



# DEXT

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

PENNY WYLDER

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# **SEXT**

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Epilogue

Excerpt of Get Me Off

Books By Penny Wylder

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# **SEXT**

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## **BOOKS BY PENNY WYLDER**

Filthy Boss

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Selling Out to the Billionaire

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# 1

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I take a deep breath and study myself in the mirror behind the bar. Okay, so he's 30 minutes late already. That's not necessarily a deal-breaker. The MTA has been a shitshow lately. Maybe his train got stuck. Maybe he got held up at work. Maybe...

*Maybe he's not like every other asshole you've been out with this week?*

I sigh and pull out my phone to scroll through his profile again.

"Rich, aka Dick," I read, scrolling through his photos. There's the obligatory bathroom mirror selfie, complete with chiseled abs (albeit a really bad choice since you can see the tile mold on the wall behind him from this angle), one of him and some friends, who all have the same buzz cut, so it's honestly pretty hard to tell which one is even him, and then the usual headshot. In that one, he's holding a pint of beer and grinning slyly at the camera, like he wants to fuck it.

The profile itself isn't exactly a winner. *Gym, tan, and pay for someone else to do my laundry*, it reads, with a little winking face.

So, okay, maybe I only swiped right because of that grin. Sue me. This new app has been bringing in the same undateable guys as all the others I've tried—despite the fact that at least four of my coworkers *raved* about how different this one was, how the guys were such high quality. I figured if I had to go on another bad date, at least it could be with a hottie.

But now karma's being a bitch, and it looks like I'm about to get stood up. Again.

I slide my drink across the bar and sigh at my reflection as the bartender refills my glass. I look smoking hot tonight. All that effort for nothing.

I review my recent candidates. There was the programmer last month who told me in great detail about how he “games the game.” In this case, what he meant was he hacked the codes behind the app and programmed it to send him pictures of only the most popular chicks. I guess I should be flattered that I was included, but I was mostly creeped out by his obsession with algorithms and finding the hottest (mathematically proven, of course) girlfriend. “It’s why I always end up dating chicks way out of my league,” he explained with a wink. Then he proceeded to show me photos of his most recent ex.

“She is very hot,” I agreed, silently adding, *and how on earth did she decide to sleep with you?*

After that date, there was the professional body-builder who spent most of the date trying to sell me into his protein-smoothie pyramid scheme. Did I mention said date was a happy hour for his protein-smoothie business? Then came the insurance salesman who got a little *too* detailed talking about life insurance schemes—*Double Indemnity* red flags, much?

There was the finance bro who bought me one drink, then invited me back to his place... And when I declined, he complained so loudly about the expense of the drink he’d bought me that I frog-marched him to the nearest ATM, took out cash, and threw a twenty in his face. I mean, first of all, do I look like a hooker? And second of all, if I *were* a hooker, I would cost a lot more than one crappy martini at a Wall Street after-work bar.

Which brings me here. Tonight. Waiting on yet another guy who will... “Miss?”

I look up to find the bartender returning my card. “What’s wrong, was it declined?” *Shit.* I paid this one off last month. It definitely still has room on the balance.

“No, miss. It’s just that the gentleman on the far end has covered your tab.”

I glance down the bar to find Mr. Shirtless Bathroom Selfie himself lifting a glass in my direction.

Okay, so maybe he’s not the worst. There could still be hope.

I pick up my drink and head down the bar to meet him. “Rich?”

He leans in for the cheek kiss/one-armed hug and I awkwardly shuffle my drink to avoid spilling it down his shirt front. “It’s Dick, actually. Rich was my dad’s name.”

*Probably should have stuck with it anyway, I think unfairly, as I take the bar stool beside him. “Dick. I’m Clove.” Not like I have room to talk anyway.*

“Also a family name?” He stays standing beside me, leaning against the counter. His knee brushes mine, in a not entirely unpleasant way. At least, at first.

“Nope, one and only.” I lift my glass in a mocking toast.

He taps his to mine, eyes sharp and zeroed in on me. “Oh, I can see that.”

“Should we get a table or...?”

He shrugs and leans on the back of my stool. He’s so up in my personal space that if I try to lean backward, I’ll land in the lap of the woman beside me. It’s hard to even lift my drink to take another sip because his chest is pressed against my whole right side. I switch hands and lean on the bar instead, trying to put some breathing room between us. His knee, meanwhile, is nearly crushing my leg.

“I’m good here,” he says. He glances over my head at the selection. “Besides, not like we’ll be here long.”

*You could say that again.* I clear my throat, resist the urge to bolt off of this stool here and now. There is no man hot enough to make up for the way his breath smells either, like stale beer and sour cream and onion potato chips. “Busy day at the office?” I ask, following his gaze mostly so I can turn away from him.

He leans harder against my leg. My toes tingle, starting to go numb. “Huh? No, I had the day off. Just got back from the beach. Hey, bartender?” He snaps his fingers. Actually snaps them, until the bartender glances back at us and, with an apologetic glance in my direction, heads our way.

“One more scotch on the rocks,” Dick says, and now I can see why he prefers this version of his name. It really suits him.

That task done with, he turns to me and brushes my hair back over my shoulder. “So, Clove...”

Realizing that I can’t keep staring at the bar forever, I turn to face him, trying on a smile.

“Damn you’re gorgeous. You get that often?”

“I, uh... Thanks, I guess.”

“How about we get out of here, huh? Enough small talk for one night, am I right?” He winks at me.

Enough small talk being what, all five sentences we've exchanged? I suck in a deep breath. Mm, *l'eau onions*. "Listen, Dick, you seem really nice and all..."

"Of course, so let's skip the boring part and head straight to my place." He downs the second scotch he ordered in one large gulp, then catches my arm.

"It's been a really long day for me, actually—lot going on at work. I'm just going to head home."

"That's cool, we can go to yours." He leans in, brushes my hair back from my forehead, and we're suddenly way too close, only inches between us.

I execute a tricky side twist off the barstool to grab my purse. "I think I'm just going to head back alone. Thanks for the drink."

"Seriously?" His expression shifts now. I don't know if it's the drink or the rejection that's injuring his frail masculine ego, but either way, I don't like the look in his eye. "Wait, wait, wait, Clove." He catches my hand in his. His grip is strong. Too strong. "We got off on the wrong foot. Let me make it up to you." With a single tug, he pulls me closer and leans over me, eyes intent on my face. "It's just, I didn't expect you to be so... You know. Hot. From your profile, you sounded like a book nerd, so—"

I wrench my hand from his with effort. "Dick, I have to be honest, I'm starting to understand why you prefer that nickname." I shoulder my purse. "I'm leaving."

"Don't be like that! Come on, we can have some fun."

"Goodbye, Dick." I stride past him, out of the bar.

Of course he jogs after me.

"At least let me call you a cab," he insists.

"I'm fine on my own, seriously." But he ignores this and jogs ahead of me to the corner. He flags down a tax, and I watch him lean in the window talking to the guy. God only knows what he's saying.

He opens the back door of the cab for me, but I hesitate, looking over my shoulder.

"You take this one, I'll call another," I say. But a glance up and down the street shows there won't be another cab for quite a while—Wall Street tends to be dead at this hour.

"I insist." Dick holds the door open a little wider.

With a sigh, I climb in.

He keeps the door open, blocking it with his thigh. “You know, if we go to mine, I can fuck you properly, Clove. It’s been a long time since anyone’s bent you over, hasn’t it?” He smirks.

It has, actually, but he doesn’t need to know that. “Thanks for the offer.” I yank on the door handle, trying to close it. That proves futile with him in the way, but hey, it’s worth a shot.

“You aren’t gonna get a better one.” He leans down and I get another strong whiff of onion breath. “A girl like you should be jumping at the chance to let a guy like me bone her.”

I cast a glance at the front of the taxi, but the driver is studiously ignoring this conversation, deeply concentrating on the one in his own wireless headset. “Again, I said thank you but no thank you.” I tug on the door, hoping against hope that Dick will finally let this drop.

Behind us, another taxi pulls up, and to my immense relief, Dick waves at it. It pulls over and he casts me one last long, dark look.

“You’ll regret this,” he says as he steps away from the door.

Regret what? Missing out on a total creepiest? I don’t think so.

I slam the door closed between us without responding. I’ve learned by now that as fun as snappy retorts are, sometimes it’s better not to antagonize the crazy people.

I lean up to tell the taxi driver my address, then collapse against the seat with a sound halfway between a groan and a sigh.

Well. That was another unqualified disaster. I close my eyes for a minute, then pull out my phone to text my coworker.

Halfway through typing a message about how she was *so very wrong* about this new app being better than the others, my phone begins to buzz.

Crap. It’s Dick.

I hit ignore, wait for it to go to voicemail, then keep typing.

*And now, on top of the last 5 disasters, I’ve got this creepy guy who told me I’d “regret” not going home with him, who’s trying to call me.*

I hit send and my phone buzzes once more. Dick. Again.

I hit ignore again, then, on second thought, shut my phone off completely. I’ll deal with figuring out how to block his number in the morning. Not like I haven’t already done that a few times for other creeps in the last couple years I’ve been trying this online dating crap.

Sometimes, it doesn’t seem worth it. Sometimes, I think it’d be better to just continue my life without a guy in it. After all, everything else is going

great for me. I just got another promotion at work—I’m only 29 and I’m a marketing manager with five people working below me. I work at publishing house where I’ve been since I graduated college and landed my dream job. I love my team, my boss, my coworkers. I love my job, promoting great literature to avid readers. I love that I get to travel, go to conferences where I meet cool authors whose books I love, and I get to help them make those books even more successful.

Plus, I have my friends. They keep me going through it all.

No, on the whole, my life is pretty great.

So why does it still feel like something is missing?

I shake my head. *Ignore it.* I don’t need a guy, especially not a guy like Dick. If it’s the choice between him and staying single forever, I’ll take the latter happily.

The taxi pulls up outside my building and I pay the driver, then push the door open. For a second, I just lean back to gaze at my building.

I was lucky as hell to score this place a couple years ago during a slow season and a market down-turn. I got it hella cheap; rent control, too. It’s the first time I’ve ever been able to afford a one-bedroom apartment by myself, and in a building with a doorman, no less.

This is how I know I’m finally moving up in the world. Finally making something of myself. I love this building and everything that it stands for—the progress I’ve made in my life, the goals I’m achieving.

I smile as I take a step toward the doors. Then I freeze, because I hear the most unwelcome sound possible behind me.

“Clove!”

*You have got to be kidding me.*

I turn around slowly, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up, my muscles tensed.

Dick stands on the curb, beside his taxi, which he clearly just asked to follow me all the way here. “Look, I know I came across a little strong earlier. I just wanted to say sorry and also that maybe we can try again...” He takes a step toward me, staggering a little.

I underestimated how drunk he was. Or maybe he showed up to the bar a few drinks in and that whiskey pushed him over the edge. “Dick, listen, I’m just going to go inside now...”

“Wait,” he says, and it comes out more of a growl than a plea. Before I can react, he launches himself across the pavement at me. I have just

enough time to take a few steps backward toward my door before he catches me, one hand wrapped around my wrist, the other on my shoulder. I try to wrench myself free, go for my phone in my purse, but I can't. His grip is too strong.

He pushes me against the glass beside the door of my building, his breath hot on my face. "You don't have to be a bitch, Clove. You can be nice about this."

I grit my teeth and throw myself sideways. It's not enough. He keeps his hold on my shoulder, slams me against the glass wall harder.

"Don't move while I'm talking. I'm talking to you bitch, you hear?"

"Dick, please let go, you're hurting me."

"I'll let go when I know you're going to take me seriously. I'm a fucking catch, you don't just walk away from a fucking catch."

I cast a wild-eyed glance over his shoulder. But at this hour, my neighborhood is pretty quiet. That's what I like about it. Liked, anyway. Right now, it's working against me. There's nobody in sight.

"Get off of me," I say, very slowly.

He smirks. "Make me."

That's when a heavy weight collides with us.

I stagger against the glass, barely managing to keep myself upright by bracing on the window with both palms. I hear grunting, shouts, but all I register is the fact that there's no one grabbing me anymore.

I push myself upright. There's a bruise already forming around my wrist, and from the ache in my shoulder, I'll have another handprint-shaped bruise there too.

When I look up, I see two figures in front of me: Dick and the back of a uniformed man. I recognize the uniform, of course. I see it every single day, at least twice a day, as I leave and come back to this building.

My doorman.

He throws a punch now, a mean right hook that connects squarely with Dick's jaw. But Dick is so drunk, that even though I hear that punch land with a smack, it doesn't slow him down. His brain probably doesn't even register the pain.

Dick roars and shoves the doorman with both hands. My heart leaps into my throat. From this angle, I can't tell which doorman it is—hopefully not Paul, the sweet little old guy who always tries to carry my groceries for me. Dick is huge, big enough to break him in half.

The doorman twists out of Dick's grip and knees him in the gut, which momentarily slows Dick down, winding him. On his way down, he pulls the doorman sideways, knocking his hat askew.

The blond hair tells me all I need to know.

Zayne.

I try to remember what I know about him aside from his name and the way he always remembers mine. Not much. He's worked here the entire time I've been living here, but aside from leaving hefty tips at Christmas and exchanging pleasantries about the weather, I don't normally pay too much attention to the guys at the door. Zayne is younger than the other doormen, I know that much.

Thankfully, it looks like he's built from stronger stuff, too.

Dick twists out of his grip and goes for one last punch, but Zayne is on top of this. He dodges the swing easily and fells Dick with a single hit to the temple. I wince as Dick collapses to his knees, holding his head.

Then Zayne turns to face me, running a hand through his short-cut blond hair.

Oh.

Oh.

How did I never notice his face before?

"Are you all right, Ms. Walker?" Zayne is asking, his expression all concern.

*I am now*, I think stupidly. But outwardly, I just nod.

"Go inside, Ms. Walker. I'll handle this."

I just keep staring at him, confused. Between the chiseled jawline, the sharp cheekbones, the intense blue eyes, I can't figure out how I never noticed him. Never really looked beneath the wide brim of his uniform hat.

His uniform is unbuttoned at the top now, disheveled from the fight. It reveals just a hint of his chest beneath, but from the shape of it, not to mention the way he just took out that brick house of a stalker, it's clear he's ripped.

I watch his head bob as he hauls Dick to his feet and half-walks, half-frog-marches him to the curb, where he hails another taxi. The muscles along his back ripple as he lifts his arm, and when he turns back to check on me, I can see a faint 5 o'clock shadow along his jawline, barely visible since it's blond, too. He could be the poster boy for Swiss-Germany, though from his thick accent, he clearly grew up around here.

*What is wrong with me?* I think, shaking my head. I don't hit on my doormen. This is ridiculous. I'm just amped up from the adrenaline, the fear of that attack, and the relief of being saved.

Finally, a taxi pulls up, and Zayne unceremoniously deposits Dick in the backseat. I watch him pay the driver extra for taking the bleeding drunk guy. When he turns back to me, his blue eyes are piercing. "Ms. Walker, please, you've had a shock. You should go upstairs and relax. I can handle this."

"Clove," I say.

His brow furrows slightly. "I'm sorry?"

"It's Clove, not Ms. Walker." I push off the glass wall and take a few shaky steps toward him. Clearly my body hasn't yet received the message that the coast is clear.

"Whoa, careful now." He catches my arms to steady me. I try to ignore how warm and reassuring his large hands feel, wrapped gently around my biceps. "You're still running on adrenaline. You should sit down."

"Thank you," I tell him as he guides me toward the double doors. He keeps one hand wrapped around my waist as he opens the door and aims for the settee just inside. I always wondered what this chair was for. It's not like anybody hangs out in the lobby much.

"It was nothing," he waves it off, but I shake my head.

"You saved me."

"Just doing my job, Ms..." He pauses. Catches my eye and holds it for a long moment, as he gently lowers me onto the seat. I collapse onto it, trying to hide my relief as I finally let my legs relax. They did not want to keep holding me upright, not after all that. "Clove," he amends, gaze still fixed on me.

I fight the urge to shiver. His voice is a deep baritone, the New York accent sexy on him.

"Your job shouldn't have to involve fending off crazy attackers," I reply with a sigh. "Sorry about him."

"Don't you dare apologize," he says, nearly cutting me off. He looks dead serious as he glances over my head, and I know he's looking back through the glass windows at where Dick was a moment ago. "I see shitheads like him all the time—drunk stockbroker trust fund kids who think they deserve whatever they want." He glances back at me. "Or whoever."

I grimace and bite the inside of my lip. “The worst part is, I’m not even sure that was the worst first date I’ve ever been on.”

I expect him to laugh, but instead, he only looks angrier. He takes a seat next to me on the settee, shaking his head.

“Men in this city can be absolute scum. They don’t know how to treat a real woman.”

I swallow hard. Suddenly, with him so close beside me, it’s getting difficult to focus. My blood is still pumping hard, the adrenaline making my hands quivery, my feet feel numb and a little shaky. Though, it might not all be adrenaline from Dick’s attack anymore. It’s hard to tell, what with the way my hormones are reacting to the heat pouring off of Zayne’s body and the proximity of his strong arms, his biceps visible through his uniform shirt.

I force myself to shrug, playing it nonchalant. “There are assholes everywhere, I guess.”

“Not like here,” he scowls. “And you shouldn’t have to deal with them, anyway. You don’t deserve that.” He casts a sideways glance at me, our eyes locking once more. “You deserve a man who treats you right. Someone who understands your value. Who knows what a woman like you needs.”

“And what’s that?” I ask. Somehow, my voice has dropped to a whisper. I don’t remember giving it permission to do that. Then again, I don’t remember leaning toward Zayne either, and I don’t remember giving myself permission to stare at his lips, just inches away from mine, slightly parted as though he’s about to say something else—or maybe just close the gap between us and crush his lips against mine, kiss me until I forget about tonight.

“Respect,” he replies. His eyes dip down a little too, glancing at my mouth, then back to my eyes. I lick my lips and his eyes flicker again.

“Care. Whatever you desire, honestly.”

My throat feels tight, my mouth dry. I suck in a deep breath of air and turn my head a little, glance around the lobby, mostly for an excuse to break the tension between us. But dammit, his scent follows me. He smells amazing—like pine needles and crisp fall air, and something else under it all, something heady and masculine and entirely him.

“Yeah. Well,” I say, eyes still on the empty lobby. “Guys like that are in short supply.”

“Depends where you look,” he says, and I can still feel his eyes on me, burning into me, even without looking at him. It’s a physical sensation, as if he’s touching me, caressing me with his gaze.

“Definitely not where I met him,” I say with a half-laugh. “Stupid dating app.”

Zayne laughs. Damn him, even his laugh is sexy, full-throated, and deep. “Which app are you using?” he asks.

I tell him, and in response, he pulls out his phone and unlocks the screen. Shows me the same app on his background.

This time, I laugh too. “Had any better luck with the ladies on there than I have with the guys?”

He smirks. “Well, I can’t say any women have stalked me home after dates,” he admits. Then shakes his head. “But no, I haven’t exactly met a lot of decent matches lately.”

“Do share. Maybe it’ll help me feel better about my abysmal luck.”

He laughs and leans back on the settee. “Oh god, where to start. There was the girl who asked me to sign an NDA before we could start dating—she brought triplicate copies to the bar.”

I burst out laughing.

His grin widens as he thinks back. “Hmm, and then there was the woman wearing a wedding ring. When I called her out on it, she insisted it was a fake diamond, that she just wears it to fend off guys hounding her. Sure, lady. And then one girl spent the whole date showing me photos of her five cats...”

By the time he’s finished recounting his dating stories, and I’ve shared a few of my own, we’re both laughing so hard my sides hurt. He’s halfway through another story, one about one of his friends whose date wet the bed on him, when a sharply-cleared throat interrupts us.

We glance up, and Zayne is on his feet in a heartbeat, before I even realize what’s happening. But then I recognize Mrs. Sharpe from the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, the one with the tiny purse dog and the husband who’s almost as tiny. She has her mouth pursed now, an angry frown wrinkling her forehead as she raps her fingers on the counter behind which Zayne normally works.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Sharpe,” he’s saying now, whipping his hat back onto his head as he skids behind the counter. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m expecting a package.”

“Of course, let me check on that.” He darts into the back, and I rise, surprised to find that my legs are no longer shaky. In fact, I feel about a million times better. Maybe all the laughter and bad date stories helped relax me after all.

I sidle up to the counter and lean against it. Mrs. Sharpe glares at me. “Zayne just helped me out with a creepy date,” I explain. “The guy followed me home, tried to attack me...”

That softens her up. The crease in her forehead disappears, and Mrs. Sharpe pats my arm instead. “Take my advice, honey,” she says. Zayne returns with her package, and she accepts it with a smile, tucking it under her arm before she turns to me once more. “Find a good man, not a nice guy,” she finishes. Then she’s off toward the elevator and I can feel my cheeks heating as I peek at Zayne.

“Good advice,” he says, leaning on the counter with a grin. If he’s bothered at all by the fact that Mrs. Sharpe discovered him away from his desk, it doesn’t show.

*What are you doing, Clove?* I can’t flirt with him while he’s working. I shouldn’t be flirting with him *at all*, anyway. He’s my doorman. He works here. I’ve walked past him every day for the last two years, and with any luck, I’ll walk past him every day for the next two as well, because I love this apartment. It’s my home. I can’t do anything to jeopardize that.

“I’ll quit distracting you,” I say, my tone apologetic. “Thanks again, for everything.”

“Anytime,” he replies, then stops himself, shaking his head. “Although, of course, I hope you never have to deal with a piece of shit like that guy ever again.”

I laugh. “Here’s hoping.”

“Yes,” he agrees, eyes suddenly sincere again, locked on me. “Here’s hoping.”

With that, I leave him to his front desk duties. I wipe my palms on my jeans as I go. Ignore the fresh sparking in my nerve endings. This time, I definitely can’t blame it on adrenaline or fear. This time, I know exactly what’s causing it.

But that’s the worst possible idea. If I hooked up with Zayne and things went sour, they’d go *really* sour.

So, I push my floor in the elevator, let the doors close behind me, and try not to think about the insanely hot man I just discovered hiding behind

my doorman's uniform.

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Midnight. I still can't sleep. Turns out adrenaline plus a healthy dose of flirting makes for one long, sleepless kind of night.

I pull out my phone and flip through my messages. I filled in my BFFs at work about the date already, blowing up our group text with details. They are appropriately shocked and appalled on my behalf. Andy even promises to buy my first round at our standing team happy hour on Thursday.

But by now, everyone's long asleep. Well, except for Celeste, who's out celebrating her boyfriend's birthday, but I don't want to bother her with more bored whining about how I'm still awake because dammit, I can't stop thinking about tonight.

You'd think it would be the stalker distracting me, keeping me up. Instead, it's images of Zayne. His piercing blue eyes as he looked me over, made sure I was okay after that attack. The flirty glint in those same eyes when he told me I needed a man who treats me right. Someone who will give me *whatever I desire*.

I shiver and roll back over in bed. Tap on the little icon for the dating app. If nothing else, it will occupy my mind. Distract me from thinking thoughts I should definitely not be thinking about my doorman.

*Like what those strong arms would feel like wrapped around me, or what his lips would taste like on mine.* Not to mention, judging by the size of his hands, he's got to be packing a pretty nice package in those uniform pants...

I scold myself internally and focus on the app. *Don't think about him.*

I try to force him out. Try to focus on the guys scrolling past on my screen instead. But staring at boring finance bro after boring finance bro gets old. They all have the same photos on their profiles, I swear. Shirtless pic to display their no doubt carefully gym-cultivated abs, another pic of them drinking beer with their bros to prove they have friends, one carefully cropped photo with their arm around someone not in the image, to prove that they've dated chicks before (or at least known them long enough to trick them into taking a photo together), and one definitely posed headshot that shows off their cheekbones at the best possible angle. The latter may or may not be heavily edited—it varies by dude.

None of them add much detail to their profiles beyond that. They're all full of one-line quotes, usually from action movies. That, or witticisms such as "I'm the one you've been looking for." Very convincing.

I swipe left through at least a dozen profiles, and I'm debating giving up and just rolling back over to try and sleep when a different image pops up. Unlike most of the other guys, this photo appears to be a candid one, unposed. He's looking past the photographer, at something in the background. He's standing on a street corner I recognize, just a few blocks away, outside my favorite deli. He probably took this on a lunch run, or maybe before his shift started.

I can guess, because I know the guy.

It's Zayne.

I tap open his profile. There are only three photos. The first one, the candid, shows off his cheekbones at just the right angle, not to mention really accentuates his sharp blue eyes catching the Manhattan sunlight so they seem to glow in the photo. Then there's another picture of him indoors —his apartment maybe? I spot a cozy-looking striped blanket and a cat curled up on his lap, though he's not posing with it, just kind of reclining and letting the cat chill there. This one isn't a candid—he's smiling at whoever's taking it. The effect is that it looks like he's gazing straight out of my phone at me. I feel two things simultaneously—a red-hot fire in the pit of my belly and an equally strong and startling sensation of jealousy.

Whoever took this photo, I hate them. For no other reason than that Zayne was smiling at them like *that*.

Damn.

*Calm down, Clove*, I scold myself.

The third photo is at a beach somewhere. There's a few guys in the photo, but unlike most dudes' profiles, I can pick Zayne out immediately. He stands out like that, impossible to look away from. He's in the middle of a volleyball game, mid-jump in fact, and goddamn, does it make his body stand out. He's in swimming trunks of course, and it highlights perfectly the washboard cut of his abs, straight down to the muscular V pointing down to his groin.

I swallow hard and find myself wishing that my phone had a higher resolution display. I'd like to zoom in on this photo, see exactly where that V is pointing, if you can see the outline of him through those trunks...

I shake myself. Tap back on his profile page.

"The only people for me are the mad ones."

I grin. Okay, sure, maybe an *On the Road* quote is a little bit cliché, but there's something almost adorable about it here.

Plus, he reads. That's a bonus.

And, I have to laugh at his username. *AtYourService*. Fitting for a doorman.

I hesitate, finger hovering over the screen. I remember the stern talking-to I gave myself in the lobby earlier tonight. *This is a bad idea*.

But I rarely ever listen to myself. Especially not when confronted with a guy like Zayne. So I slide my thumb right, and hit yes on him.

My phone buzzes almost immediately.

*You have a new match!*

He already swiped right on me too.

I lick my lips. Open the chat window that's popped up. My fingers hover over the keys. What do I say? *Thanks again for saving my ass tonight? You look better without the uniform?*

Then again, he looks pretty damn good *in* the uniform, too.

My phone buzzes once more. Looks like he spared me the trouble of figuring out an opening line.

*Trouble sleeping?* his message reads.

I glance at my bedside clock and my eyes widen. Shit. It's almost 1am already. When did that happen?

I peer back at the app.

*CallMeClove: Eventful night. I'm finding it pretty hard to doze off now, yeah.*

AtYourService: *Me too. I keep thinking about this beautiful woman who I had to save from a raving madman.*

CallMeClove: *Sounds exciting. What happened next, did you sweep her off her feet?*

AtYourService: *Believe me, I wanted to. Sadly, I think she only sees me as an employee. Bodyguard, maybe.*

CallMeClove: *I find that hard to believe. You seem like you have a lot more than just one side to you, under that uniform.*

AtYourService: *Trust me, there's a lot more than you see under this uniform.*

CallMeClove: *Don't tease me.*

AtYourService: *You mean like this?*

That last message comes with a photo attached. I recognize the background —wow, our doormen have long shifts. He's downstairs, in the mail room, which I've only ever seen from the other side of the counter. He's leaning back on a stool, his shirt untucked, his pants hanging loosely on his hips.

I swallow hard.

CallMeClove: *Exactly like that.*

I hold my breath when I hit send on this. The alarm bells are still ringing in my head, *bad idea, bad idea*, but it's late and I'm getting punch drunk on exhaustion, not to mention my hormones are still raging from earlier.

AtYourService: *So you don't want to see what's underneath?*

Another picture comes through. In this one, he's pulled his shirt up, just far enough to show his washboard abs and the waistband of his boxers.

Goddamn. His stomach is flat, rippling, and looks even more delicious

close-up than it did in that beach photo. I want to run my hands over those abs. Trace that glorious V-line straight down into those boxers and...

Argh.

CallMeClove: *I thought I said don't tease me...*

AtYourService: *My bad. In that case, are you allowed to tease me instead? Because I have to admit, I've spent all night wondering what was underneath my damsel in distress's clothes...*

I shiver. Cast a glance down at myself. I'm in PJs now, and they're not exactly sexy. Just a baggy T-shirt and my gym shorts. But my dresser is within reach, and inside it, the lacy lingerie that I reserve for special occasions.

I take a deep breath. What could it hurt? Just one picture. It's only polite after all. He sent me one first.

I pull off my T-shirt, slip on the lingerie and arrange it so it doesn't actually show anything—not my face and not anything completely untoward either. The result is sexier than I expected, to be honest. It's all black lace and a hint of cleavage, and when I hit send, I'm actually not even embarrassed. Because hell yeah, I look hot.

He replies almost instantly. There's no message this time, just a photo of him standing beside the stool in the mail room now, his boxers on full display. And through them, I can already make out the outline of his hard cock, straining against the fabric. I trace my fingers along my phone screen, and I'm surprised to find a trickle of sweat inching between my breasts. Because goddamn, I want to touch him. Feel that cock with my own hands.

AtYourService: *Still want me to quit teasing, naughty girl?*

CallMeClove: *I might be coming around to it. I'd need one more photo to be sure...*

He doesn't disappoint. I open the next picture with a skip in my breath.  
*Holy hell.* He's huge.

His cock is thick, swollen with lust, and wrapped in his strong fist. To judge by him, they aren't kidding when they say large hands equal large everything else. He's glorious, long and curved slightly upward, with thick veins that stand.

More than anything, I want to taste him. Lick along his length, swirl my tongue around the tip of him, then slowly take him into my mouth... Would he even fit?

I want to find out.

CallMeClove: *Should you be undressing like this at work? Seems very unprofessional of you.*

AtYourService: *Going to lodge a complaint? ;)*

CallMeClove: *Oh, definitely not.*

AtYourService: *That's good. Because it's your fault, you know.*

CallMeClove: *My fault? How so? I am perfectly innocent here.*

AtYourService: *That lacy nightgown says otherwise. And now you've gone and made me rock-hard just thinking about peeling it off of you...*

CallMeClove: *Well, you're the one who started it. Now I'm getting wet just looking at how hard you are.*

AtYourService: *Definitely seems like you're the one doing the teasing. Because now I'm thinking about spreading your thighs and tasting exactly how wet you are. I bet you have a tight little pussy, don't you, naughty girl?*

I slide my hand under the covers. Touch myself as I respond one-handed.

CallMeClove: *So tight. I wonder if your thick cock would fit inside me...*

AtYourService: *I'd go nice and slow. Lick you until you couldn't stand it anymore, until you were begging for me, and then I'd push into you slowly, an inch at a time...*

I spread my pussy lips and swirl my finger through the thick juices accumulating there, all the while imagining it's him. His finger, his strong, capable hand down my panties. My hand trembles as I type out my reply.

CallMeClove: *I'd be so tight and hot and wet around you, and when you finally slid all the way inside me, I'd wrap my legs around your waist, let you fuck me however you want.*

AtYourService: *I'd fuck you all night, Clove. Every way you want. Hard and rough enough that you wouldn't be able to walk straight the next day.*

CallMeClove: *Fuck yes, Zayne. That's what I want you to do to me.*

I barely manage to finish typing the last sentence. I'm too concentrated on my pussy, sliding my fingers in and out of myself, while I press down hard on my clit with the heel of my hand, rubbing it at the same time.

AtYourService: *I'm fisting my cock right now, thinking about you. Are you touching yourself? Please tell me you're touching that sweet little pussy of yours, Clove.*

That reply is enough to send me over the edge. My body shakes as I come, and I let out a faint cry, alone in the darkness of my apartment.

But now that I have, and the hormones still continue to rage, as frustrated as I am, I grimace. What am I doing? Exactly what I promised myself I shouldn't.

Seeing my name on the screen next to his makes me realize just what a terrible idea this is. I love this apartment. It's my home. I can't risk it for a fling, even if it is with a hottie like Zayne.

CallMeClove: *I have to go. I'm sorry.*

I log out of the app before I can give into temptation any more. When I roll over to shut off my light, I squint at the time and grimace even harder. Shit. Past two in the morning.

Tomorrow is going to be a very long day.

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“Good morning, Ms. Walker.”

The usual morning doorman, Paul, waves at me as I exit the building. Meanwhile, I’m suppressing a mixture of frustration and relief. Half of me wanted to see Zayne this morning. Catch one more glimpse of his sexy grin, his piercing blue eyes.

The other half is relieved that I don’t have to walk past him right away. Not after last night. And especially not with how I’m looking this morning —like I just rolled out of the wrong side of the bed and face-first into a pot of coffee. There are bags under my eyes that my makeup is straining to conceal, and my hair is a mess because I didn’t have time to shower.

As it is, I just wave back at Paul as I jog out the door, hurrying toward the train in my flats, because no way can I run as fast as I’ll need to in heels.

Half an hour later, I roll into my office five minutes before our first meeting is set to begin. Just enough time to pour myself a large cup of black coffee in the break room before I sidle up to the office where we meet every Friday morning to review our campaigns from last week and plan for the next.

One girl at the back of the room, a new hire I don’t know very well, Hannah-something, is staring at me blatantly. I do a quick check, but no, I remembered to button all my buttons. Huh. Weird.

I shake my head and zone back into the meeting.

Even though it’s business as usual, it’s still impossible to concentrate. I stare blankly at my manager, my mind still stuck on my text exchange with

Zayne last night. The image of his cock, the knowledge that he was touching himself, masturbating in the break room thinking about me.

Before long, I have to cross my legs and clench them tight, my panties already feeling worryingly damp.

Naturally, that's the moment when my boss calls my name. I focus on her, then the PowerPoint slide on the wall behind her. But it doesn't help me figure out what she just said.

"Sorry, what was that?" I wince.

My boss's annoyed stare says it all. Normally she and I are on good terms, but the rest of the day pretty much goes like that. No matter what she asks, I need her to repeat it multiple times because I can't keep my head on straight.

Then a few of the results from previous campaigns come in abysmally low, coupled with one of our vendors trying to renegotiate a contract we'd already signed, and by the end of my very long Friday, I am in desperate need of a stiff drink.

To top it all off, none of my usual post-work happy hour buddies are free tonight. Andy has a hot date with this new guy she's been flirting with nonstop all week, and Celeste has some birthday party for her aunt to go to. Which leaves me stranded in midtown with nowhere to go.

I heave a sigh and start heading for the train when my phone buzzes. Another message on the app. I hesitate for a fraction of a second before I tap it open.

It's Zayne.

My stomach flips, the sensation both nervous and pleasant at once. I open our conversation, my face flushing as I remember just how hot and heated this got last time.

But if I'm expecting just another sext, that's not what I find.

*AtYourService: Hope I didn't keep you up too late last night. How's your Friday going?*

*CallMeClove: To be honest, not great. Work was pretty shitty. All kinds of projects exploding at once.*

*AtYourService: Would coffee cheer you up? I know a great little place not far from the building, over on Madison. And I happen to be free this evening.*

I smile. Sure, the *bad idea* alarms are still going off, but they're buried deep in the back of my mind now, under a few layers of my crappy workday, my friends all being busy, and, admittedly, my hormones still in full-on raging after last night's photo exchange.

CallMeClove: *Actually, yeah, coffee sounds great. Meet you there?*

He sends me the address and I get onto the subway train with a renewed pep in my step. I check myself out in the mirror and fix my hair, add a touch of lipstick. My favorite distraction when I feel tired—bright red lipstick because then people won't notice your other flaws.

I actually don't look too bad by the time I step off the train at the other end. I guess an overdose of coffee and stress is a decent remedy for sleepless bedhead after all.

The coffee shop Zayne picked turns out to be a cute place a few blocks from my apartment that I've been eyeballing for months. It opened last summer but I hadn't made it over here yet. It's funny how you get set in your routines. You don't even know that they need breaking until someone comes along and smashes them.

And hell if Zayne isn't doing a damn good job of that right now. The moment I step through the front doors into the cozy little café, I spot him. He's impossible to miss now that I've finally tuned into his frequency. His eyes catch me from across the room and nearly pin me to my spot in the doorway. My heartbeat speeds up and suddenly it's hard to focus on anything but the extremely hot man standing up, drawing out a chair for me, eyes locked on mine all the while. In the warm café lighting, his cheekbones stand out sharper than ever. He looks sexy as hell in jeans and a T-shirt, relaxed and off duty, like a completely different person from the uniformed hottie who saved me last night.

Was it only last night? It feels like so long ago now. Like so much has already changed.

For one thing, I finally woke up to notice the guy I've spent the last two years walking right past, blind as a bat.

I take a seat across from him and look down to find he's already ordered. There's a latte cooling in front of me, a little heart drawn into the foam.

I smile and lift it to tap against his in a cheers. "How did you know my drink?"

"Educated guess. I figure, you're a twenty-something bookworm with good taste, you probably like your coffee strong with a dash of sweet."

I glance into his cup and find he's drinking the same thing. "Great minds think alike," I point out.

His smile widens. "But fools seldom differ."

I laugh. Everybody always forgets the second half of that quote. "Touché," I say, and take a long sip of my latte. It's delicious.

"So, tell me all about your shitty day," he says, leaning back in his chair. It shows off his muscles to perfect advantage, which I'm sure was the point. I can't help letting my gaze wander down across his chest, along his arms, before I force myself to look back at his face.

He lets his eyes wander too, and he doesn't seem to care that I see him checking me out. I shiver. There's something sexy about a man who's blatantly turned on by you and doesn't mind that you know it. His gaze lingers on my curves, my dress, then darts back to my face.

"You really want to hear about my crappy work problems?" I counter.

He laughs. "Only if you want to talk about them."

I heave a sigh. "Where to even start?"

"Start with what's got you so stressed out that your shoulders are up to your ears," he suggests.

I force myself to relax my posture, shooting him another glance. Normally guys aren't interested in hearing about my day-to-day life. But okay, I'll give him a try. I tell him about how my boss is annoyed at me for missing my deadline and how my project fell below par.

"But you don't normally have a tricky relationship with her?" he asks.

I nod. "Normally we get on great. Normally I perform better than this."

"Well everyone has off days. She understands that, I'm sure."

I feel myself bobbing my head. Why is he so easy to talk to? I blink and shake my head, pulling myself out of my own world. "But this has got to be

boring for you,” I admit, realizing we’ve just spent the last 15 minutes talking about my office politics.

“If you’d prefer, we can change the subject. Talk about something more distracting.”

“You do seem good at distracting women,” I reply with a smirk, letting my gaze drip over his body.

“Only when I’m inspired.” He leans closer across the table and those blue eyes draw me in again, magnets that are impossible to tear myself away from. “And I must say, you are extremely inspiring, Clove Walker.”

I raise an eyebrow, grinning. “What exactly do I inspire in you?”

“Dirty as hell fantasies for one thing.” He hooks a leg around mine under the table and slides his calf against mine. I catch my breath, brace myself against the table with both hands. But he lets me go almost right away and leans back in his seat, casual and nonchalant once more, as though he didn’t just say that. “For another, you make me want to know more about you. I mean, I know the basics. Name, address of course, and the volume of Amazon packages you get on a weekly basis...”

My cheeks flush bright red at the reminder of how we know one another. Of how well he knows my private details. I also take the opportunity to kick him lightly under the table. “Hey, I don’t get nearly as many packages as Mr. Horton down in 3C, okay?”

“True, but he’s going for the Guinness World Record of longest a man can go without ever leaving his apartment, so he hardly counts.”

“When was the last time you saw him outside?” I muse.

“November three years ago,” Zayne answers without hesitation, and I laugh again.

“No, but seriously, do you think he’s okay in there?”

“I bet he’s got a more interesting life than all the rest of us combined.” Zayne shakes his head with a half-laugh. “Watch, we’ll find out one day that all those food deliveries and household supplies he orders are actually secret spy equipment in disguise.”

“Ooh, yes, and I’ll bet he’s got a Russian spy lover who sneaks into his apartment via the fire escape every night for secret trysts.”

“Who’d have thought Mr. Horton would be the kinky type, huh?” Zayne lifts an eyebrow, smirking.

“Guess it just goes to show that you can’t judge a book by its cover.” I lift an eyebrow in return, unable to keep a wide smile from dancing across

my face.

“True enough.” He’s leaning forward again, and so am I, unable to stop myself. He’s not just magnetic, he has a gravitational pull of his own.

“After all, I never would have guessed you were so naughty, Ms. Walker.”

“I never would have guessed you were so dynamic, Zayne.”

“Pearson,” he says, filling in the unspoken blank.

My cheeks flush. “We seem a little uneven here, Zayne Pearson. You know way more about me than I do you. So come on, share some details.”

“What do you want to know?” He tilts forward, so close to me suddenly that his lips graze my ear as he whispers. “Beside the size of my cock?”

My cheeks burn red-hot now, on fire. But the rest of me is burning too. Especially my belly and the growing tight spot between my legs. I swear, when he talks dirty, I feel it directly in my pussy, like an electric shot straight to my core. “That’s definitely on the list,” I murmur with a grin. “I mean, I do have that one lovely photo, but I have to say, I’m tempted to request more...”

“Done,” he says without a moment’s hesitation. My eyebrows rise. I must look surprised because his grin deepens and he adds, “Of course, that means I get to ask for something in exchange.”

I turn my face a little, so our cheeks are almost touching now. We’re close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his skin, and I catch his scent again, every bit as intoxicating as it was last night. Salty and sweet all at once. “And what is it you desire, Mr. Pearson?”

“Turnabout is fair play,” he answers. “A photo for a photo. You teased me with that sexy little lingerie piece last night...” He lifts a hand slowly and lets it hover in the air between us. My breath catches in my throat, my whole body tense in anticipation of his touch. When it comes, it’s feather-light, just the faintest caress, his fingertips grazing across my collarbone before he drops his hand to the table once more. “I’d like to see what’s underneath.”

If my cheeks felt hot before, now they could start a fire. But the idea of sending him a photo of my breasts, something that would normally raise a whole lot of red flags on a first date, has me feeling hot and bothered instead. Because it leads me to imagining more—him jerking off in the mail room while he’s supposed to be working, unable to help himself, too turned on by the image of me, by my breasts, my body, the idea of me.

My pussy clenches, and damn, at this rate, I'm going to need a change of panties soon.

"Deal," I whisper, and his lips quirk into a grin. He's so close. Close enough that I could close the gap between us in a heartbeat, press my lips to his. I want to. I find myself tilting toward him, unstoppable, unable to fight the gravity.

That grin widens and he leans back in his chair once more. Damn him. He knows what I want. And he's enjoying withholding it.

"That's all you want from me, huh? Just my cock?"

He says it loud enough that a couple at the table beside us glance over, eyes wide. My eyes widen too, and I duck my head, face flushed.

"No, I—"

"It's cool." He winks. "I've been told it's pretty addictive, so I can understand."

I aim another kick at him under the table. "How long have you been doorman-ing, Zayne?"

"Oh, we're not going back to boring first date interview questions already, are we?" He shakes his head.

I laugh. "I'm just proving I want to know more about you than just how big your cock is."

"Two years," he replies. "First job I picked up when I moved here and I liked it."

"What about it?" I tilt my head, studying him.

He smiles. "The people. My tenants. Helping them out, making sure their lives run as smoothly as possible. I like that. I like being able to see the results of what I'm doing first-hand. I help somebody get their laundry done or send out a package or ferry their groceries upstairs, and I get to see the results real-time. Before this, I worked in an office, pencil-pushing gig. You did all this work but you never got to see anybody happy from it. You never saw proof that what you did mattered."

I can feel myself nodding again. "I get that. I feel that way a lot of the time at my job. Like nothing I do makes a real difference. Not to real people."

He slides a hand across the table to squeeze mine quickly. "I'm sure it does, Clove. You just don't always see them through your screen is all."

I sigh and nod again. "Maybe I envy you a little. That instant feedback."

“I do enjoy instant feedback.” He glances down at my phone which is resting face-down on the table. “Speaking of which. If you did hypothetically want to know about my cock... I mean, since you asked.”

Right on cue, my phone buzzes. I have to laugh, even as I pick it up. There, right on the home screen, is a new message. A photo attachment. I glance back at him, lean forward to check under the table. How did he send that so fast, without me even noticing?

“You came prepared?” I ask.

He smirks. “Maybe.”

I open the photo and immediately fight the urge to hide my phone. It’s strange to look at his dick while he’s sitting right here across from me, out in the open. Especially in a public place where anyone could walk right past our table and see my phone.

Zayne must sense that I’m debating closing it again because he snatches the phone from me and plants it face-up on the table. “You asked for this,” he reminds me in a low voice. “You should enjoy it to the fullest.”

So, I resist the urge to hide and bend forward to take in the picture. This one was taken from a bedroom—I spy a duvet in the background. He’s completely naked this time, not just pulling himself out of his boxers. And damn, his cock looks even better than I remember. It’s flushed, standing on its own. He’s standing too, and as full as it is, it stands straight out from his body, strong and hard. I imagine bending over in front of him, letting him thrust that thing inside me, and it makes my pussy feel white-hot with desire. My clit throbs, feeling heavy and weighted between my thighs.

“Your turn,” he murmurs.

“What, *here*?” I cast a glance around the coffee shop.

“You’re right.” He stands and drops a handful of change on the table, more than enough for a 20% tip. “They’re about to close. What say we continue this next door? There’s a little Irish pub on the corner, and the bartender owes me a few drinks on the house.”

I trail after him, heart pounding. As we exit the coffee shop, he catches my hand, and I wind my fingers through his, loving the feel of his thick, strong fingers enclosing mine, protective and possessive all at once.

The walk to the bar is far too short, mostly because once we get there, he lets go of my hand again, and my skin burns where he was just touching me. I want nothing more than to grab his hand once more. Or better yet, pull him against me, crush our bodies together and pull his lips to mine. I

want to kiss that grin off his face, replace it with a sexy, sultry smile. I want to taste his mouth, his tongue. I want to kiss my way along his stubble-dusted jawline, down the side of his neck. I want him to push me up against this bar and take me right here.

Shit.

*Calm down, Clove.*

The bartender greets Zayne by name, then catches sight of me and rests an elbow on the bar, eyes darting up and down my length with a smile of approval. “And who is this beautiful young lady?”

“Clove, this is Nick. Ignore anything he tells you,” Zayne advises with a smirk at his friend.

In response, Nick slides two glasses across the table. “You’re just in time. I’m trying out a new recipe.” But I notice his eyes keep darting back to me. I wonder if that’s because he’s surprised to see me here with Zayne. Then I wonder why. Does Zayne usually bring a different girl every time he comes here? Or does he not usually have a girl in tow at all? It’s hard to tell.

The guys banter for a minute while I sample the drink. My eyes widen. It’s delicious—fruity but not too sweet, and a little smoky on the tail end.

“I call it a Southern Fire-Starter,” Nick says, noticing my expression. “Bourbon-based.”

“It’s delicious.”

“She’s got good taste,” Nick points out to Zayne with a wink. “Well, you know, except for showing up here with you.”

I grin over the rim of the glass at Zayne while he insults Nick back.

“Seriously though, how *did* he talk you into going out in public with him?” Nick adds when Zayne pauses to knock back a taste of his own drink.

“Funny story...” I start, but Zayne finishes his drink with a shake of his head and wraps an arm around my shoulders.

“How about not giving her the third degree right off the bat, huh, dude?” He’s grinning, but something about their postures tells me there’s more going on here than meets the eye. They’re both joking, but Nick is asking Zayne something else, I think. Something that I can’t quite put my finger on.

I shrug it off when Zayne leads me to a back table. I don’t need to figure out his friends. I’m not here for them, after all.

We take a seat in a far corner, a cozy little spot that I could definitely get used to. It’s the kind of local dive that I love best—not too pricey, not too

crowded. Just the right number of locals who know each other's names, and a bartender who remembers their favorite drinks.

We sip on Nick's specialty cocktail and talk a little bit about the neighborhood. Zayne grew up here, apparently, and before long, he's regaling me with stories of what this place used to be like when he was young. He's only a couple years older than me, I learn, which surprises me. He has one of those faces that could pass for almost any age between 28 and 40.

Still, for only being 31, he knows a lot about the history of this spot. This pub has apparently been here all along, one of the only institutions that survived the real estate crash and then the following real estate explosion a few years later when rent prices started to recover. There used to be a big park next door, but about fifteen years ago they razed it to put up another apartment complex, and then in turn razed *that* to build a bigger, fancier complex.

It's intriguing hearing about all this history. I never really thought about the neighborhood, about what it used to be like before I moved in. Now it's ritzy as hell, with tons of boutique shops and fancy restaurants on every corner. I don't mind that at all, but it's strange to think of what it must have been like for Zayne. To grow up here, to watch his neighborhood go through so many transformations.

I tell him about my old neighborhood where I grew up, out in west Ohio. It was a tiny town, barely a blip on any map. Even locals had hardly heard of it. I had 50 people in my high school graduating class. He laughs at that. I describe our weekend pastimes—yes, cow-tipping was a real thing. No, we never actually managed to push a cow over. Though one time my brother did get kicked in the shin while trying.

Before I realize it, we're on our third round of drinks, the first two compliments of the house, and I'm feeling them. Not to mention, with every round, we've inched closer together, going from sitting across from one another at this table to side-by-side, to now, with Zayne's leg and side pressed against mine. I can feel his hips as he shifts in his chair, leans closer against me. A spark flies through me when he drapes his arm over the back of my chair, letting his fingertips trail along my bicep.

"So," he murmurs, against my ear when we're halfway through our third drinks. "Earlier..."

“Mmhmm?” I tilt toward him, distracted by the faint graze of his lips against my earlobe, and the continued tingles along my arm as he traces his fingers lazily over my skin.

“You were going to return my favor.”

I cast a sideways glance at him and find him grinning at me, a spark of mischief in his bright blue eyes. “What, here?”

He lifts his eyebrows. “Well, we aren’t at the café anymore. And you know, they do have a bathroom...” His eyes dart to the far wall, to a little corridor that leads to the single stall at the back of the bar. It’s only just visible from here, and not viewable from the rest of the bar since it’s around a corner.

When I look back at him, I’m pretty sure my eyes are alight with the same kind of mischief. “Good point. So, you want me to go in there and...” I trace a fingertip down his chest, pause to tug gently at the collar of his shirt. “Strip?”

“Just your top, if you prefer.” He lets his gaze drop to my chest. “Though, I won’t complain if you want to take off more...”

“That’s going to cost you a lot more than just a dick pic,” I reply, leaning in to let my forehead rest against his, our eyes locked as I grin.

“Hmm... Well if it involves getting to see what’s under *your* uniform, I am definitely willing to pay.” His hands wander down my sides, wrap around my hips. Our breath mingles between us, barely an inch of air separating us. I want to close the gap so damn badly. I want to press my lips to his, taste him.

Instead, I decide it’s time to give him a taste of his own teasing medicine. I push out of my seat and stand, snatching my phone on the way up.

“See you soon,” I tell him with a wink, and then I wind my way down the hall toward the restroom.

It’s free, so I step inside and maneuver in front of the mirror. For a pub bathroom, it’s really not too shabby. It’s clean, well-kept. I cast a glance at the door and decide to get this over with quickly. Luckily, I wore my favorite bra today, mostly as a private mood-booster this morning when I was exhausted and trying to force myself out of bed. It’s red and lacy and lifts my girls to just the right height, giving me a hint of cleavage without going overboard. I pull my dress off, so I’m just in my panties and bra. I

snap a photo in the bra first. I hit send on that, then hesitate, glancing at myself in the mirror.

I've sent nude pics to guys before, of course. But only guys who I've been dating for a few months. Guys I trust. And not even many of those. It's a lot to ask for a guy I only just met. I'm all too aware of what can happen to girls who aren't careful, who send nudes to guys who suddenly decide they want to take revenge on those same girls later.

But I've known Zayne for years, even if not intimately. And besides, he works in the same place where I live. He's not going to risk his position to mess with one of his customers, is he?

That makes me pause.

Customer. I am basically his customer. Or his boss, depending on how you look at it. He works for the building, which means he works for the residents, which means he works for me. Is this weird? Is this too much of a business relationship for me to turn it into anything more?

And what if the flirtation goes south? What if this leads nowhere, or worse, leads to a few hookups and a bad split? I'll have to pass him every single day on my way in and out of the building. Constantly being reminded.

Then again, we've come this far. I have photos of his cock on my phone. I'll be constantly reminded no matter what happens now. I might as well take the leap into the deep end since I've already gone and gotten myself wet.

I grin at myself in the mirror, amused by the analogy. My phone buzzes. *That's not what I asked for*, Zayne says, and don't I know it.

I unclasp my bra and let it slide down my arms. Take a deep breath, face myself in the mirror, and snap another photo. In this one, I'm grinning, just a little, sultry and sexy all at once. And my tits are on full display, nipples hard from the cool air in here—and from the thought of who is about to see this picture.

I hit send. Then I start to lift my bra back on.

That's when the door opens.

I gasp and drop my phone into the sink, startled. Shit, I forgot to lock it. But when I see who it is, I freeze in place.

Zayne turns the lock behind him, a wide grin on his face. "I have a policy about open doors," he says.

“What’s that?” I ask, lifting my chin. Trying desperately to pretend that I’m not standing here topless in a public restroom, staring at one of the hottest guys I’ve ever known.

“I always walk through them if I want what’s on the other side.” With that, he crosses the restroom in a single stride and catches my chin in one hand, wraps his other arm around my waist. Next thing I know, his lips collide with mine, and I forget that I’m half-naked, forget where we are.

I forget everything but Zayne.

His mouth parts, and his tongue invades. I let him claim me, twine my tongue with his while our hands roam across each other’s bodies. I run one hand through his thick blond hair, along the back of his neck, while my other hand traces the hem of his shirt. Slips underneath to press my palm flat against his hot, bare back.

He grips my waist with both hands and crushes me tight against him. I can feel the hard press of his cock against my belly, and when I wriggle against him, he pulses against me, groans faintly into our kiss.

I tilt my head to let him kiss me more deeply, then gasp when he catches my lower lip between his teeth, bites down gently. His hands trail up my waist to my breasts, and trace underneath, above, circling around them. His lips leave mine, and I gasp again in protest, but then I don’t have time to think about it, because he’s kissing his way along my jawline, down the side of my neck. His stubble scratches against my soft skin, but I love it, the sharp contrast between his stubble and his soft mouth, his hot tongue wet against my neck.

He nips at the skin just below my ear, and a shiver runs through my entire body as I crush him tighter against me.

His hands finally reach my nipples, and he rolls them between his forefingers and thumbs. I moan, sinking against him, loving the sensation of his strong, muscular body, so hard against mine. I tug at his shirt, wanting to feel his skin against my skin. He pauses to let me pull it off, then he’s right back on me, squeezing my breasts hard enough to make me gasp, his mouth tracing my neck down to my shoulder, my collarbone. I lean back, and he dips down to suck one nipple into his mouth, his tongue swirling around the hardened tip, as his other hand continues to work my other breast.

The sink digs into my side as he leans into me. I glance over his shoulder, check the door, realizing someone could walk in at any moment. I

should care. But it's hard to think about that, when Zayne is pressed against me. With his free hand, he traces my spine, down, down, pausing at the small of my back to flatten his palm against my skin, and then he slips his fingers down the back of my panties, the thin fabric giving way easily to his rough touch. He grabs my ass, squeezes hard, and I arch my hips into his, loving the feeling of his hard cock pressed against my belly, his hips digging into mine.

He pushes me backwards, into the sink, and the cool porcelain a sharp contrast to his hot skin.

My clit feels like it's swollen, a fat weight between my legs that's begging me to take this farther. To let him take me, fuck me right here over this sink.

But when I glance away from him, remember where we are, my heart sinks a little.

I want to fuck him—desperately. I want to feel his thick cock inside me, and let him take what he wants from me. I want him to fuck me so hard I can't walk, just the way he promised, and then I want to fuck him again and again until both of us will be sore in the morning but neither of us will care.

But not here. Not like this. Hooking up in the bathroom of a dingy little corner pub...

Zayne leans away from me, and follows my gaze. He must read my mind, because a moment later, he stoops down to scoop his shirt and my dress off the floor, and passes me mine. "As much as I'm enjoying you, Clove, I have to admit I'm not really into restroom hookups."

I accept my dress with a grateful half-smile. "You read my mind."

His eyes fix on me, still taking in my body hungrily. "So what's say we blow this joint?"

"Your place or mine?" I lift an eyebrow.

He grins. "They're the same address, so that makes it easy."

My cheeks flush. *Of course.* I should have figured he'd live in the building too. Damn, this is becoming a worse upon worse idea. And yet, I feel myself bend to pick up my bra, all the while shooting him a flirty grin. "Let's decide on the walk, then."

We make it as far as the front door of the pub before we fall into each other's arms again. The second we step outside and cool night air hits us, it seems to go straight to our heads. He kisses me hard, backs me up against

the wall of the building, and I lift one leg to wrap it around his waist as we kiss, burying my hands in his hair.

“I have to admit, this seems like an even worse hookup spot than the restroom,” I gasp when we finally part for air again, both of us breathing hard. His cock digs into my thigh now, and I fight the urge to inch my hips a few inches sideways and grind my clit against his hard length. I’m already wet enough, soaking straight through these thin panties.

“I can’t wait to tear this dress off you,” he murmurs into my neck, his voice low, almost a growl now. “You make me want to take you right here, right now.”

I shiver in anticipation, arching into him. “I want you to take me however you want me,” I whisper.

In response, he catches my hand, pulling me away from the wall and into a brisk walk. As we walk, he casts a grin down at me. “I can be patient... For now.”

Those words reverberate through me as we cross the blocks to our building. When I was walking here tonight, it felt close. Now, it feels like an eternity. An agonizing wait, when all I want to do is jump Zayne’s bones right here.

We run up against a red light, and he takes advantage of the moment to bury one hand in my hair, kissing me once more, hard and deep. His tongue slides between my lips, and I twine my tongue around his, soaking in his taste, his scent, his heat, the feel of his hot lips on mine, his sharp stubble against my cheek.

“Who’s my naughty girl?” he murmurs against my mouth, and I sink into him, letting him take control.

His hands grip my ass, lift me half off the curb as he crushes me against him, and I tilt my head, part my mouth to let him take what he wants from me.

“You like that?” He squeezes my ass again, harder, and I grin into his kiss, arching against him. “You like it rough, Clove?”

“Fuck yes.” I bite his lower lip for emphasis, and he growls, practically lifting me off the ground and grinding his hips against mine.

“Good. Because I don’t want to go easy on you.”

I lean back far enough to catch his eye, my own alight with desire. “Don’t you dare.”

His grin widens. “Be careful what you wish for, dirty girl.”

In response, I wriggle my ass, which grinds our hips together, his thick cock pinned between us, digging into my belly. He slaps my ass, not hard, but enough to make me startle and jump against him. He grins and leans in to catch my earlobe between his teeth and bite down, just hard enough to make me gasp.

“Oh, the things I’m going to do to you...”

Then, without warning, he pulls away, and it takes me a second to breathe in enough oxygen to remember where we are. What we’re doing. Because we’re still standing on a street corner in the middle of the city, and the light has just changed. I trail after him, across the road, head swimming, cheeks on fire. Normally I hate PDA, but with Zayne, I didn’t even remember we were still in public. When he touches me, everything else fades into the background. I could be anywhere, doing anything, and all I can see, all I can feel or hear or taste or think about, is him.

*He’s dangerous, I think. But even worse?*

I like it.

We finally reach the building lobby, and Paul buzzes us in. To judge by the way his eyebrows rise and his gaze darts between us, to call him “surprised” would be the understatement of the year.

But Paul is nothing if not the consummate professional. So after a moment of gaping, he simply bows his head. “Zayne. Ms. Walker.”

“Evening, Paul,” Zayne says with a wink as we saunter past him, arms wrapped around each other’s waists.

“Hello,” I manage, still embarrassed, still feeling my cheeks burn white-hot. This is what it will be like if things go sour with Zayne, I remind myself. I’ll have to walk past him every day, have awkward conversations like this one.

“Lovely night out,” Paul is saying as he digs under the counter. “Ms. Walker, you had a package...”

Zayne shoots me a sideways grin. “What was that about you not ordering too much on Amazon?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “I’ll pick it up tomorrow, thanks so much, Paul.”

“Of course.” His eyes trail us all the way to the elevator, and I wonder suddenly if there are security cameras in here. If he’s going to see that we push floor 11, where Zayne must live, instead of floor 5, where I live.

“You aren’t going to get in trouble for this, are you?” I ask, suddenly thinking about it. Is there some kind of rule against this? Dating the... customers, I guess?

Zayne only laughs and hits the door close button. “The only trouble we’re getting into tonight is one another,” he says, pinning me against the corner of the elevator with one arm on the glass behind me. I lean against the wall, looking up at him. I’m struck again by the way his sharp blue eyes pierce me, the way his body angles toward me to turn me on, light me up.

One way or another, tonight marks a turning point. Either this is a very, very bad decision—something the nervous rumble in my gut tells me it very well might be—or it’s a different kind of bad decision. The kind that will give me sleepless nights thinking about it for days to come.

Either way, it’s too late now. I’ve already jumped.

The elevator doors ding and slide open. We step out onto Zayne’s floor, the 11<sup>th</sup> floor, a floor I’ve never been to in all my years living in this building so far. He crosses to his door, unlocks it, and I take a deep breath and fall straight into the deep end.

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The second the door shuts behind us, Zayne shifts into alpha mode.

“Take off your dress.”

Our eyes lock. I keep mine on him as I slowly reach for the hem of my dress. Catch it and raise it over my shoulders. Normally I’d be shy about undressing for a guy the first time, but something about the white-hot heat in Zayne’s gaze doesn’t allow for it. He wants me—*bad*. So why feel shy about letting him take what he wants?

I drop the dress beside me, standing in my panties and bra before him.

He paces around me in a slow circle, eyes darting up and down my body as he sizes me up. “Now take off your bra.”

I catch his eye once more, hold it while I reach back to unclasp my bra. I let it slide down my arms, and my belly tightens at the way his gaze drops to my breasts, a hungry glint in his eye. He lifts one eyebrow, allows himself a small, private grin.

“Take off your panties now.”

I lift my chin and let my gaze drop down his body pointedly. “This seems a little one-sided,” I point out.

“Are you disobeying me, naughty girl?”

“What do you plan to do with me if I am?” I ask, my smile widening.

“Mm...” He pauses to let his eyes wander across my body once more, as though debating. “If you *are* being disobedient, I suppose a spanking would be in order... I’d have to bend you over my knee and give it to you hard.”

My throat goes dry, my pussy tight with anticipation. God I am so fucking wet already. How does he do this to me? I lift my chin, put one hand on my hip. “Hmm. In that case, I am *definitely* disobeying you,” I reply.

In an instant, he’s beside me, one arm around my shoulders, the other sweeping my legs out from under me. I barely have time to squeal and fling my arms around his neck before he’s dropping onto the couch and bringing me with him, spreading me across his legs. With both hands, he easily flips me over, as if I weigh nothing at all. I suppose to him I probably don’t.

I lean across his knees, bent so my head faces the floor. He positions me so my ass sticks straight up in the air, across his thighs. Then he runs his hand over my cheeks, one at a time, slow and considering.

Shivers of anticipation and pleasure rush down my spine as he takes his time, massaging my ass.

“You’ve been teasing me all night. Acting very dirty. I think it’s time you learn what naughty girls get for that.”

I suck in a sharp breath, tensed. I’ve always loved the idea of being spanked, but I’ve never had the guts to ask a guy to do it before. Somehow, with Zayne, it feels okay. More than okay. It feels safe. “Punish me,” I whisper, and he laughs, a low, throaty sound that resonates deep in my belly.

Without warning, he spansks my ass once, hard. I gasp and jump against him, but with his other hand, he pins me in place, holding me down across his legs.

“Count,” he says, as his hand comes down again in another sharp slap.

“One,” I gasp. The pain is sharp, stinging, but not unpleasant. It makes me even wetter, imagining how else he’ll punish me. What else he wants to make me do.

He spansks me again, and I count it. We keep going like that, until we get to five and both of my ass cheeks are burning, my whole body alight with the sensation. Then, abruptly, he stops, and starts to massage my ass again.

It feels different now, the spanking making my skin sensitive as hell. His rough, strong hands working across the now-stinging skin makes it twice as sensitive, the pleasure even sharper in contrast to the pain before.

“Are you ready to obey me now?” he murmurs, and I turn my head to catch his eye, savoring the hungry, lustful glint I find there.

It turns me on so fucking much, to see how much he wants me. "Yes," I whisper.

"Good." He grins and stands, pulling me to my feet beside him. I don't expect it so suddenly, and with all the different sensations still rushing through my body, it takes me a second to get steady on my feet. "Now drop those panties."

I push them over my hips. Let them fall to the floor in a puddle.

He glances down at them, smirking. "Wet for me already, dirty girl?"

"What can I say?" I bat my eyes. "You know how to turn me on."

He laughs again and spreads his arms wide. "Your turn," he says, lifting his eyebrows, almost in a challenge. "Undress me."

I pull his shirt off first. Then I have to pause, because the sight of these perfectly carved muscles up close is distracting as hell. I run my hands across his chest, and dip my head to kiss my way along his collarbone, while I trace my fingers along his abs, then slowly down the V that points directly to his groin.

"And try not to get too distracted along the way," he adds with a smirk.

I grin back at him and undo the clasp of his jeans. I inch them down his thighs and take a second on the way down to the floor to eye his muscular legs. Damn, even his thighs and calves are toned as hell. He steps out of the jeans, casting them aside with the rest of our clothes, and I stand back up, only his boxers between us now. The cool air in his apartment feels even colder now, and I shiver a little, tightening my legs. My pussy is already so wet, so the chill isn't helping. I want nothing more than to pull him against me, wrap myself in his warm body. But he's watching me with that smirk still, his eyelids lowered, expression dangerous. He didn't say I could touch him, not yet. Not aside from removing his clothes.

So, I hook the band of his boxers with one finger, and slowly, slowly tug those down next.

When his cock springs free, I can't help but gasp in appreciation. God *damn* he is huge. And it looks so much thicker in person, so much more tantalizing—and somehow intimidating, all at the same time. Because hell, looking at him right now, I find myself wondering whether he really will fit or not.

Fuck if I don't want to find out, though.

"Lie back," he says, and he casts a glance at the couch beside us. I lift an eyebrow at him, still smiling. He just waits, patiently, until I obey.

I step back and start to bend over the couch, but he catches my shoulder. Slides a hand down across my chest to circle my nipple with his fingers.

"Not like that," he says. "Lie backwards across it."

I turn around slowly, eyes locked on his. Then I lean backward over the edge of the couch, until my head hits the pillows behind me and my legs are spread. The arm of the couch digs into my ass, pushes my hips straight up into the air.

Apparently that's what he was going for.

Zayne kneels between my knees and grasps them in both hands. In one swift motion, he shoves my legs apart, baring me to the world. I shiver again, as the cool air of his apartment hits my wet, exposed pussy.

He smirks up at me. Fuck, the sight of him kneeling between my thighs is impossibly hot. He grins and purses his lips, blows gently right against my pussy lips. I shiver, unable to help myself, and dig my nails into my palms to distract from the intensity of the cold sensation.

He laughs softly, at the back of his throat. "Cold? Don't worry. You won't be for long." He bends closer, licks the inside of my thigh, just inches away from my pussy. He's so close to me that I can feel the graze of his stubble against my other thigh. "I can't wait to taste you, Clove."

I reach down to run my hands through his hair, my head falling back against the couch cushions. "Now you're being the tease," I point out, which elicits another laugh.

"Oh, definitely," he agrees. "But I don't hear you complaining." He turns to lick the inside of my other thigh, and I shiver, my whole body going tight with desire. My clit feels like it's on fire, like one straight lick from his tongue will send me rocketing toward an orgasm.

I want him so bad. I want him to lick me, suck me, taste me, and then I want him to fuck me.

"Definitely... no complaints... here," I manage, though to be honest, keeping control of my vocal chords is getting difficult as his tongue inches closer to my lips.

He presses one hand to my pussy, spreads my lips with hot fingers, his skin calloused and just rough enough that it adds an extra sensation when he runs on finger slowly from the front of my slit all the way to the back, leaving a trail of my juices all along my pussy.

"I love how wet you are for me, Clove."

"I want you," I gasp.

"I know." He grins. "You are such a sexy, gorgeous little naughty girl, aren't you?"

"Mm, yes..."

He slides his finger back up my slit, circles it around my pussy entrance. "Are you my little slut, Clove?"

"Yes, yes." My voice goes louder, sharper, as he pushes that finger against my entrance, not quite inside me yet. "Fuck yes."

"That's a good slut. Beg for me. Beg me to lick you. Taste you."

"Please, lick my pussy."

He licks across my mound, his tongue pressing down hard enough that I can feel it all the way to my swollen clit, even though he doesn't touch it, not yet. "Do you want me to put my finger inside you?"

"Yes, please, god, Zayne..."

He pushes his finger into me an inch at a time. I tense as he enters, his digit already slick with my juices, but he just keeps pushing, deeper into my pussy, until he's all the way inside. He feels thick and delicious pressed there, and even more so when he bends his finger a little to curl it inside me, the tip of his finger pressing against my front wall. He draws it out slowly, watching me as he does, savoring my reaction as he pulls his finger out of my pussy again. When he hits my G-spot, my hips buck of their own accord, and I gasp, clenching my fists again.

He smirks, then, all at once, thrusts his finger back into me and leans down to lick across my clit.

The gasp turns into a cry, turns into almost a scream as he keeps licking back and forth across my clit, hard enough to make my sensitive nerves leap straight to pleasure so intense it's almost painful. Then he leans back and goes back to only fingering me, slowly, building up the pressure one thrust at a time.

"Fuck," I manage through gritted teeth.

He's still watching me, those blue eyes of his darker now, filled with lust. It's even hotter when he looks at me, when he savors my reactions as he makes me feel whatever he wants me to feel. "You are so beautiful," he murmurs. Then he draws his finger out of me, spreads it against my thigh instead, and replaces it with his tongue.

His tongue is white-hot, a curl of muscle against my inner walls. He explores me inch by inch, swirling his tongue inside my pussy, then licking

along my slit before he flattens his tongue and laps at my clit in slow, flat strokes.

This time it's less intense, more of a slow build. But it still doesn't take long before I'm arching up against him, my hands buried in his hair, my throat raw from crying out each time he strokes along me.

Just when I'm at the peak, I tighten my hands into fists. "Fuck, Zayne, I'm going to come," I groan.

He stops, and I lift my head to stare down at him with a frustrated gasp of protest. "Don't come until I tell you to," he says, eyes fixed on mine.

I swallow hard. Nod.

Then he licks me again, and resisting the urge to go over the edge is the hardest thing I've ever done. I have to clench my fists, dig my nails into my palms, focus on that instead of the pleasure rocketing through me.

"I can't... I have to come..."

He stops licking me again, starts to finger me instead. "You can control it."

"Not... with you... doing that," I point out, especially when he drags that finger along my front wall again, right over my G-spot. I feel like I'm going to burst, like the pressure will make me explode.

"Do you want to come for me?"

"Please, please yes."

He keeps fingering me without responding for a moment, watching me as though he's debating. Deciding.

"Please let your slut come for you," I whisper, eyes locked on his.

He grins. "You are a good slut..." He slides his finger out of me. "You can come for me now, slut." Then he licks me once more, hard and fast, and that's the last thing I can process before I let the orgasm hit me.

I can vaguely hear myself screaming his name. The rest is just a flood of pure pleasure, more intense than I've ever felt before. My nerve endings are on fire, and my pussy clenches, my body shaking of its own accord as I fall over the edge.

When I finally come back into myself, Zayne has wrapped his arms around my waist, and he's pulling me upright. I try to stand, find my legs are too shaky, and lean against him for support.

"That good?" he asks, but with a cocky smirk that tells me he knows exactly how good it was.

In response, I grab his face with both hands and kiss him hard. I taste myself on his lips, a salty tang that's even hotter combined with his flavor, his scent. He parts his mouth, swirls that magic tongue of his around mine.

But it's my turn now.

I break away from the kiss and drop to my knees before him. I steal a peek up at him, and find him watching me with wide eyes, as though surprised. "What's the matter?" I ask, running a finger along the side of his cock, so lightly that I'm barely touching. "Haven't you ever made a girl hungry for your cock before?"

His grin deepens. "I mean this in the best possible way, Clove, but I have *never* met a woman quite like you before."

I grin back and circle my hand around his cock fully. God, my fingers don't even fit all the way around him, he's so thick. I lift my other hand too, wrap them both along him, and stroke his length. He's silky smooth in my hand, velvety soft over a hard steel core. I lean in to lick the tip of his cock, where a single drop of precum gathered. The *taste*. I've heard friends talk about loving the taste of cock before, or their boyfriends' cum, but I've never quite understood it. Not until now.

He sucks in a deep breath through his teeth. "Fuck."

I press my lips around his head and slowly lean forward, sliding his cock into my mouth. His hands bury in my hair, fists clenching until my eyes water from the pull. I don't mind. The pain adds to the pleasure, and I love that he's losing himself so much he can't concentrate on anything else. I dig my tongue into the underside of his cock as I pull him deeper, deeper into my mouth. At the same time, I reach up with both hands to clench his ass hard, and use that to push him against me.

Fuck, he tastes so good. My jaw aches, stretching wide enough to take him in, but I love it, love the sensation of his cock filling my mouth.

When he's as far in as I can take him, his tip almost touching the back of my throat, I lean back to pull him out again. Then I pause to trail my tongue along the side of his cock, licking him from tip to base and back again.

"I want to suck you off. I want to take your cock into my throat," I tell him.

His eyebrows rise. "Have you ever deep-throated before?"

I shake my head, stroking him with one hand as I lock eyes with him. "I want to learn."

He laughs, eyebrows still lifted, incredulous. "God, you're a thirsty little slut, aren't you?"

"Very." I grin.

I take him back into my mouth, and this time, when I have him fully inside, I look up at him, waiting. He tightens his grip on my hair and gazes down at me.

"Relax." He presses his hips forward gently, an inch at a time.

I force my jaw to relax, and my throat too. There's a moment where my body clenches, and I cough, but he just keeps pressing forward, hands caressing my scalp.

"Don't think too much about it. Just give in. Let me take control."

So I do. I surrender. Let him push into me, his cock inching down my throat until my lips touch the base of his cock. I lift one hand to roll his balls through my fingers, and he sucks in another sharp breath as he starts to lean back, draw himself out of my mouth.

"Fucking hell, Clove," he manages between hard breaths. "You're a natural."

We pick up the pace, him leading, thrusting against me, and I keep toying with his balls, my other hand digging into his ass as he starts to move faster and faster, until it feels like he's fucking my face, thrusting against me with abandon. I love it, and even more than that, I love looking up at the lost expression on his face, the one distracted by pleasure, his eyelids half-closed, mouth slack.

Finally, without warning, he pulls out of my mouth and staggers backward, his cock glistening with my saliva, still rock-hard and pulsing in the cool apartment air. I lean back on my heels, pouting, disappointed. I wanted to taste his cum. Wanted to feel him come in my throat.

"Not yet," he says, eyes back on me, as though reading my thoughts.  
"Stand up, Clove."

I rise on still-shaky legs, and he immediately wraps an arm around my waist, crushes his mouth to mine.

"I want to fuck you properly first," he whispers against my lips.

I grin and kiss him again, softly. "Mm, I suppose I'm okay with that."

He bends to his jeans, digs in the pockets for a condom. When he unwraps it, I reach for it, and he laughs and lets me take it. I slide it down his cock, savoring the feeling of his hardness between my palms as I do.

"Clove..."

With the condom on, I look up to find him watching me steadily, a hungry gleam in his eye. "Zayne?"

"You drive me absolutely wild."

My cheeks flush. "I could say the same for you."

He laughs. "Good." Then he wraps his arms around me and forces me backward a step. Another step. And another, until we crash onto the couch, and he's lying along me, and our lips collide again, his hot and possessive. "You're mine," he growls against my mouth, and I arch up against him to emphasize the point, sighing in the back of my throat with agreement.

He spreads my thighs, pushes his hips between them, and I wrap my legs around his waist, angling my hips to give him the best access. "Have I told you how fucking gorgeous you are?" he murmurs as he strokes his cock between my lips, tracing the length of my slit. He runs from my ass all the way up to dig lightly against my clit, before he slides back down. I'm soaking wet again already, both from how turned on I got sucking his cock and from his ministrations now, and it doesn't take long before his head is coated in my juices.

"You might have mentioned." I smirk, and he leans down to nip my neck lightly.

"Good. Because you need to know that, Clove. That, and that you are the sexiest, hottest, naughtiest slut I've ever had the pleasure of being with."

I laugh a little and trace my hands over his back. Shit, even his back is muscular, chiseled to perfection. I let my hands slide down to his hips, his ass, and I grip his ass tightly, my nails digging into his skin a little, his muscles tense and strong beneath my fingers. "I have to admit, I don't think I've ever felt like being quite so slutty for someone before."

He grins. "Even better." He's still stroking me slowly with his cock, teasing again. It makes my muscles tense with anticipation, my throat dry and body trembling.

"Fuck, Zayne..."

"Is that what you want?" he whispers into the crook of my neck as he layers kisses along my collarbone. "You want me to fuck you?"

"Fuck yes."

He pauses right at my entrance. Adding pressure but not enough to push his cock inside me, not yet. I arch my hips up toward him, but he catches them in both hands and pins me against the couch, holding me down. "What do you say?" he asks with a glint in his eye.

"Please," I gasp.

Only then does he thrust inside me, his hands still wrapped around my hips so tight I can feel each of his fingers imprinted.

And his cock. Fuck.

He stretches my pussy wide, makes me feel tight around him. He's thick, and so long that when he pushes all the way into me, I can just feel his tip bottoming out at the end of my pussy, buried as far inside me as possible.

Both of us moan, our faces pressed together, his stubble on my cheek. It feels so fucking good, his warm skin on mine, his muscles hard everywhere that I'm soft, his cock thick and pulsing with desire inside me.

For a second, he turns his head, and our eyes meet, both of us lost, distracted by the sensation. The way that it feels like relief, scratching an itch I never knew I had. Finding home again.

Then he bites my earlobe sharply and that pulls me back into myself, into the physical sensations.

"Zayne," I murmur as he pulls back out of me again. My pussy tightens, contracts as it adjusts to his girth, and he sucks in another sharp breath at that feeling.

"Fuck, Clove. You are so fucking tight. So wet and hot..."

"Fuck me, Zayne. I want to feel your cock claim every inch of my pussy."

He pins me against the couch with a growl and starts to thrust in a rhythm, faster with each motion. His cock glides in and out of me, slick with my juices, and every time he slams back into me, my body rocks with the sensation. I strain to thrust against him, to match his pace, but he keeps me pushed against the couch, controlling the motion, controlling me, my pleasure, my body. I surrender to him, loving the feeling of giving up control.

He locks eyes with me as we fuck, flattens one palm against my belly to keep hold of me and lifts the other to run through my hair. He brushes it off my face, then grabs a fistful and pulls me into a deep kiss, his tongue invading my throat as he continues to fuck me.

It doesn't take long for the sensations to build toward a peak, my clit still sensitive to the point of almost feeling sore from my orgasm earlier. He bends down to kiss my neck, my ear, then tilts my head back, exposing my throat for him to run his tongue along.

"Fuck, Clove," he hisses again. I tighten my pussy, clench around him, and he groans aloud.

Then, without warning, he pulls back. Grabs both of my ankles and flings them up over his shoulders, all the while still fucking me, his balls slapping against my ass. I arch my hips, and with my legs over his shoulders, he's fucking me from below, so his cock drags along my front inner wall, his tip slightly curved upward, running right over my G-spot. I cry out, the cry dissolving into a moan as he continues to fuck me hard.

"God, I'm going to come. Zayne. Zayne," I repeat, muscles clenched, hands in fists around his biceps.

"Come for me baby," he growls, and relief floods me for a moment. If he'd asked me to stop, to hold it back like last time, I don't know that I could have. I'm already right at the brink, speeding toward it, and his thick cock against my G-spot isn't helping me fight it.

"Fuck," I cry out, right as the orgasm hits. Every nerve ending in my body sparks, and my pussy spasms around his cock, the muscles clenching and releasing in quick succession as I come hard around him.

For his part, he moans and keeps thrusting, his hands on my calves now, gripping hard as he fucks up against me. The orgasm keeps going, lingers, and it starts to build again almost straight away, and I moan aloud, the pleasure so intense it borders on painful, but in the best possible way. I want him to fuck me forever.

He sees me twist and writhe beneath him, feels the way I tighten again around his cock. He lets go of my leg with one hand and reaches down to stroke my clit within easy reach of his hand. He grins as he does, taking in my pleasure, enjoying knowing how hot he gets me.

I scream this time, louder, as the second orgasm washes through me. He keeps stroking my clit, even as I jerk and twist beneath him. And then he drops his hand, drops my legs back down to the couch and lies along me, our bodies flush, as he fucks me harder. His cock plunges in and out of me, and his balls hit my ass hard on every thrust.

I wrap my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck.

"Fuck, Clove, I'm going to come."

"Come for me," I murmur into his ear.

He pulls my head back, looks straight into my eyes as he finishes, groaning deep in his throat, a desperate sound that's almost a growl. I love

that, love the desperate look in his eyes, the way his body shakes in my arms.

When he finally collapses against me, we keep our arms around one another, both of us breathing hard, our bodies slick with sweat. I can feel his heartbeat hammering, and my own pounding back against it, our chests pressed together. When he finally leans back to catch my eye again, we both laugh, half-delirious.

"Fucking hell," he murmurs before he kisses me again, softer this time. More sensitive.

"I know," I whisper when we break apart once more. Our eyes lock, and there's something about him, about his eyes, his touch... the way that felt.

When he pulls out of me, I have to fight the urge to let out a sigh of protest. I want him back inside me already; I want to stay as close to him as possible, both of us basking in the aftermaths of our orgasms.

Luckily he doesn't stay apart from me for long. He scoops me up into his arms and carries me through the apartment, toward his bedroom. It's a different layout than mine, I notice, a little larger, more open-plan. I like it. And he's decorated it well too, not like the typical bachelor pad. It's all modern designs and simple, tasteful furniture.

Then I forget about the apartment, because he's setting me down on the bed and curling in beside me, and I'm lost in his kiss again.

A few minutes later, we lie side-by-side on our backs, staring up at his ceiling, still breathless, our bodies slick with sweat, sticking together.

"Bet you never expected your doorman could do that," Zayne says, a little smirk dancing across his lips.

I lean in to kiss the corner of that smirk. "I knew he was good at fighting off bad guys," I say. "I had no idea he was such a naughty guy himself."

"Only when inspired," he replies, and I laugh, remembering our conversation in the café earlier.

"So what else inspires you?" I ask, settling into his arms.

"Music mostly," he replies. "If we're talking that kind of inspiration."

"What type?"

"Indie bands, classic rock... Little bit of everything really. It's the best part of my day sometimes, just heading into the stock room to get everything ready, listening to the perfect playlist."

“Make me one sometime?” I ask, and then feel my cheeks flush. Was that weird to ask? Is this just a hookup, can we do things like make each other playlists?

But Zayne is already nodding, his eyes bright with ideas. “Definitely. I know what to put on it already.”

“You do?”

He tightens his arms around me. “I thought of the perfect song the moment I met you.”

I laugh. But he doesn’t. I turn in his arms to meet his eye. “Really?”

“Sometimes people just do that. People who really click with me. It makes a song come into my head, and I want to share it with them...”

“Can you play it for me?”

He reaches across me for his phone. For a moment, I regret the lack of warmth where his arm had been a moment before. But then he’s back, phone in hand, and I snuggle into his side as he cues up the music.

I’ve never heard the song before. Don’t recognize the band either, but I love the rhythm. It’s an acoustic guitar, and a soulful singer, singing about a girl he once met, but never knew her name. It’s sweet and sad all at once, and as I curl up against his side and listen to the lyrics, my head fills with a pleasant buzz. This feels right. Zayne feels right. I don’t know how to describe it.

When we finally drift off an hour later, my body curled up to his wrapped around me, arms around my waist, cradling me against him, I have one last thought before I drop off into sleep.

*Uh oh.*

I wake up the next morning, and for a moment, I'm disoriented. This looks like my apartment. Sounds like my apartment. There's the same distant blare of traffic and the same slant of sunlight through the standard-issue blinds. But the bed feels softer beneath me than I'm used to. And I'm warmer than I'm used to, too. Mostly because there's a very warm body curled against mine, and a strong arm wrapped protectively around my waist.

I shift a little and feel something else press against me. A hard, thick cock prodding my ass.

Then I remember last night. Everything from the coffee date all the way to our wild session on the couch. I smile and turn my head to peek over my shoulder.

Zayne blinks at me, sleepy, still waking up. But he probably has the same idea that I do, because a moment later, he shifts his hips against mine, and his cock digs harder against my ass.

"Good morning, sexy," he murmurs.

"Morning, hot stuff." I grin. He kisses me softly and I smile into it. Then I wriggle my ass, let it grind against his cock.

"Still thirsty, I see," he comments when we break apart. I laugh. But he doesn't. He pushes gently against my upper back, bending me forward into a tighter curl. "Be careful what you wish for, naughty girl."

"What if I'm wishing for you to punish me, though?" I ask, and bat my lashes just a little.

"Hmm..." He hums a little under his breath as he traces his hands over my back, down my spine to cup my ass on either side of his cock. He spreads my cheeks and lets his cock slide between them, along my slit. Then he runs his hands back up my back, massaging lightly. "Then I'd have to say, be careful what you wish for," he finally says.

I feel the bed shift as he turns to reach for the nightstand. I hear the crinkle of a condom wrapper, and for a moment, his cock leaves my backside as he slips it on.

Then he's back, hands sliding around to my front now. He massages my breasts, one at a time, taking his time, kneading them hard before he pinches each nipple, rolling it between his fingers until they're hard. He pinches my right nipple harder, enough to make me gasp, and then he grins and kisses the back of my neck.

"Was this what you had in mind?" he murmurs against my skin. "Me punishing you, taking what I want from your body..."

"It's yours," I whisper. "Do with me what you wish."

"Oh, Clove." His hands slide down the flat plane of my stomach to my mound. Flattens against it, and his forefinger grazes my clit. "I plan to."

He strokes my clit slowly, lightly. At first it feels nice, but as the pressure builds, that light touch becomes torturous. I thrust against him, but he pins me down, his arm heavy on my hipbone.

"Ah, ah. This is my pussy. I'm in charge, naughty girl."

I swallow hard. Those words send a pulse of desire straight to my belly. "Yes."

"And what I want right now..." he says as he keeps stroking me lightly, faintly, "is to fuck you senseless."

With that, he thrusts his cock into my pussy, hard and without warning. I gasp and buck against the sheets. He plunges deep inside me, and my pussy is tight with surprise. But I'm already wet from his touches, his slow strokes, and he slides all the way inside me without resistance, stretching my muscles, making me ache.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard you won't be able to walk downstairs," he whispers, and my pussy pulses around his cock, another spike of desire heating me up.

"You like that, I see." He pulls out of me. Thrusts in again, harder. "You're such a dirty little slut. I love it."

He keeps it up like that, fucking me, then slowing down to tease me, stroking my clit alternately whenever he pauses. It's not long before I feel desperate, crazed with desire. I try to thrust against him, but he spanks my ass once, hard enough to sting. Then he keeps fucking me, hard but slow, driving me wild.

Finally, just when I feel like I'm going to lose it, going to go crazy from the urge to truly fuck him, he grabs my hips and starts to fuck me in earnest. It feels so good after all the teasing that I cry out. That shifts into a low, throaty moan as he keeps fucking me, his cock spearing me with every thrust, thick and tight inside my pussy.

He bends me in half, fucks me so hard that I lose track of anything but his body against mine, his cock in me, my hands fisted in the sheets. When I finally come, he's right there with me, both of us crying out with pleasure at the same time as we finish.

He pulls out, still breathing hard, and rolls onto his back cursing under his breath.

"You are positively addictive, Clove Walker."

"I could say the same about you, Zayne Pearson."

We move to the shower, ostensibly to clean off. We are covered in sweat, after all. Among other things. But he insists on washing me, and when he lathers up his palms with soap and runs those rough, strong hands over my body, slowly, head to toe, I can't help it. The fire starts to build in my belly again, this lust, insatiable, impossible to please.

Finally, when it feels like too much, I spin to face him, half-covered in soap that he's massaged into my body.

"Let me suck your cock again. Please."

He half-laughs, eyes hooded and dark with amusement. "Who am I to deny a lady what she wants?"

He steps back, and I kneel before him in the shower. Let the hot water run over my back and shoulders, rinsing me off even as I part my lips and suck his cock into my mouth.

He tastes just as good as I remember. And this time, when I build up a pace, sucking him in and out of my mouth until he starts to thrust into my throat, losing control, he doesn't stop me. He throat-fucks me, slams his hips into my face, the tip of his cock sliding down my throat with every thrust, until he's gritting his teeth and groaning loudly.

I keep going, my hands wrapped around his balls, tugging at them, toying with them as I suck him into my mouth. He fucks my face, slams against me, and I relax, opening myself to him fully. I let him take control and fuck me how he wants, until he's right at the brink.

"Swallow my cum," he groans, just before it hits him. When he comes, I tighten my lips around him and press my tongue along his length. He comes hard, deep in my throat, and I swallow it all, savoring the taste, the particular, unique flavor that's all him. I keep going, keep sucking until he moans my name, and only then do I lean back to lick his cock clean, slowly, an inch at a time.

I stand up, and I'm amused to find him red-faced and breathing hard, leaning against the shower wall. Now it's his turn to struggle to stay upright.

"How was that?" I ask innocently, batting my eyes.

He shakes his head, a smile on his face and his eyes locked on mine. "You were definitely still thirsty," he points out, and we both laugh a little.

Eventually, we do manage to clean off. Then we stumble out of the shower in towels and he gestures for me sit on the couch.

"I can help," I protest as he sets about making breakfast, puttering around the kitchen.

"You can, I'm sure," he admits. "But you aren't allowed to. You're only allowed to sit there and relax." He shakes a spatula at me, threatening. "You're my guest, Clove, you don't get to cook."

I groan in faux-protest and sink back against the cushions. "Fine. But only because I like it when you boss me around." I stick my tongue out, and he laughs, then turns to finish flipping the omelets he started.

As he does, I catch a glimpse of the book on his kitchen table. "1Q84?"

"Just started it. Have you read it?"

I sit up straighter, grinning. "Oh yeah. I love Murakami."

"*Kafka on the Beach* is one of my favorites."

"You'll love this one. Especially..." I bite my tongue. "Damn."

He laughs. "No spoilers! That's cheating."

"Okay. I'll just say you're gonna love it, that's all." Now that I've noticed the one book, I let my gaze drift to the shelves beside his TV, chock full of others. "What kind of stuff do you normally read?"

"Little bit of everything. A lot of dystopian, literary fiction. You know, the depressing shit." He laughs, a little self-deprecating.

"Why do you like depressing books?"

He shrugs. Pauses to flip the eggs on the stove. "I guess it just makes me feel like my problems aren't so bad. No matter how much shit I might be dealing with, it could always be worse."

I snort. "Very optimistic world-view."

"Well, could be worse. I could think my problems are the absolute worst. Then how annoying would I be?"

I grin and roll my eyes. "Fair point." I can't help letting my gaze drift to his bookshelf again. I spot at least three of my favorite authors there, along with more than a few who have been on my radar for ages.

Well-read, good taste in music, hot as hell, and he cooks...

He joins me on the couch a few minutes later, two plates of perfectly cooked omelets in hand. I take one bite and my eyes go wide. He added spinach and cheese and bacon and something else, some spices I don't recognize but that go perfectly.

"How are you still single?" I ask, once I've washed that bite down with a sip of the coffee he brewed.

He laughs. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?" I gesture wildly around the room with my fork. "You're hot, you're smart, you're fucking fantastic in bed, *and* you cook? That's ridiculous. How has some lucky hot girl not snatched you up already?"

"Is the omelet really that delicious?" He shakes his head. "It's only eggs and some veggies. You should really try cooking more, Clove."

I narrow my eyes. "I cook! I make a mean ramen noodle soup."

"Packet ramen doesn't count."

I roll my eyes now. "Yeah, well. My ineptitude in the kitchen aside, you're still a catch. So my question stands."

"Which question?"

Now I frown. "The why you're single one, obviously."

"Oh, you know. Same reason anyone is single."

"That's not exactly an answer," I point out.

"Maybe I just haven't met the right girl yet."

"The fact that you're so obviously dodging the question makes me think there's more to it than that," I reply, shaking my fork at him.

He sighs and takes another bite of his omelet. Takes his time chewing it and drinking a long sip of coffee before he answers me. "I don't trust a lot of

people," he finally admits. "I haven't exactly had the best history when it comes to dating."

I snort. When he looks hurt, I spread my hands. "Sorry. I just meant... I mean, obviously I don't have the best track record either. You had to beat up my most recent stalker of a first date, for Christ's sake. I can relate."

"Yeah, he seemed like a real winner. Dating in this town..." Zayne shakes his head.

I frown at him. He's still dodging. There's something he's not telling me. But then again, how long has he known me? A couple of days? No wonder he doesn't want to go too deep into his backstory. So, fine. He can be weird about this if he wants.

"What's your weekend look like?" he asks, and I let him change the subject this time.

"Dunno. I was going to use the time to catch up on some reading for work, but..."

He grins at me. Raises an eyebrow. "But?"

"But, I could be persuaded to be naughty and slack off. If, you know... a more interesting opportunity presented itself."

He takes my plate, the omelet already mostly devoured since I couldn't help but inhale the deliciousness. Then, gently, he sets it on the end table, his own plate with it. "Is that right?"

"Yeah, I guess I'm easily influenced." I grin.

He leans toward me. Places one hand on either side of me, and stares down at me. "So, if some other plans came up that involved, say... spending most of the weekend naked and splayed across my bed..."

"I wouldn't object. No." I raise an eyebrow.

He breaks into a grin too. Then he grabs my hands and pulls me upright. Without warning, he hoists me up, tossing me back over his shoulder and slapping my ass on the way up. "Good. Because I had some plans of my own in mind. And they do not involve letting this sexy little minx get away just yet..."

I squeal and kick my legs in faux distress as he carries me back to the bedroom. Frankly, I could get used to this.

## 6

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By Monday morning, I'm starting to wonder if you can get addicted to orgasms. I've had more than I can count on both hands in the last two days. Between Zayne tying me to his bedposts with a couple of T-shirts to eat me out, then him fucking me bent over his kitchen table, and finally against his balcony window, where half of New York could probably see if they looked up at the right moment, and where our neighbor across the street could definitely see if they opened their windows, I had no idea I could get so turned on so fast by someone.

In between fucking, we took breaks to watch a couple of movies. He's got great taste in films, preferring older film noir above all else. We watched a few I'd never seen, like *Double Indemnity* which involved some hot-as-hell hookup scenes that led to us getting distracted and fucking again before we switched to watching *Chinatown*.

Our conversation after *Chinatown* was almost as good as the fucking, though. He spent an hour dissecting the movie with me, savoring all the minute details, letting me rewind to gush over certain scenes. I love doing that when I watch movies—it makes me feel like they last longer, like they're books I can slowly digest. I'd never met anyone else who was interested in doing that. Mostly my exes just humored me when I insisted on it.

But Zayne? Zayne not only enjoys it, but after that, he encouraged me to do it with every movie we watched afterwards. We spent hours on each one, and while that would normally make me feel like a total nerd, with him it

just felt normal. Like comparing these movies to our lives and dissecting each one was a perfectly cool, natural thing to do.

He cooked the whole time too, and I swear, each meal tasted better than the last. He made me a veggie curry for lunch, then steaks for dinner, and leftover steak and eggs for breakfast the next morning. Who needs NYC brunch when you have your own personal chef and sexy sex master in house?

But Monday arrived, as it always does. With it came the responsibilities I'd been avoiding. A shit ton of reading that I'll need to catch up on all morning, plus all the work drama that led me to complaining to Zayne last Friday, which I still need to handle.

But somehow, after this weekend of retreating into the Zayne bubble, I feel more ready to face it than ever. I feel energized, recharged, ready to tackle the whole world if I need to. What could possibly go wrong? I've finally found a decent guy who's in my corner— and in my bed, for that matter.

When I leave that morning, Zayne walks me downstairs. “Back on the clock?” I ask him in the elevator. I already know this was one of his rare weekends off.

He nods. “Going to have to work a double today to make up for skiving on Sunday.”

My cheeks flush. He skipped because I asked him to. Not that he complained too much. But as I realize now what it’s going to cost him, it makes me feel guilty. Schedules here are crazy. I can’t believe how little time off he gets, either. Someone should really complain to the management company about that, I think as we step into the elevator. I make a mental note to do that later.

“Sorry again that you’ll have to make up time.”

“Please.” He scoffs, and stops me before we reach the main lobby, and any other prying eyes. “Clove. I cannot explain to you in words how worth it it was to skip that day.” His eyes bore into mine, and I let myself sink into them. I close my eyes as he leans in to kiss me softly. “I would skip Sunday again and again. I’d work every double from now until Christmas if it meant I could spend more time with you in between.”

My cheeks flush, a not unpleasant sensation. I lean up to kiss him again, and savor the way our lips meld together, so naturally. “Well. Next time I’ll make sure to work around your schedule instead, how’s that?”

"Deal." He laughs softly before kissing me once more. Then we lock hands, and head for the main lobby.

We pass Paul downstairs, already in uniform. He eyes Zayne, clearly wondering why Zayne isn't dressed for work yet or ready to take over the desk when he should be starting in just ten minutes.

"Be back down in a jiff, Paul," Zayne calls as we step outside our building.

Then, on the corner of the street, still in full sight of Paul and anyone else we live with who might be passing by, he kisses me full on the lips. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back hard, savoring it. Savoring the way he makes me feel.

When I climb onto the subway train toward work, it does not feel like a Monday. There's no slog in my steps, no despair about going back to work again. I'm just... happy.

It's a strange feeling.

I reach the office with plenty of time to spare before my first meeting. I wave cheerily to Sara at the front desk as I stride past her to the coffee room.

She frowns and watches me from the corner of her eye. But I get it. It's still Monday for most people. For anyone who hasn't discovered a secret hottie living undercover in uniform in their own building, whose cock is huge and thick enough to make them see sparks when they come...

I shake my head to clear out the cobwebs, and pour myself a cup of coffee. Beth and John are leaning against the water cooler chatting, but they fall silent the moment I step into the room.

"Hey guys." I smile at them, and after a beat, they smile back. But it's strained, forced.

What's with everyone this morning?

Ignoring the strange stares, I fill my coffee mug and head back to my desk. This time, though, the whole office feels like it's tracking me. I catch Becky from accounting making eye contact and spinning around almost immediately, a faint snicker escaping her. Carl from IT winks at me and pats his chest appreciatively. I scowl back at him. Gross. And also, what the hell has gotten into everyone?

I spot that new girl again, Hannah. She has her arms crossed and her chin lifted. She's glaring at me too, judgmental, just like all of them. What the hell?

Even my boss is frowning when I walk past her, eyes darting to me and away again quickly as though they were rocks skipping across the surface of a particularly distasteful pond. I swallow hard. What now?

I thought I was catching up on all of the deadlines we talked about on Friday. And I know that we had a pretty rough day, but it's not like we haven't had those before...

I shake my head as I return to my seat. I'm probably just imagining things. Blowing this out of proportion.

I take a seat at my desk, and almost immediately, a new chat window pops up. "Girl" is all the message says. It's from Andy Slate, my best gay at work.

**Clove:** What?

**Andy:** How did this happen?? Did your phone get stolen by bikers or something? Tell me it's Photoshop.

I steal a peek over the top of my monitor at Andy's side of the office. He sits on the far side, at least fifteen desks away from mine. But I'm still close enough to make out his signature WTF face which he's wearing at full tilt right now, directed straight at me.

**Clove:** What the H are you talking about?

Swearing, alas, raises flags on our company servers. Otherwise, I'd already be cursing up a storm to threaten him into telling me what's going on.

**Andy:** ... Shit. You haven't seen it.

**Clove:** You know I hate suspense almost as much as I hate surprises, Andy. Out with it.

**Andy:** It's not exactly SFW, if you know what I mean.

**Clove:** I own a phone, dude.

Next thing I know, said phone buzzes with a text. There's no explanation, only a link from him. I click on it and hold my breath. I don't know what I'm expecting. Nuclear apocalypse news? A letter from my boss explaining that we're all being let go? I don't know, but somehow, what I find is simultaneously worse and more personal all at once.

The page finishes loading, and it takes me a moment to comprehend what I'm staring at.

Tits, obviously.

But not just any tits. Familiar tits.

A pair of breasts I see in the mirror every single day. Not to mention the face attached, fully visible, because oh my god what was I thinking when I took that photo, I didn't even crop it, didn't even think that someone might be able to get a hold of it.

It's me.

Naked.

In front of, I can only assume, my entire office.

Underneath the photo, much to my chagrin, there's a caption. And below that, a few hundred comments. The caption is short, sweet and to-the-point.

*Slut for hire*, it reads. *Willing to do whatever you ask, as long as it's dirty as hell.*

The comments are even worse. I only make it through the first few.

*Fuck yeah, I'd fuck up that filthy slut.*

*\$100 says she's the cheapest whore in town.*

*Now there's a cum-slut if ever I've seen one.*

My stomach churns. I'm going to be sick. Sure, it's fun and a little hot when Zayne gets all possessive and calls me his little slut. But that's in private, behind closed doors, where we can have fun without anyone seeing or judging us. This?

This is something else entirely. I shut the window, unable to look at it anymore. Andy saw this. How many other people?

I grab my keyboard so fast it screeches against the desk, a horrible plastic on plastic sound.

**Clove:** Where did you get that? Who sent it to you?

**Andy:** It circulated through the whole office this morning. First there was a spam email, then another message online.

Before I can ask for more details about the second message, though, I feel a light tap on my shoulder. I suck in a deep breath and look up to find my boss, Stacy, standing beside me, arms crossed, a subtle frown on her face.

"Can we speak privately, Clove?"

My heart sinks down through my throat, a slow progression toward my stomach. My boss never asks to speak in private. Not unless it's something extreme, like our annual reviews or the conversation we had a couple of months ago about my annual bonus this year, assuming I do all my work well and exceed expectations in the workplace.

Somehow, I have a feeling I won't be getting that bonus. Not after this.

I rise on unsteady feet and follow her into her office, my hands quivering at my sides. This isn't my fault, I remind myself. Lots of people take semi-nude selfies. It's not my fault it fell into the wrong hands, wound up somewhere it shouldn't.

Someone must have hacked my phone, or maybe my iCloud account, where I store all of my pictures automatically. They must have seen this and sent it around the office because....

Well, I can't quite figure out why yet. But that doesn't matter. Not right now. What matters is surviving this meeting with my job in tact.

My boss closes the door behind her gently, and I stand in front of it, chest heaving. She takes a seat at her desk. Normally, when we meet in private, this is when she'd gesture at the chair across from her and ask me to have a seat too, so we can speak on the same level, eye-to-eye as colleagues.

She doesn't invite me to sit down now. Instead, she steeplest her fingers under her chin and rests them against her lips, eyes piercing through mine. For a long, tense moment, silence reigns.

Then, she sighs.

"Clove, this is a family business. It's been run by the same family for the last 150 years, and much of the content we produce is kid-friendly, books meant to enhance families' knowledge and lives. We pride ourselves on our core values. Our dedication to safe learning environments and to getting the

job done. Normally, you do just that. But this...." She drops her gaze to her desk. Her eyes flicker to her computer screen, and I wonder if she still has the website open. If she's staring at the photo of my half-naked body right now. My cheeks light up bright red with shame and fear. "Clove, what were you thinking, posing for this photo?"

My cheeks continue to burn, but in my defense, I raise my chin a little higher. "With all due respect, Stacy, this was a private photograph. It was never meant for public consumption, so I didn't think—"

"No, you most certainly did not think." She heaves a sigh. It sounds regretful. Almost as if she hates to do this. Yet here she is, doing it anyway. "Clove, this picture has been circulating across our company's social media pages. Someone with the password to our accounts has been posting it with all sorts of awful captions..."

"It's not what it looks like."

"Nevertheless, all the public can see is the external view. And right now, to our customers, it looks like one of our employees has begun using our site as her own personal advertising service to try to recruit... well... to try and start a side venture of her own, shall we say."

My mouth falls open at that last line. I'm still thinking about the caption on the photo, all the nasty comments people left beneath it. "I did not... I would never..."

"I know that, Clove." Stacy finally reaches across the desk to offer a hand. I give her mine, and she squeezes my fingers gently. Then she releases me with a regretful sigh and leans back in her chair. "But there's only so much we can do right now, as a company."

"Can't we find out who's doing this? Fight them?"

"I have IT tracking possible perpetrators at the moment, but there's only so much they can do. Whoever did this used a VPN and external routers, bounced their signal all over the place to scramble the trail. It's unlikely we'll be able to definitively pin it on anyone. In the meantime, we need to be able to tell our shareholders that we're doing something to deflect this."

My brow furrows in response to her continued frown. I don't like the way this sounds. "What does that mean exactly...?" I ask slowly, afraid of the answer. Afraid of the way she's already looking at me with pity in her eyes.

"I'm going to have to ask you to stay out of the office for the time being."

I can feel myself surging to my feet. My face was already flushed from embarrassment, shock, horror. Now it goes redder with anger. "I'm being suspended?"

"Not suspended. We're just asking you to use a few of your vacation days right now."

"That's insane. Ridiculous. I'm being victimized and I get punished for it?"

"You know what the internet is like, Clove. You know how often things like this get leaked. Why would you put pictures like this out there in the world, knowing how easily they could be leaked? Why would you sign yourself up for this risk?"

"I didn't—"

"You have to take responsibility for your actions." My boss's expression closes off. Shifts from pity to pursed-lip disdain. "I'm sorry that it has to come to this, I truly am. But we cannot allow such actions to go unchecked. As soon as we've completed our investigation, and we're satisfied that we've either stopped the ongoing threat or determined who is at fault for these photos, then we can reinstate you as a full-time employee. Assuming, of course, that you will keep our company values in mind in the future, as you continue forward as an employee of our company."

"But—"

"I'm sorry, Clove, but for now, our decision is final. Please collect your things and head home for the day."

"This is crazy. It's the 21st century."

"Exactly. With 21st century benefits come 21st century dangers. I hope you keep them in mind next time you trust someone with incriminating photos like these, photos that go against everything our company stands for. And also against our employee code of conduct form, I might add."

I clench my fists at my sides, but force myself to nod as though I agree. As though I understand. As though this isn't complete bullshit. My stomach churns even worse than ever, roiling with anger and confusion and underneath it all, fear. Sorrow. Who did this to me? Why?

They're clearly out to get *me* in particular. This wasn't some random cyber troll attack. They deliberately went out of their way to get my picture, post it to my company's social media sites, and email my coworkers and boss to ensure they saw the photo. Why? What did I do to them?

I think about that all the way home. About who I may have offended, who I may have pissed off somehow. Who would want to hurt me like this? To undermine my career and my social standing?

I can't think of anyone. It's not like I go around making enemies. I'm a normal person with normal friends and a few ex-friends I've drifted away from. Nobody out to get me. Nobody who hates my guts.

My head hurts. *This isn't happening*, I think. I want to think. I want to believe. But no matter how often I think it, reality still stands.

My life is about to be ruined.

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When I walk into my building, I automatically check the counter, praying that I'll see a familiar, sympathetic face there. Instead, Paul just waves at me, a bored smile on his face as he buzzes the door open. I grimace and walk past him, trying not to think too much about why I'm already so anxious to see Zayne.

Plus, part of me is thinking about this photo already. About what it means. About who had access to it... Because I only ever sent it to one person. But I don't want to think that. I don't want to believe it.

*It couldn't be him. Could it?* Maybe someone stole his phone. Hacked his account. Or maybe my phone got hacked—I sent the pic to him over bar wifi. That's not the most secure connection.

Just as I step across the threshold into my apartment, my phone rings. I glance down at the caller ID, breath held. Celeste. Thank god. I answer it right away, say hello in a strained voice.

"Oh god, Clove honey, I just saw."

"I don't know what happened." My eyes sting. "How could somebody do this? Why? And who would want to?"

"Slow down, slow down. First question first. How? Who took this picture?"

I swallow hard, to calm my racing heart. "I did."

"Okay. On your phone?"

"Of course, Celeste. I didn't hire a professional photographer or anything. Obviously." I choke out a hollow laugh.

She sighs. "But your phone is still on you. Nobody stole it, you didn't leave it unlocked anywhere."

"No of course not."

"So, who did you share this picture with?"

I blink. Stare at the wall across from me in blank shock. "I... only one person."

He's the one I took it for after all. The one I trusted with a half-naked selfie, when I'd barely ever trusted anyone with something like that before.

*How could I have been so stupid?*

"Zayne," I whisper, my throat aching with the single word.

"Who?" I can practically hear the disdain from here. The fury.

"A guy that I..." I close my eyes. I can't tell her the whole story. It's too idiotic. I knew this was a bad idea, knew I shouldn't get involved with someone from my building, someone so close to home. All men are the same, and now I have an asshole right on my doorstep who I'll have to walk past for the rest of my life. An asshole who might have just ruined my life.

*If it was him. If.*

Part of me still doesn't want to believe it. Refuses to. Not after this weekend. Not after how we felt together.

But what other explanation is there? Unless maybe someone stole it from him, stole it from his phone... my brow furrows.

"Hello? Earth to planet Clove. Come in Clove."

I blink and shake my head. "What did you say?"

"You're the one who trailed off mid-sentence. A guy that you what, met on that app? Did you meet him in person at all or did you skip straight to handing him damning blackmail evidence?"

I wince. "We met. We... we went out a few times." Well. We were technically outside of his apartment once, anyway. "It went really well actually. I can't imagine he'd do this."

"If he did, I swear I'll skin him alive," she mutters through gritted teeth. "You need to talk to him. Ask him what the fuck happened. He might know something even if it wasn't him. And if it was, you just give me his address and let me at him, you hear?"

I can feel myself nodding even though I know she can't see that. And of course I wouldn't let her actually kill the guy. "I will. Thanks, Celeste. Look, I have to run now, but—"

"Yeah, don't worry, I'll be around anytime you need me. And if you do need me to murder him, just ring beforehand okay, so I can pull all my supplies together?"

Something in her voice tells me she really isn't joking. I'm reassured by that, at least a little bit, even as I hang up the phone. It rings again almost immediately. It's a number I don't recognize. But maybe it's Celeste calling back.

Or Zayne. It could be Zayne. What if someone stole his phone, found my photo on it? I'd much rather believe that than that he'd stab me in the back like this. Maybe someone took his cell and this is his new phone.

I hit answer. "Hello?"

"Hey, is this the hot chick we're supposed to call for a titty-fuck?" The voice on the other end sounds about 15-years-old and every bit as mature.

"Only if you want me to rip your dick off." I scowl and hang up.

It buzzes again. Same number. I hit ignore.

Now a text message appears. New number this time.

*Lookin' to party wit u bee-yoo-tee-full.*

I delete it.

Another one follows hard on its heels.

*Gawd girl them tits are fine as hell.*

And more. And more. And more. Pretty soon it's all I can do to type anything between hitting ignore on calls and deleting text messages.

Finally, I manage to make my own outgoing call, to Zayne.

I press the phone to my ear, ignore the buzz that lets me know I'm missing other incoming calls in the meantime.

On his end, it just rings and rings. I grit my teeth, dig my nails into my palms and pray with every ounce of energy I have.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

"What's up? This is Zayne, leave me one—"

I hang up before his sexy baritone voice even finishes the voicemail message. Screw him.

*You did*, my helpful subconscious reminds me. Over and over and over again. Hell, if I clench my pussy tight enough, I can still feel the sweet, deep ache where his clock was just this morning when we had one last quickie before I headed into work. When he kissed me on the lips and I felt like I could conquer the whole world with him beside me.

He didn't do this. He wouldn't. I know him. Maybe not well, maybe not for a long time, but enough to know this isn't his style. If he just wanted to humiliate me, he got this photo way back on Friday night. He had all weekend to ruin my life. He didn't need to spend the whole weekend fucking me senseless in the meantime.

I manage to try him again in between the ongoing deluge of creeper calls. It goes to voicemail, again. After many rings, too. So he's either seeing my call and dodging it, not hitting the ignore button either, so I won't know he's there, or he's honestly away from the phone. I'm guessing the latter, since if he did something like this on purpose, he wouldn't care about my feelings being hurt if he sent my phone call straight to voicemail.

Crap.

He was supposed to be at work, but when I passed the reception desk earlier, Paul was on. Maybe he took off for some reason, or had to run an errand? Maybe he's back at the desk by now?

I can't recall exactly when the shifts change here, and screw it, this is important. I pocket my phone, grab my wallet and my keys, and charge for the elevator. I head up to his apartment first, figuring if he hasn't started work yet, he might still be up there getting ready.

My pussy tightens as the elevator slows to a halt on his floor. One weekend and my body has already gotten accustomed to anticipating sex when I reach this spot. Already, my mind fills with memories—him pinning me against the front door after I returned from an errand downstairs to my apartment. He couldn't even wait to drag me inside—he stripped me right there, and fucked me against the door, my legs around his waist, our hips digging into one another.

Then, of course, there was later that night, in the kitchen just off his hallway, as we tried to cook together but kept getting distracted by the brush of our arms as we reached around one another for supplies, and the way the heat from the stove made him smell even more delicious, practically edible... I'd bent over to pull some extra veggies from the fridge when he grabbed me from behind and flipped up my skirt. The sensation had been unique to say the least—the cool air from the fridge spilling over my shoulders as he gripped my hips and slid into me from behind, fucking me right there in the middle of dinner prep.

I'm breathing hard by the time I reach his front door, even though it's only a few steps from the elevator. *Get ahold of yourself*, I order, trying to

slow my breathing, calm my frayed nerves. This visit isn't about sex. This is about something so much more important. It's about my career, my future, my work... My whole life hinges on figuring out who is trying to ruin me and why.

I hit the buzzer.

Then I wait. And wait. And wait.

I check my phone to be sure I'm not imagining it, because it feels like time is crawling. I hit the buzzer one more time, just to be sure. Maybe he was in the shower and didn't hear it, or maybe he's listening to music. But the bell goes off, loud as ever, loud enough that I can hear it all the way from out here in the hallway. And from within Zayne's apartment, I only hear silence in response.

I shake my head. Okay, not home. So maybe he is downstairs at work.

I climb back into the elevator and clench my thighs tight around my pussy. It feels disappointed, almost angry at me, for bringing it all the way up to this floor and not giving it the release it demands. It scares me how hungry I am for Zayne already, after barely any time of knowing him.

I reach the ground floor and step out of the elevator, make a beeline for the front desk. Paul is still standing there, in the same spot where I walked past him an hour ago, smiling cheerily at one of the second floor tenants as she breezes past.

I sidestep to let her into the elevator, then approach the front desk, chest tight.

"Hey Paul."

He blinks, though if he's surprised to see me speaking to him first, he conceals it well behind that practiced smile of his. "Ms. Walker. How can I help you?"

"Um." This is going to sound weird. I know it is. But there's nothing I can really do about that just now. "I'm looking for Zayne, actually. Have you seen him?"

Paul's eyebrows do a little dance above his face, as though deciding whether or not to rise in surprise. Eventually, he settles for just smiling a smidge wider, still polite as ever. "He's out for lunch at the moment. His shift starts at 4 today, if you'd like to stop back then. Although, if it's anything I can help you with in the meantime, I'd be delighted to offer my assistance."

*Unless you happen to be an expert in tracking down cyber stalkers or revenge porn enthusiasts, I don't think you can,* I resist saying. I just smile instead. "Thanks, Paul. I'll stop back later."

But my mind is already racing. I think about the coffee shop where we ate our first meal together, what feels like a lifetime ago already, even though it's only been a few days. I know it's a long shot, but he did say it's one of his favorite spots in the area. Maybe that's where he'd go now.

I speed-walk the few blocks there, heart in my throat. All the while, I can feel my phone buzzing in my pocket, every few minutes another text or phone call. Some of the callers have started leaving voicemails, which I don't even want to listen to. I delete them all unread, and wonder how hard it will be to program my phone to send all these new incoming calls straight to voicemail in the future. Will I have to change my number? Can I block this many phone numbers?

Zayne couldn't have done this to me. He wouldn't. But maybe he'll have some idea how to help fix it. Or at least some advice on what could've gone wrong. Did his phone get stolen? Did someone break into it?

I reach the café and steal a peek through the windows. Sure enough, there he is at the back table, the same one we shared last Friday when he was trying to cheer me up after my especially shitty day at work. He doesn't see me yet—he's still eating, his eyes fixed on the seat across from him, half-glazed, as though deep in thought. I wonder what about. I wonder if he knows how horribly my life has blown up since I left him this morning.

I wonder if he had something to do with it.

I steel my heart. Push through the doors into the restaurant.

He glances up when the bell jingles, and his eyes light up at the sight of me, a smile spreading across his face. He half-rises from his chair by the time I make it to his table, but I pull out the other seat before he can reach me and drop into it, bypassing a hug. I can't get distracted, and I know I will if I let him touch me. I need to talk about this with a clear head, to get straight answers.

"What's wrong?" Zayne asks, after taking one look at my expression. I can't imagine what I look like right now. Murderous? Scared? On the brink of tears?

I feel like all three at once.

In response, I pull out my phone. I tap on the screen and open the website and I pass it to him without a word. My throat aches, and my eyes

sting. Something about this feels worse than knowing my office saw the photo. Zayne was the intended recipient of this picture, so why does it bother me for him to see it again?

*That's not it*, I realize. What bothers me is the caption, the comments under it. The talking-to my boss gave me earlier today. The way the whole world is judging me for sending a semi-nude selfie to a guy I cared about. Care about. Or was starting to care about, anyway.

I shake my head, and clear my throat, because Zayne still hasn't said anything. "Well?" I ask.

He finally lifts his head, eyes wide. "Clove..."

"I only sent that photo to one person," I say, my voice getting louder, heated. "My phone has been with me ever since. I really don't see how else anyone could've found that photo, unless..." My throat closes up. I can't finish that sentence.

He doesn't make me. His eyes meet mine, serious and heavy. "Unless I sent it to them."

I swallow around the lump that's forming. "Did you?"

"Clove..."

I close my eyes. I can't watch him. Can't make eye contact, not if he's about to tell me that he just fucked over my entire life, all for some sick revenge porn scheme.

His hand closes around mine, and I flinch involuntarily, because that touch still floods me with desire, a heat that's impossible to ignore.

"I would never, ever do something like that to you. Or to anyone, really. But especially not you."

I open my eyes. Find him staring straight at me, his expression still as deadly serious as ever. I nod, and blink hard as my eyes sting once more, threatening tears again. "But..."

He shakes his head, squeezes my fingers tighter. "We're going to fix this, Clove."

"How?" The tears threaten to sting at my eyes again. "My company is already trying to track down this person. Whoever did this, they were smart. Really smart. They covered their tracks, and if a professional in the industry can't find them, there's no way we can."

"Sure we can." His eyes go hard and distant, focused on the window outside instead of me now. "Because I know who it is."

I tug at my hand, freeing my fingers from his, startled by the sudden fierce anger in his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“There’s only one person who would do this. One person who’s *already* done this before.”

“What are you talking about?” I shake my head. “Zayne, you’re scaring me a little bit.” I’ve never seen him look like this, so intense and furious. It’s not directed at me, but still. Who knew what kind of anger was hiding underneath his bright, smiling exterior?

“There’s... This has happened to women I’ve dated before.”

My shoulders tense. Now *I* feel some of that anger flooding over into me. “Wait. You’re saying you knew this was a possibility?”

“I didn’t know that—”

“Women who have sent you sexts before have had their photos leaked publicly?” I press on, leaning into the table, eyes on his.

He meets my gaze reluctantly. “A couple of times, yes.”

“And you didn’t think you should *tell* me that before you asked me to send you a half-naked selfie in a bar bathroom the other night?” I lower my voice to a hiss, all too aware of the other customers in here, the stares we’re already starting to attract, because even at whisper-volume, I can’t contain the fury in my tone.

“It hasn’t happened in years, so I thought—”

“Who is it?” I interrupt.

“Clove, I can’t—”

“Who is doing this to me? You must know, if you’re the one the leak is coming from. Did they hack into your phone, whoever it is?” A sudden, horrible realization sinks into my stomach. “Oh, god. Are you involved with someone? Are you cheating on them, is that why?”

“What? Clove, no, of course not, you saw my apartment.”

True. That was a bachelor pad if ever I’ve set foot in one.

“How can you accuse me of that?” He shakes his head, genuine hurt in his eyes.

But I can’t sit here and listen to this from the man who just knowingly let me walk straight into a trap. Whether the person doing this to him is in the wrong or not, he knew about it all along. He knew and let me fall for it.

I push my chair back and surge to my feet. “If you won’t tell me what’s going on, I’m going to have to find out myself.”

“Clove, please, let me handle it. I’ll talk to her.”

“*Her*, huh?” I lift an eyebrow and skewer him with another glower.  
“Well, while you’re doing that, why don’t you have a long think about why  
you don’t even trust me enough to tell me about my new stalker, too.”  
Without another word, I snatch up my purse and sweep out of the  
restaurant, shoulders squared against the outside air.

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It's a nice day outside, balmy and just warm enough, but not so hot that the pavement feels like it's going to cook me from below. The kind of day I'd normally enjoy at an outdoor café for lunch with Andy and Celeste. Instead, I've been banished from my company, relegated to the backseat, moping around my home while trying to figure out how to fix my trash fire of a life.

I make a beeline for my apartment and ignore another pang of latent, frustrated sexual tension as I cross the threshold and pass the doorman's desk. Paul is still there, of course, waiting for Zayne to start his shift. Tonight, if I have any reason to leave my building, I'll have to walk straight past him. Stare at his smug expression, those knowing eyes, that smirk of his, all the while knowing that he helped ruin my life. And worst of all, he won't even tell me *why*.

*Her.*

Some woman is doing this. Some woman connected to him. He says it's not a current lover, and I believe that, if for no other reason than that he's right, I'd have seen some evidence of another woman around his place. A toothbrush, possessions lying around, something.

But who else would want to destroy him so badly? A scorned ex? Maybe someone he did something similar to? Did he ever put up revenge porn of another woman?

Or is he a much better liar than I think? Maybe this is all him. Maybe it's all part of his fucked-up plan to ruin women's lives. To fuck them senseless, make them fall for him, and then cut them down... Why?

For fun?

I think of the words on the website. *Slut*. He called me that, but in fun, sexy, possessive tones that made it sound hot as hell. I liked it when he called me that in that setting, when it was just me and him. Is this his real kink, though, getting off on sleeping with women and then humiliating them in public?

There are a lot of screwed up men in this city, after all. I should know. I've gone on dates with more than a few of them.

I ball my hands into fists, dig my nails in to keep myself alert as the elevator doors ding open on my floor. There's something stuck to my door, a note about a package delivery it looks like. I ignore it. No time for that right now. I sweep inside and head straight to my computer. First things first, I need to start doing some damage control.

I check the policies section of the dating app's website first. There's nothing about what to do if someone leaks photos sent via the app without your permission, but I write a long email to their contact person anyway, just in case it helps. If nothing else, maybe they can beef up their security in the meantime and help stop this happening to some other poor, innocent girl.

I have to click into Zayne's profile to send them all the details on what happened, who I sent the photo to and how it was leaked. Doing that sets off a riot of feelings in my gut all over again. Because right there on the cover photo is him, gazing at me with those damn blue eyes, so impossible to tear mine away from. Even pixelated on a screen, he's hot as hell.

I'd thought, crazy as it seemed, about deleting this app after this weekend. I'd thought, why do I need it? I've already found a guy who's way better than any of the other losers, and it turns out I already knew him in person. I didn't need this stupid app to help us hook up.

But now? I don't even know how to feel. A crazy person stole my image from his app, is threatening me, publicly harassing me, and he doesn't even trust me enough to tell me what's going on. How can I reconcile that with the guy I thought I was falling for?

My heart sinks into my stomach. I read this all wrong. I misread all the signals. He's not into this, not the way that I am.

My throat clenches hard as I click away from his profile. But closing the window doesn't help remove the memories. They surge up again, brought to the surface by the sight of that image all over again. *Yesterday, it was only yesterday*. It feels like a different era. A completely different life.

We'd finished lunch and we were playing a game at his dining room table. Poker. He was trying to teach me the rules, but I was abysmal. I kept betting on nothing hands, going all in on a pair of twos. So he changed the rules.

"Strip poker now," he'd said with a grin, gaze fixed hungrily on me.

"Okay," I agreed, and I didn't tell him that I already planned to continue sucking. Even more so now.

He dealt another hand, but this time, for once, I had decent cards. I hesitated, double-checking. But no. I was right. I had a good hand. So I placed a bet. Zayne rolled his eyes and matched it.

"You have to fold sometimes," he pointed out. "You can't go all-in on every hand and expect me to believe you've got something when the last five times you didn't."

I shrug and raise again. "Never know," I said. "The tides could have turned in my favor."

"Poker isn't the only thing you need to practice, Clove," he admonished with a wink. "You need to work on lying, too."

"But isn't that what you love about me? My innocent guile?" I raised again, and he matched again, and I could feel the win creeping up on me.

"I suppose. Then again, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe all along you've been pretending to be innocent and slow at this game, building me up, so you can sweep in like a shark at the right moment and claim victory once and for all."

My heart skipped a beat. "Oh? Is that so?"

"Maybe." His gaze caught mine. Held firm. That smirk of his widened. "So tell you what, Clove. Why don't we raise the stakes even higher? Why don't we make this truly interesting?"

"What did you have in mind?" I asked, hands carefully folded around my cards, trying to give nothing away. I had a full house. There was no way he was going to beat me, not this time.

"An hour of obedience," he replied, one eyebrow lifted. "The winner gets to command the loser to do whatever they want for one full hour. No backing out."

I shivered. The command in his voice sent a jolt of desire straight through me, all the way to my belly, and through to my tightened pussy. Part of me suddenly wished I had a bad hand. What if I lost? What would he do to me? But the other part wanted, fiercely, to win. To see this sexy,

handsome, hunk of a man kneeling before me, at my beck and call. I could make him do whatever I wanted. Make him kneel in front of me and lick me until I came again and again, then make him fuck me right here on top of the table, knocking the cards off around us on the floor... I could make him take me to the shower and wash for me, perform for me, slowly run his hands all over his muscled body, touch himself wherever I wanted him to touch himself... I could drive him mad, the way he'd been slowly driving me mad this whole weekend.

"Deal," I said, and I hoped my voice didn't give away my winning hand, the quiver of excitement almost too much to disguise.

Zayne grinned. "So, you accept this raise in stakes?"

"I do," I replied.

"Good," he answered. "Consider us both all in, then." Then it came time for us to reveal our hands. I spread mine on the table with a smirk. His eyes widened, his lips parting for a moment. I resisted the urge to laugh. He really didn't know what I had up my sleeve.

"You're getting better at this," he muttered, a begrudgingly appreciative tone in his voice. But then he lowered his hand and spread his cards in response, grinning.

Royal flush.

Shit.

"You're impossible," I groaned.

He laughed. "Admit it, you love it. Now, I believe my hour starts now..." His gaze swept over me.

"Unfair," I added with a pout.

He lifted an eyebrow, suddenly stern. "Did I say you could speak?"

I snapped my mouth shut, though I continued to glare at him.

He laughed. "Mm, the sore loser look doesn't suit you. Stand up, Clove."

I rose from the table, pushing the chair back as I did. His gaze swept down again, over the casual T-shirt and pair of his boxer shorts I'd donned for dinner. We didn't stand on ceremony that weekend, not with all the stripping we'd been doing whenever possible. His gaze lingered on my top.

"Take off your shirt."

I stripped it off without a word and dropped it beside the table. I had no bra on, having already lost that in a prior round, so my breasts were immediately exposed, my nipples hardening in the chilly evening air.

He stood up and raised a hand, and I tensed in anticipation of his warm touch. But he didn't quite touch me, not yet. He let his hand hover an inch from my chest, tracing circles through the air just inches from me.

"Touch your breasts," he said.

I lifted my hands to cup my breasts from beneath, and squeezed them, massaging them lightly, pressing them together between my palms.

"Harder."

I clenched my fists around my skin, watched the way my nipples hardened even further at the sensation.

"Now run your hands down your body, slowly."

I trailed my hands down my sides, as slow as I could, tracing my ribcage, my waist, my hips. I hesitated at the boxer waistband, looked up at Zayne.

"Take those off too," he said, his voice gone low and dark with lust. I could tell from the hard bulge in his pants that he was enjoying this every bit as much as I was.

I pushed the boxers down slowly, letting them snag on my hipbones before they finally fell to reveal my mound. They dropped to my knees, then my ankles, and I stepped out of them easily.

"Spread your legs," Zayne said.

I swallowed hard, but obeyed him, standing with my feet shoulder-width apart.

"Arms out, too" he added.

I spread them wide to either side of me, feeling like I was on display.

When he finally touched me, I couldn't help but jolt with the surprise of it. His warm skin against mine felt like an electric shock, his rough palms grazing my nipples before his hands clenched around my breasts and squeezed, the way I had a moment ago, but harder, rougher. I began to rock in place slightly, unable to help myself, swaying toward him with every rough grope of my breasts.

"Hold still," he commanded, and it took effort to still myself, to balance on my feet in one position and let him take whatever he wanted from me.

He ran his hands down my back next, stepping closer to do it. He was close enough that the bulge in his boxers grazed my belly, and I sucked in a deep breath at the sudden skim of his cock against my bare, flat stomach. His hands, on the other hand, kept moving, running down the plane of my back, tracing my spine to my ass, which he gripped so hard I was sure he'd

leave bruises. He pulled me up against him and crushed his cock against my belly so I was pinned there against him, my arms and legs spread, trying hard to keep my balance, to keep breathing normally, to keep my racing heart from driving me wild, right over the edge.

Fuck, I was soaking wet already.

He slapped my ass as he stepped back, an appreciative grin on his face. “Good girl,” he murmured, stepping aside to walk slowly around me. “Are you enjoying yourself, Clove?” he asked, his voice a whisper at my ear as he paused beside me, and trailed one finger along my outstretched arm, raising goosebumps the whole way along. “You can answer,” he added when I didn’t reply, because I’d learned my lesson about the speaking thing once already.

“Yes,” I breathed, and he chuckled, a low, dangerous sound. Fuck. What was he going to do to me?

I hoped it was anything. Everything. I wanted him to take me, possess me, own me. I wanted him to fuck me until I couldn’t stand up straight anymore.

He dipped a hand between my legs and massaged my thighs, from the outside to the inner thighs, as rough and harshly as he’d massaged my tits moments earlier. I gasped as his fingers grazed the groove where my legs met my hips, then slid higher, higher, until it took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to cry out, to beg him to touch my pussy, finger me, fuck me until I screamed.

Finally, he pushed one finger along my slit, sudden and strong. I could feel him sliding along me, slick with my juices. I felt wetter than I’d ever been before. He must have noticed, because he laughed again, still that low, dark laugh.

“Someone’s hungry for me,” he murmured against my earlobe, lips grazing my skin. “Do you want me to fuck you, Clove?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“How do you want me to fuck you?”

I swallowed. “Hard,” I managed to murmur.

He smirked. “You’ll have to be a little more specific.” Without warning, he spun me around, pulled me off balance until I had my back to the dining room table where we’d been playing. He bent me backwards over it, and I felt the cards sticking to my back, my body slick with sweat and desire, every inch of me trembling. “Do you want me to fuck you right here, like a

dirty little slut?” He lifted my knees, then wrapped his hands around my ankles, forced my legs back until my knees bent on either side of my ears, and all I could see looking down was my body curled up in front of him like an offering, free for the taking. The shivers were impossible to resist now, because the cool air was breezing right across my soaked pussy, and his cock was right there, still tight in his boxers, inches away from me, but I could see every inch of him outlined through the thin fabric, pulsing with need the same way I was.

“Yes,” I groaned, my voice hard to control now.

He lifted an eyebrow. “Do you want me to come inside you, little slut?”

My heart skipped. We’d talked about that earlier in the day, the last time we fucked. About how we’d both been recently tested, we were clean, and I was on the pill. I brought it up, unusual for me, because for once, I felt comfortable with a guy. For once, I trusted him, wanted to feel him without a condom between us.

*Stupid Clove*, I think now, but it doesn’t stop the memory from continuing, pulsing through my mind, unable to stop now. I slide a hand down the front of my jeans, even though I hate myself for it, even though I hate that this memory still turns me on, after everything that’s happened since.

“Come inside me,” I’d whispered, and Zayne dropped his boxers at that. He thrust inside me in one swift motion, so fast that I didn’t have time to brace myself, prepare. I screamed with pleasure, with the force of it, as his cock stretched my pussy wide and speared deep into me.

He planted my feet against his shoulders, kept his hands wrapped around my thighs to pin me in place, and fucked me against the table, his balls slapping my ass with every deep thrust. At this angle, he couldn’t help fucking right along my G-spot, the head of his thick cock scraping right over it every time. I was already on fire, hot from the foreplay, and it didn’t take long before I was shouting his name, writhing against the table.

The orgasm hit me so fast I couldn’t stop it. He kept right on fucking me though, teeth gritted, eyes locked on me. “I didn’t... say... you... could come...” he groaned between thrusts, and my belly tightened, his cock still deep in me, moving hard, fast. “I’m going... to have... to make... you come again,” he added, and I let my head fall back against the table, gasping.

I lost track of time as he pounded inside me. I lost track of everything but the ache in my pussy, the slap of his balls against my ass, the sight whenever I looked down at his glorious cock sliding in and out of my tight pussy, slick with my juices. I came again, moaning this time, my body shaking, my hands gripping Zayne's forearms tightly. He didn't even slow down, just kept fucking me at the same pace, eyes locked on mine, full of fierce desire, possessive lust.

I thought he'd finish then, but instead, he released my thigh with one hand and dropped it between my legs.

"Wait—" I gasped, afraid of how sensitive my clit would be.

He smirked and pressed his thumb against my clit, the pressure alone was enough to make my hips buck and sway against the table. "You should have thought of this before you came without my permission," he murmured, smirking. He circled his thumb and I cried out, pleasure and pain shocking through my system in equal measure.

"Fuck, Zayne," I managed to gasp.

He laughed between thrusts, his own breath still coming hard. "Come again, Clove."

"I... can't..." I whispered, though my hips had begun to move of their own accord, thrusting up against him, grinding his thumb against my clit.

"Yes you can. Come for me."

My mouth fell open, my eyes unfocused, the pressure intolerable, unstoppable. It was too much, too much pleasure, my body was on fire, I'd never reach the peak.

"Come for me, slut."

My pussy clenched at that, turned on by his reckless tone, his possessive attitude. He circled his thumb again and I writhed against the table. Fuck, he was right, I was going to come again. I could barely keep my eyes open, barely focus on anything in the room.

"Come. Now."

I screamed something. Gibberish. Maybe his name mixed in there somewhere, I didn't know. I was lost in the cloud of pleasure, fire sparking through my veins. I felt my pussy spasm and tighten around his cock, felt him drop his hand to grab my hips with both hands. My body shook, and my vision was clouded with bright spots of color as the orgasm continued to wash over me, through me, take control.

A moment later, Zayne's hips collided with mine and he let out a guttural growl. I felt warm, hot cum shooting inside me as he groaned and kept thrusting into me, until finally, he leaned against me, exhausted, and I let my legs drop to either side of him and pulled him down against my chest, our sweaty bodies pressed together, cool and hot all at once, his cock still deep inside me, pulsing with the aftershocks of his orgasm.

“Fuck,” I’d murmured, but he only laughed and turned to kiss my lips once, softly.

“I want to keep doing this to you forever, Clove,” he’d whispered against my mouth. “I haven’t felt like this for someone so fast in...” He shook his head, met my gaze, his eyes suddenly full of emotion, searing through me. “Ever,” he breathed, and my heart skipped in my chest.

“Neither have I,” I confessed, my voice soft, low. We leaned in, let our foreheads rest together and gazed directly into one another’s eyes for a long, quiet moment. Just drinking this in. Realizing that both of us were feeling the same height of emotion.

Then he’d smiled, a mischievous grin. “My hour isn’t up yet,” he reminded me, and...

I shake my head. This isn’t helping. None of this is. I pull my hands out of my jeans, my clit still swollen and sore, aching for release. But I ignore it, push the fantasy out of my head. I remember what happened next, and I don’t want to think about it. Not right now. Not now that I know who Zayne really is.

A liar, for one thing. A lie by omission is still a lie, and who knows if that’s the only lie he told me?

That night at poker, he said I needed to get better at lying. Maybe he was speaking from experience.

I finish writing the email to the company and hit send. Then I dare a glance at my phone. 27 missed calls, 13 new voicemails, and 122 texts. Ugh.

I scroll straight past all the unfamiliar numbers, ignoring the occasional slurs that I catch glimpses of in them. *Slut, whore, cunt.*

I scroll past until I reach my text thread with Andy and Celeste. By now it’s almost 5pm, and our workday will be ending. I might not be able to contribute in the office right now, but I can still meet them after work.

*Emergency post-work margaritas?* I ask, and it doesn’t take long before the two yes’s pour in. Love that about my work besties. I can always count

on them for a drink when I really, *really* need to vent.

I head downstairs again.

Zayne is in the lobby. I spot him even before he turns around, his stance and the familiar slope of his shoulders immediately recognizable. *What was I thinking?* I ask myself for the millionth time. Getting involved with someone here, someone I'll never be able to escape.

I try to breeze past, but his voice stops me dead halfway to the door.

"Clove."

I stop in the middle of the hallway, shoulders hunched. There's a couple of other people around, so we both, without discussing it, wait for them to clear out. Wait until it's just me and Zayne alone in the hallway. When I steal a glance at the doors ahead of me, I catch his reflection in them, his gaze fixed on me. He looks so different in uniform. Hotter, somehow, if that's possible.

"Listen, I'm sorry..."

I laugh, my voice low and bitter. "That's it?"

"I'm trying to find out what's going on."

"But you still don't want to tell me." I lock eyes with him in the window. He meets my gaze, the street reflected behind him, making his eyes seem less blue and more stormy-gray right now.

"I... I just need to work out some things..."

I laugh again, just once this time. "Good luck with that." I storm out without waiting for another word from him. It'll just be another lie, I'm sure.

That's all he's really good at.

“Oh honey.” Celeste greets me with a hug. Andy, always the more practical of our group, skips the hug in favor of ordering me a double margarita, “heavy on the ta-kill-ya,” he adds, our little in-joke with the bartender at our favorite corner dive.

I huddle into the booth between them. We sit in this corner booth every time we come here, which is probably a lot more often than any of us would care to admit.

I take a long gulp of the margarita before I feel ready to even meet their eyes.

“Tell us everything,” Andy prompts, so I do. I let it all out. Everything from the moment Zayne fought off that creepy stalker I’d been on a date with last week, down to the moment just half an hour ago when I passed him in the lobby and kept right on walking.

“Good for you,” Andy tells me on that last bit, patting my arm as I take another swig of my drink. Spilling my guts is thirsty-making work.

“It doesn’t feel good,” I sigh. “It feels like I got duped again. Zayne is just another playboy, just like that stalker he fought off, only with a slightly better game.”

“At least you got a few good lays out of him?” Celeste, ever the optimist, offers that nugget of wisdom before she finishes off what I’m guessing is not her first margarita.

I groan. “Yeah, but at what cost? That photo is ruining me.”

“It’ll blow over.” Andy shakes his head. “No way Stacy is going to lose such a great employee over something stupid like this. She just had to ask

you to stay out of the office for a while to appease the higher-ups, you'll see. In no time at all she'll be begging you to come back and this all will be a stupid mistake we can laugh about a few months down the line."

I glare at him.

"Okay, a few years maybe," he amends. "But honestly, Clove, it'll be fine. The internet has a short attention span. Those creepy guys will quit calling soon."

In response, I shove my phone at him. 32 more missed texts while we've been sitting here alone. I watch Andy scroll through some of them and cringe. Then his eyes light up, and before I know it, he's tapping away on my screen.

"What are you doing?" I ask, nervous, and lean toward him. He pulls the phone away, just long enough to tap a few more times.

"Taking care of at least some of your problems," he replies. Then he turns the phone around to show me, and I have to bite back a laugh.

He just sent dick pics back to all of the creepy dudes sexting me. Not just any dick pics either, but what appear to be the largest dick he could find online, complete with rainbow-dyed pubes.

I sigh and accept the phone with a nod of thanks.

Celeste leans over to wrap an arm around my shoulders. "Andy's right. As long as you make sure no more photos leak out..."

I snort. "Yeah, no chance of that ever again. I've learned my lesson." I groan.

"Then, this will blow over eventually. People will get bored and forget about it. And who knows, maybe Zayne will do the right thing and tell you the truth eventually."

"No chance of that either," I mutter.

"I don't know." Celeste purses her lips. "He sounds like he's a decent guy, before all this shit anyway."

"But if he *doesn't* tell you what the hell is going on, do not give him the time of day ever again," Andy butts in. "He owes you an explanation, and if he can't man up and deliver, then you need to move the hell on to greener pastures."

"Yeah, but this pasture lives upstairs and works right in my path to work," I mutter.

"So? That sounds like his problem, not yours." Andy shakes his head. "Just rise above it. He doesn't have to bother you unless you let him."

I nod. It's good advice. Wise. So why doesn't it sit right in my stomach? Why do I still feel so worried about all of this?

The topic shifts to work problems, with Celeste and Andy filling me in on all the other boring day-to-day dilemmas that I missed since being sent home this morning like a naughty student headed to the principal's office. For a while, it's nice. A good distraction. Normal problems that normal people have, which I'd be dealing with if I didn't have such a colossal issue weighing me down instead.

But there's only so much distraction I can take before I have to face reality again. That moment arrives a hell of a lot sooner than I'd like it to when we all lean around to the bar to pay our tabs, down our last margaritas, and head our separate ways.

"I'll see you guys..." I pause, then bite my lip. I don't even know when I'll see them next. I don't know when I'll be allowed back into the office again, or how long it'll be before I can get back to my career and the things that truly matter in my life.

Andy pats my shoulder. "Friday," he promises. "Happy Hour still stands, no matter what else is going on."

I force myself to nod and smile. Right. "Friday," I agree, even though it sounds like a death sentence. If I don't see them until Friday, that means I haven't been allowed to work until Friday, which means that this whole mess is still dragging on. That's more than I can handle right now.

But I keep that forced, fixed smile on my face as I bid my friends farewell and catch my train back uptown. Andy is right. There's nothing else I can do right now but rise above.

\* \* \*

Zayne isn't behind the desk when I get back. He's standing at the doors, opening them for every person who enters the building. Normally the doormen only do that when it's pouring down rain or when high winds are whipping along the street, making it difficult for residents to peel open the doors themselves while negotiating heavy coats and umbrellas.

The reason he's being so extra nice today becomes clear the minute I step up to the building, and he rests a hand on the doorknob, not opening it for me yet, barring my path.

“Clove, you’re right,” he says, all in a rush.

I cross my arms and lean on one leg, catching his eyes as I wait.

“I should’ve been more straightforward with you. I should’ve warned you right away, and when all this hit the fan, I should’ve explained what was going on. Let me do that now. Tonight. Please?”

I raise an eyebrow.

“I’ll cook,” he adds. “I’ll do anything you want. Just let me make this up to you.”

“I don’t know that you can,” I reply.

He frowns, his face falling, though to his credit, he does step aside and open the door for me, despite the upset on his face.

“But I guess you can try to start,” I add as I cross the threshold into the building.

“I finish at 10,” he calls after me, and it hurts to see the bright hope in his eyes, the way his expression transforms from despair into joy. He honestly does seem to care about me, about how I feel. About the mess he’s thrown me into. “I’ll come by your apartment then, if that’s okay?”

I nod. I don’t trust my voice to work in response. It’s too worn, too frayed. Then I walk past him, into the elevator, and shoot up to my floor. It takes every ounce of energy I have left not to collapse in the elevator and let the tears that have been burning at the back of my eyes all day fall.

Back at home, I head straight for the shower. I need to wash today off of me, need to wash all the sweat and fear and anger off before I talk to Zayne tonight. I’m going to give him this chance to explain. One chance, to be straight with me, honest about what he clearly doesn’t want to share. Then, we’ll see.

*Then, I’ll probably be alone again,* my darker side points out.

I ignore it and climb into my shower. Bury my face in the stream of hot water and let it wash over me.

But I’m not safe even here. Not protected from my memories. Especially not when that hot stream of water trickles down my chest, my stomach, past my navel, straight over my hips where it sears against my pussy, wet and reassuring and warm.

My hand strays toward my mound again, remembering the frustration earlier, the way I’d been fingering myself thinking about Zayne, but forced myself to stop.

Specifically, I remember the memory that made me unable to resist touching myself. The bet I made. The control I lost to him for an hour. One hour only, and yet it felt like so much longer. Like a whole lifetime.

He'd finished fucking me across the dining room table, and then he stood back, crossed his arms, sized me up as I lay there, too tired and pulsing with the afterglow of my orgasms to move. His gaze felt hot and heavy over my body, judging and lustful all at once.

"Stand up," he said.

I forced myself to my feet, and even though my knees shook and my thighs quivered, and I felt a hot rush drip down my thigh, his cum mingled with mine, I managed to stand in front of him and obey.

"Tell me something, Clove." He stepped closer.

My pussy clenched, and another trickle trailed down my leg. I loved that sensation, strangely. The after-rush. The knowledge that he'd come in me, claimed me.

"Anything," I told him.

He smirked. Gripped my ass in one hand and squeezed tightly. "Has anybody ever fucked that perfect little ass of yours?"

I shivered then, a full-body motion, goosebumps rising on my skin. "No," I murmured.

His smirk widened. "Have you wanted anybody to?"

I swallowed hard. Met his gaze, which was the only thing that gave me enough courage to admit this. "I want *you* to," I said.

He laughed. Slapped my ass once, not hard, just enough to make my skin sting a little, and my body tense. "Why do you want me to fuck your ass, Clove?"

"I want you to take me in every way possible," I heard myself saying. I didn't even know it myself until I said it out loud, until I admitted it. "I want you to claim me, take your pleasure from me."

He leaned in to feather a kiss along the side of my neck, so light that it made me shiver all over again, this time from desire, from wanting more, more, more. He always did that to me. Left me wanting. "You are a natural at this. It's unbelievable, how perfect you are..." His hands traced the air in front of me, like he was forcing himself to hold back, not to touch me yet.

I smiled at him, and for a moment, he broke character. Wrapped one hand around the back of my neck and pulled me against him for a slow, deep kiss.

Then we broke apart again, and he was back in the character of the poker winner, the man who owned me now, for this next hour.

“Go into the living room and kneel on the carpet,” he told me. He didn’t need to explain which one. I could guess he meant the fuzzy one, almost a shag carpet. Comfortable enough that it wouldn’t hurt to kneel on.

I went in and dropped to my knees, turning to look over my shoulder at him. I expected him to come and stand before me, have me lick our combined cum off his cock, clean him while he got hard again. But he was on the other side of the room, digging through the kitchen.

“All fours,” he added to me, and I bent forward onto all fours, a pulse of desire running through me.

Then he was back, kneeling behind me, and I felt his cock trace between my thighs, trailing through our juices, soaking up what ran down my legs. He was already starting to grow hard again, thick with desire.

“I’m going to fuck your tight little virgin ass, Clove.”

I swallowed hard and felt myself nodding. His hands traced my ass cheeks. Spread them slowly, and when one finger dipped between my cheeks, I gasped, because his finger was wet, slick with lube.

“But first, I’m going to finger you. I’m going to stretch you slowly until you’re ready for my fat cock.”

My mouth parted as his finger circled the entrance to my ass, pressing against the opening.

“Tell me how this feels,” Zayne added. “I want to hear it all from you. Every sensation.”

“The lube is cold,” I murmured. “Starting to get hotter...”

*In the shower, remembering this, I slide my finger between my pussy lips and begin to move it faster, pressing against the entrance of my pussy.*

“Your finger feels thick, hard.” He pushed against my ass, and I gasped faintly as the pressure built. “It hurts, it feels strained...”

“That will pass when I’m deep enough inside you,” he promised.

His finger pushed past my opening with a popping sensation and slid half an inch into my ass.

“Fuck,” I gasped between gritted teeth.

“Tell me,” he commanded, and I could feel the hard press of his cock, growing harder with every moment, as he pushed his finger deeper still.

“It... You feel...” I shook my head.

“Relax, Clove. Breathe.”

I forced myself to let my muscles go, to sink back against him. His finger slid deeper, probing the depths of my ass. He curled it inside me, and the pressure increased, but with it, something else. A deep, pleasant, filled sensation. “It feels like you’re deeper inside me than you’ve ever been,” I murmured, trying to describe it. “As though you’re claiming the deepest parts of me.”

He leaned down, so his mouth was close beside my cheek, his breath hot against my ear. “Because I am, Clove. I’m taking all of you tonight.”

Another pleasant quiver raced through me, and I arched my back as he drew his finger back, then pressed it deeper again. It wasn’t like being fucked in the pussy. It felt more intense, less sheer pleasure and more pleasant ache. When he drew his finger out of me, I gasped in protest. But he was only adding more lube, and then pressing his finger into me again, joined by a second one this time. I moaned out loud when he pushed the second finger into me, knuckle-deep.

“You love feeling my fingers in your ass, don’t you, my little slut?” He grinned, turned to lick and suck at my neck, and I arched my neck to the side to let him, to give him access to whatever part of me he wanted.

*In the shower, I push two fingers into my pussy, rock against the palm of my hand until it grinds against my clit, and lean on the shower wall for support as I finger-fuck myself, remembering Zayne’s possessive growl of pleasure as he pushed his fingers into my ass, claimed every inch of me for his own.*

“Fuck, Zayne,” I gasped, and that turned into a louder cry of protest as he pulled those fingers out of me. But the protest didn’t last long, because a moment later, I felt the head of his cock pressed against my entrance, already wrapped in a condom, harder than ever, and doused in a healthy helping of the cool lube.

This time, when he pushed inside me, I couldn’t help crying out loud. He was thicker than his fingers, and harder, the steel at the core of his shaft intense and thick with pressure as he inched his cock into me. He moved slowly, a few centimeters at a time, letting me adjust to his width the whole time. But with each inch deeper he moved, the stretch increased, and so did the pleasure. When his balls touched my pussy lips, and his hips ground into mine and he’d fully entered my ass, I felt fuller than I ever had in my life. I felt stuffed to the brim, ready to burst, speared on his length, and I couldn’t get enough of it. I wriggled back against him, ground my hips into

his as I groaned, unable to articulate the pleasure anymore, unable to explain anything, because all I knew was that I wanted more of this, more of him.

“Fuck, you feel amazing, Clove,” he murmured, the character broken. I looked over my shoulder and he kissed me, deep, probing, his tongue exploring my mouth the way his cock explored my ass.

“Take me,” I gasped when we parted, and he did. He slid back out of me, then pushed back in, slow at first, rocking gently against me to let my ass adjust to the sensation, grow used to his cock probing deep inside me. Finally, he worked his way up to fucking my ass fully, and I leaned forward against the carpet, braced on my forearms, my face buried in the rug as I cried out. I was so loud it barely muffled me, but Zayne was just as loud, groaning as he slammed into me, losing control, his hands wrapped tight around my hips as he fucked me so hard I knew I wouldn’t be able to walk straight the next day.

I still couldn’t. If I clenched my ass now, I could feel him inside me, the memory of his cock inside my ass. I did it again, felt that bone-deep ache even as I continued to fuck myself with my fingers, leaning into the hot stream of water.

I come hard, gasping to myself in the shower, letting the pleasure wash through me. I hope on its way through it will wash away some of these memories, stop letting them control me, so I can focus and ask Zayne everything I need to know tonight, instead of just wanting to jump his bones the second I see him again.

I finish and wash myself off, though I still don’t feel clean by the time I climb out of the shower again. I think it will be hard to feel clean again, not for a long time. Not until I can get all of these dirty memories of the weekend out of my head. Which at the moment feels like it might be never. How could I forget the hottest weekend of my life?

I dress in jeans and a blouse—casual but not totally lazy. I still want to look hot. Mostly because I want him to regret what he’s missing out on. But still.

My doorbell rings at 10:02pm. Got to give him that, he’s prompt.

I answer it and freeze on the threshold, stunned by the size of the bouquet he’s holding.

“Zayne...” I start, but he’s already handing it to me. It’s a mixed bouquet, made of white flowers dotted here and there with colorful roses, a

mix like I've never seen before. It smells amazing, and the moment I accept the vase, my whole apartment seems to brighten with the color of the flowers. Still. That's just one small gesture.

But I can't deny that it loosens the tight knot in my chest somewhat.

"Come in," I call over my shoulder with a sigh as I set the vase down on my kitchen counter. The jerk is winning me over already and I'll bet he knows it, cocky bastard. I keep my gaze on the flowers as he shuts the door behind him.

"Clove, I just want to say how sorry I am for all of this. You were right."

I turn to look at him now, and am surprised to find his eyes over-bright, fixed on mine with an expression of pleading in them.

"I should have told you about all of this from the start. I should have let you know it was a possibility. And I definitely shouldn't have asked you for that selfie, not when I knew this could happen. It's just, it's been years since this has happened, so I thought it was over, I thought we were done with this goddamn dance now."

"Dance?" I raise an eyebrow.

He shakes his head. "Something I used to say with... With her." He grimaces. "You were right about that too. I should have just told you the truth when you asked me, in the café earlier today. I just... I didn't want to admit to it. I thought you'd judge me, especially since..." He shakes his head again, harder. "No. No more excuses." He swallows hard, with what looks like real effort, and meets my eye again. "Remember when you asked me why I'm still single?"

I nod. Of course I do. "You acted really strange about it," I point out.

He laughs faintly, with no real humor behind it. "Well, because it's a really strange situation. I was... I was dating someone a few years ago. We were together for three years. At first I was really into her, she seemed so attentive, so nice and caring. But things got... Strange. The longer it went on, the more red flags popped up. I realized that things weren't working out, and I tried to end it."

"Tried?" I raise an eyebrow.

"Well. I did end it. Two and a half years ago. But she didn't... She didn't accept it."

"What do you mean?" I lean against the counter. The scent of the flowers catches in my nose again, and I sigh faintly, distracted by the

pleasant smell.

“She started following me everywhere. To my old job, to home. Any time I went out with anyone else, even just friends, she’d get their phone numbers and call them, harass them, try to get them to tell her who I was with and what I was doing. She was even worse to anyone I was dating. After the first few dates, when she stole the girls’ phone numbers and wrote them on bathroom walls, I cut off all contact with her. Changed my phone number, left my old job, hell, I even moved.”

My eyebrows rise, if possible, even higher. “You changed jobs and moved because of her?”

“Not exactly because of her, really. I’d been thinking of making changes in my life. I was dragging my feet before, delaying because it scared me. Her creepy behavior just gave me the final push I needed to get out of my routine and change things up. But...” He sighs and gazes at the flowers with a forlorn expression.

“But?” I prompt, when he doesn’t speak again for a long moment.

“She found me.”

“*Here?*” My mouth drops open. No wonder he’s still single, if this is what he thinks women are like. If this is what he’s had to deal with in his life already.

He’s nodding, a grimace on his face. “She works in tech, so stalking me, finding where I worked and lived, then trying to find whoever I was dating, it’s her professional skillset. The first few dates I went on after we broke up, she pulled this exact stunt. Stole photos of the girls—some of them nudes, some of them just regular pictures that she edited and Photoshopped to look like the girls were naked. She posted them everywhere, harassed the women, started fake websites like she did with yours.” Zayne groans and runs a hand through his hair. “I had to file a restraining order. We got everything set down legally. After that, I hadn’t heard a thing from her. It’s been over a year since she did this to anybody, and I’ve been on a few dates since then. I figured the danger had passed. She hasn’t tried to ruin any other girls’ lives in a year, so I didn’t even think to warn you...”

I groan and press my fingers to my temples, massaging. “Shit, Zayne. I’m so sorry that you had to deal with that.”

“No. I’m sorry.” He catches my wrists. Draws my hands away from my forehead to fold them in his instead. “You shouldn’t have to pay for my past mistakes. You shouldn’t be suffering for my problems.”

“You shouldn’t either,” I counter, my lower lip trembling. “I can’t imagine what all of that was like...”

He laughs faintly, bitterly. “That wasn’t even the tip of the iceberg. God, there was the time she set my car on fire...”

“She what?”

“The time she tried to poke holes in all the condoms, back when we were still together—”

“Fuck, Zayne.”

“I’m sorry, Clove. I’m a mess. I’m messed up, after all of that. I should have told you, but it was so...” He shuts his eyes. I fight the urge to kiss him, to kiss away the pain that’s written so obviously across his face. “Embarrassing, really. And just, an old wound I hate reopening. I didn’t know how to explain, how to talk about it. And I don’t know why she would do this now, why she would come back to try and hurt you.”

I give in to the urge and press a faint kiss to the corner of his mouth. “It’s okay. I mean, it’s not okay that you didn’t tell me the truth, but I understand why you hesitated.”

He opens his eyes to meet mine. Runs a hand through my hair, smoothing it back from my forehead. “I should have trusted you.”

“We don’t know one another that well yet,” I point out.

He shakes his head so hard his hair flops across his forehead, almost into his eyes too. “We do, Clove. I know it’s crazy, I know we’ve only been talking like this for a few days, only seeing each other up close for that long, but it feels like I’ve known you forever already. It feels like this is right, this is where we’re meant to wind up.”

I can feel myself nodding, agreeing. “That’s why it hurt when you didn’t tell me about your ex. When I found out someone had leaked photos like this before around you...”

“I know. I get it, Clove, really. And I never meant to hurt you. I swear I won’t again.”

I can hear myself laughing. “All this from a stupid dating app.”

He laughs, too. “You know, much as I’m glad it helped us find one another...” He smooths my hair back again, gazes into my eyes. “I’m deleting that app tonight. I don’t need it anymore.”

My breath catches in my throat. “Me too,” I hear myself whispering.

His smile widens. But then it catches, snags, sags a little. “I just don’t want to hurt you, to hurt your career, over this mistake.”

“You were right too,” I counter, shaking my head now. “We’ll figure this out. Especially now that we know who’s behind this.”

“Clove, I don’t know what to say...”

“Then don’t,” I suggest. Then his lips are on mine, and I don’t need another apology. This is explanation enough. I collide with him, let my head fall to one side and my mouth part as his lips work against mine and his tongue slips between my lips to tangle with my own. He knows me already, after just three days. Knows how to kiss me, how to turn his head at the right moment to deepen that kiss, and how to wrap his arms around my waist and lift me against him so that I can forget everything else in the world except for the feeling of his arms around me.

When he sets me back on my feet, we’re both smiling faintly, despite the knot of worry still buried deep in my stomach. Somehow, I still need to find a way to solve this. But that feels possible here, wrapped safely in Zayne’s arms. With him by my side, we can manage anything.

He kisses my forehead lightly. “Can I take this as a sign that we’re okay again?” he murmurs softly.

“As long as you promise you’re not hiding any other dark skeletons in your closet from me,” I reply.

He laughs. “My closet is open wide. You can have a look anytime you want.”

“What if I’d rather steal a peek under your clothes instead?” I counter with a raised eyebrow.

His grin deepens. “Hmm. That could also be arranged. But first, I’m afraid there’s something else I really need to do.”

“Oh? And what might that be?”

Without responding, he steps back and catches the hem of my shirt. In one smooth motion, he pulls it up and over my head and drops it to the floor beside us. “I’m very hungry, Ms. Walker. I need to eat something. Preferably you.”

I laugh, which turns into a shiver as he catches me in a tight grip and lifts me onto the kitchen counter. He spreads my legs and starts the slow process of peeling my jeans off. I lean back, my head grazing the flowers that sit in the vase beside me, perfuming the air. I breathe in the scent deeply, sigh it out again as he yanks my jeans off my legs and tosses them aside with my blouse.

He kisses his way back up the inside of my leg, from my ankle up to my knee, then past it, along my inner thigh.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, Clove,” he murmurs as he works his way up my body. “Every minute of the day, all day.”

I think about the shower, my fantasies. My inability to force him out of my head, even when I was mad at him, even when I thought he did this, or thought he was lying to me. *He was, I guess, but I understand his reasons.*

“I can’t stop thinking about you either,” I whisper.

“I get hard every time I remember how gorgeous your body is, how beautiful you look spread out before me like this...” He leans in to lick his tongue across my mound for emphasis, and I gasp, biting down on my lip.

“I have to touch myself whenever I think about what you did to me this weekend,” I admit, my voice low, soft. “When I think about that hour when you commanded me...”

“Or when I think about the way you moaned so loud and desperately, with my cock inside your ass...” He stands, so I can see the hard bulge in his pants, the way he strains for me.

“Nobody has ever made me come the way you do, Zayne,” I admit.

He smiles. “Nobody has ever made me want to fuck them for hours and hours the way you do...” He trails his finger up my slit, through the wet juices already gathering there, and then pops it straight into his mouth, licking my juices with a hungry glow in his eyes.

“I feel like I’m going crazy.” I brace myself against his shoulders, both hands gripping him tight. “How can I feel like this for you so fast?”

“Because I was always there, Clove. Waiting for you to see me under the uniform. We haven’t known each other long, but we’ve been standing right in each other’s paths for years.”

He’s right. I may not have known him well, but Zayne has been in my life for a long, long time. No wonder it feels right, now that I’m realizing how much more in my life he needed to be. How deeply involved in my life he should have been from the start.

“Let me make you feel good, Clove. Let me take your mind off all of this...”

He kneels in front of me again, but it feels different this time, charged somehow. Like he’s not just touching me, tasting me, but feeling me too. He wants to give me pleasure, doing it gives *him* pleasure, and knowing that

only turns me on even more. This isn't just a hookup. It can't be. Not when it feels like this.

Zayne spreads my legs, hands wrapped around my ankles, and kisses his way along my inner thigh. I close my eyes and shiver, savoring the feeling of his rough stubble as it grazes against my sensitive skin, right at my hipbone. He takes his time, the way he always does. I love that about him, the way he's so careful with me, so precise. He makes sure that I'm aching, about to burst before he gives me what I want. I never knew denial could be so hot, or that making me wait could make me so much hungrier for him when he finally gives me what I need.

When his tongue delves into my slit, I clench my fist in his hair and arc my back, leaning backward along the kitchen counter. He pushes his tongue inside me slowly, circling, tasting each of my walls as he enters me.

"Zayne," I gasp, my hands clenching and releasing in his hair of their own accord. He always does this—makes me lose control of my limbs, my hands, my own body.

I can feel the curl of his lips as he smiles against me, but he doesn't reply, just keeps licking me, inside me. He eats me like a starving man, like I'm the only meal he's had in months. He grips my ass with one hand, lifts my pussy closer to his mouth, and I can feel his stubble scratch across my inner thighs, graze the edges of my lips as he forces his tongue as deep inside me as possible.

At the same time, I feel his other hand slide up my thigh too, until he's stroking his forefinger along my slit. I don't realize what he's doing, don't notice how he's coating his finger in my juices, until he presses the tip of that finger against the tight pucker of my ass.

I cry out as he presses his finger into my ass, slowly and deliberately. The sudden tight, full feeling is doubled, because I clench my pussy in response, and feel his tongue press back against me, the flat plane of his tongue caught between my walls. My head falls back against the counter, my body too distracted by the conflicting sensations—the fullness from every angle.

He starts to move his finger, sliding it deeper into my ass, then drawing it out again slowly. At the same time, he continues to lick into my pussy, his tongue curling to drag against my front inner wall. I thought I felt wild before, but this pushes me to a new limit. I twist against the counter, the

hard marble cool against my ass, another contrast to the white-hot heat pouring from Zayne's mouth, his finger inside my ass, his whole body.

I can't help it. Before long, I'm bucking against his face, and he flattens his lips around my pussy, licks me hard and fast as he continues to finger my ass. I wrap my legs over his shoulders, hook my ankles to hold him against me as I bury my hands in his hair. I come with a loud cry, the orgasm sweeping through my whole body, from the tips of my toes all the way to the top of my head. I feel like I'm on fire, bursting from the inside out.

He keeps his finger buried inside my ass and draws back to lick my sensitive-as-hell clit. I gasp and jerk against the counter, and he laughs, his breath hot against my soaking wet pussy.

"You like that, Clove?" He grins up at me, still kneeling between my legs, that cocky grin of his irresistible from this angle. Or from any angle, really.

I grin back, breathless, heart still racing. Then I clench my ass around his finger, and smirk. "What was your first clue?"

He lifts an eyebrow, enjoying the challenge. "Hmm. So you like having both holes filled at once, is that it?"

My cheeks flush bright red, but I hold his eye, emboldened by the naked lust in his eyes. "If that orgasm was anything to judge by, it's definitely nice, yes."

"Mm..." His gaze rakes down my body, and his lower lip juts out as though he's considering something. Pondering. "Well, I didn't come prepared, but I think we should be able to make do..."

With that, he stands, and draws his finger out of my ass. I gasp in protest, especially because without him kneeling between my legs, I feel cold, my naked ass freezing against the marble countertop.

But he doesn't leave me hanging for long. He scoops me into his arms, and I wrap my legs around his waist. His hard cock presses against my ass, so I'm almost sitting on top of it as he holds me against him with one arm and digs through my drawers with the other.

"What are you doing?" I ask, but he only winks in response. I feel him shift against me as he picks up something, and then we're moving, before I can tell exactly what he has in mind.

He carries me to the doorway of my bedroom, then hesitates in the entrance, glancing past me. "Red sheets. It's almost like you planned on

having a sexy encounter in here sometime soon..."

I laugh, and feel my face flush again, this time with regular embarrassment. "I... Forgot I had those on."

He casts me a sideways smirk.

"It's my favorite color!" I protest. "I just like it is all."

"I like it too." In response, he steps across the threshold, and tosses me onto the bed without warning, so hard that I bounce a little, laughing as he steps up to the bed, gazing down at me. "The color suits you. You look good on it." His gaze roams across my body, naked and exposed before him. "Though you'll look even better spread-eagled across it."

My laughter turns a little breathy, my flushed face getting even hotter as he kneels beside me and leans down to kiss me softly, slowly. "Zayne..." I murmur. Then I lift my eyes to his, smiling, because a sudden idea took hold of me. "It's my turn," I say.

He raises an eyebrow, still smiling, but questioning. "Your turn to what, exactly?"

"To spread-eagle you." With that, I push myself up to a sitting position, then flip around to kneel next to him. He lets me push him over easily, even though of course, he could overpower me if he wanted. There's something sexy about that, about the confident way he's willing to let me take control when I want to. He doesn't have anything to prove—he just wants me to enjoy myself however I want. And right now, I want to do to him what he just did to me.

I spread his legs wide, then position his hands over his head. After a moment's consideration, I grab the edges of the my sultry red sheets—silk, no less, because I love the way it feels against my skin, cool and soothing and smooth as hell. I wrap each corner around the bedposts, then use them to tie Zayne's wrists to the bed frame. He smirks at me. I know it's just a loose knot—he could slip it anytime he wanted. But he lets me do it, and to judge by the stiff cock standing erect in his boxers in front of me, he's enjoying this too.

I bind his ankles too, the same way, not very tight, and he could easily slip the knot if he wanted.

"I hope you know turnabout is fair play," he comments while I work. "The next time I'm back here, I'm going to have to tie you up nice and tight for this. Maybe even give you a spanking, too." His gaze drops to my ass,

and I shiver at the thought of him doing this to me. Tying me up, leaving me vulnerable and exposed before him. Having his way with me.

My pussy clenches just thinking about it. “Promises, promises,” I tell him, a playful sparkle in my eye as I wink and finish tying off his right ankle. “But first, it’s my turn.”

Now that he’s bound, I reach up to trace my hands over his sides. Let him have a taste of his own medicine—see how it feels when I touch him like this, slowly, tortuously, not touching his sensitive spots, not yet. I trace his muscles, every inch of his hard abs and the flat plane of his stomach. I lean down to feather kisses along the carved V that points straight to his cock. I flick my tongue into his navel, loving the salty-sweet taste of him, and the way he inhales sharply, trying to hide his pleasure. He can’t though, not when I have him like this, naked before me. He can’t hide anything from me here.

“Zayne...” I catch his eye again. Begin to inch his boxers down his legs. “Have you done this before?”

“What, been tied up?” His eyes catch mine with a mischievous glint. “Once or twice, I have to admit.”

I laugh. Then shake my head. “Have you ever felt so... hungry for somebody before?” I trace my hands along his sides, down to his upper thighs. I pull his boxers further down, far enough that his cock springs free, standing tall at attention, curved upwards so the tip almost touches his navel. “You just made me come, and it was great, fantastic, but I...” I graze his cock with my fingertip, barely a touch, just enough to make him jump as his muscles clench in reply. “I already want more.”

He swallows so hard it’s audible, and gazes up at me with sincerity. “I know exactly what you mean, Clove. I never knew it was possible to feel this hungry. Every minute of the day, I think about you, about all the things I want to do to you, all the ways I want to enjoy your body. I’ve been hard practically since the night we first spoke...”

I touch his cock again, still lightly, barely touching him between my fingertips. I stroke them up and down his length, hardly touching him, but he’s so turned on already that it makes his hips twist against the bed, his eyes hot where they catch mine. “I know how you feel,” I murmur. “I feel like I’ve spent the entire weekend wet, red-hot, ready to jump you any second you’ll let me.”

“Which is any second you want,” he points out.

“What is this? Why do we feel this so quickly?” I murmur, my voice dropping lower.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “But whatever it is, I don’t want it to stop. I want you, Clove. I want to be with you. When you showed up downstairs with that... that...” His face twists into an ugly expression, a scowl. “That fucking disrespectful asshole who followed you home. I wanted to tear his throat out for touching you. For trying to use you.”

I lean down to feather a kiss along his jaw, but he turns his head and catches my lips with his, kisses me hard and deep. “Nobody else touches me,” I promise as I draw back, just far enough to meet his eyes. “Nobody but you.”

He smiles, a soul-deep smile that catches my eyes, sets me on fire. “Because you’re mine, Clove. And I’m yours.”

“Mine to do with as I wish,” I point out, spreading my fingers wide and wrapping my hand around his cock in earnest this time, clutching him tight enough to feel his velvet-smooth skin under my fingertips, and the hard steel of his shaft beneath.

“And what do you wish to do to me, Clove?” Zayne’s eyebrows rise, those blue eyes of his fixed on mine, all heat underneath and ice on top, like he could burn and chill me all at once. He does, in fact, quite frequently.

I tighten my grip on his cock and begin to slide my hand up and down his shaft, my own smile widening. “I want to make you come so hard you forget your own name,” I murmur.

He smirks and tilts his body, curving his hips up toward my hand to give me easier access to him. “If anybody can make me lose control, Clove, it’s you.”

I don’t need more invitation than that. It’s already hard enough to resist the sight of his thick, swollen cock, and the scent of sweat and sex that hangs heavy in the room. His scent drives me mad—I never much thought about hormones before, but now I realize how real they are, how crazy the scent of his makes me. I lean down to kiss around the base of his cock, letting his shaft brush against my cheek, my forehead, my hair, as I circle him. His cock jumps again, the muscles tensed, out of his control now. Just the way I like.

I duck my head between his thighs to lick his balls, one at a time. He tastes amazing, hot and heady with a touch of salt, and an underlying flavor that’s all him, more addictive than anything I’ve ever tasted before. I suck

one of his balls between my lips, close my lips around him and roll it along my tongue. He moans faintly, just a soft sound, one he's clearly trying to suppress. He won't be able to for long, if I have anything to say about it.

"Fuck, Clove," he murmurs as I release that ball and lap at the other one, flick my tongue across him, then dig it against the sensitive spot right between his balls and his cock. His cock jumps again, and I catch it in a tight fist, start to stroke him again while I continue licking around his base. I close my lips around the side of his shaft, suck hard enough to leave a little mark, hard enough to make his hips jerk once more, and then I move on, rolling my tongue around him as I inch up his length.

When I reach his tip, I gently purse my lips against him, my mouth already wet from licking him so much. Slowly, I increase pressure, parting my lips around the head of his cock to gently press him into my mouth. I keep my lips tight around him, press my tongue up against the underside of his cock, tracing the thick veins there, so he feels every inch of my mouth as I take him inside.

"Your... fucking... mouth," he whispers between hard breaths. I grin and keep taking him in deeper, sliding his cock along the length of my tongue.

"You're fucking magic," he murmurs, head falling back on the pillow.

I take him deeper, deeper, until the tip of his cock touches the back of my throat.

"Clove," he moans, and I wrap my one fist around the base of his shaft, keeping the pressure there as I sit up slowly, drawing him back out of my mouth once more.

When he's fully out, I lick the tip of his cock and savor the droplets of precum I can taste already. I lean back to eye his swollen length, glistening with my spit, hard as ever, his veins standing out, the whole cock pulsing with blood, his desire evident, impossible to deny.

"Don't..." He stops himself, grits his teeth.

I grin at him. "Don't what?" I lift one eyebrow. Lean back down to lick his tip again, and enjoy the way his cock jumps once more. I circle my tongue around his head, and wrap my fist around his base again, stroking him slowly. "Don't stop?"

"Don't..." He locks eyes with me and sucks in another deep breath. *This is it*, I think. I've finally made him beg the way he always makes me.

“Don’t make me punish you worse later,” he replies, a glint of mischief in his eyes.

I have to laugh, though I lean down to lick along one side of his cock again as I do. “I thought you enjoyed punishing me,” I point out, then lick the top of his cock, my mouth open so he can watch me do it. He drinks in the sight, his gaze as hungry as ever. He might be tied up just now, but my lover still looks dangerous, ready to pounce on me at any moment if his lust reaches frenzy pitch.

Part of me hopes it will. My belly clenches, a curl of anticipation hidden deep inside.

“Oh, I do,” he murmurs, and my pussy tightens too, those words sending a pulse of desire through my whole body.

“Good,” I reply. Then I lick along him again and flatten my hand across his stomach to pin him against the bed. I keep up that slow, maddening pace until he seems like he’s about to burst, his muscles strained and his breath coming fast, even though he struggles to disguise it.

Finally, I take him into my mouth and begin to work on him, sliding him in and out of my mouth, all the way to the back of my throat like he taught me. As I expected, he doesn’t let me stay in control for too long. I get him worked up to a point but then he loses his ability to remain cool. He tugs his arms free from my meager restraints and grips my head, hands buried in my hair, eyes shut with pleasure as he thrusts up into my mouth. I relax my jaw, catch breaths between his thrusts, and let him fuck me from below, his hips rising up with every thrust, his cock spearing deep into my throat.

I love this best of all—the way he abandons all sense of control, becomes wild, animalistic with lust. He wants me, and nothing will stand in his way. I watch him, enjoying the almost pained expression of desire on his face, the way his eyes screw shut and his mouth falls open in ecstasy.

As he nears his peak, his eyes open and find mine. He watches me, a dark, hungry glint in his eye as he thrusts into my mouth again, again, hands clenched tight in my hair, his teeth gritted. And then, all at once, his expression shifts, his mouth parting farther as he comes hard, deep in my throat. I swallow his cum, savoring the taste, the flavor of him magnified, stronger than anything else. When he sinks back against the bed, I keep licking his shaft, his tip, cleaning every drop from him, until finally he shudders, grips my shoulders and tugs me up toward him.

I fall at his side, and he wraps his arms around my body, pulling me against his warm, naked skin. He kisses me once more, deeply, and his tongue slips between my lips, probing my mouth, tasting himself on me.

“Fuck, Clove,” he murmurs again when we break apart. “You are impossibly perfect.”

I smile and nuzzle into his side, arms tight around his waist. “Me? You’re the one who was hiding right beneath my nose this whole time. In a doorman’s uniform, no less.”

He laughs, and I can hear the echo of it in his chest as I lie against him, the feel of his breathing against my cheek, the hum of his voice when he speaks tickling my cheek. “I wasn’t hiding. I was right there in plain sight. You were just blinded by the sexy hat.”

I snort and flick his stomach. “Sure, that was it. That damned hat stood in our way.”

“And to think, all it took to get you to look beneath was punching out an asshole.”

I laugh and elbow him again. He just laughs harder.

“Well,” he amends. “Punching out a guy, and then sending you a particularly witty sext later.”

My cheeks flare red-hot again. I lean up to make eye contact and glare down at him, pretending to be offended. “How dare you insinuate that I would ever take part in something so crude as sending dirty texts, sir. I am an innocent, nice girl. I would never do such a thing.”

His eyes spark. “Not from what I’ve seen.” He grips my hips and flips me around, all in one smooth motion so I’m underneath him smirking up at him. Then he leans in to nibble along my neck, teeth grazing my skin just hard enough to make me gasp, goosebumps rising along my whole body. “You are one... very...” He bites me a little harder to make a point, “naughty...” He leans up to nip at my earlobe, sucking it between his lips, “girl,” he finishes whispering in my ear.

I wrap my legs around his waist and pull him against me. His cock is still wet from my saliva, but I can feel him start to tense, a fresh rush of blood flowing south as I lean up to lick along his ear in response. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“No? Maybe this will refresh your memory...” He sits back and pulls me up with him, then promptly bends me forward over his legs so his slowly hardening cock presses against my side, and he runs his hand along

my ass. “After all.” He smirks, the smile evident in his voice. “I believe I owe you a spanking...”

I turn just far enough to bat my eyes at him. “You did promise to make it a worse punishment this time,” I remind him.

He grins back, eyes on fire. “Oh, that much I do remember, my darling.”

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## 10

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Our reunion lasts well into the night. Later than it should, considering Zayne is on the early shift tomorrow. But he insists that he doesn't care. It'll be worth feeling tired on his feet tomorrow, if he can fuck me senseless tonight. I have to admit, I don't protest too much.

When we're finished and I fall asleep in his arms, though, part of me feels almost nervous. This feels too easy, too perfect. Something has to go wrong, throw a wrench into this.

*What, you mean besides the mess you've already landed yourself in?* I think when I wake up the next morning, still tangled in Zayne's warm, reassuring embrace. The sound of his phone alarm ringing at full volume startled me awake, straight out of a stress dream in which my boss was telling me that she'll have to make this break permanent and let me go. I'll have to find a new job, a new career, all with this staining my reputation. If anyone googles me, the first thing they'll see is this fake sex advertisement with my real tits plastered all over it. How can I ever find a job again if this company won't keep me?

Yet somehow, even with that stress keeping me up, worry flooding my subconscious dreams, I can't help but feel reassured with Zayne here. He might be the cause of the problem, but it's not like he did it on purpose. And he's going to help me fix it. Nothing could stand in the way of the two of us working it out together—I feel sure of that.

I roll over to kiss his jaw lightly, and he sighs, shifting in his sleep. "Five more minutes," he murmurs.

My chest tightens. Something about this, the way it feels so normal and natural to wake up in his arms, is so sweet it's almost painful. "Zayne." I nudge him. "Your phone is going off."

"Five minutes," he repeats. Then he heaves a sigh and cracks one eyelid to peer at me. "Wait. We changed it last night didn't we."

I have a dim memory of around 3:30 in the morning, as he coaxed me into one more romp, his fingers stroking along my mound. "I believe you said I couldn't let you sleep through this alarm on pain of death and/or dismembering from Paul."

Zayne groans and levers himself up on one elbow. "I guess a deal's a deal, then." He glances over at me, and pouts a little as his gaze drips over my body. "Unfortunately I won't have time to make you scream for mercy again this morning..."

I laugh and swat his shoulder. He grins and catches my wrist, tugs me forward into a quick kiss.

"But I'll settle for an IOU." He winks, and I feel a flush of heat, both in my cheeks and deep in my belly at the promise of another round tonight.

It could always be like this. We could always be like this.

"Zayne..." I swallow hard, unsure where to go with that. I want to tell him what I'm feeling, but it seems so fast, so sudden.

He curls his fingers around mine and lifts my hand to his lips for a slow kiss along my knuckles. "I know, Clove. This is... I didn't expect this either. But let's enjoy it as it comes. And as for the rest, the photo..." His face falls, somewhere halfway between sorrow and anger. "I am so sorry for all of it. I'll find a way to fix it, no matter what it takes. I just... I can't bear the idea of knowing that I did that to you."

"You didn't." I shake my head, firm and fierce. "Your ex isn't your fault. We'll figure it out together. Who knows?" I force a laugh, a carefree expression I don't really feel. "Maybe the company has already written back to me. Maybe they found the culprit and we won't need to worry about this anymore. They could get the photo removed from the other website, have it shut down somehow."

"Maybe." He smiles too, and though both of us can tell that it's forced and fake, neither of us wants to admit it. So, we lean in and kiss again, our lips forcing all the emotions we can't express into that one kiss.

When he leaves, I linger by the doorway staring after him for longer than I care to admit. I feel unmoored, purposeless. Without my job, I'm not

sure where I ought to be anymore, what I should be doing with myself right now. I guess just solving his whole photo attack mystery and getting back to my regular routine as quickly as humanly possible.

So, with that thought in mind, I skip cooking breakfast altogether. I normally skip it anyway, but these past few days with Zayne, he's been cooking for me each morning, and I find myself missing the habit of it, the routine of eating first thing in the morning to wake up my brain before I start to tackle the day ahead.

Who knew so much about you could change so quickly when you meet the right person? With Zayne, I feel like so many missing pieces are clicking into place that it's hard to keep track of how fast it's all moving.

But I don't regret it. I'm loving this ride, crazy as it may be.

Still, today, I decide to forego the breakfast, because I want to get straight to work. I power up my computer, leaving my phone safely shut off so that I don't see any of the harassing messages. Not yet. I'll deal with those later, when I have to. For now, I log onto the app's website and scan my inbox, praying for a response.

But I don't see any reply with the company header on it. No answer to my long message about what happened to me, about my picture being stolen from this site and used in a horrible attack on a different site.

There are a couple regular messages, a lot of "hey" and "'sup baby" with winking faces. I ignore those.

Then there's one more message, from a blank profile. The name just says *YouShouldKnow*. There's no photo or anything. But it's the subject of the email itself that catches my eye. Catches my eye, and makes my stomach sink inside me, nerves firing all over again.

*About Zayne.*

Zayne doesn't use his real name on his profile. Nobody does on this site. We've all learned better by now—me especially, given everything that kicked off this week even without my real name being accessible on this app.

So who is this from, and why are they talking about him?

I click it open and my stomach sinks even farther.

There's no text in the message. No explanation for what I'm looking at. But it doesn't take me long to piece it together.

The message contains a series of screenshots. They're all of one profile, a profile I don't recognize. *MrPlayaZ*. But they're not just public

screenshots. It includes private messages, messages to and from that MrPlayaZ account.

And the “playa’s” account itself? It’s all photos I recognize. The same photos that Zayne used in his *AtYourService* account.

Heart in my throat, I scroll through the other screenshots. There are texts, messages between *MrPlayaZ* and other women.

*Hey baby, love ur pics. I'd like to get that top off you ;)*

Worse ones, ones that go back and forth between other girls. My stomach rolls over, and I feel nauseous, looking at the evidence right in front of my eyes.

**MrPlayaZ:** Last night was amazing, wanna grab a drink again this weekend?

**CandyCane:** I have to wait that long to feel that sexy tongue of yours again?

Or another.

**MrPlayaZ:** I can make you come in ways you can't even imagine, babe.

**XtraSaucy:** You're welcome to try anytime you think you can handle this ;)

And more. And more. I scroll through them all, even the longer conversations, full on sexts with women, describing how hard they make him, asking them to finger themselves. Details of how they touch themselves thinking about him. Hell, even one where he talks about jerking off in the back room at work—the same mail room where he touched himself thinking about me this weekend.

That message hits home because it's dated.

Yesterday.

I want to vomit. The whole room feels like it's spinning around me.

Frantic, I check Zayne's regular profile. But the evidence is scrawled across it too. Something I should have noticed, something I was so stupid to miss. The date that any new account is created is listed on the user's homepage,, mostly so the site can spam you with ads about "giving new members" a chance, hoping you'll be more likely to match with someone even if they have a lame pickup line.

Right there at the bottom of the *AtYourService* account is the date it was created.

Friday. The same day he fought off that creeper. The same night we matched and first began to text.

Then to sext, using the same horribly cheesy lines Zayne used to pick up girls on his other profile. His *real* profile, the one he never told me about.

He was talking about deleting the app the other night. About getting off this site, because he didn't need it now that he'd found me. But I'd bet anything he was just going to delete this brand-new account, made only to lure me in. He'd keep right on sexting all these other women with his regular account.

I feel nauseous.

I can't think straight, can't even formulate a response to this anonymous sender.

I can guess who it is, of course. It has to be the ex that Zayne told me about. The crazy stalker psycho ex-girlfriend trying to ruin his life. But is she?

What if she was just a normal girl trying to save me from getting played? What if this is her trying to spare someone else the same heartache she felt?

Everything hurts.

I slam my laptop shut and storm across my apartment, tears stinging my eyes. My bedroom is the worst place to go because it still smells like us, like him, like sex. I tear the sheets off the bed and crumple them into a tight ball, stuff them into the bottom of my laundry bin. Tomorrow I'll wash the scent away, wash those sheets until I can't smell Zayne on them, until I won't be reminded of him commenting on the bright red color, or grinning as I tied him up using the silky fabric.

Fuck. Maybe I'll have to throw them away at this rate.

*How could I be so stupid?*

That's the refrain echoing in my mind all the while. How could I fall for a playboy like him? How could I think that what we had might be special, might be the something I've been waiting for all this time?

Tears sting at my eyes and I head into the shower. Because if the bed still smells like sex, then oh, god, you'd better not catch a whiff of me. I smell like him all over—and part of me loved that, loved the way he left his mark on me, and anytime I caught the scent it reminded me of last night and this weekend all over again. It reminds me of the way he drove his cock deep into me, fucked me hard, senseless, until I came screaming...

*Fuck him. Fuck men, all of them.*

I turned on the shower, scalding hot, and stepped right into the stream. Buried my face in the water so that when I finally let go and began to cry, my hot tears would blend into the stream rushing over my face.

I hate this. I hate feeling this way again. I thought I'd found someone different at last, but he's just like all the other assholes in New York City. He didn't care about me, he just wanted to fuck me. As soon as he got what he wanted, he was probably off chatting up other girls with the same pickup lines, the same stupid lines he used to lure me in and make me fall for him.

I know it's only been a few days, but somehow our connection felt deeper, more real. Finding out that he's just like all the other guys I've been with—just like that creepy stalker he punched in the face—it feels so much worse than any other shitty date. Because I'd started to actually fall for him. I'd started to actually believe there might be decent guys out there, and that maybe, finally, I'd found one.

*Why do guys always do this to me?* Why do they always use me, take advantage of me, play with my emotions. And why do they do it to other women to? I bet this ex of Zayne's isn't even crazy. I bet she was just a normal girl he seduced and used and jerked around until she got sick of his shit and decided to get even.

My stomach sinks even farther. I just wish she hadn't decided to get even by posting *my* naked photo everywhere.

Then again, was that her? What if he'd been lying again? What if that was him... But why?

My head hurts, along with everything else. I can't take this.

I shut off the shower now that I've sufficiently scrubbed myself clean of him. Then I turn my phone off airplane mode and watch with listless eyes

as the dozens upon dozens of creepy sexts pour in. I skim past those notifications, keeping my eyes peeled for any messages from my friends.

Nothing yet. But then again, they're at work, doing their jobs, like normal, productive adults. They're where I should be. Where I can't be right now, thanks to this asshole creepfest who I thought actually had feelings for me.

I open our group chat and message them both.

*He's just another NYC asshole player. Should've known.*

Then I close the window. I can't even wait for my friends' replies right now. I'm too exhausted. I fall asleep to the sound of my shower dripping in the distance, and outside, the faint rumble of construction equipment from somewhere up the street. A suitably depressing soundtrack for my suitably depressing life.

\* \* \*

I'm in a hot tub. I'm in a nice bathing suit, tight-fitting, exposed in all the right places. It's sexy as hell, and I know it. I'm shifting in the water, showing it off for the guy with me. Zayne. His gaze travels over my body, hungry as ever, and I feel a pulse deep inside me that responds to the hunger in his eyes. I want him the way he wants me. I always do.

He beckons me and I curve toward him, unable to move away. I slide right into his arms, and he grabs me, strong and possessive, just the way I like. But that grip shifts. Turns painful as he shoves me away again. Presses me against the side of the hot tub, and leans in to sneer in my ear. "Did you think I found you attractive? *You*?" He laughs, and when I look down again, everything has changed. The hot tub isn't a hot tub at all, it's a mud pit, and I'm dressed in a horrible, ugly, sagging suit, one that exposes all my worst flaws. My stomach sticks out, my thighs are covered in cellulite, and I feel naked in the worst way. Exposed, put on display like a circus freak.

"How could I ever have been attracted to *you*? Did you honestly think I'd want *this* body?" Zayne shakes his head and pushes me away, into the mud. I land on my hands and knees and skid away from him. "You're a slut, Clove. A disgusting, horrible slut. You deserve this. You deserve to be exposed to the world for what you really are."

There's some distant part of me, far away and trapped, that rebels against this. That wants to shout at him, *No. I'm not.* But that part is locked deep down in my subconscious. I can't unlock it, can't make myself wake up. All I can do is cry and nod in agreement. Because look at me. I am pathetic. Gross. A slut. He's right. I deserve this.

I wake up with tears on my cheeks and a pounding ache in my head that won't subside. I groan and roll over to check my phone, an old habit that I'm going to need to kill fast if this keeps up. Because all I do is open it to find another scroll of texts, another torrent of abuse waiting for me. All those assholes saying the same thing that Zayne said in my dream. I deserve this. I'm disgusting, unattractive, a slut.

Notice how they call me gross and yet too promiscuous in the same sentence. Notice how I'm hot if I might bang them, but gross if I won't, and if I do bang them, I'm easy and loose and a terrible slut anyway. Can't win either way. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't.

I skip to my text thread, and my heart swells a little at the messages from Andy and Celeste. It's all supportive, asking if I need to talk and if they can bring me over some wine. I squint at the time and sigh. It's already 9pm—I slept most of the day away. I'll probably be up all night sleepless now. And anyway, Andy and Celeste will be home by now or off having an adventure somewhere without me.

*Don't worry about me, guys, I'm fine. Just need some alone time to chill with reruns.*

*Tell Samantha we say hi,* Celeste replies immediately. They know me too well. *Sex and the City* is always my go-to moping show.

But this time, I don't even feel like I have the energy to turn that on. Instead, I put on some loud music and lie in bed staring at the ceiling, replaying the last few days in my head.

All I can think about is how stupid I've been. How blind.

When the knock first sounds at my door, I ignore it, figuring it must be a delivery guy who got lost on the wrong floor. When it persists, I force myself to roll over and lever my body out of bed. Whoever it is has progressed to ringing the doorbell now, over and over.

I shuffle toward the door, rubbing sleep from my eyes. That's when I hear his voice.

"Clove? Are you okay?"

My stomach churns, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to double over and heave from the sudden rush of anger, hurt, worry.

But of course, he doesn't know that someone showed me his other profile. He doesn't know that I know exactly who he is now. What kind of a lying, sneaking scumbag he is underneath his kind words and the front he puts on for the world.

"No," I tell the door, arms crossed over my chest. Against my better judgment, I lean down to steal a peek through the spyhole. Of course, he looks as frustratingly, impossibly handsome as ever, dashing in his pressed uniform, hat off and cradled in one hand, his hair messy from being underneath it all day.

"What's wrong?" he asks, and the frown on his face is so sincere, his concern so convincing, that it makes me sick to my stomach all over again.

"Just go away, please." I force myself to speak loud enough to get through the door. It takes effort. My voice is scratchy from sleep, my throat thick with emotion.

"Clove, talk to me. What's going on? Did something else happen with the photo?"

"Go. Away. Zayne."

"Please, just tell me what's wrong, Clove. Whatever it is, we can talk about it, work through it."

Almost without thinking about it, I realize that I've turned on my phone. Pulled up the app and scrolled to the message. I stare at the images of the texts he's been sending, the dates stamped across them. I glance back and forth from that damning evidence to the handsome, desperate-looking man outside my door. Is he faking this? Is he this good an actor?

My gaze lands on one message in particular. An exchange with a girl whose username is *MissMisMatched*. Half of me wants to laughingly appreciate the pun, especially given who she's talking to.

Zayne's message to her is the one that sticks in my head. The one that stings. The one that makes me realize this isn't a joke or a fake.

*Trouble sleeping?* he asks her. That opens the conversation, which quickly turns to flirty talk of what they're both doing up so late. (Him: *I work the graveyard shift some nights, so I'm always up late looking for intriguing distractions*). The words resonate, a little too familiar.

I open up my conversation with Zayne. Scroll up to the top, past all of our sexts and flirty back-and-forths, and even the photo image I sent him

that started this whole mess.

I scroll all the way up to the top, and I stare at those two words, written in damning black-and-white on the screen.

*Trouble sleeping?*

It's how he first started talking to me. The opener he used after we matched, when I was still trying to figure out how to respond to him. And here he is, just a couple of days later, using that same opener on another girl, after he told me he wanted to delete this app altogether.

"Goodbye, Zayne," I tell the door loudly.

He protests, calls after me to wait. But as I turn and trudge back to my bedroom, I pause just long enough to turn the volume of my speakers up all the way. Music blasts through my rooms, drowning out his knocks and shouts. Eventually, even the distant faint ring of the doorbell fades away, as I presume he finally gives up on me as a lost cause and heads up to bed.

He'll get over it. He can find some other girl to string along. Someone else to mess around, while he messes with a few dozen other girls' heads at the same time. Me, I'm over it.

That's what I tell myself, anyway, as I crawl into bed and bury myself in the covers. But I've already slept a lot today. I know I'm not going to be able to get back to sleep, not for a long while. So I just pull the comforters up around my head and stare at my ceiling, willing time to pass faster. If it does, then maybe this bruise on my heart will heal faster, too.

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*Right.* I've moped long enough.

I wake up bright and early the next day and put on my war paint. I do my makeup to the nines, professional as hell. I put on a pencil skirt, a formal blouse, and even switch my belongings from my usual slouchy old hobo purse to a structured, tailored bag that I bought a few months ago. It looks like a briefcase, all professional lawyer-chic, but I'd been too lazy to switch purses ever since I bought it.

Today, however, calls for the new purse. It calls for breaking out all the big guns, in fact.

Today, I've decided I'm going to get my job back.

I can't stand sitting around this apartment any longer. I need to pull my life together and put it back on track, and that starts with a polite, face-to-face, professional conversation with my boss. I fire off an email to her just as I'm strapping on my heels—the demure, mid-height ones that are perfect for business meetings, but not high or sexy enough to be suggestive. The last thing I want today is to come across as sexy in any manner. I want to be professional, family-friendly, and the face of everything my company stands for.

After all, that's how I plan to convince them to let me come back.

I write the email in a deliberately straightforward way. *I have to stop by the office today, so I was hoping we could speak about the situation and ways in which we may look to remedying it.*

I don't ask her for a meeting, because if I ask, she could say no. Instead, I'm going to just show up and not take no for an answer.

I'm not sure it will work. I'm not sure anything will, at this point. But I have to try.

Battle armor donned, I square my shoulders in the mirror and give myself one good stern nod for good luck. Then I wrench open my door, and nearly trip backwards over myself in surprise.

Zayne rolls into my apartment, his head drooping to one side, neatly pressed uniform crumpled and wrinkled. As soon as his body touches the ground, he startles awake, pushes himself back into a sitting position and rubs sleep from his eyes. But there's no disguising what happened here last night.

He clearly spent the night sleeping on my doorstep.

"Zayne..." I bite my lip, shaking my head. I don't know what to say to him. Nothing seems right. I step over him and stride across the hall toward the elevators. "Try not to drool on my welcome mat," I call over my shoulder.

"Clove." His voice sounds almost as bad now as mine did last night. Scratchy and thick with sleep. "Please, wait, I need to talk to you."

"Anything you have to say to me, you can say to my voicemail. I'll delete it right along with all the creepy messages the other assholes are leaving me, but still. You can get it off your chest there." I press the elevator call button decisively.

"What happened?" He struggles to his feet and staggers across the hall toward me. He catches my hand just as the elevator arrives at my floor. He holds my wrist, not too tightly, gently enough that I could pull away if I wanted to. But his skin against mine reminds me of things I don't want to remember. Of all the ways he sets me on fire, ignites me in a way that nobody else can. "Yesterday morning when I left, we were great. Then I got back from work, and you refused to see me, just kept telling me to leave. Clearly something happened, Clove, so please, tell me what it is. We have something real here, a connection, don't we?" His eyes bore into mine. I can't stand the sincerity in them. I can't stand the way my heart screams at me to trust him when the proof of his untrustworthiness is sitting just inches away in my phone, damning, impossible to ignore.

"You owe me this much," Zayne murmurs, his voice dropping low with feeling. "At least tell me what's going on."

I swallow hard. "I could ask you the same thing." I can't meet his eyes. Not with all these thoughts racing through my head. I stare at the floor

between us instead. “Why do you have two dating profiles?”

Silence.

I look up, after it stretches on long enough, and find Zayne grimacing, running his hand through his hair. “Well? Are you going to deny it?”

He meets my gaze, and I ignore the shock of pain in my gut. Hold his eye, because dammit, he should at least need to look me in the eye while he lies to my face. “No,” he says. “I won’t deny it.”

The blow lands hard. *At least he didn’t lie*, I think, distantly. But it doesn’t help very much. The truth still hurts.

I pull my hand free from his. The elevator doors have long since closed again, but when I stab at the button, they open once more, ready to whisk me away from here. From him.

“Clove, please, wait.”

I step into the elevator, but he steps in with me, pins me against the back wall with his hands on both of my shoulders, gripping me tight, desperation in his eyes. “I can explain,” he says.

I laugh once, sharp and bitter. “Right. Like you’ve explained everything so far.”

“I only made the new profile for you.”

My eyebrows shoot up so high that it’s a wonder they remain attached to my face. “You think that’s *helping* your case? You made a whole profile to trick me? Great.”

“No, that’s not... Not to trick you, Clove. To match with you.”

“What the hell are you talking about.”

He’s digging in his pocket now, pulling out his phone. I reach past him to press the ground floor button, but hesitate halfway there. The elevator doors close, leaving us suspended in midair above my floor, but I still, I don’t hit the button. Part of me wants to know, too badly, how this story pans out.

I hate that part of me.

“Clove, that night when I fought off your stalker... It wasn’t the first time I noticed you.”

I scowl at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’ve been wanting to talk to you for years. Trying to find ways to get closer to you. But you never noticed, never saw me standing there. I thought a few months ago, when you joined this app, that maybe this would

be it. The way I could get through to you. Finally connect. We matched, actually, three months ago. On my old profile.”

I frown. “What?” No we didn’t. No way. I would remember that.

He’s nodding. “But you unmatched me almost right away. Before I could even message you or say anything.”

I grimace. I do have a tendency to do that. When my app gets too clogged with matches, I trim it down. Swipe left again on any guy who I’m not 100% sure would be my type, just to clear the space for guys who are more my speed. “Prove it,” I hear myself saying anyway, because I still don’t think I would have missed something like that. Zayne is hot as hell in his profile pictures. Would I really unmatch him?

*You spent years walking right past him,* part of me points out. And besides, it’s not like his profile said anything much about his interests or hobbies. Or even his job. Maybe I just assumed we’d have nothing in common. He was pretty but that was about it.

Zayne, for his part, has sprung into action. He scrolls through his phone, and then hands it to me. I stare at the app page, both unfamiliar and familiar all at once. It’s his other profile, his real one. There are a few dozen messages sitting unread—*probably from all those girls he’s been messaging while we’ve been apart for a few hours*, I can’t help thinking, because even if he explains this profile, it still doesn’t explain why he’d lie to me about wanting to get off the app when he clearly doesn’t want to stop messaging other women yet. I ignore those and watch as he swipes onto my profile, searching by previous matches.

There I am. Right on the screen, in the same pixels that damned him yesterday.

*Previously matched*, it says, but there’s no contact button, no way to message. He’s right. We matched at some point, and then I unmatched him.

“But...” I trail off, biting my lip.

He heaves a sigh. “Clove, I liked you from the start. I tried to talk to you on here, but you shut it down. And you never noticed me at the door. So that night when that asshole tried to follow you home, and you finally seemed to look at me—really look—I had to jump on that chance. The only way to talk to you, I figured, was a match like this. I already knew you were on the app, and we live in the same building, so I figured if I made a new profile, it’d pair us soon enough. And it did, thank god.” His eyes bore into mine, as if he’s willing me to believe him.

I want to. So badly. I want to just give in, quit asking all these questions, trust him. But that's so hard to do. Especially after everything that's happened. Everything I've seen.

I shake my head. "Okay, so you made a whole profile just to stalk me. Great. That's a real point in your favor."

"It wasn't to stalk you, Clove, it was just to start a conversation. If you hadn't been interested, I would've dropped things right away. But you answered, you struck up a conversation with me. It went both ways."

"Right. And how special was it really? More entertaining than the other dozen conversations you have going on right now?" I roll my eyes and hand the phone back to him.

"What, these?" He laughs, a scoff in the back of his throat. "I haven't checked this profile in weeks. Especially not since I met you."

"Then why do you have so many unread messages?" I point out, rolling my eyes. Now I do lean past him to jab the first floor button.

He's faster though, and double-taps it to unselect the floor, leaving us suspended in midair once more. "Clove, look." He opens his message section and points me at it. "See these last read messages? They're from weeks ago, some of them months."

I stare at the inbox, my brow furrowing. "That can't be right."

Now it's his turn to scowl. "What, I can't possibly be telling you the truth?"

"What happened to all the conversations with the other women?" I counter, crossing my arms.

"Other... What? Clove, there are no other women. There haven't been since we met."

"That's not what I saw."

"Saw where?" His frown has deepened even further, though I don't think it's directed at me. He looks a million miles away now, thinking hard.

To bring him back to reality, I pull my phone out of my pocket. Now it's my turn to open my app and pull up the messages that came in yesterday. I flip the screen around, hold it out for him to see. At least today the incoming calls and spamming sext-messages from total strangers have calmed down enough that I can safely use it. Enough to show him this, at any rate.

He reads. With every line he reads, his eyebrows rise higher, and his jaw clenches. By the time he reaches the end of the messages, he looks furious,

angrier than I've ever seen him. His fists are clenched at his sides, and his whole body trembles from the force of his fury.

"How fucking *dare* she."

I swallow again. Against my better judgment, against all of my instincts, I believe that anger. He can't be this good of an actor, no way. "Your ex?" I ask, a hesitant tremor in my voice.

He clenches my phone so tight in one fist that I'm almost afraid the screen will shatter. "How did she even..."

I gently pry my phone from his fingers, mostly to save its life. "Did she make up those conversations? Because some of them..." I pull open the one where he's talking to another girl. *Trouble sleeping?* "Seem awfully familiar." I lift one pointed eyebrow.

Zayne grimaces. "Some of them are real. Probably most of them, I don't remember. But the dates are all wrong. Look." He scrolls through his phone. It takes him a while, but he eventually locates one of the conversations, the one with *CandyCane*. Sure enough, it took place almost two years ago. Same with another one, shortly afterward, with *XtraSaucy*. In fact, almost all of the conversations are from that time period. The screenshots are real, identical to his account message history. All except for the dates which had been carefully, meticulously altered.

"It's all the people I was messaging right after she and I broke up," he finally says, his tone heavy. "Right when I first moved in here..." He winces at one particularly sexy conversation. "Some of these are embarrassing."

"Not as embarrassed as I am," I mutter, wincing.

"No, Clove. You couldn't have known." He wraps an arm around me, and finally, after what feels like holding my breath for 24 hours, I sink into his embrace once more. It scares me, how much I crave this. How desperately I wanted him to touch me, even when I thought he'd been betraying me, screwing me around. I still wanted him, even when I knew I'd have to walk away.

That scares the shit out of me.

"The screenshots were so realistic..."

"I'd have thought the same thing as you," Zayne admits with a clenched jaw. "I'm so sorry that you have to go through this mess. You don't deserve this kind of drama. If you want to walk away now, to spare yourself, I will completely understand."

“Hell no.” I wrap my arms around him too, and lean into his warm embrace. “You don’t deserve this kind of drama either, Zayne. I mean, how did she even get those conversations?”

He scowls. “She must have access to my account. Nothing else makes sense. She must have gotten in there and been able to see the conversations, and...” His eyes widen, his jaw slackening. “That’s how she found your photo, too. It has to be. She took it from your inbox, where we were messaging.”

“Since she knows about both of your accounts, it must not have been too hard,” I agree. “If she hacked this old one, she must not have had a hard time hacking the new one too.”

“Christ, how long has she been doing this?” Zayne shakes his head. “Has she targeted other people I’ve messaged? I never heard anyone talking about being harassed like this, having their photos put up on a website somewhere...”

“Doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. They might have just assumed you did it and sworn off ever speaking to you again.” I sigh.

“Shit.” Zayne pockets his phone in a single, angry gesture. “I have to stop this. I will. I’ll fix it.”

“How?” I catch his eye, my own wide with fear.

“I’m going to confront her. Tell her she needs to stop pulling this kind of shit. I’ll go to the police otherwise. We have proof it was her, and if she hacked my accounts, then she probably still has more screenshots like this saved. None of this is legal, Clove.”

I can feel myself nodding, my heart rising in my chest once more. But still... “You shouldn’t have to talk to her. Let me.”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“But you have all this history, this baggage. It will hurt you to confront her.”

He’s shaking his head hard. “It’s my mess, Clove. I’ll clean it up.” He steps back and presses the ground floor button. The elevator heaves around us, like it’s relieved to finally be in motion. As we whir down toward the first floor, he finally seems to take a look at my outfit, the whole thing, from head to toe. “What about you? You look like you’re off to take care of business, too.”

I nod, steeling myself once more, shoulders squared. “I’m going to get my job back. No matter what it takes.”

He smiles and leans in to kiss my lips, just once, feather-soft and light, a kiss that's there and gone again before I have time to blink. "You will. You're incredible, Clove. If anyone can talk your boss into having you back in the office, it's you. And if you need me to come in and testify about it, explain that it was all this psycho..."

I laugh, shaking my head. "Somehow I don't think that would help. If you tried to explain that it's all a big misunderstanding, someone stole my sext to you..." I raise an eyebrow pointedly.

He grins in response, and leans down to kiss me one last time before the doors open. "Well, I offered."

"You did. I'll keep that in mind when I've finished winning my case."

"Good luck," he says, offering me a hand as I step out of the elevator. I take it, and twine my fingers through his, squeezing tightly just once for affirmation.

"You too," I tell him, pouring every ounce of feeling into my tone that I can. I hope he can do this. I hope he can talk his ex down. I hope it won't hurt him too much to be around her, to have all those old memories drug up. I hope she stops coming after him, leaves him alone to live a normal life.

I hope a lot of things today.

Time to start acting, at least on the ones I can affect.

I square my shoulders and cast Zayne one last long smile, then stride out through the glass doors of our apartment building to face the coming storm.

\* \* \*

"And you want me to tell the board this?" My boss stares at me across the desk, hands folded on top, leaning forward just far enough that I can see the wrinkles at the edges of her eyes, the corners of her mouth. Normally she's a cheery person, always smiling and laughing. Even when we do our annual performance reviews, she's happy, complimenting me on my work and cheerfully explaining any areas that she thinks I should work on in the coming year.

It feels strange to see her frown, especially this much.

"If you think it would help," I say, "sure. But either way, I wanted you to know exactly what's going on. I want you to know that this isn't who I

am, who I ever would be in my professional life.” I’d just finished explaining the entire saga to her, starting from the point where my doorman saved my ass, all the way up through the awkward part where I shared one risqué but entirely consensual photo with him, and to the part where his psycho ex creepily hacked into all of his accounts and took it upon herself to make an example of me. All for daring to date a guy who dumped this girl years ago.

My boss sighs and rubs a temple with one finger, massaging it in slow circles. “I don’t know that sharing this level of detail with our higher-ups would help, Clove.”

“Then don’t.” I bite my lip. “Can we just explain that we found out who made the website, and we’re working on getting it removed? And that I’ve never done anything like this before and never would in the future.” I don’t need to send Zayne naughty photos anymore—he can see what I’ve got to share in person. I’ve learned my lesson about putting myself at risk, even with someone I trust.

I square my shoulders, rest my new purse on the table between us, and pull out some charts that I made late last night, as I lay in bed with the worst case of insomnia I’ve ever battled.

“In the meantime, I think this might help convince them that I’m worth keeping around.” I spread the charts on the table. One of them is my projects’ performances for this full year. I had the one disappointing campaign, true, and the fact that it happened right before this whole mess kicked off isn’t helping me, I’m sure. But that was one mediocre campaign in a heap of really successful ones. I point out the growth in all the areas I’ve been marketing, along with the results of my last few experimental campaigns, one of which was entirely my idea and generated a ton of revenue from an untapped stream for the whole company.

Next, I draw out another series of charts that I made. Ones to explain how much more useful I’d be if I were able to start working on relaunching the failed campaign from last week. I put together a whole new strategy and an estimated schedule of how quickly I’d be able to make up for the lost time and investments in that campaign.

“Just give me a chance,” I tell her. “And I’ll make it worth your while. The board can keep reviewing the case, decide later what they want to do about me, if they can keep me on or not. But in the meantime, let me help you. Let me keep doing my job. Please.” I lock eyes with Stacy. “I need

this. Not the money, just the... The activity, the job itself. I need to have something to do. It's been just a few days and I'm already going stir-crazy."

She sighs. "I know this job means a lot to you, Clove. And you're right, you've always been a highly valuable member of our team..."

"So let me come back. Please."

"It's not up to me. If it were, you would never have been asked to leave at all." Stacy purses her mouth, her fingers dancing over the desk phone beside her, as she considers. "But you're right. This is crazy, to keep you out of the office. Especially if you're sure there won't be any more leaks like this. And if you already know who this is, we can file a lawsuit against them—this person hacked into our company servers too, you know. They sent spam messages about that website and your... ah, image. To our clients. We'll press charges."

My heart leaps at the same time my stomach twists. Will Zayne want that? He said he'd warn his ex, not straight up sue her. But then again, if she's done all this to me, how much has she tortured other girls in his life? All for simply existing?

I can feel myself nodding. "I agree," I say. "We're going to confront her, but either way... She can't feel free to do this again. She can't keep ruining people's lives like this."

My boss extends a hand. I lift mine, clasp her fingers in a single tight handshake. "Deal," she says, and I'm surprised to find that after all this, we're both smiling.

So there's one problem down. Here's hoping the rest fall into place just as easily.

*Success, I text Zayne on the train home. Just to his real phone number now, having learned my lesson about trusting app accounts. How about you?*

I don't want to admit how nervous I am to hear back. How much my heart sticks in my throat until my phone finally dings, and I can flip it open to see the reply.

*Went as well as it could have. Which is to say, not great. But I think she took me seriously. I think she'll really stop this time.*

Good, I reply. Then I bite the inside of my lip. I have to tell him. *Because we need to talk about something that came up in my meeting...*

I text Zayne from the train to meet me outside our building. It's his day off, which is good, since he looks like he slept on a floor all night and then spent the last hour arguing with a psychotic ex.

"Coffee shop?" he asks before I can even open my mouth to suggest it. I shoot him a grateful sideways smile and we head off toward what's quickly becoming our spot. Somewhere along the way, he loops his hand through mine, and I squeeze his fingers tightly, enjoying the warmth of his grip, the steadiness of his support.

"So," he starts as we step into the warm, reassuringly coffee-scented air of the corner coffee shop where we had our first date. "Tell me what happened."

"I need caffeine first," I protest. Like a mind-reader, he's already in line. He orders for us both, and I notice with a little secret thrill that he remembered my order from last time. He already knows how I like my coffee. How many guys would notice that, let alone remember it?

We take a seat at the back, the same one where we sat last time, and I blow on my latte while he takes small sips of his tall black coffee.

“You made it sound like bad news,” he finally says, when the silence has stretched on too long.

“It’s not. It’s just... Complicated news,” I reply.

He lifts his eyebrows, expectant. Waiting for me to explain.

It doesn’t take more than that to get me to spill. I launch into the full story, from the moment I first told my boss everything, up to her proposal. “I don’t know how you’d feel about it; I know you wanted to warn her, give her a chance to back off, but she hacked corporate servers, Zayne...”

“I know.” He grimaces and blows on his coffee absently, before taking another long gulp. “But you’re right. She’s broken laws at this point. I can’t protect her from herself. It was her choice to hack your company, use that against you. She’d already gone way too far with taking that photo and putting it out in the world, she didn’t have to try and ruin your career along with it.” He scowls and shakes his head so hard that a lock of his blond hair falls across his forehead. I fight the urge to reach out and brush it back. That’s fast becoming a habit already.

“I’m sorry, Zayne.”

“Don’t be,” he answers fiercely, almost as soon as the words are out of my mouth. “I keep telling you this, Clove, but I mean it—you did not do anything. You don’t deserve any of this. Whatever we can do to fix this for you, we will.”

“So if I asked you for your ex’s details to send to my boss...”

He nods. “I’ll send you everything I have as soon as we get back home. Name, address, the way I think she hacked my account, in case it’s how she hacked your company’s too. All of it.”

“Thank you.” I bite my lip. “So...” His turn now. “How did your side of it go?”

He groans and drains the rest of his coffee in one swig. “She’s still living in the same apartment she had when we were dating. I’m not sure she has much of a social life, friends. It was weird.” He winces, closes his eyes. “She seems obsessed, really.”

I frown, my brows drawing together. “That bad?”

“Her whole apartment is just plastered with photos of us. Old ones, ones from years ago. And then newer photos, photos of me. Some of them she’s...” He clears his throat. I can tell that he’s badly shaken—and no

wonder, given what he had to face today. “Some she’s Photoshopped me into. Others are me out on dates with other girls, people from the app who I met months ago. She’s crossed out all their faces, drawn curses on the pages. There’s one of you...” His voice breaks and he clenches his coffee cup so hard that the now-empty paper crumples in his fist. “She just sounds so normal when you speak to her. Like this is all so practical and mundane. Like she doesn’t even realize anything is weird about it.”

I reach across the table to rest my hand on top of his. “She needs help, Zayne.”

“I know. I tried to talk her into coming with me to a hospital, talking to a doctor, anything. She refused. Said it was none of my business. And I told her I’m deleting my account on that app, so she can stop bothering to hack it. She just told me that I got what I deserved.”

“But she hasn’t hacked any of your other devices or accounts, you don’t think?”

“Not that I could tell. Everything she had, all those pictures and information, it was all from the dating app. And she’s not exactly subtle. If she’d hacked other pieces of my life, I think there’d be evidence sitting around her house. Or she’d talk about it, mention it somehow. She isn’t sly, that’s one thing I have to say for her.” He laughs, a low, bitter laugh. “She always tells you the truth about exactly how fucking batshit she is.” His voice breaks on that, the bitterness too sharp for him to maintain. “I just want to see her somewhere safe. A hospital maybe, or with her family. She needs somebody to stop her from doing this.”

I can feel myself nodding in agreement. “We’ll find that for her. My company will look into it and they’ll realize that she’s not just a crazy random, that she’s... that she needs help from someone.”

“At any rate.” Zayne shrugs it off, with an almost physical effort, and smiles at me once more. “No matter what, she’s off your back. There’s no way she can access anything else we say to one another; she can’t get any more photos of you to harass you or threaten your career.”

“Thank you for talking to her. I know that must have been hard.”

He catches my hand and squeezes tightly. “Not as hard as the thought of losing you. Now that we’ve finally found each other, we finally have this chance...”

I nod, eyes locked on his. “We’re not going to miss each other again. Not this time.”

His smile widens. He turns my hand over in his and lowers his head. Plants a slow, searing kiss on my palm. It feels intimate and sexy as hell all at once, like we shouldn't be allowed to do it in public, here in this coffee shop where anyone could look at us. I tug his hand toward me and kiss his fingers too, one at a time. By the time I reach his pinkie, he's already standing.

"Want to go home?" I ask, one eyebrow raised. "It's a bit early for bedtime."

He smirks in response. "Actually, Ms. Walker, I was thinking that it's about time I took you out on a proper date." He glances past me at the clock above the coffee shop door. No, not at that, I realize. At the marquis across the street. The little cinema that only plays 2 or 3 movies a week, depending on the week. Right now, it's playing some film I don't recognize, though to judge by the name, it's some kind of mystery or action flick.

The next showing starts in 5 minutes.

"How would you feel about a movie?" he asks as he rises to his feet.

I stand beside him, and lean in to nudge my shoulder against his. "I could be lured into a dark theater with you," I murmur, eyes bright with mischief.

He grins and taps under my chin lightly with one finger. "Don't go getting too many ideas yet, dirty girl. The night is young."

With that, we sweep out the coffee shop and beeline for the movie theater, our hands still wound tightly together. My night is looking up.

\* \* \*

We take seats far at the back, expecting the rest of the theater to fill up. But by the time the previews end and the opening credits begin to roll, we're only two of five people in the theater. The other three are dotted around the rows, the nearest person at least 4 rows in front of us and on the far side of the theater, sitting next to the aisle as though they're worried they'll need to do a few bathroom runs during this movie.

"What are we seeing?" I whisper, because the previews were a mix of comedy, horror, action and animated films, so I can't even guess what genre this one will be.

To my amusement, Zayne shrugs. “No idea,” he whispers back. “I just liked the title.”

We settle in, the popcorn he insisted we buy balanced between us. Every now and again, our hands brush as we both reach into the popcorn at the same time. Every time they do, he insists on nudging my fingers. I lose count of how many times he makes me drop the handful of popcorn I’ve gripped, simply because I can’t help the small startled reaction that still races through me whenever our bare skin brushes. A spark of ignition that’s impossible to ignore.

The movie starts out with an explosion, and only gets louder from there. Turns out it’s one of those comedy-action movies, but not a funny one. After the fourth joke falls flat, Zayne takes to whispering better versions of the lines in my ear. I have to fight cracking up and turning heads across the theater—although, admittedly, there aren’t even too many heads to turn.

“Not your thing, huh?” I ask him with a smirk as he makes fun of the sixth line in a row.

“Are you kidding? I love shitty movies. The worse the better.”

We trade favorite un-recommendations for the next few scenes, but by then, it’s become clear that this movie is just ridiculous.

“Not even MST3k could save this,” I mutter, and Zayne lights up, squeezing my leg.

“You watch that too? I loved that show.”

“Wow, nerd.” I smirk at him.

“You’re one to talk,” he counters.

“Me? I am innately cool.”

“Don’t you work in a publishing house? Pretty sure all publishers have to be nerds. It’s in the job requirement right?”

“Only book nerds though. Not TV show nerds.” I roll my eyes.

“Is that worse?”

“You tell me,” I counter. “You’re the nerd expert here.”

“Tell me, Clove.” His fingers track up my thigh, moving slowly, like he’s turned his hand into a spider and he’s crawling it up the rain spout. His fingers dance closer and closer to my hips. “Would a nerd be able to make you come as many times as I made you scream my name last weekend?”

I can feel my cheeks flush in the dark of the theater. “Maybe. I don’t know. I haven’t really tested nerd versus non-nerd’s abilities in the bedroom.”

“I see. So I haven’t fucked you enough times yet, is what I’m hearing.”

I swallow hard. “Well. That’s one way of interpreting that.”

His hand slides along the crease of my thigh, right where it meets my hip. His fingers delve between my legs, pressing hard against the tight fabric of my pencil skirt. I wore this skirt specifically to avoid any sexual attention, but right now, it’s taking all of my self restraint not to tear it off. “I like my interpretation.” He leans in to brush his lips against my ear, his breath hot on my neck. “It gives me a good excuse to fuck you again.”

With that, he pushes up the arm of the seat between us. I barely have time to react before he’s grabbing me with both hands, his fingers clamped around my hipbones. He pulls me across the seats and settles me in his lap. I can already feel the hard press of his cock against my ass, through the fabric of his jeans and my tight skirt.

“We’re in public,” I hiss over my shoulder.

“Do you think any of these people are going to notice?” Zayne gestures around us. The other three people in the theater do look pretty distracted. They’re far away, and their eyes are fixed on the screen. But if one of them turned around now, they’d see me sitting far above the seats, exposed, obvious.

“What if they hear?” I whisper, wriggling against him. But I don’t move off of him. It feels too good, his hard cock digging into my ass, his warm, strong arms still wrapped around my waist.

“You’ll just have to be quiet,” Zayne murmurs against the back of my neck, his nose grazing the soft skin there. “Think you can do that for me, dirty girl? Think you can be quiet while I fuck you until you come?”

I tense and cast another nervous glance around the theater. *Can I?* Normally I’d say yes, but given the orgasms Zayne has given me recently, I’m not so sure anymore...

“I can try,” I murmur.

He smirks and catches my earlobe between his teeth, biting down just hard enough to make me inhale sharply. “I’ll take that as a challenge.”

He runs both hands up my thighs now, and catches underneath my skirt to pull it with him. He inches the skirt up, up, until my panties are exposed. He keeps going, hiking the skirt around my waist, out of the way, and then drops his hands back down to trace the edges of my lacy thong.

“This is very naughty underwear, Ms. Walker. Entirely inappropriate for being out in public.”

A shiver races down my spine at the sound of his voice, low and sexy as hell. I lean back against him and his chest vibrates against my back when he speaks.

“I’m going to have to relieve you of it.”

“What a shame,” I manage to breathe. Then I arch my hips enough to allow him access to hook his fingers through my thong and tug it down. He pulls it all the way down to my knees and leaves it dangling there, as his hands slide back up to my thighs. He traces the edges of my pussy, along my mound, down my thighs, not quite touching me yet. All the while I can feel his cock digging into my ass, straining against the clasp of his jeans.

He arches his back, and I lean down against him, circling my hips, grinding myself shamelessly against his thick cock.

“Hungry for me?” he asks. My belly tightens.

“Always.”

He dips one finger between my legs and traces my pussy lips lightly. “Mm, I can tell.” He pushes gently against my lips until they part, and his finger slides between them, along my slit. “I love how wet you get for me, Clove.”

“You always make me wet.” I glance over my shoulder at him and circle my hips again for emphasis. “Just like I always make you hard.”

“As a rock,” he agrees.

I reach beneath me to fumble for his pants clasp. Find the button of his jeans and start to undo it without looking.

He catches my wrist with his other hand. “Ah ah. That’s my job.” He nods forward. “You focus on not giving us away,” he says, and with a start, I realize I’ve forgotten where we are. That we’re in public, just a few feet away from other people.

I face front again and suck in a deep breath, trying to concentrate. That gets harder when I feel him unzip his jeans and push them down his legs, his boxers going too, until I can feel his smooth, steel-hard cock bare against my ass.

“Zayne... Is this a good idea?” I whisper.

In response, he grips my hips and positions me above him. His cock lays along the length of my slit now, just between my lips. He’ll have to angle himself to thrust into me, but already I can feel him pulsing with lust, and my pussy tightening in response. Fuck. I can’t say no, not now. I want him too much. I always want him, no matter where we are, but here...

I cast another worried look around the theater. Fuck. We're so exposed. If anyone looks back...

But there's something hot about that. About being so exposed, so vulnerable. So close to other people in public...

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you just got wetter," Zayne murmurs in my ear.

I cast him a sharp glare over my shoulder. "Well someone is torturing me."

"Torturing you, hmm? That sounds terrible."

I swallow with difficulty. "Maybe."

"I see. Is this terrible, then?" He pushes me up off his lap a little, angles his hips and reaches down with one hand to position himself, so the tip of his cock is between my pussy lips, poised at my entrance. One small thrust up and he'll be inside me. Hell, if I just sit back against him, it'll force him into me. I start to lean back, but he stops me, one hand around my waist, the other on my ass, suspending me above him.

"Very terrible," I answer, my voice twisted with frustration.

"What's so terrible about it exactly?"

"The teasing," I hiss back almost immediately.

"Ah. So you don't want me to fuck you right here in public, is that it?"

"I... That..." I clamp my mouth shut, annoyed. Because of course, *now* I want him to. Damn him.

"I could stop." He eases back into his seat, drawing his cock away from me.

"No, don't," I gasp, almost too loud. Someone in the front row turns their head a little, glances over their shoulder. Not long enough to realize I'm out of my seat, sharing a seat with someone else. Just enough to express their annoyance.

Shit.

I'm going to have to be a lot quieter.

"I take it you do want to be fucked right here, then. Like the dirty girl you are. With all these nice people watching..." He drags his cock along the length of my slit, back and forth, his head between my lips, so I can feel him getting wet and slick with my juices.

"Yes," I breathe, making sure to keep my voice lower this time. Luckily the sound of this movie covers it mostly. There's a lot of loud explosions happening on-screen. Which is good timing because Zayne chooses that

moment to thrust his cock into my pussy. He pulls me down against him at the same time, pushing all the way inside me in one smooth thrust. I can't help gasping, my body arching back against him as his thick cock strains against the walls of my pussy.

"Quiet, dirty girl," he whispers in my ear. I reach down to grip the seats on either side of us, using them to brace myself as he pushes me up off his lap, slowly, letting me feel every inch of his cock inside me as he draws out of me once more. Then he pulls me back down again, hard, and this time I manage not to make a sound, even though my mouth falls open and my belly feels tight, my nerve endings sparking. All I can think about, all I can feel, is the thick length of his cock in my pussy, the way his hard shaft feels as he pushes me up again.

I start to rock with him, thrusting down as he pulls me onto him, and leaning up as he pushes me up again, finding our rhythm. My breath comes faster, my heart nearly beating out of my body, not just because of the way he fucks me, slow now, but building faster, faster. It's also because I keep glancing around the theater, dim in the low light, but lit up every now and again by bright explosions from the cheesy action thriller playing on the screen. If anyone looked back over their shoulder, it would be obvious what we're doing. If I make any sounds again...

But I manage to clamp my lips tight, hold in the cries that try to force their way out of me, as Zayne fucks me.

Just when we've found a rhythm, he slides his hand around my waist, his fingers inching between my thighs to stroke along my mound. He keeps up the pace, thrusting up into me, even as his fingers circle closer and closer to my clit.

"Fuck, Zayne," I hiss between gritted teeth.

"What did I tell you?" he murmurs, his voice lost in my hair, as he buries his face against the back of my head, drawing me close against him. "You'll have to stay very quiet... But I'm not going to make it easy for you."

I twist against him, trying to ease up the pressure. But the pleasure is too much. He knows exactly where to touch me, exactly when and how. He presses his forefinger against my clit as he continues to fuck me, and the sensation makes my whole body jerk, an electric shock straight to my nerve endings.

At the same time, he flattens his other hand against my back, bending me forward. I grab the seats in front of me, hang onto them as he thrusts up into me. At this angle, his cock drags along my inner front wall, the tip pressing right across my G-spot, at the same time that he keeps fingering my clit. Spots cloud my vision, and I have to bite my lip to keep it shut, to silence the cry that threatens to escape at any second.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“Can you come quietly for me, Clove?” Zayne’s voice is a whisper, a breath against the nape of my neck, which makes all the hair there stand on end.

In response, all I can manage is a faint moan, deep in my throat, where I try to keep it lodged as the pressure builds inside me toward a peak.

“That’s it,” he urges me on, and I sense him tensing too. His thrusts take on a wilder, less controlled speed, as he nears his edge too. “Come for me, Clove.”

I can’t help it. I cry out faintly, just at the same time that another deafening roar sounds from the screen, thankfully drowning me out, as my orgasm sweeps through me. My body shakes against Zayne, and he pins me against him, keeps thrusting into me, holding my hips down against his, as my pussy tightens convulsively. I keep my eyes open, but all I can see are kaleidoscope colors, the world seeming to fade away in the rush of electricity flooding my veins.

He comes soon after me, with a soft growl against my neck, and we both gasp again as his hot cum rushes deep into my pussy. He sinks back into the seat, but I keep going, keep rocking against him in a slow, steady motion, milking every last drop from him until we both collapse, panting, our legs slick with sweat, hearts pounding in our ears.

The movie plays on, as boring as ever, and almost on cue, one of the characters cracks a lifeless, dull joke. We both laugh, breathless, hearts racing, amazed at what we just got away with.

Now one of the other theater goers does turn around to glare in our direction, but I’m already sliding off Zayne’s lap, pulling my skirt down, savoring the hot burn in my pussy, the tight sensation, almost painful, yet a good kind of sore, where his cock was buried a moment ago.

“Fuck, that was hot,” he whispers into my hair, and I turn to catch him in a deep, slow kiss. I can taste sex in that kiss, in the air between us. When we break apart, we rest our foreheads against each other’s, and he cups his

hands around my face on either side, as though shutting out the rest of the world. There's nobody but us, nobody who matters besides the two of us.

“Clove...”

“Zayne.” I catch myself smiling like an idiot. I can’t help it. He always makes me this way. Giddy, almost insane with pleasure.

“Do you want to get out of here?” His eyes glint with mischief.

I let my hand trail down his neck, along his arms, until I’m gripping his wrists with both hands, his hands still cupping my face. “Fuck yes.”

We leave the theater, hands clasped, giggling like teenagers at yet another horribly cheesy line of dialogue. One of the old men sitting near the exit door hisses at us to “shush,” but that only sets us off into another bout of loud laughter, especially once the theater doors swing shut behind us and we’re safe in the lobby hallway.

“I cannot believe we just did that,” I gasp between laughs.

Zayne pulls me against him and plants a long, slow kiss on my lips.

“You are fucking amazing. Have I told you that yet?”

“You might have mentioned it.” My eyes sparkle.

He lifts a single eyebrow, smirking. “If I have,” he says, “then I haven’t mentioned it nearly often enough. Because you are. Genuinely.”

I swallow around a sudden lump of emotion in my throat. “You are too,” I murmur, though it doesn’t feel like enough, doesn’t explain what I feel for him, not really.

That’s okay. We have time to say it. All the time in the world.

We emerge from the theater into the night, streetlights bright around us. That’s always a surreal experience in New York, the way that even late at night, on busy streets like this, it still looks like broad daylight. We wander along the street hand-in-hand, appreciating the storefronts we pass along our stroll. Zayne suggests ice cream, so we pop into a small shop for cones, which we enjoy as we continue our walk. Then we trade licks of one another’s cones, and burst into laughter again as we fail at holding the cones steady, and smear ice cream on each other’s noses.

Zayne cups my cheek, turns my face to his, and licks the ice cream straight off my nose without hesitation. I laugh and pull away, blushing. But whereas that would normally embarrass me on a date with any other guy, with Zayne it feels normal. Natural. I don’t care what anyone else who sees us might think about us, because we’re the only two whose opinions matter.

I can't remember the last time I felt like that around someone. Maybe never.

"Where next?" he asks when we deposit our ice cream soaked napkins into the trash can.

"The park?" I suggest with a shrug. It's still early enough that Central Park is full of activity, lights brightening paths, and couples strolling through in every direction, hands clasped.

"Maybe we can find a dark corner to sneak off into," he agrees with a wink, and there's that blush again. Damn him. My face is going to catch on fire if he makes me blush anymore.

We head into the park, and breathe in the cool evening air, scented with flowers and freshly cut grass and the faint whiff of waffle cone trucks packing up for the night. We stick to a path with some pedestrian traffic, some couples, dog walkers, and us, meandering slowly through Central Park. Still, something gives me the chills, makes the hair at the nape of my neck stand up and a faint shiver run through me.

Zayne senses it and pulls me closer to his side. "Cold?"

I shake my head. "It's nothing." I let my head fall back and gaze at the stars above to distract myself from this odd chill. "So, tell me about yourself. What's the real Zayne like, what makes him tick?"

He laughs. "I think you already know that." His grip tightens around me, protective and possessive all at once. "You learned how to push my buttons far too quickly, Clove."

I grin. "Maybe. But I don't know all of them. I mean, what about your family, for instance? Are you guys close? Who are they?"

"They're great. My dad's an auto mechanic, my mom stayed at home with me until I was in high school, then went to work as a secretary in a law firm. They've been together since they were in college."

"They sound nice."

"They're probably the other reason I hadn't dated much before. I'm picky, because..." He hesitates, and now it's my turn to squeeze my arm around him tighter, reassuring. "I want what they have. A real partner. Someone who matches me. You don't find that just anywhere."

I can feel a smile spreading across my face as I lean my head against his shoulder. "Oh trust me, I know."

"When I dated my ex, I think it was just... I was lonely and sick of waiting for the right person. I thought I could make this girl into the right

partner since she cared about me. So I thought. But she didn't really care about me—not the real me. She just wanted to be with a guy, any guy, and she just projected who she wanted me to be on me."

I can feel myself nodding in sympathy. I'd dated guys like that. Not for long, but I knew all too well how it felt to have someone date you because they wanted to change you, not because they truly appreciated you for who you were.

"But the best relationships are the ones where you can be yourself. Because that's who the other person wants. The real you."

"I couldn't agree more." I tilt my head back to catch his eye and feel another flash of gratitude. Even given everything that's gone wrong, all the drama we've been through, I don't regret meeting Zayne. Or, well, not meeting him—finally seeing him for the first time. This feels like a beginning. The start of something real. And as far as I can tell, he feels that too.

He leans in, and when we kiss this time, it's slow, both of us savoring the moment. Our lips touch, part, and close again as we sink into one another. I could kiss him forever. His lips are so soft, his cheeks a tad scratchy with stubble, his hands strong yet gentle as he traces them up my back to pull my body against his.

I lose track of time, of everything else, while we kiss.

Until that faint tickle starts up at the back of my neck again. An uneasy sensation, like we're being watched.

I pull back and can't help stealing a glance around us. But like always, it's just the two of us on this path, a few other people walking past, lost in their own conversations. Nearby, a woman is holding a leash while her dog pees. Up the road, another woman chats on a cell phone, oblivious.

Why do I feel like someone's watching us? Like we're being followed?

It has to be residual weird feelings from all of the problems we've been dealing with. The website, the hacked phones, the creepy messages from men who now have my phone number. That's all. I'm just jumpy after dealing with all of that.

Still, Zayne notices the way I'm feeling, and leans in to kiss my cheek once more softly. "Are you okay?" he asks, brow knit in concern. "Maybe we should head home."

"Yeah, maybe..." I shake my head, feeling stupid. I'm ruining the mood for no reason. I heave a sigh and cast a glance up the path, at the spot where

a path leads off to the public restrooms. That's what I need. Just a moment to collect myself, splash some water on my face, pull it together. "Can you give me a minute? I'm just going to run to the bathroom, then we can head back to the apartment."

"Of course." He squeezes my hand as I leave, and I cast a grin over my shoulder at him before I jog up the path toward the bathrooms.

Inside, it's dingy and dark, away from the path and streetlamps. There's a single bare bulb dangling from the ceiling but it's burned out and I have to squint to see myself in the mirror as I splash cold water onto my cheeks.

That's when I hear the door swing shut behind me.

Another woman steps inside. For a moment, I don't recognize her, the way she's holding her head—face down, eyes averted, hair falling across her forehead. She's cute, shorter than me, with a pixie cut and dark eyes. Then she catches my eye in the mirror, and I smile in recognition.

"Hannah, hey, how's it going?"

I only get a scowl in response, which makes my stomach tighten. Crap, did I get her name wrong? She works in my office, but she's pretty new and she's always so quiet. I think back to the last time I saw her, on the day the email with my photo circulated around the building. She'd been glaring at me something awful that day, but then again, who hadn't?

"Sorry," I say, when she doesn't respond. "It is Hannah, right?"

She crosses her arms and stands in the doorway, weight on one hip. "So you remember one thing about someone besides yourself. Congratulations."

I blink in confusion. "Um..." What the hell did I ever do to her? "Well, it was nice seeing you." I move toward the door.

She sidesteps to block me. "Great to see you too. Really funny, running into you here of all places."

"What do you—"

"Here in Central Park. Here where he took me to break up with me on the anniversary of our first date. Did he tell you about that?"

My stomach sinks even farther now, knotting in sudden realization. *Oh my god.*

No wonder she knew where to find me. No wonder she was able to circulate my image to everyone at work and use our own company servers to do it. "I don't know what you're talking about," I lie, even as I try to ease past her again.

She steps in front of me once more and uncrosses her arms now. When I try to walk around her, she reaches out and shoves me, hard, in the shoulders.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask, my voice going loud. *Why didn’t Zayne tell me, why didn’t he tell me her name?*

“I know all about you, Clove Walker. I know what kind of whore you are. Marketing manager at your big fancy publisher, just another boring New York transplant, another country-bred slut who came to the big city to chase other women’s men.”

Fire flares in my veins. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know what our boss thinks about your performance on that camera.” She smirks.

“That photo wasn’t for anyone else to see. That was private. All of this is private—you need to leave Zayne alone. Let him live his life.”

She rolls her eyes and laughs, a harsh, echoing sound. “Oh sure. Easy for you to say. Now that you’ve brainwashed the poor guy into saying whatever you want him to think. I know you sent him to speak to me, to try and mediate. You think that will work? He’ll see through your bullshit eventually.”

“Hannah, that’s not what’s happening here.”

“You stole my boyfriend.”

“You weren’t together anymore.”

“Only because he’s confused. He doesn’t realize what he needs. He doesn’t realize that I’ll give him more than any woman could. He *needs* me. You? You’re just the fuck of the minute. He’s had a million sluts like you in his bed. He’ll get bored of you before the week is up.”

“Hannah, let me leave.”

Instead, she squares off in front of the door and spreads her arms wide. “Well I’ve had enough,” she’s saying. “I’m not letting you fuck with him any longer.”

“You’re the one who’s fucking with him,” I counter, my voice rising.

“You won’t leave him alone. That’s not normal, Hannah.”

“Of course it’s not normal. He and I were never boring, normal. We were better than that. We *are* better than that. As soon as sluts like you stop distracting him, he’ll see that. He’ll realize he’s meant to be with me.”

“You have to stop this. Let go of him.”

“Make me,” she snarls. Then, without warning, she launches across the room at me. I manage to catch her wrists in mine, but her momentum sends us both flying backwards. My back cracks against the tile wall and I groan. She takes advantage of the moment to pry one hand free and slaps me across the cheek. I shove her off me and bring up an arm to block her next strike which lands against my forearm. It stings, but not as much as my cheek, which burns where she hit it.

“Hannah, stop.”

“Fucking slut. I’ll ruin you. I’ll make you regret the day you laid eyes on him.”

She lunges at me again, and this time, I’m ready for it. I catch her shoulders with both hands and shove her sideways into the sink. She roars with rage as she crashes against it, and pushes off the sink to grab my hair. I ignore that and punch her straight in the nose, the way my dad always taught me. The way I’ve never had to do before.

But it works. Her eyes start to water, and she shrieks, letting go of my hair.

“Hannah, please—”

“You *bitch!*” She hits me with both arms now, and I don’t see the other hit coming, don’t have time to block before she’s shoving me against the wall again, hitting my chest hard enough to make me gasp for air.

Dimly, at the back of my mind, I’m aware of the door swinging open, someone else barging in. I hear shouting, voices. I’m too focused on catching my breath, forcing air through my aching throat into my lungs once more.

When I come to focus again, someone has pulled Hannah off of me and is holding her by both arms.

Zayne.

I gape at him, watch him pinning her to the wall as she struggles against his grip. At the same time, someone else, a young woman, pushes through the door and sees the three of us, Hannah kicking at Zayne as he struggles to stop her fighting.

“I’ll call the police,” the woman gasps, disappearing once more. Hannah, for her part, only takes that as a renewed reason to fight. She swings at me with a leg, trying to kick for my arm, but I back out of the way before the kick lands.

“Hannah, please, just stop,” Zayne says, his voice low with anger.

“This slut is corrupting you. Brainwashing you. Don’t you see?”

“All I see is you attacking my girlfriend,” he spits back.

A little thrill sparks in my stomach, even in spite of the circumstances, at hearing him say that. *Girlfriend*.

“She doesn’t deserve you. She won’t care about you the way I do. She won’t give up everything, sacrifice the world for you. Don’t you see?”

Hannah twists in his arms to meet his eye, her face a mask of desperation.

“Zayne, this is real. Me and you.”

“No, Hannah. This was never real.” His face, on the other hand, is torn between fury and pity.

“How can you say that? I’ve been here every minute. Watching you, waiting for you. I helped you get rid of those ugly sluts on that dating app \_\_\_\_\_”

“Hacking into my phone without my permission and harassing women I like isn’t helping me.”

“They weren’t good enough for you. Nobody is. Nobody but me because I love you.” She twists in his arms until she’s facing him, and I can see even from here what effort it takes him not to cringe away. “This is real love, Zayne.”

“No. It’s not.” He releases her, carefully though, hands still poised to catch her again if she lunges for me once more. But as he lets go of her, his gaze drifts to me, his eyes dark and serious. “Love is not toxic or controlling. It’s not spying on people and hurting innocent bystanders in the process.” He locks eyes with me. “I know what real love is now.”

My mouth falls open as I look at him, a flurry of sparks setting off in my belly. *Does he mean...?*

Just then, the door bursts open once more. Zayne steps away from Hannah as the woman who poked her head in before returns, now with a couple of police officers in tow.

“What’s going on here?” the cop asks.

I open my mouth to explain, but I don’t need to because Hannah chooses that moment to lose it again.

She’s been shooting me death rays ever since Zayne looked my way. Even more since he said those words. Words that haven’t stopped echoing in my head since he said them. *I know what real love is now.*

“You whore!” Hannah flings herself at me again, and I raise my hands over my face defensively.

The officers catch her before we collide again. It takes both of them to wrestle her into handcuffs, and only when they've finally subdued her do they ask us what happened. Zayne takes over, explaining about how Hannah has been following him, hacking into his phone. At that point, I interrupt to explain that my company, which Hannah also works for, is pursuing a lawsuit against her for hacking their equipment. Zayne catches my eye at that, startled. Hannah, for her part, just continues to yell from the corner, calling me a slut and a man-stealing whore until the other cop finally frog-marches her outside to sit down while we finish explaining the situation to his partner.

In the end, they book Hannah. Through it all, though, Zayne keeps hold of my hand, his fingers tight around mine, his touch giving me the strength to see through the end of this nightmare at last.

"I didn't know she worked at your company," he murmurs. "I haven't spoken to her in years. She sends me messages now and again, but I delete them unread—they're usually too crazy, too upsetting to read."

I shake my head. "It's okay. It's over now. Work will figure it out; I'll explain it all to my boss..."

When the police car lights finally fade in the distance, and we're left alone at last on the edge of Central Park, the last obstacle in our path finally removed, I collapse against him, relieved and exhausted at once. Zayne wraps his arms around me tightly, strong and reassuring as always, even now. Even after dragging up all of his own personal past shit, and confronting a person he used to care about, a person who has gone off the rails with her abuse.

"Did you mean what you said?" I murmur, tilting my head up to meet his gaze.

He smiles down at me. Plants a soft kiss on my lips. My strong savior, he doesn't even look ruffled, even after all of that. "What I said when?"

"In the bathroom. When Hannah was yelling at you, you said..." I pause. Shake my head, because my throat has gone tight again just remembering. "You said you know what real love is now..."

"I do." His eyes stay locked on mine, burning into me, snagging my gaze the way nobody else can. "You taught me that, Clove." He nudges my chin, tilts my head up further, and leans in to kiss me once more, slower, softer. When our lips part, I sigh, leaning unconsciously closer to him, our bodies pressed together. "I love you, Clove."

“I love you, Zayne.” I laugh faintly, breathless. “It’s crazy, but—”

“Who cares?” He grins and kisses me again, and that kiss is breathing again after years of drowning. That kiss is finally feeling all the puzzle pieces click into place. “I love you, you crazy beautiful woman.”

“I love you, you crazy handsome doorman.” I smirk, and he laughs and smacks my ass in response. “Do me one favor though?” I add, lifting an eyebrow.

“Anything for you.” He runs a hand through my hair, smoothing it back from my forehead before he plants a soft kiss on my forehead.

“When we’re telling everyone how we met, do *not* tell them you won me over with a sext message.”

He bursts into laughter then, and sweeps me off my feet into a low dip, planting a kiss on me as he does. I laugh against his mouth, until the kiss turns deep, slow, serious, and our mouths part, his tongue entwining with mine, exploring my mouth. He straightens, draws me back up against him, and slides one hand down to grip my ass, pulling me up against him.

I arch my hips, lean against his strong body, and wrap my arms around his neck.

“I promise nothing of the sort,” he murmurs, just before he dips to kiss along my neck, his mouth searing against my skin in the cool night air.

I sigh and let my head fall back, let him kiss me wherever he wants, touch me any way he wants. “Ah well, nobody’s perfect,” I reply in a whisper as he kisses along my throat now. “I suppose I can live with all of your friends thinking I’m a huge slut.”

“As long as this particular slut is all mine, I’m happy.” He winks.

I laugh and swat his shoulder.

In response, he dips to fling me over one shoulder. I cry out as he stands, and kick my legs in feeble protest. But he’s already walking away from the park, toward our apartment building.

“Now, if you’re my slut, I believe that means I should have my way with you... Again.”

Those words send a spark of desire through me. I’m surprised to find that I’m already getting wet just thinking about what he’ll do to me tonight when we get back to the apartment.

“Promises, promises,” I repeat, and that earns me another spank, which sends shivers through me.

Okay, so one slutty photo may have nearly upended my life. But now that we have our privacy back, I have to admit, being slutty wasn't such a bad idea. After all, it landed me right in the arms of the hottie I never noticed standing right in front of me...

\* \* \*

THE END

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The Pool Boy

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# **THE POOL BOY**

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**VERA**

I read the email again for the third time, the disappointment sinking into my chest and sticking like glue.

*Dear Ms. Caldwell,*

*Thank you very much for giving us the chance to consider you. We have reviewed your application and the supplemental materials you sent, but we are sorry to say that we are not able to offer you a position at this time.*

*Please feel free to continue checking our website so that you may apply again if another position becomes available.*

*Best,*

*The Essex Foundation Recruiting Team*

*P.S. We very much enjoyed meeting with you this past week. Please give our best to your father.*

I don't understand what's happening here. I walked out of that interview feeling amazing. I connected with my interviewers, and they seemed genuinely interested in me. They also seemed really intrigued by my insistence on working in low-income areas. Plus, I rocked the test they gave me—hypothetical plans for a neighborhood square. What could have possibly gone wrong?

I guess it doesn't really matter why. Once someone turns you down, that's it. I sigh, grabbing a pen and crossing off The Essex Foundation from my list of applications. That's my twenty third rejection in the last three months. It's only the fourth time I even got an interview. I try not to take it personally anymore, but it feels personal.

I glance down at my list of outstanding applications. It's getting thin now. I'll have to take some time tonight to send some more out because I'm running out of time.

Wandering down to the kitchen, I grab a sleeve of Oreos from the secret stash that our chef Gregory keeps for me. It's definitely cookie time. I get a glass of milk and a fork and dig in, pushing the fork through the cream and dunking. I watch little air bubble pop up as the cookie absorbs the milk. Whoever thought of this combination should be added to the list of saints.

I'm halfway through the sleeve when my mother comes into the kitchen. "Uh-oh," she says, "I know that face and I know that snack." My mother pretends to understand my obsession with Oreos, though she doesn't. To her, processed food is the devil and all evil springs from it. But she tries not to judge too much. I shove another cookie in my mouth.

"Another rejection?" she asks.

"The Essex Foundation."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry. I know you wanted that one."

I glance at her out of the corner of my eye, trying to gauge whether she's being sincere. Neither of my parents agrees with my professed choice of career, but just like the Oreos, my mom tries to give me as much support as she can. From the look on her face, she's actually a bit sad for me. That's nice.

She pours herself a glass of water and perches on a bar stool across from me. "What happened?"

The last thing I want to do is rehash everything I've been thinking about for the last hour, but I know better than to not answer. She'll just continue to ask me pointed questions until I do. I shake my head. "I honestly don't

know. That was the interview I felt best about. The interviewers and I really had a great conversation, and I thought we connected. I was really confident about the sample materials I sent in. I just...I don't know."

"Well," my father's voice cuts across the kitchen, "If they didn't hire you, it's obviously not the right place for you. Time to move on."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. My father is Timothy Caldwell. Yes, *that* Timothy Caldwell. Architect to the stars, builder of half the celebrity homes and high rises in L.A., and number one on the list of people who disapprove of my life choices. "I am moving on, Dad," I say, "I thought maybe I'd just take an hour to regroup." I dunk another Oreo a little too forcefully, causing some milk to spill onto the counter.

Dad comes into the kitchen and stands in front of my mother, who helps him fix his tie automatically. This has been one of their routines for as long as I can remember. Whenever my father goes out to meet a client, my mother gets the final polish. "How much longer?" he asks.

My stomach drops. I know exactly what he's talking about and I don't even want to think about it because it makes me nauseous. "A week."

We made a bargain. Well, I say *we* made it, but it was basically my father dictating the terms. He said he'd give me till the end of the summer—the actual calendar day at the end of the summer—to find a job on my own, doing whatever I wanted. If it didn't happen, he'd draft me into service at his company. I think the phrase he used was, 'you'll come work for me,' but being drafted is probably more accurate.

Now, I've got only one week left until the deadline, and then I get swept against my will into the high-end world of luxury real estate. That is nowhere near where I want to be. I'm grateful for the money that I've grown up with, but I have no interest in building a millionaire's fourth home. I've been given a lot, and I would much rather try to pass what I can on to people that need it instead of serving the people who can afford more than enough.

"Thank goodness for that," my father says, opening the fridge and grabbing a bottle of his favorite green tea to go with him. "I'd much rather have you learning the ropes with me. I didn't build an empire just to leave it to no one."

I sigh pointedly. "Dad, your empire is very impressive," I say dutifully, "but building the fourth house of some pop star is the furthest thing from what I want."

“Vera, you’re twenty-two,” he says, his face darkening. “You don’t know what you want. And since you don’t have a job or a house or money of your own, I would think you’d be grateful that I paid for the entirety of your education and that I’m willing to give you a place at the company. Not all fathers would be willing to do that.”

I glance over at my mother, and she nods encouragingly. I know she agrees with him, but she doesn’t want to pile any more stress onto me. I appreciate that at least, but the anger boiling up inside is too much not to let out. “You did pay for everything, and I’m very grateful for that. I’m thankful that you have allowed me to be debt free. But up till now you also let me choose. So why does everything I’ve worked for go out the window just three months after graduation?”

He doesn’t even bat an eye at my words. Nothing ever riles my father, which infuriates me even more. “Because I know this world better than you. You had your fun, and it’s good to have dreams. The things you talk about are very noble, Vera. But people don’t hire untested architects who only want to make houses for people who can’t pay. Maybe sometime down the road when you’ve got some experience in the real world you can try to change it. But right now, you’re going to work for me.”

My eyes prick with angry tears. If he was just going to stop me from going after my dreams, why did he let me follow them this far? “I still have a week,” I say.

“A week or a month, the end result is the same.” He picks up his briefcase and kisses my mother lightly before leaving. The kitchen is filled with an awkward silence now.

I pour what’s left of my milk down the drain and put the cookies back in their cubby. My mother clears her throat, but I ignore her. She’s just going to defend him.

She clears her throat again.

“Yes?”

She takes a small sip of her water. “He just wants what’s best for you.”

“Really?” I laugh, but it gets cut off by the lump in my throat. “If he wants what’s best for me, then why hasn’t he bothered to consider what I think is best?”

“Because you’re young,” she says, “and—”

“Mom,” I interrupt, “I’m young, but I’m not stupid. It’s really time you and Dad stopped treating me otherwise. I’ll be in the garden.”

I throw myself out the back door and onto the patio before she can say anything else to stop me, hating myself for acting childish but unable to take the higher road. I want to do something meaningful with my career, with my life, but most of the time it feels like I'm the only person who believes I'm capable. And what drives me craziest of all is my fear that maybe they're right.

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## VERA

I feel like a cloud of bad energy follows as I head toward the garden to try and get some zen. I try to fight the anger building in my chest, but it's hard. How can my father, a self-made man himself, be so brazenly against me striking out on my own? He has all the power right now, too, since I've been miserably unsuccessful at finding a job so far. That thought sends another pang through my chest, and more than a little panic.

The grounds of our house are huge for L.A., but I've managed to claim a little corner as my own. It's a little fenced in garden with a mix of roses and wildflowers, plus a few neatly-tended rows of spices and vegetables that I give to Gregory when I can. Working outside and helping things grow has always brought me a special kind of peace and calm. I've never been able to replicate the simple feeling of happiness I get when I'm out here—which means it's exactly where I should be right now.

Because I've been busy stressing about my interview, researching other potential employers, and prepping materials to send out to new design firms and foundations, I know my garden is going to be a mess. There will be weeds to pull and watering to do. It will be perfect.

I retrieve my gloves and tools from our utility building and head over to my fence. I painted it a bright blue when I was in my teens and it's faded now to something sunwashed, cracked and beautiful. I push past the gate and look around, analyzing where the most desperate work is needed... except there isn't any.

The garden is immaculate. There isn't a weed in sight, and my flowers have been pruned. There's fresh dirt around some of the plants and I can

still see the damp places where they've been watered. The air huffs out of me like a blow to the stomach. The caretakers aren't supposed to touch my garden. Whenever I'm home I make sure to tell them to let me do all the work. It's less for them to do and stress relief for me.

After the rejection and the argument with my dad, this feels like the last straw. I missed out on taking care of my garden by what may have been just a few minutes. The loss of the work and the feeling of betrayal from someone else tending my plants, everything releases the anger I've been holding in. I leave my garden and head further into the grounds. The caretaker is here somewhere and I'm going to make sure they know this was a mistake: no one touches my garden but me.

Coming around one of the tall hedges that gives us privacy, I see the telltale blue polo of one of our caretakers. He's watering the flowerbeds at the edge of a fountain, and I can't see which of our staff it is since he's facing away from me.

"Hey!" I call out to him, but he doesn't turn. He's next to the fountain, so maybe he didn't hear me. I jog over to him and tap him on the shoulder. "Hey. Are you the one who did work in the private garden?"

He turns around, and all my irritation evaporates as the words that were forming leave my mouth. In fact, every thought flies out of my head except one: *That is one fucking hot gardener.*

I have a hard time breathing, because I'm trying to take it all in and also make it look like I'm not staring. And not salivating. *I'm not doing that, right?* Tan skin, dark hair, dark eyes, and arms that are bursting out of that stupid polo the company makes them wear. If the rest of his body is like his arms...*damn.*

"Private garden?" he asks, confusion written all over his face.

*Oh. Right.* I'm supposed to be here to yell at him about the garden.

"Yeah." I say, trying to form words. "The garden that's fenced off. No one on the staff is supposed to take care of it. It's my garden—I do the work." I'm finding it hard to be mad anymore, and to be honest I can't fault what he did there. His work was flawless, and I wonder if his work in other areas is equally flawless. Wonder if he's as good with his hands as he seems to be... I rein in my thoughts from the path they're going down. *What is wrong with me?*

"I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't know. I'm...new."

I nod, resigned to the fact that my anger is gone and that it was misplaced to begin with. This isn't about my garden. It's about my dad, my job, my entire life spinning out of my control. I force a smile. "It's okay, and you did a good job. But you don't need to do anything in there from now on. I like to do it."

He gives me a smile in return, and I feel my pulse kick up a few solid notches. "I'm sorry for the oversight, and I'll remember that. The plants just really looked like they wanted some attention." I could swear his eyes stray down my body for half an instant, but maybe I imagined it.

"How bad was it?" I ask.

"It honestly wasn't too bad. A few weeds here and there, some deadfall to trim, but nothing terrible," he says, his eyes warm. "First time back in a while? Maybe you were away on vacation, or...?"

"I wish." I run a hand through my hair in frustration. "I've actually been busy with these job interviews and stuff. It's all I think about. And then today..." I gesture blindly toward the house, unable to put into words the conflict with my dad. Not to mention he's a total stranger. I can't believe I'm standing here confessing all of this. "Anyway, I was just hoping to blow off some steam," I finish. "I'm Vera." I hold out my hand, which he takes.

A hot jolt runs through me. His grip is firm and his hands are rough and calloused. I can feel my cheeks heating. "I'm James London," he says. "Nice to meet you."

I nod, reluctantly letting go of his hand. "Nice to meet you, too."

I look back toward the house, and see someone at the patio doors. It's been only a few minutes since I left, and I'm sure it's my mother looking out to check on me. I imagine her seeing me talking to a caretaker and smile. There's an opportunity here, and I'm not going to waste it. I look back at James. "Do you need any help?"

His eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. "You want to help me?"

"Well, I was going to work in my garden. But since I can't..." I smile.

"Right." He laughs a little nervously. "Well, sure. I still need to water all of the flowers here, and add some new soil. I can go grab the bags if you keep watering."

"That I can do." My mom will see me working with James, and I have no doubt she'll tell my dad. Being able to look at someone this hot and piss off my parents at the same time? This is a priceless opportunity.

He hands me the hose, and I aim it at the flowers. I definitely, definitely watch him walk away and back toward the utility building. I wasn't focused on his ass when I was about to yell at him, but now that I look...yeah. I didn't think it was possible to be attracted to a guy's ass. I guess this proves that theory wrong.

When James comes back out of the building, he has two bags of soil on his shoulder. The shirt they gave him doesn't fit him well, and it keeps riding up as he walks, affording me some priceless views of his tight abs. I'm about to call up that company and say thank you. The skin I see is tan and toned, and suddenly I realize that he's looking at me looking at him, and I'm watering the ground and not the flowers.

I look away, a flush of embarrassment rolling over my whole body.

He sets down the bags by the flowerbed I'm watering and starts to add new soil around the existing and newly planted flowers. "So, Vera." I think I hear a smile in his voice, but maybe he talks to everyone that way. "What kind of jobs are you applying to?"

"Architecture."

"Following in your dad's footsteps?" It's so unexpected that I look over at him. He says, "I know who your father is."

"Yeah..." I clear my throat. "His line of work isn't exactly what I'm interested in." I move on to the next flowerbed.

"What are you interested in?"

Part of me doesn't want to tell him, afraid that he'll judge me just as harshly as my friends and family. But I dismiss my hesitation—he's just trying to make conversation. "Ultimately I'd like my work to be humanitarian. Hopefully someday overseas. I probably won't be able to do that right away, but I'd like to be part of a firm that's at least interested in that." I glance over at him, trying to read his reaction.

He gives me a look and an encouraging nod. "That's a beautiful goal to have. I'm sorry you're not having good luck."

"How did you know that?"

He packs down some dirt. "If you were having good luck, you probably wouldn't be home in the middle of the day or need to blow off steam."

"Right," I laugh. "Good point."

"But," he says, "You may have a promising career in over-watering flowers."

I look down, and see there's a puddle of water around the base of the camellia I'm watering. I quickly point the hose in a different direction. "I swear, I'm not usually bad at this."

"Don't worry," James says. "I was in your garden—I've seen what you can do."

I smile at him. "Good. But next time you want to go in my garden you have to ask permission."

"I will. I think I'd like to explore it further." He winks at me. I didn't realize winks could be so sexy. "I promise to be careful and not deflower any of your plants."

My mouth goes dry as I realize: he's flirting with me. *Oh. My. God.* I've never been good at flirting, but his words have my imagination spinning and the reply is easy. "Sometimes a little deflowering is healthy."

"I can't argue with that."

I feel my body heat up, and I have to move away from him. I finish watering the circle of flower beds, and then grab the second bag of soil. I join James on the ground and dive into filling the beds. It's hot, and soon I'm sweating, my arms covered in dirt. James is sweating too, and I'm desperately trying not to imagine him without his shirt on, sweating and glorious. The work is good, and the silence comfortable. I keep sneaking glances at him out of the corner my eye because I can't help it. I'm pretty sure he knows it too.

He pauses to get more soil from his bag and adds, "I wouldn't have thought you were the kind of girl to get dirty." The way his fingers form the soil around the plants has me imagining his fingers doing other things. To me.

"I—" I look over at him, and he's closer than I realized. So close that I can see his eyes are a rich coffee brown and there are crinkles around them as he smiles. His eyes move down to my mouth, and I realize I'm thinking about him kissing me. And what I imagine is being kissed like I've never been kissed before, right here on the ground, his arms pulling me tightly against his hard body, and now I'm staring at him again. "I like getting dirty," I murmur. "Dirty is good."

His lips curl into a teasing smile. "I guess we'll have to save that for another time, then." He gestures to the ground. "We're finished."

I hadn't even realized that we'd made it all the way around the circle. "I guess we are. What do you have left to do?"

James picks up both the bags of soil. “Clean the pool. Saved it for last.”

“Great,” I say, “I’ll see you over there.”

He laughs. “It’s kind of a one person job, though I appreciate the offer.”

I turn and give him my best flirtatious smile. “You’re going to clean the pool. I’m going to use it.”

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## JAMES

I watch Vera walk toward the house, and I'm absolutely sure there's a swing in her hips that wasn't there before.

Damn, I'm in trouble.

When Mike asked me to fill in for him this week he told me the client's daughter was hot. I'm going to kill him when I see him next, because she's way more than hot. She's got curves no amount of clothing is going to hide, and I've been half hard since the moment she ran up totally intent on ripping me a new one.

I take the bags of soil back to the utility shed, thinking about the way she let her hands get dirty. I've met plenty of girls like her—rich and spoiled and totally privileged. But most of them are too worried about looking good to do any kind of work. Vera surprised me, but she was still planning on busting me for working in her garden. Until she saw me.

I relive the way her eyes travelled all over me, and...I have to think about anything but that in order to keep my body in control.

Then there's the fact that she wants to be a humanitarian. It's something else I wouldn't have pegged her for. I like the contradictions I'm finding even though I just met her. The image of her sweating in the sun and inches away from me comes back. I was seconds away from kissing her. I would have pushed her down into the flowers. I would have kissed her breathless before slowly finding out the dimensions of each and every one of her curves. I let myself imagine everything.

I can see the way her skin will streak with dirt and sweat, her nipples hardening under my lips and teeth. I can feel the heat of her as I pull my

gloves off and press my fingers into her one by one, and I can imagine the tight exquisite pleasure as I sink deep inside her.

My dick is straining painfully against my jeans, and I'm more than tempted to take care of it right here in this little garden closet.

I think about vegetables. About cute animals. About being cold. Anything to get me to cool down. I took this job for the extra money, and I don't want to get fired for jacking off next to the tools. If I'm going to get fired, it's going to be for a better reason than that.

It takes a few minutes, but I manage to get the raging hard-on under control. I check the time—I have a couple of hours. I have more than enough time to clean the pool and get back across town in time. If I move fast I might be able to get some work done on the Mastersons's house before the end of the day. I make sure all the landscaping tools are put away and head over to the pool shed. It made me laugh when Mike told me they had two sheds, but these kinds of houses always have more than they need.

The pool shed is infinitely nicer—it doubles as a changing room for guests. I grab the pH kit and the chemicals and the skimmer and head back out onto the patio—holy hell.

Vera is lying out next to the pool.

And that might be the smallest bikini I've ever seen.

Her eyes are closed as she basks in the sun and I take this moment to consume her without being observed. I let my gaze slide down her body, starting at her face and mouth and moving to her breasts, which are barely contained by that blue top. Her stomach is glistening, and I watch it rise and fall with her breath, trying very hard not to visualize my hands touching her everywhere. Finally my eyes land on her hips and the fact that her bathing suit bottom ties at the sides. I memorize the image—I'll certainly be returning to it later.

My dick is stirring in my pants and I grit my teeth hard enough to crack to keep it down. Vera opens her eyes and sees me. A lazy smile plays across her face, and suddenly I feel like she's wearing that just to tease me. Keep it together, man. You took this job for the money, not to get tangled up with a rich girl.

Vera stretches, her arms over her head, arching her back. Her tight belly contracts and her breasts thrust upward and I swear for a second I think they're going to burst out of her suit.

Damn damn damn.

I move over to the pool. I can't just stand here staring.

But I can see that Vera's smiling at me, and I know she isn't finished with me yet. I force myself to look away and get to work. If I can make it all the way through this week with my pants on, I'll be lucky.

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**VERA**

I own several bathing suits, none of which are nearly as skimpy as this one. But from the look on James's face, it's doing its job. I wanted him to look at me the way I looked at him—as absolutely delicious.

I stretch out on the chair, arching my back. It feels great after being hunched over working on the flowers. Plus, I know that James is watching me. It may be incredibly stupid, but I'm hoping my hitting on James gets back to my dad. It's the perfect opportunity to piss him off. I'm old enough to know better, but the truth is, I want nothing more than to make my father angry. Maybe then he'll feel the way I've been feeling for months.

I hear James clear his throat and move over to the pool. I watch him set the skimmer aside and kneel down with the plastic case that tests the chemicals.

“I’ll let you test that first so I know it’s safe for me to swim.”

He smiles just a little. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

“All the same,” I say, “I wouldn’t want to get soaking wet only to find out I was being poisoned.”

I put my hair back in a clip so I can keep it dry when I get in and lean back on my elbows, very aware that this position makes my body look damn good. The sun is reflecting off the pool and shining on James’s face and I think I could look at him all day. He takes a sample of the water and puts it in the tester, shaking the container gently.

“You said you were new,” I say. “When did you start?”

He glances up at me. “Today.”

“Lucky me,” I say under my breath. Louder, I ask, “Liking it so far?”

His gaze rises across the pool and drags up my legs and chest before landing on my face. His eyes on me feel like a physical thing, sending tingles over my skin. “You could say I’m enjoying myself.” Is it my imagination or is his voice a little rough? He checks the tester. “Good news. You won’t be poisoned.”

“Excellent,” I say, standing. I walk into the pool from the shallow end, the water a perfect cool temperature.

James is standing now, skimmer at the ready. “How’s the water?”

“Perfect,” I say. “It’s too bad you can’t swim with me. We could get you out of that terrible polo shirt.”

One corner of his mouth tips up into a grin. “It almost sounds like you want to see me shirtless.”

“More like I want to see the death of the polo, but the end result is the same.” I dip into the water, letting it rise to my shoulders. “How much trouble would you get in for swimming with me?”

“Probably a lot.”

“Really?”

“Well, maybe not the swimming. It’s what would likely happen while I swim that would get me into trouble.”

My breath catches, and I laugh it off, stroking my way back to the shallow end. “You have some weird thing you do while you swim?”

James doesn’t say anything. Did I say something wrong? I look up, to find him staring at me. Heat flushes through my body at the unfiltered want I see there. I realize now that he’s seeing me dripping in a bikini that hides the essentials only. His jeans are bulging, and I can only imagine what that looks like.

I raise an eyebrow at him, wandering closer to where he’s standing at the edge of the pool. “Having some trouble with control?”

“Yes.” His voice sounds deeper, and he looks away. He dips his skimmer into the pool—not that it needs it.

“And why is that?”

He reaches the skimmer across the pool, crouching down to reach further. He’s close to me now, and I can hear him speak soft and clear. “Because I can’t stop looking at you, and I’ve already imagined dozens of ways of fucking you—from burying myself in you on top of those flowers to letting you ride me in the deep end. Seeing you practically naked and floating in a pool like some kind of walking fantasy isn’t helping, and it

makes me want to touch you and taste you and make you scream my name.” He stands back up. “Does that about answer your question?”

The images he just described roll through my mind, and I’m seeing splaying limbs and straying fingers and feeling his mouth on parts of me that haven’t been touched in far too long. I’m suddenly very glad that I’m in the pool, because my entire body is flushed and I’m now soaking wet in more ways than one.

James is still looking at me, though not at my face.

I glance down. My nipples are hard, and my bathing suit does nothing to disguise the fact. I swallow, trying to get my voice back. “I don’t know what to say.” This time it’s my voice that’s rough.

“Well, it’s not words that I’m looking for.”

Wow. I let the possibility of this spin out in my mind. I’m not a virgin, but I haven’t been with anyone since I graduated—unless you count my vibrator. I look at James out of the corner of my eye. Let’s be honest, there’s not a lot I wouldn’t do just to have the chance to see him naked. Getting caught would be bad. Very bad. But is it worth the risk?

I sink back down into the water, and James cleans the pool. We don’t say anything, instead taking turns looking at each other, occasionally locking eyes. It doesn’t take long for James to finish skimming, and shortly after that, he puts in the little robot that roves the bottom of the pool sucking up gunk. He grabs the test box and the skimmer and goes into the pool shed. I glance at the house to make sure my mother isn’t peeking through the windows, and realize I’ve made my decision.

I don’t bother with a towel, instead going straight into the pool shed, closing the door behind me. James turns from where he was putting away the equipment. “You followed me,” he says.

“Yes,” I murmur, taking a step toward him.

“This is not a good idea,” he warns, taking a step toward me.

“No, it’s not.” Now we’re face to face, inches apart.

“Thankfully I’m not known for my good decisions,” he says, and then he kisses me.

Oh god. The kiss slams through my body and it’s all consuming. It feels like my entire body has been asleep and suddenly decided to wake up. James’s hand runs down my back and the sensation sinks into my spine. His tongue plunges into my mouth and I gasp, sending mine right back. He’s

not close enough to me. I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing my body against his and feeling his erection hard and ready.

I weave my hands into his hair and feel him groan more than I hear it, the vibrations skimming through my mouth. I feel his fingers at my neck working at the knot of my halter, and I freeze. “Wait.”

Catching my breath, I pull away from him. I don’t like stopping, but I need to be sure. “If we get caught, you’re definitely going to get fired. You’ll actually be lucky if you get fired. My father will kill you.”

“Then I guess we shouldn’t get caught,” he says, with a smile as dirty as the devil on his lips.

“I just want you to be sure.”

With one fluid motion, he takes his shirt off. My heart skips a beat as I see the dips and planes of a body that is *cut*. Gardening has been good to him. “Believe me, I’m sure.”

“Well then.” I clear my throat. “I guess I won’t be needing this.” I reach up and untie my halter, letting the fabric fall away from my breasts. I hear James suck in a breath as I untie the back and toss the top aside. The way he’s looking at me now, I don’t know if I’ve ever felt sexier or more powerful. “Show me some of those things you imagined.”

James reaches out, skimming around my breasts and taking them in his hands. Goosebumps rise on my skin as he touches me, and I want more. My body is still damp from the pool and because I’m cold his hands feel like sweet, sweet fire. He takes my nipples between his fingers, rolling them and squeezing. The sensation makes me gasp, lines of heat running straight to my pussy, which is soaking through my bathing suit. He pinches harder, the small bite of pain waking up all my nerves, and then he pulls. He draws me forward by my breasts until there’s no more space between us.

He’s taking his time and playing, still pinching and squeezing, now leaning his head down and putting his mouth on me. His tongue rasps over my nipple, teasing me before he sucks my breast deep into his mouth. I let my head fall back, groaning as I imagine that he’s sucking on other parts of me. He releases me, leaning forward to lick the skin between my breasts. “Your nipples are darker than I thought they would be,” he says.

“Oh?” I can’t manage more than the single syllable.

“And just as sensitive as I hoped.” He takes my other nipple in his mouth and as I moan again, I realize that I’ve never felt like this. We’re not even to the sex yet and it’s the best sex I’ve ever had.

I explore his chest and abs with my hands. His skin is firm and warm and I would love to take the time to trace every line of his body, but I'm not going to be able to wait that long. I drop to my knees and I'm working on his belt before I'm even on the ground. I pull down his jeans and his cock is straining against his underwear. Even masked by the fabric I can tell that he's huge, and I'm sure that what I'm about to see will match his body in its perfection. I press my mouth against his length, licking him through the cloth, and from above I hear James curse.

Slowly, I pull his underwear down and allow his cock to spring free. I want to touch and taste every part of him, and so I do. My hand is barely able to wrap around him, but I still try as I trace my fingers along his length, grinning as the muscles in his stomach tense with anticipation, and jump at every unexpected touch. Sealing my lips around him, I swirl my tongue over his head and tease him at the tip.

“Fuck,” he says, and I look up to see him watching me. His expression is a perfect mixture of awe and lust, and so far it’s the best one I’ve seen on his face. I lift him up, running my tongue along the length of him and stroking him with my hand. I love this feeling, having him literally and figuratively in the palm of my hand. It’s a heady feeling, knowing you can make someone else feel this kind of pleasure.

I take his balls into my mouth, and roll them across my tongue. The sound that comes from James is raw. It’s pure lust, and I feel my body warming in response. Sucking gently, I look up at him. We lock eyes, and I watch his go dark at the sight of me like this. Letting him go, I lick my lips. “Is this what you imagined?” I ask.

He nods, “And there’s so much more.” He steps away from me and out of his jeans. “Tell me what you want.”

I don’t get the chance to answer. He spins me so my back is against his chest, his cock pressing up against my ass. He’s untying the bottom of my bikini, and then his fingers are on me and in me and I think I might come right now. His thumb slides across my clit and I see sparks as my whole body tightens in anticipation. “Tell me what you want,” he repeats in my ear.

“Fuck me,” I say breathlessly. “Please. Fuck me.”

His hands leave me for a moment and I hear him tear open the wrapper of a condom. He guides me forward, my hands landing on the sill of the small window that overlooks the patio. The window. Shit. “Not here,” I say.

“Yes. Here,” he commands, sliding into me. I groan. His cock sliding into me is pure bliss. It’s been a long time since I had anyone inside me and I’m tight. He’s stretching me and the friction is divine. James slides out, and then all the way back in. God, yes. He starts a rhythm that’s steady and sweetly punishing as it ramps up, pleasure building deep inside me. He shoves a knee between my legs, spreading them farther apart. This new angle is deeper and James is thrusting faster and soon every stroke is causing my pussy to spasm in pleasure. I’m off balance and my breasts are pressed against the window and my breath is fogging the glass and—

Shit, I can see my mother sitting on her balcony reading a book.

One look in this direction and she’ll see me getting thoroughly fucked against this glass. The thought sends adrenaline roaring through my body and I’m so close and every breath out is a yes, yes, yes.

James threads a hand into my hair, pulling my head back so I’m arched between the window and his body. I feel his teeth on my neck and then he’s sucking on my ear and I hear his voice growl, “I said I wanted to make you scream, and I will. But right now I’m going to make you come, and you can’t make any sound. If you scream they’ll all come running.”

They’ll all come running, or my mother will look, or both. Oh god, I can’t think while he’s driving into me like this. His hand curls around my stomach, sliding down to my clit. I can’t see anything anymore. Everything is white light and firecracker sensations. He rubs circles on my clit, pressing and pinching and I bite my lip because I am on the edge of screaming. I shut my eyes tight and let myself feel it all and oh...

Everything shatters outward as my body spasms on his cock. Pleasure sizzles through me and this is what people mean when they say fireworks. He hasn’t stopped fucking me, and it’s too much. It’s all too much. I let out a whimper and he slows, bringing me back to him with soft strokes. His fingers are still on my clit, pinching and flicking and stroking and keeping me on edge.

My body is warm and pliant and aroused. I arch my back further, pushing my ass against him. “Take me,” I say. “Give me more.”

James doesn’t hesitate, slamming in deep. My pussy clenches in response, and I hear him swear. He’s gripping my hips, pounding into me, and I love the rush of pleasure I get at having him inside me.

“I’m close,” he says, and I can feel the desperation in his pace. His body tenses, and he moves. He pulls out of me, spinning me to face him. He rips

off the condom and his hand is stroking his cock as he comes. It spills across my breasts and stomach, and I arch toward him. His face is dazed with pleasure and his muscles are taught as he continues to come. When he's finished, he opens his eyes, taking me in.

He opens his mouth, closes it. Instead of speaking, he reaches out to me. He draws his fingers up my body, collecting his semen in his fingers. He says, "Open your mouth." And I do. His fingers glide across my tongue and I suck them clean. He tastes like salt and cream and man, and I swallow him down. That same hand curls around my neck and pulls me toward him and then he's kissing me again, and I can still taste him on my tongue as his explores my mouth.

"I was wrong," he says. "This was a very good idea."

"Mmm."

His hand is on my ass and he pushes my hips against his. "I'm here for one week."

I smile, "And?"

"And there are many, many things I would like to do to you." His voice drops to a whisper as he adds, "Preferably some place where I can keep the promise of making you scream my name and beg for more."

"I didn't think begging was part of the promise."

"I added it just now." He lets me go, taking a towel from the shelf and handing it to me before taking one for himself. "If I stay much longer, it will seem strange that I'm still here."

I nod, still in a haze of pleasure and not really processing. He pulls on his clothes, and it feels like a sin to watch that body disappear. He pulls me in for a last kiss, and if he wanted to stay in this pool house forever and fuck I would say yes.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Vera." The way he looks at me, I know he means more than see me.

I smile. "I'll see you."

He gives me a long slow look as he leaves the pool house, and then he's gone.

One thing is for sure—that vibrator is never going to cut it anymore.

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**VERA**

I stand in the pool house for a while, unable to move. I feel languid and relaxed and content. But after a while I also realize that I'm still naked, and covered in a good amount of James. I clean myself off and toss that towel in the laundry before hunting for my bathing suit. Even though I'm dressed again, I wrap another towel around myself. I don't want to encounter anyone in the house in this bikini. I've pushed my luck as it is.

I slip out the door of the pool house, and it's just a mere few steps from that door to the back door of the house, and the proximity shocks me. I've never noticed just how close it actually was. I slide the patio door open, and close it behind me. Turning to go to my bedroom, I nearly jump out of my skin.

My father is sitting at the table in the kitchen, papers spread across its surface. I thought he might be home, but he nearly always does his work in his office. The fact that he was that close to where I was just well and thoroughly fucked makes me ill. I manage not to stare at him—I'm still pissed, and I *definitely* don't want him asking questions about my day. I slip through the kitchen to the stairs, and I don't even think he noticed I was there.

The reality of the situation hits me: James said it was a bad idea, and it is. If my mother had seen me, if my father had wondered why I'd come inside in a bathing suit but not seen me in the pool, if one of the house staff had come in to get the laundry, since we didn't lock the door. Oh god. We were incredibly lucky, and I wanted him so much that I didn't really think it through.

I wanted to piss off my dad by hitting on James, but if he found me fucking one of the hired help, it would be a catastrophic event of biblical proportions. He'd be furious at me for ruining his perfect reputation, for doing something that could jeopardize his business. That's rule number one. Never do anything that endangers the business. I'd never get a job in architecture. One word from him, and no one would touch my resume with a ten-foot pole. I don't know if he'd be so angry that he'd kick me out or disown me, but the way my father's been acting lately I wouldn't count it out.

By the time I reach my room I'm hyperventilating, my body humming with panic. I can't sleep with James again. There's too much at stake for me to risk it for sex. Amazing sex. Mind-blowing sex. *Get it together and stop thinking about the sex, Vera.* My body tenses, and the thought of not being with James again sends a pang of unhappiness through me.

But it doesn't matter. It can't matter. I get in the shower and I make sure that the water is scalding. The heat reminds me of James's skin, and the water running down my body reminds me of the way he looked at me in the pool. Just the thought of that look and my body reacts, getting wet and ready for the pleasure it now associates with it.

No. This has to stop—I can't get carried away every time I think about him. If I let myself go there I'll never be able to stay away. I find my rattiest comfy clothes, hoping that dressing in the least sexy thing I own will be at least a little bit of a mental barrier. I have plenty to do without this distracting me. I have to look for new places to apply. I have to work on my ELIH—Efficiency Low-Income Housing—project. I have to find a way to make sure I don't have to go to work for my father.

But as soon as I sit down at my desk, I feel it—the not unpleasant soreness of muscles I haven't used in a while, the lack of tension in my body in the aftermath of bliss. I remember the feel of his hands on me, his mouth on my breasts. I can only imagine what his mouth would feel like other places. I realize that my eyes are closed, and I'm both reliving and adding on what might be. *Snap out of it, Vera.*

I bury myself in the internet. I hit every place I know looking for job openings, but when you've been looking in the same places for three months, you can pretty much tell when there's nothing new. It still takes forever—hours. I even check resources that would take me out of the state. I even check ones that would take me out of the country.

I do find one new prospect, and it looks promising, so I submit my resume. It's a simple application in comparison to some of the other ones I've put in the last few weeks, but that's fine with me. I shut my computer and move over to my drafting table.

On the way I catch sight of my bikini where I abandoned it on the bed, and my mind is immediately back in the pool house where James is untying it. I feel hot in my clothes, like just the memory of his fingers inside me is enough to raise my body temperature. I grab the bikini and chuck it into the closet. Out of sight, out of mind, right?

I focus on the ELIH project that I've started. I'm trying to balance cost-effective materials and quality of life. I want to find a way for the buildings to afford the same space and comforts as any other house. But I'm also trying to cut the building and labor cost so that people with smaller incomes can afford to actually own their houses. I've even made sure to include space in these plans for a small garden area.

I hear James's voice in my head, telling me he'd like to explore my *garden* further. God, how hot would it be if he took me in the garden? Surrounded by flowers and sun and sky. I can't say I don't want that.

Damn it.

This clearly isn't working. I'm never going to get any work done on this if just looking at the plans makes me think about him. Anger at my body and brain rises up—I mean it was good, but was it really *that* good? It hasn't been so long since I've had actual and good sex that I need to sit here and crave it. It was good. Fine, great. But I can move on. There are more important things than my sex life.

I get into bed and flip off my light, forcing myself to relax, to sleep. I'm starting to drift off when the memory of him finishing on me floods my mind, hard and strong. I groan into my pillow. *Fine*. It was amazing. It was—no pun intended—fucking amazing. I can admit that, and I still have to say no to sleeping with him again.

But what he doesn't know won't hurt him, and he never has to know just how hot and bothered he makes me.

I slide my hand inside my underwear and I'm already so wet that my fingers slip across my clit. I brush my other hand across my breasts, remembering how he pulled me against him using only my nipples. My hips jerk against my hand as I dip my fingers inside myself. I can see his face filled with lust, feel his body hovering over mine, and imagine that his

fingers are inside of me instead of my own. The feeling of his cock plunging inside me comes back, vividly. My thumb circles my clit as I remember him stretching me out and filling me up over and over.

I move my fingers faster and I'm grinding against my hand as the pleasure of this moment and my memories combine. There's an orgasm rising inside me, and my first instinct is to slow down. I want to let it pour over me slowly, savoring every second. But I know with a deep certainty that if James were here he wouldn't stop. James would not stop if he were fucking me, relentlessly, until I come. Once again I imagine it's his hand, and he doesn't give me a break. I can feel his lips at my ear, whispering the dirty things he's going to do once I finish. My fingers are moving faster and deeper and I'm breathless, hovering on the edge of pleasure.

I imagine his lips running along my skin—down my throat and along my breasts. My thumb slides across my clit, and I imagine it's his. He tells me to come, demands it, and I do. My hips arch off the bed and the pleasure rolls from my pussy up my body and through my breasts. I tease myself a moment longer, trying to make the feeling last.

Pulling my hand away from myself I stare at the ceiling. He's here for an entire week. How am I supposed to make it through six more days, knowing what's under those clothes? Knowing exactly how he can make me feel?

Seeing him tomorrow is going to be torture.

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## JAMES

I drop onto my couch, utterly exhausted. I'm dirty and need a shower, but I don't think I can move right now. I probably shouldn't have stayed at the construction site as late as I did, but every bit I can do on the Mastersons's house is a little bit less we're behind next week. I know better than anyone that the faster a house like this is finished, the better. The Mastersons need this house, and they need it now.

The fact that I had to delay construction at all doesn't sit well in my gut, but I didn't feel like I had a choice. Mike was in a desperate situation, and I'm too familiar with desperate situations to not help. Besides, if I hadn't delayed or taken the job I wouldn't have met Vera.

Vera Caldwell.

Just thinking about her name makes my cock stir in my pants. I can't remember a time when I've had such a visceral reaction to someone. And being inside her...god. The decision to fuck her was probably stupid as all hell, but I can't say that I regret it. Everything about being with her was better than I had imagined or expected.

I get up and head to the bathroom, stripping out of my clothes on the way. The shower is hot, and I force myself to wait until I'm under the stream before I let the memory flood me. I wrap my fingers around myself and squeeze, starting off with slow strokes as the images pour through my brain. Watching her lick my cock, seeing her dare to put her mouth on my balls, feeling her ass bounce against me as I fucked her into the window. My cock is rock hard in my hand and I let the memory play out as I increase my speed. In my mind's eye I watch her eat hot cum off my fingers as I

stroke myself to the finish. My balls tighten, drawing pleasure up from my toes and I can't stop myself from groaning as I climax over my hand. I'm glad that I live alone.

I lean against the wall of the shower, spent again, but it's not enough. I want her again, and not just sexually. She's intriguing, and I want to get to know her. All of her. I want to put my tongue inside her and fuck her senseless, and then ask her all the get-to-know-you questions. I want to spend some time with her in a place where I'm not wearing a uniform. No matter what I think about, I'm filled with a consuming desire to be near her.

I shake my head to clear it, turning off the shower. Things like this don't happen. No one can make a connection that fast—not one that's real. But still, I remember that moment when I turned and saw her. She was ready to spit fire at me and I didn't care because something reached inside me and pulled.

I grab my phone and check the time. Ten-thirty. I wonder what she's doing right now.

More to the point, I wonder if she's thinking about me. If she's touched herself wishing I was there instead of her fingers. My cock likes that thought too much, and I feel myself hardening again. It's like my body is insatiable when it comes to her. I pull on some clothes, trying to ignore the instinct to fall into my memories again.

My phone chimes with an incoming text, and I try to ignore the pang of disappointment when it's not from Vera. Which is ridiculous, since she doesn't even have my number. No, the text is from Mike:

*Was the job okay today?*

Was it okay? Okay is a fucking understatement. I type out my response:

*It was great. I'm going to pummel you the next time I see you for not warning me how hot Vera was.*

I see the little bubbles pop up and down as he types:

*I did warn you.*

I laugh before replying:

*Not enough. How's your dad holding up?*

*Good. We go in the morning for the surgery. Should have a clearer picture of how things look tomorrow night.*

Mike's father has heart problems, and last week he went into cardiac arrest. I guess what the problem is can be fixed surgically, or at least they hope. That's the reason I took the job at the Caldwells's in the first place. I

try not to take landscaping or caretaker jobs during my construction contracts, but this couldn't be helped. Mike didn't want to lose his spot working their property—they're generous with their employees—so I agreed to fill in for him.

*Tell him hello for me, and keep me posted.*

Again the bouncing text bubbles.

*Will do. And thanks again for doing this.*

*No problem.*

Another wave of tiredness washes over me, and I set my alarm before falling into bed. I need to sleep if I'm going to keep this schedule all week. Of course, the man in me is saying I need sleep so I can have as much energy as possible for Vera. I laugh as I turn out the light. She's certainly a contradiction: a rich and spoiled heiress who works in her own garden and wants to do humanitarian work. She's brazen as hell but I also think she might be hiding something. And I'm going to find out what that is.

In my mind's eye I see her spread out in front of me, back arching as I taste her neck. She tastes amazing. My mind spins outward, imagining the things I could do to her if she was in my bed. I would plunge myself deep inside her, not letting her come until she begged. I would take her ass for the first time, listening to her moan as she felt me claim something no one else had ever touched.

My cock is in my hand again, and I'm squeezing it, stroking it. I imagine the silk tightness of being buried in her ass. I hear the sounds she'll make as she asks me to fuck her harder, and harder, and I imagine the sensation of coming deep inside her. I can see it leaking out slowly. My body tightens, and I'm so close again. My hips are straining off the mattress. My imagination isn't done with me yet as I see her use her mouth on me, sucking my cock clean. I groan as I fall into the white-hot brightness of my orgasm. Pleasure shoots through me from my balls to my brain, and I keep stroking myself as the grip of the orgasm fades. I savor it until it's completely gone.

Earlier today I said that I didn't need any entanglements. I sure fucked that one up. I am very, very entangled.

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**VERA**

Finally! Some good news.

I took full advantage of my joblessness this morning and slept in. I'm glad I did, because while I was sleeping I got an email from the Harrison Foundation—the place I applied to last night. They read my resume overnight, loved it, and want an interview the day after tomorrow! I dance around my room like there are clouds under my feet. The weightlessness is freeing and I feel like I can conquer the world. This is a far better morning than yesterday.

I read the email again. They want me to come interview with them, and if everything goes well they'll show me one of their work sites. I email them back, confirming that I would love—love love *love*—to meet with them. I know I shouldn't get my hopes up, but screw it. Hope is awesome. Hopefully this will be exactly what I need to shove all my father's 'I-told-you-so's back in his face.

I spend some time digging into the Harrison Foundation, and I like what I find. They do have high-end clients, but they also specialize in helping displaced families build homes. That's so up my alley it's not even funny. I can see myself working for them so clearly, the feeling settling in my chest. I want that.

I suddenly start to get ideas. I pin a new piece of paper to my drafting table and begin to sketch. It's rare that it happens like this, where I just sit and sketch without thinking endlessly first. Architecture doesn't come easily to me, so I know when moments like this happen they have to be taken advantage of. My hands don't stop. I'm not just drawing things for

ELIH, but everything from new archways to stairways. Whatever pops into my head is what I put down. I do work on several variations of the ELIH house, changing and perfecting. I think I like the new version even better than the one I had been working with.

My stomach growls when I come out of my haze of inspiration. I look at the clock and am absolutely shocked to see that it's three o'clock in the afternoon. Wow. No wonder I'm hungry. I put on clothes that aren't pajamas. If either of my parents sees me in pajamas at this time of the day there will be *hell* to pay.

Thankfully no one is in the kitchen as I rummage around in the fridge and make myself a sandwich. My mother would probably prefer I called one of the staff to do it for me—or better yet, make me an actual gourmet meal—but I'm perfectly capable of feeding myself. A flash of blue catches my eye and my stomach drops through the floor. James is outside on the patio, just starting to skim the pool.

My good news and my frenzy kept me from thinking about him, but everything floods through me now. Desire is the first thing that I feel, and then resolve. I have an interview coming up, so now I have even more reason to say no to more sex. *But*, my mind whispers, *there's no harm in just talking*. So before I know it I'm carrying my plate out to the patio and the table. James is facing away from me, and I sit down at the table without saying anything. I'll wait for him to notice me while I watch his fantastic ass. If I'm not allowed to touch him anymore, I'm definitely not keeping myself from looking.

I set my drink down on the table and the noise catches his attention. As soon as he sees me his face breaks into what might be the biggest smile I've ever seen. "Hey there."

"Hi."

"I hoped I would see you earlier," he says, fishing out some leaves.

I take a bite of my sandwich, and speak through it. It's totally unladylike. I'm hungry enough that I don't care. "I was working—I got this burst of inspiration, and I kind of forgot to eat."

He laughs. "Well I think we can agree that that's important."

There's a moment of silence as I eat and he works his way around the edge of the pool. When he's closer to me he says, "I thought about you last night."

“Really?” I say casually, not sure if he means that he thought about me, or he *thought* about me. Suddenly he strips out of his shirt, and I’m not sure if I’m breathing.

“Yes,” he says with equal casualness. “Twice, actually.”

Oh god. An image pops into my mind of James touching himself, my name on his lips as he spills over. I feel myself blush, and have to take a sip of my water to compose myself. Then he asks, “Did you think about me, too?” and I try very hard not to choke.

My mother chooses that moment to poke her head out of the patio door. “Vera.”

“Yes?” I say, trying to breathe.

“Your father has clients coming over for dinner. They’ll be here at six. Please make sure you look nice.”

I roll my eyes.

“And make sure you don’t do that. It’s not polite.”

“Yeah, I know.”

She looks between me and James—who has gone back to cleaning the pool—and gives me a long stare. I know that look; it’s a look that says ‘don’t you dare.’ I pointedly roll my eyes at her again, and she shakes her head and goes back inside. She *would* come outside right at that moment.

James is looking at me again, and I realize that I have to tell him. I have to, but I don’t want to. Neither of us speak though, aware that my mother is probably observing us. I finish my sandwich. I finish my water. Now I’m just sitting and watching him work.

Okay fine, I’m looking at his body. I am the utter cliché. I’m looking at my pretty pool boy, and I’ve already fucked him.

James puts down the skimmer. “Miss Caldwell, would you be so kind as to accompany me to your garden? I have a question about its care I’d like to ask you.”

What? He knows that I don’t want him to take care of my garden. I raise an eyebrow at him, but say, “Sure.”

He heads away from the patio and I follow him, going around the pool and toward my garden. I turn the corner, but I don’t see James. He steps out from behind the garden shed and catches my hand, pulling me to him. One moment I’m in his arms, the next I’m against the wall of the shed and he is kissing me.

It's like a shot of adrenaline straight to the chest. My heart is pounding, my body saying yes yes yes. The part of my brain that's telling me that we can't, that we should stop, is being drowned out by the feeling of his lips and the caress of his tongue.

"I haven't stopped thinking about you," he confesses, before kissing me again.

"Me either," I manage.

His fingers are playing with the hem of my shirt, teasing my skin underneath and slowly moving upward. If he keeps going I might very well get my fantasy of him and me inside my garden. But...no.

I place my hands on his chest, pushing gently. "James, we can't do this."

"Don't worry," he says, that devilish grin spreading across his face, "We're not going to get caught."

He leans in to kiss me again and I stop him. "I'm sorry. We really can't."

All the playfulness wipes from his face and he takes a step back.  
"Why?"

"It's a really bad time for me..." I say, hedging around the reason.  
"Yesterday was amazing. I just can't do it again."

A little laugh escapes him, but there's an edge to it. "I didn't think you were one of those girls."

"What girls?" I ask, my voice coming out harsher than I meant it to.

He shrugs. "A thrill seeker."

"What?" I'm confused, and defensive. "I don't understand—" I stop as I look at him, the reality of what he's saying hitting me. "Are you *kidding* me? You think the reason we have to stop is that I wanted to slum it with you and then dump you?"

He doesn't say anything, looking at the ground. Anger pours into me, freeing me of any of my restraint. "If it weren't that I have everything—*everything*—to lose in the next week, I'd be fucking your brains out right now. But I can't, because if we are caught, then my father will lose his shit. He'll go back on his deal with me. He'll destroy my career before it starts!"

"Vera—" he starts, but I don't let him finish.

"He'll force me to do the one thing I will *never* want to do which is work for him. Because his daughter having sex with the pool guy could get out and damage his reputation—and his business—and you never, *ever*

damage the business. It doesn't matter what I want, or that I love designing houses for families who deserve them but can't afford them. It doesn't matter that I have no interest in helping millionaires looking for their fifth house. My father will own me."

I know that my voice is louder than it should be, but I can't stop. "I don't know what made you think I was the kind of girl who would do that to someone. If you really think that's who I am then you can fuck off right now. I don't just go around screwing people. I don't know why I'm so attracted to you, but I am, and yesterday was amazing and it was incredibly difficult for me to tell you to stop, but we have to." I'm a bit out of breath now. "In short, that is why I am not currently fucking you in the garden."

James is staring at me now, mouth open in shock. "Wow," he says.

"Yeah."

He reaches out like he's going to touch me, then thinks better of it. "That was a terrible thing for me to say."

"Why would you think that?"

"I don't," he says quickly.

"There must be a reason why that's the first thing that came to your mind."

James shakes his head. "I've never slept with anyone on a job before, but—"

"Someone tried?"

He nods. "And she made it clear why."

I don't know what to say to that. It's terrible that that happened, but what he said was terrible too.

"I apologize, Vera. It wasn't fair for me to assume that. And you obviously don't owe me anything." He slides his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "I don't expect you to excuse that I said it, but I am sorry."

"We don't know each other that well yet," I say, "so we'll make an agreement here. No assumptions. Nothing good comes from them."

"You're right, and I can agree to that."

"Then I accept your apology," I say.

"That was a lot of information you just gave me," James says. "And I get it. I do."

"Thanks."

"And I can wait."

Did I hear that right? "What?"

“You said you have everything to lose in the next week. I can wait that long.”

“But—”

He keeps going, “There’s something here. There’s something between us. I want to figure out what it is, and I think you do, too.”

I can’t answer.

I have no answer, because he’s not wrong.

“So I’ll wait for you while you handle your business, but this isn’t over.”

I think my heart stops beating, because he’s still not wrong. Just the fact that my body warms up at those words proves that it’s not over. Hell, it hasn’t even started.

“Unless...” He takes a step toward me. “Is waiting really what you want?”

“No,” I breathe. “But I don’t know another way.”

“I’m sure we can find one.” He kisses me. It’s a gentle kiss, but it is unyielding. I swear I can feel that kiss in every pore, and god I want more. He wraps an arm around me, pressing me into him. My hips are pressed against his, my breasts pressed against his naked skin and I still want to be closer. But instead he’s pulling away, smiling softly. It’s maddening.

“Fine, you’re right, it’s not over,” I say, and he laughs.

“Can I ask you something?” He looks back toward the house.

“Sure.”

“You said you like to design low-income housing?”

I nod. “Yeah. It’s what I want to do.”

There’s a light in his eyes and he seems excited. “Do you have designs here?”

I smile. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

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**VERA**

Having James in my room is...weird. It's oddly intimate. I've only ever had boyfriends while I was away at school, so none of them ever saw this room. And James isn't even my boyfriend, is he? I don't know what we are at the moment. We're nebulous.

Sneaking him up here wasn't easy either. I took the long way around through the garage and up the back stairs, making sure to stay as far away from my father's office as possible. I'm sure on the surface my parents wouldn't object to James looking at my architectural designs, but 'better safe than sorry' seems like a motto I should live by in this situation. Thankfully he has his shirt on. He's less distracting that way.

"Here," I say, leading him over to the drafting table. But he's not looking at the designs. Instead, he's looking around my room. I blush, wondering what he's thinking of the things I keep here. What does it say about me? What do the colors and books reveal about my personality that he might not have known? Finally he comes to where I'm standing, and I show him the different version of my ELIH house and the breakdown of affordable and eco-friendly materials I hope will be used.

I didn't expect for him to contribute. But instead of just looking at my designs, he points out places where they can be better. Places where I can add more functionality. As I nod along with him, I suddenly realize he may not be the only one who made assumptions about the other.

"Thank you," I say. "This will help. Now if someone would only be interested in the designs."

James flips back through the different versions one more time. “I have no doubt that they will,” he says. “They’re really good.”

I bite my lip to keep from smiling too widely. I think they’re pretty good too, but they’re all about function—not usually the type of architectural designs that get a lot of praise. So far in my experience, no one really cares about houses for poor people.

There’s a chiming sound, and I realize it’s the doorbell. I look over at my clock. It’s six. *Shit*. I got so carried away with James and the designs that I forgot about my dad’s guests. I’m not even close to being ready. I run into my closet and shut the door. I grab the first dress I see that’s appropriate—a short black one that’s pretty but tame enough for my father not to give me any disapproving looks.

I hear James’s voice from outside the door. “You don’t have to hide. I’ve already seen you naked.” His voice is amused.

“Funny,” I say, grabbing a pair of short black heels.

I slip them on and come out of the closet, going straight to the vanity. Light makeup it is.

I can see James gaping at me in the mirror. “I think you might be superman,” he says.

“Why?”

“Because that’s the fastest I’ve ever seen anyone change.”

A smile creeps across my face as I put in a pair of silver earrings. I run a brush through my hair and opt only for a quick sweep of mascara and a little dab of lip gloss. “Good enough,” I say.

“More than good.”

“I’m really sorry I lost track of time. Wait till we’re seated in the dining room—you won’t have any problem leaving after that.”

James grabs my hand to pull me against him, and kisses me. It’s light and teasing and god I can’t be thinking about this when I’m with my parents. “I could think of some ways for you to lose track of more time,” he says.

“I wish,” I say, laughing and making him stop. “I have to go.”

\* \* \*

I think this dinner has been the longest meal of my entire life. In fact, I think that my father's clients somehow *broke* time to make this seem like forever. This couple is rich as sin and they're commissioning my father to build a house for them on a piece of beachfront property they recently purchased. The woman's laugh is on my last nerve. It was on my last nerve even before she asked, "So, Vera, what do you do?"

I didn't get the chance to answer. My father chimed in immediately. "Following in my footsteps." There was a giant smile on his face, even though I knew it was fake. "I've been trying to convince her to come work for me. We'd be unstoppable."

"Cheers to that," the husband had said, and raised his glass to us. I pressed my lips together and tried to smile. Take a drink. Chew my food. Just get through it.

It's almost nine now and I feel like I'm slowly dying. This couple has said nothing of actual substance the entire night. It has been all about their other properties, their exploits in society, and the woman's trips abroad to go shopping. I like shopping as much as the next girl, but I don't have to switch continents to do it.

When my mother finally signals to one of our staff to clear the plates from the table I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. She gestures to our guests and asks me, "Will you join us in the lounge for some coffee?"

We all stand. "If you don't mind," I say, "I think I'm going to call it an early night. I've got to get an early start tomorrow. It was nice to meet you." I shake their hands, ignore their slightly surprised goodbyes and make my escape. I can deal with it if I get a lecture tomorrow, but I am not going to spend another hour listening to them talk.

I take my heels off at the top of the stairs, letting my feet breathe the rest of the way to my room. I wasn't planning on actually going to bed when I said it, but I might. I'm tired—I never knew boredom could make you that tired. Guess that's something I should be aware of from now on. I toss my heels in the corner of the room and take out my earrings.

"How was dinner?"

I swear I jump about a foot. James is lounging on my bed—I was so distracted I didn't even see him when I came in. My heart is pounding from the adrenaline. "What the hell are you still doing here?" This surprises me, but I can't say I'm not happy about it.

He says, “I have two answers to that.”

“And they are?”

“The first is that I didn’t want our biggest interaction today to be a fight. And the second, is that you wished.”

I give him a look. “I wished what?”

“Before you went down to dinner, I told you I could think of some ways for us to lose track of time, and you said ‘I wish.’” He shrugs. “Well...”

I start laughing. “You want to have sex with me while my parents and my father’s clients are in the house?”

“If by sex,” he says, lowering his voice, “you mean stripping you down and pleasuring you till you can’t breathe, then yes.”

My stomach drops to the floor. Even as my body heats up and I feel myself get wet, my mind is panicking. “This isn’t what I thought you meant when you said we’d figure it out,” I say. “You said you’d wait.”

“I *can* wait,” he says, “if that’s what you really want. But if you’re willing to take the risk, I’m going to take you to bed. And I’m going to fuck you until we’re both satisfied.”

My pulse jumps again, and I can feel the wetness in my pussy soaking through. I think about the risk. It’s been years since either of my parents set foot in my room—their master bedroom is in another part of the house. And they’ll be occupied for at least another hour...

The absurdity of these thoughts suddenly hits me. I am an adult, and I don’t need to sneak around. I want this man, and if I want to let him take me to bed then I’m going to do that. It’s none of their business. I walk over to my bedroom door and lock it.

“Does that mean what I think it means?” James asks.

“Shut up,” I say, straddling him where he’s sitting, “and take me to bed.”

He doesn’t need to be told twice.

His arms reach around me, pressing our bodies together as he devours my mouth. I can feel his hardness through his jeans and a shudder goes through me at the memory of it and the anticipation. His fingers are at the hem of my dress, and I raise my arms to let him take it off. My bra follows and he’s kissing me again, hands roaming my skin and spine.

Something rushes through me, like a door has been opened, and I can suddenly *feel*. The vulnerability of being held by him—nearly naked—

undoes me. It's so simple, and yet I know deep in my gut I've never felt anything quite like this.

He raises his arms, and I remove his shirt so I can see his naked skin for the second time today. This time I get to touch him, fingers tracing and teasing. I taste him. My lips are on his collarbone and I let my teeth graze along his skin just so I can feel him shudder. And then James moves and he's over me on the bed, eyes filled with lust and fire.

"Are you satisfied?" he asks.

"What?"

"I said I was going to take you to bed until we were both satisfied. So I'm going to keep asking you. Are you satisfied?"

"No," I say. How long will it take me to be satisfied? I've never craved anything like this, and I'm a little worried I might never have enough.

His hand slides down my stomach and suddenly he's there. His hand is in my underwear, his fingers sliding through the slickness of my pussy. My back arches up and I try pushing my mound against his palm as he teases me. He's touching me everywhere but where I want. His fingertips draw along the sides of my opening. They swoop up and above my clit. Each touch is closer, and closer, but never giving me what I crave.

"I'm going to taste you," he says, and he presses his mouth against me through my panties. He sucks through the fabric, and I can feel his tongue pressing into me, and the scratch of cloth inside of me. The feeling is so raw and alien that I get wetter. I know he feels it too.

He pushes the fabric aside and licks my hot skin, and I swear loudly. He laughs, and the sound vibrates through me. I can't breathe. He uses his teeth on me, softly biting my clit and pulling. I get wetter again, and he doesn't let any of my juices escape. He covers me with his mouth, and my mind cannot process the fact that he's drinking me.

He pulls away and removes my panties and in seconds his head is between my thighs again and I'm fisting my hands in the bedspread. He hums against my clit, and I swear I will throw my vibrator away because even his voice is better than that thing. My hips move against his face and I can't control it. This is exactly everything I needed.

He slides his hand under my ass, and I feel his finger pressing against me there. I freeze, anxiety rushing in. "Trust me," he says, nipping the inside of my thigh. "Let me in. Relax."

He isolates my clit between his lips and pulls, sucking and biting and making it swell. The wave of pleasure that rides over me gives him his chance and he slips the tip of his finger into my ass. I gasp, the intrusion feeling huge and wrong and right and I don't know.

"You've never done this?" he asks.

My voice is barely a breath. "No." I manage to lean up and look at him between my legs. His smile is nothing but sin as he locks eyes with me and licks my pussy. Just the sight of him licking me nearly sends me to the brink, but he takes his time. He keeps licking and holding me on the edge as long as possible. The finger in my ass presses deeper, sending strange new sparks through my body. He pulls it out a little, pushes it in. Out, in, out, and in. I close my eyes.

The sensation is wholly new and I can't say that I don't like it. His finger moves faster, and his tongue goes to work again, thrusting deep inside me. Oh god. Fuck. I think I'm swearing out loud. He's fucking my ass and my pussy at the same time and my body can't keep up with the rhythm. Every stroke is a wave of pleasure and I don't have time to recover and he knows that and he doesn't stop, he just goes faster.

His tongue sweeps across me and suddenly I'm blind as the orgasm hits. Pleasure rushes up and over me, everything centering on his goddamn tongue. He doesn't stop, and his hand doesn't either and *oh my god oh my god* a second orgasm hits as his finger plunges far inside my ass. This one comes from far deeper. A rushing tide of brightness hits my body and I can't breathe, hear, or see anything. Somewhere I feel my back arching off the bed, I hear myself crying out, but I can't do anything. All I can do is feel that rush of delicious pleasure soak my every nerve and leave me limp and breathless.

It's his voice that brings me back.

"Vera?"

"Mmm?"

I hear him chuckle, feel his legs on either side of my hips. He's naked now. I wonder when that happened. "Are you satisfied?" he asks.

"God yes."

"It's too bad that I'm not."

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## JAMES

I could watch Vera come forever. She's gorgeous the way she lets go, letting herself feel everything that I give her. The sight of her dazed and sated makes my cock uncomfortably hard, and I can't wait to plunge myself deep inside her. But first I want to play. I meant what I said—I'm not satisfied yet, not with her pleasure or with mine. I watch as she slowly comes back to herself, sees me straddling her. I watch her smile at me with a sweet and seductive expression that is entirely sex.

I lean down to her so that our faces are close. "I meant it. I'm going to fuck you until we're both satisfied."

"I believe you."

"But do you know what I want to do before that?" Her eyes grow dark and a flush creeps up her chest and neck. I kiss her softly, punctuating my words. "I want to fuck your perfect tits until I come in your mouth."

I kiss her again, pausing to pull back and look at her. I raise an eyebrow, asking. She nods, and I kiss her again, plunging my tongue into her mouth the way I'm going to plunge my cock into her.

I glance over at the nightstand and see a jar of lotion. I reach for it and spread a generous amount on my hands. Then I touch her breasts. I didn't have a chance to explore these properly yesterday. I cover them with lotion, massaging around the sides and over her nipples and back. I pinch her nipples, pulling on them until they're hard and she groans. Her breasts are glistening with lotion now, and I press them together.

I slide my cock into the valley between her breasts. "Oh, fuck. This feels amazing."

It does, better than I even imagined it would. I keep going, watching the tip of my cock press through to the other side of her breasts, so, so close to her mouth. The tip slides back and forth slowly, and she nearly makes me come when she flicks her tongue out to lick me. I'm not going to last long. I'm too aroused, and I want her too badly to hold off.

She moves her hands to her breasts, holding them together so I don't have to. She presses harder than I was, and the feeling of her skin squeezing me pulls a groan from my throat. I lean forward, taking my weight on my arms, and I start to fuck. I watch my cock appear and disappear in the valley of her tits and it makes me harder.

She presses her head down, and suddenly the head of my cock is in her mouth with every thrust and—*shit*. My balls tighten and I know I'm going to come, and soon. I try to hold it off as long as possible, wanting to savor this feeling. It's her tongue that does me in. She's flicking it over me when I'm in her mouth and I can't stop it now. I feel my muscles spasm as my rhythm becomes erratic.

I manage to form the words, "Open your mouth," seconds before I come. She does and I watch as my cock shoots streams of hot cum across her tongue. It drips down and pools, and when I'm spent and gasping she closes her mouth. I watch her swallow, locking eyes with me the whole time, and it's so hot that I nearly come again.

She sucks the tip of my cock, cleaning the last bit of semen from it. "Satisfied?" she asks.

"Not nearly." I thread my fingers under her head and through her hair, lifting. "Keep doing that." I close my eyes.

She swirls her tongue over the head of my cock, sucking as deep as she can. I hold her head still, keeping her mouth on me as the blood flows back in. It doesn't take very long until I'm hard again. Maybe harder than before. I release her, and that smirk is still there. Not for long. I jump off the bed and search through my clothes for the condoms I brought just in case. I slip one on before returning to her. "When I'm done with you, you won't be smirking."

"Want to bet?" she teases, laughing.

"I never bet." I slide a finger into her and she's still so wet. Hot and tight, I feel her pussy squeeze my finger. Then I lift her legs, folding them up so she's spread open for me. There's no more room for foreplay. Fitting myself right against her slit, I slide in to the hilt in one smooth motion. Vera

gasps, and I stop, letting her adjust to my size. The angle lets me far deeper into her pussy than yesterday, and I plan on using every inch. The feral, manly part of me loves that I have to let her adjust to me. It loves that I'm probably the biggest she's ever had.

I move my hips, testing, and hers respond in kind. I lift out of her slowly before slamming in deep. Then I go hard. The pace I set is wild and fierce, plunging inside of her over and over. Her eyes are closed and her mouth is open and I can see her breath coming in gasps. My balls are slapping against her and I love that sound—*god she feels so good*. Her pussy contracts, squeezing me tight, and I stop thinking. I fuck.

I'm leaning over her now and our faces are together and we're gasping the same air and I can't slow down. Reaching down between us, I find her clit and pinch, my fingers sliding across it because she's so wet. Her eyes fly open and her muscles jerk and I see the moment she comes. Her arms tighten around me, holding onto me as an anchor as she shudders uncontrollably and her pussy spasms, drenching my cock with her cum.

I feel my own orgasm coming, and I spread her legs wider as I speed up. I'm slamming into her at full force and she takes all of me. The feeling hits me all at once, covering my whole body as I thrust into her and hold, my cock exploding with pleasure. It pulses through me, and I let my head fall onto her chest. She's breathing just as hard as I am. I lick her nipple, and I hear her moan.

“Satisfied?” I manage to ask, my breath heaving.

“More than.”

I pull out of her, letting her legs down. I clean myself up before returning to the bed and letting myself down next to her. We lay together, both limp and gasping. I slip my arm around her waist and pull her close, breathing her in. I place my lips against her ear close enough that she'll feel my breath. “You’re addicting,” I say.

“I know,” she says, and I laugh. She does too, her eyes crinkling. “You are too.”

We breathe in silence for a while. I draw tiny patterns on her skin and she closes her eyes.

“If we’re going to figure this out,” I say, “then it can’t be just this.”

Vera turns toward me, and there’s a mask of pretend devastation on her face. “You mean we can’t just continue to have amazing and shallow sex?”

It makes me laugh. I thread my fingers through her hair and pull her against me, sweeping my tongue across her lips before I kiss her. “We are *not* going to stop having amazing shallow sex,” I say. “I still haven’t kept my promise to make you scream my name. I will take you anywhere you let me,” I go on, pulling us closer together so she feels my body against hers, “I want to go to your garden and spread you open, fucking you on the grass. I want you to ride me until I’m soaked with you. I want to bring you to the edge as many times as I can before you come so that you have the best orgasm of your life.”

I feel her heart rate speed up against my chest and I watch the possibilities of what I’m saying form behind her eyes. I continue, “And when I finally get you into *my* bed, the things I’m going to do to you...”

She shivers, and not from the cold.

“But I have every intention of taking you somewhere we don’t have to hide. Where we can get to know each other, and neither of us are afraid of getting caught or the consequences.”

A smile blooms on her face. “Are you asking me on a date?”

“I am. Because I know almost nothing about you other than that you like to design houses and I can’t get enough of the way you taste.”

Something about the way her face flushes with embarrassment makes my dick twitch, and I want to flip her over and show her just how much I mean it. But I need to show her that I want more than that.

She says, “Well, I don’t know anything about you other than that I can’t stop thinking about you.” She’s silent for a moment. “You know more about me than I do about you. I haven’t even asked. I could have when we were working together yesterday and I didn’t. Guess that was pretty thoughtless.”

“That you didn’t ask for my life story?” I laugh softly. “So you didn’t predict that this would happen. Besides, that’s what first dates are for, right?”

Her fingers slide between us, down my stomach. I catch her hand because if she goes any lower my body is going to realize that the night is barely half over.

“So, when?” I ask.

“I have an interview on Thursday. I need tomorrow to prepare.”

“Friday it is,” I say. “Any food you hate?”

She shakes her head. “No, but I am partial to Italian.”

“I’ll let you know where.” I have the perfect place in mind, but maybe I can think of something else special before everything is set in stone.

“Okay.”

We breathe in silence again, and I feel Vera’s body relax further. Her eyes are closed, her lips parted. If she’s not asleep then she’s almost there. It’s time for me to go, so I slowly untangle myself from her body, and cover her with as much of the blanket as I can without disturbing her. I find my clothes and put them on.

*Shit.* How am I going to get out of here? If Vera’s that concerned about her family then walking out the front door isn’t the best idea I’ve had. I lean over her and press a kiss to her lips. It works, her body stirring under me. “I need to go, Vera.”

Her voice is heavy with sleep. “Why?”

“Because,” I say, laughing. “I need a shower, and I need to put my clothes on so I can come back. But how can I leave?”

She points to the window.

“Alarm?” I ask.

“I’m an architect’s daughter—disconnected that years ago.” She closes her eyes again and snuggles down in her pillow. “But I can’t believe you’re sneaking out the window.”

I kiss her one last time. “Yeah, I’m a big cliché.”

It’s not a lie, the poor guy falling for the rich girl. And I can’t say that I’m not nervous. This could all go very wrong very quickly.

The rational part of me tells me that I should shut up and enjoy the amazing sex as long as I can, damn the consequences. But for some reason this feels bigger than that. I don’t want to limit it to just sex, because I like what I see beyond that. And it’s something that hasn’t happened in a long time.

Using the tree outside her window, I manage to get out of the house. I do feel like a teenager and a total cliché, but it’s worth it.

I hope it will be worth it.

I slip off into the dark and head for home.



## VERA

I wake up to an unexpected breeze on my face. My window is open from when James left through it last night. Just the thought makes me laugh stupidly. I have an interview tomorrow, and...I also have a date. I smile into my pillow, embarrassed by how happy both of those things make me feel. Especially the second one as it seeps through my skin like the sunshine and settles in my stomach.

I have today to prepare my portfolio for my interview with The Harrison Foundation. It's in good shape, but I want it to be perfect. I would love to finish up the design for the ELIH house to show them. But first, my stomach is growling.

Grabbing breakfast is easy, and I catch myself looking for James out the patio doors more than once. But I don't see him. He's spent the last two days close to the house so he's probably working on the farther edges of our property.

*That's okay,* I rationalize it to myself. I'm more disappointed than I ought to be, but...

It's a beautiful day. No reason I can't work on my design on the balcony. I practically sprint back to my room and grab my smaller, portable drafting table and set it up on the balcony outside our upstairs sitting room. It's the same balcony my mother was sitting on when James and I came so close to being discovered. I glance down at that window and I feel myself flush.

I make another trip back to my room and grab the design and my supplies. This is a great idea. The temperature is perfect, and I avoid the

inevitable distraction of going to my window every few minutes trying to catch a glimpse of James. After setting up, I work on the design for a while, smoothing and perfecting it. I include some of what James pointed out yesterday. It's in pretty good shape now, but I probably have another couple hours of tinkering before I'm totally finished.

The door behind me opens and my mother comes out on the balcony.  
“May I join you?”

“Sure.”

She has one of her books with her, and a pen. My mother loves to annotate her books. She’s constantly reading anything she can get her hands on. I honestly think reading might be the great love of her life.

“You’ve been working out here a while. For anything in particular?”

I glance at her sideways to gauge her reaction. “I have an interview tomorrow at The Harrison Foundation. I’d like this to be finished for them.”

“That’s good news.” She’s smiling.

“Do you really think that?”

She sighs. “Vera, I want you to be happy, and I want you to do what you want to do. But I also don’t think those things are impossible working for your father. After a while, once you have more experience, I’m sure you’ll be able to do whatever you want. Wherever you want. He’s just worried for you.”

“But that’s just it,” I say. “He’s forcing me into this now—what makes you think he’ll let me go my own way later? He wants me to run the company.”

“Is that the worst thing in the world?”

I think it over for a moment. “I suppose not. But if he saw what I wanted to do with it, he might not feel that way.”

Mom tilts her head, a questioning look on her face. “Why?”

“Because,” I laugh, “If I ran the company it would be completely different. I would take its resources and invest in other companies. I would focus on building houses for people who can’t—” I break off, knowing that this won’t help anything. “I’ve already given you this speech, Mom. You know what I want.”

She gives me a smile. “You’re still young, dear. I’m sure everything will work out.”

“Yeah,” I say, stifling a sigh just as I spot a flash of that horrifying blue polo coming towards the house.

James is wearing gloves and carrying giant shears—so *he was working on trimming the privacy hedge*. No wonder I couldn't see him earlier. The privacy hedge is huge. He glances up at me, and I give him a quick smile before ducking my head back down to my design. I can't do anything. Not with my mother right here.

He disappears into the garden shed, and I draw a few lines before I faintly hear the door open again. Glancing over at my mother, I see that she is engrossed in her book, making a note in the margin. I straighten up, disguising my look as a stretch. James comes around the corner and stops where I can see him. Slowly, seductively, he lifts up his shirt so I can see his abs. His other hand runs across his torso and down, rubbing himself through his jeans.

My mouth goes dry with a combination of panic and lust. Then he turns and it was like he never even stopped. He's heading back out beyond my view and I'm left with my paper and an overactive imagination. I focus my eyes on my drafting table again, ignoring the warm feeling in my pussy. I take a few deep breaths before I set my pencil to paper again. I'm trying to exhale the excess energy that I suddenly seem to be feeling.

Luckily my mother is still engrossed in her book and hasn't noticed the air shift around us. I take my eraser and begin the process of cleaning my lines. I'm a total stickler for clean drafts and I want this to impress. It's slow going and I have to shake out my hand every few minutes because it gets so tense. I'm not even a third of the way done when I see him again.

He pushes the wheelbarrow out toward the house, filled with various landscaping supplies. I can feel his eyes on me from the moment we can see each other. I will not return his look. I will not stare.

Fuck. I looked. Why is this so hard?

I barely resist the urge to bang my head on the table in frustration. He goes into the shed, and I don't think I breathe the entire time he stays in there. What if he does what he did last time? What if my mother sees?

When he comes out of the shed he doesn't look at me, instead crossing the yard. He stops well within view of me, but now my mom would have to turn in her chair to see him. Then he turns and I see why. Every ounce of breath in my body disappears. His jeans are open and his cock is in his hand. I can see even from here that he's hard. When I look up I realize that he is also watching me as he slowly strokes himself. My pussy clenches in response, and I try to swallow but find that I can't. This is insane.

“I’m going to get a drink,” I say as casually as I can. “Do you want anything?”

“No, thank you,” Mom says, barely looking up from her book.

James is leaning against a tree, eyes closed in pleasure as he touches himself. God, I’m going to kill him. And later, I’m going to fuck him.

Once inside I get downstairs as quickly as possible. I tiptoe outside, trying to keep the patio door silent. I sprint to where James is standing and yank him back toward the house. All the way, until we’re pressed up against the wall where my mother won’t be able to see us. She could still hear us though.

James stands in front of me now, cock still standing at attention in the open. He’s grinning, and he starts to stroke himself again.

“Are you crazy?” I hiss through my teeth.

“Maybe.”

I glare at him. “You can’t just do things like that.”

“It got you to come down here, didn’t it?”

“I’m prepping for my interview,” I say.

He smiles, and it’s a beautiful smile like he isn’t standing in front of me with his shaft at attention. “You looked like you could use a break.”

I sigh, unable to keep my eyes off him. “Why did you work so hard to get me down here?” Our whispers are soft, and hopefully inaudible.

“I thought of another thing I want to do with you.”

“Oh?” Sarcasm drips from my voice. “How can I serve you today?”

“Jerk me off.”

It takes me completely by surprise. “What?”

He takes a step forward, his arms bracing the wall behind me and closing me in. His erection is pressing into my stomach. “Jerk. Me. Off,” he says, his voice so low and dirty I can feel my pussy contract. “I want to feel your hands on me, stroking me until I come. And when you need another break...well, then it will be your turn.”

Everything suddenly comes into sharp focus. I feel the soft breeze blowing through the yard, the wall behind me digging into my back, the heat of his cock through my shirt. His face is so close to mine and we’re breathing each other’s breath. “I guess this is part of that amazing sex we’re still having?” I ask.

“You could say that.”

I lick my lips, unable to stop myself from teasing him. “And why should I do what you say?”

“No one’s forcing you,” he says, a hint of a smile on his lips, “but I think life’s better when you take some risks. And you, Vera Caldwell, you do not take them. I think I can help with that. So today, you do what I tell you.” He presses lips against mine roughly, thrusting his tongue into me. Oh god, it feels like he’s fucking my mouth with his. Heat spreads through me like a fever and I may have changed my mind. Maybe I’ll fuck him now.

He breaks our kiss. “Vera, put your hands on me. Now.”

I do. Reaching between us, I take hold of his cock. It twitches in my hand and I start to stroke him. Our foreheads are pressed together, and his breathing is uneven. I lick one hand and then the other, giving them slick friction. I use them both, squeezing and twisting as I increase my pace. James bites his lip and I think it might be the sexiest thing I’ve seen on his face.

Suddenly I change the rhythm, now giving him slow and deliberate. I fist my hands around him and drag along his cock from base to tip and back. I slowly fuck him with my hands and suddenly his eyes fly open and his body stiffens. His cock shudders in my hand and he spills over into my palm. I feel his come drip between my fingers. He groans softly, “Fuck.”

I’m aroused beyond belief and I know that if he were to touch me right now I’d be seconds away from coming. He doesn’t move, and we’re frozen for a second, recovering. My hand is still covered in him, and a feeling of raw power flows into me. The knowledge that I made him come, that I can bring him that kind of pleasure. I want him and I want him now. “James,” I say softly.

Then he smiles. “I think you’re going to like what I have planned for you.”

My stomach tightens, and if I hadn’t been wet before that would have done the trick. “Take me now.”

He leans into me, and we’re eye to eye. “Finish your design. Meet me in your garden in exactly two hours.” Two hours? I groan. If I can make it that long I’ll be amazed. Then, as if he can read my thoughts he says, “And no cheating. If you come before I get to take my time with you, I’ll know.” He kisses me, a rough press of lips and tongue, and then he is gone. I lean against the wall, staring after him. Two hours to go.

I go back inside and get the drink I made my excuses for and go back to the balcony and my design. I clean my hands before I join my mother back on the balcony.

My mother looks up from her book. “That took a while.”

“Yeah,” I say, clearing my throat. “I got distracted. Realized I had to check something in my email.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, my voice overly cheery.

Two hours. I pick up my eraser and start to work. These designs are the only thing that will keep me sane.

\* \* \*

Times slips by and I think I’m as ready for the interview as I could ever be. Trying to keep my mind off of James and what he’s planned has turned me into an efficiency machine. I finish cleaning up the rest of my design and use my father’s studio to make some copies to add to my portfolio. I double-check said portfolio and made sure everything I need is in there. Then I check to make sure that all of it is still in perfect condition. I also double-check my interview clothes, a sleek suit that I save for occasions like this.

By the time the two-hour mark rolls around, I’m not only aroused and excited but also less anxious about the interview. I also changed into a skirt —my instinct tells me it will be easier this way. As I head outside, I’m relieved to see that my mother is no longer on the balcony. The garden is drenched in afternoon sun, and I stop to admire it. This is one of my favorite times to be here, when it’s quiet and sunny. No place has ever felt more like home than my little garden.

I hear his footsteps a second before his arms wrap around me from behind. “Hello.”

“Hi.”

He grabs my hand and tugs me into the garden. The grass under my bare feet is wet, like it’s just been watered. I should scold him for watering my garden again, but I have a feeling he’s about to make it up to me. “How’s your design?” he asks.

“All done.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I got pretty much everything done in the last two hours. I was incredibly focused.”

He laughs as he guides me to my bench; I picked it because I thought it was beautiful, and it became a great place for me to study on the weekends.

He tells me, “Sit down.” And I do. “Close your eyes.”

I do not. “Why?”

James smiles. “Because today you do what I say. And,” he adds, sitting down next to me, “I don’t want you thinking about anything besides what I’m about to do to you.” His voice pitches down on those last words and I shiver. I close my eyes. “Keep them closed.”

His hand is on my shoulder guiding me so I’m leaning against the back of the bench. Then it’s on my skirt, lifting, his fingers teasing my pussy through my underwear. My whole body is on alert, waiting for his next touch. All the arousal I’ve been ignoring the past two hours comes roaring back and I’m finding it hard to breathe.

“Do you trust me?” he asks.

“Yes.”

He’s no longer sitting next to me. His hands are on my knees and then my thighs and then my underwear are sliding away. James pushes my knees apart, and with my skirt up around my waist I can feel the air on my pussy. I have the urge to open my eyes, to make sure that we’re alone and that no one else can see me. But James asked me to trust him, and I will even if the thought of being vulnerable in the open makes me shake.

He draws my legs further apart, and I bite my lip. I’m holding my breath. There’s the lightest touch on my clit and my nerves crackle to life, sending heat through my core. There it is again—just a flick—barely there. He touches me over and over with his tongue, each touch a little stronger, each a little more curious. He drags the tip across the top, cutting so close to my throbbing center, and then I feel it explore underneath. And then he starts flicking from side to side. I can’t predict where he’ll go next.

When he slips a finger inside me, I groan. Sealing his mouth over me, he sucks hard while his hand works inside me. He adds another finger, curling them and stroking me from the inside. They slip across that spot that makes me go blind and my body jerks in response. I feel him smile against my pussy as he continues to work me with his tongue. The sensations inside and outside of me combine and send me straight toward the edge. It feels

like the pleasure is being drawn from everywhere in my body, all of it rushing between my legs to his lips locked against me. I feel that rush building. I let my head fall back and surrender, preparing for the wash of pleasure welling up within my body.

As he starts fucking me faster with his fingers, I savor the edge of pleasure before the fall. I'm close, so close, so—and then he stops. Entirely. His fingers don't move, his mouth leaving my pussy ice cold in the open breeze. My eyes fly open and I look down to find him grinning. "Not yet," he says. My jaw drops. I think I might kill him.

He tells me, "Close your eyes."

"James."

"Close your eyes, Vera."

I close them and clench my teeth together. It doesn't matter. As soon as he touches me again I'll be seconds away from my orgasm. It's still so close. But James doesn't touch me there. He takes his fingers out of me and then his hands are running along my thighs and down my calves. The muscles in my legs relax as he massages, and my orgasm fades.

There's a part of me that's seriously reconsidering the choice to trust him. His hands move to my feet, working out any tension he finds. I gasp as he works out a knot I didn't even know was there. Massage is definitely a career choice he should consider. When he's finished with my feet he moves up, reversing his trail until his hands are centimeters away from where I need them to be. The sound I make isn't ladylike, and I don't care.

"You're not being patient," he says, amusement evident.

My voice is more growl than girl. "Would you be?"

He laughs, and I get my wish. His mouth takes me, plunging his tongue deep inside, and my arousal comes crashing back with force. It's not slow this time, not exploring. His hands press my thighs wide as he devours me. Teeth graze my clit followed by lips and tongue. His pressing becomes pulling, and the licking becomes sucking and it inverses, reverses, beyond my control, everything driving me higher and higher as the feelings he gives me pulse deeper and deeper, the rush overtaking me as I imagine the feeling of his cock filling me all the way up and I realize I'm moaning and now I'm coming so hard I can hardly breathe.

The orgasm splinters through me, and I feel like I'm drowning in it. Those few seconds of sheer bliss are always too short. I fall back into myself, slowly blinking myself back to reality.

“Hmm...” James says, and I look down at him. “It seems like I got your pussy dirty. I guess I’ll have to clean it.”

I’m about to ask what on earth he’s taking about when I see him reach down to the ground. He has a garden hose in his hand, and it’s already running. Somewhere in my mind I realize that’s why the grass is wet. I don’t even have time to think. James moves the water and it’s flowing over me, and I gasp because everything is sensitive. The water is cool and the flow of it feels so good. He moves the water around, and it hits different parts of me, sending aftershocks through my nerves.

I watch James, and he is utterly focused on the water and my pussy. Then his fingers move and I understand his plan. He covers the water with his fingers and suddenly there’s hard pressure and— “Oh god.”

He’s drawing patterns on me with the water, always returning to my clit and teasing. Hard pressure, then soft, then hard again. It doesn’t take me long to realize that I’m going to come again. “Please,” I say, “Please. Yes. Yes.” The water moves back and forth over my clit and I can’t stop asking him. “Please don’t stop.”

The pressure slows, water moving in lazy circles over my pussy, “Are you begging me?” James asks.

“God, yes. Please. Make me come. Please.”

James locks his eyes on mine, and suddenly the water pressure is harder than it’s ever been. He doesn’t look away as he works it over my clit and I lose track of everything. He moves the water, circles and crosses, never stopping, and everywhere it goes is sheer pleasure. I still beg him to let me come, I’m so close, *God, please*. Suddenly his hand stops, the water at full force directly on my clit, and I break open.

I hold onto the bench as my orgasm wrenches through me in spasms. I feel heat and I see light. I savor that indescribable feeling deep in my gut. The water doesn’t stop and neither does my orgasm. I feel like it goes on forever and I’m fine staying here. I don’t even feel myself lie down. The pressure fades slowly back to a gentle flow, and then it’s gone. When I open my eyes again, I’m looking up at the sky. I feel his finger press against the top of my clit, dragging down through my folds, and dipping inside me. I shudder in response.

I feel James pull my skirt down over my legs again. He gets up, sits on the bench next to me. He pulls my legs over his. I feel like I should say

something, anything. But I can't find my voice to say anything. Instead I lean forward and kiss him.

"You are stunning when you come," he says, and I blush.

I'm furious at my body for blushing at that when his tongue was just inside me.

"Plus," he says, with a smirk on his face, "I got you to beg."

I make a face. "Well, that won't happen again."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Maybe." I smile.

We sit together in silence, looking at the garden. I'm struck by how comfortable this is. I'm also struck by how much I enjoy it, just sitting here together relaxing.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow?" he asks.

That's a good question. I shrug, mulling it over. "I'm going to do the best I can, make the best impression I can. But that's all I can do. Then it's out of my hands."

"Good attitude to have."

I laugh. "Well, I've had a lot of rejections by now—it's mostly self-preservation."

"I'm sure you'll be great," he says.

We sit in silence again, and then we hear the front gate. My father is home.

"I guess that's my cue." He extricates himself from my legs, and leans over to kiss me. "In case I don't see you before, I wish you the very best of luck."

"Thanks." I'm blushing again. Dammit.

He saunters away and there's no way I'm not looking at his ass. I should go back inside. I should move away in case someone saw him walking away from this direction, but I don't. I want to sit here for a while longer, keep the moment going as long as I can.

So I do.



## VERA

The Harrison foundation's office is in a glitz part of L.A. filled with boutiques and high-end restaurants. I'm pleasantly surprised by the relaxed nature of their offices. They have many windows, and everything is filled with natural light.

The interview itself feels like it is speeding by, but I think it's going well. The founder of the company, Rebecca Harrison, likes my work. As we get further into it, I realize that she is especially interested in my ELIH designs. The Harrison Foundation, in addition to their more high profile projects, does a significant amount of charity work.

When we've finished she asks if I'd like to visit one of their sites under construction. Of course I immediately accept. Seeing designs and concepts is one thing, seeing a building come into existence is a whole different ball game. The design we're going to see is a new town center, surrounded by houses, stores, and apartments. While we make our way over there, Rebecca tells me more about their charity work—which is also tied to this project. “It’s hard,” Rebecca says. “You have to balance the cost of the pro-bono construction with projects that are profitable, but we do what we can. I’ve chosen for the time being to focus on people who have lost their homes—particularly veterans and their families who have lost their houses due to medical bills.”

“That’s great,” I say.

“I’d like to expand the criteria we use at some point, but we’re not at the place where we have the capital.” She glances over at me and smiles.  
“We’re not a juggernaut like your father’s company.”

I laugh, trying to hide my nervousness. “That’s really okay with me. I’m looking for something a bit smaller and more personal.”

“Well we certainly are that.” She turns off the main road. “Anyway, several of the homes under construction in this neighborhood are part of our charity initiative. We contract the work to people who specialize in low-income housing. They know how to stretch the money further than we do, and that allows me to take on a couple more charity projects every year. Every little bit counts when you’re helping families survive.”

We’re driving through the bones of a neighborhood now. The skeletons of houses rising here and there. Here on the edges of the neighborhood things are just getting started and it looks more like a wasteland than the suburbs, but I can already tell it will be a nice place to live. Deeper into the neighborhood the houses become more finished, closer to being livable.

Rebecca slows down and points to a house on the right. “This is one of our pro-bono houses.”

It’s a nicely designed house. The framework is for a two-story house, and it looks like the windows and doors have recently gone in and the siding is mostly completed. “Looks like it will be beautiful,” I say.

“I hope so.”

Just then, a construction worker comes around the house carrying several two-by-fours, and I have to keep my mouth from falling open. It’s James. James is working on this house.

My mind goes blank—why is he here? He works construction as well as landscaping? I mean...the fields are certainly compatible, but...

Everything inside of me tells me this doesn’t make sense, but I don’t have time to puzzle it out. We’re driving on and into the town center, which is a beautiful confection of textures and color, a subdued color scheme of greys and blues along with stone and glass. It looks finished—minus retailers in the storefronts.

“This is gorgeous,” I say.

“Thank you.” Rebecca pulls into a parking space in the vast empty lot. “We’re hoping to use this as a model and show towns the benefits of creating built-in communities. If successful, I’d like to think we’ll build them all over the country.” She walks me around the town center, and it’s impressive. In the back of my mind I’m still freaking out about James, but I force myself to focus—*this is more important*.

After a tour and some final questions on Rebecca's part, we say our goodbyes. As I retrieve my bag and portfolio from her car, she asks, "Are you sure you don't need a ride back to my office?"

"No, thank you," I say. "I've got a family appointment, and I'm going to meet them. I'll have someone pick me up. Thank you so much for showing me this. It's lovely." It's sort of a lie, but a small one. I just know I can't leave here yet.

She waves as she gets into her car. "We'll be in touch."

"I look forward to hearing from you."

I watch her car until it disappears, and then start walking. I don't call a cab yet, because I'm going to find out why James is here building a house for the place interviewing me. It seems too convenient to be purely coincidence, but then again...I've heard of stranger things.

It takes me maybe fifteen minutes to get back to the house—and by that time I'm wishing I'd brought different shoes. I hear the sound of a drill from inside, and wonder if I should just ask him about it when I see him tomorrow—*No, if I don't ask him now it'll just burrow into my brain and drive me crazy before we even get to dinner tomorrow. And if there's something he's been keeping from me, maybe tomorrow is off the table.* I realize that it's just late afternoon, and wonder if he came here straight from my house.

I push open the door and see the first floor is mainly completed, though the finishing touches haven't been added yet. The sound of work is coming from the back of the house, and I wander through it, looking for him. The house is well done, with clean lines and lots of open space.

Finally, I find him. He's on a ladder installing a heavy iron and glass light fixture to the ceiling. I don't want to startle him when he's working with something so heavy and breakable, so I hang back, waiting until I see that it's secure.

Finally, he releases his hold.

"James," I say, and just like I thought he might, he jumps while scrambling to see who said his name.

There's confusion on his face that's quickly replaced by a genuine smile. "Hey there. What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," I say. "My interview was with The Harrison Foundation."

He hops off the ladder and comes over, all smiles. “That’s great! You didn’t mention who it was with. How’d it go?” He kisses me, and I find myself pulling away.

“I didn’t know that you were a contractor.”

He raises an eyebrow at me, and his voice is playful. “You thought I made a living as a pool boy?”

“Caretaker,” I say, blood rushing to my face as I realize how ridiculous I sound. “You do this on the side?”

“I do that on the side,” he says. He takes off the work gloves he’s wearing and stretches. “I think I mentioned I’m filling in for one of your guys this week. I took it for the extra money.”

A bunch of little things click into place all of a sudden. “That’s how you made all those great suggestions on my design. How you knew that they would work. Why didn’t you tell me what you really do?”

He shrugs. “It never came up. I mean the way we met...we talked about you and your fight with your dad and what you wanted to do with your life. And after that—”

“I didn’t ask.” A surge of shame washes through me. I assumed because he was doing the job of a caretaker that that’s all he did—that that’s all he was qualified for. I didn’t ask because I assumed that I already knew the answer. And there are a hundred assumptions that line up behind my assumed answer that led me to those conclusions.

I’m no better than that rich girl who tried to sleep with him just for the thrill, because I didn’t care to go any deeper.

“Vera?”

“I’m sorry.” Tears start burning my eyes. I try to blink them away. I turn away from James, even though there’s a zero percent chance he didn’t already see them.

“Hey,” he says, and I feel him come up behind me. “You’re okay. I knew we were going to talk on our date. Cover all the first date topics. We’re still going to, right?” He hugs me from behind. “You’ve had a crazy week. I don’t think less of you for not asking.”

“You probably should.”

“No,” he says, “I shouldn’t. We all come from a certain worldview. Some things are built into it. And we learn those limits, we grow as people.”

I close my eyes and relax against his chest. *Take the lesson, move on. Open up. Try. Okay.* Actually, I won’t have to try, because I know deep

down that I will never forget the shame of this moment. I will never forget the kind of assumptions I made about him.

“Okay,” I say out loud.

“Good.”

“Actually,” I say, “do you think we could have our date tonight?”

He turns me around to face him. “Why?”

“Because I don’t think I can wait until tomorrow to ask all the questions I have now.”

A lazy smile drifts across his mouth. “There you go being all impatient again.”

“You bring it out in me.”

“Do I?” I notice his eyes are focused on my mouth.

I tilt my face up, giving him the hint. “You bring a lot of things out in me.”

He kisses me, soft, slow and deep. We don’t come up for air, and my head spins. I grip his arms to keep from falling down.

“You win,” he says, finally breaking away. “As long as you’re okay with stopping by my house quickly so I can change.”

“Fine with me.” Who am I to argue with a chance to watch him change? That’s a sight I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of.

\* \* \*

I try not to sulk on the way to the mystery restaurant—James still won’t tell me where we’re going. He also made me stay in the car at his house. “Do you really think that if you come inside that we’re going to make it the restaurant?” he’d said. I mean...he had a point...but still.

I sigh audibly in my seat now, and James laughs. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be,” I say, putting on a mask of disappointment. “You denied me a chance to ogle you.”

“Don’t worry.” He puts his hand on my leg. “I plan on giving you many more chances.”

We pull up to a restaurant that borders the beach. It’s Italian, and I smile that he made a point to choose my favorite. We’re seated right away at a table overlooking the beach, and a soft breeze off the ocean plays through

my hair. The late afternoon sun slants toward us and the beach is practically shimmering.

I glance over the menu, and even though I feel like I should be adventurous, I opt for comfort. I order the baked ziti, James orders fettuccini and a bottle of wine. Good wine.

“So,” James says when the waiter leaves, “you said you had a bunch of questions. Shoot.”

I grab a piece of bread from the basket and spread butter on it to buy myself some time. Now that I have the opportunity to ask, I’m not sure what to ask first. I guess I’ll start with the most immediate. “What do you really do?”

“I’m a contractor. Specifically I try to focus on low-income housing, but there’s not always work in that area. I take the contracts I can get and do my best to stay in that vein. The Harrison Foundation has given me several contracts. They’re a good company. It would be great if you worked for them.”

“I hope so,” I murmur. “But if that’s what you do, then why are you cleaning my pool?”

The waiter stops by with our wine and pours us each a glass. I savor the first sip while waiting for his answer.

“Contracts don’t last forever,” he says, “and when there are none to be had, I still need a job. So I take on occasional landscaping gigs. I haven’t had to do it in a while, but I have a friend named Mike whose dad is having surgery this week. He likes working for your dad—he gives nice bonuses. Mike didn’t want the company to give his place at your house to someone else, so I said I’d fill in for him while he’s with his dad.”

Wow, I think to myself, *his willingness is amazing. And he’s so kind.*

“Mike also works on my crew when he can, so it’s the least he can do.”

“You have a crew?”

He takes a sip of wine and smiles. “If you can call them that. They’re mainly friends who are good with their hands. When I have extra money in the budget, I bring them on to help. Makes the job go faster, and they get paid.”

“That’s really nice of you,” I say, shoving another piece of bread in my mouth. His actions are staggering, really. I know that my father would never even consider doing something like that. There’s a twinge in my chest as I

realize it. I need something else from him, something lighter, and the first words out of my mouth are, “How old are you?”

He laughs at the abrupt shift in topic. “I’m twenty-seven.”

“Do you have siblings?”

His face falls. “Maybe.”

My breath catches, and I know I’ve stumbled onto something serious without meaning to. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

James holds out a hand. “It’s okay. My family history is complicated.” He takes a deep sip of wine, and it seems like he’s bracing myself.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I say.

“I know,” he says, “but it’s a huge part of where I am today. So I want to.” He takes another sip of wine. “My mother...she had me young. She wasn’t on good terms with her parents to begin with, and they kicked her out when she got pregnant. She worked odd jobs here and there, but there aren’t many opportunities for underage pregnant women.”

I nod, my brows knitting together in sympathy. “Yeah...”

“In the end, the story is unfortunately pretty typical. She lived in shelters when she could, on the streets when she couldn’t. She did what she had to, and unfortunately that mostly meant prostitution.” He breaks off as the waiter brings us our food. I can’t help but feel that it would be inappropriate to eat right now.

“I don’t remember a lot of that,” he continues. “Honestly. I do remember living in a house with a big backyard. There was a guy my mom was with, and he let us stay with him for a while. I remember being happier than I’d ever been while I was there. But then that guy was out of the picture and we had to leave. It became the same old thing of a different guy every night. Not long after, the cops were called and I was in the system.”

“Foster care?” I ask.

“Yeah, I bounced around a bunch of different homes until I was sixteen. I probably wasn’t a great kid. I had a lot of anger issues and I could never seem to settle in one place for long. My last foster home was bad. I butted heads with the guy, and we were at each other’s throats. I think at some point he was probably a good foster parent, but it got lost along the way. Really, if he had a bunch of kids like me living with him I wouldn’t be surprised. He’d go off all the time...all he wanted was his check and for the kids to be quiet, and that wasn’t me.”

He stops and takes a bite of his pasta, but I still can’t eat.

“We fought all the time and it got bad. We both hit each other multiple times. He threatened to get me thrown in juvie if I did it again, so I left. It wasn’t the smartest move, but by that time I knew that the social workers almost always believe the foster parents over the kid.”

I take a sip of my wine, and nod my head. “Where did you go?”

“I didn’t have anywhere to go.”

My heart plummets. “You were homeless.”

“For a while, yeah.” He looks at me and frowns. “Vera, eat. It’s all right. Ancient history.”

“How did you get here, then?”

He smiles. “Construction. After fending for myself for awhile I overheard someone talking about a construction job that was hiring people off the street since they needed workers so badly. At that point I was scrawny as anything, but I showed up. I lied about my age, I lied about where I lived, and they gave me the job. One of the foremen, Antony, he knew I was full of shit but he gave me the job anyway. He told me I had one day to prove myself and if I didn’t, I was out.”

“Let me guess. He let you stay.”

James nods and we share a smile. I finally take a bite of my pasta, holding back groan because it’s so delicious, and I appreciate it even more as I listen to James’ voice while he continues with his story.

“Antony kept letting me work whenever I showed up, and I tried to do the best work I could so that I would always be welcome back. He finally got me to admit that I was homeless, and he let me move in with him, sleep on his couch. He trained me in construction, and I finally started to get my own jobs when I showed people the solutions I’d found for using less expensive material.”

“He sounds like an amazing person,” I said.

“He was. And when Antony died, he left me his house.”

“Wow,” I say. We take a moment to eat, and James feeds me a bite of his fettucine, which is without a doubt the best I’ve ever had.

“I owe everything to him,” he goes on, “and I knew that if I screwed up he would come back and kick my ass. So I changed my name—I never knew my mom’s and I always used the name of my foster family. London, California was the place where that house with the big yard was, and it was the last place I felt truly happy. That became my last name. Then I started my own one-man company with the jobs I already had, and slowly started

to get more. I would work every possible odd job on the side until I could support myself. I swore that I would never be homeless again.” He takes another bite of his dinner. I watch as each chew softens the expression on his face. “But to answer your original question, I don’t know if I have siblings. Maybe. I’ll probably never know for sure.”

I can’t think of anything to say. What is the response to that? My own life has been so different that the contrast is shocking, and I’m immediately embarrassed by the ridiculous wealth that he sees every day at our house. “I’m sorry you had to go through that,” I say, hoping that it’s the right thing, or at least not the wrong thing. “And so young. You’re so strong. I wish...it had been different.”

He reaches across the table and takes my hand. “I don’t. Tough as it was, it made me who I am. And I can’t go back and change any of it, so staying angry or sad about it, or holding onto what hurt, doesn’t help anyone.”

“That’s a really great view.”

“Antony also sent me to therapy,” James says, chuckling. “But it’s true. I’m not sad about it. It led me to where I am. And I’m very happy where I am.” He squeezes my hand and I feel it in my gut. A deep and expansive feeling I’m not familiar with.

I drop my gaze into my pasta to avoid his eyes, both hoping and fearing I’ll see that same emotion clearly displayed on his face.

He squeezes my hand again. “Do I get questions too?”

“You already know a lot about me.”

“I don’t know why you want to build houses for poor people.”

After his story, I feel like the way I stumbled upon the concept pales in comparison. He has real life experience, and he knows what it’s like to have nothing. I’ve never wanted for anything in my life. “It’s going to seem silly.”

James sighs. “Vera, it’s not your fault you were born wealthy, and it’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’d never resent you for it. We both have things to learn from the other, and both experiences are valid.”

“I was in Peru,” I say, finally. “Family trip, and we were sight-seeing. It was the first time that I had seen something like that, these people who lived in these patched-together structures, and barely had a roof over their heads. I didn’t understand why their houses looked like that. I was young,

I'd only ever seen L.A., or Paris, or cities. My father's buildings. I realized that that was all they had, and I never forgot it."

"That doesn't sound silly at all." His gaze pierces into me, warm and supportive, and I feel the tightness in my chest start to loosen.

"My father pushed me to go into architecture. I knew it was because he wanted me to work for him. I told him from the start that I didn't want to do that, that I wanted to do something better. He didn't listen, and now...here we are."

He smiles, and I take the time to drink him in. I like every curve and angle of his face. I like where the light is captured, and the shadows form. I could lose myself in his eyes, dark as they are. I could spend a very long time looking at him. I've never been good at artistic drawing, but his face—*oh god, his body*—makes me want to try. He's spent his entire adult life building houses, and now I know exactly where that body came from.

"You're going to get the job," he says. "You're more than qualified, and you're perfect for it. There's no reason for you not to."

"Thanks. I kind of have to get it, though. My week is up tomorrow."

There's something hanging in the air, and I can't put a name to what it is. It's unformed and hovering, waiting for either of us to make it real.

He's braver than I am. "I like you, Vera. A lot."

My stomach drops into a free fall, the kind of exhilarating sensation you get from going over the top of a roller coaster. He likes me. A lot. And I like him, so much more than a lot. I clear my throat and take a sip of wine.

"You're okay," I say, winking.

He laughs, a huge belly laugh that draws looks from others in the restaurant. "Maybe we should keep our date for tomorrow night."

"I think I'd like that."

He settles the check and reaches for my hand. "Drive you home?" he asks.

"Not to your place?"

"And take you to bed on a first date?" He returns my wink. "What kind of gentleman would I be?"



## JAMES

Vera is quiet on the way back to her house, and I'd do anything to know what she's thinking. But at the same time I think she might need some space. I'm sure that my story is a lot of information to absorb in a short amount of time. I know that I'd need some space if someone dropped that kind of personal history on me. But I'm glad it's out in the open now, glad she knows the *real* me. I reach over and take her hand, and she weaves her fingers through mine.

The pit of my stomach warms up at the action, the heat spreads, and I feel it again. Something was in the air while we finished dinner. It's strange, and I think she felt it too. I feel impossibly close to this girl even though we've known each other such a short time. I haven't told anyone my history, not even Mike. But I wanted to tell her. I want to tell her more. I want to tell her absolutely everything about me.

I stop myself. Wow.

The air in the car grows close and I find it hard to breathe as the realization hits me like a freight train: my feelings for Vera are far deeper than I thought they were, and those feelings are far deeper than they have any right to be. The rest of the ride flies by as I grapple with whether or not I am falling for—*screw it*—I am falling for her. I've never felt anything this deep or this fast. I've never really gotten to know any woman well enough for it to even be a possibility.

What would Vera say?

*She'd probably think you were crazy. That's what.* For sure, now is not the time to bring it up with everything on her mind about her dad and her

career. Everything in me hopes that she gets the job. Not only would she be doing what she loved, but she could work with me. There is something warm at the thought of us working together. A hazy vision forms in my mind of all the things we could accomplish together with her brilliant designs and my practical skills.

I park down the block from her house, not wanting to alert her parents. They'll find out eventually I imagine, but that's her call until then. In the meantime I'll push her boundaries as far as she'll let me, but I'll never cross them. I turn to her, and with our linked hands I lift the back of hers to my mouth and press a kiss to her skin. "You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says, and I can see her blush in the dark. "Sorry I've been so quiet. I'm still anxious about how the interview went."

"You're going to get it," I say. *Please god, let her get it.*

She laughs, but it has no heart. "It's out of my hands, right?"

"That's right." I pull her close to me, wanting to feel her in my arms as much as possible in the small space. I kiss her, and it's a whole new world. In this moment, the softness of her lips are the only thing in existence that I could ever want. I want her. I want all of her. She kisses me back, and when her tongue runs along my lips I feel my cock wake up. I pull away gently, and I place one final chaste kiss on her lips.

"Unless you want to ride me in this car," I say, "we have to stop here."

"That's an idea," she replies with a twinkle in her eye.

"As much as I"—*and my cock*—"love that idea, I think you need sleep tonight."

There it is in the air again as she leans against me, kissing my lips, my jaw, my neck.

"James," she says softly, and it sounds so much like a moan I have to force myself not to take her right here. "I like you, too."

Before I can think of a reply, she gets out of the car and slams the door. I watch her walk away, putting the car back in drive after she waves from the gate. As I head home I can only think one thing: *I'm still in so much trouble, but this is the kind of trouble I want.*



## VERA

When I wake up, I find I have an email from Rebecca asking me to call her at my earliest convenience. It's only nine, and she sent the email a half-hour ago. Such fast news must be good, right? *It has to be.* I shake myself awake and grab my cell. I dial her number and wait for an answer. Butterflies are in my stomach. This is it. I can feel it tingling in my toes.

The receptionist. "The Harrison Foundation. How may I direct your call?"

"Good morning," I say, "this is Vera Caldwell calling for Rebecca Harrison."

"One moment, please."

I wait on the edge of my seat as chirpy hold-music plays in my ear. It doesn't even take a minute. "Rebecca Harrison."

"Hello, Rebecca. It's Vera Caldwell."

"Vera," she says, sounding happy, "I'm so glad you called."

"My pleasure."

She clears her throat, and my stomach tightens. "I have to say I am so sorry that you won't be joining us, but your father explained the situation and I wanted to thank you personally for the donation. With that, I'll be able to take on ten new charity homes."

*What?* I don't understand. She keeps talking.

"I do hope you'll consult with us, though. Your low-income plans are exactly what we're looking for here."

There's a sinking feeling in my gut and tears spring to my eyes. I do my best to keep them out of my voice. "Of course, I'd be happy to."

My father called her.

My father bought her off and she was going to give me the job. The job I've been working my ass off for and dreaming about for half my life.

A fury nothing like I've ever known fills me, followed by a crushing sadness. Because that money my father donated? The Foundation *needs* that money. Those families need that money, need the houses those funds will build. Rebecca continues with her thankful speech, and I don't know how much more I can listen to it, when I know she's thanking me for my father's betrayal.

"Just let me know if you need anything, Vera."

An idea forms, the very least I can do with this situation. "Actually, I have a request."

"Name it," she says.

"You have a contractor—James London?"

"Oh yes!" Her voice lights up. "We love James."

"He's a good friend, and I know he does good work. The homes you choose to build with the donation—schedule permitting, of course—would you consider giving those contracts to him?"

She laughs, "That seems simple enough. We're always happy to have him on board."

"Thank you," I say.

"I hope that we'll be speaking soon!" And she signs off.

I sit on my bed, utterly unable to move. I'm at war with myself, wanting to destroy something and at the same time wanting to crawl into my bed and hide for days. Then a resolve forms. *No. No hiding.*

I pull on clothes, not bothering with makeup. I don't have time for it. My anger won't wait for it. I go across the house to my father's office and throw open the door. I push it so hard I hear it slam against the wall with a very satisfying crack. My father is at his drafting table and I'm gratified by seeing his pen snag across the paper in his surprise.

"How much did it cost you?" I ask.

He finds his blotter and starts to work on the mistake I just made him make. "What are you talking about?" He isn't even looking at me.

My voice is loud and I hear it echo as I shout—*I don't care, let everyone hear*—“Bullshit! You know exactly what I'm talking about. The Harrison Foundation. How much did it take you to buy them off? How much did you

lose to make sure they were fine with you withdrawing me from the position?"

He looks up mildly. "Two million. I figured you would appreciate it."

"Appreciate it?" I seethe. "Why would I appreciate you sabotaging my career? I've dreamed of doing this kind of work since..." I trail off as my voice breaks with emotion.

He just rolls his eyes. My father, the great Timothy Caldwell, rolls his eyes. "Don't be so dramatic, Vera. You know you're blowing this entirely out of proportion."

I take a deep breath, desperately trying to keep from screaming at him. "I'm not being dramatic. You bought someone off—"

"I made a donation," he interjects.

"You bought someone off to *force me* to work for you."

He looks at me for a moment. "I suppose you can put it like that, if you insist. Though I'm doing it for your own good."

"If you were going to do this, going to force my hand," my fingers squeeze into fists and I desperately want to hit something, "then why make that deal with me at all? What was the point of the past three months of me looking for a job?"

The mistake on his plan fixed, my father puts his drafting tools away and fully turns to face me. "I wanted you to see just how hard it would be for you if you were on your own. I wanted you to appreciate the fact that I am handing you a career and a legacy on a platter. Most people would be grateful for the opportunity, Vera. I've worked hard to make sure you have a place in my company, and so you will accept it with grace. Understand me: this tantrum you're throwing will be the last time you will be allowed to behave this way."

"Tantrum," I say, a sudden and deadly cold flowing through my body. "Confronting you about this thing you did and standing up for myself is not a tantrum."

We stare at each other, and everything clicks with a horrifying certainty. Every rejection that I've received from my interviews referenced my father; my no-longer-future employers keep asking me to give him their best. I thought it was because he was famous. I'm realizing it's because he paid them off.

Every single interview I've had has been sabotaged by him.

"*You paid all of them off,*" I say, my voice taut.

He nods, as if there's nothing wrong with it. "I consider it an investment in the future of my company. We both know that your place is with me at the firm."

My mouth is dry. "Did you ever mean for me to find out?"

"Does it matter?" He shrugs. "It's the same result. Don't worry, I made a point of giving the money to the charitable divisions of all the companies. I figured that if you found out, the money would help you let go and get this charity kick out of your system."

"This *charity kick* is what I want to do. Not that you've cared to listen to that for the past four years I was working on my degree."

"And when you're my age and well established, if you still feel that burning need," he scoffs, "feel free. It will be your company by then. For now, you're twenty-two, my daughter, you live in my house, I paid for your education, and you're going to work for me."

I grit my teeth. "You can't make me do this. You can't force me."

"Really?"

"Yes," I say, straightening. "There are other options. Other places I can go."

My father leans back in his chair with an infuriating smile. "Where, exactly, would you go? To whatever slum your poor boyfriend lives in?" My mouth falls open and he grimaces. "You thought I didn't know that you've been slumming it with one of the caretakers? Letting him fuck you all over our property? You can be sure he'll never work for us again."

So this is speechlessness. My father doesn't stop speaking.

"And what would you do instead?" he asks. "The entire architecture community knows that I want you to work for me. No one will want to get on my bad side by hiring you now, and you're trained for nothing else. You start on Monday. See you at nine sharp."

He gets up from behind his desk and comes around it, stopping in front of me. "I suggest you take this weekend to think very carefully about your future, Vera. Because if you're not in my office on Monday morning, don't bother coming back to this house."

I gape at him, unable to combat the fact that he's ignoring everything but his own logic. He's going to disown me if I disobey. I can't believe this is happening. I turn and storm out of the office, brushing past my mother who is watching from the door. There's a look of shock on her face, and I hear her voice mixing with my father's as I sprint down the stairs.

I go outside, unable to be in the house for a single second longer. I go to my garden, my refuge, and I scream at the top of my lungs. It feels so good that I do it again, louder, and then I collapse onto the bench.

I've always used this garden as a refuge, as a safe haven. There is no other place that I would even think to go. Except for the fact that it doesn't feel the same, and this isn't where I want to be—the shock that I want to be with James comes just as strongly as the desire to be in his arms. I don't question it. I can't. Instead I run out of the garden and toward the back of the property. He was working on the hedges, I remember. There are so many that's probably what he's still doing.

I'm right. In the back corner, I find him. The shears are in his hands and he looks so at ease that I start to cry before I even reach him. He sees me coming toward him and has the good sense to drop the shears to the ground before I jump into his arms. He crushes me in his embrace, and I'm sobbing because now I can and someone else will hold me. Tears are pouring out of me because it's not fair. His voice is in my ear asking me what happened and if I'm alright, asking me what's wrong.

Somehow I find my voice and tell him. I tell him everything about how my father ruined my chances for this job, and every other job I've applied to this summer. That he knows about us. That I never thought he'd do this to me. That he's going to disown me if I don't obey.

James doesn't say anything, instead holding me against him. When I've finished, he releases me long enough to take off his thick gloves and drop them on the ground. Then he scoops me up in his arms and starts walking.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you home. To my home.”

I put my hand on his chest and try to get down, but he's not having it.  
“What about the work? What about Mike?”

James snorts, “The property is immaculate, and I’m sure the hedges can survive another couple of days before Mike comes back. And if your father sees me and tells me to stay, I’m going to tell him that it’s going to cost him two million dollars.”

I laugh through my tears and let James carry me away.



## VERA

James barely gives me time to grab my things. He's almost more eager to be out of the house than I am, but I'm not going to spend this weekend in my pajamas either. I throw my small suitcase on the bed and gather what I need: underwear, jeans, a few t-shirts, contingency clothes, my toiletries, laptop and phone. I look around, and even though I'm only grabbing things for the weekend, there's nothing I really want to take with me. It all just seems like stuff. My now-old room is filled with meaningless stuff.

I zip up the suitcase and hand it to James, at the last second grabbing my portfolio. Then we're out of the house and into his car and I feel like I can breathe again. I open the window and close my eyes. The noise of the wind and traffic, the feeling of the air on my face, it all distracts me from rethinking everything. The breeze steals me away from reliving my father's words over and over again. Or at least I try to pretend that they're not popping into my head every other second that passes.

There's a brush of skin on the back of my hand as James gently takes it in his. He doesn't say anything, but even that small gesture is enough for me. He's taking me home. *To his home.*

I ignore the way my stomach drops into a nervous free fall. I know it shouldn't feel like such a big thing. Plenty of people who date see each other's houses right from the start. But still, it feels like a big thing. I feel my pulse rise, and I get more nervous about this. *Do I want it to be a big thing?* Is it possible for something to grow between two people so quickly? I guess it doesn't matter if it's possible—it happened—how, I'm not sure... it was just supposed to be sex...

I squeeze his hand and feel him squeeze back. The warm feeling returns to the pit of my stomach, and I'm very grateful that he's more than just sex. I'm not sure how long it is that we drive, or even where we're going. I keep my eyes closed and try to relax. I'm not very successful, but the movement of the road is soothing.

When the car finally comes to a stop I blink open my eyes, squinting against the sun. We're in the driveway of a beautiful two-story house. It has a classic design, but it's painted a pale gray with crisp white trim that lends it a modern edge. A beautiful oak tree stands in the front yard, tall and full-canopied. It's a testament to how long this house has been here. I remember its history, how James inherited it from his benefactor.

James grabs my suitcase from the back and takes my hand again, leading me inside. The interior is also cool and pale, with very current style lines that make me think he's remodeled it. James disappears down the hall with my suitcase, and I wander after him.

I see the way he put his living room together so it's light and open. It feels so inviting that I sit down on the couch while looking around. He has a minimalist eye for detail that I find really appealing. Not the first thing I would have guessed, but now that I know him a little better it makes sense. He lived with so little for so long that he only keeps the things that are really important to him.

I hear James walk in behind me through an open archway into the kitchen. He returns with a glass of water for me, and I take it.

"Thanks." Once I start to drink, I can't stop. I didn't even realize that I was thirsty.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, taking the empty glass from me.

I take a deep breath and release it. "I really don't know. I still feel a bit blindsided, to be honest. And so naïve. And just...sad."

"That makes sense. You're not naïve, though, Vera. Far from it."

He sits down beside me and puts his arm around my shoulder, pulling me into him. My body relaxes and a sudden wave of exhaustion flows through me. "Is it normal that I feel so tired? It's barely noon."

He nods. "It's normal after a shock. I think you can definitely count what you discovered this morning as a shock."

"Yeah."

"Here." He pulls me to my feet. "I have just the thing to relax you and take your mind off things."

I open my mouth, and he beats me to it.

“Not sex.” He’s grinning as he leads me into a spacious master bedroom. “That comes later.”

A laugh spills out of me in spite of myself. “And what are we doing now?”

“I’m going to give you a massage.” He pulls down the blankets on the bed. “I think you’ve earned it. I just have one request.”

I smile. “Oh?”

James stands in front of me, our faces close. “I’ve imagined you naked in my bed, and there are few things I want more than to see it.”

I lean forward and kiss him softly, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I think that can be arranged.” I breathe against his lips. Peeling my t-shirt over my head, I let him unclasp my bra and toss it away. James sinks to his knees and then my pants are gone. He leans forward as if to touch me, but I move away, instead crawling across his bed.

His sheets are dark and soft, and I drape myself across them. I turn to look at him and the heat in his eyes is palpable as he takes in the sight of me. I follow his gaze as it moves along every inch of my body, and the pull in my core suddenly makes me think I might want the sex to be sooner instead of later. “Is this what you imagined?” I ask him.

“Much better,” he says, and his voice is hoarse. I don’t have to look at his pants to know that he’s hard. He clears his throat. “Time for your massage.”

“I have a request too,” I say, making him pause. “I never want to see you in that blue polo shirt ever again.”

His smile is slow and sexy. “I think that can be arranged,” he says, pulling the shirt up over his head and tossing it in a corner. The morning light hits his body, highlighting every line. The longer I stare, the more I understand what people mean when they say breathtaking.

James grabs a bottle of lotion from the top of his dresser, reminding me of the last time he did that, heat flooding closer to my core. “I’m rethinking the ‘no sex’ now,” I say.

He laughs. “You’re still exhausted, and in a couple minutes you’re going to feel it again.” He climbs onto the bed with me, turning me over so my back is exposed.

“I’m sure I could stay awake for it,” I mumble into the pillow.

The lotion is cool on my skin, and the movement of James's hands quickly warms it. His fingers move across my back, strong and slow. He starts at my shoulders, dragging down all the way to my ass and back up, working my skin with his palms. I hate to admit that he's right, but my exhaustion comes back full force as my body starts relaxing under his hands. He starts a slow path down one side of me, pressing deeply into my muscles.

"You're very good at this," I say, though I'm not sure it came out as coherent.

"Thank you."

I lose myself in the feel of his fingers, and slowly every part of me relaxes. With each stroke of his hand the world falls out from under me, and soon I drift off into sleep.

\* \* \*

It's James's voice that brings me back to consciousness, but he's not talking to me. His voice is hushed.

"That's good," he says. "I'm really glad to hear that."

Through the fog I realize that he's talking on the phone. It's funny to me, I never imagined him talking on the phone because we have yet to do that with each other. It hasn't exactly been necessary with him showing up at my house every day.

"Something came up, and it's important. But tell him hello for me. I'll be sure to drop by sometime next week. Will he still be at St. Mary's?"

A silence.

"When does he come home then?"

I work on opening my eyes. I'm still draped across the bed, the windows now showing the light of late afternoon. I'm covered with a blanket now, but still naked. James's voice comes from behind me.

"Good. Listen, there's a little bit of a mess in the back corner of the Caldwell residence. I'm sorry about that—I left the wheelbarrow and some tools out there. I'll text you a list of what I think I left."

He laughs softly. "Yeah, it has a bit to do with that." He listens for a moment. When he speaks again his voice softens. "No. I promise that it's good. It's a very good thing."

I can hear the smile in his voice. “All right. Keep me posted, and I’ll give you a heads up when I’m going to come by. Take care.”

There’s a soft tap of his finger against the screen as he hangs up and I hear him set his phone on the nightstand. I stretch, my muscles feeling amazing from the work he did on them. Rolling over to face him, I ask, “Who was that?”

James smiles at me, a brilliant smile that tells me he’s happy I’m awake. He drags me across the bed and pulls me against his body. “That was Mike,” he says.

“Ah, the infamous Mike,” I say. “I’m so happy Mike happened to need this week off.”

“Thank god for Mike,” he agrees, and kisses me. He smoothes an arm down my back, pressing me harder against him as he traces my lips with his tongue. I open my mouth for him, and he plunges into me, reminding me of all the other things he’s done and has yet to do with his tongue. *God, I could live forever in his kisses.*

I pull away for a breath. “Were you supposed to see him tonight?”

He raises an eyebrow. “I’m hoping you weren’t actually thinking about Mike during that kiss.”

“No,” I say, blushing, “but I don’t want to keep you from seeing your friends.”

James runs a hand along my side, and I suddenly have goosebumps. “It wasn’t anything official. I said I might stop by the hospital.”

It clicks in my brain, then. “You said his dad was having surgery.”

“It was successful. Mike’s been a good friend for a long time, so I know his family. I figured I’d stop by and say hi.” He laughs. “Mike says his dad’s grumpy as hell.”

“We can go,” I say.

“It’s all right. He’s staying in the hospital for a few more days. Right now I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

I make a face. “I’m not made of glass. I’m upset, but it was just an argument. I’ll survive.”

“An argument where your dad threatened to disown you.”

“Still,” I say softly, “it’s only words. There are worse problems to have.”

He looks at me for a moment. “If you really want to go, a visit might cheer him up.”

“Then let’s go. I really mean it.”

“Okay,” he agrees. I try to roll off the bed and he stops me. “That is, if I can stand to let you out of this bed when you look like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you just woke up naked in my bed,” he says, rolling over me and pressing me into the mattress. It feels so good I let out a long sigh.

“I did just do that,” I admit.

“I know,” he whispers, mouth against my neck. “And I can only imagine what you’re going to look like when you wake up in my bed after you’ve been thoroughly fucked.”

My breath is suddenly shallow, and I feel my pussy get wet at the thought. I wrap my legs around his hips and he grinds against me. The fabric of his jeans is rough against my clit, and the grind of it has me gasping already. His mouth slides along my neck, leaving a trail of tingles behind from the heat of his lips and tongue. It’s not enough. I pull his face back to mine as he thrusts against me again, and I groan into his mouth. The muscles of his back are hard under my hands and I can feel the hardness straining in his jeans.

I force myself away from his lips, trying to gather enough breath for speech. “If we don’t stop, we both know that we won’t leave this bed.”

There’s a wicked gleam in his eye. “That sounds like a challenge.”

“Let me up.” My attempts at a stern face dissolve into a smile. “I want to see Mike.”

He groans, but he does let me up. I find my suitcase by the wall and dig through it for some clothes. I’m opting for casual again, since that’s pretty much what I brought. I get dressed quickly and grab my makeup bag, determined to make myself look like I didn’t sleep for half the day.

James pulls a shirt from his closet—a thin long sleeve shirt that clings to his body and makes me stare so long that he notices. He pushes up the sleeves while I’m watching and it just makes the look so much better.

“You’re staring,” he says.

“Guilty,” I grin. I force myself back to the mirror. “It’s just so much better than the polo shirt.”

He cracks up laughing behind me.

I finish getting ready and within a few minutes we’re back in the car and on our way. “Should we bring something?” I ask. “Maybe cookies?”

“That’s a nice thought,” James says, “but I don’t think that we should bring cookies to a man who just had heart surgery.”

“Fair point.”

We pull up to St. Mary’s hospital, and I find myself suddenly nervous. It’s clear that Mike and his family mean a lot to James, and I don’t want to embarrass him. Maybe he was right—maybe we shouldn’t have come. But it’s too late to turn back now.

James takes my hand as we walk into the hospital. It strikes me how much I like something as simple as walking hand in hand. I don’t know that I’ve ever had that with another boyfriend. If I did, the feeling wasn’t nearly as natural.

Mike’s father is on the third floor, and before I know it we’re there. As soon as we walk into Mr. Willis’s room, I recognize Mike from his work around our house. He’s a little bit shorter than James, with a young face and close-cropped brown hair. I’m suddenly embarrassed by the fact that I never knew his name until James told me. I never cared to know. Just another instance of my own self-absorption. I hope I can make it right.

I see Mike’s eyes go wide as he sees me. Then his gaze moves to my hand entwined with James’s and I think he’s struggling to keep his mouth closed. “Miss Caldwell,” he says, “I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

He holds out a hand and I take it with a firm grip and a warm smile. “Hello, Mike. It’s so good to see you again.”

James lets go of me long enough to give his friend one of those complicated guy handshakes before taking my hand again. I’m glad he does.

“I suppose I’ll get none of the attention even though I’m the one who’s admitted?” a voice says.

I look over at the hospital bed, and find that Mr. Willis is not what I was expecting. When James said he was grumpy, I thought he might be a tiny old man, face tangled with frown lines and disapproval. Mr. Willis in reality is closer to Santa Claus with his rosy cheeks and a face that has joy written all over it—even if he is glowering.

“Who did you bring with you, James?”

“Hey, Mr. Willis,” James says, pulling me with him over to the bed. “I’m glad you’re doing well.”

“They’ve failed to kill me so far, though the nurses are certainly doing their best with this sorry excuse for food.”

I laugh in spite of myself, and Mr. Willis's eyes focus on me again.

"This is Vera Caldwell," James says. "My..." He looks at me, and I don't know what he's going to say. How do you describe us and the backwards way we went about things? "She's my girlfriend."

A glow, warm and golden, slides through me as I extend my hand toward Mr. Willis. "It's nice to meet you. Sorry about the food."

He pushes his glasses up his nose and inspects me. "Well," he says, "I can already tell you're far too good for our James." I think I see a hint of teasing beneath his cranky facade.

"I doubt that."

"Well," he says, "pull up a chair and tell me about yourself and we'll find out."

"That's a good idea," Mike interrupts from across the room. "I need to talk to James for a minute about picking the slack back up at work. So you two talk, and James and I will step outside."

"Sure," I say, nervous as all get out. I tend to be shy with new people. James gives my shoulder a squeeze as he heads for the door, and I'm left alone with Mr. Willis.

"So," he says, all pretense of a grumpy old man fading away, "what kind of dirt do you want on James? Because I know it all and am happy to give you enough blackmail material to last for the rest of your life."

My laugh echoes through the room. I think I'm going to like Mr. Willis.



## JAMES

“Man, are you crazy?” Mike asks me as soon as the door closes behind us.  
“What on earth are you doing with Vera Caldwell? You trying to get me fired?”

“Don’t worry. Your job is perfectly safe,” I say. “And I don’t know what to tell you. It just...happened.”

“How does that just happen?”

I give him a look. “I’m not going to give you the dirty details.”

Mike shakes his head. “I thought you weren’t into screwing the rich chicks after what happened with Briana?”

“This is different,” I say.

“How?”

I glance through the window in the door, seeing Vera and Mr. Willis laughing together. I have no doubt they’ll be fast friends. There’s no one I can think of that doesn’t like Mr. Willis. “It just is,” I say, shrugging.

“There’s something between us. I can’t explain it.”

“So she was the something that came up?”

I clear my throat. “I don’t want to say too much because it’s her business, but she had a fight with her father. The kind of fight that impacts the rest of your life. So she’s staying with me for the weekend.”

“You took her to your *house*?” I think Mike might collapse from shock.

I look away from him again, watching Vera through the window. “Yeah, I did.”

“Does she know that you never bring anyone to your house?”

“She knows my family history if that’s what you’re asking.” I shove my hands in my pockets.

Mike takes his turn looking through the window and into the room.

“Yeah, but does she know you’ve never brought a woman to your house?”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not a conspiracy, Mike. It just never felt right.”

“Then you’re right,” he says. “There is something between you two.”

“Yeah.”

He stretches, his full body extending, and I can hear the bones in his joints crack. “Okay, fine,” he says. “I’m still a little weirded out, but just tell me. How much do you like her?”

I look over at him. “I like her.” I’m not sure how much I can get across with just those three words, but I try, hoping that he understands.

He looks at me for a second. “Okay. Then I’m happy for you, man.”

“Thanks.”

“So those tools you left sitting out...”

I sigh, “They’re in the back corner of the property. I’d bet a large amount of money neither of the Caldwells will go back that far on the grounds in the next couple of days.”

“Fine.”

“But Mike,” I say, “When you do go back, maybe don’t mention me.”

“Because you slept with the boss’s daughter?”

I grin. “Yep.”

He shakes his head. “As long as I’m not fired, I’ll say whatever you need me to say, or not say.”

“You going to be free this week to come work on the Masterson house?”

“Should be.”

“Good,” I say. I pause, unsure how to phrase this. “Seriously, Mike. I know it sounds like I’m glad your father needed surgery—I’m not. But I’m glad that you asked me to cover for you.”

“Because you met her?” he asks.

“Because I met her.”

He laughs, “Man, you’ve got it bad. And don’t tell my dad. If he realizes that he’s responsible for you two being together he’ll never let us forget it.”

“Vera may have already told him.”

Mike looks through the window. “Then let’s go back in before your girlfriend gives it away and my dad has a chance to tell her every bad thing you’ve ever done in your life.”

I laugh under my breath. “No kidding.”

\* \* \*

We spend a couple of hours exchanging stories about each other for Vera’s benefit, laughing ourselves hoarse. She was right to make us come here. It’s been good for both of us, and I can see Mr. Willis’s mood lifting as we speak. Whatever small nervousness I had about bringing her here has flown out the window. She fits in perfectly, joking along with us and contributing a few funny stories of her own.

When visiting hours are finally over we take our leave, with Mr. Willis giving me a small wink and a thumbs-up as I leave the room. Together, we walk with Mike out to the parking garage and say goodbye. It feels like no time at all before we’re back inside my house.

“That was really fun,” Vera says. “Thanks for letting me go.”

“Are you kidding? Thank you for making me take you. I wanted to stay, remember?”

She comes over and wraps herself around me. “It was good. I like them both.”

“They like you too,” I say as I lean down to kiss her.

“Thank you for bringing me here, too,” she says. “I don’t know what I would have done in that house with him for two days.”

The anger I feel toward her father boils up in me and I have to force it back down. I’d like to give him a taste of the kind of pain he caused, illustrated by my fist in his face. But I don’t think Vera would want that.

“You’re welcome,” I say. I try to kiss her again but she pulls away, a devilish smirk on her face.

She pulls me into the living room and sits me down on one of the couches. “I know a way to say thank you that I think you’ll really like.” She drops down and fits herself between my knees. My cock instantly hardens in my pants.

“You don’t have to do that,” I say. I’m going to have her naked in my bed soon enough, and as badly as I want her mouth on me I can wait. After today, I just want to make sure that she’s all right.

“And if I want to do it?” she says, looking up at me.

I have no answer for that.

Her fingers make quick work of my belt and the zipper, pulling my jeans down. Then Vera leans in and presses her face against me, and I can feel her teeth graze the head of my cock as she takes my underwear in her mouth and pulls it down. My cock springs to attention as she pushes me and I lean back into the couch. She smoothes her hands up my thighs, her fingers circling in a way that sends whatever blood I had left straight to my cock and balls.

I can already see the tip of my cock glistening and Vera does too, licking across the top and sending a burst of sensation through me. She takes me in her hand, tipping my cock back so she can lick along the bottom in one smooth stroke. “I didn’t get to explore this as much as I wanted to that first day,” she says.

Her fingers flick along my length, teasing for a moment before she circles me with them, stroking. Her fingers barely touch my skin, and still a deep satisfaction rolls through me. Then Vera leans down, taking my balls into her mouth like she did on that first day, and I groan. God it feels so fucking good. She sucks them both into her mouth, and I feel how full her mouth is with them. Her tongue sweeps across them, and I shudder. “Vera,” I say, unable to stop myself.

“You like that?” she says, letting go.

“Fuck yes.”

“Good.” She seals her mouth over the head of my cock and sucks. All my muscles twitch and I swear I could come right now. I watch her work her way down my cock, pushing me deeper until her mouth is full of me. The sight of Vera’s mouth stuffed to bursting with my cock is easily one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen. She continues to suck, creating a vacuum in her mouth and I close my eyes. Every time she sucks it’s a bolt of pleasure along my nerves. I grab the couch in order to stay still. My body tightens as I fight for control to not fuck her mouth until I explode.

Vera retreats and takes a breath, stroking me with her hand. I keep my eyes closed, and I feel her mouth close over me again, sliding downwards. Down and down, and she doesn’t stop. Suddenly my cock is at the back of her mouth and she still doesn’t stop. My eyes fly open as the head of my cock pops into her throat. And she still doesn’t stop, sliding me further and deeper as her mouth comes to rest at the base of me, lips pressed against my stomach.

“Fuck.” It’s the only word that I can think of.

I feel her tongue reach out, caressing the bottom of my cock as she bobs her head up and down. She's sliding me up and down, but never releasing me from her throat. I reach out and thread my fingers through her hair, wanting to feel her rhythm in my hands. Vera hums and swallows, and I curse as her throat constricts around me. She releases me entirely, taking a deep breath and giving me a slow smile.

"I don't want to swallow," she says.

Her hand is still moving on me. I blink, trying to focus. Fuck. "You don't have to." She can do whatever she wants as long as she puts her mouth on me again.

She gives me a long, slow, lick and locks her gaze onto mine. "Let me be clear. The reason I don't want to swallow is because you're going to be so far in my throat when you come that I won't have to."

My cock jerks against her hand, and I freeze, the visual of her words flooding my mind and sending me straight to the edge. She takes me into her mouth again, moving rhythmically along the shaft until I'm too deep inside to see straight. My hips are moving now, pushing into her even as I try to keep still. Vera works me with her throat, bobbing quickly. She hums and uses her voice to tease me and I am so close to coming.

She pulls me out, back to my head, sucking on the tip before plunging it as far down as it can go, her tongue touching my balls. Again, it's the sight that drives me crazy, and I cry out as my balls tighten and I release into her. I feel my cock jerking in her throat as I come, sending everything I have deep inside her.

Vera sucks my cock hard, keeping her mouth sealed and not letting a single drop escape. Finally releasing me, she licks her lips. That devilish smirk is back.

"That was fun," she says lightly.

I can only groan, words still out of the realm of possibility.

She raises an eyebrow at me as she stands. "I hope that didn't take too much out of you," she says. "Because I'm going to be naked in your bed very shortly, and I expect you to fuck me. Thoroughly."

I watch her walk toward my bedroom as she pulls her shirt over her head. I'm already getting hard again as I contemplate all the things we can do together, how I can really make her scream my name. I'm fully naked before I reach the bedroom, and as I walk through the door, I see that she is too.

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## VERA

The weekend passes like a dream. James and I are never separated, and even when we're not having sex we're touching. We are constantly entwined with each other, and I still just can't get enough of being with him. And we talk. We talk about the silly little things you might find out from each other on a first date, and we share things like our firsts. Mine was sloppy and awkward, and so was his. I feel at ease sharing these moments with him, in a way I have with no one else.

Then there's the sex. He does make me scream. He challenged himself to make me come as many times as he could using only his mouth in only an hour—that left me seeing stars. Then we burned our lunch because we ended up fucking on the kitchen floor. His store of condoms is running dangerously low.

By the time Sunday night arrives, I'm not sure how much more my body can take, even if it feels like I'll never stop wanting it. And on top of that, my own reality starts to leak through.

I've managed to mostly not think about my father this weekend. But tomorrow is the deadline, the day I report to my first day on the new job, and dread steals the heat from me and pools in my stomach like a weight. I put on one of James's shirts and wander out to the kitchen where he's cooking. *Pasta*, I think. I smile at the fact that he's making me Italian.

I lean against the archway of the kitchen and watch him. His back is to me, and I let my eyes wander, examining the way his shoulders move and the way the muscles of his back disappear into his sweatpants. He turns and sees me staring. He smiles. "Hey."

“Hey.”

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, fine.”

He turns away from me briefly to stir the pasta. “That doesn’t sound fine.”

“I’m just—” I sigh, shaking my head. “I’m thinking about tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” he says.

I watch the water bubble for a minute. “What do you think?” I ask.

“About you and your dad?”

I nod.

His face closes off. “That’s not really my call.”

“I know, but I want to hear your opinion.”

He starts to get dishes out from his cupboards even though the food isn’t ready, and I get the impression he’s trying not to look at me. “I think you should walk away,” he says.

I knew that’s what he thought, but it’s still a shock hearing him say it out loud. “You think I should volunteer to be disowned?”

“No,” he says. “I think you should respectfully tell your dad that you need to go your own way for a while. And then go. I’ve seen your designs, Vera. You’re good. I think it’s very possible he’ll come around.”

“He’ll make sure I don’t get hired anywhere else, though.”

The timer beeps and James turns it off. “Your father isn’t all powerful. And Rebecca loved you—you think she really wouldn’t hire you if you explained that it was a misunderstanding?”

“I don’t know. Two million dollars is a lot of money,” I say. “Plus, he’s right. I have nowhere to stay.”

“You’d find a place.” James drains the pasta. “You would get a temporary job, get an apartment. You don’t have to have a place to go—make your own.”

“Yeah.” It’s not a bad idea, but it is terrifying. The prospect of leaving the safety of what I’ve always known is daunting.

“You could start your own company. A non-profit,” James says.

I laugh. “No I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have no money of my own to start a non-profit. All I have is my savings, and since it’s just the money I made while I was doing my

work study job at school, it isn't enough to start with. Big donors don't write checks to nobodies."

James carries two full plates into the adjacent dining room. "You're not nobody. You're Vera Caldwell. Your name doesn't have to work against you."

"You make it sound so easy," I say, following.

"Not easy, I don't think." He pulls out a chair for me and I sit. "But it is simple."

"Would you contract with my imaginary non-profit?"

He smiles. "Of course I would. We'd be an unstoppable force."

We talk about other things for the rest of our meal, but the idea worms its way into my brain. *Can I really just walk away?* I'm not sure that I'm strong enough to just start my life over. I know James did it, but he was forced into it. Choosing that feels very different. But I do like the idea of running my own non-profit. Being in charge of what I do and imagining all the ways I can help people? It sounds pretty perfect.

It's getting late, and together James and I retreat to his bedroom like it's the most natural thing to go to bed together. I take off his shirt, and he takes off his pants and we lie together in the dark. It feels wrong to have any barrier like clothing between us right now.

"I don't want this to end," I whisper.

"It doesn't have to," he says, but I know it will. This magical weekend is almost over and all of reality is about to come flooding into the little bubble we've made with each other. He doesn't understand that I just want to stop time and stay here. Now. God I want to not deal with any of the shit that's going on anywhere else.

Or maybe he does understand, because he kisses me. It's slow and heated. Everything about this is slow and soft and deep. He touches me everywhere, using his hands to massage my entire body until I'm wet and gasping. But still, we don't speed through it. He rocks into me slowly, moving his hips just a little at a time until he's fully inside me. He takes my hands, pinning them to the bed under his.

Our mouths are together, and I feel like we're breathing each other in. Our bodies move together, never separating. His hips roll with mine, slow and steady, and the building of pleasure takes its time. From the pit of my stomach it flickers, spreading until I can feel it in every part of my body.

We're not kissing now, instead I can see him. We're staring into each other's eyes, foreheads touching, and breath mingling.

We don't stop moving, and we don't speed up. The orgasm builds in me, and when I go over the edge it's not an explosion. It feels like I'm drowning, surrounded by pleasure as my body shudders under his.

It's only moments later that I see his pupils dilate, feel him come. I'm still coming, and I can't look away from him. I've never felt this close to any person before, and I know that I'll always remember this moment. We're not moving anymore, instead just being. We kiss, and at some point we fall asleep tangled in each other.

\* \* \*

The first thing I feel is warmth. I open my eyes to see James's face close to mine, our bodies still pressed together. My heart lurches at the sight of him and the memory of last night. I think something may have changed for us in that moment, and I don't want to spoil it.

I don't want to face this morning. I want to stay in this bed forever. But I can't. I have to go. I start my new job today. With my father. My stomach roils at the thought, but I can't do what James said. I can't just walk away from my life and my family. I'm not strong enough to do that.

Slowly, I move out from underneath James's arm. I'm careful not to wake him. I brought some work clothes with me and I retrieve them now from my bag, along with my makeup, and then retreat into the bathroom for a shower. While imagining myself showing up at my father's office in pajamas with no makeup and terrible bed head gives me some pleasure, it will only make things harder for me in the end.

James is awake when I come out of the bathroom. He's sprawled across the bed, beautifully naked with an impressive hard-on. If I didn't have to go I would take advantage of it. I take a moment to call a cab from one of my apps.

His eyes travel up and down my body, taking in the suit and the makeup. "I thought you might change your mind," he says.

I sigh. "It's not that simple, James. You know that."

He pulls a pair of sweats on. "No, I don't know that. What happened to all the things we talked about? You can do this. You don't have to let your

father hold your leash.”

“Excuse me?” I turn on him, my cheeks going hot. “Hold my *leash*?”

I can see that he’s gritting his teeth. “That’s not what I meant—”

“No, it is. You mean that I’m my father’s little puppet and I’ll do whatever he says.”

“No,” James says, folding his arms across his chest, “that’s not what I meant. I meant that what you do really has nothing to do with him. You don’t have to choose this.”

I shove the rest of my things into my suitcase. “I don’t see any alternative. I have no means of my own. Maybe in a couple years after I have some real savings I can leave. There isn’t a choice.”

His voice is softer. “I thought, after last night...”

I finish zipping up the suitcase. “What? What did you think?”

“I—you felt it last night, didn’t you?”

I can’t pretend I don’t know what he’s talking about, no matter how upset I am right now. “Yeah, I did.”

“And?” he asks.

“And...I don’t have the words to describe it. It was perfect. But it doesn’t change what’s happening in my life.”

The look on his face is suddenly desperate. “You can do this, Vera. I can help you with whatever you need. You can choose me.”

I freeze, a shot of cold going through me. “Are you saying that if I go to work for my father, we’re finished?”

His face hardens. “I don’t know. I do know that working for your father is the last thing you want. Everything I’ve learned about you tells me that you’re passionate—that you are fierce, and brilliant, and independent. But making this choice? Out of fear? It’s going to eat away at you, and all of that passion will be crushed. Along with everything that makes you ‘you.’ I don’t know if I want to see that happen.”

I feel hot tears behind my eyes but I blink them back. “I don’t have a choice, James.”

I take my suitcase to the front of the house, and I see the cab pull up outside. I don’t want to leave. It feels too final, too real. But it will be okay. He’ll be okay. I’ll fix it later. We’ll be okay. We have to be.

“Vera.” I turn, finding James in the middle of the living room. There’s no hint of a smile or softness on his face. I do see sadness though. “I know what it’s like to not have any choices. You’re choosing this.”

Outside, I hear the cab driver honk their horn. I shake my head and leave the house before I can say anything else to make this worse.

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## VERA

My security photo is awful, but I suppose that's to be expected. I feel like I've been through every office in this building filling out paperwork and getting an ID. I have an office already set up for me and it's big for someone at my level. I suppose it's meant to be a peace offering of sorts, but I still hate it. I hate everything. I hate the suit that I'm wearing, and I hate the color of these walls. I hate how I left things with James this morning. I hate that my suitcase is sitting in the corner and I hate the note sitting on my desk. I hate that it's telling me to meet my father in his office at ten a.m.

I hate the fact that I'm here at all, and he's the cause. He's not in his office when I go, but he steps in right at ten. I have to control my glare.

"Good morning, Vera," he says, sounding for all the world as if this were a normal day. It strikes me that he never questioned whether I would be here. He assumed that I would make a fuss, but do what he said—and he was right. I think I might throw up.

"Good morning," I say, making a point of keeping my voice utterly neutral.

"Everything settled with your office and your pass?"

I clear my throat. "Yes, thank you."

"Good. We're going to meet some clients today. They want to show us the property they've bought and walk us through their preferences."

He leads the way out of his office, and I follow. We're met by my father's driver in a sleek black sedan. The thought of spending a car ride in awkward silence makes me cringe, but I get in the car. The driver takes us

across L.A. toward the coast. Traffic is horrible, and about an hour later we pull up to an empty lot at the beach. The couple from dinner the other night is waiting for us. I don't remember their names.

My father greets them as Sharon and Alan. *How did I miss their terrible names?* They walk us across the property to where they want the house to sit. It's on the top of a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and I can't deny it's beautiful. Sharon describes in detail what she'd like, and as much as I find her annoying she has good architectural taste. We walk along the grounds to the north and she describes the kinds of grounds she wants.

Her ideas include a significant guesthouse and a tennis court, among other things. Eventually we reach some houses, smaller than the typical mansion. They don't seem to be abandoned, but Sharon and Alan keep walking. "Down here, there's a lovely little cove where I think a boat house would be just lovely," she says.

"How far does your property extend?"

"Oh, another few acres or so."

Setting aside how rich they must be to afford this much beachfront, the houses bother me. "Who lives here?" I ask as we walk by. My father clears his throat in warning, but I ignore him.

Sharon waves a hand. "Oh, doesn't matter. They sold the land years ago. Couldn't afford not to, I think. People who inherited some money and then lost it all, probably. I'm sure they had it coming. We'll evict them as soon as construction starts."

My mouth falls open, and in that moment, I know that I can't do it—I can't be a part of this—not just this project, but my father's company. These are the kind of people he deals with every day, and I don't want to do it. I want to help people who need it. I have no interest in people who think the poor had it coming.

James was right. I can choose.

And I will not choose this.

I walk away. I just turn and start walking.

My father calls after me. "Vera, come back here please."

"No."

"What?"

"I'm done." I keep walking.

"Vera," he says, warning in his tone. "We talked about this."

I turn around and look him straight in the eye, defiantly. “No. You talked and you didn’t listen. I’m done. I’m not doing this.”

He stalks toward me, lowering his voice. “You live in my house.”

I laugh. “That’s your threat? I don’t need your house.”

“If you walk away from this, don’t bother coming home.”

Those words settle in my gut with a heavy finality, but also a relief. I feel like I always knew this moment would come. I just didn’t know what I would choose. I do now.

“Okay. I’m sorry, Dad. But I need to do this my way.”

I don’t look back, and on the way toward the road I call another cab.

\* \* \*

I go straight to the construction site, and I feel light as air. I have nothing. And it’s totally fine. I know that I’m going to be okay. Because even though I’m scared, I know that I have somewhere to go.

I pay the cab driver and go into the house, listening for the telltale sounds of a power drill or hammering. There’s nothing though. I walk my way through but there’s still nothing. No one is here, and my heart sinks. I was sure that this is where he would be. He’s not working at my house anymore. Did he have another contract? I don’t know. I didn’t ask.

I don’t even have his phone number because our relationship was a secret at first, and then we were together so much we never even asked. Even if I did have his number, though, I know that this cannot be fixed with a phone call. I sit down on the steps outside the house. *It’s early, maybe he just hasn’t gotten here.* After an hour of waiting, my anxiety rises. After two, I know that I can’t stay anymore.

Where would he go? I don’t know his favorite places. I don’t know where he goes when he wants to be alone. I don’t know where he goes when he’s blowing off work. But I have an idea. I do a quick internet search for our caretaker company and give them a call. It’s not hard to get them to give me Mike’s phone number when I tell them who I am, and in just a few minutes his line is ringing.

“Mike Willis,” he answers.

“Hey, Mike. This is Vera Caldwell.”

There’s clear surprise in his voice. “Hi, Ms. Caldwell.”

“Please call me Vera,” I say.

“Sure.”

“I was actually wondering if you had heard from James today?”

“Yeah, earlier this morning,” he says. “He told me not to bother going to the Masterson house today, said he was taking the day off. Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” I say, far too enthusiastically. “We just never exchanged phone numbers. You know how we met—well. I’d like to give him a call. We...had a little disagreement this morning and I want to apologize.” That’s minimizing it, but I don’t really feel like baring my soul to Mike.

“Sure thing,” he says, giving me James’s number.

“Did he say where he was going by any chance?”

“No, sorry,” Mike says. “Sometimes he goes to the beach. Surfing. Walking. Other than that though...”

“Thanks, Mike,” I say. “I hope I see you and your father soon.”

He laughs. “You too. Let me know if you need anything else.”

I can’t dial James’s number fast enough, and my heart plummets as it goes directly to voicemail. Shit. I can’t even ask him where he is. I call another cab. I search James’s address on the internet, pulling up a map to look for the beachfront closest to his house.

I walk up and down that stretch of shore for a long time, hoping to see him. But he’s not there. I try to let the ocean soothe me, the waves tickling my bare feet. Even that doesn’t calm the anxiety in my heart. I need to fix this. I need to tell him what I chose. The sun is beginning to sink in the sky when I make my way back to his house.

He’s not there, but I’m not leaving. This time, I will stay until he comes back. It’s his house, he can’t stay away forever.

I take off my shoes and curl my knees up to my chest. I keep my phone in my hand, hoping that maybe he’ll see a missed call on his phone and return it. It’s a long shot, but hope loves long shots. The time while I wait feels like an eternity. I know I should get up, maybe go someplace and eat something, but I’m too upset to feel hungry and I’m not going anywhere without talking to James.

It’s just getting dark when he pulls into the driveway. He sees me and stares. I see relief on his face, and worry. He gets out of the car and comes up the drive, but stops a few feet away from me, seeming unsure. He’s here.

*Finally.* I can't even describe the feeling that sinks into me, and what exactly it means. "Hi," I say.

"Hi."

I don't get up yet. "I'm really sorry about this morning."

"I've been driving around all day, kicking myself for the things I said. I'm sorry too."

He comes to me and pulls me to my feet, pulls me into his arms and holds me.

"I told my dad off," I say, and it is so freeing.

"What?"

I tell him what happened, and his smile gets bigger and bigger. By the time I finish, I'm trying to tell him through all of his kisses. "I'm so proud of you," he says.

I laugh. "Thanks. Do you think...would it be crazy to ask if I can stay with you until I get things sorted out?"

"Vera, you can stay with me as long as you want. Forever, even." He takes my face in his hands, and there's no hint of a smirk or a joke. "I'm in love with you. Please stay. Stay with me."

My breath catches and I know what I'm going to say next with the same certainty I knew how to choose today.

"I love you too."

## EPILOGUE

VERA

### Six Months Later

Peru is beautiful in the morning. I look out my window at the mountain view and stretch. James is still asleep behind me, and I'm going to let him. He worked hard yesterday, and he worked me hard last night. He deserves his rest.

It's our last day here, and I'm going to miss it. Hopefully we've done some good. With our crew we've built ten new homes for people in this rural area, and now we're completely finished. Today we'll meet with the local government to evaluate what we've done and make arrangements with them for future trips. I'm excited at the prospect of getting to talk to them about exactly what they want and need in terms of housing and infrastructure.

If we can make it happen, we'll try. We're not a full non-profit yet, this trip being funded by several charitable corporations including The Harrison Foundation. But I know James won't let me rest until I finally start my own company. And I won't let him rest until I'm sure he can do it with me.

I check my email on the phone, sketchy as the internet is here. I have an email from my bank, and...woah. *That's not what I was expecting.* There's a deposit for two million dollars into my account, with a personal message:

*Sorry it took me this long.*

*Good luck.*

*Call me soon.*

*Love,*

*Mom.*

I beam at my phone. *Thanks, Mom.* This money is coming at the perfect time. With it, James and I can come back here for another building trip. We can expand our original plans and the amount of houses we were going to build. The progress will still be slow, but it will be full of good help. *Screw sleeping, I'm going to tell James.*

When I turn and see him, he takes my breath away. The sheet is draped across his legs, and the rising sun is striking the muscles in his stomach. He is the world's most perfect painting. *Except for the enormous morning wood sticking up from beneath the sheets.* I know his favorite way to wake up. I slide onto the bed and duck my head under the sheet, coming face to face with his cock. I don't think I'd ever considered a cock gorgeous before I met James, but it is.

I open my mouth and take him in, diving down to take him all the way into the back of my throat. He shifts on the bed and I know I've gotten his attention. I hold my mouth down on him as long as I can before coming up for a breath and teasing his tip with my tongue.

James groans, "You're going to kill me, after last night."

I lick along him, grazing him with my teeth just to feel him jump.

"What?" I say in mock horror, "You're not man enough to take me again?"

He starts to say something but I take him deep into my throat again and whatever he was going to say is lost in one long groan. He pulls me off his cock and flips me over, his eyes fiery and fully awake. "You question my manhood?" he says, matching my mocking tone. "If that's the case, I think it's time for something we've been saving. We're in Peru. It's time for firsts."

I give him a look. "What are you talking about?" It's hard to imagine there's something he hasn't done to me.

He leans down and takes a nipple in his mouth, playing with me before answering. "I'm going to fuck that sweet ass of yours."

My pussy clenches. He's been working up to that for a long time, and I can't say that I'm not ready—I am—I'm just nervous. My mouth is suddenly dry. "Okay."

He leaves the bed, digging in his bag. Then he pulls out a bottle of lube and tosses it over to me.

I tell him, "You knew you were going to try to get me to do this."

The only response I get is his slow smile. He gets back in bed, turns me on my side, and lies behind me. I can hear him stroking his cock with the lube and I shudder in anticipation. Then I feel his fingers probing, pushing into me. My body heats in response. I know this feeling, I know the kind of orgasms he can give me from here, but his cock...it's so much larger. His fingers disappear and I feel that same cock against my ass. God it feels even bigger than when it's in my pussy.

James reaches around and starts to play with my clit, teasing me and warming me up as he works into my ass. I'm gasping as he pushes in, and I've never felt this full. He goes slowly, but he doesn't stop. It seems to last forever and I feel him in such a different way and it hits different nerves. I already feel one of those deep orgasms coming on, and he circles my clit suddenly, so fiercely that I come unexpectedly in a hot rush.

It's fast and bright and I cry out as he pushes the rest of the way into me. He toys with my pussy, drawing my orgasm out from my body, as everything comes down from the overload and adjusts to the feeling of him in my ass.

Just when I think I've adjusted, he moves his hips, and I curse. He's so far in me and it feels amazing and I can't believe he's all the way inside. His lips are on my neck and his hand drifts up to my breasts, tweaking my nipples before returning to my pussy. He starts to rock, and I know that I'm going to come again. On instinct, I squeeze my ass around him and he growls in my ear, rocking faster. He slips his fingers inside my pussy and I see stars. I love this feeling of being fucked in both places, and he knows that, and it's so much better now.

I can't breathe, I'm moaning so much, I can't stop. Every thrust into my ass sets off a lightning burst of pleasure behind my eyes and he finger fucks my pussy relentlessly, driving me to the edge and over. I am not prepared. The world goes a blinding shade of white and I scream James's name. Everything in me contracts, and I hear him cry out. The pleasure comes in waves that wreck my body—I've never had an orgasm like this—and dark

spots form in front of my eyes as another orgasm hits on the heels of the first. My entire body goes limp and I am at the mercy of this pleasure. I can't move, I can't see. I can only feel.

James is still in my ass and I feel him come, warming me from the inside. When he slips out I feel the loss. I'm still in free fall, my body oversensitive and tingling. He turns me over toward him, and he's smiling. "I think that was worth the wait."

"We will be doing that again." I let him kiss me, still unable to move properly.

I close my eyes, my body pulling me towards delicious sleep.

"If you're going to sleep, I suppose that means I earned my manhood again."

I smile, "We'll see how I feel when I wake up." His cock stirs between us, and I laugh. I tell him, "I love you."

"I love you too." He rolls away from me and I hear him digging in his bag, but I'm already halfway gone. It's only when I feel him tug at my left hand that I manage to open them. I catch him just as he slips the ring onto my finger. "James," I say, "What are you doing?"

His face is chagrined. "I should have waited longer. I was hoping you'd wake up and see it."

"Are you serious?"

He rolls over me, kissing me so deeply that it lights that fire in my belly. "I couldn't be more serious."

"You have to say it."

He pulls back from me, kneeling on the bed. Totally naked and glorious. "Vera Caldwell, will you marry me?"

I bite my lip to keep the smile on my face from growing out of control. I didn't think anyone could ever be this happy. It fills me up to bursting with joy and light. "Yes."

His smile matches mine and he's kissing me again, tangling us in the sheets.

Sleep is out of the question.

\* \* \*

THE END

Want to see what happens one year later? [Sign up here for an extended epilogue!](#)

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\* \* \*

## Chapter 1

Consoling my best friend Stephanie has turned into a fulltime job. I feel for her, I do. It must suck to have every single boyfriend she's ever had cheat on her. But when you're only attracted to the bad boys, what do you expect? They don't get those bad reputations by handing out flowers and writing love letters with words that make Hallmark cards seem like scribbles on the stalls of men's bathrooms.

Stephanie and I go back and forth instant messaging each other. It's been almost a month since the "incident" with her ex and yet it's still all she talks about. I guess I'd feel the same way if I were her, but I've never stuck around relationships long enough to be cheated on. I've never connected with someone enough to care about what they do when I'm not around.

While she vents, I check out the latest Twitter gossip. There's always someone saying the wrong thing while the internet crouches down like some creep in a back alley waiting to pounce. Sometimes it's better than reality TV.

Stephanie: *Why are guys such dicks?*

Me: *You're asking the wrong person.*

I switch over to Twitter again. Some D-list celebrity has finally made it back into the spotlight over some sexist remark and now suddenly, everyone is going insane. I'm glad nothing I post is worth talking about. Despite my five thousand followers, I doubt anyone would notice me even if I said something rude and offensive. Most people just follow me so I'll follow them back, or because we live in the same town. It's all so pointless, and damn entertaining at the same time.

Stephanie: *Whats so wrong with me that all those fucker's feel the need to be with someone else WHILE their still with me.*

Her grammar is atrocious.

Me: *There's nothing wrong with you. You are amazing, and you can do so much better.*

Stephanie: *I'll never find another guy like him again.*

Dramatic as ever.

I roll my eyes. Me: *Sure you will. If you sit in front of the jail long enough, the next love of your life will walk out of those doors any minute now.*

Stephanie: *Your not funny.*

I smile at the bright screen.

Me: *\*you're\*.*

Stephanie: *I hate you.*

I check out Twitter again. Things have quieted down for the most part, but I leave it open so I can check in from time to time.

Stephanie: *I'm going to send you a picture.*

Me: *Of what?*

Stephanie: *My burning rash. Tell me if it looks infected.*

Oh god. She's my best friend and I love her to pieces, but sometimes I think we've grown too close.

I start to type back, begging her not to, but realize I was starting to reply in my Twitter-feed instead. I delete it and switch back to Instant Messenger. She already sent the photo. It pops up on my screen and I breathe a sigh of relief. The title says *Infection*, but it's a picture of her ex and his new girlfriend.

Stephanie's boyfriend isn't great-looking, but he has a nice body and never seems to have trouble with the ladies. Stephanie thinks he looks like Ryan Gosling. Maybe if you squint hard enough and put a picture of Ryan Gosling in front of his face there might be some resemblance. The new girlfriend, on the other hand, is stunning. Long blond hair, perfect boobs, shapely legs in a short skirt. Of course I don't tell Stephanie that.

Me: *She's gangrene.*

Because that's what good friends do.

Stephanie: *I'm mostly pissed about the sex though. He was AMAZING in the sack. It was like NASCAR up in our bed. Zero to Fuck Yea! in five minutes flat.*

I cringe while picturing his face in the throes of an orgasm, those bulging eyes, balmy skin no matter the weather.

Me: *You're lucky.*

Stephanie: *How so?*

I can't believe I'm about to admit this to the person with the biggest mouth, but maybe it will make her feel better.

Me: *What I'm about to tell you better never fucking leave this space.*

Stephanie: *And you're the one always calling me overly dramatic.*

Me: *I'm serious. If you don't make me a promise, I won't tell you.*

Stephanie: *Fine. I promise.*

Pop-up ads fill my screen, slowing down my computer. I click out of them before I reply.

Me: *I've never actually had a guy give me an orgasm before.*

I've never told her that. I probably should've kept it to myself. The longer I sit with the thought, the more I start to regret telling her.

I wait for her to say something about it—freak out, more like it. It's not the type of confession Stephanie will just let go.

One minute goes by, then two, and still nothing. Maybe she's too busy rolling around on the floor, laughing.

Fuck. Now I'm really regretting it. Stephanie and I tell each other some personal shit, but this might be over the line. This has potential to become an anvil she'll hold over my head for the rest of my life. A pointed weapon she can jab me with whenever she feels the need to entertain herself.

While I wait for her to reply, I turn up the music on my iPod and go through my Christmas list, checking off the gifts I've already bought and the ones I still need to buy. Stephanie has been taken care of. She's the easiest to shop for. Sex toys all the way now that she's living the single life again—and perhaps, after my admission, a ball gag. The list seems to go on forever. I need to get something for my boss. The Christmas party is coming up soon and I haven't gotten anything for anyone at work yet. I'm such a procrastinator. If I wait any longer, I'll be fighting the Christmas Eve crowds in stores I would never shop at otherwise.

My eyelids grow heavy and I catch myself starting to doze off. I can't nap right now. There's too much to do, so I get up off my bed in my PJs and thick socks, and go into the kitchen for some caffeine. Once I've made my coffee and get something to eat, I look out the window.

Such a beautiful winter evening. The sun is starting to set, casting everything in a gray-blue shadow. A perfect layer of fresh snow on the ground, unmarred by the scurry of busy feet. Winter is my favorite time of year for pumpkin and chestnut flavored things, for reading beside the

fireplace, and wearing all my cute scarves and boots. I'd love to just sit around the apartment all day, every day, doing nothing—like I did today.

I take my coffee and go back to my room where my fluffy feather comforter is in a ball on my mattress and last night's clothes lay scattered across the floor. I never bother to clean on my days off.

The light on my phone is flashing on my bedside table. Picking it up and swiping to reveal my home screen, I see that there are several texts from Stephanie and an equal amount of missed calls. What the hell? I was gone fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. She never calls me unless there's a dire emergency.

Suddenly I'm thinking car wreck. Please tell me she wasn't messaging and driving. Especially in the evening when the temperature begins to dip and streets ice up. I worry about that girl sometimes and her bad decisions, but I don't think she would be that thick-headed.

She didn't leave a voice mail, so I check my texts. There are five of them and they all say the same thing: *Check your freakin computer, damn it!*

I frown at the screen. If she were hurt, she would've said so. My relief is subdued by the annoyance pricking my nerves. This is too needy, even for her.

I glance at my computer where my Instant Messenger is closed. Weird. I don't remember closing it. I just sent her a message before I got up. I open the app and see her frantic words in all caps.

*HOLY SHIT. LOOK AT TWITTER.*

Really? Is whatever's happening on Twitter worth scaring the shit out of me with all those phone calls? Figuring she's following the same story I was, I go to Twitter—which I thought I closed along with the pop-ups, but apparently didn't—and see that I have over three hundred 'likes' and one thousand shares.

Shares? I haven't posted anything recently, not since announcing the coming snow storm in the local forum, which, obviously has already happened. Not exactly a post newsworthy enough for likes, and definitely not for shares. All you'd have to do was turn on the news for that kind of info anyways.

I look at my previous posts to see what's going on and my stomach lurches. Suddenly the room is too hot. My feet are burning inside my comfy socks, socks that aren't feeling so comfy at the moment.

Instead of sending the message about my orgasm—or lack thereof—to Stephanie on Instant Messenger, I sent it to my Twitter feed. A very public Twitter feed. To my five thousand followers—three thousand who live in my very town. I guess I’m no longer invisible to them after all. My omission is displayed like some lewd flasher in the mall, exposing myself.

What. The fuck.

My phone rings. I pick it up. Stephanie’s voice on the other end, high and frantic: “You are punk as fuck,” she says in her high, brassy excited voice. “I can’t believe you just told the entire Twitterverse about your bedroom tragedy after you swore me to secrecy. I thought you didn’t want anyone to know. Doesn’t everyone we went to high school with follow you in the local forum?” She doesn’t stop talking long enough for me to reply. “You’re seriously my hero.”

At first I just stare at the computer screen, my mind spinning in circles. Finally, I find my voice. It comes out meek, scared. “I didn’t mean to.” I clear my throat, and when I speak again it’s less pathetic. “That was meant to be a private message to you! I can just delete it, right? Pretend it didn’t happen.”

Stephanie can’t hold back her laughter, even though I know she hears the distress in my voice. She’s probably thinking, ‘better you than me.’ Actually, I doubt she would care if it were her. Most likely she’d find her own admission funny too. She would love all the attention. Sometimes I wish I were more like her.

“Deleting it would be a little obvious, don’t you think?” she says. “Leave it. That way, if people think you did it on purpose, you’ll seem like some kind of rebel. You know, fuck the world. Like some brave bloggeress who’s confident enough to tell the world about her sad vagina.”

Jesus Christ. I’m so fucked.

The shares and ‘likes’ just keep multiplying until one thousand becomes two and I’m thinking of different haircuts and disguises I can use to change my identity. I will be Callista no more. Maybe I’ll change my name to something more timeless, more old Hollywood, like Maude, or Betty. Or how about something exotic? Angelica, or Mariana.

“How the hell am I getting so many shares?” I demand. It’s not like I’m some celebrity or something. I’m just nobody trying to figure out what the fuck I’m supposed to buy my friends and family for Christmas.

“People have no lives,” Stephanie says. “It’s cold as shit outside and everyone is sitting around their computers like zombies, shopping online and checking out the WhatTheFuckery happening on Twitter. Like us.”

My computer chimes.

“Oh, God, here we go,” I say, my heart seizing. “I just got a private message on Twitter.”

Her laughter rings in my ears. “Read it.”

I don’t want to read it. I want to delete it without even opening it. People are bold on the internet. They say hurtful, horrible things and don’t care who it’s aimed at. They don’t stop to think that there’s a living, breathing human being on the other side of their insults. I don’t want my Christmas to be ruined by hateful trolls.

I stare at the little envelope icon with the red dot next to it, wondering what to do next. If I delete it, I’ll always be wondering what it said. Whatever it says, I can handle it. I’m sure I’m not the only girl in the world who’s never had a guy give her an orgasm before, right? I mean, that’s not my fault.

Or maybe it is.

Doubt starts to wriggle its way inside my head until I’m wondering if maybe it’s me. Maybe there is something wrong with my body and it was never the fault of the guys I’ve been with—even if most of them seemed to be fumbling idiots in the sack with no clue as to the workings of female anatomy.

I’ve had plenty of men brag about their sexual prowess before having sex with me, only to give it their all and come out defeated. My vagina is oh-for-none. Men come to play, and leave with their tails tucked forlornly between their legs. I used to fake orgasms to give them a boost of confidence, like a participation trophy. The older I get the less patience I have. You either play to win or get the fuck off my field.

Ugh. Okay, enough of the sports analogies.

I look at the envelope icon again and decide, fuck it. Whatever it says, I can handle it. Can’t be worse than it already is. I’m far too curious not to read it anyways.

I open it. The message is from a user named Heath ‘O-Maker’ James.

An amused laugh rises up in my throat. Is this guy for real? This is going to be weird, and I’m not sure if I’m up for it right now.

“Did you open it yet?” Stephanie says. I’d forgotten we were still on the phone.

“Not yet,” I say, trying to figure out how to turn on the speaker, but unable to find the right button. We rarely ever talk on the phone. It’s always text or Instant Messenger, and on rare occasions, Skype. “Switch to messenger.”

“Yeah, because that had great results last time,” she says. “I think you’ve forgotten how to internet.”

“I don’t want to juggle my phone on my shoulder while I’m trying to read my messages.”

She grumbles. “Fine. But try not to embarrass yourself again.”

I hang up. The moment I do, she’s messaging me. Moving the messenger icon onto my toolbar, I go back to Twitter and into my private messages.

I hesitate a moment longer, then open it.

Heath O-Maker James: *Never had a man give you an orgasm before, huh?*

Oh God. Who is this guy?

My Instant Messenger frantically dings. I can practically feel Stephanie’s anxiety coming through my computer. Ignoring it, I stare at the Twitter message from Mr. O-Maker, my hands hovering over the glowing keys.

I contemplate telling him it was just a joke, something my friend and I did to get attention, but for whatever reason I just don’t want to. I’m not sure why, but I feel compelled to tell the truth. Confess to some faceless person I’ll never meet in real life. Tell him that no, I’ve never had a man give me an orgasm before. Not for lack of trying, of course. I’ve had plenty of boyfriends give it their all, but for some reason they just never got me there.

My fingers tingle, ready to type. I don’t know this guy. What if he’s some creep and I’m playing into his sick fantasy? Then again, what do I have to lose?

Taking a deep breath, I type. *No, I haven’t.*

I chew on my bottom lip while waiting for him to reply.

Heath O-Maker James: *I could help you with that.*

I cough out a laugh.

*Me: You don't even know what I look like. For all you know I could be some hairy middle aged truck driver, scratching my balls in my elderly mother's basement while trying to pick up young guys.*

My profile picture is of my feet in the sand from Stephanie's and my trip to the Oregon coast over the summer. I've never posted my face on Twitter before.

*Heath O-Maker James: As fun as that all sounds, I know what you look like. Your Instagram account is posted in your profile. You're very beautiful.*

I pinch my eyes closed. Damn it. I forgot about that.

*Me: Oh. Thank you. Even if I did make a habit of sleeping with randoes I meet over the internet—which I don't—we probably don't live anywhere near each other.*

*Heath O-Maker James: You live in Brettsville. I'm in San Pedro County.*

My breath catches and I scoot away from my computer like it might bite me. How does he know that? Fear curdles in my stomach, making me feel sick.

As if reading my mind, he writes back: *Your location shows up next to your name every time you type me a message. You really should utilize your privacy options.*

I'm still stunned and don't reply right away. I should've known better since I can see other people's locations too once in a while.

My Instant Messenger goes off again and again until it's too annoying to ignore. Finally, I click on it.

*Stephanie: Who is the message from? What are they saying? I swear to God, if you keep ignoring me, I'll come to your apartment and never leave.*

I sigh. She'll do it. And once she does, she's impossible to get rid of.

*Me: It's some guy by the name of Heath O-Maker James. He wants to help me with my little problem.*

Several minutes pass and she hasn't replied. In the meantime, I get another message from Heath. I hesitate, then open it.

*Heath O-Maker James: I know what you're thinking, but I promise I'm not some pervert lurking in the shadows, trying to lure insecure girls into my dungeon. I'm just offering to make you feel good. No strings attached.*

Insecure? He thinks I'm insecure? He's not wrong, but where the hell does he get off saying things like that? As if I'm some sad case who can't get laid? Trust me; I can get laid. That's never been the problem. The problem is what happens after the clothes come off.

My fingers punch at the keys, irate: *Oh, well, since you promise, then, um, no. And, by the way, I'm not insecure. I'm a very secure person, thank you.*

A second later he responds with: *Ha! Is someone a little touchy? Did I strike a nerve?*

He's baiting me. He's using words like "insecure" to get under my skin. It works, but I'm not going to tell him that.

My Instant Messenger dings again. I'm having a hard time juggling both conversations. Maybe Stephanie was right. Maybe I don't know how to internet and should try my hand at old fashioned phone conversations.

I bring Instant Messenger up onto my main screen.

Stephanie: *Oh My God. You have to say yes to him.*

Me: *Are you insane? I don't know this guy. What if he's a serial killer?*

She responds with a link.

Stephanie: *I looked up his name and was searching through his feed and found these.*

I click on the highlighted link she sent. It's a list of comments from women to Heath O-Maker James on Twitter. Not from just one or two, but from lots of women. I read them aloud to myself. "Thank you for last night," I say. It's from user @JasmineFontana. "You were incredible last night." From @BrendaQua. "I've never had a man touch me like that before." This one is from @LadyBella, who is a certified Twitter user with a check next to her name. I thought only celebrities got those. The last one says, 'You made me cum so hard.' I read that one several more times in my head.

I can't help but feel intrigued. I'm not going to say that to Stephanie though, or she'll push me even harder to sleep with this guy. Especially if I tell her we live less than an hour apart.

Me: *He's disgusting.*

Stephanie: *You're kidding, right? He sounds exquisite.*

Me: *Look how many women he's had sex with. It's ridiculous.*

Stephanie: *Look how happy they are.*

That's undeniable. But I can't even fathom having sex with a stranger. Chances are, even if I were crazy enough to give it a go, I'd be too nervous to even get turned on.

Me: *I'm not doing it.*

I've made up my mind. This is too insane. This is something Stephanie would do on a whim. Not me. I'm not that brave—or crazy.

Stephanie: *You haven't even seen what he looks like!*

Me: *I don't care what he looks like.*

Stephanie: *For shits and giggles, let's just see what he looks like first before you shut him down completely.*

Me: *It doesn't matter.*

Stephanie: *Please. For me.*

I grumble. She always pulls that “for me” bullshit. As if our entire friendship hasn’t always been for her.

Me: *Fine.*

I give in like I always do.

I send a message to Heath: *Since you already know what I look like, it's only fair if you send me a picture of yourself.*

A few seconds later a message shows up in my box. I click on it and see that it’s an Instagram account for Heath James. No “O-Maker” in between the names. Just him.

I lean closer to the screen. Hand shaking, heart pounding in my chest, I reach for my mouse. I don’t know why I’m so nervous about seeing what he looks like. It’s not like anything will ever come of this. We won’t text or talk on the phone. We won’t ever meet—no matter what he looks like. I’m just curious, I guess.

I don’t know what I was picturing, but it’s not the man in the photos. He’s in his mid-late twenties, he looks tall, though I guess it’s kind of hard to tell from a picture. He’s drop-dead gorgeous, has scruffy stubble on a strong jaw, soft-looking full lips, and the most amazing icy-blue eyes lined with long dark lashes that make them stand out even more. I would kill to have those eyes. How is it fair for one person to have so many perfect attributes? I bet he’s a real asshole. That, or a complete idiot. Someone who looks that good can’t possibly have a great personality too.

In nearly all of his pictures, he’s with a dog. A husky with one blue eye, almost the same color as Heath’s, and one brown. They aren’t selfies. Just of Heath and his dog in different places. Mostly in country settings, hiking near a river, kayaking on a lake. An outdoors, rugged kind of guy. He looks like the type. I wonder who’s taking all of these photos. Probably the women who seem to worship him in bed.

I stumble across a picture of him without a shirt, standing knee-deep in the ocean in a pair of swimming shorts. His chest is smooth and hairless—unlike his face—and chiseled with muscle as if he'd just stepped out of the gym. His smile shines bright white, squinting his eyes as his dog leaps out of the water to grab the stick he's holding in his hand.

Are you fucking kidding me? He even has perfect teeth. Even if I were contemplating sleeping with him, there's no way I could be with a guy who's better looking than me. On a good day, with the right makeup and decent lighting, I might be an eight. Heath is a hard ten. Easy. I've only seen men like him in magazines. He looks airbrushed, beautiful. Nothing like the men I've had in my bed.

Suddenly, without realizing it at first, I'm picturing him lying on top of me, those beautiful blue eyes staring into mine. I'm actually picturing what it would be like to be naked in bed with a perfect stranger.

My Instant Messenger chimes, and I open it.

Stephanie: *Well, did you find out what he looks like?*

I contemplate telling her no. If she sees how good-looking he is, she'll never let it go. But I've never lied to my best friend and I'm not about to now. No matter how annoying she can be.

I send the link, then switch back over to Twitter and my conversation with Heath.

Me: *I like your dog.*

Heath O-Maker James: *That's it? You like my dog?*

I'm sensing that he's waiting for me to gush about how hot he is. I'm sure that's what all the women who talk to him do. I'm not one of his groupies. He's practically a god, yes, but I'm not about to feed his ego with cheap fluff.

Me: *Yes, I like your dog. What's his name?*

Heath O-Maker James: *Opie. He's my best friend.*

I fight the adorable thoughts running through my head. I swear, I'm a sucker for a guy and his dog. I'm sure it's yet another way he lures women into his sex web.

Me: *So, are you like a prostitute or something?*

I guess it would be called a gigolo for a man, but that's such a stupid word and I refuse to use it.

Heath O-Maker James: *No, nothing like that. I just like sex and making women feel good. If you've never had a guy make you come before, chances*

*are he's doing something wrong. You need to be with someone who knows what they're doing. I can make your pussy explode just by using my fingers, and I'm far better with my tongue. Do you like to have your pussy eaten?*

I'm taken aback by how blunt and sexual he is. I don't know this guy and I'm definitely not comfortable talking like that to someone I don't know. Without responding, I click out of Twitter and bring up Instant Messenger again and see that there's a string of messages from Stephanie. They mostly blather on and on about how hot he is.

Me: *I gotta go, Steph. I'll talk to you about it later.*

Stephanie: *Don't hang up on me, Callista. We need to talk about this O-Maker some more.*

Me: *Later. I promise.*

Okay, so maybe I do lie to my best friend once in a while, because I have no plans on talking about it later with her.

\* \* \*

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