL from Niko and her confidence in the language is growing.

Taking my hand, Talia leads me to the couch and points to one of the boxes. She says something to me, realizes my head is not in a space to lip read and faces my mother.

Mom interprets, “Her teacher gave her an award for good behavior yesterday.”

“That’s great!” I sign, unleashing a more genuine smile.

Talia shows us the award. It has a giant, flourishing signature along with five gold stars. I think of Miss Abbot and imagine how relieved she must be now that Talia’s settled down.

Mom and Talia return to voicing and I turn back to Lucy.

Wiggling my phone at her, I ask:

Where is Dare?

I see a flash of pain in her eyes and she takes my phone to type.

Why do you care? Didn’t you break up with him?

He’s the one who broke up with me.

Lucy frowns and types furiously.

That's crazy. Dare would never break up with you. He's obsessed with you.

Lucy shows me the phone with a bit of an attitude.

I reach for it, but she snaps it away to type again.

I know it's none of my business, but why did you two break up?

I try to take the phone, but again she yanks it out of reach.

Was it the age difference?

I move to answer and am thwarted by Lucy changing her mind and adding more text.

It's because he's rich, isn't it? I saw your social media profile. You're one of those social justice folks who hate rich people.

Okay this is getting annoying.

"I don't hate rich people," I sign. "I hate systems of oppression."

Lucy has no idea what I signed, but I doubt she'd listen even if she did. Heck, I listen way more than she does. Lucy's ears might as well be for decoration.

By the way, I think it's so hypocritical to break up with someone because they're rich. Who do you think gives the most to charity, huh? Who do you think supports the causes that poor people cry about? It's not the ones who can barely pay their bills, that's for sure. They can barely help themselves, much less someone else.

I read her words and take an aggressive step forward, gesturing for the phone.

She hands it over with a little tremble to her fingers.

I am not getting into a debate with you right now. All I want to know is WHERE IS DARE?

Mom walks over.

"Is everything okay here?" she signs. Her eyes dart between me and Lucy like a bald, oversized barkeep sniffing out a fight.

I'm not surprised that she noticed the tension. Mom is always ready to defend me when she feels I'm being bullied. The thing is, even with our differences, I don't think Lucy falls under that category. We've never been best friends, but I also don't feel like she's trying to attack. It feels like she's being as protective over her brother as mom is towards me.

Lucy gets tired of handing one phone back and forth. She takes out her own cell and taps on it.

I'm not telling you anything.

I need to talk to Dare.

Do you know how hard Dare's taken the breakup? He looks like a broomstick now, he's lost so much weight. And he can't even take a second to process because he's up to his eyeballs in lawsuits thanks to that buffoon he kicked off the board. With all that's going on, YOU do not need to add to his stress!!!!

My stare turns fuzzy as I process her words. That hesitation gives her just enough time to type:

If you didn't know what a good thing you had when you had him, you don't deserve to yank on his chain now that you've changed your mind. Please leave.

Lucy juts a manicured hand at the door, her face set like stone. Her expression reminds me of Dare when he tore up the contract. Apathy. She's totally disengaged. She's washed her hands. She's done.

Mom opens her mouth to argue, but I tug on her sleeve. We won't get any information out of Lucy.

I muster a smile and wave goodbye to Talia. Her face crumples in dismay and she forms the word 'noooo' clearly enough that I can lipread. She runs toward us, but her mom grabs her, holding her back. Talia bucks, bawling out to us. Whatever she says, it makes my mother's eyes turn misty.

We leave and the door slams so forcefully shut that I pick up the vibration in my hearing aids.

Mom stands there for a second, her nostrils flaring and her eyes blinking a mile a minute. I touch her arm in comfort, watching as she takes a breath, gathers herself and offers me a small smile that makes my heart ache even worse.

“I doubt you got what you came for,” she says. Switching to signing, she adds, “what are we going to do now?”

She signed ‘we’.

Overwhelmed, I rush forward and give her a hug.

Mom eases me back, her chin wobbling. “Alright, that’s enough. Let’s get back to the car.”

On the drive home, I log into social media. My notifications are bursting at the brim. There are tons of encouraging messages from my ‘fans’, the fickle people who just recently called me a ‘scammer’.

I scroll through those and tap on Dare’s profile.

Private.

My jaw drops.

Dare blocked me.

It feels like I just got sucker punched.

Earnestly, I hunt for a way to locate his whereabouts. Mosely’s account hasn’t been used for ten years. I text José, but he hasn’t been working with Dare since our breakup and has no idea where Dare is now.

I want to get Sazuki’s help so badly, but I refuse to interrupt my sister’s bae-cation because of my crisis. She deserves to have a nice time without me piling on my problems.

Mom parks in front of our house and asks, “Anything?”

I shake my head. “He blocked me.”

Mom cringes. She might be decades ahead of me, but even she understands the severity of a social media diss.

“Maybe there’s another way to get his attention,” she suggests.

“How?”

“You know him best. What’s most important to Dare?”

It doesn’t take me long to answer. “His family,” I sign.

“Should we ask Talia to spy on her mother? I’m sure she would. She’s very resourceful.”

“Mom, no! She’s a child.”

“Which is why no one would suspect her.” Mom raises both eyebrows and I realize that I might be living with a secret war general.

“We’re not recruiting little kids to be our spies, mom. I know there’s another way to get through to him. I just...”

An idea hits me like a flying freight train.

Thumbs whirring, I summon the group chat.

Mom waves to get my attention. “What are you doing?”

“What’s the number one thing I’m good at?”

“Being our daughter.”

“Okay, the second number one thing.”

“There can only be one number one,” mom argues.

I narrow my eyes in impatience.

She sighs. “Modeling?”

“No,” I show her my phone, “social media.” Mom’s confusion increases at the exact rate of my excitement. “Henry and I couldn’t get our brand off the ground, but that was because we were trying to sell something. My personal page was buzzing, but once I started selling things, I lost organic followers there too.”

“Doesn’t that mean you’re... not good at social media?” Mom points out.

“No, it means I know how to use pictures to sell a story, not a product. When the posts were just about me living my life, I had way more engagement. That’s what convinced me I could sell products too. I lost focus because I was trying to be something I wasn’t. A saleswoman.”

“How does this help you with Dare?”

“Lucy said Dare had to fire an executive and that executive is suing him.” It doesn’t take me long to search up the articles to show mom. If I’d been brave enough to google Dare earlier, I would have seen the controversy.

Mom’s eyes spark with light. She whips out her phone and does a quick search of her own. “His company put out a statement. One of those dry, ‘we deny those allegations, don’t spread misinformation’ posts.”

“It’s a common strategy. They’re taking a passive approach, thinking the truth is all they need. But this guy is churning out bad press every day.” I remember Dare mentioning an important government project that required his name being squeaky clean. “It’s probably his biggest headache.”

“And you think you can fix it? But how? Even if you post something to defend him, that doesn’t mean anyone will listen. You have authority in the entertainment world and in modeling, sure. But this is the business world. They might not care enough to hear what you have to say.”

“That’s why I’ll drown their world out until they can’t hear anything else.”

“By sharing pictures of yourself?” Mom still looks perplexed.

I grin. “I said I could sell *a* story. I didn’t say that story would be mine.”

* * *

One call to Clay Bolton is all it takes to get Dare’s location. After all, Clay—Island’s husband and the best ex-military security contractor in the city—can track people in his sleep.

Turns out, Dare is out of the country working on a new investment.

Island offers to get her husband to hack into Dare’s phone and send a message. It’s tempting, but I tell the Boltons no. Dare probably won’t be happy to have his hard drive wiped just so I can tell him we need to talk.

Instead, I hole up in my room, researching every negative article that’s circulating about Dare, Dare’s late father, and their company.

The first thing I do is verify whether those statements are true. I’m no stranger to digging up dirty laundry on shady companies, which is why I wouldn’t have touched the original Ru-Carpsel with a ten-foot pole.

Dare’s company comes out relatively clean in my search, as far as any giant corporation can be. They made their fortune selling software, licensing digital products and then investing in real estate. There are no gold mines, sweatshops, or factories with atrocious human rights violations.

That gives me both a moral leg to stand on and certainty that his ex-employee, Gregory Carmichael, is full of hot air and on a smear campaign.

Next, I contact the most influential people I know.

Nova is my first target.

Initially, she resists me, but eventually I convince her to share her rags to riches story—coming from a little girl in a struggling family to manning Adam Harrison’s billion-dollar fortune and being the CEO of a successful R&D company.

Once the article is published and the buzz on Nova starts gaining traction, I send out videos asking my fans to share the story. Drawn by the hashtags and viral videos, it doesn’t take long before giant news outlets are writing about Nova’s success.

The negative articles about Dare’s company get buried under positive press for Nova.

But that only makes Carmichael and his bots more determined.

The next day, Carmichael drops another hate campaign on Dare that blows my first attempts out of the water.

But I'm ready for him, having anticipated that he wouldn't go down without a fight.

"You think I'm scared of you?" I whisper to my phone, scoffing at the article that's blazing on the front page of a business Internet forum.

Massaging my thumb so it's ready for battle, I thump the 'post' button.

Instantly, a video with Sazuki joining hands with Adam Harrison and forming a new research company is posted. That was super-secret news, but it's now an arrow in my arsenal. The perks of being the sister-in-law of Ryotaro Sazuki.

So it continues.

Every time Carmichael raises his ugly, virtual head, I stamp it down with my virtual Versace pumps. Undoubtedly, his minions are scrambling to gain back the ground they lost, but I don't give them a minute to breathe and keep them pinned.

The currency of social media is outrage.

Not just any outrage. *Immediate* outrage.

I don't have the antidote for the internet, and I doubt one's been invented yet, but I do know how to slow down damage before things turn critical. The more Carmichael loses momentum, the less people care and the less power he has. I want him like a hamster on a wheel, losing steam as he turns in circles.

It doesn't take long.

Social media giveth and social media taketh away.

On the seventh day, there are no new articles, tweets or posts about Dare and the old posts have zero traction. Folks who'd boiled with rage had moved on to another dog with another bone.

On the eighth day, I get my reward.

It's one text.

One acknowledgement from Mosely.

I'll make sure he's at the fashion show. After that, he's flying straight to Uruguay.

I clutch the cell phone firmly.

I get one shot.

And I'm going to make it count.

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CHAPTER 21

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love bites and dents

DARE

“You need to eat something.”

I turn the page of the research document. “I’ll eat when I’m dead.”

“The phrase is ‘I’ll sleep when I’m dead’, sir.” He clears his throat. “Or did you mean you won’t eat *until* you’re dead?”

I stop reviewing the file long enough to pin Mosely with a dry look.

He avoids eye contact.

Pointing my attention on my work where it belongs, I mumble, “You’re worse than Lucy.”

“With all due respect, your sister is much worse than I am. You don’t realize it because you’re not the one she’s calling every day.”

That gets me to pause. Looking up at the sweat on his forehead, I note, “You’re scared.”

“Ms. Sullivan made it clear that I won’t keep my job—or my head—if you continue to lose weight.”

“I’m fine.”

“Your tailor said you dropped an entire pants size.”

“My tailor has a gambling debt and is itching to reconstruct my wardrobe to pay it off. My clothes fit me like a glove.”

That’s not entirely true. I’ve noticed how gaunt my face is when I look in the mirror.

Which is why I've stopped looking in mirrors. I'm like the Beast living in that castle BB—Before Belle. Or in my case, Before Yaya. The only time I catch my reflection these days is when my laptop screen dies.

Mosely sighs. "You should have at least flown in earlier to see your family."

He's right and I feel a pinch of guilt that I'm dropping in and out to monitor the fashion show before I'm off to assess an investment in South America.

To be fair, I wasn't supposed to be here at all.

I didn't *want* to be in town for the fashion show.

It's been a long time since I've seen Yaya and I don't know how I'll process watching her strutting down a catwalk with that sultry smile on her face and her honey eyes glowing in the spotlight.

The easiest solution would be to not show up, but Mosely didn't give me a choice, stating that I *had* to at least show my face at the company rebrand given how much of a splash we've made about it in the press.

Taking Yaya out of the event would have been much easier for me, but I couldn't stab her in the back like that. In fact, I instructed the PR team to continue with Yaya as the main face of Tru Essentials, the new and improved Ru-Carpsel.

I told Mosely it was for business, which is true. Yaya is a talented model and she's also got the 'it' factor. People naturally gravitate to her. They like and trust her. Not only that, they respect her as someone who refuses to label herself as a victim. She is living proof that anyone can do anything if they put their mind to it.

But it's not all about the bottom line. I also remember how excited she was about being on stage again. No matter how painful our breakup was, I couldn't yank that away from her.

Mosely's grumbling lures me back to focus on him.

"We're on a private jet with all the food and wine money can buy, yet you starve yourself." The frown etched into his face is so deep, it might become permanent. "Humans can't survive on coffee alone."

"I am proof to the contrary." The document in my hand rustles as I turn the page. Unfortunately, discussing the fashion show made me think about Yaya and now my brain is incapable of focusing.

Something red flashes on the page and I glance at my watch.

Mosely settles into the seat across from me. “That watch has been blinking a lot recently.”

Pinching the watch between my fingers, I stare at the light.

“Seems like your niece misses you every second of every day.”

“Huh.” I make a mental note to ask Talia about that on our next phone call.

Just then the flight attendant strides up to us. “Sir, we’re about to land. Can you fasten your seatbelt?”

I put away my laptop, documents and pens.

The belt fastens with a click.

Despite the turbulent landing, we make it safely on the airstrip. I head into the terminal for private jet passengers and I’m whisked off to the fashion show.

A line of cars wrap around the block. Reporters and gawkers throng outside the premises. I’m desperately late and, despite my intentions to sneak in under the radar, reporters catch me in the basement parking lot.

Surrounded by journalists, I give Mosely an impatient look, to which he responds with an imperceptible ‘calm down’ gesture. My initial annoyance wanes. Showing my face and accepting a few interviews is the reason I agreed to attend the fashion show in the first place.

I oblige their screamed pleas for my attention and face the mikes that are so close to my face I can smell the spit and sweat of the last person who spoke into them.

“Mr. Sullivan, is it true that your acquisition of Cullen Tech was to negotiate a government contract?”

“No comment.”

“Mr. Sullivan, have you and Mr. Carmichael settled your dispute out of court?”

“All actions have consequences. Carmichael will face the legal ramifications of his choices.”

“Does that mean you’ll be suing him?”

“Next question.”

“Mr. Sullivan, do you admit to manipulating the free press?”

I point my eyes at the reporter who said that. A seedy little man with a comb-over and an ill-fitting tux.

“I can assure you that the only weapon anyone in my company fights with is the truth.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange the way positive articles about your rich friends buried any negative publications about you?”

My eyebrows twitch. I glance questioningly at Mosely.

He looks away.

Was there a tailored PR campaign? This is the first time I’m hearing about it. A dirty fight with Carmichael was not worth my time, so I instructed Mosely to handle it quietly. Dad showed me the beauty of being silent and waiting for the truth to be revealed. And my own experience taught me that empires as big as the one I’m running aren’t quick on their feet. I couldn’t afford to make careless decisions just to go after Carmichael.

From the shifty way Mosely’s acting, there’s something he didn’t tell me.

I square my shoulders and grind out. “Next question.”

Another round of shouting fills the air.

I try my best to answer every question that I can. Above me, music is thumping and I’m keenly aware of how much time I’m spending in the parking lot. I was originally against seeing Yaya and getting my heart ripped out all over again, but the longer the reporters take, the more I itch to head upstairs.

Mosely sees me checking my watch for the fifth time and his eyes meet mine.

I jut my chin at the door.

He nods and motions to the security team stationed at the exits. At once, the guards form a human barricade around me.

“Mr. Sullivan!”

“One more question!”

The reporters call out to me. Camera lights flash.

I lift a hand in goodbye and stalk into the elevator. Mosely leaves the security team to take care of the reporters and slips in with me just before the door shuts.

“What were they talking about?” I ask roughly. “Did you ask Alistair or Stinton to clean up our Carmichael mess?”

Mosely gulps. “No, sir.”

I want to interrogate him more, but that persistent red light flashes from my wrist. Dragging my gaze to the watch, I sigh. Why is Talia signaling me so desperately? Is she okay?

“We’ll talk about this later,” I tell Mosely, sticking up a finger in warning.

Since my niece should be in school and won’t have access to a phone, I call Lucy instead. The elevator doors open as my sister picks up.

“What a rare and shocking surprise!” Lucy croons. “I thought you’d forgotten my number.”

“Hey, Luce.”

I walk forward and notice the thick double doors in the distance. The fashion show is just inside, and the music is so loud that I hustle in the opposite direction to get some quiet.

Mosely starts to follow me, but I gesture for him to go inside first.

Once I can hear more clearly, I ask my sister, “Has Talia been in any trouble lately?”

“What do you mean?”

I hesitate. As far as I know, Lucy is unaware about our watches’ connectivity. I don’t want to spill the beans unless I have to.

“Has her mood been off? Is she having problems at school?”

“Are you kidding? My daughter has a busier social life than I do. If she’s not at that farmhouse, she’s going to piano classes with Niko.” Lucy scoffs. “I can afford to hire a Sazuki-level piano instructor and Talia would rather get a *free* lesson from that foundation. It’s ludicrous!”

I hurry her along. “So you’re telling me that Talia’s okay?”

“She’s thriving.”

“And what about her nanny? Is she trustworthy?”

“Nope.”

“What?” I grip the phone tighter, already imagining all the horrible things the nanny might be doing to cause Talia to use the watch so often.

“The nanny eats way too much cheese and non-alcoholic champagne and also binges soapy cowboy TV shows until twelve a.m.”

I stop short. “That’s strangely specific. Who’s the nanny? What agency did you use to find her?”

“I got her from the same place where mom and dad got you,” Lucy says.

My brows furrow.

“It’s me,” my sister says proudly. “And everything over here is fine.”

“Define ‘fine’.”

“I’m telling you that there are no panties on fire or nannies locked in closets to report. Talia actually listens the first time... okay the third time when I tell her something. And I only get minimal smack talk. Which is saint-level behavior from her. It’s like *she’s* the one who went to rehab. Although, my therapist did say that once I take authority over my life, every area will improve. Including mothering—”

“That’s great, Luce. Thanks. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Wait! Dare, have you eaten today?”

“Yes, I have.” A giant lie. “I gotta go, okay? Later.” I hang up. A bit rude, even for me. But I can’t shake this feeling that I should investigate the watch. Those flashes mean something. Something important.

I study the lights on the edge of the device.

It’s stopped blinking.

Does that mean Talia’s okay now or that she’s given up on contacting me because she thinks I won’t come to her rescue?

This won’t do.

I need to check on Talia.

Tapping Mosely’s speed dial, I listen to it ring and ring. He’s inside for the show. There’s probably no way he can hear the phone.

My footsteps thump as I hurry inside.

I’m immediately inundated with the smell of fog smoke, a mishmash of highly fragrant perfumes and the stench of cigarettes.

The show is an exclusive event with the most prominent influencers in attendance. Every seat is filled. Kudos to the PR team. I know how hard they worked on this.

An LED stage fills most of the room and seats are set up all around it. Electronic music is blasting, and a camera flashes each time a model arrives at the very front of the stage.

I’m scanning the semi-dark room for Mosely when I feel a shift in the air. An invisible hand snakes over my face and wrenches my head around so I’m looking at the stage.

All the lights in the room follow one model.

I hear a heavenly chorus.

She’s there.

Yaya.

My dream, my destiny, my destruction.

She's in the Tru Essential's limited edition formal wear, a bright and flowing dress with fabric that trails behind her like a stream. Long brown hair bounces with every step. It seems like she's floating over the stage, long legs eating up the distance to the edge.

Every eye is locked on her. She's art and poetry and inspiration in motion. The very definition of a painter's muse.

I wish I had the right words to describe how perfect she is, but my brain goes blank. I can hear my own heartbeat pounding in my head, vibrating through every part of me.

Yaya walks to the front of the stage and throws her skirt back, showing off the scandalous slit once hidden by all the folds of cloth. My eyes hungrily devour the brown skin glowing under the lights before the skirt whooshes back into place like a flirtatious dance.

She turns swiftly, and it stuns me that she's just as glamorous from the back as she is from the front.

Someone touches my shoulder, and it feels like I'm waking from a dream.

"Sir?" Mosely yells to be heard over the music. "I saw your missed calls."

I stand there, my brain re-booting from the system-wide shock Yaya delivered to me. Finally, I remember my niece and my need to check on her.

It's only because I held Talia in my arms when she was born and I think of myself as her stand-in dad that I leave. Because every... single... *part* of me wants to stay. Wants to pull up a chair and sit as close to the stage as I'm allowed. Wants to get more glimpses of Yaya. And have her watch me back. And maybe then my world will be right again.

It physically hurts to climb into a vehicle and drive away. Mosely keeps checking on me in the rearview mirror but, thankfully, he doesn't ask me how I'm feeling.

Because I wouldn't know how to put these cavern-deep aches in my body into words.

At Talia's school, I'm greeted by the principal who comes out to see me in person.

"Mr. Sullivan!" She grabs my hand and pumps. "It's good to see you again."

I note her entourage of administrators. "I didn't mean to disrupt your work."

“Nonsense? A generous patron like yourself deserves at least this much pomp and circumstance.” She flashes a grin so wide that I second-guess the number of zeroes I added to that cheque.

Twisting my head slightly, I give Mosely a questioning look.

My assistant lifts both shoulders subtly.

“Right this way, Mr. Sullivan. We’ll announce for Talia to leave class so you can see her.”

“I really don’t need any announcements.”

“It won’t be but a second.”

I’m escorted straight to the principal’s office where I’m offered coffee and pastries. The principal folds her hands together and preens at me.

“The sizable donation you made has already been earmarked for our new sports wing. The lacrosse team is ready to bring glory to our division next season...”

Something about her words make me itch.

“We’re already in talks with a Division 1-level secondary school. My dream is to build a pipeline straight from our hollowed halls to the big leagues...”

“Not sports.”

Her eyebrows hike. “Erhm. Excuse me?”

I lean my elbow against the desk. “I’d like to fund an ASL course at the school.”

The eyelashes start fluttering next. “Mr. Sullivan, I don’t believe that’s how donations work.”

“That’s how they work now,” I say firmly. “Will that be a problem?” The words are accompanied with a stern frown.

The principal bursts into nervous laughter. “Oh no! Not at all. Whatever you like!”

There’s a knock on the door.

Talia pokes her head in, eyes wide in curiosity. The moment she sees me, a giant grin spreads across her face.

“Uncle Dare!”

“Hey, pretty girl.”

Talia streams inside the room and leaps on me, wrapping her arms around my neck. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to check on you.” I pinch her cheek affectionately.

The principal presses both lips together, smile strained. "I'll let you two have a moment." She stalks out of the room and I hear her mumbling about 'entitled pricks' as the door closes behind her.

"How have you been, Tals?" I cup her cheeks and turn her head back and forth. I don't see any head injuries. "How many fingers am I holding up?" I flash a peace sign.

She giggles and pushes my hand off. "Uncle Dare, did you call me to the principal's office for this?"

"Didn't you miss me?"

"Yeah, but I'm *in school*," she says it the way a lawyer would whisper '*I'm in court*'.

I squint at her. "Why does it sound like I interrupted you?"

"We're in the middle of story time." She purses her lips. "You could have waited until Algebra at least."

"Algebra is import... Talia, where's your watch?"

My niece lifts her bare hand and looks down as if noticing it for the first time. Guilt flashes in her eyes and she hides her arm behind her back.

"Um, in class."

"You took it off and left it in class?"

Another eye dart to the left. "Mm-hm."

Suspicious, I lift my niece and set her on my lap. "Why did you take it off? Didn't we promise to always wear these watches?"

I balked at the idea at first, but now I don't even blink an eyelash when business associates catch sight of the gaudy pink thing wrapped around my wrist. It's turned into a conversation starter and the traditional, family-men who run businesses respect me even more for it.

"Yeah, we did," she says cagily.

"So where's your watch? Is it really in class?"

Talia pulls her bottom lip into her mouth and chews nervously. I think about all the times that watch has been flashing red and my suspicions surge.

What if none of those signals were from my niece?

"Tals," my heart starts beating fast, "did you give your watch away to someone?" My throat gets scratchy. "Was it... Yaya?"

Suddenly, Talia bounces off my lap and lands on the ground.

"Uncle Dare, I need to get back to class. I'll call you!"

I let out a breathless little chuckle. She's not slick in the least. I need to teach her how to dodge unwanted conversations more smoothly in the future.

With my niece fleeing back to the safety of her classroom, I return to the receptionist's office where Mosely is sitting. He's flanked on either side. One child is dressed in an all-black outfit and wearing eyeliner in this generation's version of a goth outfit. The other is wearing baggy pants and a hat pulled low over his head.

My assistant is sitting stiffly, both arms tucked into his side as if *he's* the one in trouble.

The moment he sees me, Mosely shoots to his feet. "Ready to go, sir?"

When I nod, my assistant looks relieved and eagerly ushers me out of the school. The principal is nowhere to be found and I assume she's trying to 'spite' me for dictating how my donation to the school should be used.

Back in the car, Mosely punches in directions to the airport.

I stare at the city passing by, seeing the blur of skyscrapers and registering little of it.

Is it Yaya? Is it not?

My thumb caresses the nicks and grooves of the pink watch.

Thinking that Yaya has the matching pair is ridiculous. Maybe Talia really does have it in class. Even if she doesn't, it's possible she lost the watch and didn't want to admit the truth to me.

So what if the lights are flashing? A random child in a random neighborhood could be playing with it, which explains why it goes off so often and without rhyme or reason.

There's no way Yaya would be in possession of the item that connects me and my niece and there's no way she would be pressing it as if to signal that she's missing me.

Yaya is with Henry now.

Yaya wants a deaf partner.

Those two facts are undeniable.

I can buy her everything she could ever want. I can take her everywhere she could ever want to go. I can love her the way she deserves to be loved, but I can't be the man she's envisioned for her life, and I don't believe in returning to a company that's already taken negotiations off the table.

It's safer to spend my days working. At least million-dollar contracts won't choose Henry over me.

“Sir,” Mosely faces me, “are you okay?”

I blink slowly. The car’s stopped moving and we’re in the airport’s private parking lot.

Shaking my head to clear it, I abandon all thoughts of running back to Yaya knowing that, at this point, it would be pushing myself on someone who doesn’t want to be chased.

* * *

On the flight to Uruguay, I force myself to eat something. Maybe it was the hunger that put all kinds of weird thoughts in my head.

You were doing such a good job of moving on, Dare. Don’t let this shake you.

It takes great effort to function as normal when thoughts of Yaya keep bouncing around like a pinball machine. Or perhaps it’s more like a game of whack-a-mole. Each time I successfully squash a thought, another image of her at the fashion show or during our last date together or a conversation we had over text, will return to mind.

I thought I hid my turmoil well but, after our last meeting, Mosely pulls me aside.

“Are you okay, sir?”

“That’s the third time you’ve asked me that question today,” I grumble. “Do I not look okay?”

“You seem... distracted.”

“I’m fine.”

“That’s also the third time you’ve used those words to assure me and they sound less convincing each round.”

I glare darkly at him.

He hands over a set of keys.

“What is this?”

“Uruguay has beautiful mountain roads, perfect for a relaxing drive. As luck would have it, the local dealership is in possession of a Black Feather Rolls Royce.” Mosely pauses and waits for a reaction. When I don’t give him one, he adds, “*The Black Feather.*” A long, probing pause. “The line in which only five were manufactured.” He pauses again. “The line where *you* own one of those five.”

I flinch. The Black Feather is tied to Yaya. It was the car she destroyed when we first met. I'd always wanted her to be my passenger princess but, by the time the Rolls was fixed, we'd already gone our separate ways.

I shove the keys into Mosely's chest. "I'm not interested."

His eyes bug and he shuffles behind me. "Sir, you're in one of the most beautiful countries in the world. You can't possibly intend to hole up in a hotel room and work all evening?"

"I *fully* intend to do that." I push the button for the elevator.

"What about the car?"

"You drive it since you're so interested."

He darts into the elevator behind me. I hear him tapping his fingers against his leg and breathing hard.

When I whirl around again, Mosely's glaring at me, his eyes narrowed. I'm about to ask him what's wrong when he bursts into action. Stomping in front of me, he punches the button for the ground floor and slaps the key fob back into my hand.

"Mosely, what is this about?" I bark.

"Dare, I was your father's assistant, and I was honored to be chosen as yours. However, unlike you, I am not a machine. I cannot live by coffee alone. I have not seen my cat in *far* too long because providing support to you, a clinical work-aholic, has eaten up all my free time. Now, I went the polite route but since that isn't working, I'll be outright. *I* need a break. So for the love of all that is holy, go and take a drive and leave me in peace."

I want to point out that he can retire to his own hotel room and have all the peace he wants there, but Mosely looks like he's about to blow a gasket. Perhaps it would be wiser to just take a drive.

The elevator doors open.

I edge around my assistant and walk into the lobby. If I were younger, I'd be mumbling about Mosely needing a chill pill, but I'm a respected businessman now and not the bumbling child following my dad and his assistant around at work, so all I whisper is 'I'll bring back a Xanax'.

The lobby is empty except for a few tourists wearing floral dresses and T-shirts. Tropical flowers are the main decor, present in all the paintings, inspiring the wooden etchings in the bamboo chandelier, and filling the earthen vases all around the lobby.

I blow out a breath and relax my fingers. A noisy jangle fills the air and I look down, realizing I dropped the key. My head spins when I bend down

to pick it up. Huh.

My body feels like it's shutting down and my personal assistant just yelled at me, which means I'm even worse at the work-life balance thing than my father who had to be marched out of the office by his ear when mother got enough.

Cautiously, I turn back to the elevator. I could still sneak into my own room and do my work in there instead of the conference room we rented. Mosely wouldn't know.

But there's nothing wrong with getting a little fresh air.

Mind made up, I clutch the keys in my fist and walk out the door. The sun is still high in the sky—the time difference between the US and South America means we earned ourselves a few hours of daylight. I could probably drive fast enough to catch the sunset dipping beneath the peaks.

"Where did they park the car?" I mumble, stepping past rows of vehicles.

A loud *crash* stops me in the middle of my search.

My body tenses on instinct.

Another crash. This time it's accompanied by the sound of shattered glass.

I turn around and see a woman hunched over a car. She's wearing a long-sleeved shirt under a mechanic jumpsuit. Heavy duty gloves wrap around a baseball bat and I see goggle straps around her head. She's got her back to me, but something about her height and build is familiar.

Bam! Her bat whacks off a side-mirror.

I should mind my own business. This disturbance has nothing to do with me.

I'm about to walk off when the woman turns around.

Every bone in my body goes still all at once.

My heart falls with a bang to the pavement.

Honey-brown eyes sparkle at me behind a pair of safety goggles. That perfect, sultry smile tugs at full, maroon-toned lips. Skin the color of dark chestnut glows from the inside out as the Uruguayan sun spotlights her better than any fashion show in the world ever could.

"Yaya?" I whisper.

She yanks off the gloves—the first hand, then the next—revealing slender, brown hands fitted with rings. And a pink watch.

The goggles go flying next and they land in the mound of shattered glass at her feet.

I don't remember giving my legs permission to walk but, when I come back to myself, I'm in front of her and I realize my body moved without me.

My thoughts are racing.

And yet, when I lift my hands to sign, I ask the stupidest question...

"What are you wearing?"

What are you wearing? Really, Dare?

Her smile turns mischievous. She's not bothered at all. "I thought, this time, when I wreck your car, I should wear proper gear."

So pretty.

So precious.

So... here.

Here.

Why is she here? Smiling at me like that?

Am I dreaming? Did I faint after Mosely told me off and practically pushed me out of the elevator? Or did I imagine that conversation too? My usually mild-mannered assistant suddenly erupting on me? That probably didn't happen.

So that means, at this moment, I'm passed out on the conference table, having finally overdosed on coffee and heartbreak. And pretty soon, Uruguayan hotel cleaners will stumble in and find my unmoving body and assume I'm dead.

Am I dead?

Did I die on the plane ride to South America?

I'm spiraling, desperate to trace back the point of my demise when two warm hands bracket my face. Her touch grounds me. An anchor in a storm.

Those hands feel real. They smell like some kind of exotic spice I could never find even if I bought every perfume factory in the world. The rings on those fingers slightly dig into my cheek and I wish they'd dig even harder. Wish they'd leave an indent. Brand me so everyone knows I belong to her.

Is this... really happening?

She inhales deeply and releases it.

Hee-hoo.

Hee-hoo.

Like she's walking me through a panic attack.

Or a pregnancy.
Something snaps in my head.
Senses come alive. The smell of her hand. The feel of her palm against my cheek. The sight of her sweet brown eyes.
Yaya is real.
Not a figment of my imagination.
Not an angel here to take me to the afterlife.
Does this mean she's mine? Does this mean I get to love her now, marry her now, impregnate her with all my children?
She drops her hand and I want to nuzzle back into them like a dog with his favorite owner.
Smile growing, she signs, "Surprise!"
"What are you doing here?" I sign. Including the demolished car in my sweeping hand gesture, I ask, "Why did you do this?"
Rather than answer, she produces an envelope and hands it to me.
The last thing I want to do is read it, but she's looking at me so earnestly that I take a deep breath, push my raging desire to kiss her to the side, and read the contents.
By the time I've read the last word, my heart is about to swell to the point of bursting. If I were the kind of man who got emotional, I'd probably be in tears.
"I. Love. You. If you still love me too..." She voices, "Sign here."
"I love you. I will always love you," I sign back.
She taps her lips impatiently.
"But maybe we sign with ink this time. Just in case you want to change your mind."
She rolls her eyes.
I laugh at her response, joy unfurling in my chest. And then I wrap my hands around her waist, crush her to me, and I kiss the living daylights out of her.

CHAPTER 22

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the final contract

THIS COMPENSATION AGREEMENT (this “Agreement”) dated this day

BETWEEN: Richard Sullivan II (the car owner) AND Yaya Williams (the car assailant)

BACKGROUND:

A. The car owner and car assailant entered into an employment agreement for girlfriend services that was later terminated by the car owner.

B. This agreement does not replace the employment agreement that was already terminated. It stands on its own.

IN CONSIDERATION OF and as a condition of the parties entering into this Agreement, the receipt of compensation is as follows:

1. The car owner will receive the car assailant’s unwavering love and respect.

2. The car owner will receive the car assailant's heartfelt loyalty. Should any other car owner appear that has a better car in any way, the original car owner will take precedence.

3. The car owner will be paid in at least three kisses per day in perpetuity, the terms of which can be negotiated in extreme circumstances or where context requires otherwise.

4. On the termination or expiry of this Agreement, the surviving party will be entitled to funeral costs as the ending of this Agreement means one or both parties have passed.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties have duly affixed their signatures under lips and seal on this day.

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CHAPTER 23

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sign and sip

YAYA

Dare's lips move against mine like I'm his poison and his antidote. Like he was on the verge of dying without oxygen and I'm his last tank of air.

My insides melt at his touch, everything turning to mush.

He tilts his head, deepening the kiss, demanding everything. And I hold nothing back, annihilating every inhibition and throwing caution to the wind.

I feel his chest rumble in approval, and he sweeps his hands over me, his insistent fingers dipping under my jumper and tugging my shirt out of my comfy, traveling yoga pants. I flatten my palms against his back, pulling him closer as he roughly places his hands under my blouse. Goosebumps chase every inch of skin his fingers explore.

I suck in a shocked breath when that exploration goes a little further than expected. He smiles at my response, nipping at my bottom lip and tasting my surprise with his tongue.

His nose brushes mine, giving me time to recover and then he proceeds to drape my throat in maddeningly soft kisses. I arch my back and tilt my chin up, allowing full access.

Dare is the only man to make me *need* him. *Want* him. In every way. And it's not a polite kind of desire, the kind that takes a seat and waits its turn. No, it's a need so violent, so urgent that it feels like I'll burst into a million tiny particles if I don't get a taste.

Our physical chemistry is undeniable, but it's more than just carnal desire.

I feel so safe with him, so seen, so prioritized.

I'm right where I want to be.

With the man I want to be with.

And I'm going to show him that he's not the only one who can be daring.

I grab the hair at the nape of Dare's neck, pulling myself forward. Forward. Forward.

Into him.

The friction of his clothes, the hardness of his body, his hand falling a little too low on my back—it's all perfect. And not enough.

His embrace becomes incessant, primitive. He sweeps his tongue into my mouth and stakes his claim, takes immediate ownership. I twist my fingers into his collar, pulling him even closer, inviting him to pillage me for everything I'm worth.

Holy *Chanel*.

I don't realize he's walking me backward until I jolt against something hard. The car I destroyed is at my back and I'm being bent over a hood with a giant, bat-sized dent in it.

Dare's kiss slows down and I feel his focus shifting from me to the vehicle, as if he's concerned about all the glass shards and other possible hazards.

Ugh. He's so *responsible*. I don't care if we're making out in the middle of a knife-throwing contest. It's been too long since I've touched him, too long since his mouth has been on me. I'm not giving him up until I have my fill of his hot, possessive kisses.

Mouth still connected to mine, Dare slips both hands under the small of my back, intending to pulse me upward. Stubbornly, I take his bottom lip into my mouth and suck on it while wrapping my leg around his waist.

The motion drags him forward. His left hand slams the hood next to my head as he loses his balance and falls on top of me. Eyes hooded, he looks at me for a second, not moving. And then he shifts his hips up and down in an intentionally brazen tease.

My heart crashes through my ribs and does a rolling flip to the concrete as lust floods low in my abdomen. I tremble, overheating with sensation,

when he kisses me again. My hands glide down his glorious back, his sides, his stomach.

Don't stop. Don't stop.

In direct contrast to my throbbing lower half's instructions, Dare stops. I loop my arms around his neck and press up, intending to galvanize him back into action. *More rubbing and kissing please.* His hand rises to my waist, and I feel him pulling me up, grounding me so my feet are flat on the pavement.

Annoyance burns my insides.

Why is he stopping me? Who told him he could?

I stubbornly bounce back on my toes and sip from his mouth. Slow and sensual at first. And then quick, determined. I devour my share because I have one mission and one mission only. Dare Sullivan will not be released until I'm satisfied.

His arms relax around me and I feel the fight leave his body.

My heart is about to crash out of my chest like those old commercials of the Kool-Aid man bursting through walls to get into birthday parties.

Until Dare eases back with an annoyed expression, which quickly shifts into a blank stare.

I look around and realize there are two Uruguayan cops glaring darkly at me. They speak at a breakneck speed with lots of pointing and motions. One of them is holding a baton and I flinch.

Uh-oh.

I'm guessing *this* is why Dare tried to slow us down earlier.

My bad.

I'm usually better at picking up on cues, but I lose my mind when his lips are on me.

As I duck behind Dare, I imagine what the angry cops are yelling.

'We got a call. Code 114. Property damage. But now we're going to charge you for public indecency.'

I hope that Dare's argument is convincing enough to keep me from being hauled off in handcuffs. I don't want to go to Uruguayan prison. It was hard enough navigating the local airport alone.

Unfortunately, the cops aren't giving Dare a chance to talk and they both seem pretty amped up.

I glance up to assess Dare's comfort level. If he looks panicked, I'm going to run. I'd rather take my chances at the US embassy.

Thankfully, Dare is calm and seems content to let the cops huff and puff in front of him. When they quiet down, I wait for him to pop out a Spanish translation dictionary or at least try to explain our situation.

Instead, he goes for something in his pocket.

I immediately bristle. Is he taking out his wallet? Does he seriously think he can *bribe* these officers?

He flashes his phone instead and scrolls to his contacts. When he shows it to the police officers, they shift back uneasily. One of them points in Dare's face.

He responds by tapping his phone and putting the device on speaker.

I crowd around Dare, spying on the phone screen.

The contact name is saved as 'Commissioner'.

My eyes collide with Dare's and he winks at me before voicing something that makes the police officers jump back. Their shocked gazes ricochet from Dare to the phone. After a minute or two, they shake Dare's hand, wave politely to me and drive off.

I blink up in surprise. "What just happened?"

"The Commissioner wanted to thank me for my donation to the social justice initiative."

I scrunch my nose. Life really is all about who you know.

Before I can let the horror of capitalism sink in, Dare turns to me. His gaze is so focused, it makes my stomach quiver.

"I missed you," he signs. His eyes darken as they lower to my mouth. It's a look of dirty promises and wicked delights. "Want to go upstairs?"

Aaaand, now my stomach isn't the only thing that's quivering.

I so badly want to be whisked away to Dare's room, but my sense of responsibility won't let me leave this mess.

"I need to clean this up first," I sign, pointing to the discarded bat and the mounds of glass shards.

"I'll ask the hotel to take care of it."

"It's my responsibility," I insist.

"They won't have a problem." He starts to reach for my hand so he can tug me away.

I resist.

He frowns.

I frown harder.

He sighs, shakes his head, and then a small, amused smile lifts his lips. "This is how it's going to be for the rest of our lives, isn't it?"

"You'll learn to love it."

He laughs.

I smile harder and sign, "Now get me a broom."

Dare fetches the broom, but he insists on doing all the work for me. Once he ditches his tweed jacket and starts unbuttoning his cuffs, I stop protesting and enjoy the show.

While I'm on a bench nearby watching his sexy back muscles contracting beneath the button-down shirt, Mosely texts me.

Mosely: Did your plan work?

I imagine that scorching-hot kiss and grin like a lunatic.

Yaya: I think so. Yeah.

Mosely: Good. Enjoy your drive. He hasn't been doing anything but working since you parted ways. Maybe stop by a restaurant and get Dare some dirt too.

Yaya: ?? Dirt?

Mosely: He said food tastes like dirt now, which is why he won't eat.

I frown in concern and look Dare over. Come to think of it, he does seem a little leaner. Earlier, when I had my hand on his face, his cheekbones felt more pronounced. At the time, I thought it was because we hadn't seen each other for a while and I'd forgotten the details of his face but now...

A shadow falls in front of me.

I look up and see Dare, barely winded, with the broom in his hand and a trash bag tied at his feet. I grab my phone and take a picture of his sexy, sweaty face. Would anyone back in the city believe I had *the* Dare Sullivan cleaning the streets in Uruguay?

"All done?" I sign.

He reaches a hand out to me and pulls me to my feet. "While I was cleaning up the wreckage, I noticed something. That car wasn't a Black Feather."

I quirk an eyebrow. "Did you think I'd be stupid enough to trash *another* expensive car? There are only five Black Feathers in the world, you know?"

"I do know." His eyes linger on my lips. "Should I buy them all for you so you can take your bat to them one-by-one?"

Rolling my eyes, I shove him.

He captures my hand and pulls me closer.
My chest brushes his with every inhale.
His thumb caresses my knuckles. Back and forth. Back and forth.
Each sweep revs my engines.
My brain and body are in agreement for once.
Get Dare naked.
Straddle his perfect body.

Comb your fingers through his hair while he gives you all the pleasure you can handle.

I try to swallow and realize there's not enough water in my mouth to do so. Fanning my face, I turn away.

I'm thinking of bunnies hopping in emerald-green fields, babies rattling their toys. Ferns. Lots and lots of ferns. The ferns I'll plant in exchange for my private jet passage.

Slowly, my blood returns to a normal temperature.

Food before anything.

Spending the night with Dare won't be fun if he passes out from malnutrition. And if I have to cart him, naked and unresponsive, to a hospital in a foreign land where they only have Spanish Sign Language interpreters... It's a horrible thought.

After performing my own hypothetical ice bucket challenge, I feel comfortable enough to close the distance between me and Dare. Running my hand down his chest, I look up, smile and sign, "I want to go upstairs."

His fingers close around my wrist immediately.

"But," I shake him off, "there's something we need to do first."

* * *

Dare is *not* happy when I lead him to the hotel's dining room instead of his suite and he makes it very clear by scowling so hard the waitress's hand shakes when she pours our water.

"I'm not hungry," he signs when we're alone.

"I heard you haven't been eating."

"Mosely," he grumbles.

"Forget Mosely. *I'm* hungry," I sign.

“Is that why you ordered steak? You’re no longer on a diet?” He shows me the phone that’s still open to my notepad.

“Okay, fine. I was told you’re on the verge of collapsing.”

His entire chest fills and empties on a sigh.

“Dare, I’ve been in the industry for years now. I’ve seen what malnutrition does to a body. It can really damage you.”

“I’ll eat after,” he argues.

I try *so hard* not to picture what he’s intending to eat ‘before’.

“I’m not happy about it either,” I sign. “If *someone* had been feeding himself instead of getting buried in work like a zombie, we’d be having a different conversation right now.”

His eyes narrow. “If *someone* had told me earlier that they were still single and not dating their male best friend, I wouldn’t have had to bury myself in work.”

“Do you really want to play blame games? Right now?”

“No. I really want you naked. Underneath me. Upstairs.”

Heat blasts my face and I push his hand down. “Dare!”

A quick glance around reveals that no one is looking.

He captures my wrist and signs with his other hand. “No one can understand us.”

Which makes it even more scandalous.

He keeps a firm hold on my hand. That dangerous, dark look is back in his eyes. How on earth did he show such self-restraint when this insatiable beast was inside him all along?

Dare gestures for me to come over.

“Where?”

He doesn’t expound until I get up from the table. He guides me to his side of the booth and tugs me into the seat beside him. I fall with a plop. That’s still not enough for him. Dare winds his hands around my lower hip and jerks me close. Everywhere from my thighs to my arms touches his.

He nods as if satisfied and avoids the glare I’m sending his way. Probably because he’s too busy rubbing a circle in my knee.

My needy body screams in time to each completed circumference. Since when did he get so good at... signing with one hand?

“You looked beautiful in the show,” he signs, twisting his body so he can face me. “You were magnificent.”

“You were there?”

He nods.

“You were late. I was hoping you’d be there from the beginning.”

“Were you waiting for me?”

“I had this whole routine planned out with placards and everything.”

“You did?” His eyes glisten.

“I did.”

“You’ll have to show me next time.”

I don’t have a response. His caresses have moved up my thigh now, so dangerously close to where I need him to be.

Heart thumping, I press my thighs together to keep him from going into public indecency territory. I don’t want any more visits from the Uruguayan police. Plus I’m sure all the nice tourists don’t want their vacation in South America ending with Richard Sullivan the Second going to Richard Sullivan the *third-base* with his girlfriend in the hotel restaurant.

I shoot Dare a warning glance.

His responding smile is wicked and knowing, but he drops his caressing back to my knee. “How did you handle moving around Uruguay without an interpreter?”

“Don’t ask,” I sign.

Thankfully, the flight to South America was pretty uneventful since I was able to ‘borrow’ Sazuki’s private jet—with an internal promise to plant as many trees as I humanly could for the next year.

But while most US airports have accessibility systems in place, the rest of the world isn’t that accommodating. The process of clearing immigration, catching a taxi, translating my notepad texts into Spanish—ugh. Overwhelming is an understatement.

My hand unconsciously fiddles with the button on the watch and I’m a little startled when I see both watches lighting up.

Dare glances at me with an amused smile. “How long have you had Talia’s watch?”

“About a week.”

He nods as if that corresponds with his suspicions. “I noticed it flashing often in the past few days.”

“I told myself I’d be patient and wait for you to show up at the fashion show, but I broke and eventually asked Talia if I could be there when you did a video chat.” As I sign, his eyes widen. I’m sure he hadn’t been aware that I was nearby on that call last Saturday. “She must have seen how

emotional I got. She gave me the watch and told me I needed it more than her.”

“I’ll buy her a jet,” Dare signs, looking like the world’s proudest uncle.

“How about we stick to making her flower girl at the wedding?”

Joy springs to life in his face. “Speaking of, how soon should we have the wedding?”

“As soon as you propose.” I notice him gearing up to sign a ‘marry me’ and grab his hand. “No need to rush. We just got back together.”

“And I already have a signed contract saying we’ll never be apart again. All we need now is the reception.”

I laugh. “Don’t even think about it. I want a big wedding in a giant Cinderella dress with all my friends and family there.”

“You would look stunning in a Cinderella dress.” He rubs his chin. “Would that make me the Prince?”

“That would make you the fairy god-father since I already know you’ll insist on paying for it.”

“I’m happy to be both.”

“I’m happy you’re happy,” I sign.

Eyes going soft, Dare leans forward and kisses me. I kiss him back for all I’m worth, content to pretend we’re in our own little world.

But we’re not.

I feel a shadow across our table, sense something blocking the air conditioning and realize we have a guest.

Dare breaks off too and I applaud myself for getting it right this time. Now that I know how lost I can get in his kisses, my spatial awareness will need a few adjustments.

The waitress rushes to put the food on the table, but before she can hustle away, Dare voices to her. I wait for him to interpret what he said, but he doesn’t. Instead, he stands and the waitress takes the food away.

“Where are we going?” I sign, utterly confused. “You haven’t eaten yet.”

Dare points a finger up.

I frown, but he doesn’t allow me to argue. He leads me to the elevator and tries to back me into a corner and kiss me. Pushing him away, I frown.

“You promised you’d eat first.”

“And I will,” he signs back, unbothered.

His calmness sets me off. “Food.” I punctuate the sign with an eyebrow raise and jerky movements. “You’re supposed to eat food.”

“As opposed to what?” His eyebrow arch is downright naughty.

Something catches in my throat and I cough.

Thankfully, the elevators open.

I rush out in a cloud of embarrassment.

Once we get to Dare’s hotel room, my embarrassment disappears in a plume of fragrant smoke.

Shyness takes over in its place.

It’s been a while since I’ve been with anyone.

Okay, it’s been forever.

And I’m sure Dare’s had way more, uh, practice than me. What if this doesn’t go to either of our expectations because of our differences?

Don’t freak out. Just get undressed first.

I shrug out of my jumper, standing in my T-shirt and yoga pants, before suddenly freezing in the doorway.

Wait. Why am I alone here?

Dare was walking toward the balcony, but he notices that I’m not with him. He turns and his eyes meet mine.

I blink.

One side of his lips arches up darkly. He beckons me.

My feet are rooted in place, but my heart pops out of my chest and races around the room like a hairball in a hurricane.

Dare’s eyes glint in the semi-darkness. He approaches me with measured steps. A shadow gliding across a gilded room. It’s not long until he’s standing there, hovering over me. I retreat, suddenly fearful.

The doorknob digs into my back.

I tell myself to calm down as he reaches out to me.

My heart picks up speed.

So we’re doing this now? I quickly take stock of my presentation. I’m wearing my nude underwear from the show. I shaved, again... for the show. And my hair is a fresh install... thank you Tru Essential Fashion Show.

But I’ve had hours of traveling. Should I brush my teeth first? And does Dare have protection?

Three thick thumps vibrate the door at my back. Is someone knocking?

My head whips up and I take in Dare’s fond little smile. A second later, he twists the door knob... which was what he’d been reaching for earlier.

Not me.

Another wave of heat hits my face and I realize I might die of humiliation before any clothes can come off. In fact, I'm already half-liquid. By the time Dare actually has his way with me, I'll be a puddle of human goo.

The door opens wider and the hotel staff wheel in our dinner. They leave after receiving a tip and Dare closes the door.

We're alone again.

He shakes his head slowly. "What wild thoughts are you thinking, sugar?"

I feel dizzy when I see Dare making the 'cute' sign with all four fingers.

A slow, burning pleasure washes through me. It's like he put those fingers on my body.

"Where did you learn that?"

"Come sit on my lap and find out," he signs.

Oh-ho.

Who is this Dare and where did he come from?

After delivering that sensual invitation, Dare pushes the cart outside. The suite has a private balcony that's high enough to touch the stars.

There's a balmy breeze coming from the sea, flickering against two wicker chairs with green cushions and a round table, which Dare pulls closer. He sets out the food and then takes a seat. Legs slightly spread. Back straight. Eyes on me.

While his gaze is thick and unwavering, I take an unsteady step forward.

Another.

Another.

Until I'm in front of him.

I glance at the second chair that's a nice, healthy distance away from Dare. And then I return to his eyes and find him looking at me, chin tilted up in challenge.

Determined, I walk toward him and start to lower myself on his lap, butt first. Dare's big, firm hands cup my hips and spin me around. The next thing I know, I'm straddling his lap.

I feel my body temperature spiking when Dare signs, "Face me. Always. I want to see you."

The balcony gets ten times hotter and I'm wondering how on earth I managed to resist him for this long when he is the sexiest man under every sky in every nation.

I settle myself on his legs, eyes fluttering closed in anticipation. His hand brushes my cheek and my insides set off fireworks. I expect his warm and tender mouth to meet mine. Instead, something that smells distinctly like barbecue taps my lips, demanding entrance.

Eyes bursting open, I see Dare feeding me a piece of his steak.

Wait... are we... actually eating food now?

The urgency I'm feeling is *not* reflecting in his expression as Dare waits patiently for me to open up. What is this? Some kind of test? Or does he want to taste the barbecue on my tongue while he's kissing me? It's a little... out there, but I'm open-minded.

Nose scrunching—that really is a high barbecue smell—I nibble at the end of his fork and take a bite that is respectful of my calorie output.

Dare tries to maneuver the fork back to the plate without gouging me with his elbows. I see him struggling and take the fork, spearing some vegetables and offering it to him.

He smirks a bit as he takes the food into his mouth. “You get the steak and I get the vegetables?”

“You *are* older. You need the nutrients.”

He laughs.

I spear a piece of the steak and offer it to him. Jokes are great and all, but I'm glad to see him eating something. It pains me to hear that he was suffering so much while we were apart.

Dare chews and observes my face. Suddenly, he places a finger between my eyebrows.

“What's wrong?” he signs.

“Nothing.” I offer him a sip of wine. “I just made a promise to myself.”

“What promise?”

“To take care of you even more than you take care of me.”

He stills, his eyes scouring mine.

I duck to escape from his persistent gaze and gulp some of the wine, drinking from his cup. Dare doesn't let me deflect. He takes the wine away, grips my chin and brings me close for a firm kiss. His tongue sweeps into my mouth and every nerve in my body buzzes and hums with electricity.

He pulls back, eyes half-mast.

I'm trembling from the magnitude of my love for him. The vulnerability, the softness Dare brings out in me is terrifying. It was fine when I knew I was falling, but it's another thing to recognize how *far* I've fallen.

I love that Dare is hearing.

I love that he's so generous with his wealth.

I've come to terms with the things I once thought were too difficult to accept.

But now, I face the biggest challenge of all.

Dare himself.

This man can destroy me. I've given my heart to him. And if I ever lose him again...

He captures my chin, keeping my head up. "What are you thinking, Yaya?"

The words are whispered, but I'm able to lipread.

"Have some more wine," I sign.

Dare grabs my hand before I can reach for the glass. Moonlight reflects in his chocolate eyes. "The wine tastes better on your lips."

This time, when he kisses me, it's not soft and tempered. It's urgent. Hungry. Almost too rough. But I lean into it, sliding down further into his lap until I'm flat against his hard chest.

My legs spread even more, open and ready. Primed for all of him. Slight pain pinches my knee. The fabric of the wicker chair is a hard plastic, despite its outward appearance of hay or wood. It digs into my lower legs while Dare's wicked fingers skate over my upper thighs.

It's obvious how much he wants me, especially when he flattens one hand against the center of my back and pulls me even more into him, palming my hip.

I feel his touch like a snap of thunder. Like the stars are falling from the sky, burning me from head to toe. I grip his thick hair, curling my fingertips into his scalp and tugging for dear life to the tune of a thousand suns crackling under my skin.

He pulls back, mouth slack and glistening with my lip gloss. He drags his lips along the line of my jaw and then skims the sensitive skin right below my ear. My hearing aids jostle as he places kisses there.

I caress his neck, draping myself over him. Already spent. Already wrung dry.

And he hasn't even taken my clothes off.

Say anything you want about Richard Sullivan... but the man can *kiss*.

I wonder if it's from all that 'experience'. Is this why my sister chose an older guy too?

There's an ease, a confidence to the way he touches me. Like he knows exactly what to do. Like he has no doubt in his mind that he'll have ruined me for any other man by the time he's done.

Not that I *want* any other man.

Not that I can even think about...

Dare's hand snakes under my white T-shirt and he reveals a brilliant display of dexterity when he discards everything underneath it in record time.

My hair swings forward to cover my face as I slightly lift and adjust myself on his lap, waiting for more undressing. But *more* doesn't come. His eyes move to my mouth and the attention of his fingers soon follows. He tugs on my bottom lip with his thumb and then offers me another bite of steak.

I'm fully clothed but I'm also bra-less. Hidden, but exposed.

I nibble at the meat, skin buzzing.

Dare slips his fingers under my blouse again and I almost choke on my steak. The side of his mouth curves upwards as he hands the fork back to me, one arm free while the other is completely disappearing under my clothes.

"Are we eating food or not? I don't like multi-tasking," I sign, easing forward so his hands can skate up my body.

"And I don't like repeating myself."

"Did you ask me something?"

"What are you thinking?"

Huh. He did ask me that earlier.

"You're very persistent."

"You're very evasive," he signs back.

I hiss when his thumb skates higher, marking a straight line up my chest.

"So this is my punishment for not answering you?" I sign.

"Think of it more as a reward for when you do." His fingers move in slow circles. And then he stops.

I shift forward until my face is buried under his jaw. He gathers an expansive breath and eases me backward.

"I'm waiting," he signs.

"It's your fault I can't concentrate. I'm a simple girl. I can only focus on one thing at a time."

"Then focus on me. Tell me your doubts so I can prove why your fears won't come true." Something in his expression makes me pause and I realize he's willing to end our night right here just to hash this out with me.

My movements are clumsy as I scramble back a bit. Dare allows the distance, his gaze trained on my face.

I frown. "You're not supposed to understand me that well yet."

Humor and affection flares in his eyes, brightening them. "I study what I care about and, the truth is, Yaya Williams, there is no one in this world I care about more than you. So explain to me why I saw fear in your eyes when you looked at me."

Realizing he won't let this go, I finally cave. "I just," I lick my lips, "don't want to lose you again."

"Isn't that what the contract is for?"

"You have a lot of faith in contracts."

He doesn't deny it. "A contract is more substantial than a verbal agreement."

"Marriages are contracts too, and people divorce all the time."

"Marriages are about commitment and communication. The terms are simple. People are the ones who make it complicated."

"Exactly." I sign, "Communication is a hard enough task when two people speak the same language. We don't. What if we have more major misunderstandings in the future? Love alone won't always be enough."

"That's true." He rubs his chin and then signs, "If it pleases you, I can have my lawyers draft a marital contract stating that you'll get all my assets if I ever leave you. We can also add a clause for marital therapy if the need arises."

I frown in frustration. "That's not what I meant. See? Even now, it feels like we're talking two different languages."

He scrutinizes me, as if looking for the answers in my face. "I will never leave you. I will never let an argument drive a wedge between us. I will never misunderstand you—"

"That's impossible. Of course you'll misunderstand me. We're human."

“Exactly. We’re human. Fickle. Unreliable. That’s why verbal promises won’t give you the reassurance you seek. I can’t kill your doubts for you. Yaya. There are some conclusions you must reach for yourself. All I can do is prove to you, with my actions, that you’re safe with me. As a businessman, this is how I show my sincerity. This is how I choose you. Because no matter what option you’re up against, no matter who in the world dares to present a choice to me, I will always choose you.”

He starts to reach for his phone as if he’ll call his lawyers right this minute. The poor guys probably rue the day they agreed to take Richard Sullivan’s shiny retainer fees.

I grip his hand before he can do anything. “Call them tomorrow.”

“It’s early enough.”

“Let’s finish eating.”

He narrows his eyes.

I avoid his gaze and admit, “I believe you, Dare. The problem isn’t that I don’t trust you. It’s that I do. So much. These feelings are new and a bit overwhelming. It’s true that I’m still a little fearful, but it’s not of you. It’s not of us. It’s of the future and what the world might throw at us. But I’m here because I believe we can overcome anything.” I take a sip of the wine, lean over and chase his mouth. Our lips meet in a gentle kiss. Easing back, I sign, “And I promise I won’t leave you either.”

He looks at me, dazed.

Feeling calmer, I pick up the fork and offer him another taste of the food. When he doesn’t move to eat it, I turn the food on myself.

Before I can take a bite, the fork is abruptly removed from my grip and Dare is surging at me. A violent tremor wracks my body as he conquers my mouth so thoroughly that my head lulls back.

While I’m distracted by his roaming lips and tongue, Dare somehow manages to rid me of my shirt and roll my yoga pants to my knees. I only register my nakedness when the heat from his kisses can no longer compete with the balmy wind, tapping against my exposed skin.

A strike of sobriety fills me. *What if someone sees?* This high up in the penthouse suite, we’re semi-secluded, but there are other hotels on this stretch of the beach.

My protests die before they see the light as the slide of Dare’s tongue has me closing my eyes again. His kisses become purposefully succulent, as

if he's forcing himself to slow down and make love to me with his mouth before we consummate with our bodies.

My eyes flutter open and meet his, a dark and dizzying obsidian.

He slips a hand under my thighs and lifts me. I expect him to take me into the bedroom, but he sets me on the edge of the wicker chair instead. The lumpy weaving makes me wince and Dare notices immediately.

He lifts me again and adjusts me on the edge of the sturdy round table we'd been eating on, shoving aside our plates to make room. My breathing stutters and then gallops as he pushes my dangling legs further apart.

I figure this is a give and take moment and I reach out to undress him.

He snatches my wrist and lifts my hands above my head, pinning me in place with his hungry stare.

All the air flees my body in a whoosh as he kneels and directs those relishing, succulent kisses to somewhere other than my mouth. Uncontainable energy bursts through me. My newly freed hands scramble on the table, skidding across filmy glass and hitting a plate. The dishes crash to the floor, whatever noises they make only serving to spur Dare on.

The skillfulness of his mouth and tongue make me beg him in my thoughts and plead with him in sign, neither of which slows the agonizing bliss that sends white hot lights blazing across the sky. Or maybe that light is inside my own mind. Behind my own eyelids. Tattooed under my skin.

I don't know.

I don't know anything anymore.

Except that Dare's only whet an appetite that's unquenchable.

By the time I come to, I realize I'm clawing at his belt.

This is an impatience I've never experienced. It's agony to have him touching me and not being able to return the favor. I want to set him on fire. I want to leave him in an equally breathless heap.

But Dare grips my arms and eases me back, licking his lips like a chef ruminating over his favorite meal.

He's a wild man. Everything about him is raw and addictive and untucked. No perfectly coiffed hair tonight. Now it's untamed, rifled as much by my fingers as it is by the wind. No perfectly shaved jawline and chin. Now the scruff is thick enough to prickle my skin, adding new layers of sensation to our kiss.

"Do you know," Dare signs, panting as if he'd been the one on the receiving end of greedy hands and wicked lips, "how gorgeous you sound

when you groan?”

“Me?” I sign, my eyebrows climbing. I send a swift glance down at the broken plates near his feet. Wow. Did we have so many dishes tonight?

“Are you sure you weren’t hearing those?”

His fingertips slide up my thigh and back down. “You’re joking.”

I can barely remember how to sign right now, much less crack a joke.

“You didn’t know?” Dare looks alarmed. As if the fact that I’m noisy should be a nationally celebrated fact. Like a parade should be thrown.

I shake my head ‘no’. That’s the first time anyone’s told me that. Although, to be fair, I’ve only ever been with guys from my community.

Dare mumbles to himself, “So these sounds are just for me.”

I don’t know if he remembers that I can read lips, especially when I’m naked and nose to nose with the person speaking.

I don’t think he cares.

His mouth tightens as if he’s struggling to keep himself together and the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention.

A jaw muscle clenches and, if not for the hunger in his eyes, I’d think he was angry. Slashing eyebrows. Clenched fingers. Everything about his body language screams that he’s about to lose his mind.

As if to prove this is something far more enticing than anger, Dare lets his fingers play again and I know I react with another groan because his face crumples and he grits his teeth even harder.

It’s a struggle to catch my breath, but I sit up. My head lolls. It feels like I’m drunk. Like I’m floating on one of those drugs the girls at the agency sometimes sniff to take the edge off.

Why are we having this discussion when only one of us is naked?

He’s going to make me beg, isn’t he?

But thankfully, I don’t have to bury my pride—which I totally would for the sake of getting Dare’s clothes off—to get Dare moving again.

He lifts me in his arms, cradling me like I’m fragile glass and takes me to the bed. Clothes disappear with each flap of my eyelashes.

Blink.

Dare is infinitely hotter shirtless than in tweed, which I didn’t think was possible.

Blink.

My yoga pants have been trapped around my ankles for so long I didn’t realize they were still *on* me until they were gone, fluttering to the floor

along with Dare's pants.

Blink.

It's not just Dare's pants that are on the floor.

I blink again and Dare's reaching for something in the hotel drawer while I'm trying to do mental calculations about round holes and round pegs and frantically calling on every biology lesson that promised humans have been making those particular items fit for millennia.

I suck in a sharp breath when Dare climbs over me, but he doesn't move closer. Instead, he stretches out beside me and takes both my hands. He places a tender kiss on one hand and then the other. And then he kisses each of my fingers.

By the time he's done, I'm about to roll over him myself and take control.

Reverently, he lifts one hand to his chest and places it over his heart. I feel the vibration against my palm. It's thumping hard and fast.

Eyes covered in shadows thrown from the lamp, Dare signs, "Remember my promise?"

What promise? The one that involves him putting me out of my misery this instant? Because if he hasn't made that promise yet, he should.

I shake my head.

"I will always be facing you." He traces my hands. "I'll always be watching you."

I nod.

He keeps tracing. "Your eyes will let me know what you like, but you can tell me in other ways too." He brings my hand to his chest and slides my fingers down, down, down. "Talk to me in whatever language you want. I'll listen."

I know he will.

Because this powerful, lithe, stunning man loves me selflessly and sacrificially.

So, I pull him into me and groan for him in a language that only Dare—the love of my life, the man of my dreams—can hear.

CHAPTER 24

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a birdie for a ring

DARE

The bed is not our final destination that evening.

We also revisit the balcony.

And the balcony railings themselves—those were my favorite. The way Yaya's screams echoed over the crashing waves and got thrown back by the wind changed the entire course of my life.

Now, the sun is rising and Yaya's asleep.

Poor thing.

I should tease her about not being able to keep up with an old man later. That will probably lead to her wanting to prove me wrong. And the thought of all the ways she'll do that has me shifting in my big spoon position and burying my nose in her neck.

Yaya swats at me, not used to being in bed with someone who likes to cuddle.

Frankly, the way she was responding to my touch last night, I don't think she's had much experience being in bed with someone period.

I can't wait to spend a lifetime exploring every inch of her, what she likes, what she loves, what makes her groan in *that* way so I can do it again and again without thought.

Yaya turns and the silk bonnet she's wearing fans out behind her head. I had the hotel staff scouring the city at an unholy hour to find her a proper bonnet.

Yaya had mentioned that she never slept without protection for her hair and, when she saw the fuss I was making, tried to convince me that it wasn't important.

Ridiculous.

If none of the hotel staff had produced a bonnet, I would have awoken the entire city to locate one.

Her breathing brings me back to the moment. Yaya turns around in her sleep. She smiles as if having a sweet dream and her breath escapes on a contented sigh. I grin in return, looking down at her eyelashes—why are they so long?—and her pouty lips—why hasn't someone signed her to a makeup label yet?—and my chest tightens.

She looks much younger when she's asleep. Peaceful. Someone men fight wars for. Someone they'd undoubtedly protect.

I want to protect her, protect that determination and optimism with all my heart. Nothing bad is allowed to touch her. Nothing ugly. Nothing grim. Nothing that can dim her light. I'll fight them all first.

Yaya slings her arm around me and her leg kicks up on mine too. Her mouth slackens and I swear she marks the sign for sleep on my back.

I should probably take that advice, but I've been powering on with zero rest for years now and I'd much rather spend the time with my eyes open, watching her.

What a view.

Soft brown skin dips from her jaw muscles to her neck. Unblemished. Soft as a flower petal. Her long, sloping nose draws my eyes next. Her nostrils flare as she sleeps.

I haven't shared my siren theory with Yaya yet. I doubt she'd believe me. But a beauty this unearthly has to come from some kind of legend. If not sirens then... fairies? Perhaps an African folktale I've yet to learn about?

Yaya's watch buzzes.

She'd taken Talia's off last night, but she kept hers on. That thing buzzes hard enough to set off a bomb.

Lurching forward, I check on who's calling so I can decide if it's worth rousing her from sleep.

'DEEJ'.

I debate waking Yaya to answer her sister's text when the buzzing stops. A second later, my phone rings.

I roll out of bed to answer it in the bathroom. “Good morning, Mrs. Sazuki.”

“Dare,” she sounds bright and chirpy, “given my sister did not fly back on the jet crying and plotting your imminent demise, I can assume she’s with you and you’re back together?”

“Yes, she is and yes we are,” I confirm.

“Well, that means you can drop the ‘Mrs. Sazuki’ crap. You’re family now. Trapped really. Guard your loins.”

My loins are very much unguarded at the moment, but I fear that’s a little too much to share with my sister-in-law. “Noted.”

I hear shuffling in the background of the call and some kind of mumbling.

“Ryo is asking if you plan on marrying my sister anytime soon. He wants to know how distracted I’ll be in the next few months.”

I laugh. “Yes, I want to propose soon. I’d like to speak to your father. Get his blessing. Is that something you can help me arrange?”

“A meeting? Yes. A blessing... Dad’s been itching to talk to you since he found out about all this.”

That sounds ominous.

“Oh it’s not as bad as it sounds,” Dejonae says laughingly. “Even Sazuki got dad to turn on the waterworks. He’s a big old softie. Especially if he trusts you’ll take care of his girls.”

“I get the feeling he might be a bit more protective of Yaya.”

“You’re not wrong,” she says thoughtfully. “My sister might act tough, but she’s got dad’s marshmallow heart.”

That she does. It’s why I was so drawn to her when we first met.

“I know how well you’ve been treating her while you were ‘fake dating’,” Dejonae adds. “I hope that doesn’t change now that you’re dating for real.”

“It will change. But for the better.” I no longer have to hold myself back and I look forward to that freedom.

“Where is Yaya now? She hasn’t responded to my texts.”

“She’s... tired.”

“Oh. *Oh*. Well, I’ll let you get back to, um, ‘it’.” Dejonae signs off after an awkward goodbye.

I listen to the dial tone ring in my ear and chuckle. Yaya will be inundated with questions from her sister later. Perhaps I should give her a

warning.

Since I'm already in the bathroom, I take a shower and get dressed. Next, I call Mosely.

"What's on our agenda for the day, sir? More meetings?"

"No, I have something even more important to do."

"A call with Cullen Tech?"

"A date with my girlfriend."

"Ah."

"You can complete the rest of our itinerary alone, Mosely."

"Yes, sir!"

I laugh at how happy he sounds. "Were things that dire?"

"You looked like death warmed over, sir. I was genuinely concerned you'd leave Uruguay in an urn."

"Well, let's be glad you won't have to attend another Richard Sullivan funeral any time soon. I look terrible as ashes."

"Oh dear." As Mosely speaks, I can picture him scowling in disdain. "Are bad jokes a side effect of being in love, sir?"

"Would you like your pay deducted, Mosely?"

He bursts out laughing. "You're a comedic genius."

I smirk and hang up on him.

Next, I call the hotel and order room service, but change my mind and ask them to bring up only one item instead. I have a feeling Yaya will sleep in and I'd rather eat with her than alone.

By the time she wakes up, the sun is already high in the sky and the beach below is crowded with locals and tourists enjoying the water and sunbathing under giant umbrellas.

Yaya blinks at the bright sunshine and seems to be mentally calculating where she is and why. I love that befuddled, innocent look on her face.

"Hello, beautiful," I sign.

"What time is it?"

"About time for lunch."

She massages her throat and makes a pained face.

I spring into action. "What's wrong?"

"My throat hurts."

"I figured it might." I stride over to the electric kettle the staff brought up and pour out the tea I kept warm for her.

Yaya gives me an adoring look when I hand her the cup. She takes a sip and her eyes flutter closed in bliss.

I sit on the edge of the bed, watching her.

This woman is like my own personal sunrise. I will never get enough.

Yaya pokes an eye open. Smiling, she sets the cup aside and signs, “How did you know my throat was going to hurt?”

“I called Athena and asked what the ramifications are when someone who mostly signs uses their voice as much as you did last night.”

Yaya glances away shyly. “Did you... mention the details of last night to her?”

“Only hypothetically, but I think she caught on anyway.” Athena is far too sharp-witted to not understand.

Yaya collects herself and looks back at me to sign, “And what did Athena say?”

“That when your primary language is ASL, your hands don’t get tired, but your throat does.” I pick up the tea again and offer it to her. “Drink more.”

Yaya obliges me. When she’s done, she shifts off the bed to use the bathroom. I notice her wincing and flinch, imagining how sore she must be this morning.

While she’s gone, I order room service for us both.

The bathroom door cracks open and Yaya shuffles over to her phone. She smiles when she sees the text from DeeJ and then her eyes dart slyly to me. I imagine she’s thinking of how best to relay our night together.

While she’s occupied with that, I fill the bath for her and return to find her sitting up on the bed.

“Are you working again today?” she signs. There’s a hopefulness in her eyes that conveys she’d like me to say no.

“I am,” I sign. Kissing her forehead, I say, “you’re my most important appointment.”

That makes her smile wide.

I pick Yaya up off the bed. She throws her arms around me and cuddles into my chest. It’s such a subtle move, but it conveys all her trust in me and I don’t take it lightly.

In the bathroom, I set her on her feet and test the water temperature. Next, I help her disrobe and move her into the water.

It's amazing the way she doesn't fight me at all but, when she sinks in the warmth of the water and closes her eyes, I realize she accepted the gesture out of necessity.

My heart pains me and I make a note to be gentler with her tonight.

It seems she wants to soak for a bit, so I leave her alone and accept the food that's arrived. Yaya emerges from the bathroom, wearing my button-down and a tweed sweater. She's tied everything with a belt so, despite my clothes being far larger than her, they look chic and runway ready.

"Stunning," I sign as she sits down to eat.

"I know." She grins and picks up her fork. Tossing her hair over one shoulder, she digs in. When she notices I'm not joining her, she stops and looks up in inquiry.

"How do you feel about mixing business and pleasure?" I sign.

"If you mean how comfortable I am having a repeat of last night in your office, I'm down."

I chuckle. "Noted, but that's not what I meant. I'd like you to continue to be the face of Tru Essentials, but I don't want you to feel pressured because of our relationship."

"A man who draws a bath for me, orders tea for me, treats me the way you do cannot 'pressure me' into doing anything," Yaya signs. "The more you do for me, the more I want to do for you."

My lips quirk up and I kiss her briefly. Pulling back, I sign, "I appreciate that, but I guess my question is better framed as 'what would you like to do going forward'? I know you had your plans with Henry."

"Those plans are long gone."

"And Henry?"

She looks a little sad as she signs, "Long gone too."

I wish I could feel sorry about that, but I don't.

She purses her lips, head tilted to the side and eyes on the ceiling. Her thinking face is as alluring as all the ones she made while under me. I make a concerted effort to keep myself in my seat. This conversation is important and I don't want to cut it short by throwing her back into the very bed that caused her to need a soak in the tub this morning.

"If you'd still like to create your own brand, there's space under the Tru Essentials umbrella," I sign. Going over to my laptop, I show her what I've been working on all morning. "Or we can branch out on your own name. I

can purchase a studio. Hire the best editors. Get you going with a YouTube channel.”

She laughs. “When did you put a report together?”

“You’re aware you woke at noon?” I sign with a dry expression.

“You’re aware you kept me up until three a.m.?” she signs back with an attitude.

“Should we keep this going? Because I have several marks on my shoulder that you and your pretty teeth need to take account for.”

She pins her lips together and shifts in her seat. “We can stop here.”

“So would you like the studio?”

“No, Dare. I don’t.”

I smile at her response because it’s exactly what I expected. “I understand that you want to do things on your own, but you don’t have to. I’m here to help in whatever way I can.”

“It’s not that I’m rejecting your help. I just have a different dream.”

I lean forward, watching as her eyes sparkle.

“While I was creating those news stories to fight against Carmichael’s smear campaign—”

“Wait.” I sign over her which is something I really try not to do, but I can’t help myself. “That was you?”

Yaya nods and rolls right on as if she hasn’t rocked my world again. With her clothes on. At noon no less.

“I really liked using my platform to highlight positive stories rather than clothes and shoes. Don’t get me wrong. I love fashion. I will always love fashion, but I see it as a vehicle for a story and not the destination. You know? Pretty clothes will get people to stop scrolling, but the stories will get people to think.”

I take off my boyfriend hat and put on my business one. After mulling it over, I nod. “I like it.”

“You do?” she signs, her eyes wide with excitement.

I get up and crowd her chair. Gripping the back of her seat and placing one hand on the table, I whisper, “But you know what I like more?”

Her eyes dart from my lips to my eyes. “What?”

“You.”

She groans and lifts her hands, probably to tell me how cheesy I am. But she doesn’t get a chance because I’m far too busy kissing her and picking her up so I can take her back to bed.

* * *

Yaya and I spend a few more days exploring Uruguay. It's a lesson in compromise as I'm more of a 'surf the waves, ride a Jet ski, adventure guy' and Yaya is all about avoiding mosquitos, staying close to civilization, and lounging.

It's easy to cater to her every want. Especially when she's determined to cater to mine.

But that's a problem too.

We end up fighting over whose plan we're going to follow.

I make sure I win most of the time.

Hey, happy soon-to-be wife, happy life.

And I want my life to be the happiest it can be.

When we get back stateside, I spend a bit of time working out a better schedule with Mosely, drawing on Holland Alistair's strategy of hiring multiple personal assistants.

Mosely will oversee them for a short time and then he's retiring. I'll be sad to see him go, but he's more than earned a life of leisure and respite after taking care of both me and my father.

I accompany Talia on a one-on-one trip to Disney land as repayment for her lending Yaya her watch.

And then I visit Mr. Williams.

Yaya's dad is a big man with dark skin and laugh lines that are so pronounced when he speaks that I know this serious expression on his face is not one he uses often.

While Yaya's mom is gracious and welcoming, her dad immediately demands we talk alone in his office.

"Dad," Yaya warns, her eyes stern, "don't do anything embarrassing."

"You just help your mom finish up dinner," her dad signs. He gives me another dirty look and stalks down the hallway.

I'm not scared when I follow him through the house. Since Uruguay and Dejonae's warning about her dad, I decided to treat him the same way I did Sazuki. The piano prodigy hated me and well, now he's apathetic to me.

See? Progress.

The point is... Mr. Williams loves Yaya.

So do I.

Mr. Williams wants me to treat Yaya well.

I have every intention of doing so.

We have the most important factors in common already. Whatever it takes to get his approval, I'm willing to do.

"Why are you two following us?" Yaya's dad casts a frustrated look over his shoulder.

Mrs. Williams returns it with a calm look.

Yaya signs to her father, "I mean it, dad. Don't over-do it."

"This is a conversation between men," Mr. Williams says. I notice he voices and signs more eloquently than I do. It's still something I'm working on. "Please give us some privacy."

The women circle him like suspicious cats. Yaya's dad shoves me into the office and pokes his head out, shooing his wife and daughter away.

I hear their retreating footsteps. Mr. Williams locks the door and then stays there. After a few seconds, he wrenches it open again, checking to make sure they're really gone.

Slowly, the door clicks shut, but he keeps his back to me.

Unsure of what's going on, I decide to deliver my speech anyway. "Sir," I say, "respectfully, I'm aware of how bad an impression I must have made, given how my relationship with Yaya started. But I can assure you that there is nothing fake about my feelings for her and—"

Mr. Williams turns to me with the world's biggest grin on his face.

Is he the Joker? Is this the part where he kills me and hides my body under his clown costumes?

"Relax. Relax!" He flies over and pumps my hand in a hearty shake. "Welcome to the family, son."

I blink, so shocked I can't move. "J-just like that?"

"No, not just like that." His face falls flat and he looks at me like I'm an idiot. "You think I'd let any old bloke come and talk to me about my daughter?"

"Sir?" I speak slowly, as if English isn't my first language.

"You learn ASL for her." His voice rises in a sing-song cadence as he says, "*Check!* You buy an entire company to salvage her reputation. *Check!*"

I wonder if that had, indeed, been a characteristic Mr. Williams had been looking for. If so, 'a billionaire to buy her a company' is strangely specific.

“You don’t tear away her opportunities because you two had a split. Double check.”

I guess that one makes sense.

“And most importantly,” he meets my eyes, “you help Henry’s grandmother receive the surgery she needs.”

I avert my gaze. “How do you know about that?”

“Henry came over here, ranting and raving, demanding to know if it was us or if it was you. We told him the truth. Wasn’t us. And he swore he’d pay back every penny.”

“No need.”

“Ah, leave him. It’ll build character. Hopefully get him to stop destroying all the good things in his life.”

I, for one, am not sorry Henry destroyed any of the things in his life. That goes for my car and for his friendship with Yaya.

“Why’d you help someone who clearly hates you and wants your girl?” Mr. Williams eyes me like a hawk.

I think about it before I speak, but there’s really no profound answer. “Because it’s what Yaya would have wanted.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“So simple?”

“Yes, sir.”

His lips ease into another, approving grin. “See that? That’s the mark of a man with character, of a man who’s considerate, and cares about others more than himself.” He ushers me into the sofa and lugs a golf bag over. “You play, son?”

“I do, but Yaya didn’t mention you did.”

“I’m a simple guy, really. I thought golf was only for rich folks. But one day, I went to the country club with that Alistair guy. Thought I’d be uncomfortable among those types, but I fell in love with golf.”

“It’s the best sport,” I agree.

“I’ve been taking Sazuki with me, but that one’s not much of a talker and it can get a little awkward on the green.”

He pulls out a club and does a swing.

“Your footwork could use some help,” I point out before thinking it through. “And you’re not swiveling your hips correctly.”

Instead of getting offended, Mr. Williams grins big enough to show off his gold tooth. “See that? That’s what I need.” He sheathes the club. “Teach me how to hit a birdie and you can have her.”

I rise to my feet and offer my hand. “Thank you, sir. It’s a deal.”

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CHAPTER 25

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epilogue: sign here

YAYA

What's the difference between 'real' dating and 'fake' dating a hearing person?

Nothing, really.

Not when you still have a contract that you stupidly offered at the beginning of your 'real dating' relationship. A contract that Dare is not afraid to call on when he gets in trouble for staying out late 'working'—something he's been doing a lot lately.

"Three kisses," he signs. "I haven't gotten one today."

I scowl and slap three punishing kisses against his head.

"Ow." He voices, but I read that flinch of pain loud and clear. "I think you bucked your teeth on my face," he signs.

Good. I'm not sorry.

Dare captures me in his arms and hugs me. "I promise. My work will settle down soon and then I'll be all yours."

"Who says I want you?" I sign.

"Should we test that theory?" His eyes slide over me, leaving a trail of hot goosebumps everywhere.

I back up a step.

"Should we," he signs as he walks closer, "take that dress off and see how much you want me, sugar?"

Before I can coach my face back into its angry expression, I'm airborne and being carted off to Dare's bedroom.

After we're done and I've collapsed against his chest, I look up at Dare and sign, "You've been going on so many trips lately."

"I know. I'm sorry."

I sigh and breathe in his spicy, Dare scent. I'm being a little unfair and I know it. Since Henry stepped out of my life, I've been getting closer and closer with the farmhouse ladies. But they've gone MIA lately.

Even DeeJ doesn't have time to hang out anymore.

I was feeling like a survivor stranded on an island all alone but, earlier this week, I ran into June again. Since most of my deaf friends are near the agency where I quit working last month, I hadn't yet settled back into the deaf community here.

Fortunately, June invited me to a Beethoven's Nightmare concert with her friends from painting class. Dare got us all VIP tickets since he thinks that splurging money is 'spoiling me'. I rocked out with everyone in the room and made a ton of new connections. I look forward to hanging with June and my new friends again.

But no matter how many new friends I make, they can't replace my boyfriend.

My very handsome, attentive boyfriend... who is somehow never around anymore.

Dare runs a finger over my lips. "Clear your schedule. I'll take you somewhere tomorrow."

"I have an interview booked." I'm actually really excited about it. I'm meeting with an urban designer that up-cycles fashion to save the planet. It's a story I'm sure my subscribers will be interested in.

Thanks to my boyfriend being Dare Sullivan, I don't *have* to worry about subscribers or work in general, but I have my own goals and ambitions. I want to grow a media empire like Kenya did with her publishing house. But I want *my* focus to be on fashion and current events.

I'll never stop modeling and I'll keep posting my photoshoots, behind the scenes and, eventually, my runway Versace walk (that day will come!), but I also want to post about worthy charity causes, environmentally-friendly fashion tips, and so much more.

Dare takes my answer in stride. "After your meeting then."

I agree and we fall asleep.

In the middle of the night, I feel that something's missing and open my eyes. Dare's out of bed. His outline is in the bathroom and he's on the phone.

Who is he talking to at this hour?

I want to believe it's Mosely, but little doubts start niggling in my head. Did he find a hearing woman? Is he cheating on me right in front of my face because I'm deaf? Are all my worst fears about loving a hearing person coming true?

Dare patters back to bed and I squeeze my eyes shut, pretending to be asleep. The next morning, he leaves early and I get dressed and follow him.

José is a good sport about tailing his boss and I'm grateful for the millionth time that Dare hired him back. Jenny is in the car too and she's less convinced about this plan.

"Are you sure you should be doing this?" she signs.

"If it makes you feel any better, you're only here as backup. I don't think I'll actually need an interpreter."

I peer out the window at Dare's truck.

Huh. He goes to his company and stays right there.

So... does that mean he's cheating on me *with* a girl from the office?

I text DeeJ to talk about it and, hopefully, to have my sister talk *me* out of my crazy thoughts. Except for the long business trips, everything is perfect with me and Dare. Too perfect. But I can't just ignore him talking to someone in the middle of the night.

If it was Mosely, he would have waited until morning. Mosely has a way better appreciation for work-life balance than Dare.

After wasting an hour in front of Dare's building, I head to my interview and Jenny goes back to work.

José doesn't say anything about the spy mission, but I know he's judging me.

In the evening, I get enough of my crazy thoughts, so I ask Lucy if I can pick Talia up after school. We both let out some steam killing zombies on the screen and dancing our hearts out on the DANCE MOTION game.

Talia gets a text and then glances up at me. "Can you take me to the farmhouse instead of back home?"

"Is your mom okay with that?"

She shows me a text from Lucy that gave permission.

I agree and usher her into the car. José drives us to Darrel and Sunny Hastings' giant, Victorian-style house.

You should come in, Talia writes on her phone.

I shake my head, reluctant to head inside when most of the people there haven't spoken to me or invited me over for two weeks now.

But Dare's niece inherited his stubbornness, and she doesn't stop until I'm out of the car.

I expect Talia to take me into the farmhouse but, instead, she leads me around the side. My eyes bug when I see a massive catwalk in the middle of the Hastings' backyard.

Lights are flashing from steel-pipe rigs and there are giant bass speakers situated all around. I laugh when the music starts thumping so hard, the bass speakers rattle the trees in the distance.

What is going on?

I look down at Talia, but Dare's niece just slips in her earbuds and grins mischievously. She points to the stage, redirecting my attention to someone sauntering onto the catwalk.

It's Kenya holding a sign over her giant belly that reads 'the first night I saw you, you were wearing a red jumpsuit'.

I cover my mouth, battling dual emotions of bewilderment and laughter when I see Kenya wearing a jumpsuit fitted for her small frame but *exactly* like the one I wore at Clarissa's wedding.

Kenya struts backstage and Belle walks out next, in a similar jumpsuit like her mommy.

She's holding a sign too and her sign says: 'first I saw your light, then I saw your beauty'.

The farmhouse ladies pour out one after another. Sunny's wearing the pretty-in-pink outfit I wore to my first meeting with Dare on the mountain. Her placard reads 'I wanted you to be mine in any way I could have you'.

Sunny's boys are noticeably absent from her side—I doubt anyone could convince them to wear pretty-in-pink *anything*, but it doesn't matter. There are enough models to go around.

Even Dawn emerges in the outfit I was wearing for the TV interview. Her placard reads ‘the moment we kissed, I knew it was you and me forever’.

By the time Clarissa ends the show in the Tru Essentials gown I was wearing during the fashion show, I’m in tears and can barely read her sign.

‘I’ve tasted the agony of losing you once and I will never put us in that position again’.

I sniff, waiting for Dare to come out since the bass has stopped thumping and no other models have emerged.

Instead, Michael and Bailey—Sunny’s kids, along with Rowan—Adam and Nova’s son, and Joel—Clarissa and Cody’s eighteen-year-old adopted son, show up and escort me around the back of the stage.

Each boy helps me to mount a stair until I’m standing at the rear of the platform.

My sister appears and hands me a bouquet. She smiles at me and whispers something that feels a lot like ‘I love you’. I’m too choked up to sign it back.

Deej gives me a little shove and I step out onto the stage.

The bright lights welcome me, a familiar home.

I notice everyone on the sidelines watching me, cheering for me. Bolstered by their energy, I model in my jeans and T-shirt, doing the best catwalk of my life.

Until it’s cut short when someone jumps from the audience onto the stage.

I freeze when my eyes meet Dare’s.

He’s wearing a fitted tux, no tweed in sight. His hair is brushed back from his face and he looks like a heartbreaker. Except he’s not. He’s a heart-fixer. A heart-nurturer. A heart-carer.

“Is this why you were on the phone last night?” I sign.

His eyebrows climb and he signs, “You saw that?”

I nod.

He looks sheepish. “I was talking to the transport guys. It was... a lot to get this set up.”

“It’s perfect. I love it.”

“You told me that you’d planned something for me with placards at the Tru Essentials Fashion Show. I didn’t know what it was and I know you

were disappointed that I couldn't see it, so I thought I'd recreate it for you." He glances around and then looks at me. "Was I close?"

"This is ten times better." I smile tearfully.

Dare takes my hand and, with his other, he offers me a cell phone.

Dear Yaya,

Remember when I didn't speak a lick of ASL and we had to communicate like this? There was a point in that process where I never thought I'd know enough ASL, but I don't regret any step of that journey. I had to be dedicated, focused and never give up.

Similarly, there was a point in our relationship when I didn't think you and I would ever end up together too.

I half-laugh and half-sob when I read that.

But when I gave up in that journey, you never did. And I promise you that, just like my journey to learning ASL, I will learn you, study you and be dedicated and focused on you. I will never give up on us.

When I look up again, Dare isn't there.

Instead, I see my parents in the crowd, watching me proudly.

Dare's head bobbing at waist level gets my attention and I look down to find him on his knee in front of me. My eyes widen in shock, and I nearly whack my eyes out with the flowers as I snap my hands across my mouth.

Dare opens the ring box and, behind him, everyone holds up their placards close together. The back of the boards form a sign that says 'YAYA, WILL YOU MARRY ME?'

I can barely see it from all the tears. "How long did it take you all to rehearse this?"

"You don't want to know," Dare signs with a chuckle.

Whoever's holding the question mark part of the sign starts shaking it as if to say 'hurry it up already!'

I laugh and face Dare again. Looking into his chocolate eyes, I sign, "I will."

A handsome smile tugs at his mouth. He slips the ring on my finger and then shoots to his feet. Cupping my jaw, he pulls me in and kisses me.

I return his passion with my own, glad that I kept going on this journey too. And even when it seemed to take twists and turns that didn't make sense, it was always the right direction. It was always the right sign.

* * *

Thank you for reading *The Right Sign*. Curious about Dejonae and Sazuki's romance? **PRICKLY ROMANCE** is their enemies-to-lovers story.

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DEJONAE

There are certain things you just don't do in life.

Like accompany your chai obsessed, supermodel best friend to sneak in a latte behind her husband's back.

Or drag her three-month old baby into a vicious middle school street fight.

Or immediately fall in love with a nine-year old ninja only to find out her dad is the devil himself.

But guess who did all three?

I lift a trembling finger as I stare down the man who single-handedly ruined one of the biggest nights of my life.

"You? *You're* her dad?" I croak.

"That is what I said," Ryotaro Sazuki responds in the world's most impatient tone.

If I could find a loose stone to throw at his face, I would.

Sazuki rips his gaze away from mine. Despite his gruff voice, his touch is gentle when he cradles his daughter's face.

I start making quick comparisons. Sazuki is tall and regal. Broad shoulders taper down to a lean waist. With his silky hair brushed back, his brown eyes and chiseled jawline reveal a chillingly sharp face. Even though he's dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and slacks, looking every bit the under-the-radar billionaire that he is, there's something cold and dangerous about him.

His daughter, on the other hand, is pure sunshine. Golden-brown skin, full, Cupid's bow lips, and long curly hair that reaches almost to her tail bone. The only hint of her mixed ancestry is in the shape and tilt of her stunning brown eyes.

This really is Sazuki's daughter.

I can't believe the Lord allowed this man to *procreate*.

Sazuki mutters something in Japanese and Niko seems to understand because she nods.

Turning slightly so the sun hits his formidable cheekbones, Sazuki grunts. "What happened here?"

My jaw drops at his rudeness.

Vanya pushes her stroller forward and sets a hand on my arm. "I got this."

She's way too calm. And I can only assume that being a new parent has given her inestimable patience.

"We were out for a stroll," Vanya begins, "and overheard some boys harassing someone in the alley. Dejonae ran off like Superwoman, and by the time I got here, the boys were on the ground and your daughter looked unharmed."

Baby Ollie starts cooing like she wants to give her eyewitness account.

Sazuki inhales a deep, measured breath. His nostrils flare and, with his eyes closed, he looks more intimidating than ever.

Sazuki's daughter glances up with a sheepish expression. She pokes her dad in the shoulder. Lips moving soundlessly, she signs, "How did you find me?"

"Akira." Sazuki scans her face. "You were supposed to meet her at the school gate."

Niko chews on her bottom lip and doesn't respond.

Abruptly, Sazuki turns to us. When his eyes meet mine, he frowns in distaste.

Glad to know the feeling is mutual, jerkface.

He dips his head, still looking annoyed. "Thank you."

"Deej did most of the rescuing." Vanya gives me a dazzling grin.

Sazuki seems unarmed by Vanya's smile, which is totally understandable. The plus-sized model is gorgeous. Vanya's been rocking fashionable clothes all through her pregnancy and that hasn't changed now that Ollie's joined us in the real world.

Today, she's wearing a flowing blue dress with a plunging neckline that shows off her cleavage. Her hair is slightly curled at the ends and brushes against her bare shoulders.

Sazuki finishes his little scan and then returns to scowling at me. "Thank you as well."

Wow. Growly much? "No need to thank me. I'm glad your daughter's okay." Bending slightly, I sign to Niko. "It was nice to meet you."

She grins, making her eyes collapse with happiness.

Sazuki's shock is hidden quickly. When he looks at me this time, it's with more than just disdain. He hesitates, mouth opening and closing before

he comes to some kind of internal conclusion. Hands steady on Niko's shoulders, he steers his daughter away.

Niko stops him with a slight touch on his arm and I make note of how he leans down to watch her. One of my sister's biggest frustrations growing up was not being heard when she had something to say. I can tell that Sazuki and his daughter are close by how in-tune he is to her needs.

He's still a major douche-canoe.

But he's not a... horrible dad.

"I want her to come with me," Niko signs.

The scowl that crawls over Sazuki's face is ten times darker than before. "No."

Niko pushes out her bottom lip.

Vanya inches the baby stroller toward me and peers at the father-daughter duo. "What are they saying?"

"Niko wants one of us to go with them."

"Go where?"

"Don't know."

"And which one of us?"

"I'm not sure. She didn't specify."

Just then, Sazuki's sharp gaze swings to me and I swear, it's like he's *impaling* me with his eyes.

Vanya clears her throat. "I think I have an idea which one of us he *doesn't* want, but look... his daughter is pointing to you. I think she wants you, Deej."

"I'm not going anywhere with him."

"Why not? He's cute."

"Cute isn't the right word," I mutter. Sazuki's too sharp. Too angular. Too *intense*.

"You're right. Sexy is a better word, I think."

"Aren't you married?"

"What are you? The marriage police?" She snorts.

I scowl.

"Deej, I'm married. Not blind. And I'm not looking for me. I'm thinking of you. You and Sazuki can clear up whatever happened at the gala."

"I'm *never* forgiving him for what he did at the gala."

"What exactly did he do to you?" Vanya asks.

“Throwing me off his keyboard wasn’t a big enough infraction for you?”

“I meant, what did he *say*?”

I shake my head. “All you need to know is that he’s rude and obnoxious and not worth my time.”

Niko’s hands are still moving at warp speed. Sazuki watches intently.

“Did you know that Sazuki’s daughter was deaf?” Vanya whispers while the two fight it out.

“I don’t think anyone knew he *had* a daughter.”

Vanya pulls the shade a little further over Baby Ollie, who’s starting to fuss. “You know he comes from a line of super famous, super rich, super mysterious musicians, right?”

“I’m familiar with the Sazuki family,” I respond dryly. Anyone with classical music training would have studied them at one point or another.

Vanya peers at Ollie. “I wonder if the reason Sazuki stayed out of the spotlight, maybe even the reason he’s moving permanently to the US, has anything to do with his kid.”

“It’s none of our business either way.” I bend over the stroller and coo, “Isn’t that right, Ollie? Tell your nosy mama to butt out.”

Vanya and Hadyn’s three-month-old stops crying long enough to grant me a befuddled expression.

A sound of abject frustration comes from behind me. I check over my shoulder and see Niko pushing her dad my way. Sazuki’s almost digging his feet into the sand to keep from coming over.

“I wonder why she wants you to go with her?” Vanya muses.

“Probably because I understand her.”

“That simple?”

“Imagine how black travelers feel when they see another black tourist in a foreign country. It’s like you know them and they know you even though you’re strangers. The deaf community is kind of like that.”

Vanya suddenly looks away. “Oh shoot. He’s almost here. Act natural.”

I roll my eyes.

Sazuki stops in front of us. He inhales a deep breath that fills his whole chest and then leaks out a resigned sigh.

“Are you busy?”

I keep my arms loose at my sides. “Yes.”

“She’s not. She’s very un-busy.” Vanya nudges me forward with her elbow.

I shoot a dark glare over my shoulder.

“*What are you doing?*” I hiss.

“Ollie’s getting fussy. We’ll head back home so I can put her down for a nap.” Vanya juts her chin at Sazuki and Niko. Her long, dangling earrings brush against dark cheeks. “Go with them.”

“What about chai?” I ask, knowing it’s her weakness.

She hesitates but not for long. “We’ll grab chai another time.”

“I’m sorry.” I frown at Sazuki because the last place I want to be is alone with him. Even if he comes with an adorable daughter. “I’m supposed to be Vanya’s bodyguard. She gave birth a few months ago and she hasn’t really recovered yet. I should make sure she gets home safely.”

“That is fine with me,” Sazuki says in his crisp accent. He tries to take his daughter’s hand.

Niko pulls away, looks imploringly at me, and rubs a circle on her chest. It’s the sign for ‘please’.

Must resist.

Must...

“Okay.”

Niko jumps happily.

Vanya grins so wide I’m surprised her cheeks don’t pop off her face.

“You’ll pay for this,” I whisper as I pass her by.

She winks and waves goodbye before she and Baby Ollie go traipsing in the opposite direction.

“What’s your name?” Niko signs.

“Dejonaē.” I sign each letter slowly. “But you can call me DeeJ.”

“Niko.” She gestures.

“Pretty name,” I answer with my mouth instead of my hands.

She beams, confirming her lip-reading aptitude.

We walk to Sazuki’s fancy SUV. The thing is built like a tank. Sazuki opens the back door and gestures bluntly. His jaw is clenched and his eyes are on anything but me. The tension in his body suggests that he is not a fan of this plan.

You think I want to be here, you grumpasaurus?

Although every bone in my body is telling me not to go anywhere with him, I climb in.

The car smells like him, minty and expensive. I'm surprised to find the passenger seat empty. The first time I met Sazuki, he had a small platoon of bodyguards following him around.

Niko scrambles in after me and locks the door. For a second, I have a mild panic attack.

What if this is their act?

What if they're a father-daughter team of con artists?

What if I'm their next victim?

Then I realize I'm being ridiculous.

Sazuki is a billionaire with an incredible and extravagant family background. If he has to con poor college students for cash, then the entire world is doomed.

Niko slides into the seat right next to me. Her eyes are brilliant even though the light is dim thanks to the tinted windows.

"Where are we going?" I ask her, keeping my face turned to hers so she can read my lips easily.

She runs her fingers sideways, back and forth, as if there's a piano right in front of her.

I dance my fingers over imaginary keys. "Piano lessons? That's so cool."

Sazuki clears his throat. "Seatbelt, Niko."

She struggles with the belt and I lean over to clasp her in.

"Thank you," Niko signs.

"Welcome."

Sazuki starts the car before I've buckled up. I guess I know which one of our lives he values more.

Jerk.

"How do you know how to sign?" Sazuki growls at me.

I translate his question for Niko.

Her smile gets wider and she nods.

"My sister is deaf," I say out loud. "She's also a model." Well, an aspiring model. But being in the local Macy's catalogue totally counts in my books.

Sazuki makes a left turn. "Is that how you know Miss Beckford?"

"It's Mrs. Mulliez now and—" I realize I haven't translated his words for Niko and quickly rectify that. "Your dad asked me how I know my friend," I sign.

Sazuki glares at me. "She can see what I am saying."

"How?" My eyebrows pull tight. "She can't read your lips if you're driving and she's in the backseat."

I hear a *tap-tap* and drag my attention back to Niko. One sneakered foot is pointing to a screen that's embedded in the back of the chair. I hadn't noticed it when I slid into the car. The screen shows the lower half of Sazuki's face, starting at the bridge of his sharp nose, his small but full lips and ending at his chin.

"Whoa. Is that forwarding the feed in real time?"

"It is," Sazuki says.

Pulling out my phone to snap a picture so I can show Yaya later, I ask, "Who came up with that idea?"

"My dad," Niko signs.

It's too late to look unimpressed.

"Hm," I say, trying my best to reverse the ego-stroking.

Sazuki slows for a red light. His eyes meet mine in the rear-view mirror. One corner of his lips hitches up in a ghost smile and...

Dimples.

Two of them.

My heart flails.

Dimples that big and cute do not belong on a man who looks like he could slay as the star of a samurai action movie.

I quickly glance away.

Get ahold of yourself, Dejonae.

My attention snags on Niko's comic book. I tug it from the middle of the chair. "What's this?"

She snatches it from me and hides it against her shirt.

Sazuki's half-grin fades, replaced with a parental look of censure. "Her favorite comic book."

"Let me guess." I tap my chin. "Echo?"

"What's Echo?"

"Who's Echo," I correct Sazuki. "She's a Marvel superhero."

"Superhero?" Niko signs.

"She's deaf and a great fighter." I frown, slightly perturbed by their confusion. "You don't know who Echo is?"

"No."

"But she's deaf."

“Am I supposed to know all the deaf superheroes?” Sazuki fires back.

“I do.” I lift my chin proudly. “I searched them all up. It was important to me that my sister see how capable she can be.”

“By introducing fictional characters to her?”

“You had better role models?”

“Chisato Minamimura. Ayumi Hamasaki.” He pauses. “Even Beethoven.”

“I actually recognize that one.”

Niko giggles.

The ghost smile on Sazuki’s face is fleeting. “We do not have to look to fictional creations for encouragement.”

“I disagree. I don’t think anyone should be limited by what’s already been done. When we look at fictional characters, they aren’t bound by physical rules or fear or even history. These heroes are the very essence of what someone can accomplish without limits.”

“These ‘heroes’ are also not real,” he insists.

“And Beethoven’s dead. What’s your point?”

“Yes, but he lived.”

“And who’s to say there’s not a deaf crime-fighting ninja out there, kicking the butts of drug lords and kingpins? We don’t know. Anything is possible.”

Niko giggles and shyly slides the comic book over to me.

“*Last Game?*” I read the name on the cover. It’s got a sketch of a couple holding hands. “This... wait, this looks like a romance.”

Niko signs something I don’t understand.

I scrunch my nose in confusion. “Can you say that again?”

She signs, “M-a-n-g-a.”

“Manga?”

Her little head bob is both quick and adorable.

“I’ve told her to stop reading that trash,” Sazuki mumbles.

Niko isn’t even looking at the screen when she signs, “My dad calls it trash, but it’s really good.”

“You are not dating until you are married,” Sazuki admonishes. “There is no need for such books.”

I exchange a look with Niko.

The little girl rolls her eyes like she was raised by a black woman.

“Niko will return the book tomorrow.” Sazuki lowers his head so both his eyes and mouth get caught on camera. “And you will apologize to Akira for making her worry.”

Niko glances down, feeling the weight of her father’s censure.

I decide not to take up for her in front of her dad. Anything I say probably won’t help since Sazuki hates me anyway.

Instead, I slide the book back to Niko and sign, “Tell me all about your favorite stories. I’ll check them out for you.”

She brightens and bobs her head enthusiastically.

Sazuki watches me suspiciously through the rear-view mirror, but I smile innocently. This is between me and his daughter. What he doesn’t know isn’t going to hurt him.

* * *

“Hi, Niko!” An overly cheerful woman with big eyes, limp purple hair and a nose ring pops in front of us like an extra in a horror movie.

I launch back, yelping.

Niko’s laughter peels out over the hollowed halls of Terrence Holler Music Academy.

It’s a pretentious name for what is basically a rich people’s after-school center.

Vaulted ceilings, chandeliers, and detailed wooden finishings remind me of an old church. The students are all wearing private school uniforms, complete with preppy skirts and sweater vests.

The adults look equally stuffy. My sneakers, crop top and high-waisted jeans are out of place amidst their sharp pencil skirts, pumps and panty hoses.

Who even wears panty hoses anymore?

Sazuki gives me a scolding look for yelling.

I curb the urge to stick my tongue out at him. He’s lucky my parents raised me to be somewhat of a respectful member of society.

Purple Hair slants me a blank stare. “And you are?”

“She’s my friend. DeeJ,” Niko signs.

“I see.” Purple Hair does not look impressed.

Sazuki wears his perpetually annoyed face when he says, “We apologize for the imposition. Niko insisted.”

“I want her to stay,” Niko signs.

Sazuki gestures to me. “I hope you do not mind if Miss Dajon—”

“It’s Dee-jonae. Deej. Not Daj—”

“—If *this woman*,” Sazuki cuts me off, “sits in on Niko’s piano lessons.”

Every muscle in my body tenses. *Did this man just cut me off?*

Niko grabs my arm and drags me down the hallway, saving Sazuki from—at minimum, a tongue lashing and at most, a swift kick in the groin.

We gain speed as we turn the bend. Niko’s curly hair flairs behind her and, I can’t lie, my inner child bursts out.

Musical instruments blare from every room. Violins, cellos and flutes. A cacophony of beautiful, musical chaos.

We skid to a stop in front of an empty room. The sounds bleed into silence. The room’s got thick soundproof walls and lots of overhead lights. I inhale deeply, loving the scent of sheet music and instrument oil.

Niko shows off a grand piano. It looks exactly like the one Sazuki brought into the Belle’s Beauty gala—the one he pushed my hand away from before he whispered in my ear and made everything inside me freeze.

“Is this yours?” I ask.

Niko grins, her head tilted and her eyes shining.

“Can you play?” I sign.

Niko takes the bench and pats the seat next to it.

When I start to move in, Purple Hair and Sazuki arrive.

“That’s my seat!” Purple Hair blurts out before my butt can touch the cushion.

I freeze, mid-stoop.

“Sorry.” Her puff of laughter lacks sincerity. Edging behind the music stool, she clasps her hands together. “The professional sits there. Not just anyone can teach, you know.”

What is your problem?

“Right,” I say coldly.

We exchange places. I stand behind Niko and her teacher, while Sazuki leans against the door and watches everything with his shrewd eyes.

“Niko,” Purple Hair signs, “you remember what we did last week?”

Niko bounces her head.

“Let’s begin.”

The teacher sets the metronome on top of the piano desk. Leaning forward, she taps out the beat on Niko’s leg while the little girl reads the music.

Niko plays expertly, hitting all the right notes. Unfortunately, she’s a little behind the beat.

“No, no, no.” Purple Hair shakes her head. “Niko, we’ve been over this. You need to *feel* the timing. *Feel* it.”

Niko gives her a frustrated look.

“Let’s go again.”

Sazuki’s phone rings while Niko and the teacher start from the top. He leaves the classroom to answer.

Free from his overwhelming presence, I start to relax.

Niko’s light brown fingers sail across the keys. She’s incredibly talented. There’s a youthful, passionate expression to her music. She reminds me so much of my sister. Both of them are determined, talented, and capable of doing anything they set their minds to.

Niko hits a bad note. Her nose scrunch says she knows what she did wrong, but the teacher still points it out to her.

“You were supposed to go to A#,” Purple Hair says with barely hidden annoyance.

Niko signs, “I know.”

“She’s probably nervous because I’m here,” I say, trying to smooth it over.

“That is exactly why I don’t allow visitors in class. She needs to focus and she can’t play her best with an audience.”

Keep quiet, Deej.

Don’t start a fuss.

This isn’t your place...

“She’s going to have to play in front of an audience eventually,” I argue.

Purple Hair swivels in her seat as if she’d been *waiting* for a chance to fight me. “Learning in front of an audience and performing in front of an audience are two different things.”

“You have to start somewhere.”

“Ma’am,” Purple Hair speaks in her best, *I’m about to call your manager* tone, “if you can’t remain calm and quiet during our session, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

I scoff. Who exactly does she think she is?

Rather than let the tiger jump out of me, I glance at Niko and calm myself. After a deep breath, I respond in a similarly condescending manner.

“*Ma’am*, if you can’t convey the point of your lesson without getting impatient and snappy at your student, maybe you should pursue a different line of work.”

Red steals into her cheeks. Her eyebrows join in the center of her forehead. “Maybe you should learn to keep your mouth shut.”

“What are you going to do if I don’t?” I fire back.

Purple Hair half-rises from her chair.

Niko, sensing the tension in the air, turns too. Her beautiful eyes lock on my face. There’s a wrinkle between her arched eyebrows and a tightness to her lips that signals discomfort.

She doesn’t understand what’s happening and we haven’t been speaking slowly enough for her to read our lips.

A twinge of remorse hits my chest.

I shouldn’t be starting fights in front of children.

Feeling slightly ashamed that I lost my temper, I bend to Niko’s level. “It’s okay, sweetie. Your teacher and I are just having a discussion about... Mozart.”

Purple Hair flares her nostrils, but her voice is still that sickly-sweet tone. “Who exactly are you again?”

“I’m just a friend.”

“Well, Miss *Friend*, are you a licensed music teacher?”

“No.”

“And,” her eyelashes flutter non-stop, “do you have a Bachelor’s Degree in ASL?”

“No.” I shuffle my feet.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t speak on things you don’t understand.”

“Your methods are flawed. You shouldn’t be so defensive when people point it out.”

She gestures to Niko. “Since you’re so full of advice, would you like to take my position?”

“I would actually.”

Her eyes widen. She didn’t expect me to agree.

Too bad.

I never back down from a challenge.

Ever.

I approach the piano. Purple Hair doesn't move out of the way at first and I have to wedge myself between her and Niko.

Niko shifts nervously. "I'm sorry I can't play it better," she signs.

"It's okay."

"Look, you're wasting our time—"

"Shush." I lift a hand at Purple Hair.

Her gasp of outrage barely penetrates my focus. While silence settles, I flip open my purse and search for the modified headphones I always carry around. Next, I pull out my phone.

"What are you doing?"

I ignore the question.

"Do you think she's going to hear anything on those headphones?"

I ignore that too.

"She's *deaf*!"

I sync the headphones with my cell and open the metronome app. The steady *tic-tic-tick* chants in my ear. *Good*.

Niko gives me an uncertain look when I slide the headphones over her ribs.

"Do you feel that?" I ask.

She pauses. Her eyes fall closed and I can sense the way she gets in-tuned to her body. After a few seconds, Niko nods.

"Good." I take her hand and set it on the piano. "Try again."

Niko plays with uncertainty. Purple Hair grins in delight when she falters. I pretend the aggravating woman isn't in the room and keep my hand on Niko's, coaching her through the music until she gets better at the timing.

"That's right." A smile inches over my face when she falls into the pocket of the rhythm. "Niko, that's perfect."

Niko's eyes light up and she gives me a hug. I wrap my arms around her back, squishing the headphones into her stomach by mistake.

She makes a pained grunt.

I wrench backward. "Sorry. Sorry."

She laughs and waves my apology off.

Plucking the headphones away, I turn to the teacher. "When one of our senses is impaired, we rely more heavily on the others. But what people often miss is that we also rely on our gut instincts. The spider-sense, if you

will.” I wave the headphones around. “You’re tapping her leg to help her keep the time, but your timing is off.”

“What?”

“You’re playing a little ahead of the metronome.”

Shame burns her cheeks red and she glances away.

“But even if you were directly on time, it can’t replace *feeling*. Niko’s got great instincts. Let her trust it.”

Purple Hair huffs and opens her mouth to answer when a voice rumbles, “*Interesting.*”

We both turn around.

I’m shocked to see Sazuki standing in the doorway. He’s watching me with hawk eyes.

I lick my suddenly dry lips. “How long have you been standing there?”

He stares me down, refusing to answer.

My cell phone chimes.

It’s an alarm I set to remind me of my next class.

I jump to my feet. “I need to go.”

Niko pouts.

“I have a graduation project I need to prepare for,” I say apologetically to her. “But I’d love to hang out again.”

Purple Hair gestures to the door. “Goodbye.”

Jeez.

I stalk past Sazuki, but I’m not rude enough to leave without at least acknowledging him.

Careening to a stop, I tear off a piece of paper from the notebook in my bag and scribble on it. “This is my number if Niko wants to get in touch with me.”

He takes the number without a word.

Okay then.

I smile at Niko once more, shoot another glare at Purple Hair—who returns it, and leave Sazuki behind.

It’s strange, but I swear I feel his gaze burning into my back long after I’m gone.

* * *

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