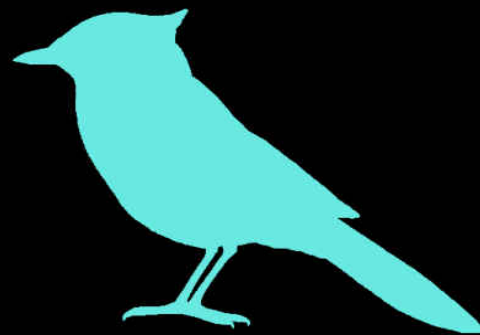




Quid
PRO
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A NOVEL BY NENIA CAMPBELL

QUID PRO QUO
by NENIA CAMPBELL

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DEDICATION

*To those who love a bad boy redeemed
(especially if he stays a little bad)*

Prologue

2017

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Nicholas Beaucroft leaned back in his chair, stretching his long legs beneath the streamlined metal desk. With the shades drawn, the office was dark. Gray paint and a mulberry tree growing unchecked beyond the window were the culprits for the room's bleakness. He could have, and probably should have, had the gardeners crop the branches, but—no.

He wanted it wild. He wanted to remember.

Seventeen years ago, when he had been a boy, there had been a young cat in the tree. He and his friends, Jake Van Hoff and Aaron Kranz, had been out in the yard, unsupervised and listless. They had been wondering what to do next when they heard the small mew overhead and looked up, glimpsing what appeared to be a white ball of fluff. He couldn't remember which of them had thrown the first clod of dirt, or why they had thought that would coax the kitten down, but suddenly, there had been a blur of blue and brown and a shouted cry:

What the fuck are you doing?

It had surprised him—the lowness of the voice, the easy vulgarity. How the owner of the voice had sounded so young and yet so confident. Jake had nearly shit himself, he remembered with a slight sneer, and Aaron had been too stunned to move, the clod of dirt crumbling in his hand as his fingers clenched in involuntary response to the note of authority.

The girl—because the owner of the voice *had* been a girl—had climbed the tree, her patched and dirty sneakers hooking on the bark as she shimmied up the branches to where the kitten was huddled in terror. Her shorts had been too small, riding up on her thighs in a way that looked like it pinched, and when she had swung back to the ground, he'd caught a glimpse of taut, brown midriff. The sight of that had done something to him, and even though he'd been ten and utterly disdainful of girls by his own admission, he couldn't bring himself to look away from the tall, leggy creature who, with her sweatshirt knotted around her long, slim waist like a kilt, looked like some defiant young goddess.

“W-we were just trying to get it down,” Aaron had stammered. “Nick started it.”

“It's just a baby.” She'd had the cat cradled against her chest, pitching her voice low. “Are you such psychotic little freaks that you would throw rocks at a helpless creature?”

Slowly, Nicholas had allowed his eyes to drift to her angry face, to drink in the flashing hazel eyes, the pointed chin, the nose with its unfashionable bump. Girls around here didn't have bumps like that; as soon as they were teenagers, they all went out and got noses that looked like ski slopes. She didn't look like the other girls at his school. She didn't look like anyone he'd ever met; but she was still the most beautiful girl that he had ever seen.

“Who is *that*?” Jake had whispered, with equal parts fascination and annoyance, and for some reason, he had found himself wanting to slug the other boy in the face.

He had watched the girl march away, still clutching the cat, muttering to herself as her sweatshirt swished angrily around her hips with each determined stomp.

“I think that's my new stepsister, Justine.”

The phone rang shrilly, gnawing into his memories so that they crumbled into nothing. He picked up the phone, toying with a small, stuffed bird he'd picked up at an estate sale. It was a little blue jay, made of felt. The jet beads it had for eyes seemed to glitter with the facsimile of life in the dim light. *She never liked her name*, he thought, fingering the stitching on the ruff. *She always wanted everyone to call her Jay*.

As the woman on the other end of the phone went on, his eyes closed in impatience, strong fingers clenching minutely so that the fabric began to buckle in protest over the delicate cardboard base. “Blue jay” was what he, and only he, had called her.

His little bird.

No longer a girl now, Jay had become a woman: a beautiful woman, with only a few silvery strands threading through her dark corkscrew curls like pieces of tinsel, and a keen intelligence in her luminous eyes. He had stared at the photo that had been provided to him, greedily comparing it to the one that existed in his mind from when he had last seen her eight years ago.

Different, but the same. He would know her anywhere. He would know her blind.

Part of him had wondered whether her effect on him would remain. She had been twenty-three years old when she left, four years younger than he was now. In the photograph, she was wearing office attire, looking over her shoulder while purchasing coffee, her face possessing the watchful calm of a grazing deer. His eyes had scanned over her fitted skirt and blouse, unbuttoned enough to reveal a glimpse of something lacy, and he had instantly gone hard.

On the phone, the woman continued to rail at him and he listened silently. Though he was careful to make no sound that could be heard over the phone, he couldn't quite suppress his smile. It warped his swarthy, patrician features, forming the perfect arrangement of studied cruelty. Jay would have recognized it instantly and gone running.

"Yes," he said softly, picking the bird up in his hand. "I understand that your financial straits are dire. Well, if you wish to discuss it further, you can arrange it through a lawyer."

He knew she didn't have a lawyer. She only had Jay to speak for her now. Sweet, loyal, *ethical* Jay. That selfsame goodness was precisely what had propelled her into flight from his arms the first time. Of the two of them, she had been the one with the tender heart.

Not that she had ever been willing to give it to him.

His fingers convulsed and there was a quiet crack as the bird's hollow body collapsed. Carefully, he replaced the phone in its cradle, hanging up on the shouting that was still emanating from the line. In the blue wash of his computer screen, his gray eyes held an uncanny, arctic gleam.

Nicholas tossed the ruined bird into the trash and smiled grimly as he turned to the computer and bought himself a plane ticket. *I'm going to possess you, my little blue jay. And I'm going to make you love it.* He folded his hands in front of him and glanced out at the tree.

He only wished he could see her face once she realized she was caged.

Chapter One

2017

■□□□□■

There were three things every woman needed in the city: sensible shoes, an umbrella, and a cell phone. Currently, Jay Varens had none of these, because some asshole had just cut the straps on her cute leather backpack and was racing off with it down the street.

“Hey!” she shouted. “Hey! Stop! Thief!”

A few of the passers-by looked at her curiously. Several of them deliberately looked away.

Helplessly, Jay watched the man dart away with her backpack tucked under his arm like a football, eventually disappearing down one of the underground BART tunnels. Why her? Why today, when it was raining? She couldn't even call the police—the bastard had her cell phone.

Rain continued to pour down from the sky as if from a broken spigot as Jay schlepped herself to work in her pinching heels. By the time she got to the office, her light gray sweater with the sewn-on pearls was now a much darker gray and her curly hair was hanging in tangled clumps around her shoulders, making her feel like something scraped from the gutters.

“Good morning, Ms. Varens,” said Ian, the elevator man.

She forced a brave smile, trying not to cry. “Hi, Ian. Pretty cruddy weather, huh?”

“Forget your umbrella?”

“Yeah. I guess I did.”

She managed to keep it together until she got to her desk, which she shared with Lily Chang, who worked as an administrative assistant for the other executive in Parker-Hawthorne, LLC. Lily was eating a piece of toast, which she immediately set down, eyes widening. “Oh no! You're soaked, Jay. Are you all right? Do you want me to make you a coffee?”

That tiny bit of kindness undid her and a few tears spilled out, along with a choked-up sob. Jay hated crying, *hated* it, because it always made her feel small and powerless.

Her chest tightened as old memories threatened to rush in. Nobody had helped her then, either.

"I'm sorry." Jay grabbed a tissue from her desk. "I was just robbed on the street by a man with a knife and nobody did anything to help. He took my phone, my sneakers, my umbrella—"

"Your keys?" Lily asked, returning with a steaming cup. "Your wallet?"

"N-no." Jay sniffed. "I have those. They were in my pocket. Thank God."

"Well, that's something. At least now you don't have to cancel your credit cards."

Jay tried to remember if she had ever paid for anything with a credit card on her phone and whether she ought to cancel them anyway. She logged into her Apple account to track her phone and saw that the phone thief was speeding towards the East Bay. Probably on BART. Using *her* Clipper Card. *Bastard*, she thought angrily, logging out of her account.

"Thank you for the tea." Jay sighed and opened up ShiftWare, the platform they used to keep track of the CEOs' schedules and click through calls and appointments. "It helped a lot. I felt like I was about to start screaming my head off. You're seriously the best."

"Don't I know it," Lily said, with a little hair flip. "Drinks after work? I'll buy. We'll invite Grace, if she's not working late again."

"Great. I like Grace."

An appointment popped up for Jay to schedule. She glanced at it and let out a small gasp.

"Jay?" Lily didn't look away from her screen. "You all right over there?"

"Burned my tongue on the coffee."

She stared at the name, burned into the screen. Nicholas Beaucroft. What the hell was her stepbrother doing in San Francisco? The last time she had looked him up, feeling drunkenly masochistic, he had still been living in L.A. Had he been looking for her, too?

No, she thought, even as goosebumps broke out beneath her damp and clingy sleeves. Her LinkedIn was private, inaccessible to anyone who wasn't in her network, and her Facebook didn't say where she worked. *He took over his father's investment firm when he died*, she reminded herself, trying to quell the panic. *It's strictly business—that's all.*

But what would Nicholas want with soap and bath oil? In San Francisco?

No. He had come here to find her, she was sure of it. Given what had transpired when she had last seen him, Jay could only imagine what his motives were.

Revenge, probably.

You're going to refuse me again? She could still conjure up his voice so easily: deep and smooth and painfully cold—an icy river churning with hidden undercurrents of violence.

Jay looked at the pending appointment and considered trashing it or pretending she'd never seen it. Tempting, but no. Those types of things could be traced and she didn't want to lose her job. She didn't want to cost her boss his. Nicholas could make or break this company with his money. *With his father's money*, she corrected herself. *He didn't even earn it.*

Jay scheduled the appointment for late afternoon the next day and resolved to leave early.

“So,” she said, turning to Lily with a bright smile, “where are we going tonight?”



After two Boothby cocktails, Jay's head felt like it was going to float away on a cloud of champagne. She thanked the Uber driver Lily had ordered for her before climbing up the stairs to her apartment door. It took her several tries to fit the key into the lock. She dropped them on the second attempt and something about the way they looked, all spread out from their ring on the ground, struck her as hilarious, and she began to giggle hysterically as she picked them up.

Such a lightweight, Lily had teased her affectionately, while Grace, who was Lily's cousin, had laughed. *I can't take you anywhere, Jay.*

Sitting in the trendy cocktail bar in the FiDi district, with the raspberry-colored lights and loud indie music, Jay could almost forget the reason for the darkness clouding her heart.

Finally, she got the door open and clumsily tossed her keys in the little ceramic dish by the door as she did up the latch and bolt. Carbon, her cat,

rubbed against her leg, meowing vocally. She bent to pet him, scratching behind his ears the way he liked. She'd always loved cats. Before Carbon, she'd had a white cat named Gypsum. She was long dead now, but she had continued her weird trend of naming her pets after rocks.

She found herself thinking of the gypsum rose Nick had gotten her when his dad had taken him to Nevada. Back when her collection had been smaller, it had been the nicest rock she owned. She had been touched. An olive branch, she'd thought, from her weirdly intense younger brother. *How wrong I was*, she thought, staring unseeingly at her tattered old sofa.

It was locked away in a drawer somewhere, now. She hadn't been able to bring herself to sell it, but she couldn't stand to look at the flattened cluster of crystals, either. Maybe she *should* sell it. The one he had given her was a nice piece and probably worth a lot.

What was he doing in San Francisco? Seeking revenge?

Fear surfaced anew, ready to consume her if she let it. Jay drew in a breath and walked towards the kitchenette with small, determined steps.

Rocks cluttered many of the available surfaces in her apartment. Once people found out that she collected them, that was all they tended to give her as gifts. She had lots of geodes, a few pseudomorphs, a king's ransom of semiprecious stones. Her favorites were the fulgurites, the spiny bristled structures that formed out in the desert when lightning struck the earth. There was a big one on her coffee table, carefully mounted on a wooden base by a collector friend of hers.

Lightning turned to stone. She stared at the dangerous spikes. *That's what I feel like sometimes.*

She was at that point of being drunk where feeling good could easily turn into feeling bad and was just sober enough to recognize that, so even though she felt hungry, Jay decided not to eat. She turned on the hot water boiler instead, thinking it would be nice to have a hot cup of tea.

As she puttered around her studio apartment, she noticed the light on the answering machine was blinking. Hopefully that wasn't her bank calling to tell her she'd been scammed. Just thinking about what had happened earlier, and how *no one* had helped, filled her with another tide of fresh anger. She couldn't believe no one had even asked if she was all right.

Look for the helpers, Mr. Rogers had said. Clearly he'd never been to San Francisco.

She pressed the button for “new messages” and winced when her mother's nasal voice filled the room. “Justine,” she said, “it's your mother. I need you to call me right away. It's urgent.”

It's always urgent, thought Jay, folding her arms. Last time, her mother had called, she had been convinced that she was being “scammed” because she didn't understand the additional charges on her food delivery. By the time Jay had finally called her back, her mother had already disputed the charge and gotten into a shouting match with her bank.

Jay thought about listening to the other two messages first, but decided against it, quickly dialing her mother's number. “Hi, I got your message,” she said, a little breathlessly. “What's wrong? Are you all right?” *Please don't let it be about money.*

“Your stepbrother got us both disinherited.”

Shit. “He did? Why would he do that?”

“Because he's a bastard,” her mother hissed, “and he clearly has it in for us.”

Jay wasn't surprised that her mother had forgotten that she was never even in the will. Damon Beaucroft had never legally adopted her, so she had never even been in the running.

“What happened?” Jay asked slowly. *What did you do?*

“Apparently,” she continued in seething tones, “Damon added a stipulation to his will stating that his wife needed to remain faithful until his death, or she would lose everything.”

And you weren't, Jay finished for her silently—and Nicholas knew it. He'd told her as much. “How did that get out?” she asked, falling into her computer chair, hot water forgotten. She already knew why, already dreaded hearing it. “How would they even know?”

“Your stepbrother has photographs. The fucking snake. He was always slinking around the house with that camera of his, and of course, his father never did a damn thing to stop him.”

Jay felt her throat tighten with unvoiced suspicions. *Photographs.*

She turned to the computer, typing in a quick search that her mother should have looked up from the start. Her fingers stumbled only a little; she

told herself it was because she was drunk. “I’m sorry,” said Jay, “but I’m not sure what you can do. It looks like you could assert something called your right of election, as his spouse, but that seems to be for general disinheritance and not for, like, the kind that comes with stipulations. Can you hire a lawyer?”

“I can’t afford a lawyer,” she said. “I’m broke. He’ll crush me in court.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“He won’t speak to me. I tried calling his office. His secretary wouldn’t let me through.”

Administrative assistant, she corrected silently, far too used to the dismissive indignity herself. “I’m sorry,” Jay said again, leaning back in her chair. “I wouldn’t fight him on this. It really sucks—but I’m just not sure what you can do. You know what he’s like.”

There was a pause. “He said he would be willing to speak to you.”

Jay’s heart froze. She felt the filaments of that chill extend to her veins before snapping off like sharp, stabbing needles to pierce her throughout her body with that terrible cold.

“Absolutely not.”

“But Justine—”

“No.”

“He looked up to you,” her mother said pathetically. “You were close.”

Next time I come, I’m going to be inside you.

“Really?” Jay said, in a calm, alien voice. “Close? Is that what you think we were?”

“Please, Justine. You’re the only one who could control him.”

What’s the matter, little bird? Didn’t work when you ran to Daddy? But then he’s not your Daddy, is he?

“Not even I could do that,” Jay said, only a little faintly now. In her periphery, the corners of the room seemed to be going dark. “Good luck with the case if you pursue it.”

“Justine! You’re being ridiculous. It’s a lot of money and I can’t just—”

I’ll be your Daddy. You can tell me what’s bothering you and I’ll make it all better.

Jay hung up the phone.

He was coming for her. There was no doubt in her mind of it now. Oh, God.

She'd always wondered if her mother had known what had been going on between her and Nicholas. Damon had known—the sick fuck had even encouraged it, in his way—but she had let herself believe that her mother maybe hadn't seen the way Nicholas looked at her. The way he always contrived to get her alone.

Now, Jay wondered—at what her mother might have known, at her willingness to sell her out. Even though her mother had made a career of stripping, Jay had never once thought of her mother as a whore until now.

Everyone has their price. I wonder what yours is.

Jay pressed play for the remaining messages on the machine with an attempt at calm. The next one was a voter survey. She deleted it, breathing more evenly still, knowing that the calm was transient, and would fade when the effects of the alcohol did. *Next one*, she thought.

And the phone fell from her nerveless fingers when she heard *his* voice fill her room.

“Hello, little bird,” she heard him say, in a voice as textured as raw silk, “I'm sure by now you've heard from your mother about how she's been disinherited from my father's will. I'm sure you also know that neither of you have a chance in hell of fighting me on this—” there was a sound like a smothered laugh, as if he knew she would be afraid and reveled in it “—I am, however, open to negotiation with you. I'll be in town tomorrow afternoon, and I was thinking about stopping by for drinks at Bana. Come find me there. I'll be waiting.”

There was a click and the line went dead.

Yes, everyone had their price. As Jay replaced the phone with a trembling hand, listening to the sound of her own rapid breathing, she couldn't help wondering if she were about to find hers.

Chapter Two

2017

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Jay woke up to heavy gray skies and a cat kneading her stomach. For a heartbeat, the day was a day like any other and she couldn't quite figure out why her nerves were all lighting up as if she had been plugged into a live socket. And then she remembered—*little bird*.

He was coming to her office today because she'd scheduled the damn appointment. Why had she done that? She should have canceled it, claimed it was an accident. He would never know.

I could call in sick, she thought, lifting Carbon off her body and setting him on the floor. She was rarely sick. Her mother used to tell her snidely that she was as “healthy as a horse” when she was younger, usually following it with “and you have the appetite of one.” Nobody was going to come after her for missing one day. She could make it rain PTO if she wanted.

But could she do that to Lily? To Owen? She only had so many hours of time off and they had to last her the entire year. Plus, she had scheduled Nick's appointment so late that, even if he arrived early, she'd already be on her way home, with him being none the wiser.

Her mother had been wrong about her ability to control Nick, but she did know how to handle him. He was so used to getting what he wanted that defiance always caught him off guard. Jay supposed that was what happened when you grew up with a bastard of a father who expected you to ask “how high?” whenever he said “jump.”

Jay pulled on a shapeless sweater, pairing it with a pair of tweed pants and her boots. She looked at her reflection, frowned, and added a pair of chandelier earrings. As she ate a bowl of cooked spelt berries, she Googled herself, as she often did, before placing a rush order for her new phone, and then grabbing her iPod and heading out to catch the train.

Just a normal day, she told herself. *Relax. At least it isn't raining this time.*

She just barely made the Northbound heading into the city. Her limbs somehow felt heavy and jittery all at once. She hated the crowded trains, the constant sensation of being groped. She hated that losing her Clipper card

meant paying for a ticket with cash, which meant long lines and an anxious wait. Vanessa Carlton was blasting in her ears but not even that could cover the screech of the train on the tracks or the shouted curses of the homeless man in the back.

“Trying out a new look?” Lily asked, when Jay hung her coat up on the hook. As usual, she looked flawless and put together in an A-line skirt with a bow and a pressed floral blouse.

“It's cold,” said Jay, by means of explanation. “And it's laundry day, Ms. Fashion Goals.”

“It looks very cozy,” Lily said, a little mischievously, and Jay sighed. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” Jay glanced at the clock on her computer. “I love you.”

“I'm taken.” She held up a hand, baring a silver ring. “By the BTS Army.”

Jay rolled her eyes. “Whatever that means.”

“Oh my God,” said Lily. “I never got you into K-Pop? I am the worst friend ever.”

When Owen Parker and Sheridan Hawthorne walked back in from wining and dining their clients, *Blood Sweat & Tears* was playing and Lily was demonstrating dance moves with fist pumps and shoulder rolls. It was during one of these latter that Lily saw their bosses entering the building and Jay wondered if she had gotten whiplash. *I didn't know the human neck could turn so fast*, she thought, fighting back a giggle as Lily turned bright red.

“Good morning, Mr. Parker, Ms. Hawthorne. How *are* you?”

Sheridan coughed, like she was trying to muffle a laugh, while Owen said only, “Good afternoon, girls. Ms. Varens, did I get any calls?”

“No, Mr. Parker. There have been no new calls, although you have an appointment at four.”

“Very good.”

Jay leaned over and quickly switched off the music while the two executives resumed chatting on the slow walk back to their offices, although she noticed Owen looking back at her over his shoulder with raised brows. She smiled guiltily.

“Ah!” Lily tugged at her skirt, smoothing it. “Why didn't you say something?”

“Because I didn't *see* them,” Jay said, turning towards her. “I was looking at *you*.”

“I am so embarrassed. I need to recover my dignity.” Lily fanned her face. “I am going to drown my sorrows in the bottom of a poke bowl. Want to come with? They have a tofu option.”

“Not today,” said Jay. “I'm working through lunch. How about tomorrow?”

“I'm always up for lunch with you, boo.” A look of concern crossed her face as she snagged her purse off her desk. “Don't work yourself too hard, though. Okay?”

“I promise,” said Jay. “I'll swan about and do nothing but make coffee.”

“Atta girl.” Lily clicked her tongue while making finger guns, which made Jay laugh again as she watched her friend skip down the stairs and out the door, leaving her alone in the front office with her thoughts and the clock. 2:45. She had forty-five minutes to go.

It's too quiet. She turned on some quiet music and got up to scan some documents for one of Owen's meetings to the sweetly wistful strains of Rachael Yamagata. Even though their company was trying to go paperless, many of their clients still wanted hard copies to take notes on. She needed twenty, but the copier had different ideas.

“Out of paper?” Jay muttered to herself. “You *have* paper, you greedy son of a bitch.” She filled the tray and pressed buttons, swearing when it spat out three badly blurred copies.

Maybe she needed to fill the other tray? While she was lifting the rear compartment, she heard the door chime and the sound of footsteps heading up the stairs. *Now who might that be?* Jay wondered, after another compulsive glance at her watch. *Maybe someone looking for the bakery next door.*

But then Jay saw the blurred reflection of the person on the polished stone tile—swirls of gray and black, like Lily's skirt and hair—and she turned with a smile. “Back so soon, Lily? Maybe you can help me tame this ink spewing . . .”

Her eyes drifted up and the papers fell in a scatter over the floor.

“Monster,” she finished, voice just above a whisper.

He stalked closer and his shiny brogues echoed off the tile like the reports of a rifle being fired. *Nick*, she thought, and something curdled inside her under that deliberate stare. He stopped a few feet away and his eyes dropped insolently, taking her in, before going to the scattered papers.

What the hell was he doing here so early? Had he known she was going to run? Oh, God, he probably had. She should have called in sick. She should have—

His coat flared out, drawing her eyes back to him as he bent to one knee to pick up her scattered papers. She could see the fabric of his shirt undulate as his arms moved, hinting at the heavy muscle beneath. In her memories, and her thoughts, Nick had always been a boy: a cruelly intense boy, mired in the kind of brooding sullenness that eventually become self-indulgent and callous, but a boy, nonetheless.

He wasn't a boy anymore.

Still on the floor, he paused before rising, and when he lifted his head, she felt his breath stir through her pantleg. The coldness inside her body solidified, becoming pure ice as awareness of what their respective positions would look like to anyone passing by drove into her with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, making her stumble back drunkenly.

It's really him, she thought, when he handed her the files. At 6'4", he was one of the few people she had to look *up* at. She didn't look up, though. She refused to give him that pleasure. Instead, she stared at his throat, clutching the papers to her breast.

“Nick.”

“Blue jay.” He reached out—to touch her hair? Her earrings?—and Jay scooted another step back. His smile hardened as he let his hand fall. “You haven't changed at all.”

“Mr. Parker is in a meeting.” She was proud of herself. Her voice didn't even shake. “Do you need help with something?”

That cold gaze flicked over her again and she was very glad for the acrylic sweater's thick, shapeless warmth when his eyes lingered briefly on her breasts. “Are you his little secretary? That's so cute. I'm meeting with him at four.”

"I'm an administrative assistant." She spoke through clenched teeth. "*His* administrative assistant. And if your appointment isn't until four, why are you even here?"

"Because you also have an appointment with me." Nicholas took another step closer and Jay felt the copy machine hit her back. It let out an indignant beep, making her jump.

"I can't go out for drinks now," she said. "I'm still working."

Another step. "When do you get off?"

Jay looked away, staring at her desk like it was the most interesting place in the world as she tried not to let his suggestively-phrased question get to her. "Five."

"How convenient. That's when my meeting ends."

I know, thought Jay, and her heart gave a traitorous thud. *I scheduled it.*

"Bana at five." He shifted and Jay's eyes swung over to him in alarm. If he took one more step, their bodies would be touching. "I'm looking forward to it."

Jay bit her lip to keep it from trembling.

Nicholas studied her for a moment longer as the now-working copier revved at her back. She was debating on whether she ought to fake him out or run for it when he abruptly angled himself away. "I'm going out for a brief walk. I'll be back in time for the meeting."

Jay watched him stalk away; he left right as Lily was coming back in. She glanced up at Nicholas and said something to him—"I'm sorry" or "excuse me" or "you go ahead"—as if reality had diverged and he were just some ordinary guy and not . . . himself.

"I got you a matcha latte with soy milk because I'm awesome—they didn't have oat. What are you—" Lily's eyes scrolled down abruptly and she continued, in an entirely different tone of voice, "What are you doing down there on the floor, Jay?"

Her legs had finally given out. "I fell." Her voice sounded rusty. "It's these new boots. The soles are slippery," she added lamely, clutching her bundle of papers tighter.

Lily didn't say anything else as she set the drinks and food down on her desk. "Are you all right?" she asked gently, bending down. "Did something happen while I was gone? Was it that guy?"

“No.” Jay got up and sat at her desk. “I really did fall. I’m actually feeling a little dizzy. I think—I think I might sneak out early today.”

“That’s what happens when you don’t eat lunch, Jay.” Lily winked, though her face was drawn. She obviously didn’t believe the lie. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell.”

They worked in silence for a while but Jay could sense Lily glancing over at her every so often, which made her even more self-conscious. Her hands were visibly shaking and she kept her wrists pressed against the desk as she typed, trying to control her breathing.

I’ll leave when he gets back. She took a sip of her matcha tea and froze with the straw still in her mouth.

Nicholas walked back in. His eyes went to Lily, who was eyeing him with suspicion, and then to her, his expression darkly amused. “I’m here to see Mr. Parker. Is he ready for me?”

Are you ready for me, Jay?

Aware of Lily watching, Jay pressed the intercom button. “Mr. Beaucroft’s here, Owen.”

She glanced at Nicholas and wished she had not when she saw the look on his face. The heat in it was blistering. Oh yes, she knew that look, just as she knew exactly what would happen if she went with him for drinks. Jay sat straighter, locking her back against the building shudder.

You’re Daddy’s little bird.

“Great, Jay,” Owen was saying, oblivious. “Go ahead and send him in.”

Jay gestured at the door and caught a whiff of citrus as he swept by her, shooting her another one of those glances as he went, and then the door closed and the world was moving again and Jay was on her way out the door, running like her life depended on it.

She didn’t feel safe until she was speeding away on the train.

At home, she sat on her sofa with Carbon next to her, nibbling at a tahini-spread wrap she’d filled with fresh lettuce and fried cauliflower. Her thoughts were becoming more defined, more reasonable, as her panic cleared, and she realized that she might have made a big mistake.

Nicholas would be very angry when he realized she wouldn’t be coming. He didn’t like being outmaneuvered and he would probably take it

as a challenge. She eyed the phone warily, as if it were a coiled serpent, bracing herself for the ring, for the sound of his voice.

How had she gotten into this mess? Why couldn't she just have a *normal* life? She'd gone from spending her adolescence doing her homework by the flickering lights in a seedy strip club's dressing room, only to be hurled into the other wild extreme: a deceptively picturesque beachside locale whose lurid opulence and tranquil waters were all lined with vicious, sharp-edged teeth.

Mentally, she included her mother in that latter category, still stinging from the betrayal. How could she have tried to sell her out to Nick, of all people?

Of course, it was a lot of money, she conceded bitterly. Millions of dollars, probably. Her mother liked her as much as she liked anyone, she just liked money more. It wasn't personal—it never was, not even when it should have been. Jay wasn't sure what her mother had been slated to inherit, but she guessed it was either a quarter or half of whatever Damon owned. Wasn't that typical for spouses with adult children? She really didn't know much about probate.

Damon had made a career out of making people rich, and it had made him rich, as well. His house had been huge. The master bath alone had been as big as the one-bedroom she'd shared with her mom in the Tenderloin. You could get lost in there; *she* had gotten lost. Sometimes it felt like she was still lost, stuck in that house, always running, always trying to stay one foot ahead.

She had never been comfortable there. People had accepted her because they were afraid of her stepfather and because they thought she was *pretty*, but she had always been looking over her shoulder, consciously aware of how easily everything she'd worked for could be torn down.

It turns out, most people find perfection really fucking annoying.

Here, in a tiny studio apartment in the Mission, she had carved out a niche for herself. It was *hers*, and everything she had now, she had gotten independently without any handouts. Her life was modest. She had given up the trappings of wealth and excess when she ran, selling off what remained of her jewelry, living within her means, and she was perfectly comfortable with that—

Until Nick had found her.

She's not coming.

Nicholas had suspected she wouldn't be ever since he had come out of that intolerably dull meeting and seen the empty chair, her dark monitor. The Asian girl at the other desk had given him a look, like she knew where he had buried all the bodies. He wondered what Jay had said to her, if anything, about the meeting. She had never been the type to open up and confide in others.

What a passionate and aching lonely girl she had been—so bitter beneath the sweet. She might have changed, but Nicholas didn't think so. Not after hearing the music she'd been playing in the office or hearing her swear softly at the copier. Not after seeing how quickly that bright smile had withered or how her eyes had filled with fear upon glimpsing him.

Her hands had actually trembled when he'd handed her those papers. Did she think he'd been planning on dragging her down to the floor and fucking her in that sterile little office of hers? Did she remember how he liked to fuck? *Maybe that's what made her run.* He smiled grimly, running a hand along his unshaven jaw. Foolish girl. She knew he loved the chase.

Seeing his smile, Owen Parker turned to him and said, “So what did you think?”

“I'll let you know my final decision tomorrow,” Nicholas said absently, and the other man looked disappointed but not entirely surprised. “Thank you for the presentation.”

Damn the presentation, he thought, as the other secretary looked pointedly away from him. He hadn't come four hundred miles to sit through a three-hour long bullshit session about the merits of soap and bath oil and scented candles. What a waste of his time.

He went to Bana anyway, just to give her a fair chance. It was a Turkish bar that was known for its raki, but they had appetizers and liqueur-based cocktails, as well as a limited tapas menu. Nicholas stayed for an hour: he had two drinks, left a generous tip, and then left, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his blazer to keep out the encroaching chill of the fog.

San Francisco was surprisingly cold. So much more so than Hollybrook. Only fools and masochists would tread along these inhospitable beaches, or swim in that iron gray water. He couldn't see how Jay could possibly enjoy living in this dump. She'd always seemed to like L.A.

Until you, that dark, niggling voice whispered. You made her run.

Nicholas returned to his hotel, greeting the clerk—a trick he'd learned from Jay. She said hello to people because she genuinely seemed to like people; he did it because the service was so much better. Once he was alone, he leaned against the closed door of his hotel room. Then he stalked towards the bed, shrugging his coat off and tossing it on a nearby chair as he began to undo the pristine white fabric that had been beneath it, balling that up and tossing it, too.

The sheets had been soft enough last night but now they chafed against his skin. The king-sized bed was too big for one person, but he hadn't thought he'd be returning here alone. He slid off his belt with a musical jangle and unzipped his jeans, pulling them down just enough to free himself. *Mr. Beaucroft*, she had called him, in that soft, mellifluous voice. Not as good as what he wanted, but better than *Nick*: it had just enough reverence to get him hard.

A sound escaped his lips as he began to stroke himself. As his mind hazed over with pleasure, he began thinking about how he was going to get his flighty bird to come to him.

It would be harder this time. He couldn't just grab her off the street or buy her off the way her mother could be bought off, which meant he was going to have to resort to his old games and fuck with her trusting little head. Nicholas arched back, slowly rocking his hips into his own jerking fist. God, he wished she were a secret deviant. If he was going to blackmail her, he needed something more on her than just a stripper mother, or a mildly salacious tape.

Everyone else in our family was depraved, he thought. *Her mother, fucking the pool boy. My father, fucking everyone else.* Even he had done his share of the illicit, largely because of his father, who had seen that first faint spark of depravity burning inside him and encouraged it to burn. He still remembered that trip to the brothel when he was eighteen. How that

whore named Ivy had looked and sounded so right in some ways, but so wrong in the ways that mattered.

He climaxed with a vengeance, spattering hot come on his tensed stomach. Nicholas leaned over and grabbed a tissue from the nightstand, cleaning himself off as his breathing eased. No, it hadn't been the same, and that was why he had stopped seeing her. It was why he had stopped seeing all women, really, regardless of how prettily they sucked his cock or begged.

There was only one woman who belonged beneath him, so he might as well delete the—

It hit him, in a burst of insight: *the photograph*.

He knew exactly how to trap Jay.

Chapter Three

2017

■□□□□■

No new meetings to schedule.

It should have been reassuring, but instead it was ominous; she felt like someone was holding a gun to her head and she was kneeling in the dark, waiting to see if it would or wouldn't fire. Jay couldn't believe that he would come all this way to see her and then simply . . . give up.

Really, it wasn't her fault. Considering everything that had happened between them, Nick couldn't be surprised that she would never want to see him again.

No new meetings to schedule.

He had her home phone number. He probably had her cell phone number, too—too bad that was stolen. Her mouth twisted. Hell, who was she kidding? He probably had a thousand ways of looking her up. There was no shortage of resources in the world for a man like him. He could make her life very painful if he wanted to. The question was, did he want to?

Jay looked at the door. *Maybe he's going to confront me in person and make a scene.*

The thought made her sick. She'd always hated scenes. But Nick seemed to get off on them.

"Laundry day again?" Lily asked, walking by with a cup of coffee from Jumpin' Java.

Jay clutched at the fuzzy neck of her turtleneck sweater. "I'm just trying something new."

"The Cat Grandma Fashion Handbook?" she quipped. "Step one: wear a cat hair sweater?"

"It's mohair," said Jay. "And I'm not a cat grandma—at the most, I'm a cat aunt."

I could be an aunt, she realized. Nick's twenty-seven now. I could be an aunt multiple times over. He could be married—divorced. Why did that make her feel as if she had a fever? She tugged at her sweater, as if to fan the heated skin beneath. I don't know anything about him now.

“Okay,” said Lily. “Seriously, Jay. What's going on? You keep staring at that door like you think it's going to bite you. Are you expecting someone?”

“No,” said Jay. “I'm just not feeling well.”

The door behind them burst open, chatter escaping. “Ms. Varens.” Owen walked towards her with his arm around—*no*. “Have you met Mr. Beaucroft?”

“Yes,” she said, furiously modulating her voice. “Yesterday. In reception.”

“Jay is such a delight. So is Lily. Sherry and I love these girls. Yesterday, the two of them were in here dancing to K-Bop music, or whatever it's called, if you can believe that.”

“I can,” said Nick, smiling humorlessly.

“You're a lucky girl, Jay,” said Owen. “Nick here would like to take you out to lunch.”

Lunch? The thought of being seated across a table from this man sent her thoughts into a tailspin. “Oh no,” she said, falteringly. “I couldn't—”

“I find administrative assistants often have their finger on the pulse of the company.” Nick stepped forward as Owen let his arm drop, his eyes locked with hers. “I'd love to pick your mind, Jay.”

“Just don't give him too much,” Owen said, with a wink. “Remember your loyalties.”

My loyalties, thought Jay, feeling her face pale. She sneaked another glance at Nick, arms folded, head tilted at an angle that could only be described as predatory.

“Don't worry about marking it off on your time sheet,” said Owen. “It's company business.”

Painfully aware of everyone's eyes, but especially his, Jay got to her feet. When she didn't immediately collapse, she grabbed her cheap bag off the desk. “Okay,” she said. “Let's go.”

“Have fun.” Owen waved cheekily, like he was doing her a favor. He probably thought he was. Being paid to take lunch with a good-looking man probably would have made most people's days. But she was not most people, and Nick was not just any man.

And she was in big trouble.

He walked at her side, looming over her. She hadn't worn her boots today because they had made the balls of her feet hurt, but now she wished she had. She would have liked those extra two inches, so he didn't loom over her quite as much. Even though four inches wasn't much better than six, it would have made her feel like less of a pushover.

She glanced up at him warily. His face was harsh in profile, shaded by afternoon shadow. His pale eyes were trained straight ahead on the busy sidewalk, like he knew exactly where he was going. His dark hair was, as it had always been, in casual disarray. Any sort of hazard, be it rain, wind, or even his own fingers, put a curl in his forelock that no amount of hairspray or gel could tame. And then there was his mouth, firm and unsmiling—

Jay found she could not stand to look at his mouth. Her eyes quickly dropped.

His clothes were darker today, perhaps because his mood was darker. His pants and belt were black and the suit coat was charcoal; the only contrast to all that shadow was a white shirt, left open at the throat to show off his golden tan.

“Like what you see?”

“I . . . I'm sorry?”

“You should be.” Nick's voice dragged her eyes back up to his face. He still wasn't looking at her—he had hardly looked at her at all since leaving the office, in fact—but his anger all but rumbled from him now and he had clearly noticed her staring. “You stood me up.”

“I thought I could make it. Something came up.” When his eyes shifted towards her, Jay flicked her gaze away, studying the crosswalk sign with rapt interest. “I'm busy.”

“So am I.” His low voice deepened, hitting a register that sent a shiver down her spine. “I don't particularly like it when people waste my time, Jay. It's worth a lot these days. You're lucky I don't bill you for it.”

They were approaching a building with a familiar green sign. The Green Grill. She actually really liked this place, but it wasn't the type of joint that popped up right away in a search. Jay looked at him in alarm, her mother's words on the phone floating back to her—*he was always slinking around*. “Have you been spying on me?” she demanded, crossing her arms.

She had spoken too loudly. Several people looked over, drawn to that illicit word, *spying*. A muscle in Nick's jaw jumped when he noticed the extra attention. "We're not discussing that here."

"It's a yes or no question," said Jay. "I think you can manage."

He gave her another measuring look and this one scared her where the anger had not fully succeeded because it was deliberately impassive, gilt in swirls of darker emotions that colored his features like an impressionistic overlay of pure menace. "Yes, then," he said coolly. "I hired someone."

A waitress approached before Jay could demand the obvious follow-ups: What the fuck? Who? Why would you do that? And, Are you completely insane?

They were seated in the back behind a potted Guiana chestnut that looked fake and probably was. The table was right next to the open kitchen and Jay could feel the torrents of oppressive heat from the grill, even from across the aisle. Nick shrugged off his coat and began cuffing his shirtsleeves, revealing a watch that probably cost a month of her rent.

Jay fidgeted uncomfortably, pushing up her own sleeves and tugging at the restrictive neck of her sweater. There was no way she was going to (*take your top off and kiss me*) take it off in here. "You hired someone," she reminded him tightly.

"Just a private investigator, Jay. It's not like I took out a hit on you."

"Can I get you anything to drink?" asked the waitress. "Tea? Soda? Wine?"

"I'll have your house red," said Nick, which sent another cold chill through Jay. The last time she'd seen him, he hadn't been old enough to legally drink. "Go ahead and bring the bottle."

"Water," said Jay. "Sparkling, please." She could feel a headache coming on.

"So here we are." Nick picked up the menu. "What remains of the happy family."

"We're not family," Jay said, more defensively than she wanted to. "Not really. Your father never legally adopted me." She wouldn't let herself think about why.

"Poor little bird." He glanced at her over the laminated folds. "You tried so hard to get them to love you."

“Stop calling me bird names.” She hated herself for saying it, for rising to the bait, even as the words that followed them sank into her like hooks drawing blood. “Why did you want to see me, anyway? It's been eight years. I doubt you invited me here to ask about soap.”

“I did come here to invest.” Nick set the menu aside. “I happen to believe it's very important to take the moral fiber of a company into account before sinking a ton of money into it.”

Jay scoffed. “Bet your father didn't teach you that.”

“No. You did.”

Another chill. She locked her shoulders against it. “What would you know about morals?”

“I know a lot about morals.” He dipped to rifle through his briefcase, pausing to smile up at the waitress who had arrived with the bottles of Pellegrino and red wine. She took their orders—he got the cauliflower steak and she got avocado fries—and when she was gone, he slid a piece of paper towards her, face-down, across the table. “And I know how much they matter to you, blue jay.”

His face revealed nothing. She slid the paper to the edge of the table, making it easier to tilt it up. Deep down, she already knew she wouldn't like what she was about to see, or he wouldn't be sitting there looking at her so smugly, but *this*—

The woman in the photograph was naked, and it was the sort of pose meant to titillate. Her back was arched, her nipples stiff, fingers parting herself to reveal her glistening . . . *everything*. The cameraman, whoever that was—she glanced at Nick—had obviously been kneeling between her legs, shooting up with a very expensive camera. The resolution was crisp.

“Classy,” she said sarcastically, setting it down. “Who's this?”

“Her name is Ivy. She lives in Mound House, Nevada. It's where I got you that gypsum rose you decided to sell. You look a little flushed,” he added pointedly. “Maybe you'd be more comfortable without the sweater.”

“Is this your girlfriend or something?” She pushed the paper back. “Did you think I'd be jealous?”

“She's a whore from a brothel,” he said bluntly, which made her flinch as he'd undoubtedly intended. Plucking the paper off the table, Nick looked

briefly at the photo before turning it over again. “I’ve always thought that she looks quite a bit like you.”

It took Jay a moment to speak; she was horrified to realize her mouth had fallen open in shock. *Like me?* There was so much in there she didn’t want to touch that she was afraid of where to even begin without springing open some kind of trap. She began to fidget, struggling against the itchy wool as the heat became unbearably oppressive.

“She’s ‘ambiguously ethnic,’” said Jay, putting quotes around the words, “and she has dark, curly hair. Apart from that, she looks nothing like me.” *You goddamn asshole.*

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” Nick slipped the photo back into his briefcase just as soon as it occurred to her to grab it. “I think if people saw this photo online, labeled with your name, they’d take it at face value—don’t you think so? Ivy isn’t on social media, so there’s really no one to trace it back to. Except for you.”

Jay felt a bead of sweat roll down her spine. “It’s online?” *With my name?*

“No.” His smile was wolfish. “Not yet.”

Her hands began to shake and she pulled them hastily into her lap, but when she tried to take her plate from the waitress, she ended up dumping half of the fries on the table as a tremor tore down her arm. “Oh my God,” said Jay, so upset that the waitress immediately lost her faint look of annoyance and began to apologize profusely to *her* as she fetched a trash can. “No, I’m so, so sorry. Thank—” She swallowed raspily. “Thank you.”

“Always so nice to the help,” Nick murmured, following the waitress with his eyes. “You were constantly sucking up to Yelena. I annoyed her—but she liked you. Everyone did.”

The waitress had given him two glasses. He filled both with wine but she shook her head when he pushed one at her, glaring at him hatefully.

This isn’t happening. This can’t be happening.

“Do you remember,” he continued, swirling his own glass, “the first day we met? When you saved that little cat that was caught up in the tree? I remember being so jealous of that furry beast. Nobody ever went to bat for me the way you did for that damn cat.” He laughed bitterly as he took a sip of his wine. “It was a fucking cat.”

Jay picked up her water glass and drained it. His dark mood was as oppressive as a weight. "What do you expect me to say?" she asked, after a pause. "That I remember? That it was an insight into your true character? That I'm sorry? I'm not sorry."

Nick cut his eyes at her and she stopped speaking.

"I told your boss that I'd make my decision tomorrow. That I needed to think about it. But maybe you've given me doubts, Ms. *Varens*. Maybe I did some digging about the company and found that photo of you online cemented what I already suspected. That your little company isn't worth my time or my money, and you're not the *delight* your boss thinks you are."

Jay felt her breath escape her in a rush. "I'd lose my job. No one would hire me."

"I wouldn't say that." He tapped his briefcase. "I think there's a few places that would."

Oh God. Her eyes were filling up with what she thought might be tears. Inhaling sharply, she focused on a button that had been fastened crookedly on his shirt, staring at that small piece of imperfection as she struggled to compose herself. "What the hell do you want?"

"Take off your sweater."

Jay widened her eyes. "I don't have anything on under it."

"Bullshit, Jay. You always wear at least two layers." His smile faded. "Lose it. Now."

Fighting him on this point seemed fruitless. She yanked angrily at the hem and got tangled in the hot, woolen mess of it. When she had it over her head, her hair was a frizzy cloud from the static and one of the straps of her camisole was halfway down her shoulder. He looked at it and Jay hastily slid her top back into place, fighting the urge to cover herself as his eyes roved over her torso.

"That's nice." He lingered on the lacy neckline of her camisole before lifting his gaze to meet hers. Jay wasn't sure what her face looked like; she was trying so hard not to give in to the urge to cry that she felt like everything else in it might have been all screwed up. "How you came out of your foolish whore of a mother is something I'll never understand. One of the universe's greatest unsolved mysteries," he scoffed, spearing a piece of cauliflower.

“Don't talk about my mother like that.” Yes, anger—anger was good. She could lose herself in her anger and try not to cut herself on whatever sharp emotion was glinting in his eyes.

“Don't defend her. She sold you to me. Or didn't you wonder how I got your home number? She gave it to me quickly enough when I suggested it might be worth her while.”

He said he would be willing to speak to you. Christ. Her mother had outed herself and she hadn't even noticed; she'd been so wrapped up in the drama of the moment. Danielle Varens hadn't been blocked by the secretary, after all. She'd spoken to the devil himself.

And he wanted to cut a deal with her.

“She's broke,” Jay said, as much for her own sake as for Nick's.

“I don't want to hear the excuses. She made herself broke. She could pawn her jewelry and actually try living within her means for once—I know you sold some of yours. But she didn't want to do that. She'd rather sell you instead and that,” he said savagely, “is precisely why that woman is the foolish whore I say she is. She severely undervalues your worth. I won't.”

Suddenly, it felt like her neck was no longer capable of supporting her head. With a muffled sob, Jay bowed forward, face in her hands as her hair spilled forward over her shoulders, and she heard Nick let out an involuntary breath as she gave him the perfect view down the front of her skimpy top. Blushing furiously, Jay bolted upright, sitting ramrod straight in her seat, but it was too late; he'd already seen what he'd seen.

“Fuck,” she thought she heard Nick mutter. He shifted slightly in his seat and drained his wine glass as a moody pop song began to play from the speakers.

“What do you want?” Jay asked again. She twisted a strand of her hair. “Me, I'm guessing.”

“Quit your job.” He spread his arms over the back of his side of the booth. “Come work for me.”

Jay was no longer sure where she should look. His current posture was so affectedly careless that it was almost crass. He had been just nineteen when she had seen him last. That was not a nineteen-year-old man's body. “One can only assume,” she said to the table, “that you mean on my back.”

His chest hitched in a silent laugh and the buttons seemed to strain dangerously. “No, Jay. My secretary is terrible—she let your mother through, for one, after I specifically told her not to, which is obviously very unacceptable to me. Even if it did work out in my favor. I want you to work for Beaucroft Assets, and if you do, I’ll double whatever you’re making at the soap shop.”

“Really.” Jay didn’t bother to hide her disbelief as she hugged the sweater to her stomach. “You’re blackmailing me so you can give me a *raise*?”

“This is separate. Consider it a gift for your own sake. I’ve seen where you’re living. No, I’m blackmailing you because I have something your mother wants and she appointed you as intermediary to get it from me. She also really decided to fuck you in the process, but she’s not very good at fucking you, Jay. I think I can fuck you a lot better than your mother can.”

A strangled sound escaped her. “You don’t get to talk to me like that.”

“This is business. It’s a fuck or get-fucked world out there.” Nick let his arms fall from the booth as he slid forward. “Guess which side of the table you’re sitting on.”

Anger was almost, but not quite, beginning to eclipse her fear. She grabbed her sweater and yanked it back over her head, ignoring his quiet laugh.

“That’s what I want, little bird. I want us to continue where we left off. Just like old times. What can I say? I suppose I’ve been feeling nostalgic in my old age.” She felt a tug on her hair. Nick had captured one of the spiraling locks, twirling it with surprising gentleness in his fingers. When he brushed her nose with it, she flinched, and he released the strand of hair as he leaned back. “I’m going to ruin you either way, so you might as well live a little.”

Chapter Four

2017

■□□□□■

Part of Jay had wanted to pick up what remained of her water glass and slosh it into his face. She could imagine the crashing rush of adrenaline, the startled gasps that would follow, his seething rage. *Go fuck yourself*, she would say, and for a few minutes, it would be wonderful.

For a moment, she allowed herself to bask in the fantasy, to let her fingers close over her glass and entertain the thought of this alternate-reality Jay who truly didn't give a fuck. But since Jay did, she raised the glass to her lips before setting it down hard enough to splash some water on the table.

I want us to continue where we left off.

“You want me to work for you,” Jay said slowly. “But you also want to —”

“Fuck,” he supplied, a grim smile touching his mouth. “Say it. You'll be doing it.”

It wasn't hard to imagine him wearing that same look on his face while someone on the other side of a desk stammeringly confessed to a monumental screw-up. Which, she realized with a strange frisson, could easily be her, if she accepted his wildly inappropriate job offer.

She cleared her throat and stared down at her cold fries. “Contrary to what you might think, I am a serious professional. I do actual work for my boss. Good work.”

“I wouldn't touch you in the office. It's bad for morale. I'm not my father,” he added, the rebuke in the words clear.

Jay blinked, memories of a holiday party coming back to her with stark, chilling clarity. Cold blue light. Dark hallways. A woman's low sobs. The sharp, coppery tang of blood.

No, thought Jay. He isn't his father. He's much more terrifying.

“I run a professional business.” Nick refilled his wineglass. His third glass? Fourth? He didn't seem to be tipsy at all. “I fire people who don't. How I conduct my personal life is entirely separate from what I do at work.”

“Not entirely,” said Jay, glancing at her water. Why did she feel like *she'd* drunk the wine?

“Perhaps.” His tone was level. “I can be discreet, Jay. Patience, however, is not one of my virtues. I've got to return to the hotel and head over to the airport, so I need an answer from you now. Yes or no?”

“Fine.” The word tumbled from her lips, hostile and defiant. “Whatever you want.”

How hideously easy it was to sign her life away. She was sickened—with herself, with him, with the whole situation. For a moment, she stared at the still-full wineglass, sorely tempted.

“Carte blanche?” Nick glanced at her and then at his watch. “Seems unwise.”

Strangely, she found herself becoming insulted. He had blackmailed and bullied her into capitulation and now that he'd gotten what he wanted, he didn't seem to care.

“I'm sorry I'm boring you,” she said icily.

“You aren't. I'm working out some quick math.” He slid his blazer back on without rolling down the sleeves and grabbed his briefcase, glancing at her. “If you're done, we can leave.”

Jay immediately stood up, closing her eyes against the sudden head rush. Nick strode ahead, easily outpacing her. She watched him pay, watched him smile at the hostess—that was weird. The Nick she remembered had never smiled like that; he had always been so sullen.

“What were you working out?” she asked. “The tip?”

“My flight,” he responded. “Your flight, too. It's really too bad you didn't meet me at Bana when I asked. I thought I'd get you in bed at least once before I left.”

She looked at him so sharply that she stumbled on a crack in the sidewalk and nearly went flying. He caught her by the arm, pulling her upright in a way that left her even unsteadier than the near-fall because his grip was strong and filled with the only the scarcest restraint.

It was the first time he'd touched her in eight years and it was making her unravel.

“The logistics aren't great,” he said, “so I suppose I'll have to wait one more day to see you.”

Her body was jolted, hard, as someone shoved past her in annoyance. It crowded her against Nick, who glanced after the man who had shoved her in irritation, even as he moved them closer to the edges of the building. *One more day.* “You mean tomorrow,” she said.

“Yes, well. It's not wise to agree to the terms of a contract before you get them in writing.”

She stepped back from him and he let his hands fall back to his side, a smirk playing on his full mouth. She hated him then, but she hated herself just a little more, and said nothing else as they walked back in the direction of her office. Normally, she paid very little attention to her surroundings—which was probably how her purse had gotten stolen in the first place—but in her quest to ignore the man at her side, she found herself noticing everything.

There was a Thai restaurant she hadn't tried; she wished she'd seen it earlier, because she would have gone there with Lily. Movie posters for *The Disaster Artist*, which she wanted to see, and *Dunkirk*, which she didn't. An artsy poster for a midnight showing of *The Forbidden Zone*. In her periphery, she was aware of Nicholas tilting his head to study her, which made her look even more intently at the buildings across the street, even as her heart began to race.

I can't believe he expects me to just go to him—like he thinks I'm on-call, she thought angrily. *What am I supposed to do? Uproot my life and everything I worked for because he's—*

She caught herself.

Was that food truck always there?

There was an abrupt tug on her arm, a blur of colors and faces and dark concrete walls, and then Jay found herself being dragged off into the alley by her grim-faced stepbrother. “Nick!” she yelled, clutching at the hand on her arm. “Stop! What are you doing?”

“Don't call me Nick.” Without releasing her, he pivoted so that his back was facing the busy sidewalk. Before she could demand her release, his mouth was over hers.

It was—Jay did not have words to explain what he did to her mouth. A kiss was sweet, tender, a promise of passion. This was demand couched in

raw, animal hunger; as scorching as the heat of the sweltering kitchen: the unrelenting pressure of his lips on hers promised her own destruction.

Her body sank, her hand still clutching the one of his that was on his arm. Gently, he freed himself from her grip and put his hands on her waist, beneath her heavy sweater, touching her through the thin camisole. Her body jerked as his thumbs traced the shape of her breasts, coaxing her nipples to stiff, aching points. She moaned into his mouth, which still tasted like wine, her fingers digging into his shoulders through the tweed blazer as she lost herself to the sensations of what he was doing to her body. *It wasn't like this before*, she thought. *He wasn't like this before*.

And then rough brick was at her back, catching on her sweater, and Nick—*Nicholas*—was at her front, startling her into opening her eyes as her body brushed against his. She could smell something rotten and was reminded of where they were and how fast she was breathing.

“You see what I mean,” he said, only a little breathless. His eyes were on her face. “You told me I could do whatever I want. Is that a condition you're capable of fulfilling?” His hand, still beneath her sweater, now inched beneath her camisole, thumbing the edge of her waistband. When she didn't speak, his grip tightened and he added harshly, “Would you fuck me in public?”

Jay looked at the empty alley. At the dumpster overflowing with refuse. Then she saw his self-satisfied sneer and her anger spiked in recognition. “Sure,” she said. “Go ahead. Should I turn around or do you want it face to face?”

The sneer disappeared and his face became a perfect blank. He slipped his hands out of her sweater, strumming over her ribs on the way down. Carefully, he tugged at the woolen hem, straightening the fabric, and when his thumbs brushed over her hips, Jay felt curiously lightheaded. *I'm too hot*, she thought. *This sweater is making me too hot*.

“I'm not an exhibitionist.” Nicholas gave her a look of reproof. “And I'm not a sadist.”

“You could have fooled me.”

Her words hung suspended between them, barbed and dangerous. She was trembling again; her skin was prickling everywhere he'd touched and she was almost painfully aware of the texture of her clothes and the way they were sliding over her skin. Moisture had gathered between her legs and

she felt that, too. Every time she shifted her weight, that cold kiss against her inner thighs felt like a stinging reprimand.

Nicholas released her, holding her at length. The air that flowed in between them burned cold. “You’re shaking,” he remarked. “Can you walk?”

“D-don’t flatter yourself,” she said. “I’m fine.”

“I’ll leave you to sort yourself out, then. I really do need to go. Text me your flight number and I’ll arrange a car to meet you at the airport when you arrive at LAX. You have my number.”

“I deleted it.” She didn’t mention that she’d had to buy a new phone.

Nicholas made a sound she couldn’t interpret and pulled out his phone. She saw his thumbs tap over the screen and then her new phone, which had the same number, bleeped.

She looked down at it bleakly. He’d sent her a bird emoji.

“Don’t delete it this time.” The phone was shoved back into his pocket. “And don’t stand me up again, Jay. I’ll expect that flight number before eight tonight or I’m going to call you—no matter how busy you are. We’ll be in touch.”

He’s grown up, thought Jay, watching him walk out of the alley.

She wondered why the thought of that was so utterly terrifying.



There were few things in life Nicholas couldn’t get if he wanted them. Sitting across from Jay in the vegan diner, watching her entrancing face light up with anger and frustration as she tried to poke holes in his carefully constructed plan, he thought that there was perhaps something to the delaying of gratification, after all. It made victory so much sweeter.

She had always been the one thing he could never have.

Control had once been his biggest weakness. Now, he prided himself on his. Seeing how flustered she had become in the face of it had been extremely gratifying—although not quite as gratifying as the unexpected bonus of her presenting him with an unobstructed view of her braless chest that had him sliding a hand into his pocket to readjust himself.

He could still taste her; beneath the taste of oily breadding on her tongue was the lingering sweetness that was just her, Jay. Sweet Jay. God—how had he forgotten the feel of her mouth? Or the shape of her breasts? Her nipples had been so hard beneath that ridiculous sweater and the sounds she had made as they kissed had been fucking maddening. If she had been wearing a skirt, he might have fucked her in that filthy alley as a prelude to what he had in store for her. Just remembering the feel of her body against his was getting him hard.

Nicholas shook his head viciously, trying to clear the images. *Tomorrow*, he reminded himself. *She'll be mine.*

She didn't belong here, working the grind. Living in an apartment that was scarcely larger than a shed—he'd seen the photographs of it and looked up the floor plan; it was small. Smaller than the actual shed of his own house, where he stored old pool equipment and a grill. No, she belonged in Hollybrook with him. Where she should have been from the very beginning.

The thought was tinged with something approaching guilt. He knew why she'd left. He also knew the reason for the fear on her face and that it was deserved. His house had never been a home to her and as a young man, he had used her badly. His father had provided him with plenty of opportunities to test the mettle of his cruelty and he had insolently seized upon all of them in his willingness to hurt her.

And his father had been the worst of all.

For reasons Nicholas still did not quite fully understand, Damon Beaucroft had seemed to want to see Justine Varens destroyed. Perhaps he had wanted to possess her, too. Considering what had happened the night of that holiday party, that seemed most likely. Jay had been a beautiful girl and his father had enjoyed acquiring pretty, costly things—

And what he couldn't buy, he ruined.

Nicholas slammed his suitcase shut and pulled out his phone, checking his messages. There were plenty of those but none from Jay, which didn't surprise him. She would probably text him at 7:59, just as she undoubtedly knew that he would call her at 8:01 exactly if she didn't.

A reluctant smile tugged at his mouth, softening his face. So *predictable*.

The smile quickly disappeared as he began scrolling, going to his calendar app and setting up an invitation with Meghana Srivastava from HR.

It was overdue. He wanted to get rid of Crystal Yost immediately and needed to determine a proper course of action before terminating his secretary—administrative assistant, he mentally corrected himself, the smile nearly threatening to resurface—and onboarding her replacement without eliciting a wrongful termination suit or claims of favoritism.

Favoritism seemed the most likely, since he planned to push Jay's paperwork through the day the position opened. Of course, when they met the woman, it would be a reprise of high school. She was so good at making people into her slaves. Owen Parker talked about her like a man with a crush and the other assistant had been ready to throw him out on his ass for her sake.

According to the P.I., she was single and didn't seem to have many close friends. She spent most of her time at home. *Which means she lied to me about being busy.* Her little show of defiance amused him, even though it had cost him a night of having her in his bed.

Send me your resume, he messaged her, adding his email address.

The cab ride to the airport was unremarkable, and the two hour flight to L.A. was dull. A long night of work awaited him, so he grabbed a coffee on the way out of the terminal, downing most of it in five scalding gulps as he walked up to his driver. Despite his exhaustion and general crankiness, he still managed a quiet laugh when his phone buzzed at precisely 7:59.

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Jay felt as if her limbs had each gained fifty pounds as she dragged herself back to the office. Her heart weighed especially heavily in her chest, so much so that she wondered that it didn't drag her straight down into the earth. *He did this to me,* she thought, pulling open the door that led to their office suite. *He did this, and he barely touched me.*

She could feel her face heating up anew remembering that flicker of dark interest that had lit up his eyes as he studied her in the diner. He was going to destroy her. He nearly had before, but his vanity and his

egocentrism had rendered him too myopic to truly see into the heart of her and do the damage that he'd craved. This time, she would not escape unscathed; he was going to make her suffer and do it so well that she might even grow to crave it—until it sent her plummeting. Until it left her broken and bleeding.

Until he ripped her heart out.

The bell jangled overhead and Lily waved from her desk, her face curious. Jay didn't have time to speak with Lily, though, because Owen was waiting for her, too.

“Jay!” He beckoned her to his office, which she only went into when transcribing a meeting or delivering coffee. “Come in, come in. Tell me how lunch went. I want to hear all about it.”

Well, you see, Mr. Parker, my stepbrother just blackmailed me into sleeping with him because my mother got posthumously disinherited by my stepfather for fucking the pool boy, and she really, really wants her cut—so she pimped me out to him, which kind of sucks. But the food at the restaurant was great, so over all, I'd give it a C-?

“Where did you two go?” Owen was asking. “Did he seem happy with the company? Were there any difficult questions? Any pain points?”

Oh God. “It was great,” Jay said, not entirely evenly. She could feel her face beginning to heat. “We went to the Green Grill. I think . . . uh, I think he'll invest.”

“That's great news.” Owen looked so heartened that Jay wanted to cry. “Great work, Jay.”

Jay felt her phone buzz and peeked at it. *Send me your resume.*

“Um.” Jay swallowed hard as the walls began to tilt. “There's more.”

“Oh?” Owen was still smiling but now it looked cautious. “What is it?”

“He kind of offered me a job and it sounds like he wants me to start right away.”

“I see.” In a neutral voice, Owen asked her, “How soon is right away?”

“Like . . . tomorrow.” Jay hung her head. “I'm sorry. I had no idea that he'd hire me.” *I had no idea that he would come here at all.*

She braced herself as Owen's face flickered in a way that she was unable to interpret. But then he laughed. “I guess I couldn't hide the best-kept secret in San Francisco forever.”

Jay blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I’m not going to lie, Jay. When Beaucroft said he wanted to meet with you directly, I did wonder if perhaps you’d been applying elsewhere on the sly.”

“I wouldn’t—” *This is better. Let him think this.* “I’m sorry.”

“More time would have been better,” Owen admitted with a sigh. “But I think Lily can pick up the slack while we interview other candidates to fill your position. You’ve done excellent work for us, Jay, and even though we’ll miss you dearly, I think I speak for everyone at this company when I wish you the best at what is sure to be an exciting new opportunity for you at this stage of your career.”

“You’re being—” Jay swallowed “—incredibly understanding about this.”

“Landing an investor on your way out certainly sweetens the sting,” said Owen, which made the color drain from her face. “My best wishes to you, Ms. Varens. Feel free to use me as a reference.”

Jay left Owen’s office feeling stunned and sat at her desk unblinkingly.

Lily wandered over, sipping on a drink that was an alarming neon purple. “What’s that?” Jay asked, turning her head to stare at the other woman and the drink. “Is that glitter?”

“It’s a unicorn frappuccino. I got connections.” Lily took a long, slurping drag. Jay could smell the sugar coming off the concoction from here. “How was lunch with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Scares the Shit Out of You?”

Jay laughed in spite of herself because it was really the perfect description of Nicholas. “He offered me a job at double my salary.”

Lily’s eyes flew open. “What?”

“It’s in L.A. County,” said Jay. “I start tomorrow.”

“What?”

“Also, I’m stealing Prince Harry away from Meghan Markle. We’re eloping tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Lily slurped another sip. “Well, that’s no surprise. I always had you pegged as a secret gold-digger.”

Jay could not quite hide her flinch. Fortunately, Lily didn't seem to notice.

“Seriously, Jay—what the hell. What happened at that lunch?”

“Um.” Jay stared at her desk, which, it just struck her, was quite impersonal. It was as if she had always known on some level that she would eventually be leaving. “I guess we hit it off. Also, I had a, uh, personal connection.” *Very personal*, a small voice whispered.

“Lucky.” Lily sighed. “Now you get to go to sunny L.A. and Work From Beach while I have to double down on everything, short one friend, as Owen rocks himself in the supplies cabinet.”

“He wasn't upset,” said Jay. “He was actually very weirdly understanding.”

“Jay.” Lily patted her hand. “He's losing you. Of course he's upset.”

With that puzzling statement, Lily sashayed back to her desk, still slurping. For the rest of the day, she played Vitamin C's “Graduation” on repeat until Jay threatened to go over there and kill her.

“I'm going to miss your threats,” said Lily. “Let's go mourn the end of an era by getting all gross and nostalgic with drinks.”

“Okay, but I don't know any good bars.”

“Let's go to Bana,” said Lily, sending a ripple of *something* down Jay's spine. “It's this hot new Turkish place that opened up just around the corner. I'll ping Sheridan and Owen. I bet they'd like to come, too.”

“Oh, they're both so busy, though,” said Jay. “They aren't going to want to see me off.”

But to Jay's surprise, both executives eagerly agreed.

Chapter Five

2017

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Jay arrived home from Bana slightly drunk. Even though Lily had only been joking, things *had* gotten a little gross and nostalgic—in the best possible way. It ended up turning into one of those evenings that made her wish she was the type of girl who went out all the time.

Bana was one of those places that kept the lights dimmed low and the music turned up loud, forcing you to lean on the small tables to listen to your companions. The setting was incredibly intimate, almost seductively so. With the surprisingly strong drinks, Jay thought it was a little like being stuck in a hazy, intoxicated twilight.

Sheridan Hawthorne told them stories about spending her childhood summers in the Catskills, adding just enough romantic color that it sounded like she'd lived through her own private version of *Dirty Dancing*, which had Jay and Lily both sighing. Owen, who was slightly drunker, talked about the time his foot had gotten severely infected after going backpacking in Indonesia while wearing cork sandals. “I was high,” he slurred, self-deprecatingly.

“What about you, Jay?” Lily asked. “You never talk about your childhood. Did you travel?”

“I went to Berkeley,” said Jay, side-stepping the question. “I used to hike the Oakland hills all the time. They were beautiful, but one time I almost fell into a canyon. So I guess that made it a *can't-yon*,” she added, smiling as she took a small sip of her cocktail.

Everyone laughed—except Lily, who groaned—and the talk turned to other things. And then “Freak Like Me” had started playing on the speakers and Jay had frozen, clutching her drink in both hands as the seductive, up-tempo riffs of the song she had once loved dancing to filled the room.

I don't want to fuck an angel.

She must have made a face because Owen was looking at her. She smiled at him, forcing herself to relax, but the memory made her wonder, suddenly, why Nicholas hadn't threatened her with any photos the way he had her mother. Especially if he still had that video.

Maybe it didn't occur to him yet, she thought. Lost opportunity and all that.

After a couple hours of drinking, she and Lily said goodbye to their bosses and shared an Uber ride home. The driver had been a nice hipster named Guy, which had made them both giggle drunkenly—“Guy the guy!” Lily had cried out, and he had smiled like this was the first time some drunk had ever shouted that from the backseat—and Jay had thanked him profusely as she slid out of his Volvo on unsteady legs, closing the door on the floating strains of Wilco.

The alcohol buzzing in her bloodstream made her feel all sloshy, like all of the things in her limbs had been replaced with water. She stumbled into her front door and nearly tripped over the rug. *Whoops*, she thought, pushing herself up and tugging off her sweater.

While Carbon watched her, clearly disturbed, Jay dragged her suitcase out of the closet and began to pack what she thought she would need for Los Angeles. They really only had two seasons down there: beachy and broiling. In winter, it was a balmy 70 degrees, where it stayed until summer, skyrocketing into the 90s and beyond. The beaches could be cold at night, but once she had gotten older, Jay hadn't spent much time on them.

She worked mindlessly, not letting herself think too deeply on what she was doing and why. Once the suitcase was full, Jay looked down at what she'd packed and realized she'd filled it with all of her dowdiest, baggiest clothes, already falling into the mental trap of thinking as she had as a young woman in Hollybrook.

Her thoughts turned rustily to that stupid resort trip. Oh God, she didn't want to think about that—it was where everything had started to go wrong. But once the memories started flooding in, it was like trying to hold back a dam with her bare hands.

She had been pathetically nervous and excited to go, never having been to a resort before. Even now, Jay cringed on behalf of her eighteen-year-old self. At how desperately she had wanted to fit in and be liked. It was funny how humiliation endured that way, like a wound that never fully healed. Sometimes it would open up and the sting would be as bad as the first time.

She had been wearing a one-piece swimsuit and a pair of shorts and Nick had been—Nick. Trying to play it off like he didn't care about what people thought of him or how he looked, even though she could tell that

he'd tried to style his hair. He'd been wearing the puka shells she had given him, and after how viciously he'd derided them, she'd been surprised to see them around his neck. He had been such a cruel and callous bastard back then.

Girls had been checking him out since they arrived and he hadn't seemed to notice or care. He'd snapped at one of them on their first day for getting in his way, a little thirteen-year-old clutching her beach towel who'd stared at him for too long. From the look in her eyes, Jay knew she was about to go off somewhere and cry because a cute boy had yelled at her.

It had made her angry, especially when he'd said, "She's just a dumb kid. She'll be fine."

That whole day had been especially awkward and she wasn't sure why. She had just wanted to go to the beach and veg out in the water. It had started out nice. She'd talked to a nice college guy from Australia who had fetched her hat when it had blown off in the waves, and then she had found a pretty shell on the walk back—and then Nick had gotten into a mood and stormed off.

And then those other guys had come, almost like they'd been waiting for him to leave.

"Hey there, baby. How much do you cost?"

"How'd you like a pearl necklace, sugar tits?"

"You legal?"

Even thirteen years later, Jay squirmed to think of it. The incident *still* made her feel disgusting, as if something scummy were clinging to her skin. The way the men had looked at her, like wild wolves poised to tear her apart, had made her feel like throwing up.

"Go away," she had said. "I'm with my brother and he'll kick your ass."

She had pointed out Nick, who, even at fourteen, was beginning to inch up in height. He had been slim then, only 5'11", but with the lean musculature all boys at that age seemed to have as they worked against their bodies' natural urges to devour everything in sight as they shot up like weeds. And more importantly, he had the broad shoulders and strong arms of a swimmer.

The guys had left then, after tossing off another comment about her breasts, and she had taken Nick's discarded shirt and put it on, feeling like

she wanted to cry. Wishing she was anywhere but that stupid beach. Wishing she didn't have a body that made people feel as if they had the right to say things to her like that. Wishing that she didn't feel like it was *her* fault.

Then Nick had come back and he had been mean. *Really* mean. Almost cruel. It made her wonder if maybe her stepbrother saw her the way those guys had—dirty, slutty—and was judging her for it. And then, on the walk back to their family's suite, he'd tried to kiss her.

It was as if she had been wearing a pair of tinted glasses that had shattered. Suddenly, the world looked different and she knew that it would never be the same again.

Jay stared at her suitcase, shuddered violently, and took everything else out. She repacked the suitcase, trying to add a blend of work clothes and casual wear, before bagging up all her toiletries and tossing them in at the top in a Ziploc bag. By the time Jay was done, a thin sheen of sweat was misting her body and the alcohol had worn off enough that the nerves were creeping in.

She wasn't sure what to do about her apartment or how long she'd be gone, so she didn't say anything to her landlord. Rent was paid off for the month anyway, and it was possible she might need to return sooner if things didn't work out. She wanted to leave herself a path of escape.

Her phone vibrated and she glanced at it, unamused to see a whole flock of bird emojis. She'd sent him the stupid flight number and he'd sent her the phone number for the driver along with a pick-up time. Apparently she was supposed to have responded and he didn't like being ignored. She stared at the screen for a long time before sending a middle finger emoji.

It buzzed again. Sweat droplet. What was that supposed to mean? That she was making him hot? Was he *flirting* with her? The phone slipped from her nerveless fingers.

She wasn't sure how to flirt with Nicholas. She wasn't sure he wanted to.

Setting her phone on the nightstand and resolving not to touch it again, Jay got up and began to empty her fridge. Having a task calmed her, and she let her mind empty out as she poured out the old stuff and packed everything that was still good and sealed in a cardboard box.

Holding the box under one arm, she went to the apartment next door, where she had seen a kid running around before. “Hello,” she said, smiling brightly at the woman who answered. “I’m your neighbor. I got called away to visit family and I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. I have all this new food in my fridge—I don’t suppose you’d like it? I’d hate for it to go to waste.”



The next morning, Jay gathered together all of her personal documents, her chargers, her wallet, her keys, her laptop, and everything else, and loaded them into her suitcase and purse.

She lured Carbon into a cat carrier with his “just for special occasions” cat food, and he started yowling almost as soon as she closed the door, which made her feel awful. The yowling eventually died down to anguished meows, punctuated by long, judgmental silences. *I’m sorry*, she thought, wishing she could explain her intentions to the small, sullen animal. *It’s just so you won’t get hurt*. If only there were someone looking out for her like that.

“Where to?” her taxi driver asked, eyeing the cat carrier nervously.

“San Francisco Airport, please.”

Jay had only been on a plane a handful of times, and always in coach. She never liked it. Takeoff made her feel like she was being packed into a rocket that would be hurdled to space. It was incredibly claustrophobic and made the air in her lungs fizzle like a carbonated drink.

When she got to her gate, she was surprised to learn that her ticket had been upgraded to first class. For a two hour flight? It seemed so wasteful. Her irritation rose. Did Nicholas think he could buy her now, throwing money away for her on frivolous things? *How dare he*.

She walked onto the plane with the shaking cat carrier and her giant Longchamp bag and something in her seemed to sigh when she saw the curtained, padded chairs. *Don’t be weak*, she told herself, as she took her seat. *This is wasteful and he’s a bastard for doing this*.

Carbon had hissed ominously at her feet when she set him down, as if in agreement.

The flight had been mercifully short and the comfort of the trip did make it seem to go by faster. She had met with the driver without issue—not Vlad, much to her disappointment, but some other man dressed in all black with a pair of sunglasses—and as the car cruised through Hollybook, seeing the patchwork of familiar and unfamiliar filled her with something too bitter to be nostalgia and too aching to be dread. *I remember that*, she kept thinking. Or, *Oh, that's new*.

Her old house looked . . . exactly the same. Just as imposing as it had when she had been fourteen and starstruck by what had seemed like a stroke of good fortune tantamount to Cinderella walking up to the fairytale castle that first time.

My God, I forgot about those colonnades, she thought. *It's so ostentatious*.

Her stomach seized up as she rang the bell, bracing herself for Nicholas to answer the door. Instead, a woman answered it—not Yelena, but a younger, sterner-looking woman she had never seen before. “H-hello,” she said. “Uh, where's Nicholas?”

“Mr. Beaucroft isn't here,” the woman said, in English that felt like a slap. “He's been detained.”

Okay, thought Jay, feeling heat suffuse her face as the woman looked her up and down like she was covered in mud. She wondered what had happened to the old housekeeper. By his own admission, Nicholas had never cared for Yelena, so she supposed it wasn't much of a surprise that he had gotten rid of her when he'd taken over the deed for the house. The way this woman was looking at her now made Jay wonder what Nicholas had said about *her* to his staff. It didn't seem like it had been complimentary.

“I'm sorry for any inconvenience,” she said. “I'm his sister, Justine. Jay.”

The woman stepped aside, letting her into the house, making no move to assist as she watched Jay struggle with her suitcase, purse, and cat. “Mr. Beaucroft doesn't have a sister.”

What? “There must be a mistake,” Jay said nervously. “I thought I was expected.”

“You are,” the woman said ominously. “Go ahead and make yourself at home. I'm Carmela, by the way. I was just on my way out—today was

supposed to be my day off.”

With that pronouncement, she left, leaving Jay standing, stung, in the hallway alone.

Mr Beaucroft doesn't have a sister.

God, that look. She was still stinging from it. What had he said to that woman to make her hate her so much? *Carmela, clean out the spare bedroom. I'll need it for my whore, Jay.*

Jay heard the beep of an alarm system engaging. Sighing, she set down her things on the checkered tile floor and massaged her aching arms as she looked up at the two double staircases. Well, if Mr. Beaucroft was *detained*, it wouldn't hurt to take a quick, impromptu tour of the house. Especially since Carmela hadn't bothered to tell her where she'd be sleeping.

The house was like Nicholas—different, but the same. There had been a lounge area by the pool that had contained a large glass coffee table and cabana furniture made out of rattan and cream padding. Nicholas had gotten rid of all of his father's furniture. There was a white sectional sofa now, and the room had been repainted a cold, icy gray with a matching rug.

Jay looked out at the blue jewel of the pool, screened by lilies of the valley in concrete planters and a wooden arbor of grape leaves, with a few rustling palms growing out of strategic points in the large garden. *That looks exactly the same*, she thought. Not that she'd used the pool.

Back in the entryway once more, Jay made her way forward, into the den. The TV had been upgraded, all of the old video game consoles that had used to clutter it either packed away or sold, but the blue sofa was still there. Jay had spent so much time on that couch, watching TV. Nicholas had even fucked her on it—twice. He'd even kept the same tasseled throw.

She stared at the fabric until it blurred and she had to grab onto the back to keep from sinking. The ribbed, velvety texture of it beneath her palms threatened to undo her—*Daddy, please, no, someone might see*—and she yanked her hands away as if they had been singed.

He'd always enjoyed making her beg. *He probably still does*, she thought, which sent another tide of dizziness shivering over her. *I guess I'll find out.*

Nicholas's childhood bedroom was next to the den, but it had been converted into storage. Everything personal in it was gone. With a shiver,

Jay walked up one of the staircases. There were two of them, a detail that had really made her feel like she was living in a palace as a young girl. She went up the left one, glancing at the half-wall that gave a view down into the den from above. There was a sculpture sitting on it by Louise Bourgeois. The organic, blobby shape of it had always creeped her out as a child, and it still creeped her out now.

She opened the door to the master bedroom.

It was completely different: dark instead of light. Unfashionably for L.A., Nicholas had gone with heavy furniture and austere colors. A mahogany sleigh bed dominated the right side of the room, turned over with slate gray and cream-colored bedding. There was a jacquard throw tossed over all it, picked out in navy, gray, and gold. It looked expensive and probably was.

The dresser, mirror, and bookshelf were all made of the same red-brown wood and they all looked old, ornately carved with details like trumpets and Flemish scrolls, which made Jay think that they were probably Victorian. Much too nice to be thrifted, they'd probably been purchased at an auction. She traced the wood, cool to the touch; everything was free of dust.

She glanced at the bookshelf, hoping for some insight into the man that Nicholas had become, but all of the books there appeared to be more for decoration than function. *Like an interior decorator picked them out to match the vases*, she thought, her mouth turning down. The glossy spines *did* match the vases, and none of the spines were cracked or creased.

The other half of the master had a small sitting area with a smaller, wall-mounted TV and a mini-bar that didn't appear to have been recently stocked. All of the bottles were half- or a quarter-full. He had a fairly sophisticated-looking sound system under the TV, next to a CD rack that was crammed with all of the bands he'd listened to when he was younger: Deftones, Tool, Nine Inch Nails, A Perfect Circle. Loud and angry music, throbbing with energy.

Metal Boy. The old childish nickname for him surfaced briefly, ghost-like, before fading.

There was a gray love seat in front of the TV, made of tinted suede, which had a view into the bathroom and dressing room. She patted the arm of the love seat to see if it was as soft as it looked before wandering into his

bathroom. Compared to the rest of what she'd seen, it was woefully underfurnished. When her mother had lived here, the counters had been cluttered with perfume bottles, jewelry, and cosmetics. Now the drawers and the cabinets were all empty, some still stained with traces of eyeliner or lipstick, and the only things on the counter were his.

He didn't appear to share the space with anyone, so he probably wasn't seeing anyone. And if he was seeing someone, they didn't live here.

Jay left the master bedroom and went wandering down the hall to the one room in this house that she had been dying to see. She wanted to know what Nicholas had done to her old bedroom. Had he gone in there and smashed everything up, or ripped out and painted over every trace of her, the way he had with his father's den or her mother's bathroom? It would give her an idea of how much he hated her, how determined he was to eradicate her presence from this house.

With a shaking hand, Jay grabbed the knob—it wasn't locked—and twisted the door open. Sucking in a fortifying breath of air, she closed her eyes and stepped into warmth.

She waited for several seconds, as if bracing for an explosion, and when nothing happened, she slowly cracked her eyes open.

It looks . . . exactly the same. The voile curtains were open, still gathered back with one of her old hair clips, which had yellowed and faded in the sun. Faded pictures of her friends were still tacked to the walls. Her childhood books cluttered the bookshelf—mostly fantasy, but also *Animorphs*, and a couple of smutty romances that she'd purchased as an older teen.

Nicholas had done nothing to her bedroom. It even had the same yellow sheets and comforter, the same sunflower motif painted over the tops of the walls. The plate around the light switch even had its little floral moldings intact, although the gaily painted colors had begun to fade.

This is freaky, she thought, circling slowly. *It's like a shrine.*

Feeling numb, Jay went downstairs to get the cat and her suitcase, lugging both up the stairs to her old room. Once freed, Carbon immediately darted out of his carrier to hide under the bed, which made her smile because Gypsum had done the exact same thing when she had brought her into this same room seventeen years ago.

She removed the top part of the carrier and filled the tray with some litter she'd packed in her suitcase, putting some kibble in a screwed-off jar lid she'd packed into her purse.

Once the cat was taken care of, Jay changed out of her gross plane clothes into a pair of loose pants and a shirt that she'd purchased back in college that said "The Hush Sound" and couldn't bring herself to get rid of, even though it was fraying thin. She slung her arms into an equally old American Eagle hoodie, zipping it all the way up out of habit, and knelt to examine her bookshelf. As she did, she noticed something gleaming on the floor next to the shelf.

It was a small piece of rose quartz.

How did that get there? she wondered, but then she remembered—it was a piece from her own collection, knocked to the floor when she and Nicholas had fought eight years ago.

The rock seemed to grow hot in her fingers.. She set it down on a shelf and grabbed a beat-up copy of *Joust*. Jay leaned back on the comforter of her childhood bed and settled back to read as the light from her window changed from pale yellow to dark gold, the turning of the pages growing less and less frequently with the passing of time as she was consumed by her thoughts. Eventually, the book fell from her fingers with a loud clap that scared the cat.

She had fallen asleep.



Nicholas had just gotten out of the last meeting in a long block of meetings. He couldn't stand presentations; he had to sit there and look interested for thirty minutes or however the fuck long it took and then start asking the questions that had everyone shifting and refusing to give him a straight answer. *How much money is this going to cost us? Do you have the numbers to back that up? Why is this worth my time?*

Really, he thought dryly. After years of this, it should stop being such a goddamn surprise to everyone that he wanted more information. And yet, here they were. Same old song and dance.

Nicholas had almost been late to this meeting. He'd had to print out all of his own notes and research the acquisitions himself. Until Jay was entered into the system and had her own clearance card, he supposed he'd be fetching his own papers and his own coffee and scheduling all of his own meetings for the foreseeable future.

He looked down at his administrative assistant's empty desk and let out a breath. Crystal hadn't been happy about being let go. She had shouted at him and then burst into tears in the conference room, and then she had sobbed all the way down the hall like a little primadonna as a grim-faced security guard trailed behind her holding her box of personal items.

"He's such a heartless bastard!" she had apparently shouted in the lobby, startling a clutch of interns. He'd heard two of his employees talking about the incident, before they had noticed him standing there and scattered like frightened quail.

Heartless, he thought, testing the word as he made his coffee. Yes, he'd been called that, and worse. There were plenty of people out there who believed he'd given up his heart and soul to get to where he was now. He remembered reading somewhere that many top-level executives embodied personality traits and behaviors that were typically shared by sociopaths.

It made him wonder where the line was.

A security notification popped up on his phone, informing him that someone was in his house. Jay. He felt a smile forming as another volley of notifications flooded his phone as she wandered room from room until he turned notifications off.

Jay was in his house. He stirred at the thought. *Something to look forward to later.*

She was going to be nervous. Nicholas could still remember how pale and shaken she'd looked after he kissed her in the alley. He wondered if he was going to have to chase her before he fucked her. The thought brought back memories that sent a dark cocktail of emotions pulsing through him that made his cock stiffen in his pants. He didn't hate the idea.

I am a heartless bastard, he thought. *Poor little bird. She's so fucked.*

Even after eight years, he still craved her surrender: the crack in her voice as she begged to come; the way she looked at him like he was her everything; the moment when shame and dread turned to helpless desire.

He liked her submissive and sweet, especially when that sweetness came wrapped up in ribbons and lace, but what really got him hard was the way she called him “Daddy.” No one else could strike that perfect chord of fear and devotion.

Nicholas forced his mind to turn back to his work but by the time he got home, he was thrumming with desire and feverish anticipation. All of the windows in the house were dark, which was a little ominous. He hadn't considered that Jay might take a look around the inside of the house and run—but it was beginning to look as if that might be a distinct possibility. She wasn't in the den and she certainly wasn't waiting in his bedroom.

But then she wouldn't be, would she?

No. There was one other place she might have flown. Nicholas took two condoms out of the drawer of his nightstand, sliding them into his pocket before stalking down the hall. He opened the door to her bedroom, using his phone as a light, and saw the reflective eyes of a cat watching him in the darkness. It startled him.

She brought a cat. It didn't appear to be the same one as before. This one was black. He wondered what had happened to the other one.

Closing the door carefully behind him so the cat wouldn't escape, Nicholas walked deeper into the room, and the pale blue light caught on the sleeping form of Jay. He stopped several feet away and looked down at her. Her hair was tangled around her shoulders and obscuring part of her face, rendered soft and contented by sleep. Her shirt had ridden up a little and that line of bare skin above her waistband was utterly beguiling.

There you are, little bird, he thought, shutting the phone off and unfastening his suit jacket, draping it over the back of her chair. Then he unbuttoned his shirt. He dropped that on top of his jacket. Kicking off his shoes as he went, Nicholas swung over her wearing only his jeans, straddling her hips with his knees as he leaned over her body. She murmured something indecipherable at the quiet clatter of his phone being placed on the nightstand. It made him smile.

He ran his fingers over the soft skin of her cheek, tracing over the bump in her nose, her pointed chin, her lips. They were soft, her lips, like crushed flowers. He let his knuckles drag down her jaw, her throat, all the way down the center of her chest. Her heart was beating slowly, a distant thud through all those layers of clothes. He felt like he was about to drown.

Nicholas dragged down the zipper of her hoodie, baring a soft cotton shirt. It didn't look like she was wearing anything under it. He dragged the fabric up until it was gathered beneath her throat and encountered more soft, bare skin. He was so hard now that it was like a physical ache. He heard her breathing shift, becoming shallow and syncopated as she woke under his touch. *Yes*, he thought, smoothing his hand over the slight curve of her belly. *Come to me, Jay.*

And then he lowered his head and kissed her.

Chapter Six

2017



Jay stirred, and for a moment, half-asleep and on the verge of waking, she thought that she was camping. *Someone has left the tent*, she thought randomly, still trapped in that warm, sleepy bubble. *I hope there aren't any bears.*

Doubt was pecking at her, though. Like an agitated bird urging her awake. The darkness was wrong and there were no stars and the light from the window was in the wrong place. *I smell citrus*, she thought. Confused and a little frightened, Jay reached out for where her lamp should be and let out a garbled sound of panic when her fingers grazed something that felt like an arm.

“Relax, blue jay.” A mouth brushed her cheek, rough with stubble. “It’s just me.”

What— She wet her lips and was surprised when they burned. “N-Nicholas?”

“Mmm.”

Her hand shot up as he leaned over her, palm pressing against his chest as his body dipped to cover hers. Hard, muscled skin jumped under her touch. He was shirtless. Breathing a little faster, Jay’s hand drifted lower and collided with something sharp: his belt buckle. *No shirt*, she thought, waking up very rapidly now, *but he’s wearing pants.*

And then his hand covered her breast and squeezed lightly and Jay realized what the zipper sound she’d heard in her sleep had really been. “W-when—when did you get home?”

How long have you been touching me like this?

“Ten minutes ago.” She felt the sting of his breath on her lips, but he kissed her neck instead, sending little electric shocks bursting down the side of her throat in a shower of sensation. “I’ve been thinking about you all day . . . about all the things I’m going to do to you.”

Jay inhaled sharply as his bare torso grazed hers. Both of her hands were on him now, fingers biting into the ridge of his hips. To push him away, she told herself, but the tipping sensation in her belly at the sound of his low laugh had very little to do with fear.

“You scared me.” The words sounded uneven to her. “What's the matter with you? I was asleep,” she added faintly. “Or is unconscious the only way you can get w—”

His mouth brushed hers, a light touch that firmed when she resisted, becoming forceful enough that it left her breathless. “Shut up and fuck me.” A painful tremor seized in her chest as his pelvis pushed into her, driving her deeper into the quilt. He was hard; she could feel all of him as he settled between her legs. “I know you remember how.”

At the clip of his teeth at her breast, she moaned, pushing her hips up against him. Heard him hiss through his teeth: “*fuck.*” The bed shifted several times in quick succession and a soft slap of fabric told her he'd taken off his pants. She held herself stiffly as he tugged her arms out of her sleeves and yanked her shirt over her head, making her shiver at the sudden chill.

And then her pants were off, and he was pressed against her—hard and soft, and full of heat. The one body she knew as well as her own. *He smells the same*, she thought wildly, as he lifted his head to cover her mouth in another one of those possessive kisses. Grapefruit and the sweet, slightly musky scent of a man's clean skin. She tensed instinctively as he nudged her thighs with the long, hard length of his cock.

“Spread your legs.”

“N-no, wait,” she said, her voice high and unrecognizable. “Use protection.”

She heard him swear again. Then he bent over her, groping for something on the floor, eliciting more bursts of heat and friction as his body slid against hers. She heard a crinkling sound, which made her relax an inch—*at least he has a condom*—until it occurred to her that she ought to be insulted that he'd come in here assuming that she'd be available for sex.

“Such a good girl.” His voice was deep and slightly mocking, almost like he could hear her thoughts. “Always following the rules. But that's what makes you so predictable. That's why you're here right now—” he slid ungently into her, the sweet torture of it wrenching a sound from her throat “—with me. Because you always play nice. And I don't.”

Jay felt a surge of shame, pinned beneath him. Full of him and nothing else. Every breath pushed her closer and when she opened her mouth, she felt their lips brush in a fleeting taste of pleasure—a slip of tongue at the

seams of her mouth, a tug on her lip, the promise of *more*—before he began to thrust. Each one seemed to rip something from her.

It had been . . . a long time.

What had he called her? A good girl—yes, she had tried to be one of those. Tried, and had not gotten very far because pretty came with a price and it could make some people ugly.

Being an adult means you pay for it.

She slid her hands over his chest and felt coarse hair and straining muscle. With a rough cry, she grabbed him by the shoulders, where her fingers became claws and her nails bit into the suppleness of his skin. “I’m here because you blackmailed me.”

He let out a hoarse laugh. “Are you sure that’s the only reason?”

Tears burned in her eyes and she was glad he couldn’t see them. “Fuck you.”

“Bold of you . . . speaking to me like that.” His voice, only slightly louder than a whisper, was like opiated syrup pouring through her senses, causing her to seep deeper into the darkness. In the dark, she didn’t have to look into those arctic eyes or feel herself being gnawed apart by that predatory gaze. “Or has it been so long . . . that you’ve forgotten how to beg?”

No. “No,” she said, too loud in the darkness. Too raw. “I don’t want to. It’s *wrong*. You’re my brother,” she added, wincing at how pathetic and fucked-up she sounded. “This is sick.”

The next thrust was hard and punishing; she felt his hand on her neck, stroking over the tender marks he’d left with his mouth like a map of where he’d been. She hated herself for leaning into it, just a little. Hated her heartbeat for kicking up when his fingers gently squeezed.

“Please.” She wasn’t sure what she was asking for. Her body felt ready to explode.

“Beg.” The word cracked like ice from a melting glacier; it made her flinch.

“No.”

With a sound of impatience, Nicholas rolled off her, gouging her with his sharp hip bones as he shifted so that they were spooning. He lifted her leg with his knee to enter her from behind while reaching between her

thighs with one big hand to stroke her, keeping her jumping flesh pinned beneath his thumb, not quite touching her where she needed him to touch.

Jay bucked and the arm around her waist tightened, making her squeak as he began moving again. She could feel his rumble of satisfaction against her back; this new position let him fuck her more deeply, and the ensuing sensations were so overwhelming it was nearly painful.

“Nick,” she gasped, crying out when he entered her on another slow, deep thrust. “Please.”

“I’m not letting you go until you say it.” His teeth lightly grazed her ear, making her thighs clench involuntarily. He knocked them wider with his knee as he circled her clit in tighter and tighter loops, pulling back every time her body bowed under his arm. “I don’t think you want to test me. You’re going to end up very sore.”

Arousal shot through her in a dark wave at the next stroke of his hips. Her shame was melting like rime, leaving her feeling chilled. He knew what he was doing to her. The pain was fading; now there was just pressure, a dull, yawning ache, and the smooth glide of his fingertips over her most sensitive parts keeping her on the verge of climax. *You knew it would come to this.*

The words were thorns in her throat, sticking and bruising; she could feel herself choking over their too-familiar shape, and she spoke them on a whisper so they wouldn’t have her voice. “I’m sorry, Daddy.” She closed her eyes and felt tears trail down her face. “I’ll be good. *Please.*”

Nicholas let out an explosive breath and shuddered violently, entering her on a deep thrust that made her yip, first in pain and then in surprised pleasure as his thumb worked her clitoris. “Yes.” He spread his fingers to brush her lower belly with a tenderness that seemed at odds with the roughness of his fucking. “You’re still your Daddy’s sweet little bird. Isn’t that right?”

Jay wasn’t sure what she said to that; everything that came out of her mouth felt broken. Too tired to do anything else, she brought her head down in a nod as he pushed her sweaty, tangled curls aside to kiss the nape of her neck. It made her shiver, as it always had, goosebumps rippling down her arms, tightening the skin around her breasts. His hand smoothed over her body with easy possessiveness as he rested his chin on her head and that was when Jay knew—

This time, he had no intention of letting her go.

Chapter Seven

2000

■□□□□■

Jay was in a bad mood as she sat at her mother's little vanity in the dressing room that all the dancers shared. That was what strippers at the Beat and Tease liked to call themselves, like it was classier somehow. Dancers, not strippers.

She'd had to tell her friends that she couldn't go out bowling tonight because her mom had to *work*. Now she was doing her Spanish homework by the flickering bulbs surrounding the cracked and smeared mirror while “Pour Some Sugar on Me” blasted out of the speakers. It was so loud, Jay could hear it pulsating through the walls and it was giving her a headache.

Estoy molesta, thought Jay. In Spanish, being “molested” meant annoyed or bothered instead of the worse thing it was in English. And having a *pregunta* meant a question instead of a baby belly.

Spanish, Jay thought, was very strange.

There was a pause and then “American Woman” began to play, and Jay figured that meant her mom had taken the stage. It was one of her mom's go-to songs for dancing. She'd had a pole installed in their apartment so she could practice her routines at home. Jay usually went out when she did. Watching her mom grind on the pole in her underwear made her feel uncomfortable.

The songs were how you could tell the older “dancers” from the younger ones. They got to choose the songs for their own sets and had to know how to work the crowd. The young ones played songs like Ginuwine's “Pony” and TLC's “I'm Good at Being Bad.” The older ones—like her mom—played songs like “American Woman” and Danzig's “She Rides.”

Jay frowned very hard at her homework and wished her mom would hurry up.

As if in response to her thought, the door slid open, letting in the sound of Bon Jovi turned way up. Jay turned expectantly but it was one of the other dancers, a Latina woman who called herself “Honey Pie.” The men always snickered when it was announced on stage and Jay had asked why. “Never you mind,” was the response, so Jay had looked it up at home on

their crappy dial-up and immediately wished she hadn't. *Never you mind*, indeed.

“Hola, niña. How goes the homework?”

“It's fine,” said Jay. “How was your dance?”

“My dance was popping, just like my joints in these shoes.” The twenty-five-year-old dancer peered over Jay's shoulder. “This looks pretty good. Except I don't know about this foot collection of yours.”

“Rock collection,” said Jay. “We're supposed to write about our hobbies.”

“Well, then you mean piedra and not pie, and speaking of pies—Me duelen los putos pies. Be my little amorcita and hand me my sneakers, won't you?”

Jay handed her the knock-off Adidas, wondering why Honey had just called her feet “ducks.” Maybe because you felt web-toed after being on them for too long. “Is my mom almost done?”

“She just finished her set-up,” said Honey. “But now she's out there talking to some overgrown fresa who thinks the sun shines out of his ass because he's BFFs with Señor Benjamin Franklin.”

Right on cue, the door opened and Danielle Varens stepped into the room wearing her lace merry widow and six inch high heels. She was an incredibly beautiful woman—short and curvy and bronzed, with honey brown hair highlighted at a salon a block away from their little studio apartment, and full red lips.

She wasn't alone, though. She was holding on to the arm of an older, intimidating-looking man whose hair had started to go gray at the temples. He had the coldest grayest eyes that Jay had ever seen and when he turned them on her, she felt something inside her freeze.

“Who's the girl?” he said. “She's not one of the strippers, is she?”

Jay felt her face heat and she had to resist the urge to tug down her shirt. She didn't look like a stripper, did she? She glanced at Honey, who looked like she could cheerfully kill Jay's mother.

“Oh, that's just my daughter, Justine.” Her mother smiled over her head at Honey. “I'm taking Mr. Beaucroft to the VIP room for a private dance, but he wanted to see my little dressing room.”

I bet he did, Jay thought darkly, as his eyes flicked over the dancers' discarded street clothes, the makeup, her neat little stack of homework weighted down with a copy of *Jane Eyre*—his eyes lingered on that, for some reason. *The dirty old fart probably thought he could get a freebie.*

Her mother was still talking, still smiling. “Would you be a dear and take Jay out for an hour?”

Honey muttered something dark under her breath about not being a babysitter, but a glance at Jay softened the look on her face. “All right. Come on, *niñita*. Your mother's buying us both McDonald's for dinner.”

Her mother's smile hardened a little, making her red-glossed lips look like vinyl, but she handed Honey two twenties. They looked limp and Jay tried really hard not to think about where her mother had been keeping those. She glanced at the man, who was staring at her again in a way that made her stomach twist. *Go away, creep.*

“Thanks,” said Honey, with a bright, winning smile, plucking the twenties from her mother's lacquered fingers. “Enjoy your dance, *mami*. Come along, Jay.”

Honey steered her down the side exit, which a lot of the dancers preferred because the exit was unmarked, and in street clothes, no one was the wiser when you stepped outside the concrete door. Plus, then you didn't have to walk past the men. Jay's mom usually took the main entrance, and sometimes she called out “Jailbait coming through!” which horrified Jay and usually elicited catcalls.

Sometimes Jay found herself wishing that Honey was her mom. Well, maybe not her mom. That would have been weird. Her long-lost big sister maybe, who would adopt her and take her away. She looked down at her bootleg Converse high-tops that she'd bought in Chinatown and were already falling apart. She'd taped the toe up but it was starting to flop.

Far away, thought Jay, thinking, dreamily, *New York or Paris.*

“Watch out for that dog shit,” said Honey. “At least I hope it's dog shit.”

Jay sighed.

The McDonald's by the dance club was a bit shady and had a gross bathroom. The fluorescent lights were broken and made everyone's skin look ashy. Jay hovered by the tables, tugging down the hem of her shirt.

She'd gotten taller again and the hem had ridden up, making her conscious of the bare strip of stomach it revealed and the way the fabric clung to her chest. That man's words rang in her head—*she's not a stripper, is she?*—and made her feel cheap. As cheap as her stupid sneakers.

One of the employees was mopping up the floor. He had one of those janitors' carts and Mya's "Case of the Ex" floated out from the speakers as Honey came back with the food. "I got you a fish fillet," she said. "It's the freshest thing on the menu because they always have to make them new because of the tartar sauce. Apple, pie, too, you lucky girl. Buen provecho."

"Gracias," Jay said uncertainly. She didn't know that one.

Honey ruffled her hair, which Jay secretly hated. Just because it was really curly, people always felt like they had a right to put their hands in it. She did some discreet rearranging as Honey dove into her food. Dressed in tight jeans and a glittery Hurley sweatshirt, Jay thought she looked very pretty, and she said so during the next lull.

Honey smiled at her, but something about it seemed a little sad. "You're quite the looker, too, niña. With that sweet face and that curly hair, your Daddy must have been some kind of man. You're going to break a lot of hearts when you're older. How old are you now? Cuantos años?"

"Fourteen," said Jay. "Mom says I'm too tall, though—and that my chin is too big."

Honey's smile disappeared. "Mother's don't always know best," she said vaguely, in a cutting way that made Jay wonder. "Bet your mother thinks she's pretty smart, too, huh?"

"I guess." Jay picked at her food. "She has a degree from community college."

Honey burst out laughing and the sound of it was so loud that Jay startled. "She has a degree in jack shit. Jay, sweetie, I love you. I love the shit out of you—most of the girls at the B&T do—but your mother is a first-degree bullshit artist if I ever saw one, and if she's really thirty-three, then I'm a virgin."

The man cleaning up the restroom looked up in sudden interest.

"I don't like that man she was with," said Jay.

"Good girl. Stay smart and watch out for the men with the serpent eyes. So." Honey took a sip of Coke. "What is it like in the mind of Jay? Que

quieres hacer con tu vida?”

She gave Jay a moment to puzzle out the Spanish herself, translating in her head while her lips moved. “I don't know,” Jay said at last. “Maybe I'd like to be a teacher or a vet.”

“I fucking love that. You know, I'm thinking of quitting the business and going back to college myself. *Real* college,” she clarified. “Not your mother's degree in mierda. What was it again?”

“Recreation and Leisure Studies—and you should,” said Jay. “Dancing seems like it sucks.”

“It doesn't have to suck, Jay. But it certainly isn't all that great when you're moving to a man's beat. Come on, let's go see if your mother is done with her fresa man.”

■□□□■

When they got back to the Beat and Tease, Jay's mother was waiting. She had her street clothes on and her coat was zipped. In her hand was Jay's backpack and Jay hoped she'd been careful when throwing her things in there and hadn't wrinkled her homework. To Honey, she said, “Thanks for taking her out. I hope she didn't eat too much.”

“Nope.” Honey looked at Jay's mother's outstretched hand like she didn't know what she wanted. “Well, have a safe walk home, ladies. I'm out. *Bye.*”

“That was two hours' worth of tips,” Jay's mother said, watching her leave. She heaved a sigh. “Never mind. If this works out, that'll be pocket change. Come on, baby, Let's go home.”

“If what works out?” said Jay.

“Justine.” Her mother's voice was forbidding. “It's time to go.”

Jay hunched her shoulders as they went out the door but most of the guys were gone and the ones who were left were stone cold drunk, so her mother didn't shout anything about “Jailbait.” Jay kind of had the idea that her mom did it for the attention sometimes, but that was kind of sick, wasn't it? She wasn't sure why her mother would *want* to embarrass her.

Her mother did a lot of weird stuff that Jay didn't like, though. Installing the pole and the mirror in the living area. Stealing Jay's own

clothes to see if she could fit into them (she usually could). Telling people that she was Jay's aunt instead of her mom. Making people guess her age when she was drunk. Shouting "Jailbait walking" at the Beat and Tease.

"What did you eat at McDonald's?" her mother asked.

"Diet air."

"You need to stop growing, baby. Look at this." She tugged at the hem of Jay's sweater, pulling it tight over her chest. "I just bought you this top and it's already too short. And we need to get you a proper bra," she added, with a speculative glance. "Have you tried the pencil test like I told you?"

"Mom," Jay squawked. "Not *here*."

"Baby, you know if I fret, it's only because I love you."

Jay wondered sometimes. "Who was that man back there?"

"His name is Damon Beaucroft. He's an investor from L.A."

"What's he doing here then?" Jay asked suspiciously.

"Investing."

In what?

She could tell by her mother's tone that the subject was closed, though, and besides, they had arrived at the tiny studio apartment in the Tenderloin. Jay raced ahead to let herself in with her own key. Much to her disappointment, it was too late for her to call her friends and ask about the night out. They'd told her that cute guys were going to be there and she wanted to know if any of them had asked about her.

Probably not, though. Since she was, according to her mother, both too fat and too tall. Jay sulked on the futon while her mother took off her face, wrapped in the fake silk butterfly robe she'd bought at K-Mart and thought made her look like Marilyn Monroe. She seemed smugger than usual and kept plucking at something around her neck.

When she turned around, it caught the light and Jay saw it was a gold necklace.

"What's that?" asked Jay, since it obviously pleased her mom and it never hurt to get into her good graces. The pendant was shaped like a gold ring and covered with small diamonds. "Is it new?"

"This," said her mother, holding it up, "could be a ticket to a new life if I play our cards right."

“It just looks like a necklace to me,” Jay muttered, rolling back over to read *The Last Unicorn*.

“Jay, stop reading that book or it'll ruin your eyes. I don't want to have to take you to the optometrist and get you glasses. You know what they say about girls who wear glasses.”

Jay didn't look away from the book. “That they're smart?”

“That nobody wants to date them.” Her mother swiped for the book but Jay's arms were longer and she held it away, out of reach, before curling her body around it protectively. “Men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses, Jay. You're already growing like a little weed. Soon you're going to be taller than all the boys and then nobody will want to date you, baby. Especially not with your little nose always buried in a book.”

“I don't want to date anyone,” Jay snapped defiantly. “And if I do, it'll be someone tall.”

“Tall boys like short girls,” said her mother. “Everyone likes short girls. They're small and that makes people want to protect them.” She looked Jay over and sighed. “If you can't be short, then you can at least try and be pretty, Jay. I wish you'd let me do your makeup and straighten your hair.”

“No.”

She pulled her book even closer to her face, trying to ignore the way her eyes stung. After a moment, Jay heard her mother make an indecipherable sound. Then she turned out the light and got on her own futon with a loud rustle of the covers so Jay couldn't even read anymore.

Jay set down her book, staring up at the ceiling, biting down on her lower lip which had started to tremble. There was a tight, pinching feeling in her gut like someone had grabbed her on the inside and squeezed. *Am I ugly?*

Chapter Eight

2000

■□□□□■

Her mom wasn't around when Jay's alarm went off for school. That was unusual. Her mom liked to sleep in after a night of dancing, calling it her "beauty rest." Jay couldn't remember the last time her mother had gotten up earlier than she had. *Maybe she had to go grocery shopping.* Jay got dressed in embroidered jeans and a peasant blouse she'd bought at a thrift shop. The blouse had been loose and a little too long when she'd gotten it, so unlike a lot of the tops her mother had bought for her more recently, it still fit.

She slipped all of her homework into her backpack, along with the copy of *The Last Unicorn* and hopped on the bus to Mission High School. Most of the people on the bus seemed normal but there was a guy with bad BO who was gripping one of the steel rails and shouting. Jay buried her nose in her book and studiously ignored him until it was time to get off at her stop.

Her friends were standing out in front of the school in a cluster. Kristine was applying watermelon Lip Rageous push-up balm while Leah and Amy chatted. Amy was leaning on the handle of her rolling backpack, which always made her look like a little commuter on her way to an airport. They all turned when they saw her coming.

"Jay!" said Kristine. "We missed you last night!"

"How was bowling?" Jay asked, trying not to sound too bitter.

"Oh my God, it was so fun," said Amy. "We played two rounds and some boys from our school showed up in the second. *Juniors*. Danny Ramos was there. He asked about you."

"He did? What did he say?"

"Nothing much. He was just like, 'Oh, where's Jay? Isn't she usually with you?'"

"Where were you, anyway?" Kristine pressed, capping the lip balm.

"I told you. My stupid mom had to work late, so she took me with her."

"Here." Leah pressed something into her hand. "I got you a sticker from the machine."

It was one of those skateboarding stickers people liked to slap on their binders at school. This one showed a little stick figure collapsed on a sofa

with the caption “I Couch Myself.”

“Are you saying I’m lazy?” Jay asked dryly, peeling off the backing and putting it on.

“Yeah,” said Amy, rolling her eyes. “That’s you, Jay. You’re like the *epitome* of lazy.”

“It’s pronounced like ‘I pity me,’” said Jay. “Like, *epitome* the fool who says it wrong.”

“You’re such a nerd. *Epitome* for being friends with you in the first place.”

The four of them walked to class, Kristine splitting off to go to Geometry II while the rest of them went to Spanish I. Jay sat at her desk, calmly conjugating a list of verbs in the present tense, but beneath the surface, she was worried. Where was her mom?

After school, her friends wanted to go to Westfield Mall. Amy had seen some new Urban Decay makeup in a magazine that she wanted to buy. Jay wasn’t supposed to go places without letting her mom know first, but she was mad at her mom, so she went anyway. She tried on clothes with her friends but there was nothing there she could afford, or she might have bought a crepe. When Amy moved to throw out her half-empty smoothie, Jay said, “I’ll finish that if you don’t want it. I forgot to eat lunch.” *And breakfast.*

“It tastes like salad,” Amy warned her.

It did taste like salad. Jay drank it anyway because she was starving.

When she arrived home, it was dark and the streetlights had come on. Her mother still wasn’t home and there was no note, but that wasn’t entirely unusual. Sometimes her mom went off with a guy and didn’t come back for a few days. Jay always feared the worst.

She picked up the phone and called the Beat and Tease. Rafael, the bartender, picked up. “Hello?”

“Hello, Rafe. It’s Jay—um, I was wondering, is Danielle in?”

“Jay.” He immediately sounded less gruff. “No. She called out for the next couple of days. You know I’m not supposed to tell people on the phone whether a girl is in or not.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Jay hesitated. “Did she say where she went?”

“No idea, sorry.” Something seemed to occur to him. “You’re not home alone, are you?”

“No,” said Jay quickly. Too quickly? “She dumped me off at my aunt’s house in Pacifica. We were just wondering if I needed to stay the night or if I, uh, needed to go home.”

“Sorry Jay,” Rafe said. “I don’t know what to tell you. Have a good night.” He hung up.

Jay stared at the phone bleakly and then went to the fridge. Still empty. She wasn’t sure why she’d checked. All she’d eaten today was her friend’s gross smoothie so she went to the empty tin of shoe polish where her mother stashed the money and dialed in for a cheese pizza.

She sat on the porch waiting for it with her knees pressed against her chest. When the pizza guy came, he gave her a strange look she didn’t like and Jay quickly yanked her hand back after she tipped him so that their fingers wouldn’t brush, squeezing into the doorway with the box and then doing up the latches and the deadbolt behind her.

She ate the greasy slices while watching the crackly cable. The sound was bad and she couldn’t really see much, but it didn’t matter. They didn’t have any of the good channels worth watching. When she was done, she put what was left of the box in the fridge and went to go wash her hands. They were out of soap so she used some of her mother’s Herbal Essence shampoo. It smelled better than soap, almost like perfume. She could imagine herself in a field of flowers if she closed her eyes.

She’s not coming back, thought Jay, as she changed for bed.

Strange how the thought could make her feel both relieved and anxious at the same time. As much as she hated her mother—especially when she was picking apart her looks or embarrassing her at the strip club—Jay wanted someone to take care of her. Someone who would always be there, even if it was hard. Her mother couldn’t deal with anything more serious than a broken nail.

Dressed in a pair of sleep shorts and a strawberry tank top, Jay came back out into the living area from the bathroom. She tilted her head at the mirror her mother had put in front of the pole. She was so tall that she almost didn’t fit in the frame and she didn’t really have much of a chest. She lifted a leg, frowning, fascinated by the way the muscles moved beneath the skin.

Glancing at the mirror again, more shyly this time, she began to copy one of the dance routines she had seen at the club. Not one of her mother's, which seemed to involve a lot of bumping and grinding, but one of the younger girls, like Honey and Angel, who actually danced. Even though she didn't like watching the girls if she could help it—it made her uncomfortable for reasons she couldn't quite put into words—she had seen way more than she wanted to and the steps really weren't all that hard.

If you weren't taking your clothes off, dancing was kind of fun. Especially without a bunch of guys hollering at you or demanding that you “take it off.” Her mother didn't have a CD player, so Jay just hummed along to a Destiny's Child song in her head, thinking that maybe this was what Honey meant. Dancing was so much better if you were doing it for yourself.



The next day, her mother still hadn't returned. Jay began to wonder if she had been kidnapped or even died. The thought made her cry. Given her horrible thoughts about her mom the other day, it was hard not to feel like she had somehow wished this into occurring.

Sick with worry, Jay grabbed her bag and went to school, but this time she was too upset to read on the bus. The kindly old woman sitting next to her kept asking if she was okay, but Jay kept her lips together and moved seats because she knew if she opened her mouth, she would cry. At school, she stood around with her friends in their usual spot, with her thumbs hooked through the straps of her backpack as she tilted her hips back and forth and gave monosyllabic responses.

When Danny and his friends came up to them to talk, Jay barely noticed. She knew Kristine, Amy, and Leah were looking at her funny, but she couldn't bring herself to care. All she could think of was that scene in *Pulp Fiction* with the woman conked out, practically dead. That could be her mom right now, and she wouldn't even know.

Jay ate the leftover pizza for dinner and counted up the money in the tin shoe polish box. There were only about two hundred dollars in it and she didn't know where her mother kept the emergency debit card. That wasn't enough to cover even half of rent, which would have to be paid up in two weeks. Would her mother even come back before then?

I should call the police, thought Jay, but she was afraid of the police, too. What if they took her away? What if they yelled at her for not calling sooner?

What if this was all somehow her fault?

Jay wished she had Honey's phone number, although she wasn't sure what the dancer could even really do if she called. Honey talked to Jay at work because Jay was there, but Jay was pretty sure she wouldn't want some kid calling her up at home, even if the kid was the "little amorcita" who fetched her sneakers.

She tried to read, telling herself that now she could stay up reading as late as she wanted, but she was too upset to make sense of the words that kept blurring before her eyes.

Sniffling, Jay poured herself a glass of water and sat at the kitchen table, trying to figure out her homework. Doing her algebra and conjugations helped clear her mind a little because you couldn't be sad and focus at the same time, but as soon as she was done with her work, all the bad feelings rushed back in, almost like they'd never even left.

She curled up in bed and cried that night, resolving that if her mother wasn't back tomorrow, she would call the police for real this time, even if they did yell at her for not reporting it sooner.

When Jay opened her eyes again, it was light out and she could smell frying bacon and hear her mother humming "Jolene." At first, Jay thought she was dreaming. Her mother never cooked.

"Mom?"

"Hey there, baby." She pivoted from the stove, wearing what looked like a new dress and that stupid necklace with the circle of diamonds. "Did you enjoy sleeping in? I tried to wake you but you were out like a little light—but I knew the smell of bacon would get you."

Jay went through several emotions in quick succession that seemed to flash like a broken traffic light. "Mom, what the hell? Where have you been? I thought you—I thought you *died*!"

Her mother laughed. "Died? Baby, no. I was in Vegas."

"V-Vegas?" Jay swallowed around the angry lump in her throat. "Las Vegas?"

“Is there any other Vegas?” Her mother smiled beatifically, “I got married, Jay. You’re looking at the new Mrs. Beaucroft of Hollybrook, California.” Her mother held out her hand. There was a ring on it the size of a dime. “You’re going to have a daddy again.”

Jay stared bleakly at the ring, not sure if she was hearing correctly and afraid that she was. “Mrs Beaucroft—wait, you mean that creepy guy from the Beat and Tease?” *The one who wouldn’t stop staring at me?* “You’re marrying *him*?”

“We are married, Justine. It’s a done deal.” Her mother’s smile disappeared. “He’s a very generous man.”

“I didn’t know where you were,” said Jay. “I called the Beat and Tease. I called—” She paused. She hadn’t called anyone else because there hadn’t been anyone else. “No one knew where you were,” she finished lamely. “I thought something terrible had happened to you. I was going to call the police.”

“Oh God, you didn’t, did you? I think there’s a baggie of weed around here somewhere.”

There had been, but Jay had found it and thrown it into the trash.

“*Mom*. Forget the weed! Why didn’t you leave me a note?”

“I thought I did.”

“*No*,” Jay half-shouted, half-sobbed. “You didn’t. You—left me—all—*alone*.”

To her horror, she started crying, while her mother just stood there and stared.

“I . . . I’m sorry, Justine. Here, come here, baby. I’m so sorry. I tell you what, let’s go shopping. That always cheers me up when I’m sad. We can go anywhere you like. You’re going to need clothes for your new life.” She smiled hopefully. “Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Jay looked at her mother’s blurry face and swiped at her cheeks.

“Okay,” she said, in a very small voice.

■□■□■□■

Nicholas Beaucroft was bored.

Even though he was hanging out with his friends, Jake and Aaron, it was starting to feel like they were always doing the same things, over and over, like a spinning record.

Aaron's house was especially annoying because Aaron had four younger siblings. "Go away, Lilian," Aaron was snapping at his four-year-old sister, who had come in to show off her Tickle Me Elmo. "We're *busy*."

They were playing Mario Party 3 but Jake kept cheating, reaching over and yanking at the joy stick of whoever happened to be winning at the time, which was usually Nick. So Nick retaliated by robbing Jake with the Boo ghost every chance he got, even when Jake was down to his last ten coins.

"Stop being a dildo, Nick!"

"You're the dildo," said Nick, smiling to himself as the ghost attacked Jake—again.

"Why can't we play at your house, Nick?" Aaron asked glumly, watching his sister depart. Probably to run off to her mom to tell, Nick thought. That seemed to be all siblings were good for.

"Because of the decorators," he muttered. "Dad has people over to set up my stepsister's room."

The news had been broken to him yesterday and he still wasn't happy about it. He didn't want a "new" mother or a "new" sister. He'd had a mom—and she had died—and he'd never wanted a sister. He liked being left alone.

"I can't believe your dad got married again," said Jake. "That's so lame."

"Yeah." Nick sighed. "I'm not thrilled about it."

"I want to play." Now Hal, Aaron's seven-year-old brother, was plopping his butt down on the rug, staring at the TV like a dog begging for a treat. "Let me play with you guys."

"No," said Aaron. "We're in the middle of a game. Go bother Lilian. She'll play with you."

"It's my Nintendo, too!" Hal shouted, startling them. "Dad got it for all of us! Not just you!"

Before any of the boys could stop him, he yanked the switch on the system, turning it off, and ran away wailing for his mom before any of them could so much as touch a hair on his head.

"That little shit," said Jake.

"Dude, that's my brother," said Aaron. "Only I get to call him a shit."

"Well, then call him one." Nick tossed down the controller. "He ruined our game."

"Easy," Aaron said in alarm.

"I feel sorry for you." Jake rose to his feet, stretching his skinny arms over his head. "Your new sister is going to screw up your whole way of life, dude."

"Probably." Nick made a face. "I'm bored of this game anyway. Let's go to the park."

Aaron shouted something to his mom as Nick and Jake walked out. Nick's dad didn't care where he went as long as he was back before the streetlights came on, and Jake's dad was a sheriff, so nobody would mess with him anyway, or they'd probably get thrown in jail.

Aaron, on the other hand, was a total momma's boy. He was always asking to use the phone when they went out places so he could call his mom and let her know he'd be late. Nick thought that was kind of pathetic.

It was too late for the little kids to be out so the three of them had the park to themselves, apart from some older kids playing soccer in the distance. They climbed on the jungle gym, Aaron sitting on one of the lower U-shaped bars, Jake on the swings. Nick shimmied up the pole and hooked his legs over the topmost frame of the swings themselves, hanging upside-down like a bat. Pretty soon, his head began to throb as all of his blood spilled down like an hourglass.

"That's dangerous," said Aaron, looking up at him nervously. "You'll fall and crack your head."

"Hasn't happened yet." Nick curled up, grabbing the bar with both hands, and swung down to the tanbark with a thump. He knew it was an impressive finish because Jake's eyes widened slightly. Turning to Aaron, he added lazily, "You sound like your mom right now."

"Shut up."

"How old is your stepsister?" Jake asked. "She's not a little weenie like Lilian, is she? I don't want to have to deal with another little kid pulling on me while I try to play Goldeneye."

"Hey," Aaron snapped.

“Nah. Dad says she's older. Fourteen. She's *studious* and likes to *read*,” he added, gagging.

Jake scoffed. “Sounds like a total dog.”

“Maybe she'll drive us places when she gets her license,” said Aaron.

Nick thought about that. His dad never drove him anywhere. The housekeeper did that, in her broken-down Gremlin. He hated the old car; he thought it was ugly and couldn't understand why she just didn't get a new one. “Maybe,” he said doubtfully. “But that's two years from now.”

“Your life is over,” Jake said solemnly. “Rest in pieces, my man.”

Nick flipped him off, but deep down he thought Jake was right.

Chapter Nine

2000

■□□□□■

On Jay's mom's last day at the Beat and Tease, she danced to The Clash's "Rock the Casbah." Jay sat at the vanity, reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the book the freshmen at her new school would be reading. At Jay's current school, they were in the middle of *Romeo and Juliet*. So far, she was thinking that she preferred the doomed Shakespeare play.

She was wearing some of her new clothes from the shopping trip her mother had dragged her on. Her mother had said to get whatever she wanted and they had walked out with six bags of clothes between them (most of them her mom's). She was currently wearing a blue velveteen shirt with tie-dye swirls of aqua and navy, and some new flared jeans that actually fit.

Her mother had been her usual self, pulling at straps, fidgeting and fussing at her, tugging at the backs of Jay's jeans to make sure they weren't too tight. "You've gone up a size."

Jay hadn't really cared about that until her mother said it like she'd gotten an F on a test. "I'm taller," she said defensively.

"Don't take anything that doesn't fit you to Hollybrook. No shirts that show your belly and no pants that don't hit the top of your shoes. Just bag them up and leave them on the curb."

"You show your belly," said Jay. "You show it to everyone."

"*Justine.*"

"Fine," she'd muttered.

Despite her mother's words, she did feel good in her new outfit. It was nice to have things that didn't squeeze and pinch, although despite her mother's instructions, she couldn't get rid of *all* her old clothes. No matter what her mother said, her wardrobe simply wasn't big enough to have everything be a perfect fit. If she wore her shorter tops with high-waisted pants, no one would even notice.

Hunched over her book, Jay listened to the other dancers talk about the men outside, their personal lives, the gloomy weather. The mood in the dressing room was weird today, almost somber. Jay got the impression that the other women really weren't sorry to see her mom go.

Naturally, her mother had felt the need to flounce in and start telling everyone goodbye, loudly and with fake tears that wouldn't ruin her stage makeup. She had taken grainy pictures on a new Nokia cell phone of her wedding at the Strip. Jay had peered over; it was one of those 24-hour chapels, all lit up in neon. She managed to hold her phone in a way that displayed her ring.

"I'm going to miss you all so much," her mother had chirped on her way out the door, and as soon as she was gone, Honey had muttered, "Put a chingada," before glancing apologetically at Jay.

"She is, though," said Jay, who had obtained a Spanish-to-English dictionary from the library and now knew that puros weren't ducks.

Honey stared at her for a moment, wide-eyed, and then she threw back her head and laughed loudly enough that she startled a woman doing her eyeliner. "God, I'm going to miss you, sweetie."

"What do you think of your mother's new man?" a Black woman named Dulce asked.

"I hate him," said Jay, which made all of the women laugh, and caused Honey to ruffle her hair again.

She wasn't sure why that was so funny. She *did* hate him, and she hated her mother for doing this to her. For disappearing without telling her, for upending her life, for dragging her away from everything. She liked her school and she liked her friends. This was so *unfair*.

"Why are you going now?" Kristine had asked. "You're leaving in the middle of the year!"

"My mom got married to some guy." Jay stared at her new shoes. They were very white. She was afraid to get them dirty, so even though her mother had told her not to, she had packed up her older Converse in her luggage, just in case. "He lives in Hollybrook."

"Where is that?" asked Amy. "I've never even heard of it."

"You've never heard of anywhere beyond San Leandro," Kristine teased.

"It's on the other side of the *state*." Jay kicked a rock. "Eight hours away. Near Beverly Hills. My mom's excited. She can't wait to shop at Rodeo Drive. I'm going to hate it."

“Let's all exchange numbers and emails,” said Leah. “Then we can stay in touch.”

It won't be the same, though, Jay thought. You'll forget me.

Things would continue to tick along in San Francisco and everything Jay would be erased.

She had wanted to cry, but she had to be brave—for herself, for her friends. She didn't want to be seen as a spineless worm and she knew her mother wouldn't want to see any tears.

Her mother, Jay had quickly figured out, had opinions about literally everything, and these opinions were gospel truths as far as she was concerned. It was easier to just nod and tell her that she was right and then go do whatever it was that she really wanted to do, but Jay wasn't sure how to do that in her current situation. It wasn't like she could just refuse to move and stay in San Francisco.

That night, Jay dozed on her futon, staring at the cartons and bags of her things in the darkness and wondering what the future would bring. She fell asleep to the red blinking light of the liquor store outside.

When she woke up, her mother was yelling at the movers as they offloaded the cartons of their belongings out of the apartment. On the curb out front was a pile of things that hadn't fit into their shiny new life: the futons, all the old dishes and silverware, Jay's old clothes.

Damon had bought them first class tickets to Los Angeles and a car was waiting to pick them up. *Probably trying to impress Mom*, Jay thought dully, glancing at her mother's shining face. *Could he be more obvious?* She just wanted to have her own room and have there not be any rats, so when she saw where they were going to live, her jaw actually dropped.

It had a gate, and an elaborate facade with a covered porch buffered by colonnades, as imposing as stone soldiers. There was a walkway to the front of the house and a sweeping expanse of emerald green lawn. Was all of this really just for one person? It looked like a hotel.

“We're living here?” It had to be a trick. When her mother nodded, she said, “Really?”

“Our new home.” Her mother was glowing, pleased with herself, pleased with the house. When the car stopped, she practically skipped out of the door, leaving the driver to tend to her things, even though Jay was pretty

sure that wasn't his job. "Why don't you see if you can find your stepbrother while I make sure the rooms are all sorted out?"

Wait. "Stepbrother?" Jay repeated, but her mother was too far away to hear.

The driver was stacking the suitcases, muttering under his breath in what sounded like Russian. "Do you want help?" Jay asked, glancing at the doors uncertainly.

"No," he said politely. "Do as your mother told you. I will be fine."

Okay. Jay brushed dust off her bare legs and knotted her sweatshirt around her waist. Trust her mother to overlook a detail like that. A stepbrother. She definitely hadn't told Jay that she'd be sharing the rest of her life with another kid.

She wondered if he was older or younger. She wondered if he was nice. With a father like that cold-eyed creep from the strip club, she wasn't sure how he could be, but she wasn't much like her own mother, either, so maybe he was different. She wondered what had happened to his real mother and whether she was still in the picture. Her mother would hate that.

Jay had always been so envious of her friends with siblings. She'd dreamed about what it would be like to have an older brother to look out for her, protecting her the way a knight looked after his fair lady, an older sister to borrow makeup from or ask about boys, or a younger sibling to look up to her and accompany her on her adventures through downtown San Francisco.

Jay had always felt like she would be a good big sister. She knew a lot of interesting facts about the world and she wasn't afraid of bugs or dirt. *I hope he's nice*, she thought wistfully.

She wandered around the side of the yard, stopping to investigate some rose bushes, and then froze. Disappointment had been a major factor in her young life and she was used to it at this point, but her heart still broke when she saw her new brother and his little freak friends throwing rocks at a kitten in a tree. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Jay hadn't even stopped to think—one moment, she had been on the ground. The next, she was in the tree, limbs bursting with feverish adrenaline as she scooped up the small, warm ball of fluff with one careful hand. The way those kids stared at her when she yelled at them! Like she

was speaking alien instead of an Earth language. Especially that stupid, dark-haired moron who just stared at her the way his dad had. They even had the same cold gray eyes.

Screw him, thought Jay, reveling in the sharp edges of her anger. *Screw all of them. I hate this place.*

Holding the cat, she stormed into the house and immediately found herself lost. The high ceilings were strangely vertiginous and the checkered floors made her feel like a piece in a game that she wasn't even sure she wanted to play. There was a sculpture hanging from the ceiling, ice blue, with dangling parts that looked like tentacles. It looked ready to fall. Jay stared at it nervously and the cat mewed softly, squirming against her.

Right, thought Jay, petting it. *I've got to find my mom and . . . stepdad.*

After wandering around in several loops, Jay found the two of them sitting in a massive lounge area that exited out to the pool. For a moment, Jay was so distracted—a pool, my own pool—that she had forgotten what she had come in for, or that she had just decided she hated this place. Both of the adults stopped talking to stare at her in bemusement.

Jay held up the kitten, which emitted another mew. “I found this outside. I want to keep it.”

Behind her, the front door slammed and she found herself with an audience. It was the three kids from the yard. The cat-torturer gang. The dark-haired kid was standing in front, as self-appointed leader, with the other ones—one with a smarmy look on his toady face, the other bespectacled and trembling—behind him.

He probably thought I came in here to tell on them, she thought scornfully.

“Justine, no,” said her mother. “You don't know where that thing has been.”

“I do know. It was in the tree.”

One of the boys giggled at that. She didn't turn to see which one.

“There's a feral cat colony that lives around here,” her stepfather said without interest. “Animal Control is always coming out here to round them up and have them destroyed.”

Destroyed? Jay's arms tightened around the cat so tightly that it emitted a distressed squeak. “No,” she cried, looking at her mom. “You can't let

them kill it. *Please* let me keep it.”

“Justine.” She was using the voice that came out with men who didn't tip and store clerks who refused to check in the back. “Put the cat back outside right now and go wash your hands.”

To Jay's embarrassment, she could feel her eyes filling with tears. “It's just a baby.”

“Let her keep it, Danielle,” said her stepfather, and Jay looked over at him in suspicion. She hadn't expected him to be her ally. He gave her a smile that she suspected was meant to be warm; it wasn't. “Her room is at the farthest end of the house. If the cat stays in there, we'll never know it exists.” He pulled out his phone. “I'll have the housekeeper make arrangements.”

She could feel the cat's little heart pounding against her arm. “I can . . . keep it?”

“I suppose so.” Her mother sighed. “What do you say, Justine?”

“Um.” Jay swallowed thickly. “thank you . . . Mr. Beaucroft?”

He looked up from his phone. “Damon. Call me Damon, my dear. And this is my son, Nicholas.”

Jay looked down. The boy had abandoned his friends to sidle up beside her. He was staring at the cat in a way that made her cover it protectively. “Justine?”

“It's Jay.” *You sadistic little freak.* “Just Jay.”

“Nicholas,” said Damon. “Why don't you show Justine her new room?”

“Fine.” The boy glanced at his friends with a look of scorn. “Go set the game up in the den. I'll be right back.” He started walking towards the double staircase, looking over his shoulder. “Are you coming or not? I want to play Nintendo.”

Annoyed, Jay raced after him. The kitten mewed again and he looked back.

“Is it okay?”

No thanks to you. She swallowed the words back. “I think it's hungry.”

The boy shrugged. “Sounds like my dad will take care of that.” They came to the top of the stairs where there was a strange half-wall. He pointed

at the statue sitting on top of it. "That's a Louise Bourgeois," he said, stumbling over the words. "My dad paid tens of thousands of dollars for it."

"It's ugly," said Jay.

The boy blinked at her, shaking his head. Then he leaned up on the tiptoes of his sneakers in a way that made her worry he might tumble over the side of the wall. She peered down and saw his two friends sitting on a blue couch, staring at the title screen of a game. "That's the den. My room's on the left." He pointed. "I have the only bedroom on the first floor."

"Neat," said Jay.

The boy glanced at her again with another one of those unreadable looks. Then he started walking like a little boy-shaped robot. "Kitchen and dining room are downstairs and there's a bathroom too. There's also a bar and a lounge for the adults. We're not allowed in there, but sometimes I go in anyway."

"Why?" she asked, only a little curious.

"Because I can."

He—Nick—continued walking. There was something strange about him. Most of the kids she knew spent all of their time playing outside in front of their apartments, cycling around the cul-de-sacs, playing in the gutters with cars or action figures. "Do you have a bike?"

"No. Only geeks ride bikes. That's my dad's room," he said, pointing into the first door they came to. It was open and she could see a massive brass bed and what looked like a rococo fainting couch. "We're not supposed to go in there, either," he added, ticking off more rooms on their way down the upstairs hall. Her own strange little tour guide.

Finally, they came to a dead end and one final door. "This one's yours."

Jay opened the door immediately and in her shock, she relaxed her grip on the kitten, who immediately raced under the bed to hide. A bed—an actual bed. Adult-sized too. A queen.

Someone—probably not Damon—had decorated the room for her. There were sunflowers stenciled on the walls, and there was an empty bookshelf waiting to be filled for her books, and a padded window seat next to a bay window that overlooked the mulberry tree outside. Someone had opened the window to air out the paint smells and it was making the voile curtains flutter.

She immediately sat on the window seat, curling her legs to her chest. *I've always wanted one of these*, she thought, feeling her heart flutter. *I'm going to stay here forever.*

Almost as soon as she sat down, she immediately sprang up and began opening the other doors. One was a full bathroom—she had her *own* shower—and the other was a walk-in closet. Jay could feel herself beginning to hyperventilate. “Oh my God,” she whispered. “This is mine?”

“Chill out,” said Nick. “It's just a room. Haven't you seen a room before?”

She spun around to look at him. He was crouched in front of her bed, lifting up the yellow bed skirt to watch the kitten. “Stop that,” she said. “It's scared. Leave it alone. It'll come out when it wants to.”

The boy pulled back, looking at her for a long moment. “You're weird, blue jay.”

“*Blue jay?*”

“You're blue and you squawk a lot and your name is Jay.” He rolled his eyes. “Duh.”

“I do *not* squawk,” Jay squawked, as the boy drifted out of her room. She tugged down her blue shirt, which she now regretted wearing, and closed the door behind him with a loud slam.

Then she drew in a long, steadying breath and began to unpack her suitcase.



Jake and Aaron were waiting with the game cued up when he got back. Nick was gratified that the two wastes hadn't started playing without him, but it soon became clear that this was less out of any respect for him and more because they wanted to talk about what had happened outside.

What *had* happened outside? The blue jay had come swooping out of nowhere like an infuriated bird. He hadn't been about to throw a rock at the stupid cat. Jake was the one who was always doing stuff like that; he'd only been going to throw it at the tree.

He glared at Jake, who was wearing a little shit-eating grin. “Hi, Nick. How'd it go?”

“How'd what go?” he asked without interest, swinging up on the couch beside him.

“Your stepsister,” said Jake. “*Jay*. You were gone awhile. What'd you do?”

“Took her to her room. She's weird. She acted like she'd never seen a room before.”

“Well,” said Jake. “I'll give you this—she's not a dog.”

“You were the one who said that,” Aaron pointed out. “Not Nick.”

“I know,” said Jake. “It's my gift to you, dude. You're welcome.”

“Shut up and play. I don't want to talk about my stupid stepsister anymore.” Nick grabbed his controller and began selecting the settings so they could all choose their guys. Nick let Aaron choose the level because he didn't really care, and because Jake was being annoying.

“We've done this one so many times,” he whined predictably. “I'm tired of the bunker level.”

“Well, we're doing it,” said Nick. “You can pick the next one.”

“God,” Jake muttered rebelliously. “This sucks.”

“Stop whining,” said Nick. “You sound like a baby.”

“I'm taking this ammo,” said Aaron to no one.

“Don't hog all the ammo, you waste. *I* need ammo.”

“It's battle royale. I don't *want* you to have ammo. You'll shoot me with it.”

“Screw you, dude,” said Jake. “Just wait until I find a Kalashnikov. I'll shoot you with *that*.”

“I can't believe Dad just let her keep the cat,” said Nick, shifting his knee up to block Jake from hitting Aaron and grabbing his control stick like the cheater he was. “*I* never got a pet.”

“Did you ask for one?” asked Aaron.

“I don't think so.” Nick thought for a moment. “My dad hates dogs.”

“She's a girl,” said Jake, like the answer was obvious.

It wasn't. “So?”

“So girls are good at getting what they want because they cry if they don't.”

"I've seen you cry," said Nick. "Does that make you a girl, Jake?"

"Fuck you," said Jake, and Aaron's head immediately swiveled around as he said, "Shh!"

"Don't worry about it." Nick leaned back, pretending he wasn't shocked. "My dad doesn't care."

"I wish I lived here," Aaron said.

"I don't," said Nick. "You'd probably bring your mom with you."

They played three rounds of Goldeneye and then Aaron had to go home. He and Jake went for a walk outside. Jake wanted to swim but Nick didn't feel like it—he'd done his mandatory hour in the pool—so after a walk down the hill to the main road, Jake decided that he was going to head back into town on foot and stop by his dad's office.

Nick walked back up the hill alone. The sky was getting darker as the sun dipped below the horizon and he noticed his dad's Mercedes was gone. *I hope he took the step-witch with him*, he thought. Her fake-nice persona hadn't fooled him in the slightest.

Bored, he stuck his head into his stepsister's room, opening the door slowly so the cat wouldn't escape. Jay wasn't in it, but she'd been decorating. There were books in the shelves now, as well as a collection of rocks, and lots of clipped-out animal posters with torn edges. Next to her desk was a ratty-looking backpack that looked gross and old.

Nick looked around, poking through all her things, before closing the door behind him. *I guess they took the blue jay, too*, he thought meanly, secretly hurt at being left behind.

He started for his own room and froze. His stepsister was lying in an S-shape on the couch he and his friends had vacated, with her legs draped over the arm. There was a bowl of granola perched on her stomach and she was dipping into it with one hand while switching channels with the TV remote with the other.

"Hi." Her voice was cool. "How many channels does this thing have? I'm already at two hundred."

"I don't know. I never counted." Nick moved closer and her leg began to kick in agitation. She was wearing her sweatshirt now but it was unzipped and her shirt was riding up her midriff so you could count her

skinny ribs. "You shouldn't eat upside-down," he said suddenly. "The food falls back down your throat and then you'll choke on it and die."

"The muscles in your throat are stronger than gravity when you swallow," said Jay. "It's called peristalsis." Click, went the remote. She lingered when it showed a group of animals on the TV, staring at a group of stupid-looking zebras as if entranced.

"You're really weird," said Nick.

"You're kind of a shit," she told him, making him bristle indignantly. "So I guess we're even."

"This is my house." He puffed himself up. "If you don't like it, you can leave, *blue jay*."

"It's your dad's house, you dope, and since our parents are married now, I *can't* leave." She sat up, straightening her shirt self-consciously. "So I guess this is just how things are going to be now. Call me names all you want."

Nick watched her for a few seconds longer, feeling strangely frustrated, and then plopped onto the couch beside her. Jay didn't move, except to keep clicking, so he helped himself to some of the granola in the bowl, pulling his legs up on the couch.

"Yelena said we're not supposed to have our feet on the furniture. It makes the couch dirty."

"Who's Yelena? It's my dad's house and he doesn't give a shit."

"Yelena's the woman who cleans your house." Jay looked at him. "You don't know her name?"

Nick lifted a shoulder. "She doesn't speak English. She only yells at me when I get in her way."

Her face darkened. For a moment, Jay looked like she was going to yell at him again and he braced herself, flooding with something that was oddly anticipatory, but she only sighed.

"How old are you?"

"Ten. Almost eleven."

"Okay, so you might grow out of it."

"Grow out of *what*?"

“Being such a shit.” There was a curl to her full mouth now, not entirely malicious, but it annoyed him. With a growl, Nick grabbed her hand, trying to take the remote.

“Give it to me.”

“Oh my God,” said Jay. “*Stop it.*”

“It's my remote,” said Nick. “My TV. You're just staying here until my dad gets tired of your mom.”

“Oh my God—” She wrenched her arm. “You are so—”

The two of them fell in a sprawl on the floor as a loud moan filled the room that made both of them freeze.

Jay looked at the TV and turned an interesting shade of red. Nick turned to look and she began punching buttons, so he only got a glimpse of orange and pink colors.

“Shit,” she muttered. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“What?” Nick glared down at her. “What was it? Turn it back. I want to see.”

“Never you mind!” she said sharply, jerking in a way that had him rolling to the floor. “Get off me! Here's your remote back, you freak.” Before he could say anything else, she was storming out of the room, muttering something under her breath.

She left her mess behind her. Nick looked down at the kicked-over granola and began nudging it under the couch with the tip of his shoe. He waited until he heard the door slam upstairs before clicking the remote back to figure out what Jay hadn't wanted him to see on TV.

He found it almost immediately. It was “the fucking channel,” as Jake called it. The adults on the TV said “fuck” a lot, but apart from that it was pretty boring. He watched it because his dad had told him not to, but he couldn't see the appeal. There was a lady wearing weird clothes and a man doing something that he couldn't see that seemed to be hurting her.

“Yes, baby,” the man kept chanting. “Take it all. Come for Daddy.”

So weird. Nick clicked back to the animal and left it on the dumb nature show before turning the TV off. *Everyone in this house is completely insane*, he thought. *I am the only normal one.*

Chapter Ten

2000

■□■□■□■

I am the only normal person in this family, thought Jay, fuming around her room as she unpacked the rest of her things the movers had dropped off that evening. She wished she could just ditch this place and live as a bohemian somewhere. She wasn't entirely sure what "bohemian" meant, but she had seen the term in a magazine fashion spread and it seemed to involve things like frilly skirts, crocheted bags, and croissants. Jay liked all those things.

It didn't take long to put the rest of her stuff away. Her closet was so big that her paltry amount of clothes looked kind of pathetic hanging all squashed together in one corner. She spread the hangers out but that was worse, like a balding guy hiding his pate with a comb-over.

She looked down at her sweatshirt and shorts and felt a wave of shame. *I don't belong here.*

A rap on her door made Jay look up. She opened it warily. It was Yelena. "Te traje estos."

The housekeeper was holding a school uniform in a plastic dry cleaning bag and a bunch of cat stuff. "Gracias. Um. ¿Necesito llevar uniforme?" Nobody had told her that she needed to wear a *uniform*.

Yelena smiled a little and nodded.

"¿Católica?" There had been a Catholic school not far from where she lived in San Francisco.

"No. Privada." Yelena glanced over her shoulder and carefully set the bag down as Damon went by, shooting the two of them a penetrating look. "Dinner time."

Not sure what else to do with it, Jay laid the uniform flat on her bed and went downstairs, sliding her palm down the polished rail. It made her feel a little like a princess at a ball.

She went down the hallway Nick had pointed out earlier and eventually located the dining room. Everyone else was already there and seated. There was some kind of green stuff in a casserole dish spiced with herbs that smelled vaguely familiar. Jay wasn't sure what they were, exactly, because her mother didn't cook.

“Did the housekeeper give you your uniform, Justine?” asked Damon.

“Yeah,” said Jay, fighting the urge to say, *You were there watching her do it.* “Yelena gave it to me.”

Her mother shot her a look but her new stepfather didn't seem to notice the slight emphasis. Nick did, though, and raised his eyebrows in a way that made her wonder what he knew.

“Good.” Damon set down his wineglass. “Come here.”

“Why?” Jay demanded, instantly wary.

“Justine,” said her mother. “Just go.”

Jay went with a sigh, trying to hide her unease. Damon was a big man and didn't seem particularly friendly. She didn't like being near him. Especially not with Nick staring at her like he thought she was going to get popped one. She wished she'd thought of asking whether Damon yelled at or hit his kids.

Mom wouldn't marry someone who hit kids, thought Jay, but she couldn't bring herself to believe this—her mother might be exactly that oblivious, for all she knew—and shifted from foot to foot as Damon pulled a blue box out of his coat. That got her mother's attention.

“Oh, no, baby,” she said. “Jay's much too young.”

“All the girls at Hollybrook are little magpies,” he said, with a laugh that was probably supposed to be charming but just made him sound like a creep. “They're always looking at each other's jewelry and comparing. The uniforms are supposed to conceal who has money and who doesn't, but of course, that won't work for the people who know who to look for and measure status and worth.”

“That's shallow,” Jay blurted.

“I got Nick a Rolex,” said Damon, ignoring her, although there was a repressive chill in his voice that hadn't been there before. “I'm giving you this, Justine. We can't have people thinking that the Beaucrofts don't take care of their own.” Before she could move, his hand closed over her hand, tightening when she instinctively tried to pull away—and it hurt.

“Ow,” said Jay, jerking, shooting a look at her mother. *Are you watching this?*

“Such a delicate girl.” Damon relaxed his grip instantly and she watched distrustfully, poised to flee, as he fastened a silver charm bracelet

around her wrist. “There you are, my dear. It's very expensive. Take good care of it—that's real silver and real enamel.”

“My watch you gave me doesn't work anymore,” Nick piped up. “It broke two years ago.”

“I'll get you a new one,” said Damon, taking a sip of wine. “A man should have a watch. We'll get you a waterproof one this time so you don't ruin it in the water like you did before.”

Nick looked at her. “I'm getting a Bulgari when I'm sixteen.”

“I shudder to think what inventive means of destruction is in store for it.” Damon pushed the empty box aside—for the housekeeper to clear, she realized with disgust—and pulled out his phone.

Jay stepped back, skirting the table to get around to the other side, and her mother gave her another look. “Say thank you, Justine. Your stepfather is going to think I raised you in a barn.”

“A barn would have been nicer,” Jay heard herself say. *Oops.*

Across the table, she heard a sound like a muffled laugh, although when she glanced at Nick, his face was carefully expressionless.

Her mother scowled at her. “*Justine.*”

“I'm sorry.” Jay rattled the charms of her bracelet without enthusiasm and added, “Thank you for the bracelet,” before plopping into the seat across from Nick, where her food was now lukewarm. She prodded at it with a fork.

“So,” Jay's mother spoke brightly to Damon, “How was your day at work, baby?”



Being the new kid was never easy. Jay had had to switch schools before when her mother got dropped from her previous job as a waitress at a good restaurant near Russian Hill. She'd been younger then, and had showed up to work high. It was a classy joint, so she was fired, and that was when she started stripping in North Beach. Jay had finished the year in Marina Middle School before switching over to Francisco.

She had gone to Francisco for seventh and eighth grade and then her mother had gotten hired at the Beat and Tease and Jay had started at Mission High, just south of Dolores Park. She loved her school. It was so beautiful and everyone there had been interesting and delightfully weird, just like her. She'd liked her friends and even though she could never invite anyone over (because of course they would ask about the pole), she'd felt like she actually *belonged* there.

The baroque tiled dome crowning the highest tower of the school was the first thing she saw every day when walking up to it from across the street, and the way it caught the light sometimes made her feel like she was going to a school of magic. The theater was cool, too, with the gold leaf ceiling and its big chandelier. Very Harry Potter. Roaming the halls with her friends, with the whole city as her extended campus, she felt free in a way that she never felt at home.

Hollybrook High was—Jay swallowed—totally different. Totally worse.

It was set back on a rolling green hill with the front all boxed off in leafy hedges that seemed to say *do not enter* and *do not touch* at the same time. There were palm trees everywhere and each big building was whitewashed so that it gleamed blindingly in the Southern Californian sun.

Jay had printed out a map that morning from the school's website using the computer in Damon's office. After some wandering, she managed to locate the administration office. The woman behind the desk was an older white woman with a grandmotherly haircut and a surly expression. "Hello," she said, looking at Jay over her glasses. "Can I help you?"

"Hi," said Jay. "I'm new and I don't have a schedule and I'm lost and I don't know where I'm supposed to go." She drew in a breath, glancing up hopefully. "Can you help me?"

The woman's expression softened by about one degree. "Are you Justine Varens?"

Jay, thought Jay, but she didn't want to push her luck. "Yeah—it, uh, doesn't say Beaucroft?"

"That's not what it says here." Jay thought the woman's eyes might have widened slightly in recognition of the name. "Does your last name need to be changed?"

"I don't know." Jay made a note to ask her mom. "Whatever it says there is probably fine."

Someone moved behind her and Jay half-turned to see a boy standing there. A tall boy with skin just a few shades deeper than her own, wearing the male version of her uniform.

At least he gets to wear pants, she thought, tugging ineffectively at her skirt.

The woman looked up and smiled. "Michael Valdez. Just in time. I have your shadow."

"Shadow?" Jay asked, confused.

"We appoint all new students with mentors who share most of their scheduled classes to walk them around, introduce them to the other students, show them the ropes."

Michael looked her over without bothering to be subtle about it. "Do you have your schedule?"

"No." Jay looked at the woman expectantly, who handed her a sheet of paper over the cubicle barrier. Her name was at the top in blocky typewriter font. *Varens, Justine M.* "Thank you," she said. "Have a good day."

This time the woman actually smiled at her. It made Jay feel glad.

She left administration with Michael and he led her up the paved walkway that cut through the grass. "So," he said, hitching up his backpack. "Where are you from?"

"San Francisco. The Mission," she lied. It was a trendier neighborhood than the Tenderloin.

"No, I meant—never mind. San Francisco, huh? Cool. Like, Golden Gate Bridge?"

Jay blinked. "Are you asking me if I live on the bridge? Or if the bridge is in the Mission?"

"Both, I guess," he said, with an easy smile.

"Well, then, neither. You can't live on the bridge. There's cops who patrol it. And the bridge is in the tip of the Presidio district, which is nowhere near the Mission."

"Wow, okay, Einstein," said Michael, laughing. "I didn't ask for your life story."

“Actually,” Jay said, feeling a little hurt, “you kind of did.”

Michael looked at her again, but this time there was a sardonic tilt to his mouth. “My bad.” He continued smiling, but his forehead crinkled in thought. “Did I hear you say you’re a Beaucroft?”

“He’s my stepdad,” said Jay. “My mom just married him.”

“Who’s your mom?” Michael asked, in a tone Jay would soon learn meant, *who are your folks and what have they done to make it worth my while to remember who you are?*

“She’s an actress.” It was the lie her mother had instructed her on. “An aspiring actress.”

“Well, if she looks anything like you, I doubt it’ll take long to get her career off the ground.”

Jay tensed, unsure if she was being teased. Probably. “She’s short and blonde and has pale skin,” said Jay. “She doesn’t really look anything like me.”

“God,” said Michael. “You sure don’t hold back, do you?”

“Sorry,” she said instinctively. “What do your parents do?”

“My dad’s in real estate—he’s a developer,” he added quickly. “He’s worked with Beaucroft Assets a couple of times. Your old man funded some of his projects. And my mom does charity work.”

“Like soup kitchens? That’s nice.”

“Oh God, no,” said Michael, with a laugh. “Like fancy parties where people pay ten thousand dollars a plate for a dinner catered by a Michelin chef and then the money gets pooled to save the whales or the orphans or the whale orphans or whatever.” He looked at her, amusement glinting in his brown eyes. “Did you fall off a melon truck on your way to Kansas or something, Justine?”

“Or something,” she said. “And it’s Jay. Only my parents call me Justine.” *And I hate it.*

“Okay, Jay,” Michael said amiably enough, although she couldn’t shake the suspicion that he was still laughing at her. He walked her to Spanish II and the conversation died after that. He was also in her freshman English class, as well as Social Studies class in the afternoon.

Her interactions with him were so awkward that she was surprised when he invited her to sit with him and his friends at lunch. “It’ll be good

for you to meet the right kind of people while you're here," he said. "I'm sure that's what your dad would want."

Stepdad, Jay mentally corrected, looking down at the stupid charm bracelet. And she didn't really care what he wanted.

She'd been expecting a table full of white kids, since the rest of the school seemed to be as white as the buildings, but apart from Michael, who was Latino, two of them appeared to be mixed race and another one was Asian. Michael quickly reeled off the names, so quickly that she barely had time to catch them all. Angela Diamante, Clary Claybourne, Jordan Cahalan, and Quentin Ho. "This is Jay," he finished breathlessly, sweeping a hand at her.

Looking them over, while they looked her over right back, Jay began to understand what Damon had crudely intimated at dinner. You could tell these kids were all rich. It was in their posture, which was deliberately careless, almost lackadaisical, like it was their right to take up space. All of the girls were wearing prominently displayed jewelry.

"I love your bracelet, Jay." Angela strummed her own necklace, a gold pendant that had what looked like Roman numerals written around the black circular stone inside. BVLGARI, Jay realized the name said, familiar because of Nick. *I thought a Bulgari was a car.*

"Thank you," she said absently.

"Is it Tiffany?"

"I don't know." Jay felt the sharp charms gouge her palm as she clutched her wrist. "My stepdad gave it to me. It came in a blue box," she added lamely.

"Jay here fell off a truck on her way from Frisco. She's Beaucroft's little stepdaughter."

Frisco? Jay glared at him and he smiled back at her in a way that made her stomach feel strange.

"You're welcome to hang with us as long as you don't embarrass us," said Jordan, flipping her blonde hair. "It's been so boring. We could use a little bit of fresh blood around here."

"Blood?" Jay repeated uneasily, glancing at them.

"Relax, baby cakes," said Quentin. "We only drink it on Fridays."

All of them had burst into laughter as bright and sharp as broken glass.

Jay thought about Jordan's words while in Social Studies, tapping her pencil while the teacher, Mr. Harbin, droned on about prehistoric communication and cave drawings.

What did she mean embarrass them?

When school ended, Yelena was waiting out in front in the old Gremlin. Looking around at some of the fancier cars, Jay wondered if this could count as “embarrassing.” Nick was lying in the backseat of the car without his seatbelt, arm thrown dramatically over his eyes.

“What are you doing?” Jay asked. “You look like you've got the vapors.”

“I'm comfortable,” said Nick. “And I don't want to be seen in this car.”

“If we get into an accident and you splatter on the windshield, no one *will* see you in this car,” Jay said forbiddingly. “Nobody will see you ever, ever again. Because you'll be dead.”

Nick reached beneath him and buckled one thigh in the seat before flipping her off.

“Right back at you, little dude,” said Jay, turning back around in her seat.

“Siempre así,” said Yelena, glancing at Jay. “Sinverguenza.”

“Silver geisha to you, too.” Nick made his hand into a gun and poked the seat. “Now drive.”

Yelena gave Jay a long-suffering look and rolled her eyes as she started the car.

Jay leaned back in the seat as Yelena drove over the rocky, hilly roads. She was glad when the house popped up in sight, even if it still didn't feel quite like home. She dumped her backpack in her room and went downstairs, still wearing her uniform. On the floor of the front hall, she found Nick's discarded jacket and tie. With an angry sigh, she picked both up and walked around until she found him in the kitchen, eating a piece of toast that had been slathered in butter and topped with sprinkles. “Want some?” he asked, mouth full. “It's called fairy bread.”

Wordlessly, she held up the clothes.

“You don't need to do that,” he said, surprised. “Yelena will take care of—*hey*.”

“Go put those in your room like a civilized person, you toad.”

"This place was better without you," Nick muttered darkly, setting his plate down on the counter with such violence that Jay was afraid it would crack. "I miss being here all alone."

Before she could respond, he was off, tie and jacket clenched in one fist as he stormed into his bedroom. Jay followed him. "Wait, what do you mean *alone*? Where is everyone?"

Nick appeared in the doorway. "I don't know where your dumb mom is, but my dad is busy. At *work*."

"And he just leaves you at home alone all day?"

"Genius." He folded his skinny arms. "Want to see my room, Brainiac? Since you're here."

Brat. She walked through the doorway, without bothering to hide her annoyance. To her surprise, it was actually fairly tidy—although that was probably Yelena's doing, not his. His bed was pushed against the far wall and there was a desk next to it, mostly bare. He had a bookshelf, but it was packed with magazines and CDs instead of books. She eyed the TV and the sofa and the speakers and thought, *Wow, spoiled, much?*

"Pretty cool, huh?" he said, watching her. "Better than yours."

Still annoyed, Jay hiked her chin up at the posters. "Do you play sports?"

"I swim on Saturdays. I have meets and I have to practice for an hour in the pool every day. I like to watch basketball. Dad has season tickets to the Lakers. He'd probably let you go if you want."

"I don't like sports," said Jay.

"Right. I almost forgot you were a nerd for a minute."

Ignoring him, Jay circled the rest of the room. Pausing at the low table in front of the sofa, she said, "That camera looks expensive."

"I guess. I'm still figuring it out. The pictures all come out blurry." He shrugged. "You want to see the rest of the house? I don't have anything better to do."

"You showed me the house yesterday."

"I mean the parts we aren't supposed to go."

Jay didn't like the sound of that—but she could imagine what would happen if the little shit got into trouble and she wasn't there to put a stop to

it.

This is your life now, Jay. Babysitting this little demon prince.

“Okay,” said Jay, putting the camera back down. “Show me.”

She thought he'd be more gleeful, but just like the way he'd been with his friends, his affect didn't really change. With a jerk of his chin, he headed out the door and started for the long hall that led to the kitchen. This time, he kept walking until they came to a room with navy walls that had sharp white accents and heavy wood furniture. “This is the bar,” he said. “For the adults.”

“You mentioned that before,” said Jay.

Nick pointed at the liquor cabinet. “I tried a little of that,” he bragged casually. “It tasted like Windex.”

“You shouldn't be drinking that stuff, dude. It'll rot your brain.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked scornfully. “Tell on me?”

Jay sighed. “No.”

“Good. You better not. You wouldn't want me as your enemy. I know things.” With that mystifying statement, he spun on his heel and pointed out some of the paintings on the wall, reeling off how much his father had paid for them to the dollar. Gesturing at a plush sofa draped in a fur throw, he added, “My dad got that couch from Gump's.”

“I don't know what that is.”

Nick squinted at her. “Aren't you from San Francisco?”

“I really doubt your dad and I shop at the same stores.”

“Yeah.” Nick made a dismissive sound. “My dad said you were poor.”

“Your dad is a jerk,” said Jay.

“Whatever, blue jay. I don't care if you're poor or not. Let's go look at my dad's office.”

“How much longer is this tour going to be? I have homework I need to do.”

“Come on.” Nick seemed eager to go to the office, for some reason. Jay wasn't sure why. It was a cold, gray room and there was a computer on the desk. It was the bulkiest thing in the room. Everything else was sleek and streamlined. “You ever seen one of these before?”

“Yes, doofus,” said Jay. “This morning. When I printed out the map.”

“Well, I wasn't sure. My friend Aaron thinks you were raised in a box. You were so weird when you saw your room, like you'd never seen a room before. He keeps his magazines in here,” Nick added, kicking at a drawer with his shoe. “And his scotch. I don't touch that one, though. It's fifty years old.”

“You shouldn't touch any of them,” said Jay. “What are you even doing in here? Do you just go through everyone's things?”

“Sometimes,” said Nick. “When I'm bored. There's not a lot to do in this house.”

A horrible thought occurred to her. “Have you been through my stuff?”

“You just got here,” he said, not reassuringly. “I saw you dancing in your room last night, though. That was weird. Your music's weird, too. Only a girl would listen to a song about riding ponies.”

Jay flushed. “Stay the hell out of my room, you little creep.”

“Get a lock. That's what my dad does when he wants me to stay out of things.” His little smirk faded. “My dad will be home soon. We should go hang out in the den. I'm pretty sure he knows I come in here, but he'd still be mad if he caught me.”

Jay was torn between going to her room and doing her homework and seeing how this played out. *What a weird kid.* She decided to follow him, watching silently as he turned on the game system and handed her a controller with surprising courtesy.

“Does your dad have—rules I should know about?”

“Yeah.” Nick dug through the box of games. “Be home before the streetlights come on, don't break anything that can't be replaced, don't talk back, and don't embarrass him.”

As long as you don't embarrass us. Jordan's words floated back to her. Shaking her head, Jay said, “What kinds of rules are those?”

“They're his rules. You'd be stupid not to follow them—although, if he doesn't catch you doing it, then it's like it doesn't count. You'll never get ahead by being noble.”

“Is that something your dad says?”

“Yeah, sometimes.” Nick plucked something white off the sleeve of her jacket. It was a piece of the fur throw from the bar. “Hurry up and pick a character. I want to play.”

Chapter Eleven

2017

■□□□□■

“I want to play.”

Jay's eyes flew open. She found herself wrapped in a man's arms and for a moment—fear, panic, confusion—bubbled through her, until she remembered who she was with and what she had done. *Oh God*, she thought, drawing in an unsteady breath. *What have I done?*

She could feel him pressing against her back, hard and warm. He was running his fingers up and down her arm—*I want to play*—and she could feel herself tensing against the touch.

“I know you're awake.” She felt him kiss her cheek. “I can hear you breathing.”

Jay stared at the bright square of the window as his knuckles dusted over her breast, catching her hardened nipple between two fingers. She couldn't seem to get her arms to unbend and remained stiff when he began kissing down from the nape of her neck. The muscles in her back bowed out when she felt a light bite between her shoulder blades that had her arching into his hand. *No*, she thought, as he stroked her teasingly before letting his fingers drift down her belly.

“Got you,” he whispered.

It had been different in the darkness. Knowing he couldn't see her had been strangely liberating. She didn't have to hide. Now, with the sunlight pouring in, she was completely exposed. There was no hiding. Everything was out in the open. It made her feel raw.

He made her feel raw.

God, she was sore. There was a stiffness low in her belly that was blossoming into a dull ache and everything between her thighs felt tender. She definitely felt ill-used—and that was his fault, too. He didn't have to take her from behind or use her so callously; he'd chosen to do that, just like he'd chosen to threaten her and her mother and force her to leverage her body.

“Blue jay,” he said, a little louder, a little less playful. It sounded like a rebuke.

She pushed away from him, groping for her discarded hoodie. It was bright pink, which made it easy to find where it dangled from the edge of the bed. She slung it on, zipping it up to her throat, and only then could she bear to roll over and face Nicholas in the light.

“What?” she said, at length.

He was sitting up in a half crouch with one arm draped over his bent knee—the one he'd been touching her with, she realized, with a rush of shameful heat. He must have gotten up in the night because he was wearing a Stanford shirt and flannel pajama pants. The stubble around his lips and chin had graduated into a morning beard, which made him look feral and untamed.

One of his eyebrows shot up. “Good morning.”

Swallowing, Jay averted her eyes. “Where are my pants?”

Nicholas regarded her for a long moment before leaning over her body in a way that had her freezing stiffly as he grabbed them from where they had either fallen or been tossed to the floor. He dropped them on her stomach before pulling away.

Jay dragged her pants beneath the sheet, working herself into them by arching her body and lifting her back, not caring how provocative it looked, or that she didn't even have her underwear to put on beneath them. An amused smile played at Nicholas's mouth as he watched her dress.

“You woke me last night with all your tossing and turning. Bad dreams?”

So many minefields. Even though Jay knew she was being manipulated, she couldn't quell her sudden unease as she wondered how long he'd been watching her sleep.

“I dreamed that we were children again.”

His face smoothed out, becoming unreadable. “That upset you?”

“It made me realize how much I hated this house. This city. Growing up feeling so alone.” She stared down at her hands. “It's still cold. Exactly like I remembered. I just wanted—”

“What?” His voice was quiet, intense.

But she couldn't bring herself to finish or even think the rest of that sentence. Not with him. She picked at the fraying sleeves of the hoodie as

she rolled them back down, glancing at him before turning her attention back to the pilling terrycloth.

“How long is this going to go on?”

“That depends,” he said, just when she'd given up on him answering. “Do you know how much your mother was pressing me for?”

Jay sat up and felt a protesting ache in her belly. “No.”

“Fifteen million.”

Jay choked.

“Yeah, it's a lot. A hell of a lot.”

“Is she insane?” Jay whispered to herself. What was her mother thinking, asking Nicholas for that much? The two of them had never gotten along, not even at the beginning.

“Well, I've always thought so,” said Nicholas. “Craziest bitch this side of the Sierras.”

“Nobody asked you.” Shock rendered her defensive, vicious, which she regretted when she saw the dark flicker of interest in his eyes.

“You did, actually. Did you know the estate was that big? I was surprised you didn't ask before bravely offering to pay for it. You were never all that involved with the finances, though.”

“No,” said Jay, speaking through numb lips. “I didn't know it was that big.”

“A whore from a good brothel might charge five thousand dollars an hour.” Nicholas sat up and stretched, straining the sleeves of his shirt a little as the muscles in his arms flexed. “Do you know how long it would take to pay off fifteen million at that price? Three thousand hours.”

Dread gripped her in a cold, iron fist. Was he calling her a whore? She didn't trust herself to speak at first and when she did, her voice cracked on the first syllable. “That seems excessive.”

“I told you it was a fuck or get-fucked world out there.” He lowered his arms and leaned towards her, his mouth twitching a little cruelly when she immediately edged back. “That's three thousand solid hours of you fucking me. One hundred and twenty-five solid days, if you don't work, or eat, or sleep.”

Jay had run out of bed to back away to. Only air was at her back now. "No," she said.

"I did try to warn you. But you were so quick to bargain yourself to me. Before I'd even asked."

"I—I didn't know." She hated herself for stammering. "You tricked me."

"No. Whatever I want, were your exact words, I believe. You have no business acumen. You never did. Of course, I could be nice," he said, on his hands and knees now as he cornered her, like a wolf about to pounce, "and say that you're worth twice or even three times the market price of a typical call girl. But that's still a lot of sex, Jay. Even if I decided you were worth fifteen grand an hour, you'd still have to be on your back for just over a month to work it off."

She didn't realize she'd slapped him until the sound echoed in her near-empty room like a gunshot. Her hand had jumped, seemingly of its own accord, before she could have the presence of mind to stop herself. With a startled sound, she grabbed her own wrist, staring at him in alarm.

Nicholas pressed his hand to his reddened cheek.

Oh shit. Jay felt her heart creep out of her chest and into her throat, where it began to freeze. "I—"

He held up a hand and she flinched, which made him curl and lower it. Shockingly, he didn't look angry. She wasn't sure what that look on his face was, but the intensity of it frightened her almost as much as fury would have. *His eyes*, she thought, wilting. *They're so cold.*

"I told you I don't play nice," he said at last, in the same even tone as before, which was more terrifying still. "Fair market value seems more than reasonable. So with everything else you'll be doing for me, I figure you'll be here for a couple years, maybe two or three. There's only so many hours a day I can fuck you, after all, and you wouldn't want me to get bored."

Jay sucked in a breath. "No."

"Yeah, I didn't think so," he said, with a dark chuckle, even though that hadn't been what she meant. "So, what do you think, Jay? You want to pay off some of your mother's debt to me? I'm actually feeling a little hot and bothered. It must have been the slap."

"I thought it was going to be a couple days," Jay said haltingly. "M-maybe two weeks. Not *years*."

"That's really not my problem," said Nicholas.

"I can't stay here for *years*." Her chest felt too tight. "I have an apartment."

"Sell it. Or I'll buy you out. Money's no object. You can have your things shipped here." He reached out to gently flick her nose. "You're Daddy's little bird now."

The dig at her apartment made her angry—as if the only reason she wouldn't want to leave was money. It was like him upgrading her to first class without asking. It made her feel cheap.

"I think we need to make something clear," Jay said, pushing his hand away. "You don't get to order me around if I'm not at work or in bed with you—and I want that in writing," she added, which wiped the amused smile from his face. "Put it in a contract. I'm not a twenty-four hour convenience and you don't get to dictate my life."

"Fast learner." His brows arched. "But then, you've always been such a cute little nerd."

"What are you doing?" Jay yelped when he slid her back from the edge of the mattress and swung over her hips with an expression that left her feeling hunted.

"I'm fucking you." He yanked on her sweatshirt zipper. "So let Daddy order you around."

He bit her ear, her neck. Rough, tugging pinches that made her breathless. She grabbed his wrist, which had settled against her chest. "No," she said. "I can't. I'm still sore."

"That's too bad," he said, kissing her bared shoulder now. "Sore doesn't pay the bills."

Jay felt an unwelcome lick of heat between her thighs as he exhaled against her collarbone, running his hands over her waist in a way that was too rough to be comforting. She could feel him pressing against her hip and a cold sensation crawled down her nape as memories from last night trickled in. *Relax, blue jay. It's just me.*

"You sure you aren't up to the task, Jay?" She realized she was still holding onto his wrist only when she felt his fingers spread and gently

squeeze her breast. “You're breathing like you want it.”

Another stabbing ache made her thighs clench when she shifted. “Shut up, Nick.”

“Hmm. So we've moved from denial to anger now.”

“What if I suck your dick?” she asked icily. “Does that 'pay the bills'?”

“And thus we come to bargaining.” Nicholas pulled back to look at her. His eyes drifted to her mouth and turned slightly mocking. “It only counts if you swallow.”

Jay wanted to slap him again but didn't quite dare. Hitting him before had been stupid and dangerous. He had never been violent when he was younger—*not towards me, anyway*, she amended with a shudder—but he could be cruel. Oh God, could he be cruel.

“Fine,” she said, biting off the word. “Anything you—” She caught herself just in time.

Nicholas laughed. “I'll tell you what. Since you're feeling so shy, I'll even let you keep your clothes on.”

She hadn't been planning on taking them off anyway, but now it felt like part of this game. *This stupid game*. Jay zipped her sweatshirt up again as she slid off the bed to her knees. Nicholas lifted his hips so she could slide down his pants, running his fingers through her hair in idle expectation, gathering up falls of it in his fingers so that it spilled out in tangles that looked like dark copper coils.

“Take me to heaven, blue jay.”

Go to hell, you bastard.

The muscles in his thighs jumped as she took him into her mouth and she felt a yank on her hair as his fingers tightened. “Good girl.” He tipped his head back. “Keep doing that.”

A sudden viciousness took hold of her at those words, *good girl*, and she wrapped her hand around him, fluttering her tongue over the slit until he began to twist and groan. When she grazed him lightly with her teeth, he shuddered, and she saw goosebumps on his arms. “Fuck,” he said, the word chopped up into multiple syllables, “that feels so fucking good.”

She glanced up and felt an unwilling spear of attraction. Nicholas was leaning back on his arms, having released her hair. The cords in his throat

were standing out in relief as he stared unseeingly at the ceiling, his broad chest rising and falling in an erratic rhythm.

Eight years, thought Jay. Her hand slid down his now-slick shaft, cupping the base of him to run her thumb over the soft, wrinkled skin, before following the velvety path of his perineum. She heard him suck in a breath as she tongued the head of his cock again and then she could taste him—hot and bitter. Jay choked, gagging a little as she pulled away, but managed to swallow.

Nicholas collapsed back against the bed, with her still kneeling at his feet. For a moment, he didn't say anything, and then he said, a little hoarsely, "Let's get some lunch."



Once Jay had gotten out of the shower, scrubbing herself until she felt raw, she hovered over her battered suitcase, staring at her clothes. She didn't want to look prudish but she also didn't want to look like she was trying to impress him, either. Eventually, she just grabbed the two things closest to the top: jeans and a floral blouse with a high neck.

When she made her way down to the hall, clutching a cheap little bag that she'd purchased marked-down at Target, she was alone in the checkered entryway. It was completely still and silent, as if the house absorbed all sound. She looked up at the Chihuly sculpture hanging over the foyer, lit up with glowing blue light. When she'd been a kid, she'd always been secretly afraid that it would fall on her and shatter, but seventeen years later, it was still upright and kicking.

"You never did like my father's art." Nicholas's voice echoed, making her jump. "I seem to recall you telling me how you thought the Louise Bourgeois was ugly."

His dark brown hair was curling and damp, almost black in the shadows. The jeans he was wearing looked so distressed that Jay figured they probably cost more than her entire outfit. That kind of calculated destruction didn't come cheap. He'd swapped out the Stanford shirt for a white tee and a cuffed chambray shirt, and around his wrist was an expensive-looking watch. Probably the BVLGARI his father had promised

him. She saw the glint of its diamond face as he adjusted his sleeves, a strange look on his too-familiar features.

“So?” she asked, knowing she looked defensive and not caring.

“It is what it is. Some of us like real art. And some of us like sunflowers painted on the walls.” Nicholas had reached her and was looking up at the jellyfish sculpture. She pettishly wished he wasn't, because the way he loomed over her was a reminder of how much bigger he had gotten. When he looked her way again, he seemed relaxed. “Where do you want to go?”

“I'm vegan,” said Jay. “Apart from that, I don't really have a preference.”

She walked out with him to the car, feeling extremely uncomfortable. It occurred to her that she had never actually been in a car with him when he'd driving, except for that one night at Dave Byron's party when she'd been all but passed-out drunk. He'd driven her Honda to take them both home, even though he hadn't had a license. God, he'd hated her Honda. It didn't have enough *status*. Unlike his father, who'd gotten through several models of Mercedes. Nicholas had opted for a Tesla.

“Nice car,” she said tonelessly.

“You want to drive it?”

“No.”

“Suit yourself.” He opened the passenger door, waiting for her to get in, before sidling around to the driver's side. His hands were loose on the wheel, his expression thoughtful as he piloted the gunmetal-colored car through the twisty roads. There was music playing, she realized, suddenly. One of the metal bands he'd listened to during the college years. He'd used to fuck her in his room with the music turned all the way up so no one would hear her when she screamed.

Nicholas glanced at her and his eyes followed hers to the car stereo. Without saying anything, he reached over and turned the sound off. The silence that followed was deafening.

I can't do this, she thought, squirming. She could still taste him in her mouth.

“Where are we going?”

“I know an Afghan place. It's good. Small.”

Jay seized on that. “I don't remember there being an Afghan place in Hollybrook.”

“It's new. A lot of things are different now.”

Like what? she wondered, leaning back in the seat with her arms folded, feeling tired in a way that she hadn't since she was working and going to school. *Different doesn't always mean better.*

Nicholas pulled into a shopping center that used to have a dELiA*s when she was young. The restaurant was actually in the space where the tween clothing store had been.

When he helped her out of the car and looped an arm around her waist, Jay couldn't quite suppress a flinch. She knew he felt it, too, because the neutral expression on his face disappeared, becoming—she didn't have a word for that look. *Studious* seemed too benign.

He kept his arm around her as they talked to the man behind the counter, almost like he thought she might be about to run. Jay looked around the cramped but clean diner. There was no one else inside but them. “Sit anywhere you like,” the man behind the counter said.

Nicholas immediately went to the back, to a table by the window that was secluded by a palm plant. A waiter appeared instantly while Jay stared at some woven rugs that were hanging on the wall. All of them done in the Afghan style, many with price tags. Nicholas ordered cardamom tea for the table and lamb skewers.

Jay quickly scanned the menu. “Is there milk in the kidney bean curry?”

“No,” said the waiter. “No milk.”

“Okay. I'll have that, please, and the pickled vegetable salad.”

Nodding, the waiter gathered both their menus and wandered towards the kitchen.

“I didn't realize you were a vegan now.”

“Your private investigator couldn't tell you that?”

Nicholas took a long sip of water. “When did you start?”

That's not an answer. Eyeing him distrustfully, Jay said, “I started when I moved back to San Francisco. It was easy. I gave it a try for a week and never stopped, and I saved a lot of money by doing my own cooking. Coconut milk in soups, whipping up aquafaba to make ma—”

Realizing she was rambling, Jay quickly fell silent, all too aware of his pressing gaze.

Nicholas set the water glass down, nudging it aside. "What do you put in your coffee?"

"Oat milk. Why?"

"I'm just curious." He looked down, noticed his watch was crooked, and adjusted it. "What else have you been doing for the last eight years?"

"What are you doing? Is this a job interview?"

"In a manner of speaking. You are technically on my payroll." He drew his fingers down the same cheek she'd slapped. "We could always review your performance."

Jay drew herself up and gave him what she hoped was a cold, withering look. "I've been busy. I couldn't afford to go to grad school, so I waitressed to pay for my administrative assistant certification. I brought a copy," she added pointedly. "In case you want to review it."

He made a dismissive gesture.

"Fine. So I got that, and while I was working, I was living with a whole group of other people in their late teens and early twenties in what was basically a flophouse for fly-by-night college students going to SF State and other local schools. I was the oldest, even though I was only twenty-three. They called me Mother Goose," she added, flushing a little when his mouth curled.

"Cute. How much did you make a night waitressing?"

What a weird question. "I don't know. Usually fifty to seventy-five dollars in tips. It wasn't really enough to live on, even with roommates. I sold all my jewelry and used some of the cash from that to pad my income when things got hard. I probably would have eventually taken on another job if I'd stayed there. I liked my roommates, though," she added abruptly. "They were all really nice. I ended up dating one of them for a while, which wasn't smart, but it worked out for about a year."

Her eyes had dropped to her plate as she toyed with her fork, so she didn't see Nicholas's face. When she dared look up, his expression didn't appear to have changed.

"How was the sex?" he asked casually.

"Excuse me?"

“How was it,” said Nicholas, emphasizing each syllable, “when he fucked you? I’m assuming it was a he. Tell me all about it. I want to know.”

Jay set her fork down with a ping. “It was *fine*.”

“Dinner is fine. Cable television is fine. I’m asking if, when he was pounding into you at night with his college boy cock, were you screaming the walls down, or were you just lying there calculating last night’s tips?”

Jay sucked in a breath and glanced around the empty restaurant with a wave of panic. He’d kept his voice low, but this was still mortifying. “You are disgusting,” she said, once she’d confirmed nobody had heard. “I’m not discussing my personal life with you.”

“Interesting,” said Nicholas.

“What?”

The waiter came then with the plates and the tea and Jay clammed up fast, shooting Nicholas a silencing look. He smiled but it was a dangerous look on him. It was the smile of a man who might do anything. “Thank you,” said Jay, looking anxiously at her curry and salad.

Now please leave.

“What was it you said you made in tips per night?” Nicholas asked, as soon as the waiter was gone. “Fifty to seventy-five dollars, was it?”

“You—” Jay drew in a deep breath. *Don’t give him what he wants. He’s always been like this. Fucking with people. Getting a rise out of people. It’s what he’s good at.* She just hadn’t realized how much better he’d gotten at it until now. “You haven’t changed at all,” she said at last.

“Now I wouldn’t say that.” Nicholas sliced off a piece of sizzling lamb. “I’m not another fuck-up hiding behind a rich father. I own a company. I call the shots—and people let me, because they know I get results, one way or another.” He glanced at her as he popped the lamb into his mouth, and it made her face feel hot for some reason. “If anything, it’s you who’s stayed the same. I bet you still dance in your bedroom.”

Jay took a bite of her pickled salad but the carrots kept sticking in her throat. She stared at a pink piece of radish, hating this, hating *him*. Hating how powerless he made her feel.

“I probably still have that video around somewhere,” he added offhandedly, making her eyes swing back to his face. “On an old flash drive. You remember the one.”

“Are you going to blackmail me with that, too?”

“No. It's not exactly career-ending these days, is it? A college girl, touching herself beneath her clothes? That's just spring break or a weekend at Vegas. It's the look on your face that makes it so affecting. You make the same one right when you're about to come. When you bite your lip.” He regarded her over the rim of the tea cup. “I don't want anyone else to see it.”

Looking into his eyes made her feel as if she were falling upwards into a winter sky.

Snow-blasted, she thought, *and frozen*. She actually did feel a little cold, except with her face, which still felt hot. “You are such an unbelievable bastard,” she breathed.

“Yeah, I am.” His mouth twisted. “Guess I didn't grow out of it, after all.”

Chapter Twelve

2017

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The drive home from the Afghan restaurant was tense, shot through with bleak memories and unspoken hostilities. The hostility might have only been on her end, though; she was so angry, she felt as if she could hardly breathe around all the words burning in her throat.

As soon as they arrived at the house, Jay immediately went to her room and slammed the door shut, leaning against it for a long, furious moment—*You're Daddy's little bird now.*

It felt like Nicholas would stop at nothing in his personal quest to humiliate her and make her life hell. Just remembering what he'd said to her in the diner was enough to make her face burn. And yes, maybe she had been trying to provoke him. It had been so easy when he was younger and his temper had burned hotter. But this colder, collected version of her stepbrother left her feeling wildly uncertain.

Three thousand hours.

Jay heard the sound of his footsteps going up the staircase and then silence and strode to her bed. She started to lie down and then immediately sat up. The sheets smelled like sex. She began yanking the sheets off, balling them up with the pillowcases and the comforter, until all of the bedclothes had been gathered up in her arms. The sheet was trailing, though, and she tripped on it on her way down the staircase. Suddenly, the floor was no longer beneath her feet and Jay shrieked as she slipped, tumbling the last couple steps onto the pile of soiled bedding.

Upstairs, a door clicked open. Nicholas leaned over the rail, looking down at her from the balustrade. A dark angel, backlit against the light pouring in from the window. “You don't need to do that,” he called down to her. “I have someone who comes and does the sheets.”

“I want to,” she said, too fiercely. “I can do it myself.”

Nicholas gave her a strange look. “You remember where the laundry room is.”

“Yes,” she said coldly, even though it hadn't been a question.

“Suit yourself, then. If you need me, I'll be out in the pool.”

Jay went to the laundry room but it was like that sudden burst of fire had been wiped out as quickly as it surged. She shoved her bedding in the washer and started the machine, taking a moment to push her hair out of her eyes. *What the hell am I supposed to do now?*

He still hadn't mentioned her employment—her *other* employment, she amended bitterly. She was beginning to wonder if there was an other employment. If maybe he had just wanted to lock her up in his house as if she really were a bird.

Lying on the stripped mattress, alone in her time-frozen room, she scrolled through her phone. There was a text from Lily, sent this morning. *Hey, boo-boo. How's the new job? You didn't forget us, yet, did you?* Jay still hadn't responded because honestly, how could she?

There had been one from her mother, as well. *Baby? Did you talk to Nicholas?* She hadn't answered that one, either, typing out a response in anger that she had instantly deleted.

No, Mom. Didn't really have time to get much talking in while I had his cock in my mouth.

The really sick thing was, Jay wasn't sure her mother would bat an eye at her for sleeping with Nicholas to get what she wanted from him. Not as long as she was successful. Danielle Beaucroft had capitalized on their relationship before, relegating many of her guardianship duties of Nick to a teenage Jay, and she was constantly asking her to intervene once he got older, wilder, and more out of control. She'd wondered why Nicholas had gone after her mother but it was starting to sound like her mother had gone after *him*, rattling wasp nests.

Jay couldn't figure out how to talk to her mother without hurling accusations or swearing, so she deleted the text without responding. Then the alarm she'd set for her laundry went off and Jay went downstairs to pop her things into the dryer, trying to put thoughts of her family out of her mind.

On her way back to her room, movement from outside drew her back downstairs, to the window that looked out onto the pool from the lounge. Nicholas was in the water, swimming. Seventeen years ago, he'd told her that he used to swim an hour a day. It hadn't really occurred to her that he might have kept up with it.

As she watched, he stepped out, dripping water from head to toe. He grabbed a towel from somewhere she couldn't see and began wiping his face, which caused a rippling contraction of wet muscle that sent a dull pang through her belly. His body was—magnificent.

I should leave, thought Jay, rooted to the spot. Despite her mounting disgust with herself, she had trouble looking away. She had wondered at his tan, at his athletic build—unlike his late father, who'd had the body of an athlete gone to fat, Nicholas had stayed fit. Broad shoulders. Trim waist. Long, muscular legs. His broad chest was covered with dark hair that had become matted by the water. That was new. He must have shaved while he was swimming. When she had seen him last, his chest had been hairless.

A chill shivered through her like ice in a glass when their eyes met through the glass.

His mouth was moving, speaking through the satisfied smile of a man who thought he had his quarry. It looked like he was saying “come here.”

Jay shook her head slowly, backing from the window. That was a terrible idea.

He started walking towards the house and her heart took flight like a startled bird. She raced up the stairs two at a time and flung herself into her room just as she heard his voice calling her name. *No*, she thought, washed with hot shame and cold terror. *Go away*.

She heard him pause outside her room. “Jay,” he said. “Open this door.”

They both knew the door was inconsequential. If he wanted to get inside, he could. She closed her eyes as her heart continued to pound, startling when the base of her spine bumped her desk chair. “D-don't come in,” she said faintly.

Through the wood, over the throbbing in her ears, she thought she heard him sigh before padding away.

Slowly, Jay sank into the chair.

She hadn't slept with many men, or even really dated much. Men frightened her—the way they looked at her body, the things they said about her, the things they wanted from her. As she got older, the demands and the comments became less frequent than they had been when she was young, but every once in a while, she'd see someone studying her and she would

think, *I know that look*, as she rode out those instinctive waves of self-loathing.

Dante Rojas had been different. Sweet. She'd actually gotten a crush on him because of his hands, which sounded dirty, but really, she had just loved watching him cook. He'd wanted to be a chef and was waiting tables until he could get through culinary school. He practiced at the apartment, cooking food for anyone who paid for cost of ingredients and gave him a share. Dante was the one who had taught her how to cook for herself and really enjoy doing it.

He'd been shorter than her, 5'7", which she told herself she hadn't minded. It was good to feel needed, wanted—but only on her terms. He'd taken her on dates. Cheap ones, since neither of them had money. She didn't mind the money. Free museum days, picnics in the park, walks around the Mission looking at things they couldn't afford; she'd loved all of it. No, what bothered her was the fact that, like so many others, he couldn't seem to get past the surface of what she was. “You're so pretty,” he kept telling her, over and over. “She's so sweet,” he told others, also over and over. Once, drunk, he had confided to her, with unusual candor, “I think you're the smartest girl I've ever dated, Jay. What do we even talk about?”

That's a good question, Jay remembered thinking, and shortly afterwards, she had dumped him. The sex hadn't been that great, if she were being completely honest with herself, and contrary to what that bastard Nicholas thought, that hadn't really mattered, either. She wasn't going to break up with a guy for not making her heart pound out of her chest when she slept with him. But she did remember thinking, a little wistfully, how much better the sex might have been if he called her filthy names or pinned her to the mattress with those strong hands of his.

She had never allowed herself to dwell on *why* she thought those things.

When her laundry was ready, she ran into Nicholas in the hall, so suddenly that she had the unpleasant feeling that he'd been lying in wait for her. His hair was damp and so was the fabric of his shirt, which was sticking to his body like clingy film. Since he didn't smell like chlorine, she assumed he'd showered. “Dinner's coming in thirty minutes.”

Jay tightened her arms around her laundry. “What—what is it?”

“Salad.” Nicholas looked her over consideringly. *A man studying his newest acquisition?* “No dressing. I can top yours with giardiniera or you can have balsamic vinaigrette.”

Jay stared at the wall over his shoulder as she began walking again. “Giardiniera's fine.”

He didn't mention the pool or ask her why she'd run. Jay wondered about that as she made her bed, just as she wondered why he hadn't forced his way into her bedroom as he had so many times before. Was this another one of this games, letting her feel safe? Sitting across from him in the chilly dining room, Jay found herself thinking: *is this the calm before the storm?*

She looked down at the salad, ordered from somewhere fancy and obviously prepared at great expense. The rainbow radishes had been chopped up into tiny pink rosettes and the giardiniera was fresh and lightly brined. She stabbed a piece of celery and tried to breathe.

“When does my new job start?”

“I'm pushing the paperwork through HR as fast as it will go. They're currently going through your background check.”

A subtle reminder of how easily he could destroy her future? She studied the celery pierced by the tines of her fork. “And it's real? It wasn't just a ruse to get me back here?”

Nicholas glanced at her. “I wouldn't do that to you.”

“You once told me that you didn't even think women should work,” Jay pointed out. “You said it made a man look like he couldn't take care of the women in his life.”

“That was a long time ago.” He picked up his glass. “The job is real.”

“Sure.” She laughed a little bitterly. “Whatever you say.”

The conversation, which hadn't exactly been sprightly before, died after that. They ate in silence, except for the clink of fork on ceramic, and the *feel* of that icy, claustrophobic atmosphere was so transportive that, for a moment, Jay almost felt fourteen again.

She trudged up the stairs with an icy bottle of water and a heart full of dread. In her newly washed bed linens, Jay lay tucked under the covers with her hands folded on her chest and the cat curled between her legs, wondering if Nicholas was going to visit her to extract another one of his

stupid payments. After all, it seemed to be all he thought she was any good for.



I'm going to bring you to your knees.

Jay woke up ill-rested and alone, haunted by nightmares that doubled as memories. She glanced at the clock and groaned—midnight. With nothing else to do, time was already playing tricks on her in this place. She pulled her hoodie on over her tank top and wandered downstairs.

There was a light on in the kitchen and she crept in there, thinking it had been left on by mistake. She froze when she found Nicholas standing with his hip cocked against the counter as he ate a piece of toast slathered in butter and sprinkles, just like he'd used to do as a child. Like her, he was dressed for bed, in flannels and what looked like an old band T-shirt.

“You still eat that trash.”

“I had an Australian nanny before you came,” he said, so casually—*before you came*. Clear-cut before and after. “She used to make this for me to shut me up. It's called fairy bread.”

“Cool.” She skirted past him to get to the fridge and grabbed a water, feeling his eyes follow her out the door as she made her way to the den. *Like a wolf tracking a sheep*, she thought randomly, and then shuddered, wishing the analogy hadn't popped into her stupid brain.

The TV was newer than the model he'd had before and now, instead of just cable, which he still had, he also had a couple of subscriptions. She saw that he'd been watching *Vikings* on Hulu. Rolling her eyes, Jay clicked to *How the Universe Works* and started up the *Planets from Hell* episode until her mind was filled with thoughts of ice and fire and darkness.

And Nick.

She straightened almost before she felt the slight dip behind her back. She looked up in alarm to see him leaning over her. His arms were folded over the back of the couch and he was close. Close enough for her to feel the heat radiating from his bare arms against her back.

On the screen was a planet that had been sucked into the gravitational field of its own star, and was slowly being devoured alive.

“You still watch these.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Can I watch the world burn with you?”

“They're not all burning,” Jay blurted, which wasn't exactly permission. It wasn't exactly a denial, either, though, and she felt her limbs turn to water when his mouth formed a smile.

“I'll get some wine.”

Wine? Sitting here and drinking wine with him on the couch that he'd fucked her on when they were young might be the stupidest thing she could probably do.

But he came back before she could summon the courage to get to her feet, holding two empty glasses and a bottle. “Oh good. You're still here.” He handed her the two glasses as he reached into the pocket of his pants and pulled out a wine opener. “I thought you might run away again,” he remarked, opening the bottle with a sound that made her jump.

“I didn't run,” Jay lied, and he gave her a sardonic look.

“Well. It's foolish to even try.” He filled a glass with sloshing liquid the color of a pigeon's blood ruby. “I know this house like I know the back of my hand, and I have all the keys.”

Keys. A wintry chill whirled through her. Another reminder that she wasn't safe.

She stared at the bottle, not recognizing the name of the winery. “I see you've moved on from sneaking your father's scotch.”

“Mm-hmm. Did you want something harder? I'll give it to you.”

Jay felt her face flush. “N-no.”

Nicholas laughed, nearly spilling the wine as he filled the second glass. “Jay, you bad girl,” he said, in a dry tone that made her face burn even hotter. “What a dirty mind you have.”

Heat seemed to drip down her throat. That smile, at once taunting and dangerous, was like a twisting blade in her chest. “If you're going to be like this, I'm leaving.”

“Sit down and drink your wine, blue jay.” He handed her what seemed to be a very full glass. The smell coming off its surface was scaldingly sweet. “I want to see the cosmos.”

I already brushed my teeth. She stared at the TV, clutching her wineglass as his arm gradually slid from the back of the couch to settle around her waist. The narrator was talking about a planet that didn't rotate, where one side was permanently scorched by its sun and the other was encrusted by the cold freeze of space.

Beneath her clothes, the skin he was grazing seemed to scorch and freeze. Guiltily, she looked up at that half-wall that dipped over the den like the bridge in a spaceship where anyone could peer down and catch them in the act. *Only no one's here to catch me now*, she thought, touching the neck of her sweatshirt to make sure it was still zipped. *I'm all alone.*

"You made me watch so many of these." Nicholas sipped his wine, eyes on the TV, taking in the computer-generated planet as the screen zoomed in. Smoking oceans of lava and ice-cracked darkness. His fingers kept stroking her through her sweatshirt, describing lazy, abstract patterns through the thin material. "Do you have any idea how many *Eyewitness* shows you made me sit through as a kid? Sometimes I still find myself humming the hook to *Bill Nye*."

"I thought you hated them," said Jay, lifting the glass to her mouth.

"If I'd hated them, I would have wrecked the tapes and hidden the remote from you. That's what I did to your mother. I was always throwing her tapes in the trash. She used to say someone should slap me. I'm sure it never occurred to her that that someone would be you."

His hand drifted a little lower, settling over her hip. Jay swallowed hard. "You deserved it," she said, surprised to taste wine on her tongue. In her nervousness, she hadn't realized that she'd started compulsively sipping it. It was sweet, which made it go down easier despite the intense burn of the alcohol. "You're completely heartless."

Nicholas let out another one of those low, humorless laughs. "You wouldn't be the first to call me that." He swirled the wine in his glass lazily. "Although it does hit a bit harder coming from you. I think you're the only person who ever thought there might be an ounce of good in me."

"Is that why you did all this? Did you want to prove me wrong?" *Do you hate me that much?*

"You want to know why I did what I did? Because you were the town golden girl and I wanted you all to myself. And I thought if I knocked you off that pedestal, you might finally come crawling to me—and you did.

Because of course you did. You were always so goddamn noble, so utterly consumed by what others thought of you. So eager to fucking please.”

“*Fuck* you,” she said heatedly. “You blackmailed me. You made me a prisoner.”

“You’re not a prisoner. I’m not going to stop you from leaving the house. You can go where you please.”

A pulsar swiveled on the screen, bathing its three orbiting planets with dead, sterile heat as it boiled away their surfaces under gravity and radiation.

Jay felt like the surface of *her* was being boiled away, too. Under the compression of her inexplicably growing anger, she could feel something hot and shameful churning in her belly, turning over and over again like a vicious star.

“So I could leave,” she said. “Right now. You would just let me walk away.”

“If you came back.” He rubbed the hem of her tank top back and forth, brushing bare skin with each pass. “We have an agreement. You know what I want from you.”

Jay said nothing. His hand settled on her bare waist, branding her with its heat. “It may surprise you to learn that as enjoyable as it would be crushing your mother to a litigious pulp, I’m really not all that interested in destroying your sterling reputation. But the risk has to be a little painful and there are always consequences when there is a failure to repay.”

“So you’re willing to hurt me,” said Jay. “To get what you want. Just like before.”

“We have an agreement,” he repeated steadily.

“Then I am your prisoner. I just happen to have a really long chain.”

He sighed. “If that’s how you want to see it.”

I’m going to ruin you either way.

Jay looked down at her wineglass and noticed, with some chagrin, that it was empty and the television no longer seemed quite as sharp or clear. *My head feels like a fish tank*, she thought nonsensically. As she sat up, shifting Nicholas as she moved, she had an image of her thoughts sliding around in her head like wine in a glass. *I’m tipsy.*

“Is this about revenge?”

He looked at her, eyes flickering blue in the light of the television. “Revenge for what?”

“I don't know.” She drew her legs up so she was sitting on her calves and felt more of that embarrassing dampness kiss her thighs. His hand was still under her top and she felt it slide over the grooves of her spine. “For what I did to your father.”

Nicholas plucked the empty wineglass from her fingers and set it on the floor. “To be honest,” he said, “I was more upset about you leaving than I was about my father dying.”

“After what you did to me, you couldn't possibly be surprised that I'd leave.”

His eyes narrowed. “Well, I was. It felt like you punched a fucking hole in my chest.”

“Poor little rich boy.” She swayed slightly, seduced by her anger. She was so angry. Where all this anger was coming from, she wasn't sure, but it made her feel hot and dangerous, ready to combust. “It was always about you. You, and my mother, and your *fucking* pervert of a father.”

“How could I resist that mouth?” It felt like she could only half-focus on his hand skating higher up her spine, she was so transfixed by the drugging poison of his gaze. “It tastes so sweet,” he said, just grazing her lips with his, “but the things that come out of it are so bitter.”

“What—”

His mouth sealed over hers and she found herself sitting astride his lap, as his tongue tangled with hers, lips cruel and biting. A rough kiss that tasted of hot, sweet wine. She nearly groaned.

His cloth-covered erection was digging into the softness of her inner thigh. Just as she became aware of this, Nicholas jostled her legs apart, and then he was pressing against her even more intimately, putting unbearable pressure between her legs. Suddenly, any movement became torture. He let out a rough breath as his palm circled around her ribs, fingers plucking at her nipples just hard enough to make her stomach clench.

His eyes locked with hers, the pupils so large that his irises shaded to a dull navy. She felt his hand cup her throat, tilting her face towards his. This time, the movement of his hips was deliberate. Desire, hot and molten, pounded through her in a vicious, agonizing throb.

“Take your sweatshirt off,” he said, in a low, heavy voice.

Oh God. She was pushing him away almost as the realization of what he had done become salient, her head sloshing with wine and fear. The citrusy scent of him seemed to fill the back of her nose, leaving her as cold as the empty void of space.

My head hurts, she thought in alarm. *I feel sick.* “What was in that wine? Did you drug me?”

“No,” he said, tightening his grip on her. “I didn't drug you. It's port.”

“Port?” Port was fortified wine. *Strong* wine. No wonder she felt like slush; he'd given her such a big glass. Jay pushed at the solid wall of his chest, sliding off his lap to the floor and nearly upsetting the wineglasses as she stumbled away. “I—I'm going back to my room.”

“Jay.” Her name was as sharp as a blade in his mouth. “Come back here.”

When Nicholas got to his feet, she backed from him, keeping the couch between them. She could see veins in her periphery: small, throbbing points of darkness.

“Stay away,” she gasped. “D-don't come near me.”

“Come back here,” he repeated, in a low, dangerous voice. “Now.”

“No,” she said harshly, weaving unsteadily “Unless you're going to force me.” She looked at him, barely daring to; his face could have been chiseled from a block of ice. “Is that part of the agreement, too? Do you get to force me?” A sob escaped her. “Do you get to rape me?”

“Fuck.” He made a harsh sound and gestured to the hall. “Get out.”

As she dragged herself from the room on weak, unsteady legs, she heard what sounded like the tinkle of broken glass.

And then she ran.

Chapter Thirteen

2017

■□□□□■

Even in her twenties, Jay had never had a very good tolerance for alcohol. It tinted her cheeks a ruddy salmon color and anything more than a glass tended to make her nauseous. She went to bed with a pounding heart and a head that spun like a carousel full of monsters.

The sound of a piercing alarm shattered through her wine-soaked dreams, splicing through her aching head like the bit on a drill. Jay shot up in bed, her blanket slipping from around her bare shoulders as she covered her ears with her hands. She could hear Carbon making panicked-sounding meows. *Is there a fire?* she wondered, looking around in a panic. *Should I wake Nick?*

“Wake up.” The light snapped on and she saw *him*, a dark and looming specter in her room. The sound was coming from him—from his cell phone, she realized. The bastard had actually set an alarm to wake her up. She groped around for the quilt and realized it was missing. *Bastard.*

“What the fuck,” she gasped, drawing her knees to her chest. “Get out.”

“Get *up*.” Already dressed for work, he was wearing a gray blazer and another white shirt, paired with the dark trousers she'd seen him wearing before. This time, the belt was slate gray, the contrast drawing attention to his narrow hips. He was going through her suitcase—*what the fuck*, she thought again, this time in anger—but at the sound of her voice, he looked over his shoulder at her. “I heard back from HR. You're starting your *real job* this morning.”

The cruel jab annoyed her, as did his smugness. *Like he thinks he's gotten the best of me*, she thought sourly, closing her dry and aching eyes. As if being right mattered more than—

She shook her head, instantly regretting it. “You could have given me notice.”

“I am.”

Some notice. Jay pressed a hand to her head, which still felt tender. *That fucking wine.* “What time is it? God, it's still dark.”

Nicholas didn't answer, and when Jay looked back at him, she saw him watching her, making no attempt to hide the fact that he was studying her

breasts. She crossed her arms, fighting to control her breathing when he began walking towards her.

“No sweaters,” he said, flinging a skirt and a lace top at her. “I want to see you in this. Be in the kitchen in fifteen minutes. Don't make me come get you again.”

Again. Jay wondered if that was a reference to what had happened the other day. His tone was a bit chillier. Remembering the sound of broken glass chasing her steps down the hall, she bit her tongue and nodded, watching him stalk out of the room like an agitated panther.

She locked the door behind him and changed in the bathroom. The top had an opaque bodice with a lace collar and an open lace back. She'd gotten it at Modcloth a while ago when they were having a sale. She couldn't remember where she'd gotten the skirt, but it was a tight A-line with a pleated hem. She wore it with stockings, layering socks over them so her boots wouldn't chafe.

Her purse still had all her travel stuff in it. She dumped it out, tossing the little Target purse she'd taken to the Afghan place, along with a handful of pens and a hairbrush. Her hair was a mess. She ran some cream through it to keep the curls from drying out, wincing at how tangled and matted it looked. She knotted it up in a bun, tying it off with a ribbon. After quickly bending to feed and pet the cat, who had crawled out from the bed, Jay was ready to leave.

She was responding to Lily—*sorry been really busy, how are you?*—when she walked into the kitchen, halting dead in her tracks when his black shoes crossed her path. She just barely avoided collision. He was looking her over, from the ribbon in her hair to the heels of her boots.

“You're taller,” he said, but unlike when her mother used to say it, it wasn't disapproving.

“It's the boots,” she said uncertainly.

Nicholas took a step towards her and her body lurched as she felt the chill of the fridge against her mostly exposed back. “Don't,” she said, groping behind her for the door and quickly opening it, throwing up an immediate barrier between them.

She could tell he didn't like that but he didn't try to close the distance, remaining where he was. “There's water at the office,” he said after a

moment, watching her slide bottles into her purse. “And a kitchen, too—unlike your little soap shop.”

Jay let the door close, clutching her bag as if it could be a shield against him. *It's not a soap shop*, she thought, annoyed now, without being any less wary.

“All right,” he said, after a moment. “Let's go.”

“Actually, I thought I might take the bus.”

Nicholas stopped walking. “You're not taking the bus.”

“Okay. Then drop me off at the Starbucks two blocks away. I'll walk.”

He swiveled on his heel to stare at her. “Are you afraid of me?”

“It's not that.” Although it *was* that. “How's it going to look to people if the boss and his secretary come out of the same car every morning? They'll think I'm—” She broke off, unable to say the words: *Fucking you*.

She could tell from his face that this possibility hadn't even occurred to him. In his mind, the two events were disparate. Nobody would ever take a look at him getting out of someone else's car and assume that he'd fucked his way to the top. He made an irritated noise, something between a scoff and a sigh. “Fine. I'll drop you off at the Starbucks. But you're riding home with me, understand? I don't want you walking back alone in the dark.”

“I could take a—”

“Jay.” It was almost a growl. The sound of it sent a little shiver down her spine.

“Fine,” she said, reaching for her coat. He caught her wrist, but gently.

“You aren't going to want that. This isn't San Francisco. It heats up quickly here.”

Jay shook his hand off. “Any other helpful advice?”

“Relax,” he said, apparently taking her words at face value. “You're very tense.”

I wonder why. She walked to the car in silence. The sun was just beginning to rise, a blush of orange on the horizon gleaming through the trees of the large mulberry tree out in front. She could smell the roses blooming, their scent intensified by the morning dew. She was glad he hadn't ripped those out; she'd always loved the flowers.

In the car, she crossed her legs and glared out the window, missing his glance at her thighs where her skirt had ridden up and the subsequent hardening of his jaw. “What did my background check turn up?” she asked, after a while. “Do they know I’m your sister?”

“This is an investment firm. Not the CIA. We just want to see if you have a criminal history or a drug habit. It’s not like we’re launching a full scale audit.”

That wasn’t a no. She could feel herself beginning to panic. “What if they find out—”

She froze. The car had stopped and his hand was on her thigh, burning hot through the silk. She looked down at his hand, and then at the window. They were outside the Starbucks. All of the other early commuters were milling around inside, under the cozy glow of the lights.

Nicholas spread his fingers. She felt them graze the top of her stocking.

“I want you to do something for me.” His thumb brushed skin. “Breathe.”

She squirmed out from under his hand and slipped out the door where the cool air hit her face like a slap. She could smell the strong coffee every time the doors opened, but as nervous as she was right now, she thought introducing caffeine into her system might cause her heart to explode like a malfunctioning fuse. *Breathe*. She glanced back at the street.

Nicholas’s gunmetal-colored car was already speeding away from the curb.

It was a brisk walk and the socks cushioned her ankles from the tight, chafing fit of the boots. Beaucroft Assets was located in a cold blue building that looked intimidating. On the outside, it was a mirrored monolith that reflected the sky, easily the tallest building around. Even three- or four-story buildings were noteworthy in a suburb like Hollybrook.

She spied Nicholas’s Tesla, parked out front with a permit hanging from the mirror. He wasn’t in it, which meant he was already inside. Jay swallowed and walked through the doors. Inside, it was spacious and modern in a way that Parker-Hawthorne, LLC really couldn’t be. Sparkling new fixtures, catalog furniture, big windows that had an unobstructed view of the distant ocean. When Jay gave her name—Justine Varens—to the front

desk worker, she had a flash of being fourteen and new and totally uncertain of herself.

“Ah yes,” the woman—Gwen—said with a smile. “Now why don't you pose over by that wall for me so we can take your picture for your security badge? Then you can take your seat over there.”

Jay stood where directed, thinking that she might have worn lipstick if she'd known her photo was going to be taken. Once that was done, she sat in the aforementioned seat, swinging her legs a little while she waited. Lily had responded immediately—*oh my god, thought you were dead, HI JAY*. She sent a coffin emoji and a bouquet emoji.

Jay snorted. *You only want me dead because you know I'd leave you Carbon when I die.*

Lily must have been bored. The response was almost instantaneous. *Yes, I covet the fluffy little kitty-man. Even if his death-floof would mean the end of my weak and feeble lungs.*

Sighing, Jay wrote back, *I miss you. How's your day going? Are they working you too hard?*

She felt the phone buzz again but wasn't able to respond because the HR rep had come over to greet her. “Hello, Jay. It's so good to meet you. I'm Meghana Srivastava, head of HR.”

“Hi,” said Jay. “It's nice to meet you.”

The introductions of the other new hires were quick. There weren't that many but their names ran together in her head. The only two who really stood out were Devon Ng from Aquisitions, because he was wearing a novelty tie with Marvin the Martian on it, and Obi Musa from Accounting, because he was apparently vegan too and told her a great recipe for vegan jollof.

She hadn't remembered Hollybrook being this accepting and diverse. Everyone had been so focused on status and appearances. She could feel herself actually beginning to relax until Meghana showed her to her desk and the nerves immediately rushed back in.

Jay looked around for Nicholas but couldn't see him. With any luck, he had his own office—far, far away from hers. She glanced at her left, where another administrative assistant was sitting. From her name plate, it looked like her name was Annica.

“Do you work for Mr. Beaucroft, too?” Jay asked hesitantly.

“No, I work for Mr. Hartwell, the CFO.”

Jay wondered if more information was forthcoming but the woman didn't seem interested in conversation, which made Jay miss Lily with a vicious pang. Remembering her buzzing phone, she pulled it out of her purse to look at it and saw a screen filled with sleeping emojis.

How's the new job?

Jay snapped a photo of her welcome bag and a Hint water she'd taken from the fridge.

She received a champagne emoji and three confetti emojis. *What about Mr. Tall, Dark, and S.T.S.O.O.Y.?*

I don't know. He's not around.

She received another text instantly but not from Lily. Looking at the conversation history, and the swarm of bird emojis, she knew who it was from immediately—*No phones at work.*

Her shoulders lifted and she looked around. *Where are you?*

Figure it out. There were three dots forming. *I take my coffee black.*

Jay set her phone down, deciding to ignore him, and booted up her computer. To her relief, BA also used ShiftWare. She was glad they were using software she recognized because Nicholas had about ten times more appointments than Owen had on his busiest days.

As she dragged and dropped, a new one popped up.

Meeting with Justine Varens.

Jay stared at the screen uncertainly. Was he going to try to fuck her in one of the conference rooms? He'd told her that he wouldn't mess around with her at the office.

As she tried to decide what to do, her phone vibrated.

Schedule the meeting. There's a document linked to it. I want you to read the attached files.

Jay scheduled the meeting for late afternoon and set her phone back down again. It immediately began to buzz, this time with messages from both Lily and Nicholas.

Lily: *You know what they say, if you can't find your boss, he's probably behind you.*

Nicholas: *Where's my coffee, Jay?*

Jay glanced over her shoulder just to check and said to Nicholas, *You are an actual child.*

Was she imagining the sound of his laughter? *The only child to be featured on Forbes' 30 under 30 list.*

Annica was giving her an annoyed look and Jay began to feel self-conscious. She was the only one on her phone. Everyone else was hard at work. *You're going to get me in trouble. Where are you?*

Look up, little bird.

Jay tilted her head back, looking up at the raised level of a second suite of offices. She had ignored them before, figuring it had to be a different department or maybe even a different company. But no. There was Nicholas with an entire corner to himself. He was leaning back in his chair, talking on his phone, but looking at her through the glass divider.

Without breaking eye contact, he picked up a mug and set it deliberately on the edge of his desk.



She didn't have time to look at her phone again.

When she went up to the second suite of offices, Nicholas ignored her as she picked up the mug. She had entertained the idea that it could be a fake phone call but the level of annoyance that was in his tone would be hard to fake and she *knew* that voice. He was pissed.

Jay had to have someone show her how to use the coffee machine. A nice woman wearing a sunflower skirt did and then she invited Jay out to lunch, so when Jay dropped off the coffee, her annoyance with Nicholas had abated a bit. Especially when he mouthed, *Thank you.*

That surprised her. He used to be such an entitled little ass.

She had lunch with Sunflower Skirt, who turned out to be named Stacey. Stacey also worked in Acquisitions, so Jay said, "Oh, I think I met someone on your team today. Devon Ng?"

"Yes," said Stacey. "I'm his manager. I'm currently training him."

"What does your team do?" asked Jay.

“We develop portfolios of potential businesses we might decide to invest in by using proprietary leads from a third-party agency. It's entirely algorithmic, and scored to highlight companies that have potential and share our values, and they sell their services to other sales and investment companies. They give us a steep discount because Mr. Beaucroft was one of their early investors.”

“Oh,” said Jay. “Wow. That's really impressive. I had no idea.”

And then she winced, because maybe that had been a stupid thing to say.

But Stacey was nodding. “Mr. Beaucroft really rebuilt this company from the ground up. It's an entirely different beast than what his father managed. It's essentially a different business.”

“How?”

“Everything. The model, the structure, the mission statement. Of course, my team helped shape some of that,” she added, bragging a little, “but Mr. Beaucroft did most of the work.”

“Impressive,” said Jay. “We didn't really talk much about what the other teams did.”

“They can't squeeze everything into orientation.” Stacey smiled, clearly pleased. “But here I go, rambling on and on about what I do. What department are you in, Jay? I don't think I've seen your face around the office before.”

“I'm an administrative assistant,” said Jay. “I report to Nicholas—I mean, Mr. Beaucroft.”

“Good luck with that,” Stacey said, with a laugh that wasn't unkind. “I don't want to scare you on your first day, but he has a reputation for running his assistants into the ground.”

Jay's phone buzzed, right on cue. She looked at it.

“If you gave him your number, you've already written your epitaph,” Stacey said, with a grim smile. “The man never seems to sleep and he works late. He and Crystal, the woman who worked before you, used to get into fights because she wouldn't get in until eleven or noon.”

“Fights?” Jay asked warily.

“Well, she would yell. I don't know what he did. But don't worry about it,” added Stacey, looking at Jay's face. “You seem much calmer. I'm sure

you'll be fine. Crystal was . . . tempestuous.”

With those words, she packed up her lunch, tossing over her shoulder, “Let's do this again tomorrow. I enjoyed our little chat.”

Jay looked at her phone. *Did you review the document yet? I don't see you in here.*

I'm on lunch, you toad.

She hadn't realized what she'd typed until she'd already sent the text. A cold wave of horror washed over her, especially when he didn't respond.

Jay avoided looking in his direction as she sat at her desk and opened the documents he wanted her to review. She'd thought it would be just a couple pages, but there were about thirty in total. She ended up printing them out and tacking the stack to her desk, scribbling notes in the margin of her notebook as she internet stalked the CEOs of the companies forwarded by Acquisitions and checked out their social media. It never ceased to amaze her what some people were willing to post online.

Out of curiosity, she Googled him in between her research on Full Circle West and Axel Integrated Systems. He didn't seem to have a Facebook anymore, even though she remembered him having one when he was younger, and his LinkedIn was private. The photo he'd chosen looked very severe and she supposed he must have glued his hair down with something for the photo, because it was the one picture of him she'd ever seen where his hair wasn't sticking up.

She stared at the picture a moment, curiously unnerved, before Xing out and going back to work.

By the time her meeting with Nicholas swung around, she was ready to collapse. It took her ages to find the conference room and a strange pang shot through her when she saw that he was the only one sitting in it, leaning back in his chair with one leg crossed over his knee.

“Close the door,” he said, and Jay couldn't quite hide her gulp.

Jay sat across from him and he pivoted in the chair to face her as she dropped all the papers and notes on the table. “So,” he said, dragging the manila file again. “You think I'm a toad.”

“You wouldn't stop messaging me,” she said. “It was—” *habit*? The thought of falling into habits with this man made her feel a little queasy.

That was a level of comfort she wasn't ready for. "A mistake. It won't happen again."

"I'm really not concerned about it." Nicholas seemed amused as he flipped through the folder. Looking over the information inside, he said, "Let's start from the top."

"Okay."

"Royal Envoy. Tell me about them."

"They're a distribution company. They broker the sale of industrial equipment to large businesses looking to cut costs by purchasing directly."

He leaned forward so suddenly that she found herself leaning back. His white shirt buckled a little, baring part of his clavicle. "Who's the CEO?"

Jay looked down at her notes. "Gerald Russo."

"I don't know who he is. Tell me about him."

"Um. Well, I guess he looks okay on paper and knows what he's talking about but he seems to spend a lot of time going off and partying and his Instagram is full of him bragging about what he—"

Casually, he reached over and slipped her notes away, tossing them into the trash. "Next one."

"What?" Jay squawked. "That was an hour of work. I wasn't done. You —"

"You don't like him, obviously, so I'm not investing in his company." Nicholas folded an arm behind his head, holding up the folder like a disaffected king. "Let's keep it moving. I have another meeting after this one."

"But he might be great," Jay said. "He might make you lots of money. I don't—"

"Jay." Nicholas arched his eyebrows. "Would you give him your money?"

She swallowed hard. "No."

"There you go then." He flicked out the folder so it cracked. "Next."

After the meeting, Jay left him in the conference room, dumping her extra notes and files into the secure recycling bin by the copier for shredding. The office had started to empty out, so she went and sat in the

break room and read the copy of *Joust* she'd brought from her room until Nicholas came to find her.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.” Jay slipped the book in her bag, trying to suppress the instinctive urge to look around and see if they were being watched.

She was relieved when she saw that the lot was empty, and even more relieved once he started driving. On the drive back to his house, she looked out the window, trying to figure out what had changed and what had stayed the same. Suddenly, she felt his hand on her leg.

Uneasily, she looked at him. They were at a red light and it was lighting up the downy hairs on his cheek as he turned to look at her. “You drive me crazy, little bird.”

His nails grazed her over the edge of her stockings and she let out a rough breath. Glancing at her, and apparently making a decision, he slid his fingers higher. She swallowed back her cry, making a distorted, desperate sound as he slid beneath her underwear.

Nicholas was still staring at the road, but she heard him hiss through his teeth. “God, you're wet.”

A car pulled up next to them and Jay jerked her leg as he slid a finger into her. “Nick,” she gasped. “No. Please. Someone—someone might see.”

As quickly as he'd grabbed her, his hands were both back on the wheel. She was breathing like she'd been rushed and she could feel his awareness as if it were the hot sun on her skin. She hated him a little for that cool dispassion, the way he could casually make her fall apart.

For a while, they drove in silence. Then he said, softly, “Come to my room tonight.”

The air in the car seemed to waver. And then Jay nodded. “Okay.”

Chapter Fourteen

2002

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Nick eventually became resigned to the idea of sharing his house with Jay. Unlike her mother, she wasn't particularly demanding. Not for material things, not for affection, not for praise. She kept to herself and as soon as she got her license, she started going out more and more, almost as if she couldn't stand to be here.

Nick could understand that. He didn't particularly want to be here, either.

He spent most of his time with Jake and Aaron, blowing off his homework until five minutes before it was due. There was usually some nerd around who would let him copy. He found that he didn't even need to threaten people to get them to do what he wanted. He could just glare at someone and let them imagine the worst.

He knew he was intimidating. Swimming had given his otherwise gangly frame some lean, ropy muscle. He'd shot up three inches in height and all of his old clothes had to be donated. Even though he was only twelve, he was already 5'2" and towered over his peers. Sometimes his legs would hurt so badly from the growing pains that he would whine until Jay sighed and pretended to be Danielle on the phone, calling him in sick so he didn't have to go to school.

"Will you stay home with me?" he asked, every time.

"No," she always said, backpack hitched over her arm. "Be a man."

"Being a man hurts," he whined after her. "God, you suck. I hate you."

"Está fingiendo," Yelena said to Jay. "Es un mimado."

"Creo que está realmente sufriendo."

"What are you saying?" Nick snapped. "Speak English."

"Stop whining." Jay dug into her bag and handed him a bottle of Ibuprofen. "Here. But just one of these, okay? Even if it still hurts. They can make your stomach bleed."

"Fine," Nick said grumpily. "I'll just take one stupid pill."

Nick would lie in the den with the bottle of the pills and play video games until Danielle or Jay came home. Danielle always seem to be

annoyed to see him there, even though it wasn't her house. "What are you doing just sitting around? Every time I turn around, you're somewhere."

"It's my house," he said irately. "I live here. Feel free to leave if you don't like it."

"Someone should slap you," she would say, over and over, but never around his father, who he knew she was afraid of, and for the same reasons, she never hit him. Nick figured she thought he would hit back—and he would—so he wasn't sure who this *someone* was that she kept referring to, but if anyone touched him, his father would kick their ass. Or *he* would.

As soon as his stupid legs stopped hurting.

When Jay was home, she was usually working on homework or had her nose buried in one of her books. Or he would open the door to her room and see her dancing in that weird way that she did whenever she was stressed or unhappy.

Once in a while, he'd run into her on the couch outside his bedroom, watching one of those boring science shows she liked. The first couple times, she'd get up and leave until, finally, he said, "It's fine, you know. I don't care. Watch your dumb show."

"Gee, thanks," she said, sitting back down. "You're such a little sweetheart."

He pretended to be bored, staring pointedly at his GameBoy Advance, but more often than not, he ended up putting the game down and watching the show with her. It seemed to make the weirdo happy, and it made him happy, too.

Sometimes he would fall asleep on her and wake up with her arm around him, feeling warm. Safe. Nobody had ever held him before, or if they had, he couldn't remember, and he would have rather died than admit to the fierce and quiet joy it elicited inside him that felt as delicate as an egg shell around his heart. As if one hard whack would make the entire structure crumble.

Nick wanted more of that feeling, and he didn't know how to ask for it; he was afraid it might be taken away, if he did. He suspected that even asking would make him weak—his father was always saying that women mocked weakness—and he couldn't bear it if Jay laughed at him, if she

pushed him away. Not when every moment he spent with her felt like it might be the last.

“Nicholas,” his stepmother shrilled. “Have you seen my new DVD of *White Oleander*?”

“No,” he said innocently.

The step-witch could leave in a box, but he found himself thinking more and more that it would be okay if Jay stayed.

Maybe even forever.



That Christmas, when Nick was gifted a bundle of games to go along with his new GameCube, he gave Jay the copy of Animal Crossing that came with it. “This is a dumb girls’ game,” he informed her, with magnanimous solemnity. “You’ll probably like it.”

“Thanks,” said Jay, rolling her eyes. She had been given clothes and jewelry from her mom and his dad, and even though she said thank you and acted all happy, he could tell that she was disappointed. Couldn’t the idiots see that Brainiac always had her nose crammed in a book? *He* had gotten her a gift card to Borders and she had obviously loved it.

Well—Yelena had gotten it, but with his money. And Nick didn’t miss how quick she had been to go, either, once she found out who the card was for. But she had also patted him on the head and said, in her accented English, “What a good brother.” So he didn’t mind. Much.

“Here,” said Jay, handing him a box. He tore into it.

“What’s this?” he asked, disappointed.

“It’s a case for your GameCube games. I overheard your dad saying he was going to get you one. You put the disks in the sleeves so you don’t have to lug them all around in a box.”

“Oh.” He stared at the case, an odd, warming feeling in his throat. “Thanks, blue jay.”

His dad gave the step-witch a bracelet with an engraving and he could tell she didn’t like it because it didn’t have one of those stupid brands she liked printed on it. “I would always rather be happy than dignified,” she

said, with an uncertain laugh. "What's that supposed to mean, Damon? Is this a joke?"

"It's from Jane Eyre," said Jay. "It's about how love makes you give up your pride because you're so in love that you don't care whether it hurts."

Nick saw his dad look over at Jay. "What a clever girl you are," he said, in a way that sounded a little like a trap. "Have you read *Jane Eyre*, Jay?"

"Yes," she said. "When I was fourteen. It's one of my favorites."

The step-witch shot Jay a dirty look and Nick thought, *Interesting*.

"Perhaps I made a mistake," said Damon. "I thought you told me that it was your favorite book. But perhaps what you actually said was that it was your daughter's."

"Well, you know me," she said, tossing her hair. "I do go on."

"Do I?" The words, spoken lightly, made Nick tense. He knew that tone. He glanced at Jay.

She looked back at him, slightly worried. *What?* she mouthed.

Afterwards, the step-witch disappeared into the master bedroom and Damon went out, which he had started doing more and more, lately. For work, he said, although Nick wondered.

He let himself into Jay's room. She was lying on her bed in her nightgown and robe with her hair loose around her shoulders. Reading a book, because of course. "Out," she said, without looking up.

He came in anyway and dropped a charm bracelet on her stomach. "I found this in your mom's drawer. It's the one my dad got you two years ago."

She plucked it up with a glance. "Oh, I was wondering where that went. You shouldn't go through people's things," she added, glancing at him. "And stop coming in here without knocking."

"You never do anything interesting," he said. "I don't know what you're so worried about."

"Oh my God," she said, glaring up at him. "Seriously, dude. Stay out of my room."

"I'm not the only one who comes in here," said Nick. "Yelena comes in here."

“Yelena cleans it. She has to come in here. Do you clean it?”

Nick scoffed. “Like I want to touch your crap.”

“Then stay out.”

“Your mom comes in here,” said Nick. “I see her come in once in a while. That's probably how she stole your bracelet.”

“Maybe I left it somewhere and she thought it was hers.”

“Yeah, right,” said Nick. “You didn't see the way her greedy eyes bugged out when Dad gave it to you. Also, I saw your mom trying on your school uniform while you were out.”

“Ugh,” said Jay. “Why? I hate it when she steals my clothes.”

“I think she wants to steal your life,” said Nick, plopping on her bed. “And maybe your face.”

“That's gross,” said Jay. “Where the hell did you get that idea?”

“*Invasion of the Body Snatchers.*” Nick kicked his feet up into the air and made the shrill scream of the pod people pointing out an impostor. “It was on late at night.”

“You shouldn't be staying up late,” said Jay. “There's things on there that aren't for you.”

“I've probably already seen all of them. What are you going to do? Tell on me?”

“You know I won't.” Jay leaned over him to drop the bracelet on her nightstand. “Thanks for this. Now get out. My mom's not going to steal my face. Hers is nicer than mine, anyway.”

No, it's not, thought Nick.

“Watch out,” he said, swinging easily to his feet. “I think she really might be planning on stealing your life. Remember, I know things,” he added, before closing the door behind him. “But don't worry. Even when your gross mom rips your face off, I'll still sit across from your ugly, faceless mug, blue jay.”

Nick heard a thump as she threw her book at him and it hit the wall.

He smiled.

Despite her initial lack of enthusiasm, Nick started to see Jay playing Animal Crossing all the time. At first it made him happy that he'd pleased her, but sometimes he would see her playing and even though he had been on his way to do something else, he would decide that he wanted to play instead, even though he'd already gotten bored of it weeks ago.

She always conceded and that annoyed him, too. It was like he was looking for reasons to be mad at Jay and he wasn't sure why, since she was the least annoying member of his stupid, annoying family, and the only one whose approval he secretly craved.

He'd been having a bad day. Aaron had just confided that he'd be moving at the end of the year because his stupid dad was being transferred to Pennsylvania.

"Can't he hold out for a better offer?" Nick asked. "Maybe then they'll let him stay."

"My dad's not yours, dude," Aaron said, a little bitterly. "If he doesn't take the job, my dad says they'll just give it to some 'hungry college student fresh out of school.'"

That made Nick feel worse and he wasn't sure why. Even though it wasn't his fault Aaron was moving, the way Aaron had said it kind of made it sound like Aaron thought it was.

Back at home and feeling miserable, he looked around for Yelena, hoping she had some conchas or Mexican wedding cookies, or if she could be persuaded to bake some. Instead she was sitting on the sofa with Jay, chatting with his sister in Spanish while she played.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded, standing in front of the TV. "Why aren't you in the kitchen?"

"Jesus, Nick," said Jay. "Because she doesn't live to serve you? She's on her fucking break."

Nick made a face at her, but the swear stung. Jay didn't swear much, especially not at him, so that meant he'd really made her angry. His own anger spiked in response, a natural defense to the misery gnawing at his gut, threatening to consume him whole. "Well—what are you talking about then?" he snapped. "Something stupid?"

"Ay," said Yelena. "Qué grosero."

"Nick," said his sister, in a bleak, warning tone.

“God,” said Nick. “Fine. I’m sorry I hurt your dumb little feelings.”

Jay paused the game. “For your information, toad, Yelena was telling me about her daughter. Apparently she’s a teacher at Hollybrook Elementary—the school you used to go to.”

“Never heard of her,” Nick said flatly, even though he didn’t actually know Yelena’s last name.

Yelena said something in Spanish that had his name in it and he demanded, “What did she say now?”

“That you weren’t one of his daughter’s students, dude. Chill.”

It had sounded way too long to be just that and Nick eyed the two of them suspiciously. “So?”

“So Yelena is going to ask her daughter if she would talk to my school’s principal about starting a volunteer reading program where high school students read to little kids.”

Yelena beamed at Jay like she was just the fucking best.

“That’s dumb,” said Nick. “Who would want to read to a bunch of dumb little kids? Sounds like a waste of time to me. Anyway, did you even ask my dad for permission first?”

Jay’s face fell. Without looking any less annoyed, she now looked upset. “Why would I need to ask your dad for permission? How would this even affect him?”

“Everything affects him,” said Nick, feeling superior. “He knows people. He knows *everyone*. You might embarrass him. You’re a Beaucroft,” he added. “And a girl. You aren’t supposed to work. Someone might talk to him about it and then he’d be mad.”

Jay gave him a cold look. “I’m a Varens, dude. Not a Beaucroft. And if volunteer work embarrasses your asshole dad, that says more about him than me.”

“Whatever,” Nick said. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, blue jay.”

He complained about the incident to his friends in detail the next day while they were playing James Bond: Nightfire. Jay had ignored him for the rest of the day and when he had tried to go into her room, he’d found that she’d anticipated that and placed a chair beneath the knob to keep it from turning.

They were playing the Fort Knox level and Jake had demanded to be Bond since it was his house. Aaron was Jaws and Nick was Renard. He wasn't enjoying himself much, though, even if he was the cool guy with the bullet stuck in his brain. "Jay is so fucking annoying."

"She's *always* annoying you," Aaron said, rolling his eyes. "What did she do this time?"

"Thinking that she's so much better than me," Nick fumed. "Thinking she's so great. If she doesn't like living in the house with the rest of us, she can *leave*."

"God," said Aaron. "Try living with my siblings for a day."

"You're only defending her because you like her," said Nick coldly.

Aaron turned red. "Shut up, Nick."

"I think you're a little obsessed with your stepsister, dude," said Jake. "You never shut up about her. You used to be so cool, and now it's Jay this, Jay that. It's super lame."

"I'm not obsessed," Nick shot back. "I can't help that she lives in my house and is ruining my life."

"Well, I wish she lived in my house," said Jake, leering. "I'll take her if you don't want her. She's hot. Don't you agree, Aaron? Isn't Nick's stepsister pretty hot?"

Aaron glanced at Nick and went pale. "I don't know."

"I mean, it's not the kind of thing you have to think about, dude. She's —ow."

"Shut up," Nick snarled.

"Shit, bro." Jake touched his reddened cheek. "I think you broke my fucking molar."

"Good. Choke on it." Nick picked up the controller. "Now stop being dickweeds and play."

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When Nick went home, his anger went with him, following him like a dog on a leash. A distance had opened up between him and Jay, and now

sometimes he was aware of her watching him in a way that he really didn't like. Almost as if she was *judging* him.

A few weeks after the incident where he yelled at her and Yelena, he was dragged to some dumb awards ceremony at the high school to congratulate Jay and her fellow nerds for their volunteer work with the dumb kids from Yelena's daughter's stupid dumb school.

Jay was wearing a slip dress with a little bolero sweater and when one of the dumb little kids toddled on stage to hug her, he wanted to barf. *She's not so great*, he wanted to say, leaning back and folding his arms. He knew he was wrinkling his suit and he didn't care.

Bored and annoyed, he glanced over at his parents. Danielle looked just as bored as he felt, alternating between fiddling with her necklace and her phone, but his father was watching Jay.

Despite what Nick had said, his father hadn't seemed embarrassed by Jay at all. He'd given her another stupid bracelet after telling her that it was “becoming” for ladies to be involved in charity work, and then he called her a “good girl.” Nick saw the flash of the bracelet when she patted the kid on the head, sparking silver under the stage lights.

Nick could have told his father not to bother. The step-witch was just going to steal it. He'd seen the covetous look on her face when his father fastened the clasp around Jay's wrist.

I'm bored, he thought crankily. *I hate this. Jay is so boring.* He wished he'd been allowed to bring his GameBoy but his father had made him leave it in the Mercedes.

“What a beautiful, selfless girl,” the woman next to him said, and Nick groaned loudly, earning himself a look from his father.

When they all got home, they went into their respective rooms to chage out of their formal clothes. Nick deleted her game file on Animal Crossing and left his door open a crack to wait. When he heard her come down, he braced himself, waiting for the screeched, “Nick, you little asshole, you deleted my game!” with his response at the ready—*well, maybe you shouldn't take up so much space.*

He was proud of himself for coming up with it. He'd thought it up in the car.

Nick heard her come down the stairs and listened, hardly daring to breathe, filled with something too dark and too bleak to be merely anticipatory as the game booted up. There was a long pause, followed by silence. The silence was terrible; it made him nervous.

After a while, he ventured out. The TV was off. She'd just . . . left.

Jay said nothing to him about deleting her game, even though he knew how much she'd enjoyed it, even though he spent the next couple weeks bracing for retaliation. She'd acted like everything was completely normal between them but it wasn't—something had disappeared, and Nick couldn't put his finger on what it was exactly, but the absence of it was like a physical pain in his chest, fracturing that fragile barrier he'd erected around his heart, and he wasn't sure how to get back what was missing if he wasn't even sure what he was looking for in the first place.

Chapter Fifteen

2004

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Nick was glad to be starting high school. It was the first step to freedom and to becoming a real man. No more of the kid stuff—he was tired of endless rounds of Call of Duty and NBA Live with his friends, and lounging around the parks like losers because none of their parents were around to take them anywhere. He was looking forward to the girls and the partying and, eventually, the cars.

He tugged at his cutaway jacket, which he usually left open even though the dress code stated you were supposed to have all three buttons done up. The boys' Hollybrook uniform consisted of the jacket, black pants, and a knotted red tie, which was supposed to be fastened with a Windsor knot. Nick rarely wore his and usually left the throat of his shirt open with the tie shoved into his pocket where it dangled like the tongue of a snake.

The girls wore cropped versions of the boys' jackets and black knee socks with their black skirts. Some of the girls liked to roll up the waistbands until the hems were just shy of indecent, seeing how long they could get away with it until some spoilsport teacher strolled up to them with a ruler.

Nick watched Amanda Strife, a blonde sophomore, have exactly that happen to her as he walked up the grass to the main part of campus. The teacher in question was saying something about “conduct” and “decorum” while Amanda sullenly pulled down her skirt.

“You know what they say,” Jake said, following his gaze. “The shorter the skirt, the less it hurts.”

“The less what hurts?” Nick asked absently, turning away.

“You know, like the first time. When you fuck them. Because they aren't virgins. Easy pussy.”

“Get the fuck off me, man.” Jake had slung his arm around Nick's shoulders and he quickly extricated himself from the embrace. “Whatever. It's just sex.”

“Spoken like someone who's never had any.”

That happened to be true, but he didn't need fucking *Jake* blurting that out to the school, in front of their friends. A few of the guys snickered, but a

look from Nick shut them up fast. “And what are you? The pussy connoisseur? You've never had a girlfriend. You wouldn't know a pussy from your ass.”

Dave Byron, a junior who'd started hanging around, laughed. “Nice one, Beaucroft.”

“Fuck you, Nick,” said Jake, blushing angrily. “At least I know what pussy looks like.”

“Oh? What did you do? Scope a look at your mom's when I was done with her?”

“No,” said Jake. “It was your sister, Jay, and let me tell you, man, it was so fucking ti—ow.”

Nick lowered his fist, while Jake clutched his arm and howled. “Jeez, stop moaning. You sound like you're auditioning for porn. Anyone do anything interesting this weekend?”

“Went to Game Stop,” Alonzo Madeira offered. “Bought a new copy of GTA.”

“I haven't played that one yet,” said Nick. “I'm getting pretty tired of my PlayStation.”

“I did Clara Roberts,” Ian Danes offered crudely. “Only, you know, she's not exactly interesting. At least, what comes out of her mouth isn't interesting. What goes into it maybe—”

“I hate to break it to you, man,” said Dave, “but nobody here thinks your dick is interesting. And Clara Roberts is played out. She's like the Vanilla Ice of people you can have sex with.”

“What about Amanda?” said Jake, still rubbing his arm. “Nick and I saw her getting yelled at by a teacher again for having her ass hanging out of her skirt. She's hot.”

“Amanda is hot,” Alonzo agreed. “But you couldn't, like, take her out anywhere except maybe to the movies. She's kind of slutty. My parents would kill me if I brought home a girl like that.”

“Unlike the Lacoste Mafia over there,” said Dave, nodding at the group of senior girls. Nick glanced over and saw Jay with them, lounging against the fountain. “Those are the kind of girls you bring home to your parents. My mom would probably cream herself if I went out with Clary

Claybourne. But just try going out with one of them and not ending up with your dick locked in a purse.”

“Not Angela,” said Alonzo, with a smirk. “She’d bedazzle her name all over your cock.”

“Jordan and Jay are the only girls in that group who don’t scare me,” said Dave. “But Jordan’s high maintenance and Jay doesn’t date anyone. What’s with that?” he asked Nick, who shrugged.

Jake, sensing an opening, said, “I hear it’s because she—”

“Man,” said Nick. “I am warning you. You’re about to start your first day from a hospital bed.”

“Fucking weak,” Jake muttered. “I’m so tired of you punching my lights out over your sister.”

“Well, maybe if you stopped running your mouth.”

“Is Justine Varens really your sister?” asked Dave. “You two don’t look anything alike. I thought she was mixed and you’re whiter than my granny’s old church bonnet.”

“She’s my stepsister,” said Nick. “Her mom’s married to my dad. She’s some washed up *actress*.”

“Nick doesn’t let anyone talk about his sister,” said Jake. “I think he wants to keep her for himself.”

“Oh yeah?” said Nick. “You’re just lucky you don’t have a sister, Jake. If she looked anything like you, she’d probably get sent to the dog pound every time she left the house. Hell, I’d drive her there myself and I bet you she’d still try to gobble down my cock, just like half the other girls in this school.”

“Uh oh,” said Dave.

Nick glanced over and blushed. The seniors had gotten up and were heading to class and from the look on Jay’s face, she had definitely heard the last part of his outburst.

“Shit,” he muttered.

“God,” said Jake. “That’s a look. Look like you’re in the doghouse now, my man.”

“I’m always in the doghouse,” said Nick. “Tell me what else is new.”

Jay couldn't believe it was her last year of high school. It felt as if she were hurtling through a tunnel at full speed. Sometimes, it felt like just yesterday when she was living in that little one bedroom in the Tenderloin, working on her homework at that cracked vanity table in the old and filthy room that smelled like girl sweat and mildew.

She found herself thinking of those shadowy figures from her past—Honey, Kristine, Amy, Leah. They had disappeared from her life like curls of smoke, and sometimes she found herself missing them, and feeling foolish for it. They had probably forgotten even her name.

I've come a long way, she reminded herself. But still . . . she never really felt like she deserved it. Any of it. No matter how hard she tried.

And she *did* try to deserve it. She tried to work hard and be kind—even to people who annoyed her, like Angela Diamante and her constant cattiness, or Jordan Cahalan and her whole outdated Valley Girl persona that Jay still couldn't figure out was authentic or ironic, or Derek, the weird sophomore who followed her from class to class and tried to show her his Magic the Gathering fan art, one of which, she couldn't help but notice extremely uncomfortably, seemed to resemble her.

She remembered birthdays and was a good listener, and every time someone said, “Jay, you're so nice!” it helped fill that empty, sinking void inside her soul that said, *no, Jay, you aren't enough and you never will be*. Yes, she tried so hard, and worked even harder, but it still wasn't quite enough.

She never felt like she deserved it.

College will be better, she reminded herself, trying to be positive. Once she got in, she would know that she had gotten in based on her own individual merit. There was a difference between being singled out and being chosen.

She also liked her schedule this year. She'd gotten every class she wanted: Advanced Composition, Spanish VI with the immersive language lab, Algebra II, Civics, and Modern Dance. Seniors were allowed a free period for a Physical Education course of their choosing and Jay loved having Dance to look forward to at the end of the day. On Wednesdays,

after school, she read to the kids from Hollybrook Elementary in the school library.

The only thing Jay didn't like about her year was *Nick*.

He'd been such a weirdly intense little kid and then, once he'd entered middle school, he'd become moody and sullen. Over the summer, he seemed to have undergone another shift: now he was crude and crass, with enough popped collars and baggy jeans in his wardrobe to outfit an entire army of fuck boys. When he wasn't swimming or listening to loud music, he seemed to be breaking hearts.

There was a girl Jay didn't know waiting for her by her locker, but she recognized her face and knew she was a freshman. She was also—Jay cringed inwardly—crying.

“Please talk to your brother for me,” she begged. “We went out last weekend and I don't know what I did, but it's like he hates me now, and he won't even talk to me or even look at me, and I just really want to know—what I did wrong.”

I'm going to kill him. “I'm sorry,” Jay said gently. “He really doesn't listen to me.”

“He said I had too much experience,” the girl wept, and Jay's mood darkened further. *I'm going to kill him slowly.* Oblivious, the girl sniffed and looked up at her with large dark eyes. “What does that even mean, too much experience? I've only dated one other guy. I'm not some dumb slut.”

The ease of the word in the other girl's mouth made some of Jay's pity die away. “I'm sorry,” she said again, a little less gently. “Um, Nadine, is it? Do you want a tissue? I have one in my bag.”

“It's *Natasha*. Natasha Wright. And no, I don't want a tissue! You've been no help at all!”

Jay watched, stunned, as the girl disappeared into the girls' restroom, letting the door slam shut with a bang behind her. A cluster of girls looked at it, and then at Jay, before they fell to whispering.

“Wow.” Jordan folded her arms, leaning one shoulder against the wall of lockers. “What was that train wreck?”

“One of my brother's victims,” Jay said grimly. “He's been super gross lately.”

“Freshmen boys are always super gross,” said Jordan. “I wouldn't touch one if you paid me. Are you ready for Dance? I'm honestly super shocked that Martin Trell is such a good dancer. With those big glasses, he looks like such a dork, but oh my God, those *hips*. I hope I get him as my partner.”

Jay followed Jordan as she rambled on, swinging her change of clothes at her side, and happened to glance over to the Arts and Humanities building where Nick and his merry band of losers liked to hold court and pretend to be little lords. As usual, the demon prince was flouting uniform rules with his open jacket and missing tie, knowing no one would call him in.

He had the nerve to wink at her. *I bet he was the one who sent Natasha to me.*

Glaring stonily, she drew her fingers over her neck and saw a couple of his friends nudge him. Just before she turned away, she saw him blow her a kiss.

“I'm going to kill my brother,” she said, to no one in particular.

“You're a Beaucroft,” said Jordan. “You don't need to get your fingers dirty. Hire someone to take him out.”

“Don't tempt me.”

She put thoughts of Nick and that crying girl out of her head, losing herself to dance, but as soon as it was over, her concerns reasserted themselves. Yelena's old Gremlin had finally broken down and she'd scaled back on hours due to personal reasons, so Nick now carpooled to and from school every day with Jay. He was usually pretty good about being on time, even though he complained about her Wednesday volunteer hours in a way that made her want to slap him, but somehow, Nick found a way to make his compliance irritating, too.

As she walked out from the dance room, she saw Nick waiting for her with another girl with him. She immediately got up, fleeing before Jay could even get a good look at her face, but she recognized that long, silky waterfall of black hair and her eyes narrowed furiously.

“Stay away from Courtney Ho,” she said, as soon as she was within speaking distance. “That's Quentin's little sister. He'll kill you if you break her heart—if I don't get to you first.”

Nick swept himself up from the grass, unconcerned. “Her last name's Ho? That's perfect.”

“What are you even trying to prove by being such a raging little misogynist? It's not cool.”

“Well, it's like Dad says, Jay. Sometimes you have to test drive a car to learn that it's a lemon.”

Jay had never heard Damon say anything like this in her life, but she wasn't exactly the prime audience for that type of rhetoric. Locker room talk. Man's talk. She'd heard him say other things, too. Flirting inappropriately with waitresses her own age—sometimes in front of her mother. Berating her mother in public. Even his praise could be offensive. Jay's hand closed absently over the charm bracelet around her wrist. *Good girl.*

Shaking off her terrible suspicions, Jay narrowed her eyes at Nicholas. “I am seriously this close to driving you out to the middle of Coachella Valley and leaving you there for the vultures to fight over. I better not get any more girls crying at my locker over you, Nick.”

“Whatever, blue jay,” he said, raking his hand through his gelled curls. “Stay out of my love life or all be all up in yours. You know you're such an ice queen, I'm honestly surprised your ass doesn't freeze the seat when you sit on it.”

“Asshole,” she said.

He snorted. “Prude.”

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“You should be more like your sister.”

Nick leaned back beneath the bleachers, his mood stormy, the words of his guidance counselor ringing damningly in his ears. Behind him, the bare wood of the fence separating the sports field from the rest of the world was splintery and badly weathered, snagging on the jacket of his uniform. In his hand was a pocketknife his dad had gotten him a while ago—rosewood with surgical grade steel—and he toyed with the blade, flicking it in and out.

If the teachers caught him with it on campus, he'd probably have been yanked into the office and threatened with expulsion, Beaucroft or not. But he hadn't been caught yet.

It never counted if you didn't get caught.

Where was she, anyway? Not that he cared one way or the other, but if he was going to get yelled at for cutting class, he generally liked to have a reason for it.

Eventually, he saw the silvery-platinum of Amanda Strife's blonde hair glinting under the sun. She told everyone it was real, but Nick had noticed her dark roots one day. Not that it mattered. She could tell everyone her hair was naturally green if she wanted. He really didn't give a shit.

"Hi," she said, in a breathless way that suggested she'd been running. "Sorry. I know I'm late. Ms. Chang is a huge bitch and she wouldn't let me get up to use the bathroom until I told her it was urgent."

"Not my problem." Nick slammed the penknife into the fence, making her jump. "Come on."

When her mouth touched his, it was like a blade glancing off metal—it made something dull and dark inside him briefly light up with violence before the emptiness came flooding in like a black lake.

It never once occurred to him that the reason messing around always left him feeling so angry and unsatisfied was because he was craving something else.

"Hey," an angry adult voice shouted. "What do you two kids think you're doing?"

Stupid question, thought Nick, shoving the knife back into his pants as Amanda tried to flee. Watching her, he thought, *Even stupider to run, though*.

The two of them both got dragged into the office for cutting class and making out, which he thought was stupid. People did way worse things under those bleachers—or did they think all those cigarette butts and crumpled condoms were from a squad of horny, chain-smoking bums?

Nick glared at the principal, who looked back at him like he was a puzzle that needed to be solved. "I expect better from you, Nicholas."

"So sorry to disappoint," he sneered.

Amanda had been taken to detention, which Nick figured meant she'd narked. Her big mouth was probably why they were in this mess in the first place. He'd just bet she bragged.

"I'm calling your father," the principal said eventually, and Nick leaned back with a sigh.

"Whatever," he said. "Call him. He's not going to pick up the phone."

But his father *had* picked up the phone, marching into the office in his three-piece suit, causing the staff to scatter. He didn't even have to say anything to suggest his anger and Nick found that fascinating, even as part of him became instinctively wary about being a target.

"You," said his father. "Get up. We're leaving now."

Nick ignored the principal, who was sitting behind his stupid desk and twirling his stupid tie. He resented being marched off campus like a prisoner on his way to the firing squad, and when they got to his father's Mercedes, he flopped into the passenger seat with a put-upon sigh.

"What," said his father, in low, dangerous tones, "the *hell* do you think you are doing?"

"Well, I thought I was making out with a girl who could keep her damn mouth shut," said Nick. "But I was wrong, obviously."

His dad regarded him for a long moment, his sudden fury winking out just as abruptly as it had flared. "I can't have you embarrassing me like this. If you're going to do something stupid with your peers, don't get caught, and for God's sake, don't get me involved."

"Fine," Nick muttered. "Can we go now?"

His father started the car. "Why don't you get yourself a proper girlfriend?"

"The girls in my classes are such a waste of time. They don't give a shit about anything."

"Then date an older girl. One of your sister's friends. Nothing wrong with an older woman. They have more experience, which you sorely need, and you could end up going to prom as a freshman."

"Jay would scratch my eyes out. Pass."

His father scoffed. "Your sister really doesn't have the influence you think she does. Date or don't, but I better not hear another whisper about you or your escapades from the school. Do I make myself clear?"

“Crystal.”

When Amanda came back to the bleachers the next day, Nick shrugged her off. “I’m not in the mood,” he said. “You’re not really my type, anyway. I thought we were just fooling around.”

“Seriously?” she asked, looking hurt. “I just cutted English.”

Nick snorted as he walked away. “Yeah, maybe don’t.”

After that, he stopped cutting classes—or tried to—but they bored him and he found it hard to focus. What he did have was an aptitude for talking back and getting into trouble. He was in detention so often that Jay sometimes had to hang around for an hour to wait for him to get out so she could drive them both home.

He could tell this annoyed her, which pleased him. He liked that his pretty, popular sister had to answer to him in this one regard; and when she was waiting around for him, on his dime, she wasn’t out with her equally pretty and popular friends.

“Why did you replace the dry erase markers with sharpies, Nick?”

“I’m not owning up to anything,” he said. “They couldn’t prove I did it.”

“Right,” said Jay. “Which is the only reason you are in detention and not suspended.”

“Mr. Masefield is always calling on me in class when he knows I don’t know the answer,” he complained. “It’s not like he’s so perfect. He’s always misprinting the damn formulas on the board. Of course, it’s easy when you’re always holding a fucking eraser.”

“That’s going to cost about a thousand dollars to replace.”

“My dad makes that much money every time he sneezes,” said Nick, glancing over to see how angry with him she actually was. Her mouth was a hard line, nearly erasing the full swell of her lips. “The money’s probably coming out of one of our family’s donations.”

“Here’s a thought,” said Jay. “What if you actually did the work instead of letting Mr. Masefield make you look like an idiot? You’re good at math.”

“He’s the one who looks like an idiot. I’m a Beaucroft and he’s some guy in short pants trying to teach Algebra to a bunch of burnouts. It’s not like it matters. Dad doesn’t give a shit. I could pull straight A’s and he wouldn’t even blink, and I’ll still get in wherever I want because he’ll just

endow a library or make a big donation, so in the end, it doesn't really make much difference.”

“So that's it,” said Jay. “You're not even going to try to do the work?”

“I'll get what I want either way,” Nick repeated. “So I might as well take the path of least resistance. I'm tired of the bullshit. We can't all be sweet little angels like you, blue jay. Some of us have dirty wings.”

“You think it's so easy for me?” she asked. “It isn't. I work hard for everything I have.”

“Yeah, you do,” said Nick. “And you haven't figured out that it doesn't really matter for you, either.”

Chapter Sixteen

2004

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It doesn't really matter.

Jay thought about Nick's words a lot in the following weeks. The bleakness of them resonated with such harsh dissonance, resounding in that hollow space inside her body that constantly echoed with the thought: *None of this will ever be enough.*

It was her worst fear, summed up eloquently in a single sentence, and to hear it come from Nick, who had nothing to fear, both chilled and angered her. It was as if he'd reached inside her and pulled out a piece of her that she had never wanted to come to light. What did he have to be worried about, anyway, beyond the usual adolescent ennui? His future was secure.

Jay shook her head and jotted down notes for Composition. She was brainstorming ideas for her journalism piece. She thought she might interview the owner of Red Brook Preserves, a local family-owned company that made jam from the orchards that used to be the property of the original founders. Mr. Garcia was the dad of one of the kids she read to on Wednesdays, and the way that young Miguel talked about his dad made her heart melt.

She wished she had a father like that, someone who made her light up with pride to talk about.

Smoothing over the page of her notebook, she paused and tapped her gel pen thoughtfully against the lined surface as her friends' chatter broke through her thoughts. Jordan was talking about her shopping trip at rodeo Drive last weekend. She'd gone with Clary because Jay had been watching one of Nick's swim meets. As usual, she was stuck chauffeuring his ass around.

Angela was harping on whale tails—the Y-shaped high-rising thongs that peeked out of girls' waistbands—which Jay figured was probably a dig at Amanda Strife. After being chased around by another faculty member with a ruler for rolling up her waistband, she had taken to pulling hers *down* so everyone could see her Frederick's of Hollywood thongs.

Jay actually thought it was kind of funny because Amanda at least seemed self-aware in a way that a lot of girls who were playing a much

longer con with the guys in this school weren't, but Angela seemed to really have it in for the poor girl. "She's just, like, so slutty," she was saying. "Like a little baby stripper. It's disgusting."

Something cold clenched in Jay's chest. "And what's wrong with that?" she snapped suddenly.

Angela paused, momentarily derailed. "What?"

"So what if you can see her *thong*?" Jay closed her notebook with a slap, startling her friends. "So what if she looks like a stripper? There's nothing wrong with stripping. They're not whores. They're just dancers who . . ." she faltered, wilting a little under Angela's glare. "Take their clothes off."

"Wow, Jay." Angela sneered. "You seem really knowledgeable about strippers all of a sudden. Did you moonlight as one or something? I hear there's a lot of those kinds of places in San Francisco. They practically have their own red light district."

"No." Jay stared at the blurring cover of her notepad. "I'm just saying—it's not the same."

She could feel her friends staring at her and her face flushed, emitting a heat that seemed to buzz around her like a radiator. Suddenly, Jay felt raw, exposed—emotionally skinned. Just like how she felt when Nick told her that nothing she did would matter, no matter how hard she tried. *Does everyone see me like this?* she wondered. *Am I really that transparent?*

The conversation resumed again and she saw Quentin Ho giving her a probing look that she quickly looked away from.

When the bell rang, her friends all got up to leave without waiting for her, even Jordan, who she had class with. Jay's eyes stung at the slight and she deliberately lingered, taking an extra moment to pack her schoolbag. When Quentin strolled up and held out his hand, she took it hesitantly. "Thanks."

"Jay," he said amiably. "What the fuck?"

"I know. I don't know what came over me."

"You know Angela's going to go around now telling everyone that you're a secret stripper."

"Yeah, I figured." Jay closed her eyes. "I don't know why she makes me so mad."

But that was a lie. She did know. *Shit.*

“You have to stop letting her mess with you, Jay-Jay,” said Quentin. “It’s been four years. You’re like a guitar on stilts, you’re so high strung.”

“A guitar on stilts,” Jay repeated, laughing. “That’s a new one.”

“Come on. I’ll walk you to class. Dance, right?”

“You don’t have to be so nice.”

“Babe, I hate to break it to you, but you don’t have the patented trademark on *nice*. Don’t worry about Jordan,” he added, with surprising sympathy. “She’ll come around. She’s not really mad at you. She’s just fronting for Angela Diamante because they’re going shopping later and Angie just leveled up in bitchcraft.”

“Fuck Angela Diamante,” Jay said darkly, and Quentin let out a surprised burble of a laugh.

“Well, there you go,” he breathed. “Justine Varens can be a bitch. I feel like all might just be right in the universe, after all. You know why Angie’s really mad at you, right? It’s because she knows that Michael Valdez only asked her out to make you jealous, and when your dumb, tightly-stringed-guitar-ass self didn’t even notice, he dumped her right before school on Monday.”

“Oh,” said Jay, in a small voice. “I thought Michael actually liked Angela.”

“He likes *you*. He asked her out in front of *you*.”

“In front of all of us,” she said defensively. “I thought it was a romantic gesture.”

“Babe.” Quentin looked pained. “He invited her out to Bubble Trouble. Your place. Nobody sucks down boba like you. Angela doesn’t even like it. She only said yes because Michael is fine.”

Jay laughed uncomfortably. “Oops?”

“Well, he’s single now. If you want to rectify that fuck-up and suck his straw. Ow.”

She lowered her hand. “Come on. I barely touched you.”

“It was assault and I’m suing your father for damages so I can retire in Palm Springs at twenty.”

Stepfather, Jay mentally corrected, but she was smiling by the time they made it to Arts and Humanities. Nick and his friends were just leaving. She mentally ticked them off, knowing their faces from seeing them bumming around the house. Alonzo, Dave, Ian, and that skinny little creep, Jake, who always looked at her like he was picturing her without clothes on.

Nick glanced up, leveling an unreadable look in her direction. He looked . . . annoyed for some reason. But just as abruptly, he turned away.

Jay thought she might be reading too much into the exchange until she heard Quentin ask, “Why is your brother mean-mugging us?”

She started to shrug, until she remembered that one day in the field. *Courtney*, she thought, feeling herself becoming annoyed again. “He’s been sniffing around your sister,” she said, hoisting her backpack a little higher. “He probably thinks I’m snitching.”

“Um,” said Quentin. “You are.”

“Whoops. Anyway, I told him to back the hell off or you’d kill him dead.”

“Thanks for that, Bizzaro Jay, you unexpected bitch. Like I really want to duel for my little sister’s honor against the captain of the junior varsity swim team. Have you seen the biceps on that dude?”

“I don’t mack on my brother like that, you gross person.” Jay rolled her eyes. “Like you would really rather see her sad hangdog face across the breakfast table after Nick’s done with her?”

“Don’t ask me that right now,” said Quentin. “I’m ready to bring the pain on her skinny little ass. The little monster told my mother that I got a B- in Calculus because I wouldn’t drive her to a fucking Dashboard Confessional concert. *I* am ready to make her weep.”

Jay smiled. “So, what, did your mom ground you?”

“Worse. Every day she conveys to me through a series of eye blinks and complex gestures that I have disappointed her with every one of my life choices leading up to this moment. Also, and even more annoyingly, she’s started bragging about Courtney to all of our relatives on the phone whenever I’m around—” he raised the pitch of his voice “—let me tell you about my daughter, Courtney, she’s so good at figures, oh, wait, let me go into the other room, Constance, *Quentin’s* here.”

“Wow,” said Jay. “Subtle.”

“Fucking tiger moms. I can't wait until my college acceptances start pouring in. Once I get into UCLA, Courtney could become class fucking president and my mom would literally not give one iota of a shit.” He glanced over at Jay. “Where'd you apply, you bright young thing?”

“My stepfather made me apply to Stanford but I also applied to UCLA, Irvine, Berkeley, and USC.”

“Spicy. You know Stanford and Berkeley are rivals, right?”

“Yeah,” said Jay. “I've heard that. Don't tell my stepfather, but I hate Palo Alto. San Francisco got a whole lot worse once all the tech people started pouring in.”

Quentin shuddered. “The only person in this town I want to fight less than your scary brother is his scary dad, Jay. And with my blood now solidly curdled, I'm leaving now. Have fun at dance.”

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It was true that Nick really didn't have to work all that hard at anything he did, but he couldn't just go mentally comatose, either, and the incident with Amanda beneath the bleachers had taught him that he couldn't openly flaunt his disregard for the school. Not so blatantly.

Since he had been performing so badly before, doing the bare minimum now accorded him praise. Nick thought it was a little pathetic how eagerly the teachers wanted to take credit for his successes, each thinking that they were the one to inspire change, not realizing that it was his talk with Jay that had led him to his epiphany. She had to struggle; he didn't—but there was a happy medium, and he found that he could bargain his way out of bad grades more easily if he put down a little collateral upfront. So he turned in his half-assed work and put on a good face for it, and he coasted his way through classes with a low B-average and no parental phone calls.

When he wasn't in school, he was either swimming, out with friends, or going to parties. But the parties were starting to feel more like work now because the girls wouldn't leave him alone. His friends all gave him a hard time about it and he could tell they were jealous from the way they teased him. He played it off, but the whole thing really annoyed him. He wasn't

interested in the attention, especially not from a girl who thought he'd get off on her vapid act.

But it was like the meaner he was to them, the more the girls wanted to him. Clinging to his arm, touching his chest, telling them where they'd be on Saturdays, trying to sit in his fucking lap. He let them do it, and sometimes he let them do more, but the thought of dating any of them, or fucking any of them, left him feeling strangely chilled.

"Dude," said Jake. "Did you see Quentin Ho hanging all over Justine? What's with that?"

"Why?" Nick asked absently, staring off thoughtfully into space, although of course, he'd noticed, too. Jay didn't smile like that much anymore. "You jealous?"

"Fucking Quentin," Jake said in disgust. "What a fucking nerd."

"Jay's a nerd." Nick glanced at him in annoyance, not sure why the conversation was pissing him off so much. "I guess it's a match made in heaven."

"Yeah, but she's a hot nerd. It's different. What?" Jake asked, flinching when Nick casually lifted his hand. "I was being respectful. Don't fucking hit me, man."

Nick maintained eye contact for a moment before letting the hand rake harmlessly through his hair, hiding his sneer when he saw his friend relax. "Thank God it's Friday. I'm so sick of this fucking hole."

"Hey," said Dave. "Nick. I'm having a party at my house tomorrow. You should come."

"Whatever. Maybe I'll show up. I don't have anything else to do and my stepmom's driving me fucking crazy."

"Invite your sister," Dave suggested.

"Jay doesn't go to parties."

"Ask her." Dave smiled. "Maybe she'll surprise you."

"I doubt it." Nick slammed his empty soda can in the trash. "She's as predictable as a clock."

He spaced out through English—it was all about poetry, sappy stuff—and when he met Jay in the South Quad, he found himself feeling strangely uncomfortable as she walked up, looking like a poster child for the school

in her perfectly-worn uniform and her too-serious face. Why *didn't* she smile more at home? She was so much prettier when she did.

She glanced at him as he slid into the front seat of her little Honda. She could have gotten a Mercedes and instead she got a fucking Civic, and if that wasn't just Jay in a nutshell, he wasn't sure what was. He wondered, a little bitterly, what Quentin thought of her fucking joke of a car.

"Can you turn that off?" he asked, after a moment. Jay was playing No Doubt on the radio and the bright, poppy ska music was annoying him. "I have a fucking headache."

"Wow," said Jay, glancing at him. "That's cool."

"What is?" he snapped.

"Nothing," she said. "I thought you had eardrums of steel, Metal Boy."

"Well, I don't," he said, glaring at her. "So either turn it off, or I will."

"Not your car, dude. My car, my rules." But she reached over and switched the music off, just like he knew she would. Her bracelet rattled and he looked at it. The silver was all scratched.

"That's trashed," he said, after a moment. "Why don't you throw it out and get a new one?"

Jay pulled her hand away. "To remind myself," she said, after a pause.

"Of what?"

"To rely on myself."

Nick shook his head. "The bracelet tells you to do that? Right. Weirdo."

"Toad."

Nick stared ahead, watching the lines of the dividers slip beneath the wheels until he felt a little nauseous. "Dave Byron's having a party on Saturday. He invited us both. Me and you."

"I don't go to parties."

"Yeah, I know. I told him that."

"Oh my God, why? Do you want me to sound like a loser?"

"Funny how you say that like you think it's hard to do."

"God, you're such an ass." Without taking her eyes off the road, she said, "Maybe I will go. I can sit around and talk big and embarrass you in front of all your friends for a change."

“Yeah, you're so embarrassing. Such a little goody-goody, beloved by all. What are you going to do? You couldn't make a tomato turn red.” Nick rolled his eyes. “I don't care what anyone thinks of me—but you do. Too much. The only one you're going to embarrass at that party if you try, blue jay, is yourself. You're such a prude.”

Jay was silent for a moment. “Is that really how you see me?”

“It's how everyone sees you,” he said. “It's how you *are*.”



Nick pulled on a white T-shirt and a leather jacket to go with his acid-washed jeans. He tried to straight out his hair but as usual, it refused to lie flat, so he gelled it into intentional disarray. Downstairs, he could hear shouting and knew, with a pulse of irritation, that it was Jay's mother.

What now? He threw down the comb, making it bounce. *Fucking menopause?*

He shoved his wallet and phone into his back pocket and began walking slowly through the den, craning his neck to hear. “—can't wear that,” the step-bitch was saying. “It makes you look like you have mannish shoulders, baby. You should let me take you shopping. We can get you some new clothes. I know what's best for your figure.”

“Well, it's too late to change *now*,” said Jay, sounding upset. “Thanks a lot for letting me know earlier when I actually had time to change.”

Oh, for fuck's sake, thought Nick.

He saw Danielle first. She was wearing a tight pair of jeans and a leopard-print top that looked cheap but probably wasn't. He'd heard his dad griping about her credit card bills. Not that money was an issue, but he wanted his women to look good, and Danielle did not look good.

Nick allowed his lip to curl as he looked at her, and then he turned and saw Jay.

She was wearing blue stonewashed jeans and a red off-the-shoulder top that made her skin look like it was infused with cinnamon. He'd never seen her wear it before, didn't even know she *had* clothes like that. It didn't make her shoulders look mannish at all. She looked like a fine-boned doll, and the

way the fabric pulled seamlessly across her breasts made him realize, with a lurch, that she wasn't wearing a bra.

Nick blinked and looked away. "She looks fine. All the girls dress like that."

"Like you know anything about it." The step-bitch's eyes flicked over him scornfully. "Men don't know anything about fashion."

I know you're a jealous whore. The thought surfaced without warning, gleaming sharply. That's what this was. All those comments, sneaking into her room, stealing her clothes. Danielle was constantly going after Jay because Jay was gorgeous and her mother was jealous as fuck.

It was so obvious, he couldn't believe it had never occurred to him before.

He let out a rough laugh that made both women stare at him. "God," he said. "This is too fucking stupid. Come on, Jay. We're going."

Jay glanced at her mother uncertainly and hitched up her purse. "Bye, Mom. Don't wait up."

The ride in the car was silent as Jay navigated the dark local roads. Dave lived out in the hills in a nice house—although not as nice as theirs. Nick glanced over at Jay in profile. She was wearing big hoop earrings and a lip gloss that smelled like sugar. He could smell it from here.

"What's with the outfit? You look like you're trying to be Angela."

She shot him a hostile, defiant look. "Well, I wouldn't look like a *prude* who cares too much about what everyone thinks of me."

"So you care what *I* think of you." He arched his eyebrows. "Really disproving my point."

"Screw off," she said, so seethingly that he was startled into laughing.

After a few minutes, he said, "Why do you let that psycho bitch bully you?"

"Angela?"

"No, although her too," he added distantly. "I mean, your mom."

"I don't. But you can't argue with her. With either of them. You'll never change their minds."

"She's absolutely jealous of you, you know." The words slipped out before he could stop them.

“My mom?” Jay's earrings jangled as she turned her head. “Why?”

“Because you're prettier than she is. That's why she's always doing the shit you hate. Pinching you. Mentioning how tall you are. Telling you to wear more makeup. She only tells you to change when you look good.” Nick glanced at his phone as it buzzed. Dave texting him, *Nick, where are you, man? Is your sister coming?* “She's a deluded old hag.”

Yeah, he typed out. *We're on our way.*

“She's my mom.” Jay paused. “She's all I have.”

“That doesn't mean she wants the best for you.”

“Does your dad do that?” she asked abruptly. “Comment on what you do? How you look? Make you feel bad about yourself?”

“He doesn't care what I do or how I look,” said Nick. “As long as I don't embarrass him, land myself in jail, or get the wrong girl pregnant, I'm golden.”

“Standards,” said Jay.

“It is what it is,” said Nick. “It's different because you're a girl.”

The party was already in motion when Jay pulled up in her little Honda. Kids were out front, sprawled on the lawn and chatting. It was busier inside where food had been set out and someone had erected a game of beer pong on the kitchen table. Someone shouted his name and Nick looked up. By the time he looked back around, Jay had already disappeared.

“Nick. My man. Here, enjoy.” Someone pressed something into his hand.

A joint? No, he didn't want that. He'd played around with pot before and didn't like how floaty and disconnected it had made him feel. Setting it on the counter, he helped himself to a beer from an open cooler while wandering around the house.

Coolio's “Rolling with My Homies” was playing and the air seemed to be flavored with the skunky smell of pot, sweat, booze, and too much perfume. He loitered for so long that the song on the mixed CD changed to Juvenile's “Back That Thang Up,” the rap indecipherable and monotonous over the sound of the beat and the violins.

Amanda found him in the living room and started dancing with him, shaking her torso with her arms over her head, spinning around so her backside was pressed against his hips. Nick obligingly put his hands on her

hips, looking around and wondering if there was anything more exciting going on upstairs, when he caught a flash of red. Jay was dancing with Michael Valdez, and Michael had his hands on the bare skin of her waist. She was swaying in his arms with the same careless ease as when she danced alone in her room.

The song changed to “Dirrty” and Jay, obviously a little drunk, stumbled next to Jordan. Nick knew the two of them took Modern Dance together and the two of them were dancing with a couple of the other girls now while some of her friends started clapping and chanting, “Go Jay! Go Jay!” She didn't even seem to realize that she was making a total fool of herself.

“Ugh,” said Amanda, following his glance. “What show-offs.”

That's funny, thought Nick. Coming from you.

Persisting, Amanda said, “Isn't that your stepsister, Jay?”

“Yeah,” said Nick, looking over again. She was holding an empty shot glass. “She doesn't drink much.”

“Want to go upstairs where it's quieter?”

“Not really,” he said coolly. “I'm not looking to hook up. I'm here to have a good time.”

Ignoring the stung look on her face, Nick eased out of her embrace and slipped outside where the air was cooler. There were a couple people in the pool but a cold wind had picked up and only the hot tub was packed, mostly with seniors. He recognized a few of Jay's friends—Angela, Clary, and two guys whose names he didn't know. *The Lacoste Mafia*, he thought, with a snort. *Suits them.*

He stayed where he was, leaning against the big oak tree in Dave's yard, sipping his beer in the darkness and watching the clouds hide and unhide the stars. Jay had been watching a documentary the other night about the life and death of stars and started sniffing when it got to supernovae. She was so upset about the idea of a star dying all alone.

The wind was blowing in direction, so he listened to the seniors talking about college plans and summer travel. And then he heard his sister's name.

“Jay's been acting so weird lately,” said Angela. “First she gets her panties all in a twist because I said Amanda looked like a stripper, and now she's in there dancing like one.”

“Senioritis,” one of the guys said knowingly. “It makes everyone act a little loco.”

“I just don't get what her problem is. What, does she moonlight as a stripper down in Huntington Beach or something to pay for her college? She's all over Michael. I mean what the fuck.”

“Didn't Michael just break up with you?” the other guy asked pointedly.

“That's what I mean. Friends don't steal other friends' exes. It's *slutty*.”

“You just called her a stripper,” said the first guy. “How friendly can you be?”

“All I'm saying is, Little Miss Good Girl in there better watch it, or she might blow any chance of making connections that she has in this town. Nobody really knows who she *is*, anyway. She just showed up one day with the Beaucrofts and expects everyone to accept it. She doesn't even have their last name.”

“Calm down, honey,” said Clary. “Take a breath.”

“I am just so done with her shit. And fucking Jordan and Quentin always take her side! Like, whose friends were they first, anyway? And now Michael likes her—I'm just tired of it,” she said, her voice suddenly small. “We were friends first and then she came and . . . and ruined our thing.”

Nick tossed his empty beer bottle aside. It hit a rock with a clang and rolled, which made them startle. “Dude,” said one of the guys. “Is there someone in the bushes?”

“Oh shit,” said Clary, when Nick strolled into the light. “I didn't realize you were out here, Nick. Um, what are you doing out here?”

Nick glanced at Angela, whose expression was both defiant and afraid. “Nothing much. Enjoying the fresh air. Clearing my head.” He folded his arms. “Any of you seen my sister.”

The second guy said, “Uh, I think Angela mentioned that she was inside dancing.”

Angela splashed water at him. It got in his beer can and he said, “Hey!”

Nick watched them squirm for a few seconds longer before heading back into the house. He and Jay had arrived pretty early; now it was even more packed than it had been before before. Someone had switched the rap

to hard synth and the heavy beats of Goldfrapp's "Yes Sir" were pounding out of the speakers, making his ears ring. Eventually he found Jay in the kitchen. She was sitting at the table with her head between her knees. She wasn't holding her purse.

"Nich—olash?"

"Time to go," said Nick.

She blinked at him and made no move to get up. Nick wondered if she couldn't.

Hissing through his teeth, he bent to drag her up, looping his arms around her waist to keep her upright. She stumbled a little, just an inch or two taller than him in her heels.

"Give me your keys. Where is your purse?"

"Dunno."

Nick tilted his head and saw it kicked under the chair she'd been sitting in. He leaned her against the table and grabbed it, looping it around his arm before propelling them both towards the door, against the crush of bodies. She immediately started shivering. When he opened the door, Jay fell against him, hands pressed against his chest.

"Nick," she said, tilting her head up so her mouth grazed the top of his lip and his nose.

Everything inside him seemed to stiffen up at once. "What?"

"I need to throw up."

Nick swore right as she dropped to her knees. He just barely managed to grab her hair before she began to puke her guts out right beneath the tires of her car.

"How many drinks did you have?" *Who made them?* If it was fucking Michael—

"Dunno." She blinked as she tried to remember. "Two?"

Two. "Two what? Glasses Beers? Shots? Did you mix them? Your face is all red."

"Two shots."

"Jesus Christ. You're a fucking lightweight."

He bundled her into the seat and buckled her belt, tossing her purse into her lap before swinging himself up into the driver's seat. They were the

same height now, so he didn't have to adjust the seat. Even though he'd just turned fifteen, he didn't have a permit yet, but he'd been practicing with Yelena and Jay and some of his friends. He knew the basics.

Better me than her, he thought grimly. She could barely keep her eyes open.

"You really can't handle your liquor, can you? What do you do when you drink?"

"Put water in shot glasses. Tell people it's vodka. Nick, my stomach hurts."

"Then you shouldn't have fucking taken the shots."

She made an unhappy sound and he threw his head back against the seat.

"Close your eyes," he said at length. "Let me know if I need to stop the car."

Jay whimpered quietly in assent.

Fuck. He drove with a tight jaw, keeping an eye on the speedometer. Even though Jake was a good friend of his, he didn't think he could count on the sheriff not to drag them in for underage drinking and driving without a license. God, his father would probably kill him.

By the time they'd made it home, he was wired and Jay was completely passed out. *Out like a light*, as her fucking mother would say. She didn't move except to groan at him when he got her out of the car and marched her up to the house. He wasn't quite strong enough to carry her and moving her was like trying to move a piece of furniture that could drag its feet and whine.

Fuck, Nick thought again. He glanced at the stairs but decided he didn't want to risk losing his grip and breaking both their necks. He went to his room with Jay still clinging to him and dropped her on his bed while he left to go change. *Why did she drink so much?* He wondered, tugging on flannel pants and an old T-shirt before savagely brushing his teeth. *Trying to prove that she can have a good time? Idiot.*

When he came back into his bedroom, Jay had taken his pillow and was hugging it.

"Jay." He shook her, lightly slapping her cheek. "Give me my pillow back, you drunk nerd."

She drooled on it and he leaned back in disgust. *Fine, keep it.*

Very grumpy now, Nick slid beneath the covers and glared at Jay, but the longer he stared at her, the more the lines gradually slipped from his face. Lying on his side, facing her, was curiously intimate and he found himself aware of her and her body in a way that he'd never been aware of anyone before. After a moment, he reached out and ran the back of his hand slowly down her cheek. He could still feel the fleeting burn of her mouth against his.

With her eyes closed, she looked very young. Not that much older than him.

“Jay,” he said, in an entirely different tone, as his hand slid down to the warmth of her throat. He didn't dare move lower, but his eyes drifted to the swell of her breasts, pushed up by her arms. Want slithered through him, cold and strangling, tying up his stomach in coils. “Jay?”

“No,” she murmured. “Go away. I don't want it.”

“Jay,” he whispered. “Are you even awake?”

There was a long silence.

“I want the jam,” said Jay.

Nick let out a rough breath. He patted her cheek before flopping over on his back and switching off the light, but he could still hear her breathing, could still feel the slight dip of her weight. Without a pillow, the mattress felt as hard as a rock, and so, strangely, did his stomach.

It was a long time before he finally fell asleep.

Chapter Seventeen

2004

■□□□□■

Jay was gone when Nick woke up. He ran into her in the kitchen with her hair in a messy bun, clutching a cup of tea. She shot him an awkward smile and mouthed, *Thank you*.

It made him feel almost, but not quite, guilty for his twisted, bent-up thoughts. *You wouldn't thank me*, he thought, *not if you knew what I'm really like*.

When Dave texted to ask what he'd thought of the party, Nick set his phone down and collapsed on his bed, closing his tired eyes. When he opened them again, it felt like there was a gnawing hole in his stomach. He'd been dead to the world for hours.

His dad came down when he was polishing off the last of his toast and Nick was relieved that he hadn't come in five seconds earlier when there were still a few pieces of rainbow sprinkles visible. Nick didn't think his father was the kind of man who would approve of *fairy bread*.

"So," said his father, in a tone that said he couldn't care less, "how was the party?"

"Pretty lame," Nick said carefully. "We came home early—me and Jay."

"I see." His father looked at him for a long moment, letting the silence build. Nick knew the trick was to create a silent vacuum, which others would feel the need to fill. It was a classic intimidation tactic, and it annoyed him to feel it working. "Who drove?" he asked at last.

When Nick still didn't respond, his father said, "I was coming out of my room for a nightcap and happened to look over the wall and see you sneaking into your room. I hope you didn't let your sister drive in that condition."

"I drove."

"Police?"

"No."

"Good." His father headed down the hall. "You were lucky. Don't let it happen again. Follow me, Nicholas. I have a few more questions I want to ask you. In private."

Nick followed his father into the office. He had never raised a hand to him before but he found himself wondering, fleetingly, *is he going to beat me?* But all he did was slide into his office chair and unlock the bottom drawer where he kept his scotch. He set out two cut-crystal glasses on the desk, filling first one and then the other.

“Take it. I know you've been sampling from my liquor cabinet—I monitor the levels. This is far better than anything you've tried.” He nodded at the glasses when Nick made no move to reach for a glass. “What was your sister doing in your room last night?”

Nick swallowed wrong and the burn of the scotch in his windpipe made his eyes water. “Nothing,” he rasped. “I didn't do anything. I just didn't want to wake you or fall down the stairs. I wasn't sure where else to put her.”

“Was there something wrong with the couch?”

Nick blinked. The thought of leaving her in the den hadn't even occurred to him. “I don't know. I didn't think of it. She said she felt sick and then she passed out.”

His father sipped his scotch. “You shouldn't have let Justine drink so much.”

“I didn't,” he said sharply. “She only had two shots.”

“You're a man,” his father pointed out calmly. “It's your job to protect her. People get the wrong ideas about a girl who can't control herself. Who sneaks off with boys.”

“We didn't do anything,” he repeated firmly.

His father looked at him, a glint of amusement in his cold eyes. “Be careful, Nicholas. Sometimes a denial can imply more guilt than a confession.”

Nick remembered the way he'd touched Jay's sleeping face and stared down at his glass.

Watching him very closely, his father said, “There are two types of women in this world. Those who will demand the world from you and those who will sit back and quietly accept their lot in life. I hope you know the difference.”

“I do,” he said, which seemed like the best answer.

"I certainly hope so. I don't want you to live with my mistakes. Your mother was beautiful, brilliant, but crushed by ambition. And Danielle—well, it's a shame that she isn't a better role model for you and your sister. Incessantly demanding and shallow. Superficial."

"Yeah," said Nick. "You said she was an actress but I've never seen her in anything. What's she been in?" He made a subtle face at his scotch. "Porn?"

"She's not an actress. She's a stripper I met in San Francisco."

"She's a stripper." *Fuck, I knew it had to be something like that.* "Why did you marry her?"

"She was very charming in the beginning. So romantic and starry-eyed. Have you ever seen *Pretty Woman*, Nicholas?" He shook his head. "She was an ingenue—innocent, sweet. Well-read, or so I thought. Poignant. I thought she would be more like—"

Nick waited, throat tight, but his father didn't finish his sentence. *Like who? Like my mother?* For some reason, Nick didn't think his father had meant his mother, Emma. *Crushed by her ambition.* As if the hemorrhage had been her fault. Anger sparked through him.

"Why haven't you adopted Jay?"

"Why?" his father demanded. "Did she ask?"

"No," said Nick. "But kids think it's strange that we have different last names."

"The simple answer is inheritance. Justine's mother gets half of what I have when I die. Assuming she follows all of the stipulations, and assuming she doesn't burn through it all, some of that will flow to Justine. I want the rest of the estate—and the business—to go to you. Justine is a smart, sweet girl, but that sweetness would be sugar in the gas tank fueling this business. She's painfully naive, can't lie to save her life, and she doesn't know how to be ruthless."

"And I do?" Nick set down his scotch, deciding he didn't like the taste.

"That remains to be seen. Right now you're too wild. I would like to see you channel that energy into something meaningful and focused." His father picked up his glass and emptied it into his own. "This is fifty-year-old scotch. Much too good to waste. When you put time, effort, and money into acquiring something, then it really ought to be savored."

Nick pushed back from the desk. "Are we done?"

"For now."

Nick left.



The next couple months passed in a whirlwind. Jay got accepted into UC Berkeley, her first choice, and started going to student orientations and other campus events. Nick poured himself into his swim meets, which seemed to be the only thing that could boil off some of his relentless, restless energy. Maybe that was what his father meant, saying that he was "too wild." Sometimes it felt like his anger was a starved beast inside him hungering for the taste of human blood.

Prom happened and Jay went with Michael as her date, along with the rest of the Lacoste Mafia, but he stopped by their house alone for prom photos, reeking of Drakkar Noir. "Hey man," Michael said, wincing just a little when Nick shook his hand with more force than civility called for. "Jay said you'll be taking our pictures? I didn't know you took pictures."

"Yeah," said Nick. "I'm a good photographer. Let's go outside. I'll shoot you out back."

He was a pleased when Michael's smile became strained.

Danielle claimed she had a headache, and retired to her room after creeping on Michael, and his father was working, so the house was empty except for them. Nick led them out to the back, next to the lilies and the pool. Jay wore a strapless lilac gown with silver screening that made her look like an angel. He snapped a few good ones of her and then took pleasure shooting the pair of them from unflattering angles that added imaginary pounds to Michael's slim build.

A few weeks after that, Jay graduated. He was forced to go, sitting out in the bleachers in the blazing summer heat, despite the tarp the faculty had erected. After that was a summer that felt far too transient because as soon as fall started, Jay wouldn't be living with them anymore.

She'd be in Northern California, in Berkeley.

She'd be gone.

And I'll be a sophomore.

Nick stared into his coffee. It was a Saturday morning but now that school was no longer in session, it could have been any day of the week. Danielle was fussing with her hair and Jay was poring over a catalog of college courses. At the head of the table was his father, holding a newspaper he wasn't reading, while he scrolled through his ever-present phone.

"You know," he said, "I think we have a lot to celebrate this year, so I've booked us all into a luxury resort for a brief summer getaway."

"A resort?" Danielle looked up. "Where are we going? Hawaii? Cabo?"

"Laguna Beach," his father said, to the step-bitch's obvious disappointment. "The resort is called Sable Blanc. It's owned by a friend of mine. In fact, Beaucroft money helped them open their doors back when they were a new business that was still struggling."

Nick shrugged, hiding his own dashed hopes. He'd been to resorts before with his dad and friends. If you went to one overpriced beach, you'd been to them all. He'd been kind of hoping they would actually go somewhere cool for a change, like Europe or Asia. It was so typical that his father would make this into just another business deal.

Jay closed her course catalog and looked up from her breakfast. "What do we need to bring?"

"Nothing much, Justine," his father said dismissively. "It's just a resort. Some summer dresses and a swimsuit and something appropriate for dinner. Just don't bring anything that would embarrass me."

Nick recognized the look of panic on Jay's face as she began fiddling with the pages of her book. *She doesn't know what to bring*, he realized. She must not have ever been to a resort before. *Probably not even a hotel. Not a nice one, anyway.*

Poor blue jay. She still wasn't quite used to his father. She was so used to having everyone like her; she hadn't figured out that some people didn't want to play the game. Their peers fell over themselves trying to please her, to get into her good graces, and Jay naively assumed everyone in the world was as nice as she was—but some people, like his father, just wanted to unnerve. Everything they did was a trap.

Angela bitched about Jay all the time, to anyone who would listen, and so did a handful of other people in town. Parents whose children had lost out on awards and opportunities that had gone to Jay. Guys she wouldn't

date. People who wanted to make her seem as cheap and tawdry as paste, and were infuriated by the mounting evidence that she was flawless.

Nick could have told Jay a lot about the world and how ugly it really was.

He watched her stare down at her empty plate, her long hair drifting down past her shoulders. Her catalog was covered in circles and scribbles and Nick could see a sheet of paper sticking out of it, scrawled with notes. She glanced up at him warily, bracing herself. "What?"

"I'll help you," he heard himself say. "I'll take you out shopping."

"What?" His father spoke at the same time as Jay, his expression ominous.

Nick glanced at him. "She doesn't know what to wear. I don't think she's even been to a beach."

"Yes, I *have*, you toad," she broke in.

"Not a nice one," he corrected her. "And not in Laguna Beach. Hippie beaches full of rocks and mud don't count. You're going to bring the wrong thing. I bet you were going to bring shorts and T-shirts. That's not going to cut it here. Let me help you. I know what other girls wear. I know what's appropriate."

His father was still watching him but now his gaze had shifted and there was something like approval in the glacial depths. "Nicholas makes a good point. You probably don't have anything suitable," he said to Jay. "I've seen how you dress. It's too bohemian. You may borrow my credit card and drive yourself and your brother to the mall so he can take you shopping."

The step-bitch looked at his father hopefully, but he only resumed eating. *Ha*, thought Nick, watching her return to her phone. *Nice try, gold digger.*

"When do you want to go?" Jay asked.

"After lunch," Nick decided.

When he came down from his room, she was waiting in the foyer, wearing pedal pushers and a little spaghetti-strapped surplice tunic top printed with butterflies.

Nick had worn baggy jeans and a tight T-shirt with his wallet hanging from his belt loops by a chain. It had his father's credit card in it and he was taking no chances. "That's nice," he said, as they walked out to her car. He

liked the way the bright blue straps contrasted against her smooth brown shoulders. “Doesn't seem like you, though.”

“Jordan gave it to me. I just washed it. It's from *France*.” She made a face. “I bet your dad thinks it's too *bohemian*, though. Whatever that means.”

“Tu es de toute beauté.”

She tugged at a strap of her top, pulling the bodice higher. He thought her face might have looked a little pink. “You should have taken Spanish. You're going to regret it later.”

“I'll think about that when I'm in the Côte d'Azur for the French VI trip,” said Nick. “I'll send you a letter written in the tears of my regret. Bonjour ma chère soeur. Je regrette de ne pas avoir suivi de cours d'espagnol. Il est temps de nager dans la chatte.”

“God, how are you struggling in French II if you can speak like that off the cuff?”

“Because I say things like nager dans la chatte. You drive like a grandma by the way.”

“I don't want to get pulled over.” Her hands tightened on the wheel for a moment. “Why did you offer to help me?”

“Because you looked pathetic and I felt bad for you.”

Jay wrinkled her nose and switched on the CD player. “Even when you're trying to be nice, you're still such a jerk.”

“I like to keep people guessing.”

“There is literally no guessing. You're just a jerk.”

“Mm-hmm. But how much of a jerk? They'll never know. And neither will you. What the fuck am I listening to?” he asked, nodding at the stereo.

“It's Letters to Cleo,” said Jay.

“Terrible.”

Jay muttered something as she parked her Honda in the giant lot of the Eden Hill Mall. They wandered past several shops, all with pop music blasting from the open doors. Eden Hill was an expensive mall, with a big, ostentatious fountain in the center that had two jumping dolphins intertwined over crests of molded sea foam. What dolphins had to do with Eden or hills, Nick wasn't sure, but it had cost a shit-ton of money and the

developers—the Valdezes, he supposed—had put it right front and center for everyone to enjoy.

“Want to make a wish?” Jay asked, glancing at it.

“No. I don't believe in that shit.”

“I don't either,” she said. “I just thought it might be fun.”

You and I, thought Nick, *have very different ideas about fun.*

Apart from the fountain, the mall was pretty typical. Open floor plans and lots of big walls made of highly reflective glass so shoppers could look at their reflections as they passed. A look on his stepsister's face surfaced; he'd never seen it before and it took him a moment to realize it was fear. She was absolutely terrified of fucking up. Their conversation a couple weeks ago about working hard hadn't really been about him at all—it had been about her.

The dynamic between them had shifted at some point. She was out of her depth in this place and because of his name, and the circumstances of his birth, some things would always be easier for him than they would be for her. No matter how hard she tried. She glanced at him, causing her hair to ripple down her back, and in that one, eloquent moment, he realized that four years wasn't such a vast divide, and it would only grow closer over time.

“What?” she asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“No reason. I'm just glad you let me help you.”

“Okay.” Jay dragged out the word as she glanced back at the shop windows. “Start helping me then. Where do we go?”

Nick pointed at a store he knew a lot of the Hollybrook girls shopped at. Madonna's “Lucky Star” was drifting from its speakers. “In there.”

“You don't have to come in with me, you know,” said Jay, when he followed her inside.

“I don't trust you not to walk out of here with something stupid like gaucho pants.”

Jay gave him the finger and began flipping through hangers while he leaned back and waited. There was a strange smell coming from the clothes, pungent and chemical. He watched her pick out four sundresses and a pretty black dress with a rhinestone clasp. She refused to let him help her pick out a swimsuit. “That's too weird, dude,” she muttered.

“Nobody wears one pieces but kids and old ladies,” he called after her, when she grabbed a handful of plain solid colored ones that were clearly intended for athletes. They even had little racing stripes. “Come on, Jay. Just get a bikini. It's not like you can't pull it off.”

“No,” she said staunchly, walking towards the dressing room.

Beside him, a woman clad from head-to-toe in Lilly Pulitzer laughed. Nick glanced over at her. “What?”

“I'm sorry,” she said, not sounding very sorry. “You two are so cute—and she's gorgeous. I wish my boyfriend had gone clothes shopping with me when I was a young girl.”

Boyfriend? He let out his breath in a burst. *Jay?*

He stared at the rack of clothes before him unseeingly until Jay found him again, now carrying several plastic bags. “I'm done. Are you okay? You have a weird expression on your face. Why are you just standing here?”

“I'm fine.” He wouldn't look at her. “Let's go.”

Jay glanced at the woman in Lilly Pulitzer. “Why is that woman waving at you? Do you know her?”

“She probably wants to rape me,” Nick said. “Forget about her.”

Jay fell into silence as they walked and he studied the ghostly outlines of their reflections in the glass. His was slim and scrawny, except for his shoulders. Jay, at his side, had a lithe build with soft, sloping curves and that mass of curly hair. *Do we look like a couple?*

They were on their way to the car when Jay ran into some of the Lacoste Mafia, although now that they had graduated, her old friends had moved on from prep wear to things like Dolce & Gabbana and Gucci. Nick recognized the logos on their bags. The step-bitch liked to shop there, too.

Jordan was instantly recognizable with that long mane of naturally blonde hair and Clary, who was mixed—Black, English, and Korean, Nick remembered someone telling him—was probably the third most gorgeous girl in school after Jay and Jordan.

Unfortunately, fucking Michael was with them, along with some of his loser hang-ons. Nick recognized one of the guys from the hot tub at Dave Byron's house.

Jay left him to go speak to the group of them, hugging herself in the way she did when she was nervous. Playing with her hair, wrapping the

curls around her finger. "We just stopped by the mall for some frozen yogurt and some light shopping," Jordan was saying, holding up a bag that looked anything but light. "Now we're on our way to the beach to have a good old-fashioned bonfire. You wanna come, Jay? We tried to call you but you, like, didn't answer your phone."

"It's dead," said Jay. "Yeah, I'll come. I've been looking at course catalogs all day."

"You can't," Nick reminded her. "You have to take me home."

"Right," said Jay, glancing at her bags. "I need to drop these and my brother off first. I'll meet you there? Silver Scape, right?"

"Sounds good."

Jordan and Clary waved and Michael hung back for a moment, saying something to Jay that Nick couldn't hear before turning and leaving with the others.

Nick was not happy about being grouped with the bags. "Drop my brother off?" he repeated, once they were both buckled up in the car. "Seriously, Jay?"

"Well, you are," she said, puzzled.

He sat in silence as they drove home, watching her slim hands on the wheel as she inched along the tortuous freeway. *Your brother*, he thought darkly. *Well, maybe I don't want to be.*

Chapter Eighteen

2004

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The resort was the same tacky, whitewashed Mission Revival style as their school, only with more glass. Nick supposed this was supposed to capitalize on the beachfront aesthetics that came from the ocean and the incredibly blue skies but because it was the obvious choice, it disappointed him.

He liked their rooms better, which were icy and modern. Shag rugs in cool tones, modern furniture with chrome, white couches. Jay raced around, acting like a fucking child, exclaiming over everything, before flinging herself into her room and saying, “Oh my God, I have my own fridge?”

Rolling his eyes to himself, Nick followed the sound of her voice to the cracked open doorway before pushing open her door the rest of the way. She was flopped on her bed like a starfish in her shorts and “Counting Crows” shirt, with a thin polka-dot scarf tying back her hair. “You are so fucking lame, blue jay,” he said. “Seriously.”

Jay kicked a sandal at him. It hit him in the stomach before bouncing off. “Close the door. I’m going to change.”

Nick arched an eyebrow. “Need some alone time with the fridge, Jay?”

Her face flushed. “Don’t be gross. I’m just going down to the beach.”

“Wait for me,” he said. “I’ll go with you.”

She hesitated. “Okay.”

Nick went to his own room, which was nearly identical to Jay’s. He didn’t think it was particularly noteworthy. Everything in the fridge was surprisingly cheap. Mid-tier alcohol in small bottles, the kinds of European cookies you could easily obtain at international grocery stores. The hotel had their own branded water instead of Fiji or Evian. He grabbed one and made a face. It tasted cheap, too, like it had been warmed in the bottle it came in.

Setting the bottle aside, Nick changed into his swim trunks, throwing on an unbuttoned shirt so he could go walking around the boardwalk later if he felt like it. Puka shells and espadrilles, two things he normally wouldn’t be caught dead in, completed the beachy look. He put on his mirrored sunglasses as he walked out, throwing the room into sepia tones.

Jay was wearing one of her silly one-pieces with pink and white striped shorts and the sandals she'd kicked at him. Around her throat was a silver necklace with a diamond-studded bear and a little J. As they clomped out, he asked, "Where'd you get the necklace?"

She peered at him from beneath her floppy hat. She smelled very strongly of sunscreen. That was another thing her stupid, leathery spray-tanned witch of a mother liked to chide her about, Nick thought. Getting too dark in the sun. "Your dad gave it to me just now," she said, after a moment. "I guess it was because I got into Berkeley. He'd probably be mad if he knew I passed on Stanford," she added quietly.

Nick tried to remember the last time his father had given him a gift outside of a Christmas or a birthday. "Congrats," he said emptily. "You excited?"

"Yeah!" she said. "I've been talking to my future roommates, Cori and Jessi. They're both really nice."

"Oh, blue jay," he said, with unexpected heat. "You think *everyone* is nice."

Jay blinked. "I think most people probably are."

"Only when they want something. That's why I'm not nice. I don't want shit from anyone."

"Well, that's jaded." She gripped the pendant protectively. "To be honest, I don't even really like the necklace. It's too flashy—like something my mom would wear. But he was looking at me so I felt like I had to wear it at least once before throwing it in a drawer."

"If I don't like something, I don't wear it," said Nick. "Sell it if you don't like it."

"Is that what you're planning on doing with your puka shells?" she asked snippily. "Because you sure wouldn't stop harping about how they weren't your style when I gave them to you."

"I'm wearing them, aren't I?" he asked, touching the necklace. It was warm from his skin.

Jay looked at him for a moment. There was a strange expression on her face, as if she had the sun on her eyes. Maybe she did, because she slid her glasses back on. "I guess you are. I'm glad you like it."

I don't like it, he thought, willing her to understand. *I like you, Jay.*

Nick sat on the sand, watching the waves crash over the shore. He loved swimming but didn't particularly relish the briny reek of the ocean or how the water teased his hair into stiff spikes.

Jay, predictably, was already in the water. She'd lost her hat in the waves and it was bobbing away and some blonde surfer guy was helping her retrieve it. He handed it to her, arm around his board in a way Nick supposed was intended to show off how cut he was while Jay gripped her hat in front of her like it was a shield.

Unwilling to watch anymore, Nick leaned back and crumbled a sand dollar he'd found, breaking the thin pieces of calcium carbonate apart into little sharp-edged pieces. Jay had told him in the car that they were related to sea urchins and the little floral patterns were called "food grooves." And then her mother had cut her off and said, "Baby, that's enough. I have a headache. You're such a little chatterbox—give it a rest, won't you?"

Jay, now sodden, trod back to him on bare, sandy feet, falling onto the sand next to him with a little oomph. "I almost lost my hat," she said redundantly. "No more swimming in the ocean for me today, I guess. It's a sign."

"That was swimming?" Nick asked, without opening his eyes. "Looked more like spazzing."

"You totally belong on this beach," she told him. "You're such a crab."

Nick flipped her off.

"Nice," she said. "Come on, Mr. Crabby Pants. Take a look. I found a purple dwarf olive on my back from the water. It's in perfect condition."

"A what?" She was holding out a dime-sized shell the color of an infected blood blister. "Oh."

"Quentin said if I found a good shell, he could bore a hole in it for me so I can thread it with cord," she said happily. "I hope I can find a scallop or a California cone."

At the mention of Quentin, he glanced at her in annoyance, and then his eyes caught on the silvery rivulets of water gleaming on her breasts. The cold water had made her nipples hard. Something hot and icy flooded through him, making his ears ring. He pushed her hand away. "Stop waving that in my face," he said. "It reeks."

“It does not. And anyway, I'm going to bleach it when we get home, so you won't have to worry about it.” Oblivious to his torture, Jay set the shell carefully on the corner of her towel, pulling the brim of her hat down over her face. “If you find another one, let me know. I'd love a sand dollar, too.”

Remembering the sand dollar he'd crushed, Nick felt a brief flash of regret. It quickly faded as his eyes drifted back to her chest. The suit was cut deeper than she had probably realized, or she never would have bought it. With her shoulders pulled back, the material was almost sheer.

Nick heard himself make a strange sound and she looked over at him. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes were the color of his father's scotch in the light: a clear, guileless hazel. Nick stared at his stepsister as his veins seemed to burn; it was like he had a whole colony of fire ants inside his body and they'd all decided to sting him at once. *She's so fucking beautiful*, he thought, nearly reeling from it. Fresh-faced and angelic and almost repulsively attractive.

What if Jay did realize what she did to him—and to other men? How could she *not* know? How innocent could a stripper's daughter really be?

It's your job to protect her.

He looked at Jay and saw only concern and unease. Without realizing it, a fierce scowl had overtaken his features, masking them like a shadow. He tore off his shirt and kicked off his shoes with such violence that his stepsister leaned back, covering the shell protectively.

“Hey, watch it! What are you doing?”

“It's too fucking hot on this damn beach. I'm going for a swim.”

The water was terrible: ice-cold and salty, stinging his eyes and sinuses and filling his trunks with drifting sand. But it soothed the burning and helped him think clearly.

When Nick glanced back, a group of older guys were talking to Jay, which filled with him a draining anger. Guys were always talking to Jay. He dove to hear the muffled rush of the waves beneath the surface of the water and when he bobbed back up, the guys were gone and Jay was alone and wearing his shirt around her slender shoulders.

She avoided his eyes as he approached, dripping wet and soaked to the bone. There were two spots of color high on her cheeks, like she'd been slapped.

"I'm cold," she said, in a subdued voice. "Can we go back now? I'm tired of the beach."

"Fine. I don't care." He hadn't really wanted to go down to the boardwalk anyway.

Jay slipped her sandals on, tucking the shell into the pocket of his shirt as she tied her towel around her hips like a sarong. She was 5'10" and he was 5'11" but he had much broader shoulders, so the sleeves of his shirt flapped down to her elbows. She had knotted the hem around her waist to keep it closed and it looked absolutely ridiculous with the towel.

"What did those guys say to you?"

"Nothing. They were just lost. I don't want to talk about it."

"Do they have anything to do with the reason you decided to steal my shirt?"

"No. And I didn't steal it. I borrowed it because—like I told you—I was *cold*."

"Maybe I'm cold, too," Nick said idly and Jay shot him an irritated look.

"You're a boy."

"Boys don't get cold?" The color in her face intensified as her eyes abruptly dropped.

"Just drop it," said Jay. "I'll give it to you in the room."

God, I wish you would. "It's my shirt." He tugged at it. "Give it to me now."

"Nick," she snapped, sounding truly annoyed. "Stop it."

He knew he probably should stop but something inside him had frayed and broken. He reached for her again and she hit him—not hard, but it was definitely a hit and it made him grunt. They fell onto the grass with a shushing sound, Jay beneath him, all those soft curves cushioning the hard planes of his body. When she squirmed beneath him, he felt it in a thousand places.

"You *asshole*." She shoved at his chest, her hands cool against his bare skin. "God, I hate you."

"Do you really hate me, Jay?"

He let himself fall forward onto his forearms and Jay went tense. His shirt had slipped open and he could feel her chest grazing his with each breath, their faces mere inches apart. “Nick?” Her eyes were wide. “What are you—”

Kiss me, he thought dizzily. *I want you to kiss me.*

“Oh.” It was a small 'oh,' like a squeak. Quick as a flash, she slipped out from his arm, brushing the grass from her clothes in a quick, agitated movement. Before he could reach for her or call her name, she was running, his untied shirt fluttering around her arms as she fled.

She hadn't even realized that she'd forgotten her towel.

Nick bent to retrieve it and felt his necklace give as the string, weakened by the salty water of the ocean, finally snapped. All of the tiny white beads rolled into the grass like hail, lost.

■□□□■

Do you really hate me, Jay?

Jay sat in the cabana lounge, clutching her purse. She was wearing one of the sundresses that she'd bought with Nick, which she now regretted bringing. She didn't like any of the clothes she had taken with her—expensive, revealing, not her style at all. What she really wanted was jeans and a sweatshirt with a hood she could bury herself in.

Beside her was a virgin daiquiri that was slowly melting into watermelon-colored slush. It was too sweet and had a strong chemical tang and she didn't like it.

A few guys had come up to her while she had been sitting on her own, offering to buy her drinks. She'd scared most of them off by telling them that she was just seventeen and waiting for her mom but one guy had been creepily persistent, offering to sit there and wait with her, like he fucking knew, and Jay had immediately gotten up and went to the bar.

Bless that female bartender. She had figured out what was going on and 86'd the creep, letting Jay sit there at the counter with her even though she was clearly under twenty-one. Jay plucked at the stupid teddy bear necklace, rubbing her fingers over the diamonds. She kept thinking of

Nick's words to her on their way to the party, so eerily prescient—*she's jealous of you*.

Since she was young her mother had been telling her that she was unattractive—not “ugly,” because that would have been too easy to deny. Harder to argue that her thighs weren't too thick, that her hair wasn't too curly, that she really wasn't too fucking tall. Pinching and prodding and picking apart everything from her hair to her eyes, telling her that she *talked* too much.

Guys had always bothered her but guys bothered everyone. Jay had seen the way they shouted and hollered at the strip club. She just figured that all men in the world, with very few exceptions, were creeps. But what if that wasn't the case? What if the problem was actually her?

How'd you like a pearl necklace, sugar tits?

Jay had to blink back a sudden rush of tears.

This whole year—it had just been one thing after another. Michael calling her the prettiest girl in town and then telling her he'd had a crush on her for a while, and then patting her condescendingly on the head when she asked him if it was because of the way she looked, asking her teasingly if it was because she wanted more compliments.

Jordan had told her that she had been overreacting when she had gotten angry, that if she didn't get with Michael, Angela was just going to steal him away again and this time Michael might let her. Jay, still hurt for reasons she couldn't even begin to explain, thought to herself that right now, that didn't really sound like such a bad outcome.

And then those creeps on the beach had approached her and made her feel absolutely disgusting and Nick had—she swallowed—and stared down at her melting drink. She didn't want to think about Nick or the way he had looked at her.

Maybe it's good I'm going away, she thought, pressing her face into her hands. *Maybe what I need to do is go away forever and never come back*.

When she lowered her hands from her head, movement caught her eye. It was her reflection in the mirrored surface behind the bar, framed by gleaming bottles of spirits. There were floral patterns and swirls etched into the glass that were reminiscent of Victorian Chinoiserie, warping and distorting the image of her face.

She stared at herself hard but saw nothing remarkable. It was the same face she saw in the bathroom mirror each morning. To her, it was ordinary. Hazel eyes, curly hair, light brown skin.

And then, there was another face in the glass, startling her badly—Nick's, or what Nick's might look like in thirty years, if he let himself be lost to the vagaries of excess and time.

“Hello, Justine.”

Jay glanced at Damon warily—he was a tall man, standing around 6'3” and she had the feeling that he used his body to intimidate people. When he was out with her tiny mother, she looked like a child standing next to him. He was wearing a vintage Tommy Bahama shirt and slacks, and was the last person she wanted to see right now apart from her stepbrother.

“I was just about to leave.” She pushed her drink away. “I know I'm not supposed to be in the bar.”

“That's all right,” he said. “Stay. I could use the company.”

What about what I could use? she thought, irrationally angry. *Maybe I want to be alone.*

She slid her drink across its trail of condensation while Damon ordered an Old Fashioned, wishing desperately that she was alone in her room.

“So,” he said, once he had his drink—she noticed he didn't thank the bartender, glancing through her as she provided the drink as if she weren't worth his time. “Where's Nicholas?”

“I don't know. Probably in his room,” she said guardedly.

“I only ask because he seemed out of sorts. He wouldn't tell me why.”

Jay turned away so he wouldn't see her let out her breath. “Sorry. No idea.” When she turned around again, her stepfather was regarding her intensely and she wondered if Nick hadn't told him what had happened after all. But the line of his eyes was lower, level with her chest.

“You're wearing my necklace.” She flinched when he plucked up her pendant and the rough pads of his fingers grazed her breast. “It looks very nice on you.”

And now it's going in a drawer forever. Forcing a smile, Jay pulled away so the pendant fell back against her ribs with a hollow thud. “Thanks.”

“Congratulations on getting into Berkeley. I do wish you had considered Stanford, though. You'd be a legacy, you know,” he added. “You might have told me that you'd been accepted.”

How the hell had he found out? Had he asked her friends? Gone through the trash? The idea of being watched like that without her knowledge disturbed her. “I like Berkeley. It suits me.”

“I'm not so sure about that,” said Damon, to her irritation, “but it is your decision. Regardless, it is a good school and it will present well on paper. By the time you graduate, you'll have connections, your little projects. I wish Nicholas had your mind for philanthropy. It's crucial in small doses.”

“He seems to think he can do whatever he wants.” *Like his father.*

“Well, yes,” Damon said, leaning on the bar. “He can. He's a Beaucroft.”

And Beaucrofts get to do anything? Jay had never spoken this frankly to her stepfather before—not in so many words. He wasn't exactly making her like him. Normally, she wouldn't have dared talk back but she was angry and upset, and she knew she would soon be leaving.

“Why aren't I a Beaucroft?” Jay stared hard at the polished counter. “Why haven't you adopted me?” She could feel him looking at her and said, dully. “What?”

“It's an interesting question.” He stirred his drink. “I'm surprised you haven't asked sooner.”

“Well, why haven't you? Is it because I'm an embarrassment to you? I work hard and I've never embarrassed you or Nicholas or my mother. I was valedictorian. I got into almost every school I applied to. I work *hard*. Why am I the only one who isn't really a part of this family?”

Her eyes stung and she held back the tears with angry impatience. *Don't you dare cry, Jay.*

She waited, tense and hardly daring to move, as Damon turned back to the bar and downed a good portion of his drink in one long swallow. “I thought I was in love with your mother when I met her,” he said unexpectedly. “She was so beautiful up there on the stage. This beautiful blonde creature. Appalling fashion sense, but lissome—a rose in filth, I thought.”

You odious man, thought Jay.

“She seemed so delicate, wistful . . . innocent.” The way he lingered on that word made her lock her shoulders in a shudder. “Quoting prose and poetry. So interested in the marvels and the mysteries of the world, and so utterly uninterested in my money. Or so I thought.”

She called you her ticket to a new life, thought Jay. *She knew exactly what she was doing*.

Wetting her lips, she said hesitantly, incredulously, “My mother . . . she quoted poetry?”

“Yes,” Damon said, with a venom that surprised her. “She certainly duped me. At the time, I thought I had found the proverbial whore with the heart of gold. My own *Pretty Woman*. You would be surprised at how many men buy into that fantasy, Justine. The lure of the unjustly fallen woman. But you know your mother. It wasn't quite that fairytale ending.”

Jay shook her head, thoroughly revolted, but he seemed to take it for agreement.

“It clicked for me when I gave her that bracelet engraved with the quote from *Jane Eyre*. Her alleged favorite book—*your* favorite book.” *That look*, thought Jay, remembering her mother's heated gaze. *No wonder*. “That's when I realized that what your mother had actually done was craft a fantasy persona for herself . . . based entirely on yours.”

Jay couldn't think of what to say, so she said the only thing that came to mind. “My mother's not a whore.”

“Yes, she is,” said Damon. “She married me for my money, and now the blush is off the rose. It is what it is, but let's not mince words. She is a whore. An expensive one.”

“I'm going back to my room,” said Jay. “Have a nice night.”

“Oh, don't be dull. If you don't wish to speak of your mother, we can talk of other things. Tell me, have you given any thought to what you'll be doing when you leave college? I understand that you've been seeing Michael Valdez. Is it serious?”

Jay, clenching the underside of the stool and ready to leap off it, suddenly found herself wondering where the nice bartender was. Michael had told her that their fathers did business. Had he enlisted Damon to help get them back together? “We broke up,” she said flatly.

"I can't say I'm surprised. It never seemed like you were interested in being a society wife and Michael is very much his father's son—spineless and quick to bend."

"I thought you were friends."

"We're business partners, my dear. Not friends." He glanced at her. "So what do you wish to do with your life, Justine? Do you want to go into business? Do you want to travel? Or would you prefer to stay closer to home?" She looked down and then up in cold horror. Damon had put his hand on her knee. Seemingly oblivious to her discomfort, although he must have felt her tense, he said, "There's plenty of room in the family business for you. You might not be a Beaucroft now—but perhaps, very soon, you could be."

"I—" Jay looked at his hand again. For a moment, it felt like she couldn't breathe. *This has to be a mistake*, she thought wildly, despite the panic thrashing through her. "You mean, when you adopt me," she said in a thick voice. "As your daughter."

She thought, *hoped*, he would laugh and say, "Yes, Jay, of course that's what I meant. What did you *think*?"

Instead, he said, rather coldly, "This coyness doesn't become you." As her hand tightened on the cold metal bar beneath the wood, he went on, "You're already so close to Nicholas and you're an incredibly beautiful young woman. My colleagues are constantly coming up to me to inquire about you. And your mother is a ceaseless burden. No, surely you see, Justine, that this is the ideal solution. For your own sake. You could be married right after you graduate."

"To you," she said, in a high, faint voice.

"You're all alone in the world, my dear. I've seen how men look at you—you don't know the thoughts that go through a man's mind when they see a girl who looks like you . . . but I do." Damon moved his hand higher, just beneath her thigh, and she saw his eyes dip to study her body through her dress. "Some women—vulnerable women—need someone older to take them in hand . . . to protect them from those who would take advantage."

She was off the stool so suddenly that she nearly dragged Damon off his. With shaking hands, she tugged down the hem of her dress. "No—I . . . I think I'd be much more c-comfortable making it on my own," she said,

feeling like her vocal chords were rusty wires in her throat. “M-maybe I don't want to be a B-Beaucroft.”

“You're making a foolish mistake, Justine. I am sure you would rather have me as your ally than as your enemy.”

“Fuck you,” said Jay, shocking herself. The sudden narrowing of his cold eyes made her very sorry she'd given into the impulse.

“Perhaps I was mistaken,” he said, leaning back. “Perhaps you are as stupid as your mother.”

Jay let out a breath, closing her eyes briefly.

“It would be awkward to explain a sudden termination of your enrollment,” she heard him say. “So I will continue to pay for your university experience. However, should you ever find yourself in any sort of trouble, I assure you—you will find no quarter with me.”

Jay turned and fled then, heading into her room and slamming the door hard enough that her mother shouted something about her headache through the bedroom door. She heard Nick slam his fist against the wall they shared, and that was just a fresh reminder of how alone she really was. Even if she told her mother what had happened in that bar, she wasn't sure she would believe her, and even if she did, she would just be blamed for her own actions.

And Nick—

A sob burst from her throat and she swallowed it quickly when she heard the door open again. There was a series of footsteps, the sound of pure, controlled fury, and then she heard Damon slip into the room he shared with her mother, followed by the rhythmic, unmistakable rocking sound of a headboard slamming against the wall and her mother's low moans.

He wants me to hear, she thought, sick and terrified. Oh my God.

Suddenly, the daiquiri was frothing up her throat and Jay barely made it to the bathroom before throwing up. When it was over, she washed her face and brushed her teeth, staring blearily at her red-eyed reflection. Then, and only then, did she allow herself to cry.

Chapter Nineteen

2017

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“Come to my room tonight.”

Nicholas didn't touch her again on the ride home but she was aware of him in an agonizing way that seemed to hum like electricity against her skin, and she knew that he was aware of her. It was as if the two of them were caught up in their own personal storm. He might have loved her once, but she wasn't going to kid herself into thinking that would save her from him now. If anything, time had only tempered his obsession, honing it like a well-kept blade, and he was keeping her on the point of it, poised one thrust away from total devastation.

They walked in together in silence. Alone in her room, Jay changed out of her blouse and skirt with shaking hands. All she had were flannel pajama bottoms and loose T-shirts. Hardly the come-hither clothes he'd probably envisioned.

She brushed her teeth and padded barefoot into his room, cursing when she tripped over his brogues. The bed was empty, still unmade from this morning, and he'd thrown his briefcase on the small couch in the next room. So he'd been in here, then. Where had he gone?

Maybe he was going to make her wait.

Jay sat on the edge of his bed and slowly reclined against it. The mattress was comfortable. The sheets smelled like him, basil and grapefruit. Spicy, bitter, and aromatic, all at once. The grapefruit, she knew, was from a body wash he liked but she wondered at the basil. She stared at the ceiling until the darkness at the edge of her vision seemed to slowly creep in. *This is stupid*, she thought, clutching the neck of her T-shirt. *Why am I even here?*

She slid off the cool sheets and slipped back into the hall, noting the dim glow of light over the half-wall with the Louise Bourgeois sculpture. She peered over the edge and saw Nick sitting on the sofa. He'd dragged out one of his old console games and was playing something with lots of gunfire and explosions. *Well then*, she thought, surprised. *Guess I get to sleep in my own bed.*

She pulled one of the water bottles she hadn't needed out of her purse and set it on her nightstand, listening to the pounding of her heart as her cat curled up on her stomach. Her dreams were strange—surprisingly unpleasant. More of a series of vignettes composed in impressions and emotions, rather than something solid and cohesive; they made her feel as if she had forgotten something terribly important, although what that might be, she had no idea.

When she woke up, she thought she was a teenager, and she couldn't understand why the ringing of the school bell was coming from her bedroom, or why the sound of it filled her with huge bubbles of panic. *I'll be late*, she thought. It took her a moment to realize that the sound was actually coming from her cell phone. Someone was calling her.

It was 1am—had someone died? She swiped for it, startling the cat, who dropped off her to the floor. “H-hello?” she whispered. “Who is this?” *Please don't let it be my mom.*

“Come down to the pool.”

Nicholas? This was so far from what she was expecting that it took her brain a moment to shift. “What are you doing? It's the middle of the night.” *I thought somebody died.*

“Jay.” He stretched out her name, turning that one syllable into an exhortation to sin. “You said you would come to me.”

“I did come to you,” she mumbled grumpily. “Six hours ago. I waited for you, but you were playing video games, so I went back to bed.”

“That's what it's like at the top, little bird. You get to keep people waiting and they still have to jump.”

“I'm too tired to jump. I have to work tomorrow, and I'm going back to sleep.” *You arrogant swine.*

“Five minutes, Jay. That's how long you have before I come up there to get you.”

The phone went dead.

“Shit.” Jay pulled a sweatshirt on over her T-shirt, hating herself for giving in so easily to his demands. But Nicholas had never been one to make idle threats, which was exactly how she had ended up as his little blackmail mistress. The thought opened up a raw wound on her soul,

making her ache. *You bastard*, she thought, as she padded through the dark and empty house.

She saw him immediately as she rounded the concrete planter filled with lilies of the valley. He was just wearing swim trunks and the sight of his bare, wet chest made her instantly wary when his eyes met hers as he stood. In the lights of the pool, his irises were a glowing aqua.

The sight of all that water running over his skin made her throat tighten. She looked away from the rivulets trailing down his abs, clenching her teeth at the obnoxious, knowing tilt to his smile as he began swimming again. He looped around for another pass before stopping to tread water a few feet away from the edge where she was standing. "Like what you see?"

"What," she began, biting off the words, "do you want?"

"I'm not sure I like your tone." His eyes flicked over her. "Where's your swimsuit?"

"I don't have one." She jammed her hands into her pockets. "I didn't think I'd need one."

"That's too bad." The fluid undulation of his pelvis as he propelled himself through the water made it impossible to look at him at all. His swim trunks weren't exactly indecent, but the wet fabric hid very little while he was on his back. "No clothes in the pool. Take them off."

Keeping her eyes averted, she said, "I can hear you just fine from here."

"Blue jay." Nicholas slanted her a feral grin. "You know I didn't call you out here to talk."

That stung. She blinked rapidly, trying not to let her humiliation show up on her face, but she had never been particularly good at hiding her feelings. *Especially not from him.*

She glanced at him unwillingly. No longer on his back, he was at the edge again, arms folded over the tiled lip of the pool. He raised his eyebrows.

"I'm serious. Lose the clothes or I drag you in."

Jay backed from him, retreating into the shadows as she unzipped her sweatshirt. The metallic drag of it was so loud, it felt obscene. Only the pool was lit and she thought maybe he couldn't see her as well as she could

see him, but she doubted it. She shot Nicholas another wary glance. He was watching her closely with his chin resting on one hand.

She made an impatient sound and turned her back as she peeled her shirt off, entering the pool in just her panties with one arm covering her breasts. The water lapped at her skin, warmed, but only barely. The smell of chlorine burned her nose. It had been years since she'd been in a pool. She kept to the edge, away from the lights.

Nicholas resumed swimming. She watched him, looking around the garden nervously. She could smell flowers, the roses and something night-blooming. Jasmine, maybe. A terrible thought occurred to her. "Don't you have security cameras?"

"Not out here."

Jay swallowed. "It's cold."

"I think it's quite nice, actually. Why don't you swim with me? That'll warm you up." He circled her with the careless indolence of a cruising shark. "We can race."

"That would be stupid." Jay spun to keep him in sight. "You'd win."

"Oh, I don't know about that. You might win. I haven't competed in years and I'm easily distracted." Another one of those almost-smiles flickered at the corner of his mouth. "I recommend the backstroke."

"I don't have time for these childish games. Just do whatever you brought me out here to do. I want to go back to sleep—and I don't want to race," she said irritably, folding her arms tighter.

Nicholas glanced at her, his expression unreadable, before diving again. *Where did he go?* She turned, looking around for him in the pool, but his trunks had been blue like the tiles on the bottom and they had drifted from the lights. "Nick?" she said.

"I'm sorry," a voice said, inches from her ear. "I didn't realize I was wasting your time."

Startled, she backed into him. Gasping, she skittered away and he laughed and dove again. When he resurfaced, he was in front of her, slicking his wet hair out of his face.

"Remind me, how much did we decide your time was worth, Jay? Thirty-two dollars an hour to have you sit at a desk and five thousand an hour to bend you over one, wasn't it?"

“You're disgusting,” Jay hissed.

“And you're nervous.” He was hedging her towards the deep end. “Can you swim?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Good.” He lunged.

Jay shrieked, kicking away from him to dive. Like most kids in California, she had been taught when she was young, but only enough not to drown in a community pool. She was a little horrified at how fast he was in the water, and how easily he caught and wrestled her to the surface.

“You are such a bastard!”

He laughed, waiting a heartbeat for her to catch her breath, and then he kissed her. His lips were wet and tasted like chlorine. She could barely see him because her eyelashes were covered in drops of water and burning from the chemicals. This time, there was a hint of restraint in the way he touched her: control tightly leashed. It left her aching for something stronger, and she was glad the water carried her, because her knees felt so weak.

Nicholas abruptly scooped her up beneath her ass and backed her against the wall, forcing her to wrap her legs around his waist to stay buoyant. She felt him push against her underwear and squirmed, a nervous sound escaping her lips when he pried her arm away from her chest and gathered it, along with her other wrist, behind her back.

The look in his eyes—Jay swallowed hard. “You're not going to . . . to fuck me in the pool, are you?” she asked weakly.

“No.” He lifted his eyes, pushing a few damp curls of hair out of her face with his free hand. “I'm not going to fuck you in the pool.” He mocked her tone, giving the 'F' in 'fuck' a slight buzz. “I do suggest you hold on tight to me, though. I'm going to be needing this other hand.”

For what? “For what?”

He flicked her nose. “Wouldn't you like to know.”

Trapped without the use of her arms, chest-deep in water, Jay felt a bolt of pure, white-hot fear lick at her from the inside. She tugged at her arms and Nicholas made a soft, admonitory sound as he began to move against her, rubbing his body against hers as he captured her mouth in another searing kiss, using that gentle friction to part her beneath her clothes until the hard ridge of his erection was rocking right against her—

Jay's hands convulsed behind her back.

He bit gently at her lip as his hand slid down her belly and into her waistband. She made a sound against his mouth, which made him kiss her even more fiercely as he began thrusting his fingers. Beneath the chilly layer of water, he was warm, but she still found herself shivering.

"I'm slipping," she said piteously.

"That's why I told you to hold on to me with those luscious thighs of yours." He shifted a little, bumping her up with his thigh. "Looks like I'm not the only one who gets distracted."

Jay let out a rough breath. "Bastard."

"Mmm. I don't think you want me to call you that." He spoke against her lips. "I might not let you come."

She met his eyes and felt heat spark in her cheeks when he pulled back to ogle her in a way that made her squirm. "Funny how you think you're required for that. I can get myself off."

Nicholas's smile widened. "Not if I tie you up."

The sharp gasp that came from her throat seemed to come from someone else.

"Interesting response," said Nicholas. "So, what's it going to be? Would you like to come for Daddy? Or am I going to have to tie your hands behind your back so you can't play with yourself while I'm fucking you? Because I will be as soon as we get out of this pool."

"Ah." Jay turned her face away when he laughed quietly.

"I didn't quite catch that," he murmured.

She tensed as that slow, melting heat built between her thighs. "I—I want to come." She swallowed hard, hazarding a glance at him. "Please."

"Please what?"

Winning inwardly in despair, she heard herself say, "Please, Daddy. Let me come. I've been good."

He let out a harshly satisfied sound and finally added the pressure she needed. She arched with a splash, raising arcs of water from the tranquil surface. She felt a low, scarcely-perceptible rumble vibrate through his throat as he slid a hand beneath her head to cushion it from the concrete lip of the pool as he pressed her more roughly against the wall. "Kiss me."

She grabbed onto his shoulders with her freed hands. They both broke water and he kissed her like he was trying to devour the very breath in her lungs. With her eyes closed, he could have been any man—a man with the mouth of an unrepentant sinner. He pulled his hand out of her underwear and she whimpered into his kiss.

Jay felt him smile before he pulled away. “Time to get out.”

Before she could move or think to protest, he'd already scooped her up. “W-wait.” She scrabbled against him and felt his arms tighten. “Where are we going?”

“My bedroom.”

“But the cameras—”

“Better hold on tight this time.”

Nicholas walked out with her, still dripping water, through the lounge, into the foyer, and then up the stairs, forcing her to cling to him at an odd, ungainly angle to hide herself from view. In the master, he dropped her ungracefully onto the expensive jacquard bedspread.

“We're going to ruin the sheets,” she said, as he stripped off his wet swim trunks. “The chlorine is going to make the colors r—”

“Don't care.” Naked, he prowled towards her in the shadows and all the moisture left her mouth when she caught a glimpse of his cock; it was fully hard, jutting towards his belly. She felt it brush her as he leaned over her body to open the drawer of his nightstand to take out a condom. He rolled it on, barred in ribbons of shadow, and then he yanked her panties down, leaving them snarled around her calves as he pushed her thighs apart and slid into her in one smooth, hard stroke.

It was more tender than painful this time; he paused a moment, his own breathing quick and light. She could feel him looking at her. Then he bent one of her legs and started to fuck her in a steady, driving rhythm, reaching beneath her backside and rocking her into his thrusts the way he wanted until she was arching her hips on own.

“Good girl,” he said, letting his hands fall away, which sent a strange tingle down her nape.

He came very quickly. Maybe because she already had. If so, he fucked differently when it was for his own benefit; it was faster and a bit more

brutal, closer to the tempo with which he'd had her suck his cock. It made her feel a little used.

Maybe that's the point. Jay braced herself against the soaking sheets, pinned at the hips by his final thrust. He had stopped shuddering, head lowered to the crook of her neck; she could feel each of his exhalations fanning softly against her throat, stirring the drying locks of her hair. She shivered. Her arms were still covered in goosebumps from his low, gravelly moan.

Nicholas pulled out of her and unhooked her underwear from her legs, letting them fall to the floor with a slap. He rolled onto his back and when he pulled her against him, Jay flung out an arm to instinctively halt her roll that ended up draped over his stomach. She felt the taut flesh jump under her touch, but to recoil now seemed like an act of weakness, so she let her hand lie where it was, flat on his abdomen. His other hand curled over his belly to rest on hers.

Jay let him press her against him, trying not to shake. Her skin still felt stiff and cold. He leaned down and tugged up the coverlet to cover them both. Gradually, she stopped trembling but she was unable to relax completely. His presence was stultifying, suffusing her lungs, seeping into her every pore. *He's so warm*, she thought, leaning her head against his shoulder.

It seemed wrong that he should be so warm when his heart was so cold.

"It's been a while." She felt him relax beside her, the arm around her waist slackening in lethargic contentment. Absently, he added, "You come like you haven't been touched in years."

Jay stiffened. "Don't say things like that."

"Why?" He traced his fingers down her back. "Are they true?"

She didn't respond, setting her jaw in an effort to swallow back her furious retort. But he seemed to feel the sudden tension in her body because his stomach hitched beneath her hand in a silent laugh and he squeezed her a little tighter.

"Fine. Don't answer. But I am going to find out what you like about the dark."

Her eyes, which had started to slip closed, opened wide. "What do you mean?"

“You enjoy doing it with the lights off.” She heard the quiet rustle of his head shifting on the pillow as he looked down at her. “My little succubus. I heard your breath catch when I mentioned tying you up—what would you do if I bound your wrists and fucked you in the dark?”

Oh my God. Her fingers clenched involuntarily.

“I see.” She could almost hear his smile. “Well then. Sweet dreams, blue jay.”



Jay woke up wrapped in Nicholas's arms. Or rather, he was wrapped in hers. Her arm was still around his waist. She was curled into his side with her face buried in the crook of his neck. All night, apparently. When she sat up and tried to turn her head she experienced a painful cramp. Wincing, Jay allowed her eyes to bounce around the room. It was still dark. Only a bit of light was flooding in from the window from one of the porch lights; the orange glow of it glanced off the bridge of his nose, the edge of one arched cheekbone.

Carefully, Jay pushed back the warm sheets and slipped nude from the bed, making a face when she stepped on something cold and wet. Those were probably her underwear, still soaked from the pool. She bent and grabbed them, fleeing to her room and feeling like she was doing the walk of shame through her own house.

Not my house, she corrected herself immediately. *I don't live here anymore—it's his.*

Carbon was waiting for her, prowling around in agitation. He still wasn't used to the new room, which made two of them. Jay fed him before dressing for work, pulling on fresh undergarments, a tie-waist pencil skirt, and an asymmetric blouse with bell sleeves. As soon as she had her clothes on she felt better, more like herself. She grabbed a new book from her bookshelf—*Fire & Hemlock*—shoving it into her purse on the way out her door.

Her eyes felt crusty and she swiped at them in annoyance as she went down the stairs. Stupid Nicholas. Why did he have to wake her up in the middle of the night? She felt a rush of heat upon catching a glimpse of the

pool from the stairs. She wasn't sure she would ever be able to go near it again. Not without thinking of what Nicholas had done to her in it.

You come like you haven't been touched in years.

Who said things like that to other people? What was that even supposed to mean? Jay thought it sounded like an insult and it probably was. He'd told her she was bad at kissing, once. Maybe he thought she was bad at sex, too—although if he really thought that, she couldn't fathom why he'd want to hold her to his stupid contract in the first place. Jay slammed her purse on a bar stool as she brewed herself some coffee, glancing impatiently at her phone.

Oh shit, she thought, right as the coffee machine began to sputter. It was only 4:30am. No wonder she was so tired. Nicholas didn't even leave for work until 6:30, and his alarm was set for 5:45. She could have gone back to bed and had another hour of sleep.

Maybe I'll nap on the couch in the den. If she was careful, she wouldn't even wrinkle her clothes. She'd certainly dozed on BART often enough. Jay turned towards the kitchen door, orienting herself towards the drawers for a spoon, and froze at a sudden movement in the hall.

"Morning," said Nicholas.

"Hey," she said, in as neutral a voice as she could muster.

He got up earlier than she did, so she had always seen him fully dressed. But now he was only wearing loose pajama bottoms that rode dangerously low on his hips, his hair still mussed and disheveled from sleep—and *other things*, her brain filled in silently, making her focus intently on the silverware as she selected a spoon with far more deliberation than necessary.

"You're up early." He eyed her appreciatively before turning to open the fridge door, giving her a view of his bare back that had her studying the reassuring darkness of her coffee. "Want some toast?"

"I can't," she said, watching the bubbles gather on the side of the mug. "Milk."

"No bread." Suddenly he was close to her, close enough that she could feel the warmth from his skin. Holding his plate in one hand, he tilted his head to meet her gaze. "How do you live?"

"I bake my own."

“You bake?”

“Sometimes.” Jay looked at him and then away. “If I feel like it.”

“You can use the oven all you want. I never do and Carmela doesn't bake.”

Jay's mouth tightened at the mention of the rude housekeeper. “What happened to Yelena?”

“She had a fall a few years after you left. She quit due to health reasons. Broken hip. I think she lives with her daughter now. Her other daughter—not the one who teaches.” He turned abruptly, dropping the two pieces of toasted bread on his plate. “I send her a card every year.”

“You do?”

Misunderstanding her tone, he said, “Not personally. My secretary sends her a card every year. *You*,” he corrected himself, “will be sending her a card every year.”

“Is she all right? A broken hip is pretty serious at her age.”

“I'm surprised you're so invested after what she did to you.”

“What *you* made her do to me,” Jay corrected, drawing herself up against the coldness seeping into her chest like icy fog. “You were the one who drove the wedge between us. And anyway, it's called *compassion*.”

“Don't worry about it, then. She continues to reap the benefits of her betrayal. I cut her a generous severance check and send her an additional one at Christmas that I'm sure warms her heart even more than the card. Maybe this year you can sign it from both of us.”

“So generous,” she said flatly, glaring down at her mug.

“I can be.”

Nicholas's suggestive tone made her look over at him. He was leaning back on the counter in a way that was making his stomach muscles flex. Almost like he was . . . posing. For her.

Jay pressed her lips together. She could imagine his brand of *generosity*. “I really doubt it.”

“I'm taking you out shopping with me when I buy groceries this weekend.” He reached over and tugged playfully at the bow at her waist, chuckling when she slapped his hand away. “You can get whatever you want. I can't have my petulant little bird wasting away to nothing.”

"I'm surprised you buy your own groceries," she said. "Isn't that the sort of thing people like you typically relegate to the help? Like the cooking?"

"People like me," he repeated, clearly amused. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Rich assholes. She glared at him, because anger was a more stable refuge than the hurt and regret that were sure to come later once all the bad things he made her feel hit their mark, and far safer than whatever was surfacing in her now as he let his eyes slowly drift to her mouth. *You're a bad person,* she thought, shifting a little uneasily. *Stop looking at me like that.*

"Oh, Jay." She stared at the hallway, her breaths coming a little faster, when he brushed her cheek, leaning closer. "You really think you have me all figured out, don't you?"

Jay's fingers tightened on her mug when he set his plate down. Freeing both his hands. "You're not exactly hard to figure out, Nicholas."

"And yet, you still let me get the better of you. What does that say about you?" Nicholas laughed softly, watching her face. "I'd say it means you're masochistic."

"*Thanks* for the psychology lesson," she snapped, angry at herself for rising to the bait. She set her mug down with sudden violence. "You should go into self-help."

"Defensive, too," he observed infuriatingly. "You look so put together, no one would ever believe how easily you come apart." His thumb caressed the line of her jaw, which suddenly felt as if it might shatter like glass. "If you want to keep it that way, I suggest collecting your clothes from the pool before the gardeners come by today or it might give them something to think about. I believe you left them by the planter."

"The planter," Jay repeated.

"By the lilies. Where you stripped for me last night."

"I know where it is."

"You were a bad girl. Turning your back on me and then hiding in the shadows. That's why I'll be getting you some nice things to wear for me. Sheer things that will be more fun to watch you take off than flannel pants

and T-shirts—even if you try to hide.” He was playing with her hair now, using a lock of it to trace the outline of her lips. “Any suggestions?”

“Saran wrap.”

Nicholas gave her a little swat on the backside that made her hips buck in surprise. His mouth pressed against her cheek and then he got up and tipped his plate in the sink.

“Don't be so quick to leave next time. I like to play when I wake up,” he said, almost as an afterthought. “I'm going to go change. Be ready to leave when I get back. I'm stopping for coffee after I drop you off at the Starbucks—do you want me to get you anything for the office?”

Jay shook her head, a little disoriented by the mercurial shift in topics. Unconsciously, her hand crept up to press against the cheek he'd bussed. “I'm . . . fine.”

“Good. Text me your clothing sizes before noon. American and European,” he added, throwing a salacious grin over his shoulder that made her blush. “I'm thinking silk and lace for you, Jay—Chantilly lace is my favorite. Look it up. You'll understand why.”

Jay bit back a response, glaring at the expanse of his departing back. She knew what Chantilly lace was. Shaking her head, she rinsed out her coffee cup and set it inside the top rack of the dishwasher. She put Nicholas's plate in there, too, feeling strangely crushed.

You know I didn't call you out here to talk.



Jay's strangely subdued mood followed her to the office. Not even the brisk walk over from Starbucks helped.

She sat down next to Annica, who had her hair pulled back into a severe ponytail and appeared very focused in her work. Jay tried to say “Good morning” but received only a tense smile in response, which was probably innocent but felt like a slight.

Meeting with Justine Varens.

Jay sighed and scheduled her afternoon meeting with Nicholas, opened all of the documents attached to the calendar invite, and began printing out the documents for her note-taking, pausing every now and then to sip at her Philz coffee, lightly sweetened, with added oat milk.

She tried to be cheerful and couldn't quite succeed, so she poured herself into the work instead. By the time she had finished reviewing all of Nicholas's potential acquisitions, she had several pages of copious notes. Nicholas seemed to be busy, too. he ended up fully booked for the day by late morning, with only a thin slice of time spared for lunch. She actually saw him leave for a couple of the meetings—he never looked her way.

This is exactly why you're not supposed to fuck your boss, she thought, watching him walk through the doors with an older man with graying hair and a kindly expression. One of the other executives, Jay thought, noting the cut of his expensive-looking suit. The man was laughing at something but Nicholas had one of those neutral half-smiles that could have meant anything.

He did look at her then and for a moment, his mouth twitched into a real smile.

God, she *was* fucking her boss. She was fucking *everyone's* boss. If anyone found out, she could lose her job. The thought filled her with shame and terror, and when Meghana from HR walked by and shot a friendly smile in her direction, Jay couldn't quite meet her gaze.

I am in so much trouble.

When it was time for her own lunch, she wandered into the kitchen and saw Stacey sitting with a brunette woman who seemed like she was in her early twenties.

“Hi, Jay,” said Stacey, waving. This time her skirt had rainbow squiggles on it. “I brought a friend. This is Gen from PR. When something good happens, they're cheerleaders with a megaphone. When something bad happens, they fit your problems with cement shoes and give them a dip in the ocean.”

“I'm not sure if that's entirely accurate,” said Gen, with a roll of her eyes. “We don't really make problems go away. We just make them smaller. Fun-sized.”

“Fun-sized problems sounds like a children's mathematics exercise,” said Stacey. “the kind you do with candy. How are you doing, Jay? Every time I walk by, you have your face pressed so close to the screen that it looks like you've been glued there. Is Mr. Beaucroft working you too hard?”

Don't. Think. About. That. “No,” said Jay, swallowing. “Everything's fine.”

“Well, if he hasn't yelled at you yet, it means you're golden. I hear he's a yeller.”

Oh my God. “He hasn't yelled at me.” Swallowing, she added hastily, “But I heard things weren't so great with Crystal. That's unfortunate.”

“Crystal was afraid of Mr. Beaucroft,” said Gen. “She said he made her very nervous. That was part of the reason their arguments were so public. Towards the end, she stopped attending meetings when he was there. It was also why she came in so late—she knew he came in early and wanted to spend as little time around him as possible. That's what she told me, anyway.”

That's weird. “I'm, uh, sorry to hear that things were so bad.”

“Gen and Crystal were friends,” said Stacey.

“Work friends,” Gen said quickly, as if to distance herself from the taint of the negligent employee. “We just got lunch once in a while. We never really connected—” She broke off.

Jay glanced over her shoulder just in time to see Nicholas sweep by in a flash of navy.

“Speak of the devil,” Stacey said dryly, watching him disappear around the corner. “He *is* intimidating, isn't he? I sometimes forget he's young enough to be my son.”

Nicholas came out of the kitchen with a bottle of water and a granola bar balanced in one hand. The other was slipped into the pocket of his blazer. Noticing he was being watched, he slowed. “Hello, Gen. Stacey.” Maybe she imagined the pause. “Jay.”

“Hi, Mr. B.,” Stacey said. “Want to join us?”

For a horrifying moment, Jay thought he would. She stared at him with wide, terrified eyes, which made him break out into another one of those slow smiles. “Thank you, but no. I can't. Jay,” he said, making her flinch to attention in her seat. “What's happening with my phone?”

“I—” Phone? His desk phone? “I set it to automatic before I left.”

“Automatic voice mail? Or automatic transfer?”

“Oh, shit—I mean, excuse me,” she said quickly to the two bemused women, before grabbing her things and retreating to her desk, stumbling a little in her haste.

Her phone buzzed. *Relax. My phone is fine.*

You are such a JERK. Are there really two buttons or did you make that up?

There really are two buttons. You pressed the right one. Also, I'm out of coffee.

I'm about to pour it over your head.

You know I'd just send you out to buy me a new shirt. Jay glanced up in irritation at the sound of hushed laughter and caught a glimpse of Nicholas smiling at his phone. *I'd enjoy that.*

Jay marched up the stairs with what she hoped was a grim expression. He swung around to face her, grabbing his mug by the top and setting it at the edge of his desk.

When she brought it back, newly full, he smiled at her. “Thank you, Ms. Varens.”

“You're welcome,” she said, just barely level, before spinning on her heel and walking away.

She could feel his eyes on her and wondered if this was how he was planning on destroying her. The slow perishing of her soul through a death of a thousand cuts. He hadn't exactly denied her accusations when she'd asked him if he was looking for revenge. She just hadn't thought he'd try to get it by toying with her emotions.

Maybe she'd hurt him more than she'd realized. Maybe she really had broken his heart.

What he didn't seem to understand was that he had also broken hers.

At her desk, her pile of documents was waiting to be organized for the meeting with Nicholas. She reached for the top sheet of paper just as the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Finally,” said a familiar voice. “Now you listen to me. My name is Danielle *Beaucroft*, and I have been waiting and waiting to be put through to an actual human being at this criminal front of yours. If you don't connect me to Nicholas Beaucroft *immediately*, you'll be hearing from my lawyer.”

“Mom?”

“Don't you talk back to m—Justine? Baby, is that you? My goodness, I almost didn't recognize the sound of your voice. It sounds so deep on the phone. What on Earth are you doing, answering Nicholas's phones?” she demanded suspiciously.

“I work for him.” *Because you sold me out. You pawned me like a diamond.* Only, if her mother had pawned her diamonds, she might not be in this situation. “Mom, what are you doing, telling people you have a lawyer when you don't? You could get in big trouble—”

She stopped abruptly, remembering where she was, shooting a wary glance at Annica.

“Shh, not on the phone. Where are you, Justine? Are you in Los Angeles? You haven't been responding to any of my texts and I have no idea what's going on with our situation.”

“Our situation,” Jay repeated, with slight emphasis.

Her mother let out a breath. “Never mind. Actually, it's so helpful that you're here now. Put me through to Nicholas, baby. I need to have words with Nicholas.”

“He doesn't want to talk to you.”

“What does that even mean?” her mother demanded. “Who do you think you are?”

“I think I'm an administrative assistant,” said Jay, letting some of the anger that had been boiling up over the last couple days seep into her voice, “speaking to someone my boss really doesn't want to be talking to. I'm also thinking that right now, I really don't care for your tone.”

“Tone? I am your *mother*. And *his* stepmother, whether he wants me to be or not. And I will speak to you in whatever *tone* I want, whether you want me to or not, because I am not going to stand for any more of this playing house. Put me through to Nicholas right now, or I swear to God, Justine, I am going to c—”

Jay hung up the phone.

Annica glanced over, frowning. “Why does your mother want to talk to Mr. Beaucroft?”

“Um. Ex-business partner.” The phone immediately lit up again and this time, Jay blocked the number. If her mother wanted to call Beaucroft Assets, she could do it from a payphone.

Standing up to her mother felt good. So good, that it scared her a little. The adrenaline from that interaction made her so jittery that she ended up taking a break to go walk a few paces around the office outside.

By the time her meeting with Nicholas rolled around, she could barely stay upright in the chair. Her mother was an exhaustive force and she was still tired from her late night and early rise. She leaned back against the padding, all but sinking into the fabric holding the files in her lap as she read down the list while he threw each of the discards into the trash.

“Why even have me print these out?” She slid Element Just across the table to him. “If you're going to throw them in the trash, I mean. It seems like a waste of paper.”

“I never told you to print anything. There's a notes function on the document I sent you. You can even tag me in the comments.” He lobbed the paper over his shoulder without even looking to check if he'd made it. It landed right in the basket. “I thought you liked the theatrics of it.”

Jay shook her head slowly.

Nicholas let his hand drop, slumping in the chair in a way that made her wonder if it was meant to be a mockery of her own posture. “Who were you speaking to on the phone earlier?”

“Why?”

“You looked upset.”

“It was my mother.”

“I see.” Nicholas folded his arms behind his neck. “And how is the former Mrs. Beaucroft?”

“Angry,” said Jay. “Threatening to sue with a lawyer she doesn't have.”

“Unwise of her,” he said. “I assume she was dealt with appropriately.”

“I hung up on her and blocked her number.”

“Good,” he said, with surprising vehemence. “That woman always thought she had you under her thumb. I suppose that's one good thing about

you leaving. She would have destroyed you if you had stayed, the way she tried to destroy everything else.”

“She wasn't the only one,” said Jay unthinkingly.

Nicholas glanced up at her, with a strangely intense expression that left his face looking frozen. Then it disappeared entirely, and she could no longer tell what he was thinking at all.

But his eyes—his eyes were a wasteland, a glimpse into her own personal hell.

Jay bounced out of her seat, even though the meeting hadn't officially ended. She could feel his gaze boring into back as she left. If looks could kill, she'd have a knife in her chest.

It kind of felt like she had one there, anyway.

Chapter Twenty

2017

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Jay kept thinking of that look in Nicholas's eyes when she had talked back to him in his office. She wished she had held on to bright shards of her riotous anger, keeping them close, but they sliced indiscriminately, and sometimes it was just far less painful to give in.

You're not the wronged party, she thought. Why don't you get that?

She had gone back to her desk on leaden feet and sat unseeingly before her computer until it was time to leave and her anger had cooled into hard, icy crystals of fear.

On the silent car ride home, Jay had looked at his hands on the wheel, trying not to think about what they might feel like holding her down in anger.

He could hurt me so easily, she thought. I wouldn't be able to stop him.

She hadn't been able to stop him before.

Are you going to make me chase you?

Nicholas glanced briefly at her before disappearing into his room. Not the look of a man in the mood for a chase, but he had fooled her before that way before.

Jay had a restless night, and woke up at 4:30 again, alone and ill-rested with a churning gut. When he came down at 5:00, he said hello to her, eating his sprinkled toast at the counter, half-dressed, while she answered in monosyllables and tried, with mixed success, not to look at him.

Work had been uneventful. Appointments, lunch with Gen and Stacey, a brief trip out for coffee with Obi. Her mother sent her a series of angry texts, all of which she deleted and ignored, as if they didn't leave her shaken. When Nicholas came to collect her in the kitchen, things seemed almost exactly the same as they had been, only now there was an undertone of restraint in his actions that she might have called guarded if they had come from any other man.

He'd ordered dinner again, since they still hadn't been shopping. It was Thai food this time. Pad Thai for him, red curry for her. He'd remembered the coconut milk substitution; she could see the little sharpie "V" on her box, for vegan. She ate the food, feeling his eyes on her. It was very good,

in the way that cheap takeout could sometimes be good—greasy, with a little too much spice. Pools of hot oil were forming on the surface in golden bubbles. She could feel it coating her tongue, sticking in her throat along with her doubts.

Every time she felt herself weakening, she made herself remember the photograph and the way he had savored her panic when it had felt like she had been about to fall apart.

“How do you like it?” Nicholas wrapped the vermicelli noodles around his fork, capping it off with a piece of chicken and a few bean sprouts. His words were so at odds with the thoughts in her head that she stared at him blankly as he went on, “I’ve never been here before.”

“Oh.” Jay swallowed her mouthful. “It’s good,” she said hesitantly. “A little spicy.” It couldn’t compare to the incredible food she’d enjoyed in the city with her friends, but she didn’t say that. The other afternoon had been a painful lesson on the dangers of being too candid.

“Any plans this evening?”

What a strange question. “No,” she said slowly, sipping the last mouthful of curry. “I was just going to read for a while. It’s been a long week.”

“Am I overworking you?”

That startled her into looking at him again. He was studying her over his wineglass in that disconcerting way of his that made it seem like he saw so much more than he did.

“No,” she said, putting her hands in her lap. “The work is fine.”

“Good.” He set down his wineglass. “Because I’d like you to come to my room tonight.”

Jay had the distinct feeling that she’d just been manipulated. “Your room,” she repeated.

“Yes.” Nicholas shot her a measuring glance before stabbing a few more pieces of chicken. “Wear something slutty,” he said casually. “I want you to look like you want it.”

Jay choked on her Thai iced tea, groping for her napkin. *Slutty?* The crude and callous words seemed to have been calculated to drum up a reaction from her and she was furious with herself for giving him one. “I

don't own anything like that.” She patted her lips with the napkin. “Wearing those kinds of clothes makes me uncomfortable.”

“I'm sure you can come up with something. You're nothing if not resourceful. The work you do for me is proof of your ability to innovate.” He gestured at her empty bowl. “Don't worry about cleaning up when you're finished. I'll take care of the dishes.”

I want those snowy white wings of yours.

Jay set her napkin on the table with a shaking hand and walked away, painfully aware of his eyes on her back. *Wear something slutty.* She went into her room, feeling like she'd been socked in the stomach. *Is he trying to hurt me?*

Maybe this was punishment for talking back to him. He could be vicious.

She ended up settling on pajamas—sleep shorts and one of the camisoles she wore under her sweaters. They were the most revealing clothes she'd brought.

When she dragged herself into his bedroom her heart had already started to pound, and she was a little horrified to find him still dressed in his jeans and shirtsleeves.

Nicholas turned and looked her over and at the look in his eyes, she nearly ran. The only thing that stopped her was the thought of him running after her and dragging her back in—a thought that was not as terrifying as it should have been.

“That's the best you could do?”

“I don't know what you expected,” Jay blurted, folding her arms.

When he crossed the room to her, she managed to hold herself still when he pulled her in for a kiss. The gentleness of it was terrifying; each soft touch suggested a passion scarce-denied that left her feeling dizzy. “I'm not going to hurt you,” he said, and those words scared her more than the kiss, because it meant he planned something that might make her think he would.

You're still making me pay.

She had spoken the words aloud. His face shifted, becoming as remote as it had in the conference room, when she had accused him of trying to break her.

“Do you want to leave?” he asked, the words so reasonable that she could only stare.

Of course I do, she thought, surprised at the question, surprised that he could even ask. *You're a sick fuck and I hate you*. But for some reason, the words wouldn't come out.

“I see,” he said, his tone dry. “You'd rather pay the tithe and think of England, is that it?”

She squeezed her eyes shut when he bent to her mouth again. *He's awful*, she reminded herself, bracing only a little when his hands landed on her waist. His grip was unshakable as his fingers spread to span her ribs. His thumbs were brushing over her nipples, making her skin prickle with each slow pass. She wanted to hate it. She told herself to hate it.

You can still leave.

As if reading her mind, he pulled away abruptly, scooping her up behind her knees to drop her back onto his bed. The sheets that had been ruined by pool water were now gone. In their place were soft and silky ones the color of ink that rustled suggestively as he backed her against them on his hands and knees, forcing her to scoot backwards on her arms.

“I would have let you go,” he whispered.

“Don't lie to me,” she hissed, which elicited a ghost of a smile before his mouth covered hers again. The light in the sitting area was on, but dimly, and very little of the light filtered to the bed. When he tugged at her top, she let him remove it, and he started kissing her harder, touching her harder, touching her *more*. The textured drag of his clothed body against her mostly-denuded one made heat gather between her legs. She reminded herself again that she hated him, but she didn't hate him enough; in the darkness, he was as familiar as a habit, and just as easy to fall into.

He ran his hands down the length of her body in a way that was like the slow strike of a match. “You want honesty?” Slowly, speaking against her lips, he told her: “I still get hard thinking about the way your breath caught in my pool. I want to tie you up.”

She stared up at his face. Intent and unreadable, shadowed by desire. “Do whatever you want,” she said, which made him exhale in what sounded like displeasure. “I really don't care.”

“Whatever I want,” he repeated.

Nicholas slid a box out from beneath his bed that jangled ominously, shooting a look at her she couldn't interpret before opening the lid and reaching inside. Jay tried to look, but he pushed her back, blocking her view of the contents with one broad shoulder.

She was expecting rough rope or cold metal, maybe even something studded or spiked, but when he leaned back over her, he was holding padded leather cuffs.

“Give me your wrists.”

She knew it was stupid, but she still gave him her hand. He kissed the back of it, securing one end of each cuff to the Flemish scrolls around his headboard and the other around each of her wrists. She couldn't look at him while he buckled her hands, but her breathing began to quicken. He bent over her, knees on either side of her hips, letting her feel how hard he was.

“Let me tell you what I want. You, screaming my name, telling me how much you love being Daddy's slutty little girl while you beg me to go harder.”

His tone, which had started out almost conversational, dipped abruptly into a growl. She heard herself gasp. Then he swung off her legs and began unbuttoning his shirt. She had to look away from that, too, her face burning, as she heard the jangle of his belt, the soft scuff of his jeans. He disappeared into the other room and the light threw the contours of his body into relief.

He was completely naked.

She stared at the ceiling, tense and utterly aware, listening to the clink of glass on glass. She could still feel the burn of his lips on the back of her hand.

I've changed my mind, she nearly said. Let me go.

When he came back, he was holding a half-empty bottle. Her gut clenched as she craned her neck to watch his approach. “I—” Jay swallowed the words sticking in her throat. Keeping her eyes firmly on his face, she said, “I don't want a drink.”

“It's not for you.” He turned her face towards the ceiling. “Keep still.”

She didn't understand at first—not until she felt the tepid splash of liquid pool in the base of her throat. It made her startle, but he gripped her face in his strong fingers until she stopped moving, and then he drizzled a bit more into the well of her navel, and that slight indent just below her rib

cage, before painting long, sticky whorls of liqueur over her torso, around her breasts, along the lines of her hips. The last thing he did was touch her mouth, dragging his thumb over the swell of her lower lip, before sliding her pants down and bending over her.

And then she felt his mouth—everywhere.

She began to anticipate his touch, but sometimes he would trick her, breathing softly against her skin before pressing his tongue to a completely different part of her body. It was torture and soon she was writhing under it, but there was something strangely freeing in having her wrists bound, which didn't make sense. It was a bit like the dark. If she couldn't see, she didn't fear. If she didn't touch, she wasn't responsible. When she finally rode out that long, drawn-out climax, Jay found herself knotting her hands in her bonds as he slid inside her.

If she didn't think, she couldn't feel.

He filled her so completely that she found it hard to be aware of anything else. It wasn't for her, but she came anyway—the small, almost-painful rips of sticky skin adhering and then pulling forcibly away; the filthy things and dark promises he whispered in her ear; the pressure as he drove her into the sheets, cinching something inside her so taut that it seemed to cut off the valve of her lungs.

When he kissed her, he tasted like sex and honeyed whiskey, and it felt like she'd surrendered her soul.

Maybe she had.



The next morning, Jay awoke to the soft flutter of his breath against her neck and quickly fled before he could wake. She stood under the scalding spray of the shower in her room, washing her hair and body, scrubbing herself until she could no longer feel him in her skin and the only smell filling her nose was the sweetness of her own apple-freesia shampoo. Her eyes were stinging; she told herself it was soap. She wasn't sure what she was feeling, only that it left her chest tight and her throat aching.

I think he might really hurt me this time.

After she showered, Jay pulled on a pair of old jeans and a faded t-shirt, pulling a hoodie over it and rolling the sleeves up. Nicholas was already downstairs, in another expensive-looking pair of jeans and one of his old metal shirts. She remembered them being loose and baggy over the skinnier frame of his youth, but now the material was tight, faded from multiple washes.

For the few seconds before he turned, she could look at him unobserved. At ease in his body and unconcerned to a degree that nearly felt shameless. Jay couldn't think of anything that might humiliate him—and then, with a lurch, she realized all at once that she could.

It was why she was here.

She must have made a sound because he turned. The only sign of his surprise was a slight widening of his eyes and then his face relaxed into something that wasn't quite a smile. “I need to run those errands today,” he said. “I thought you might like to come grocery shopping.”

Jay hesitated a long moment before speaking. “Sure. I'll get my shoes.”

“Take your time,” he said. “I'll wait.”

She grabbed her purse and slipped on the knockoff purple Vans she'd gotten from Target, before tying her hair into a bun with a little printed scarf covered in avocados. It had been a gift from Lily, tied around the neck of a wine bottle for her birthday.

I should really message her, Jay thought absently, fingering the edges of her phone in her pocket. *But maybe that would be weird. I've already waited too long to get back to her.*

It wasn't like they had really been that close, anyway. Lily had probably only been hanging out with her because of their close proximity at work. She'd only be bothering her, now.

Nicholas had left the kitchen, moving to the entryway, swinging his keys around his finger while looking at his phone. When he glanced up, his mouth twitched.

“What?” she asked, crossing her arms. “We're just going to the store, aren't we?”

“You're so cute,” he said unexpectedly. “Like the host of a children's show—the hot one everyone wants to fuck when they grow up.” Jay whirled around, trying to suppress her unease as Nicholas strolled around

her in a lazy half-circle. He shot her a grin and then deliberately smacked her ass, jostling her against him as they walked out the door.

She pushed his hand away. "What's wrong with you?"

"I'm a little worked up." The hand came back, smoothing over her jeans. "You slipped away again. I told you how I feel about that."

Jay eyed him warily. Even when he was being playful, his games could have the constrictive feel of a snare. You wouldn't feel the bite until it was too late. "Where are we going?"

"Hollybrook Grocery." His hand fell from her backside as he unlocked the car and moved to open her door, but she got to it first, swinging it open. "I happen to believe it's important to support small enterprise within the local community."

"I'm surprised they're still in business."

"They hit a rough patch a few years back when the economy was bad. A generous donation helped keep them out of the red when they were floundering."

"From you?" Jay asked, not bothering to keep the doubt out of her tone.

"I'm giving philanthropy a try," he said. "It's great for tax write-offs."

"Do you even do your own taxes?"

"Of course not." He lifted an eyebrow. "Do you?"

"Yes," she said. "Because I'm not an out of touch tycoon."

"I'm not a tycoon," said Nicholas. "I'm an investor. I'd be happy to give you a referral for an accountant. In fact, I'll even pay for yours, if you want. We'll call it a gift."

"More philanthropy?" Jay asked, sorely tempted. She hated doing her taxes. "Or do you still think you can buy your way into people's affections?"

"Maybe I'm just trying to be nice."

You're not nice. She swallowed back the words as Nicholas parked the car and loped around the side to help her out of the door, but she knew in her heart that they were true. Nobody would ever mistake him for a gentleman, any more than they would call him nice. His father had been

concerned with appearances and Nicholas had been taught chivalry in lieu of compassion.

She looked down at his large hand, closed over hers, and pulled away. When he frowned, she busied herself by rooting through her purse for her wallet. She could tell he didn't like that, either. Watching her locate her cracked and peeling wristlet, he said firmly, "I'll get you whatever you need."

"You don't need to pay for me."

"I want to." His smile was without humor. "I take care of what's mine."

"You don't own me, Nicholas."

"No," he said, in an oddly stilted tone. "On that, we agree."

With those frustrating words, he locked the car, strolling up to the entrance like he didn't have a care in the world, leaving her standing by the Tesla. Maybe he still didn't care. He had enough money that he could just throw money at his problems until they all went away.

Jay entered after him, looking around curiously. The store hadn't changed much in the eight years she had been gone. The smell was the same. The décor on the walls was the same. When she looked at the checkout area, she saw the same cork board with fliers for community events.

When she had shopped for herself in San Francisco, she had tried to keep a careful budget, staying under \$600/mo. for food. Vegetables were expensive, though, even when purchased on sale, and going out to eat bumped up her expenses to astronomical proportions, especially with cocktails. Some of those places she'd gone to with coworkers had charged \$25 for a single drink.

It had been so hard living in the city and not being able to enjoy it as much as she wanted to. Staring at the shelves, Jay realized that now she didn't really *have* to worry about food, or about weighing what she wanted against what she was allowed to have. It was a strange feeling—too heady to be relief, but tinged by emotions too bitter to be gratitude, she found herself swamped with an odd blend of resentment, eagerness, and reluctance, all in roughly equal measure.

I can get whatever I want, she thought. But what is this really going to cost me?

She began filling her basket with bags of mixed greens, root vegetables, baby kale, tofu, yeast, cashews, flour, vital wheat gluten, lentils, chickpeas, and coconut oil. Then, feeling extravagant, she got some prepared mixes as well, everything from fresh tabbouleh to packaged curries to vegetable-based broths, a package of microgreens, a big tub of hummus, a kobocha squash, and a bottle of inexpensive chardonnay. If she didn't like the taste of it, she thought she could probably cook with it, although she figured she'd like the taste.

The basket was quite heavy now and she grimaced as she hefted it away from the wine aisle, looking around for Nicholas. She finally spotted him in the frozen food aisle but he wasn't alone. Jay ducked back behind the end cap, rustling a package of cookies.

Who was that woman? She looked a little familiar, which meant she was probably from Hollybrook High. *Natasha*? No. Natasha had been the crier.

"Nick," the woman trilled. "Nick Beaucroft, is that you? It's Amanda—Amanda Strife. Do you remember me? We used to make out under the bleachers in fifth period."

What? thought Jay, glaring at Nicholas's back. She had a distant recollection of a curvy blonde with platinum hair two years her junior. Hadn't Amanda been the one who was always being cited for dress code violations? She looked very pretty now. Tight jeans and a cardigan left unbuttoned to show off a tasteful amount of lace-covered cleavage.

Good for Amanda Strife, Jay thought, surprising herself with her own bitterness.

"No," Nicholas was saying. "Sorry. I don't remember. I'm bad with names."

"I'm sure," said Amanda, after a brief hesitation. "You must be so busy now. What are you up to these days? Elizabeth mentioned that you two had been meeting for drinks."

Elizabeth?

"I haven't been meeting with anyone lately. I'm swamped with work." His head turned briefly down the aisle, giving her a glimpse of his profile. "Was it Liz Wong?" he asked abruptly. "I believe we met to discuss one of her husband's projects."

“Yes,” Amanda said, with far more enthusiasm than really seemed necessary. “Liz is my friend. And she had nothing but good things to say about you! She told me I should speak to you, actually, since you’re so *involved* with the community.”

“Oh?”

“My PR firm is blowing *up*. We recently moved offices after our latest expansion, so now we’re based in Laguna Beach. We have several very prominent influencers as our clients—even a couple A-list celebrities. The expansion is killing me—but in a good way,” she added, leaning forward on her cart the tiniest bit. “I like having to work for it.”

Jay felt the heat rise to her face. *Oh my God*, she thought, embarrassed. *Is she—?*

“Yeah.” Nicholas folded his arms, drawing Amanda’s gaze. “I know the feeling.”

“You know, I’ve always thought it was so *sweet* how you stayed in this town after what happened with your father and your sister. I mean, look at you. Big man on campus and you’re still doing your own shopping. It’s honestly so *humbling*.”

Nicholas made a sound Jay couldn’t interpret. “You’re the first to call me humble.”

“Well, I’m delighted to be your first,” said Amanda, in a way that really left no doubts at all to what she really meant. “Would you like to grab a cup of coffee, Nick? We can talk business. Maybe catch up? I don’t think I’ve laid eyes on you since high school. You look good.”

“I’ll give you one of my cards.” Nick rifled through his jeans pocket, missing the look of disappointment on her face. “My administrative assistant will schedule you. Call before noon or I get completely booked. And now I really need to find someone, so if you’ll excuse me—”

Nick turned. Jay fled.



Nicholas shoved the business cards back into his wallet and strolled past the aisles, scanning them for Jay. It never failed to amuse him how

people just seemed to crawl out of the woodwork at the slightest hint of success. *Like worms surfacing after a heavy rain.*

Oh, he remembered Amanda. But forgetting was a simple way to put people in their place, especially when distance became a necessity. She had been so certain of him that the brief look of hurt on her face had been gratifying. Sometimes people needed to be reminded where they stood.

It didn't take long to find Jay; it was a small store and she was wearing bright colors. He found her in the dairy aisle, staring at the fake milk. At the first sign of movement, she tensed, glancing at him and then away as he casually reached around her to grab a few cartons of oat milk and put them in the cart.

"I wondered where you went." His body brushed against hers. "Are you ready to go?"

"I think so." Jay looked down at her full basket. Not meeting his eyes.

How much of her submission was because of the debt? If she wasn't so desperately afraid of having her mother ruined and her reputation destroyed, would she still feel so soft when she fell asleep curled in his arms? Would she look at him with that same hopeless wanting in her eyes when he pinned her to the bed? It was in there now, though she was trying to hide it, and he heard her let out a rough sigh as he impulsively hugged her from behind, smoothing his hand over her front as he gave her soft little body a squeeze.

"What are you doing?" She gripped his forearm. "Someone might see."

"I don't really care." He toyed with the zipper on her sweatshirt. "Let them look."

"Even if it gets back to your office that your secretary is actually your sister?" She began to squirm and he let her duck under his arm. "You can't touch me like that in public. Everyone knows someone here."

"And that's why you always hated it here, isn't it? Because you hate being noticed."

Her mouth fell open in surprise. "What makes you think that?"

"Because it's true." Nicholas stooped to pick up the basket and put it in the cart, considering its contents while she tried to compose her face. "This doesn't look like much. In the restaurant you were prattling on about lentils and aguafaba. I thought you might want to cook."

“Aquafaba,” she said automatically, clutching the front of her sweatshirt. “No, I’m fine.”

“Jay,” he said, gratified when she glanced up, attentive and wary. “I’m serious. Get whatever you need.”

“Fine.” He saw her jaw clench as she looked at the shelves, instantly defiant. She yanked the zipper up to her throat. “I forgot juice. I’ll be right back.”

Nicholas watched her walk away. The ribbon in her hair fluttered in her wake.

Amanda went by, glancing at him, and then at Jay, who didn’t even notice her. She stared hard at Jay, eyes narrowed, before doing another take at him. *Isn’t that your sister?* She mouthed.

Nicholas stared at her grimly until she blushed and walked away.

Hollybrook had a long memory as far as his family was concerned. His father had dumped a lot of money into this town and once the scandal had come to light, women began to question their husbands, and men began to question their loyalties. Jay had been the town golden girl who had refused to rally behind her family as they tried to close ranks, and he had been the reformed black sheep who had stepped up when his father died and his stepmother fell out of favor.

Is this about revenge?

It wasn’t—not really. Not for the reasons she thought, anyway. She thought it was about his father, but it was all about her . . . and how she had peeled back his armor and exposed that raw part of his soul that he preferred to pretend didn’t exist.

No, he really didn’t give a fuck about his father, but Jay’s leaving had filled him with a silent, wasting fury: hot black fire that consumed whatever it touched, creating a barren void of sensation that had pushed him to dark extremes in an attempt to fill the emptiness she left behind.

For a year, he had basked in the slow immolation of his own tenuous constraints; and then, as soon as he’d discovered his limits, he had gotten bored and disillusioned.

No one else made him feel anything. Not the way she did.

Nicholas glanced around them impatiently, reaching for his wallet again. As far as he knew, nobody knew what his relationship with Jay had

really been like, either, so there was no need for them to stare so intensely. Maybe they were waiting to see if he was going to strangle her.

“I like this brand,” said the cashier, holding up the oat milk when they were at the checkout. “It tastes almost like the real thing.”

“Me too,” said Jay, gripping onto the edge of the counter like she was afraid of going under. “It's a little sweet, so you don't even need sugar. I just wish it didn't curdle when it gets hot.”

The cashier hesitated. “Are you together or separate?”

“Together,” said Nicholas, looking at Jay. Daring her to contradict him. She stared down at her bags, twisting her hair the way she did whenever she was nervous.

“Together,” Jay echoed without enthusiasm as the cashier turned to her. *You're mine, Jay Varens, he thought. This time, you're not getting away.*

Chapter Twenty-One

2017

■□□□□■

Jay threw herself into her work with the fiercely contained passion that cranked all of his internal dials to ten. She was the same way when she cooked; he had seen her prepping her meals, paying particular attention to her hands. Normally prone to trembling and shaking, Nicholas had never once seen her hands falter while she was wielding a knife.

They hadn't trembled in those handcuffs, either.

And the more she gave to him in bed, the more he craved. He hadn't been keeping count of the hours she spent with him, but he guessed it was close to thirty. Roughly 1% of the debt based on the value that he had arbitrarily assigned to her. At this rate, it would take her four years, which was double the average most couples spent together in a non-transactional relationship.

No wonder everyone ends up single or divorced, he thought cynically.

The rest of the week flew by in a whirlwind of meetings and presentations. There were days when his calendar filled up before ten. In the middle of the week, he had a business lunch with Arthur Hartwell, ostensibly to discuss the financial health of the company, but also an excuse for Arthur to write off lunches in Ridgeview on the company's dime. Arthur had grown up there and was nostalgic about his hometown in a way that bordered on fanatic.

They met at a Southeast Asian fusion restaurant called Down Buloh, which was across the street from two unlikely neighbors: a lingerie shop and an ice cream parlor. Nicholas glanced at both with amusement before stepping through the doors, where he was greeted immediately by the sound of running water and harp music, both coming from a discreetly placed CD player.

Arthur was already there, chatting with the hostess, and the two of them were seated in the back. Both of them ordered pineapple-fried rice as a side, but Nicholas ordered the chicken satay, while Arthur ordered the chili crab. It came in the shell, much to Arthur's bewilderment, and Nicholas watched with ill-concealed amusement as he began cracking it with the provided cutter.

“Did you want to try some?” he asked. “It's not that spicy and I've ordered far too much.”

“No, thank you. I think the crab might clash with the peanut sauce.”

“I'll take the extras home with me then. Maybe the wife can turn it into stew.”

Nicholas shrugged, possessing neither a wife nor cooking ability, and Arthur began sliding the shredded crab around on his plate like a guilty schoolchild.

“Let's get down to brass tacks.” Arthur scooped up some rice with the crab. “The health of the company is very good right now. We have several million in the bank and about sixty-five percent of our current investment portfolio is profitable.”

“And the other thirty-five?”

“Can be written off. We don't get taxed on loss, remember. Just gains.”

“Right.” Nicholas picked up a skewer and began sliding the pieces off with a fork. “What's our current ninety-day plan? I'm assuming we have one.”

“I can give you our one-eighty-day plan. By next year, I'd actually like to see the company go international. We'll have to hire on a new team of global accountants, but I think it will be more lucrative in the long run. It's a big world out there, Nicholas. Especially in manufacturing.”

“I'd want to see the projected costs of expansion before I commit to something that big. We wouldn't just be adding on to Accounting—we'd need to hire on an entire international team or create a new team and begin to fill it with existing employees who'd want to make that lateral move. And lawyers,” he finished grimly. “Lawyers well versed in international tax laws.”

“There's always growing pains,” Arthur said, wiping his sauce-stained hands on a napkin. “I'll have Annica pull up our numbers from the last five years and create a graph. There was a big hiring wave three years ago, and I can run up those costs. We can do a cross-analysis.”

Nicholas set the empty stick of bamboo on his plate and leaned back. The only thing more satisfying than a full meal was data-driven metrics. “Send me an email when you have the numbers and I'll have Jay block some time off. We can make another lunch out of it.”

“I’ll do that. As it happens, there’s a new vegan place I’ve been wanting to try. Everything on the menu is made with avocados.” Arthur tossed down his napkin and flagged down the waiter for a take-out box. “How is your new assistant settling in? She seems nicer than the last one.”

Nicholas, slipping his card to the waiter, was mildly surprised that Arthur even remembered he *had* an assistant, let alone a new one. But Arthur was like Jay that way; he didn’t just remember, he cared. “She is. She’s fielding most of Acquisitions’ potential leads and doing such a good job that Stacey seems to be planning on stealing her from me.”

Arthur laughed. “Brave of her.”

“That’s one word for it.” The card returned with a plate of kuih seri muka, a trifle-like dessert made with glutinous rice and pandan custard. Nicholas ate one, enjoying the floral sweetness of it as he tucked his card back into his wallet. “I’d call it mutinous.”

“Well, you know Stacey,” Arthur said in amusement. “She considers herself the captain of her own ship.”

“A captain is nothing without her crew,” Nicholas said. “If she steals my assistant, I might take it upon myself to deny her request for a hiring budget.” Arthur laughed again, although he hadn’t been joking. Smiling thinly, he slid the plate towards the other man. “Try it—it’s good.”

“You can have mine.” Arthur shrugged back into his coat. “At my age, I need to watch my sugar intake and I don’t think I care much for desserts that are green. It’s been a pleasure, by the way. One of these days, we should get together outside of work. I don’t think you’ve ever met my wife.”

“No, I haven’t.” But he’d seen the picture on Arthur’s desk and could imagine what she’d be like in person—loud, cheerful, unfiltered. Probably adequate in bed. Not that you could tell that from a picture, but Arthur was entirely too cheerful for a man enduring mediocre sex. “I’ll see you at the office,” he said aloud. “I’m going to take a quick walk before driving back.”

“I don’t blame you,” Arthur said. “If I had your schedule, I’d run, too.”

Nicholas took his time getting back into his blazer before strolling across the street to the lingerie shop he had spotted earlier. After firmly shrugging off the overly helpful salesgirl, he picked out a few things for Jay, crushing the silk and lace in his hands and imagining crushing her body to his while she was wearing them. The thought of feeling her respond to

his touch through those thin wisps of nothing filled him with such raw desire that it felt like an ache.

It was the same piercing agony he'd felt every time Jay looked right through him when they were young. She'd seen him—but not the way he'd wanted. Not until he'd made her look. He hadn't been able to touch her then, but now there were consequences for driving him crazy.

He kept the bag in his trunk until dinner that evening, which he had ordered from the same Thai place as before. She looked everywhere but at him as she examined a piece of lilac-colored lace. It was one of the negligees and he saw the exact moment that she realized she was holding the front of the gown. Then she noticed him watching her and her brows furrowed as she hastily shoved the fabric back in the bag. “What am I supposed to do with these?”

“Wear them,” he replied laconically, allowing himself a smile. “Or did you want help putting them on?”

That made her face fire up like a kiln.

Jay disappeared after that, taking the bag with her. She didn't come out of her room again for the rest of the evening. Nicholas let her hide, wondering if she had tried on any of the clothes. He didn't imagine that she would lounge around in dishabille, but there had been a brief look of wistfulness on her face as she'd handled the delicate fabric that made him suspect that she would end up yielding to her curiosity, if she hadn't already.

That look got to him but he made himself wait.

He was very good at waiting.



If one lesson had stuck with her from childhood, it was that gifts never came without strings.

Nicholas had obviously gone to some trouble. The tags on everything had been removed but she knew from the feel of the fabric and the detail of the lacework that they were costly, and they were all in colors she liked, in textures that felt enticingly good against the skin.

Jay had tried on one of the nightgowns, tempted by the beautiful skirt which consisted of elaborate panels of silk, mesh, and lace, with the

embroidered flowers spiraling around the body stitched so delicately that it felt like one touch might cause them to melt like ice. It had seemed deceptively modest with the floating silk butterfly sleeves and empire waist, but most of the bodice was open mesh covered by only a few strategically placed spirals of flowery lace.

It wasn't hard to imagine what he might do to her while she was wearing this. Not when the heat of his mouth flickering against her like a torch was such a recent memory. Not when he stared at her the way he did. *That's probably why he bought them.* She slid her hand over the ice-blue silk, thin enough that she could feel the heat of her own hand. *Because he likes control.*

But that didn't feel right, either. Control was part of it, yes, but it wasn't just about control. If Nicholas had only wanted to make her feel powerless, there were other things he could have done to her. She fingered the stitching on the roses, caught herself, and looked away.

She was intensely aware of him over the next few days. He seemed to be watching her more closely than usual, almost as if he were waiting for something. Even at work, she would look up to find herself the subject of his study; it was a heavy, ponderous look, with a dark edge that put a catch in her breathing.

While taking notes during his meetings, she had seen his prospective clients fall to pieces under that unrelenting stare. One of them had walked in with a hastily drawn-up contract that would have guaranteed only .5% of profits for an investment of one million dollars. Nicholas had been furious and after sliding the unsigned and now-marked up contract back across the table, had, over the course of an hour, bumped the investment fee up to a grim 2.5% share of the profits on his holdings. The man had walked out looking like he'd been hit by a speeding train.

And Nicholas had just sat there afterwards continuing to take notes, seemingly unaffected by the victory. He had been the exact same with way at her in the diner, and she had thought he'd been posturing then, but the other CEO was no longer around to see him flaunt his indifference.

Unless he's posturing for me.

Glancing at the closed door, Jay said, "Isn't that good for you? The two-percent?"

He glanced briefly at her, before looking back at his screen. That look of icy menace had faded but his handsome features hadn't quite thawed. "Three percent would have been better and I probably could have pushed him up to four. He knew he was fucked. Make sure you send me the notes from today's meeting, along with a scanned copy of the contract."

And then he had closed his computer, holding the door for her as they both walked out.

It had been a strange and chilling insight into his mind that should have sent her running and she wasn't sure why he was affecting her this way, when he should have been so easy to despise.

That Friday evening they'd had Chinese takeout and an Alsatian wine. She had let him pour her a small glass to go with her mixed vegetables and sesame tofu, which had made her brain feel syrupy and calm. Even when he'd suggested that she might wear her new clothes, she had felt only a flicker of panic. "Whatever you want," she said, because it seemed to annoy him, and because she was reckless and confused, and because the wine seemed to loosen her tongue.

She had been about to pour herself a second glass, but Nicholas had moved the bottle out of reach. "I think you're at your limit, Jay," he said, filling his own instead, while she glared at him. *Like you care about limits.* "Don't look at me like that. I could drink you under an entire warehouse filled with tables and you know it."

That was probably true. His father had always seemed to have a drink in his hand and she had never seen Nicholas drunk. He wouldn't want to surrender control. He was always so tightly contained, and had been even as a boy. The last time she'd seen him really lose it—

He made you cry.

Jay bit her lip, not wanting to remember. Shooting another wary glance at him, she gathered her dishes to place them in the dishwasher before going to her room.

Maybe everyone here thought he was a wunderkind, but she knew what he was like.

Once dressed, she slipped into her robe, knotting the sash firmly in place, and got into bed.

It was the tug at her midsection that woke her. The bow at her waist was undone and she could smell that sharp citrus scent. “Nick?” she asked, still sleepy, but wary now, as well. He was lying next to her, leaning on one arm. The other was on her face, turning her towards him.

“I let you sleep,” he said, running his hand down her cheek. “You were out like a light.”

While you watched? “What . . .” She cleared her throat, feeling shy and nervous and hating herself a little for getting so flustered. “Um. What time is it?”

He kissed her mouth in response; he tasted minty, which clashed with the sweetness of the wine still clinging to her tongue. The bed shook as he rolled over her and his hands smoothed possessively over her bared collarbone as he pushed open her robe.

“Midnight.” She felt him trace along the delicate straps with a finger, following the lines of her neck and shoulders, before trailing down her ribs. It was as if his touch lifted trails of rime in his wake and she was too exhausted to resist the intoxicating chill that made her body burn even as it left her feeling cold and vanquished inside. “I was waiting for you, little bird.”

Waiting for her. She heard him sigh and then he followed the same path he'd traced before, this time with his mouth, kissing each of her breasts, before sucking her nipples into his mouth and drawing hard through the cloth. She inhaled as he bit her very gently, before moving down her belly, tracing the outline of her sex with his tongue.

“I don't understand you,” she blurted, ashamed at how breathless it sounded.

“I'm hard to read.” Nicholas added pressure as he kissed her and her hips bucked against his face. “Do you spend a lot of time trying to figure me out?”

“No,” she said, as the sleeves of her robe pooled at her elbows.

“No, what?”

Jay cried out as his mouth became less gentle. “No, Daddy.”

“I've spent a lot of time figuring you out. That's why I know when you're lying to me . . . just like you're doing right now.” He lightly grazed

her with his teeth, the touch making her jump as much as his words. “Why lie, though? Unless you think about me often.”

Fuck. Jay sucked in a breath that still tasted like mint. “I don't think about you at all.”

“I bet you touch yourself while you're thinking about me.” Nicholas sat up to take his shirt off before sliding her robe off her arms. “Just like I would.”

She could taste herself on his mouth as he kissed her, just beneath the mint. The kiss was as impassioned as his words were cold and the sound that came out of her mouth didn't sound much like denial. His fingers knotted in the fine silk, working the hem higher and higher until lifted her arms, and he broke the kiss just long enough to tug her camisole over her head.

Nobody touches me like this.

Jay closed her eyes against the traitorous thought as his lips returned to hers and her shorts were pulled from her legs. He slid his hand between her thighs, stroking over her folds in a casually exploratory way before plunging two fingers inside her and crooking them. Jay gasped into his mouth as he stroked her from within, before slowly withdrawing his hand and thrusting into her more quickly, this time while pressing down on her clit. She found herself gripping him as if she wanted to climb him. She could almost forget he was paying her to do this.

Almost.

“Just listen to you.” A shudder wracked his shoulders as her hands dragged over his sides.

All she could think about were his fingers and the seductive menace of his words.

“I want to see you come,” he told her, as she gasped for breath. “I can feel it, but I want to watch it—I want to watch you. I still remember how you bit your lip—the way you arched your back. You were so rough when you touched yourself.”

It took her a moment to realize what he meant and when his arm moved, she panicked, all of her desire abruptly swirling away like paint down a drain. “No.” She grabbed his free hand before he could move towards the light. “Don't do that. *Please.*”

“Why not?” He slid his fingers out of her. “Tell me why.” At her silence, he pressed on, sternly. “Did something happen to you? Did someone do something to you?”

Yes, she thought, as her breathing quickened involuntarily. *You did.*

Wetting her cracked lips, Jay managed to say, in a level tone, “I don't want to look.”

“At?”

“Anything.” She exhaled slowly. “So, please. Don't.”

Nicholas considered her words. The silence stretched.

I know when you're lying to me.

“You're breathing very fast,” he said, which made her eyes snap automatically towards him, even though it was too dark to glimpse his face. “You were breathing like this when you ran from me in the den.”

“I don't know what that has to do with this.”

“Don't you?” he asked, in a darkly ironic tone.

Jay stiffened as his hand flexed in hers, freeing himself from her grasp. No, she thought, as her heart began to pound wildly. Suddenly, it felt as if she were fighting herself for control.

You're a terrible liar.

When she felt him lean back, she tightened her grip on his neck. His pulse was so slow. It seemed wrong that it could be so slow, so steady. No, he was a dangerous man, and once again, she had allowed him to back her into a corner.

“Wait,” she said. “N-no. Don't go. Please *don't*—”

“I'm not going to post the photograph if you don't let me rape you,” he said coldly, and her fingers dug in. Hard enough that she felt his flesh jump a little under her touch.

Rape.

“D-don't say it like that,” she snapped, letting her hands fall away as her panic cracked open to reveal the boiling agony underneath. “Those were *your* terms. That was *your* price. You came to San Francisco to . . . to buy me.” When Nicholas remained chillingly silent, she drew in another breath. “But I guess that's not surprising since acquisitions seem to be your specialty.”

“Jay.” Her name was a snarl on his lips.

“What? It's not like you really care about me. This is business—isn't that what you said to me, Nicholas? You just want to fuck me. Well you *did*.” She fell back against the mattress, trying not to cry. “You did. I wondered how you were going to try to break me this time. I knew it would hurt—because it always does—but this . . . this is so much worse.”

“Is that what you think?” It was the tone he'd used with that man in the conference room, right before he'd said, *You must think I didn't read this contract, because there's no fucking way you would ask me to sign this if you thought I did*. “You think that's what I fucking want?”

“Isn't it? I'm surprised you didn't let me get drunk at dinner,” she added bitterly. “Since you seem to be so in love with the idea of a powerless captive you can fuck.”

When he spoke, there was no emotion in his voice at all. “I see.” She couldn't quite suppress her flinch when his thumb slid down her cheek. His touch was gentle but paired with that icy voice, it wasn't exactly calming, and when his hand brushed against her throat, she felt a chill. “You have no idea,” he began, forbiddingly. “You don't know what you—”

“What?” she said, when he cut himself off.

But all he did was laugh—it was a cold, terrible laugh: it was the laugh of a man who knew he was damned, and no longer cared, and it was just wild enough to scare her. “If I were half as depraved as you seem to think I am, ten million dollars would get me so much further than it does with you. I could tell someone to bend over and they'd ask me which direction.”

“Don't talk to me like that,” Jay said, dizzied by fury and anguish.

“What's the matter? Too crude? Long walks on the beach and kisses without tongue sound more your speed? Everyone has a price—and I found yours. There's nothing wrong with being mercenary about it. What you're doing isn't that much different from paying off a car.”

Anger pulsed through her, so hot and bright that for a moment, it eclipsed everything—even the fear—and she couldn't even breathe. He caught her hands in his as she swung out blindly to strike him and arousal pulsed dully through her at the familiar brutality of it. “I hate you!”

“So tell me to go,” Nicholas said, in that tone of terrible, glacial calm. “Tell me how much you hate this, and I'll leave right now. Otherwise, I'm

going to fuck you.” Jay jerked in his grip again and this time, he lowered her hands by the wrists. “Tell me.”

“Fuck you,” she whispered.

Nicholas made a sound, too dark and bleak to be a laugh, as he slid down his pants.

“You’re so predictable.” He ran his thumb along the inside of her wrist, still so gentle despite the stinging cruelty of his words. She wanted it to hurt. She wanted another reason to hurt *him*, when he seemed so immune to it. “I think you’re getting off on this.”

“*Fuck* you,” she cried.

Nicholas sank into her as her rage vibrated in her throat like a purr. “Yes,” he said. “Fuck me. Give it all up to me, my sweet, precious bird. I can take it.”

She thrashed beneath him, hooking a leg around him with such violence that it was more like a kick. It made him recoil. Their hands were still clasped and with his body pressed against hers, she could feel the tension inside him, almost like he was holding himself back. And then he rocked against her hard enough that he knocked her flat on the bed with a deep thrust that made her ache. “That’s right. Give it all to Daddy.”

Jay bucked again, unconsciously tilting her hips to an angle that would allow her to take more of him in. He kept her wrists pinned as another shudder tore through him. This time, the sound wouldn’t stop when it left her lips—it took several heaves of her chest for her to realize that she was sobbing, each hitching breath splicing the sound into a ragged cry.

Open your eyes and look at me.

The words, relics from her past, stole the air from her lungs. *I’m close*, she thought, wondering at how she could feel so good and so bad, all at once. When she came, it felt like she was on the verge of a black abyss, one hard push from falling.

“No,” she said, “No, no, no—I *can’t* . . .”

“What do you mean . . . you can’t?”

“Please,” she gasped. “Let me go.”

He stilled without releasing her, an indomitable force, and Jay realized, with a sinking sensation, that she didn’t even have to wonder what would happen if he didn’t stop.

“All right.” Nicholas rolled onto his back, pulling her against him. She didn't resist—she was too surprised that he had given in. As far as she knew, he yielded nothing to no one. “It's all right,” he repeated, sounding a little strained. “I won't do anything else.”

She stared bleakly into the darkness as he pulled her hair out of her face. She could feel him twisting it in his fingers, gathering bunches of it in a way that caused a series of gentle tugs at her scalp. The feel of his hands was so achingly familiar.

That wasn't what I meant.

“Nick.”

“Shh.” He brushed the tears from her cheek as she swallowed back another cry. “Don't cry. I didn't mean to make my little bird cry.” She winced, turning her head away until her face was buried against his shoulder, and heard him say softly, “Sweet little blue jay.”

I'll be so, so gentle.

She felt like she was drowning in him. *What a lie.*

“Tell me what you want,” he said, still calm, but with a strange urgency fueling his words. “Name anything and it's yours.”

“Forgive the debt,” she said brokenly. “Let me go.” When he didn't respond, she swallowed back another sob. “Please. If you ever loved me at all, you'll let me go. You said you would.”

“No,” he said, after a measured pause. “I can't do that.”

She pulled away from him, then. She felt his hands tighten briefly, as if he were going to hold her prisoner in the cage of his embrace, but then he appeared to think better of it. Jay grabbed fabric as she left, speeding down the hall, down the stairs, gripping the rail tightly as she was blinded by tears, each one burning as cold as a star in a constellation of abject misery.



Nicholas woke up next to a purring cat staring at him with unblinking yellow eyes. It gave him a start and he stared incredulously as the cat's eyes slowly closed again. It took him a moment to realize that he'd fallen asleep in Jay's bed. The pillows smelled like her shampoo.

I can't let you go.

Jay hadn't returned after running off. He was alone, except for the cat, which had made itself comfortable on the discarded camisole that was now sporting many small holes and runs in the silk from being copiously kneaded. *Fucking cat.*

He pushed himself up and grabbed his pants, which had been kicked to the floor sometime in the night. The cat hopped off the bed, following him with its tail sticking straight up like an exclamation point as he tried, unsuccessfully, to locate his shirt. An unhappy meow chased him out into the hall as he shut the door on its expectant face.

From his bedroom, Nicholas got a different shirt, glancing instinctively at the sofa and the bed, even though he knew he would find Jay in neither place. If she hadn't felt comfortable returning to her own room, she certainly wouldn't retreat to his. It occurred to him that she might be upset enough to leave but—no, she wouldn't abandon her pet. Not with him.

It had been like that before. The night of his father's party, he had returned to find her gone. Her cat, her clothes, her favorite things. She'd taken what she wanted and left everything else. For weeks, he'd wondered where she'd gotten the money. Who had helped her get away.

And then, he'd only wondered at how to get her back.

Nicholas walked downstairs and heard a very soft noise come from the direction of the den. He stopped walking and turned around. There, in the bluish gloom, Jay was curled in her robe, wrapped in the tasseled throw on the sofa with her arms wrapped around one of the cushions. Her eyelashes were clumped, like she'd cried herself to sleep.

As he watched, her eyes opened slowly, and he saw that they were red-rimmed. She froze, her fingers seeking the edges of the throw as if to check that she was still fully covered. The hunted, desperate look on her face made his chest feel curiously tight.

Did I push her too far?

Nicholas thought she might scream at him but instead she looked away. Her jaw was tense and she looked like she might bolt if pushed. He couldn't think of anything to say to her that would be reassuring, so he went to the kitchen, hovering by the door, and heard the soft creep of her footsteps disappearing up the stairs. Moving quickly. Nearly running.

Her door was closed when he walked back into the hall. He could just glimpse it through the rails. She was going to hide. Nicholas bustled around the house impatiently, waiting for her to come back out, but the door remained shut. He had the key, but he knew that using it would shatter whatever remaining shards of trust that still hung tenuously between them, if any.

He went to his room to shower, and when he came back down to the kitchen, there was a new plate in the dishwasher, as well as several bottles missing from the fridge. Almost like she'd stockpiled a hoard of food and drink up there with the intention of waiting him out all weekend.

If you ever loved me at all, you'll let me go.

Manipulative words. Desperate words. But if she were really that desperate, why not leave?

Maybe she didn't feel like she could.

Nicholas knocked on her door. He could hear shuffling sounds inside and then it opened and she was looking up at him with a more composed version of the look she had given him last night. "Blue jay." He reached for her, letting his hand still when she shied from him.

"What?" she asked. "Are you here to fuck me?"

"No," he said. "Not right now."

"Are you sure? You're paying a lot for me." She folded her arms. "Don't you want your money's worth? You told me yourself, you don't call me down to *talk*."

Nicholas felt a flicker of anger and wasn't sure who it was directed at, but he recognized the sound of his own words being thrown back at him, delivered in a mocking cadence of his own voice. She had gotten good at wounding with her words before she left. When she had first come to this place, she hadn't been vicious. She had been an odd blend of naive and jaded, but there was no bitterness. Not then. But that had changed—*she* had changed . . . and so had he.

He regarded her as she continued to stand there, bracing herself against the wall. As if that could mask the trembling in her legs. He saw the resolve begin to crumble from her face as she fought the urge to look away, and when he took a slow step forward, she flinched towards the door. Nicholas

stopped moving, remembering how she had backed herself against the copier.

"I'm here because I want a hiking partner," he said. "I know you hiked a lot in Berkeley and that you don't shy away from the difficult trails. I'm willing to bill the hours to pay your debt."

She stared up at him, her expression unreadable. "Fine," she said coldly. "I'll change."

"Fifteen minutes," he said.

The door didn't quite slam in his face, but she closed it just hard enough to reveal her anger. *Too good to be corrupted by the devil*, he thought, *but not too good to take the devil's money*.

Shaking his head, Nicholas changed into a worn gray shirt and cargo shorts, sticking his sunglasses into one pocket and his phone and wallet into the other. *Everyone has their price*, he reminded himself. He knew hers—it was her sense of honor, and it was much cheaper than she wanted it to be. But then, honor wasn't particularly remunerative in a world that didn't value it.

Especially with how quick all of her so-called friends and family had been to sell her out.

And now, he had forced her to sell herself.

He grabbed a backpack out of the front closet and began filling it with water and granola bars. Jay came out of her room while he was lacing up his boots in the front hall. He watched her climb down the stairs. She was wearing track pants and a tank top. The jacket that matched the pants was knotted around her hips and she had tied her hair back into a severe bun.

"I'm ready."

"Good," he said. "Let's go."

Jay swung herself into his car and sullenly buckled herself in. Nicholas turned on the radio, glancing at her periodically as he drove. She sat stiffly in her seat with her purse on her lap, picking at the flecking fake leather. Just as soon as it occurred to him that he could get her a better bag, he found himself facing the realization that she wouldn't accept it.

Nicholas parked the car in the dusty lot. It was a hot day and the hills were blazing with light. There were quite a few other cars—more than he was used to on this trail. Probably people hoping to take advantage of the

fading cloud cover before the afternoon heat became unbearable. Even in spring, it was hot. Cracked, dry earth where the trees and shrubs just barely clung to life. Sheets of rock exposed by years of weathering and erosion. The air had a stale, mineral tang that would periodically be seasoned by a whiff of some herbal, verdant smell as some unknown plant was crushed underfoot, releasing its fragrance into the air.

Jay didn't appear to be in the mood for talking. She walked slightly behind him in silence, redolent of sweat and sunscreen. She had taken a Modelo baseball cap from his car, squeezing her bun through the bracketing like a bunny tail, and despite the heat, she was wearing her jacket to cover her arms. "You're going to want to lose the jacket. You're about to get very warm."

She rolled the sleeves up to her forearms. "I would prefer to keep it on."

"Your choice."

"Is it?" she asked.

Nicholas unzipped his backpack and handed her a cold bottle of water, letting her question hang in the air as he uncapped his own and took a long, cooling drink.

I would have let you go.

Maybe he was even lying to himself.

The heat was oppressive but it made everything more vivid. Sprays of mustard flowers and California poppies looked almost neon with the sun bathing the petals in pure, saturated flashes of color. It was exactly the kind of thing he knew she loved, and he could tell from the look on her face that she was trying hard not to enjoy it because she was so upset at him.

But he hadn't been able to get to where he was today by being a poor read on people; he knew her—he knew her better than anyone—and if he couldn't offer words of comfort, he could take her out to the hills, plunk her down in the middle of nature, and dare her not to like it.

At one point, Jay went still, a strange expression on her face. She was watching a mountain lion skulking in the bushes like a sandy shadow, holding one of its own spotted kittens in its snowy mouth. The cat glanced at them, before quickly scampering away, but he was too busy watching her face, savoring that brief flicker of childlike delight.

“They're shy,” she said, almost to herself. “They only go after small and easy prey.”

It was the first piece of conversation she'd willingly volunteered all morning. “Do they eat people?” he asked idly, like he didn't really care either way.

“Not usually. And if they were going to, they wouldn't go after you.”

“I liked the little one in its mouth. It reminds me of yours.”

She looked at him unwillingly. “Carbon?”

“No. The white one.”

“Oh. I don't have Gypsum anymore.” Jay glanced off into the trees, visibly withdrawing as she took another sip of water. “She died two years ago.”

“Where did the other one come from?”

“Lily's mom found *Carbon* in the garage of her home in San Bruno. He was part of a litter and her parents needed people to take the kittens. Lily's allergic,” she added absently, as she picked at the peeling sleeve of her water bottle, “so I said yes.”

“What made you pick him?”

“He was the only black one. I was so afraid he wouldn't get adopted. If you go to shelters, they're full of little black cats and kittens nobody wants, because people are superstitious or think they're evil or because they don't photograph well.” Her voice broke. “I wanted him to be mine.”

Lucky fucking cat. “I'm surprised you just have the one.”

“I can only afford the one,” she said, in a way that suggested that she'd probably done the math. “But every year I donate some money to the local shelter and I—”

She did a double-take and abruptly stopped speaking.

“And you?” he prompted.

“Stop. Stop doing that,” she said. “Using your charm to manipulate me. It's so *cheap*.”

“Then tell me how I should be, Jay. You say you don't like it when I try to charm you, but you don't seem to like it when I'm crude, either. You want to know what I think? I think you don't hate me as much as you want to. You've hated me for so long because it's easy, and because you need

something to fight against. I bet you came here expecting the worst, and it really fucking bothers you that I'm not the monster you expected me to be.”

“Let me guess,” she said, taking a step back. “You're really a nice guy.”

“No,” Nicholas said. “I'm not nice. *You* were nice. Hollybrook's little angel. Not me. Everything people say about me is true—but I'm not a monster.”

“Yes, you are.” She let out a harsh breath like she was fighting to keep herself from saying more. “I should take your keys and leave you here.”

“I'm sure you could find a way to do that if that's what you really want to do.” Nicholas brushed a few dead leaves from his shirt. “You were always the smart one. I never really gave a shit one way or the other.”

“And yet, life worked out great for you. Imagine that.”

“Yeah, it did. Poor little rich boy. Look at me now. Millionaire under thirty. I'm surprised you didn't turn out more bitter than you are. Life didn't turn out so great for you, did it, Jay?”

“What is that supposed to mean? Do you think you're saving me from the gutters by forcing me to play dress-up in your little mansion? My life isn't *shit*, you bastard. I had a good job with good friends and an apartment I earned myself. I love my cat and feel lucky that I can take myself out once in a while if I work hard and budget responsibly. Everything I did, I did *myself*.”

“And I didn't?” he asked dangerously.

“Your father gave you your company,” she scoffed, “just like he gave you everything else.”

Nicholas turned so sharply that he sent her skittering into the skinny trunk of the tree. “My father embezzled so much money out of the company that it was practically hollow. I had to bail it out of the water with a fiduciary bucket. The lawsuits had us nearly in the red. I had to take out loans and beg for people to lend me money they knew I might not be able to pay back to fix what he did. The money your mother seems to think is his—it isn't. It's all *mine*.”

“So you're using your own money to control me this time,” she said shakily. “Big man. Well, guess what. When I was just eighteen, your father put his hand on my knee and told me how glad he'd be to kick my mother out if I married him instead. So guess what, Nicholas, I don't actually give a

shit about the money, or I could have been a millionaire under thirty, too.” She glared at him with bright, watery eyes. “Maybe I’m not the whore you seem to think I am.”

“When did this happen?”

“At that stupid resort in Laguna Beach. Right before I left for college.” She swiped her eyes. “I could have been your mom instead of your sister. How neat would that be? Really neat, huh? Really adds a whole other level to the whole f—”

“Jay,” he said. “Stop. That’s enough.”

Her eyes were bright. “This is all your fault.”

“I loved you.”

“No.” Jay folded her arms. “No. That wasn’t love.”

“You were the only woman I wanted. The only woman I have *ever* fucking wanted. No one else comes close. *No one*. My whole life—it’s always been you. There was a time when I would have given anything for a kiss from you. I would have—” He broke off, thinking of his father, and his eyes narrowed against the heat. “If I had known . . .”

“What, you wouldn’t have been so cruel to me? You wouldn’t have—forced me?” Her voice wavered. “Do you even remember what you did to me?”

“I remember,” he said. “Is that why you only let me touch you in the dark, Jay? Because our first time was in a sunlit room and in the dark you can pretend I’m someone else? Well, I didn’t escape unscathed. Not even my father could do what you did. You fucking wrecked me.”

“*Good*,” she said. “Maybe it will bleed some empathy into you. I just wanted someone to love me. No strings attached. That’s all I ever wanted—and people wanted to hurt me for it. My mom. Your dad. *You*. I never thought you were going to be the one in that house who was going to hurt me, but you did—you hurt me worst of all.”

“Yes,” he said, even though it felt like something inside him had shattered. “I know.”

“And you know what’s really sick?” she cried, curling her fingers into his shirt as if she could claw out his heart. “Sometimes—I didn’t hate it. I wanted to, God, I wanted to—I wanted to hate *you*. But sometimes I

couldn't and it made everything so much worse because it made me hate myself instead. Why did you do that to me, Nick? *Why?*”

“Because you broke me,” he said, “and when the misery cleared away, all I wanted to do was own you, hurt you, use you, until I made you feel as broken as I did.”

“You did,” she rasped. “You achieved everything you set out to do, and you did it *twice*.”

“I'm sorry.” The words were clumsy in his mouth and Jay didn't react to them, didn't appear to have even heard. “I'm so fucking sorry. I fucked up. I fucked everything up.”

“Nick,” Jay said, and he waited. When she didn't speak, he gathered her to his chest, and he could hear her muffled cries and feel her tears dampening his skin through his shirt as he slowly slid down the trunk of the tree until they were both sitting in the twisted shadow of a manzanita.

Chapter Twenty-Two

2008

■□□□■

Jay's four years at college were the best years of her life. Berkeley was everything she had missed about San Francisco and the Bay Area in general: the crunchy weirdness, the great food, the interesting people. It was like going from paint-by-the-numbers to pure, colorful abstract, and the only thing that soured it was the knowledge that she had to return home.

To Damon.

And Nick.

She had tried so, so hard to keep from having to go back to Hollybrook. She'd applied everywhere for jobs but couldn't seem to secure anything more seasoned than part-time. It was as if she looked great on paper, but for whatever reason, things fell through as soon as she thought they were lined up. And she couldn't afford to live here permanently. Not without something more solid than waitress or comic bookstore clerk on her resume.

You will find no quarter with me.

Her stepfather's warning rang in her ears and she could feel herself becoming more and more worried as time tightened to a funnel and her remaining days began to dwindle.

Jay was surprised when they came to her graduation. She honestly hadn't thought they'd bother. Her mother was wearing a low-cut top with a thin scarf and matching beaded necklace despite the heat. Damon, as always, looked as if he'd just come from a business meeting, and glanced at her with cold eyes. And Nick—Nick had gotten tall.

She looked up at him in surprise when he embraced her, holding his camera to one side by the strap—he had to be 6'4". She could feel the heat of him through his plaid shirt and the strength in his arms was formidable. *Brothers don't hug their sisters like this*, she found herself thinking, as his fingers singed her through her graduation robes and the thin dress she wore beneath it, tracing over her back in a disconcertingly familiar way that felt more like a lover than someone welcoming a beloved relative back home.

"Hey, blue jay," he said, in a low, deep voice. "You're so little now."

Jay smiled nervously, stepping back from him. *You're so big*, she wanted to say, but something halted her. It sounded . . . wrong. Suggestive.

"I'm the same as I always was," she said at last. "Maybe you changed."

His mouth curled. "I have," he agreed solemnly, with an edge to his voice that sent the same chilling rush coursing through her that his embrace had. "I'm a man now."

Jay swallowed hard. One of her last memories of him was as an angry fourteen-year-old boy, and even though she still wasn't quite sure what had happened at Sable Blanc with Nick, she was pretty convinced that he had been about to kiss her when he bent her over on the grass.

Looking at Nick now, Jay realized that she could no longer read him. His face had thinned out and the shape of it was now alien to her, like seeing a once-familiar landscape encrusted in ice and snow. All of that sharp and vicious anger had frozen, and his sangfroid left her feeling chilled. Her eyes fell uneasily to the camera around his neck. "You were taking pictures of me?"

"Your mom thought it might be fun if we all pretended we were a happy family." He traced the zoom ring in a way that struck her as curiously vulgar. "You want to see them?"

"I'll look later. I'm sure they're great. I'm sorry I couldn't go to your graduation."

"Don't worry about it. The whole thing was a farce. You want me to take a close-up? You look good with your hair blowing back. I could get one of you under the bougainvillea."

Jay hesitated, glancing at the narrow cobbled sidewalk. It was empty. "Okay," she said uncertainly.

"Stand under the tree and look at me."

The ease of the command was unsettling and she looked at him for a moment before going to stand next to the flowering spray of purple vines. "Here?"

"Right there." Nick lifted the camera. "Relax your shoulders."

Jay let her arms fall to the side, resting one on her hip the way she had seen Jordan do. She heard a series of clicks and then he bent and shot a few more, angling up. She stared at the black eye of the camera, biting her lip as she inhaled the cloying sweetness of the petals.

"Yes," he said. "That's the look."

What look is that? Jay stepped away from the flowers, picking a few of the petals from her robe. Desperate to change the subject, she said, “I, um, heard you got into Stanford.”

“Yeah.” Nick let the camera fall back against his chest as he rose. “You sound surprised.”

“I’m not.” She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Of course you’d get in. You’re a *legacy*.”

“That wasn’t the only reason.” He thumbed through the photos and a lock of his hair fell into his eyes as he bent his head to view the screen. “I have many talents.”

She was almost relieved when her blustering mother wandered over to loudly congratulate her for being so smart—“just like her mother.” Jay could see a few people glancing over at her mother’s antics and it embarrassed her, but focusing on her was still safer than Nick.

“Where shall we go?” her mother asked. “Lunch? I thought maybe Italian.”

“Perhaps we should load up Justine’s things,” said Damon.

“I can do that.” Nick looked over at her. “How much do you have?”

“Not much. Just a few boxes. Everything’s already packed. Um.” She hesitated. “I won’t be going back with all of you, though—not right away. My friend invited me to stay with her family in Half Moon Bay so I’ll be spending a few weeks with her and her family at their beach house.”

“Which friend?” her mother asked, like she actually cared.

“Her name is Jessi Yamato.”

“That’s fine,” said Damon. “It’s important to build connections with your friends.”

Nick followed her into her room, ducking under the door frame that had never struck her as being particularly low before. Jessi, who was sorting cookware into a box, looked up. “*Hello*. Jay, who is this strapping young man?”

“He’s my little brother,” said Jay. “And he’s only eighteen, so don’t be a sleaze.”

“Jay thinks everyone is as innocent as she is.” Nick stooped to pick up one of her boxes. “She used to fill shot glasses with water at parties so she could pretend to drink.”

“*Nick.*”

“Oh my God,” said Jessi, when Nick left. “Is that true? I thought your drinks tasted weak.”

“I can't hold my liquor,” Jay said defensively. “Drinking more than one makes me sick.”

“Why are you yelling?” Cori asked, wandering into their apartment. “I hear yelling.”

“Jay's been drinking water at parties and telling people it's vodka this whole time—just like we always suspected. Remember that vodka screwdriver she had that just tasted like watered-down orange juice?” said Jessi. “Who called her out? *And* she has a ridiculously hot brother who just spilled the dirt.”

“And he's only eighteen,” said Jay. “You forgot that part, Jessi. He literally just graduated from high school, you unbelievable cougar.”

“What's your brother's name, Jay?”

“Nicholas,” she said. “Nick. Why?”

“Nick!” Jessi called out, making Jay stiffen. “Do you have any more dirt on Jay?”

“Shut up,” said Jay. “Don't encourage him. Nick, I swear to God—”

“She dances in her room when she thinks no one's watching,” said Nick, grabbing another box as she flushed. “She especially likes 'Freak Like Me' by Adina Howard and 'Pony' by Ginuwine.”

Cori clapped her hands and laughed. “Oh my God, Jay. You are such a dirty girl!”

“No, I'm not!” said Jay. “It's like singing into your hairbrush while dancing to Blondie.”

“Oh girl,” said Cori. “Spare me the details of what you do with your hairbrush when you're alone. Nick,” she called out, as Jay fell back against her suitcase in annoyance, “we need more dirt on our friend, Jay. She's been so annoyingly perfect—I crave more of this deliciously prurient validation.”

“There is nothing prurient about dancing alone.”

“She cries when she sees pictures of kittens at adoption centers.” Nick glanced at her thunderous face, a faint smile on his lips. “She also cries when butterflies come out of the chrysalis or at pictures of supernovae.”

"Why a supernova, Jay?" Cori asked, trying not to grin.

"Because it's *sad*, okay?" Jay yanked angrily on the handle of her suitcase. "It means a star has lost its life and by the time we see it, it's so many billions of light years away that it's already been dead forever, so we're just seeing something that just . . . died all alone up there in the sky."

"Oh my God, I think she's actually going to cry. Jay," Jessi said quickly. "It's *just* a star."

"I'm not going to cry," said Jay, whose eyes felt curiously sore. "Nick, you are so dead."

"Where are you going to school in the fall, Nick?" asked Cori. "Please tell me it's Berkeley."

"No," he said. "I'm going to Stanford."

"Ew," said Cori, wrinkling her nose. "Stanturd? Gross. I think you should go."

"Sounds to me like you're just jealous you couldn't get in," Nick said dryly.

"Gross," said Jessi. "Jay, your hot brother has overstayed his welcome by being an elitist snob, and now he needs to be taken out with the rest of the trash. No red shall mix with the valiant blue and gold."

Nick rolled his eyes and left. Jay's eyes flicked to the doorway. "Can I leave my suitcase in here until I come back from lunch with my family?"

"Sure," said Jessi. "I'll be here. We don't have to be out of here until five, anyway. You might want to ditch the graduation gown, by the way. You kind of look like a dweeb," she whispered.

"Oh. Right." Jay tugged it off and rolled it up into her purse, wheeling her suitcase against the back wall where it would be out of the way. She straightened out her dress, which was pink and embroidered. It had cost more than she usually paid for clothes, but she had wanted to look nice for her graduation. "I'll see you soon! We don't usually stay out long."

We aren't usually much of a family.

"Maybe I should let you pick the music for the drive," Jessi said with a wink, making Jay flush. "Your water-swilling, pony-riding, kitten-crusading queen."

"Stop," said Jay, making a face.

Cori wagged her fingers. "Have fun with the fam."

Part of 'the fam' was waiting outside in the apartment hallway, leaning into the stairwell with his hands in his pockets. "What the hell was that?" she demanded. "Are you trying to embarrass me?"

"I don't think I had to try. Too bad you didn't go to Stanford. Red looks good on you."

"You are such a bastard. I can't wait until you're off to Bastard University, you know that?"

Nick laughed and straightened up from the wall. When he walked over to her, the gesture struck her as oddly predatory. *Like a lion*, she thought nervously, *stalking a gazelle*. "You know, it's sad. Even your flaws make you more endearing—refusing to drink at parties and crying over pretty butterflies really isn't the social suicide you seem to think it is."

"I know that," she said irritably. "God, sometimes it seems like you want to humiliate me."

"Jay," he said. "If I wanted to humiliate you, I wouldn't tell cute little stories about you to your friends." He absently adjusted the sleeves of her dress, which had gotten twisted beneath her robe. The rough pads of his fingers on her bare shoulders made her skin prickle in awareness of him. "I'd just destroy you."

"W-what?" Jay let out a nervous laugh and stepped back. "Destroy me?"

"I'm just teasing, blue jay. You shouldn't be so serious. You always cared so much of what people thought of you."

Jay tugged at her sleeves, hoping he couldn't see the goosebumps on her arms as clearly as she could. "*Thanks*, Nick," she said flatly. "I missed you, too."

"Nicholas." When she looked at him, he added, "I prefer Nicholas. Nick's a boy's name."

Even though it was sunny out, Jay felt a chill as they walked out to Damon's car.

I'd just destroy you.

He hadn't sounded like he was teasing.

Things were dull while Jay was away. Her mother swanned around as if she were queen of the fucking castle while his father worked later and later hours with his secretary, Jeannie Fairbanks, a skinny little mouse of a woman who always looked as if she were on the verge of running away. *Another Jay*, he'd thought, glancing her over. *Only not as pretty.*

She'd actually come to the house once, looking for his father. Nick only knew her name because he'd wanted to make sure she wasn't a whore. His dad frequented strip clubs and singles' bars before meeting Danielle and now that the luster of the marriage had worn off, Nick figured he was probably doing it again. Honestly, he was surprised his father hadn't divorced the bitch and taken another, younger wife—not that he particularly wanted that outcome, either. He didn't care if his dad was seeing other women but he didn't want them coming to the house.

"I'm Jeannie," the woman said. "Um. Jeannie Fairbanks?"

When he stared at her blankly, she flushed, and he saw that she was actually a little cute under those glasses. "Your dad wanted me to drop off some documents? They're for work."

"He's not here right now." And then, as if he could hear Jay's mental scolding, he added reluctantly, "Do you want to come in? I can get you a glass of water."

"No," she said, looking at him and then away. "Thanks, though."

Weird, he thought.

Now that school was over, summer was his to kill until college started up in the fall. With Jay in Half Moon Bay, he spent most of his time going to parties, hanging out with Dave, who had dropped out of university to sell weed while working odd jobs, and Jake and Alonzo.

Nick wasn't sure what had happened to Ian, and he didn't really care. It seemed like he'd decided to hang out with some of the burn-outs who spent all their time doing drugs and listening to old 70s rock while hanging out in their parents' basements playing WoW and Halo.

"I can't believe that all of this is coming to an end," said Alonzo, gesturing around at the designer-clad teens, the cheap beer, the loud hip-hop music. "End of a fucking era."

"I can't wait," said Jake. He was going to Chico. "I'm gonna rush so hard."

"And then you're going to puke so hard," said Nick. "You drink like Jay."

"My parents said they'd pull tuition if I didn't swing at least a B-average," said Alonzo.

"College is tough." Dave paused to wave at a few people who had belatedly entered the house. Party-hoppers, from the look of it. Their eyes were too glazed to be sober. "It's not for everyone."

"What about you, man?" Jake tilted his head up to look at Nick. "You gonna join a frat?"

"Probably not," said Nick. "I'm not really much of a follower."

"Whatever happened to your sister, anyway?" Dave asked, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

"She just graduated, come loud," he added, purposefully mispronouncing the words to make his friends laugh. "She's in like two fucking honors societies, too."

"Your dad must be proud, man."

"Not really." Once, it had seemed like Jay could do no wrong and his father was always giving her little gifts and pats on the head. Now his face hardened whenever her name was brought up. "I think she pissed him off," he said, taking a sip of his beer. "God knows how. She's a little saint."

"Whatever, man," said Alonzo. "At least now you don't have to compete. My parents drive us like we're fucking sled dogs. My younger siblings live in permanent terror of the parental whip."

"Kinky," Nick said dryly. "Do you like it better when your mom whips you? Or your dad?"

"Screw you," said Alonzo. "You can do whatever the fuck you want and your parents don't care."

Whatever I want, he thought morosely, finishing the can. *Not fucking likely.*

Talk of school put them off their respective buzz. Dave smoked himself into a stupor, watching his party through shuttered eyes while Alonzo and Jake went off to go play Guitar Hero in the basement. Nick wandered

around until he had a run-in with a girl in a bandage top and a really short skirt. She gave him an appreciative once-over.

“Do you want to dance?”

“Not really,” he said. “I’d rather play a game.”

She smiled at him, tugging at her top. “What kind of game?”

“A counting game.” Nicholas arched his eyebrows. “You play it on your knees.”

She went with him to the second floor and he locked the door behind them while she made herself comfortable on the bed. They made out for a while, and then he tugged down her top and kissed her there, too, until she was squirming and he was hard—it didn’t take long: she wasn’t wearing a bra and her breasts were nice and he liked the way she was pulling on his hair.

“I’m not going to touch you,” he told her, looking into her wide, hazel eyes. “But you can touch yourself all you want. Now get on your knees and fuck me with that pretty mouth.”

“You’re kind of a bastard,” she said, which made his smile widen.

“Yeah,” he said, opening the fly of his jeans. “I am. And I bet you fucking love it.”

Her resolve lasted all of a minute. Nick leaned back against the bed as she slid to her knees and worked him over with her mouth. Every so often, he’d let out an encouraging groan, digging his fingers into his thighs. *Yeah, she loves it.*

Nick liked the power dynamics of a blowjob. If he couldn’t get hard, it was their fault for not being good enough at sucking dick. If they didn’t swallow, they were a prude. If they did, they were a whore. He let girls fuck around with him but he never fucked any of them with his cock and he didn’t usually play back. The performative nature of it left him feeling a little cold.

Maybe this was weird but at least he wouldn’t be getting anyone pregnant. And girls bragged about sleeping with him anyway, so it wasn’t like anyone was the wiser about his weird little kink. The way his fucking friends talked, going balls-deep just made you a slave to the pussy anyway.

God, he couldn’t wait to leave this place. Palo Alto was the hub of everything, a constant rush of innovation and networking. At Stanford,

people made friendships that lasted lifetimes—or so he'd been told. He couldn't believe Jay had turned it down.

His mind drifted to the recent photos she'd been tagged in on Facebook. Someone had gotten a picture of her kneeling on a rock, wearing shorts and a bikini top, with her hair streaming down her back. She'd obviously been swimming, because her hair had been wet and her skin had a dewy, glistening sheen.

He had printed out that photo, almost breathless with the wrongness of the act, and hidden it in one of his magazines. The one place no one in this house would look except him—and he looked. He looked at it at least once a day, imagining pulling those straps down her shoulders and tasting every inch of her hot, wet skin, tugging her shorts down and putting his mouth right over her—

“*Ugh.*” The girl at his feet looked up at him balefully. “You asshole! You didn't warn me!”

Nick made a noise of irritation and grabbed a box of tissues of the nightstand, dropping them in her lap. “What did you think was going to come out? Confetti?”

“You came on my *face*.” She wiped at her cheeks furiously. “You got it on my top—we never agreed that I would swallow,” she snapped. “What am I supposed to do now?”

“You could lick it off,” he suggested coolly. “I've been told it tastes pretty good.”

The girl made an outraged sound and threw the box of tissues at him, hard, before whirling out of the room and slamming the door shut behind her.

Someone's not graduating come loud.

The thought struck him as particularly funny for some reason and he threw back his head and laughed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

2008



Jay came home from Half Moon Bay with a tan and a new wariness in her eyes that hadn't been there before Berkeley. "Hey," she said, when she came home, looking over her shoulder like she thought she was being chased. "I'm back. Where is everyone? Have you been feeding Gypsum like I asked?"

"Every day for the past four-fucking-years. The thing eats and shits like a furry dump truck. Relax," he said, when she pulled a face. "It's fine. Probably glad to see you. You might have visited. Then you could have seen for yourself that everything was all right."

"Yeah," she said, in a way that clearly meant *no*. "I know. Things kept coming up."

Knowing she was coming home, he'd opted for a tight, white shirt and some loose sweatpants, and gone to a little trouble with his hair. That curl was falling into his eye in a way that he thought made him look rakish. The last girl he'd been with had always been putting her hands in his hair. "You think it's that shitty here, huh?"

Jay looked at him in a way that made him hold his breath. "I don't belong here," she said. "Maybe you don't see that, because you do."

"Maybe you're not giving yourself a chance to belong. You could, if you wanted to." Nick studied her face intently. "You know most of the people in this town adored you. When was the last time you texted one of your friends?"

"I text my friends plenty," she said. "Not that it's any of your business, but I talked to Quentin just last week. We're meeting for drinks."

"Fucking adorable," said Nick. "You two dating now?"

"No," she said. "We're just friends."

I bet that's not what he thinks. "Want to watch something? Dealer's choice."

"Uh, maybe later," said Jay. "I should go see to the cat."

But there wasn't a later. In fact, she seemed to be making a concerted effort to avoid him, which he knew, because he was so determined to cross

her path. There was no way she could elude him as much as she was without intent. It was a big house but not that big.

When he saw her reading out by the pool, he would go out there and start swimming. Sometimes, he would come up to the edge to chat with her while in the water and sometimes he would just swim. In either case, she would leave, staying just long enough to make it seem as if it might not be deliberate. He knew it was. She never looked at him,

When she was in the den, he would sit with her. She would give him one of those tense smiles and sit as stiffly as a virgin on her wedding night (was she a virgin? he didn't think so). He kept offering to put something on, and she would inevitably demur. There were always excuses.

Frustrated, Nick had taken to lounging around half-dressed in the mornings, because past experience had shown him that even if a girl didn't like what was coming out of his mouth, she usually didn't mind looking at his chest. The first time Jay had run into him, clad in his pajama bottoms and nothing else, she had gotten flustered. "Oh, sorry, I didn't realize anyone was in here," she said nonsensically, looking quickly away, but not before he'd noticed how dark her eyes looked or how flushed her face had gotten as she left the kitchen still clutching an empty coffee cup.

"Did you lose all of your shirts, Nicholas?" His stepmother yapped like one of those little teacup chihuahuas all of the yoga bitches had down in the Valley. "I didn't think we were so strapped for cash that we couldn't afford to dress you properly."

"That's funny, coming from you. Remind me, because I've forgotten. What exactly is your contribution around here? Putting the T&A into PTA? Feeling nostalgic at charity auctions because the sight of a man waving a hundred dollar bill makes you yearn for the good old days?"

"Nick," said Jay, who was reading at the bar area. "Don't talk to my mother like that."

"You're a foul-mouthed, disrespectful little boy," Danielle breathed. "You know nothing."

"Yeah?" said Nick. "I know you're a washed-up has-been with stretch-marked tits."

"Nick," Jay said again, slamming her book closed. "Stop it."

Danielle scoffed. "I don't have to stand around and be spoken to like this. Maybe you'll be able to talk some sense into your Neanderthal of a brother, Justine. I have a meeting with the ladies of the Hollybrook Conservation Society." She shot him a scathing look. "You might start by informing him that nobody wants to see his hairy underarms."

Nick watched her storm off with her cold glass of juice. There was a cocky swing to her backside. He knew why that was. She'd started fucking the man who took care of their pool. A slim twenty-five-year-old, fresh out of college. The new tits were probably for him.

He'd snapped some interesting photographs of the two of them in flagrante delicto. He thought about slapping them down in front of his father but decided to hold on to the pictures instead. He knew exactly how angry his father would be about the cheating—but Danielle didn't. She was the kind of woman who was too arrogant to think she'd ever face the consequences. But everyone faced consequences—at least, they did, if they got caught. If she kept fucking around with him like this, she'd learn that the hard way.

Yes, he knew all about Danielle. He knew where she kept her weed and her sex toys, and that she had a cache of jewelry in the closet, as if she thought she might have to flee like a thief in the night. He knew what position she favored during sex, and that she and the pool cleaner liked to fuck in the shed where they kept the grill and the spare keys. If she'd kept a diary, he would have found that, too. He was as familiar with this house as the back of his hand.

"I really hate your fucking mother," Nick said, leaning back against the fridge.

"Don't provoke her then," Jay said. She was opening her book again, smoothing the pages out on the counter with careful fingers. "It's stupid. Fighting with her never solves anything."

Jay, unlike her mother, had very little to hide. Some erotica novels hidden behind her fantasy books and a dusty vibrator were all that he had been able to find. She kept her diary exactly where a girl without any real secrets would try to hide it. Underneath her mattress.

So obviously, he'd read it. Multiple times.

"... sometimes I wish Angel was my big sister and she would adopt me and take me away. She calls me her 'little love' and I really wish I was,

because I'd rather live with her than my mom."

She'd been an avid writer when she was young. God, Young Jay had been so fucking cute. He wanted to go back and kidnap her. Even if she hadn't written about him all that much (*"this kid steals liquor out of his dad's office"*), and when she had, she had gotten him all wrong, he found himself enjoying the way she wrote about her transition into her new life, and the passages about her new school, her friends, and the cat (*"I can't believe she's really mine, I love her so much—she knows her name now!"*) just for the glimpse it gave him into her soul.

The entries got less frequent as she got older and busier, which was sad, because they were also more interesting and filled with what could be strikingly perceptive observations. *"Nick seems so angry lately,"* one of the entries from her junior year read. *"Sometimes it seems like he's angry at me and I'm not sure why. It feels like I've disappointed him."*

During her senior year, she had written a bit about the party that had gotten her shit-faced for the first time in her little nerd life—*"note to self: never drink again"*—but there was no mention of him, which he found irritating, since he was the reason she'd gotten home in one piece. In fact, she barely wrote about him at all that year. She wrote about the Lacoste Mafia, her dates with Michael Valdez, prom, and all of her niggling insecurities (*"Why do I feel like I'm never going to be enough?"*), so he felt like he deserved a reference or two, even if it was just a footnote.

Instead, she seemed desperate, bitter. Whole passages complaining about feeling as if no one saw her, about the mean-spiritedness of her classmates, and a sharp resentment towards anyone who told her she was beautiful. *"It's like they think that looking at me means that they own a piece of me,"* she wrote, pressing so hard with the pencil that she had smeared graphite on the pages, *"and this gives them the right to say whatever they want about me as long as they pay me upfront with empty compliments."*

The bitterness surprised him; he had never heard her complain about anyone in such stark terms. What surprised him even more was that, towards the end of the journal, a few months after her eighteenth birthday, she had written very shyly about touching herself, or wanting to.

"I'm not sure what to think about," she had written. *"So I just picture some faceless stranger kissing me in the dark."* In very small font after that,

as if she were trying to hide the words from even herself, she had added, “*I think I want him to be rough with me, but I'm also scared it will hurt.*”

God, that was hot—especially for Jay, who seemed like the buttoned-up type who'd always insist on missionary. He wondered what “rough” meant to his prude of a stepsister.

“*It feels really strange to think about,*” she had concluded, frustratingly vague.

Tell me more, he had thought. *Tell me exactly how it feels strange, Jay.* That blend of innocence and longing had made him so achingly hard that he'd gotten himself off in her bathroom, to the sweet, lingering scents of her apple-freesia shampoo and vanilla bean candles. Afterwards, he'd read further, hoping for more. More illicit confessions. More about how she craved to be touched. But after her graduation, the pages had abruptly stopped.

Looking at her now, staring down at her book, he found himself wondering what thoughts were going on in her mind. He hadn't expected her to be quite so cynical or so passionate. The journal had provided some interesting insights but he wanted to know more about the girl who could sit looking so composed while secretly desiring to be ravished by a stranger.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“No reason,” he said mildly. “Just trying to see what you're reading.”

She lifted the cover, giving him a glimpse of a blue-toned background that said *Fire & Hemlock*. “I really wish you wouldn't talk about other women the way you do.” She set the book back down, still open, on the counter, even though she hadn't turned a page since her mother left. “Your dad does it, so maybe you feel like you have to, too. But I hope it's not who you are.”

Nick pushed off from the fridge. “You've been gone for four years, blue jay. I don't think you know me well enough to discuss me or my moral upbringing.” He leaned over the counter, right next to her, propping his head up on one arm. “You really don't know what I'm like. But you know your mother. You can't sit there and tell me that you think she's a good person.”

“I think she's a flawed person.” She stared at the book. “Like you, or me, or anyone else.”

“Bullshit. I'm nothing like your mother—and neither are you.” He tapped the back of her wrist and saw her shoulders tense. “Don't let her drag you down with her because she will. How's the book?”

She folded her hands over the pages. “It's good. You wouldn't like it.”

“Why not?”

“I've seen what you read. Horror and chaos. Ayn Rand. This isn't that. It's fantasy.”

Oh Jay, he thought, darkly amused. If only you knew what I've really been reading. I could tell you a thing or two about fantasies. “Maybe I'll surprise you.”

Her eyes flicked towards him. “If you really want to read it, I'll lend it to you when I'm done.”

Nick shrugged his shoulders and padded towards the door. As he did, she slid off the stool, closing the book as she prepared to leave, as well. Still watching her, he nearly ran into his father, who seemed to be on his way out of his office. Jay, behind him, froze, eyes widening.

He noticed she edged slightly closer to him.

“Good morning,” said his father, glancing at them. “What are you two up to?”

Jay, with that wary, watchful expression still on her face, brushed against Nick's bare arm. That brief contact of skin on skin was electric. The book fell from her hand with a slap that made her jump. His father bent to pick it up and handed it to her, and he didn't miss how gingerly she accepted it from him or how much her hand was shaking. And neither, he knew, did his father.

“Thanks,” she said haltingly, hugging the book to her chest. “I was . . . just leaving.”

What was that? Nick watched her scurry to her room.

“She seems jumpy,” his father remarked.

“Yeah,” Nick said, glancing at him.

I wonder why.

A few days later, his father rapped on his door. Nick was lying on his bed, listening to a mix of Nine Inch Nails and A Perfect Circle on his iPod. The music was loud and he hadn't heard the knock, but he had seen his father's shadow and tugged down the side of his headphones. "What?"

"I thought you and I might take a trip before you go off to college next month."

Nick tugged down the other side of his headphones. "Like a family trip?"

"No. Father and son. I was thinking Las Vegas."

"Fine," said Nick. "When?"

"This weekend."

Nick shrugged. He'd gone there with a couple friends before, although he'd been too young to gamble at the time, so all he'd really done was see the shows and eat out a lot. He was still too young to gamble at most places, but at least when you were eighteen, you could do *something*.

"Fine," he said again, after a moment. "I'll get my shit together."

Nick was somewhat surprised that his father had contracted with Vlad to drive them. "Hey, man," he said, earning himself a perfunctory head tilt. The only person he'd ever seen the man smile at was Jay. "I feel like I have my own personal bodyguard," she'd said to him. "Just like on the *Princess Diaries*." And then Vlad had told Jay that he had studied krav maga and the two of them started talking like old buddies while he had huffed in the backseat.

Jay had texted him. *Mom wants to know where you're going. Is it for orientation?*

Shaking his head, Nick threw his suitcase in the trunk and climbed into the backseat with his father apparently opting to ride shotgun with Vlad. Nick didn't mind having the back to himself. His legs were so long, he liked the option of sitting sideways or he quickly got cramped.

We're going to Vegas. I'll get you a racy postcard.

Ugh. Please don't, she wrote. Mom's going to be really upset. She loves Vegas.

He wondered if that was why his father had organized this trip. To make his wife jealous and put her in her place. He had a vague recollection

that they had gotten married in the city eight years ago. Proof that what happened in Vegas didn't always stay in Vegas.

It'll be fine. Dad will buy her off with something shiny and all will be forgiven.

There was a pause. *Is that what you really think is going on?*

Nick stared at his phone thoughtfully. Did she know about the cheating, too? Maybe she thought she and her mother were going to be kicked out. He could have told her not to fret about it. A high-profile divorce case would cause more problems than it would fix, and his father wouldn't want to reward a woman who strayed from him with half his estate.

Just enjoy your books, Brainiac. I'll think of you while I'm living la grande vie. After a moment of consideration, he added, *Don't worry about your mother. Seriously.*

She sent him an angry face. He sent her a heart and then she stopped responding at all.

"Who are you messaging?" his father asked from the front seat, glancing at him in the rear view mirror. "One of your friends?"

"A girl," he said vaguely, shoving his phone into his pocket. *Maybe I tipped my hand.*

"I don't think I've ever seen you with a girlfriend."

Nick glanced at Vlad, wishing they weren't having this conversation in front of him, even though he didn't seem to care and his father had probably slapped him with an NDA. He flicked his hair out of his eyes impatiently. "I'm not really interested in any of the girls around here."

"You're not gay, are you?" his father demanded.

What? "No," said Nick. "I'm not fucking gay. I just don't like vapid, female bullshit."

"Perhaps that's wise," his father conceded. "Women tend to peak in college, although so do their expectations. In high school, you aren't expected to marry every girl you fuck."

Nick glanced at his phone. "Didn't you marry Mom in college?"

"I was a bit dishonest with you," his father said, leaning back in his seat. Ignoring the question, he couldn't help but noticing. "We aren't going to Vegas until Sunday, and only briefly on the way back. We're actually heading to Carson City."

“But that's seven hours away,” said Nick. “Why are we going there?”

“You'll see,” his father said vaguely, tilting his head down as if preparing for sleep.

Nick put his headphones on, shuffling through his iPod until he landed on Puscifer. He liked a lot of the songs, but “Rev. 22:20” had always been his favorite. He'd thought he was too wired to sleep, but when he opened his eyes, it was because the car had stopped in a little dirt patch.

“Where are we?” he asked, sitting up in his seat. “Did we get lost?”

“We're not lost.”

His father had Vlad park in front of one of the unmarked buildings and swung out of his door like he knew where he was going. Nick got out more slowly, frowning as he tossed his iPod beneath the seat. There was a sign outside the sun-peeling, faded exterior, hand-lettered in tacky flamingo-pink script with a crude painting of a fruit tree with a knot in the trunk that looked undeniably sexual, with several big, overly shiny cartoon cherries that looked like butts.

The fuck. He stared at the sign, wondering if he should snap a picture of it to show his friends. Jake would like it. “The Cherry Orchard?” he said. “What is this place?”

Some weird fruit stand?

Ignoring him, his father walked up to the door and went inside. Nick took a picture of the sign before following his father. He quickly realized it wasn't a fruit stand. The interior was like a scummy reception in a low-budget hotel, but cleaner. Only the dust, yellowish-gray like the body of a silverfish, got in. A couple of other guys were inside already, but none would meet his eyes.

His father was talking to the older man at the reception desk, who looked over at him. He was given something that was glossy and bright, like a yearbook. The pages were sticky and a little ragged. “Pick one,” his father said.

Pick one? Nick flipped through the book. It was a bit like a model's portfolio, except with lots more girls. There were four to a page, all grainy photos of the girls wearing lingerie.

It clicked for him then. “Is this a brothel?”

“I'm not going to have you going away to college and embarrassing yourself,” his father said in response, which seemed to be a yes. He handed him two condoms. “In case the first one breaks.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Nick couldn't quite keep the sarcasm out of his voice but he kept flipping through the book. Jesus Christ, did his dad really think he was such a fucking lost cause that he had to buy the pussy now? There was no shortage of girls willing to blow him. He looked down at the pictures sulkily. There were a lot of blondes. He supposed blondes must be popular.

Then Nick straightened. “I'll do her.” He pointed at a girl with light brown skin and long curly hair who had a slightly sullen tilt to her full mouth. “She's the only one I want.”

His father glanced at the girl for a long moment, expressionless. “Ivy?”

“She's available,” the man at the desk said helpfully. “She's in room twelve at the end of the hall. I'll phone her and let her know you're coming.”

Coming being the operative word, Nick thought. Shooting a last look over his shoulder, he went down the hall. His footsteps echoed. They'd opted for tile halls like a hospital, probably because it was easy to clean. They were pungent with the chemical tang of artificial citrus, as if they had just been scrubbed. Beneath it, he could make out the faint funk of sweat and old come. He knocked on the door of room 12, wondering if he was being an idiot.

What kind of loser paid for sex?

“Come in,” said the voice inside, high and girlish, when he knocked.

No, he thought instinctively. *It needs to be low.*

“Ivy?” To his disappointment, she looked slightly older than her photo, which must have been taken a while ago. Closer to thirty than twenty. But her makeup was flawless and her pink bra and panty set was completely sheer. She only had a very thin strip of hair on her pussy. “I'm Nicholas.”

“What do you like to be called, Nicholas?”

For a moment, he almost said, *Why do you care?* And then it occurred to him why she would, and he nearly blushed, which annoyed him. “Anything,” he said. “I don't care.”

He stepped into the room, looking at the fluffy pillows that were probably covered in fluids. He could smell perfume—fake sugar. It made

his chest feel tight. So did the way she was playing with her hair, twirling her finger in her curls, pulling the strands taut and then letting them bounce free. *Jay does that*, he thought, watching her.

“Don't use that voice with me,” he said suddenly. “The baby one. I don't like it.”

Ivy glanced at him. He couldn't tell if he'd offended her. “Okay,” she said. “Whatever you want.” She paused, looking him over, and something in her face softened. “Come here.”

Nick went to her. She hadn't moved from the bed this whole time and allowed him to push her flat on the mattress. Straddling her hips, Nick pressed his mouth to hers and kissed her as he reveled how all of her soft curves cushioned his much harder frame. He cupped her breast, squeezing gently, and felt her nipple harden against his palm. She ran her hands briefly under his shirt, making a faint murmur of appreciation as she worked his fly.

She took the condom from him and put it on, almost like she could tell. He watched her slim hands move expertly over his achingly hard cock with a deliberate gentleness that nearly undid him. When he slid inside her it felt—*hot and tight*, were his first thoughts, which shouldn't have been sexy, but it was. It felt incredibly fucking good and he had to fight against the urge to come.

His father's words rang in his mind—*embarrass yourself*. He'd heard girls laughing about the guys who blew their loads and finished early. Gritting his teeth, Nick imagined his cock stuck in a bucket of ice as he fucked into that warm, wet heat.

“Yeah,” she gasped. “I love the way you fuck me, Nick.”

“Call me Daddy,” he said impulsively, thrusting into her hard. *I think I want him to be rough with me, but I'm scared it will hurt*. “I'll be your big, strong Daddy, and you'll be my sweet little bird. That's what I want.”

Nick glanced at her, seeing what she thought of this, but her eyes were closed. “Okay, Daddy,” she said huskily. “Whatever you say.”

He did come, then, shuddering inside her with his hands clenching on either side of her face.

“Oh yeah,” she breathed, heaving beneath him. “That was nice, Daddy. You're so good.”

Nick gave her a look; he didn't appreciate being condescended to. He knew it was supposed to last longer than five minutes. "No, it wasn't," he corrected her, breathing a little shallowly himself. "But that's all right. Show me how to make you come."

Again, she leveled him with that slightly unreadable look. But she took his hand and spread her legs wider so he could see the firm little bud at the apex of her slit. She guided his fingers to it, at first directing his touch, but after a while, her hand fell away and he slid two of his fingers inside the still-slick passage as he traced tight, hard circles over her clit.

"How does that feel?" he asked.

"Harder," she said, hips bucking. "Please, Daddy. *Please.*"

When he pushed down with his thumb, she cried out. This time, Nick was pretty sure it wasn't entirely fake. She was so wet—and with her eyes closed, leaning back into the pillow of her own dark, silky curls as she arched under his hand, she looked so much like—

Fuck. His cock swelled again and he leaned over, growling ferally, "Again."

Chapter Twenty-Four

2008

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Jay met Quentin for drinks at Acciaccatura, a boutique-style brunch spot in the downtown area that locals simply shortened to Accia. Her mother liked going there for Sunday mimosa brunches and getting drunk with her girlfriends, and so did a lot of the other men and women in town. But it was still a pretty classy place. There were potted cypress trees outside, framing a sign on a folding chalkboard that advertised the daily specials. Today's was goat cheese arugula quiche and pomegranate mimosas.

Quentin stood up when she entered. On a Wednesday afternoon it really wasn't that crowded and she had no trouble picking him out in his bold-striped rugby shirt. He was also wearing acid-washed skinny jeans that gathered artfully at the tops of his Balenciaga sneakers.

"Jay." He held out his arms and she stepped awkwardly into his embrace as he squeezed her gently. "It's been forever. I'm so glad to see you. Hollybrook has been so stupid since everyone left."

She smiled and sat down. "You mean, none of them came back?"

"Why would they? There's literally nothing to do here in this overpriced bedroom community unless you want to shop, get drunk, or fuck."

A coiffed woman at the next table looked over and shot Quentin a dirty look before turning back to her friends and saying something, shooting him a series of angry-looking glances.

Quentin slanted a sideways grin at her. "Oh, and you can only pick two. Guess what *she* chose?"

Jay had to cover her mouth with a hand to keep her laugh from escaping. It did anyway, in a high-pitched, unattractive snort. She was relieved when the waitress came to take their orders. Jay ordered a lemon drop and a butternut squash soup and Quentin got bacon-wrapped dates and a dark 'n' stormy.

"Wow," she said, after the waitress had taken their paper menus away, "that's kind of strong for brunch. Did you have a bad day or something?"

Quentin made a face. “Dad's having me help out with the hotel. Let me tell you, managing a bunch of high-maintenance white women who freak out every time their European hair dryer blows out an outlet isn't exactly a picnic.” He glanced at her. “No offense.”

“Are you saying I'm high-maintenance?”

“No,” he said. “That's why I said no offense.”

Their drinks came and Jay took a long sip of hers. The alcohol hit her like a hammer and she leaned back in her chair with a sigh. “What happened to the rest of our group?”

“Well—Jordan is dating some hot French guy twice her age who treats her like his little sugar baby when he isn't spiriting her off to the French Riviera or Maui. She posts pictures of her shopping hauls on her blog and I hear she's being sponsored by Escada now.”

Quentin scrolled through his phone and held up a pic. Jay recognized a slightly older Jordan on the arm of a very attractive-looking guy with silvery hair who looked like a less-grizzled Gerard Butler. “Wow,” said Jay. “He is cute.”

“Lucky cunt.” Quentin flipped his phone around, earning himself another glare from the woman at the next table. “Let's see. Angie does makeup videos now on YouTube. They're not bad but she's always trying to get people to follow her on Facebook and it comes off as a little thirsty. Clary just finished up at Santa Barbara where she met all the right people, and now she's interning at some ritzy social media website in Los Angeles and seems to spend every weekend clubbing in Malibu.”

He leaned back in his chair with his drink, slinging an arm over the back. “And then Michael, well, you know—he's working for *daddy*. Bulldozing fields to develop shit. Malls, probably. I hear he still asks about you. By which I mean, he asked me about you, You're the one who got away. I'm honestly surprised nobody snapped *you* up.”

Jay laughed a little nervously. “I'm meeting him for drinks, too.”

“Drinks-drinks? Or, like, you-and-me drinks?”

“Which answer will make you pick up the tab?”

“You shameless flatterer.” Quentin grinned. “I'd date you in a heartbeat. Whatever. Do something about it or don't. I'm just saying, he's still willing and available.”

“Maybe I should hold out for the hot French millionaire,” Jay deadpanned.

“Sorry, Jay, but you don't exactly scream trophy wife—unless it's a trophy for trivia night. God, can you *imagine*. Picture a show where women have to answer Jeopardy questions to date the bachelor. But would that be empowering or exploitative? I'll have to think about that and draft up a proposal.”

“For a thesis?”

“No, *Jay*. For an agent. Academics get jack.”

Their food came and Quentin immediately started savaging the bacon like it was going out of style. Jay blew on her soup and took a sip. It was good—nutty and sweet, warming her to her toes. They didn't eat much food like this at home. If it couldn't be seared or turned into some kind of pasta, Damon had very little interest in eating it.

“So what's new with you?” Quentin asked, between bites. “Didn't you just graduate?”

“Yes, with highest honors from one of the best universities in the entire country—and I still can't get a job anywhere. My last job was working at a comic store as the literal only non-male cashier and creeps kept coming in and asking if I was one of the collectibles. I thought geeks were supposed to be *nice*. That was why I took the job.” She glanced at Quentin, whose smile became a little subdued. “I don't suppose your dad is hiring anyone at the hotel?”

“Sorry, babe. You know I'd put in a word for you, but times are tough.”

“Yeah,” Jay said glumly, taking another sip of her drink. “Tell me about it. I feel like I've applied everywhere in town. I never thought I'd be living at home again after graduation.”

“At least you live in a mansion,” Quentin pointed out. “Maybe try name-dropping your stepfather some more. He still has most of this town in his pocket—it might help you get a job.”

No fucking way am I turning to him for help. “Maybe.”

“How's the rest of your family? I've seen Nick around with his friends. Is he off to school or is he planning to slum around like Dave and peddle designer weed or—?”

“My mom and stepfather are exactly the same as they were before I left,” said Jay. “Damon and Nick are off on some sexist boys' trip to Vegas and my mother is moping around because she wasn't invited and thinks my stepfather is going to have an affair with a cocktail waitress. And Nick's off to Stanford in the fall but he's been—” Jay hesitated. “He's been acting really strange.”

Quentin's eyebrows shot up. “Strange how?”

“Well . . .” Jay took another sip of her drink. “I think . . . he might . . . have a crush on me.”

“*Nick* does?” Quentin choked on his drink, thumping his chest. “Your stepbrother, Nick? Isn't he half your age?”

“Keep your voice down!” Jay hissed, taking another bracing sip of her lemon drop. “Half my age would be eleven, which would not only be disgusting, but also illegal, you freak. Nick's only four years younger, but it's still not a great look. He's still practically a kid and I don't know what to do about it.”

“Well, there's one thing you can do about it,” Quentin said dryly.

“I'm serious,” Jay said, glaring. “It is freaking me out. I've been hiding in my room.”

“I bet you're the first girl who's ever run *away* from Nicholas Beaucroft. You remember how girls were always throwing themselves at him back in high school. People used to take bets on who he'd finally date.”

Do you really hate me, Jay?

“I remember.”

“Don't sweat it, Jay. It's probably just an innocent crush.”

Jay pressed her face into her hands. Remembering how she'd been cornered between him and his father and the hot brush of his skin against her arm. Remembering the way he'd looked at her when he'd taken her photograph and said, *that's the look*. “I don't think so.”

“Well, it's not like it's incest,” said Quentin. “There's no law that says you can't fuck him.”

One of the coiffed ladies summoned a waiter. “Excuse me, can we be seated at another table?” Jay heard their leader say, before dropping her voice confidingly and pointing at Quentin.

The water turned. “Excuse me,” he said gravely, “but I’m going to have to ask you both to finish up and leave.”

“Oh,” said Quentin. “Sure, no problem.” The waiter left and Quentin tilted his head towards the smug-looking coiffed woman. “Ms. Yates, is that you? You check in all the time at the Bayview with your twenty-year-old son—I’d recognize you anywhere. I just think it’s so sweet when kids stay close to their parents as adults. So many of them aren’t attentive to their parents.”

He dropped his napkin on his plate, strolling out of Accia, arm-in-arm with Jay. When she looked over her shoulder, she thought “Ms. Yates” looked rather flushed and defensive.

“Let me guess,” said Jay. “She doesn’t have a twenty-year-old son.”

“Never seen her before in my life,” Quentin said cheerily. “But I heard her introduce herself to the waiter when she decided to rat us out, and what goes around comes around, my sweet, Jay-Jay, and now all of her snooty friends think she’s getting pounded by her boy-toy at my hotel.”

“I can’t believe you got us kicked out of Accia,” Jay sighed. “What am I going to do?”

“Find a new restaurant. Oh, you meant about your stepbrother? Don’t fuck him. It’s too weird.”

“Thanks, Quentin,” she said flatly. “Where would I be without you?”

“Probably still inside the restaurant, pondering your future as a quasi-incestuous cougar.”

Jay hit him on the arm.

“Lawsuit,” said Quentin.

“I hate you so much.”

“Everyone does.” Quentin stroked her arm. “Except you, baby cakes. Come on, let’s grab coffee.”

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His father had apparently paid for two hours, so Nick was able to end the session with a leisurely blowjob. “Come back and see me sometime,”

Ivy said in a low voice, right as he was buckling his pants. Even though he was satisfied, it sent a pleasant current rippling through him.

“Maybe,” he said noncommittally, not wanting to seem too eager. The sex had been good, but thoughts kept intruding—that the color of her light eyes was too flat, that her perfume was too sweet, that her voice had too much fry in it. That none of this was enough.

Suddenly, he felt very ready to leave.

Straightening his clothes, Nick walked down that tiled hall to the reception area, which was now empty except for the man at the desk. He peered out through the one-way glass at the parking lot, but Vlad was standing outside the empty car, smoking. Apparently, his father had also decided to indulge.

Nick found himself wondering whether his father had ever been to this place before and whether he'd ever fucked Ivy. The thought made him feel a little sick, although he supposed Ivy probably fucked a lot of men. Maybe even thousands.

He wondered how many guys Jay had fucked.

“I'm going for a walk down the road,” Nick tossed off over his shoulder at the receptionist. “If my dad asks.” He didn't stick around to see if the man had heard or even listened.

It was hot and dusty and there wasn't much to see outside. The ground was cracking as if the earth itself was splitting apart beneath his feet like a rotten melon, choked with native weeds and grasses like Indian ricegrass and globemallow. In the distance, he could see a rickety-looking train track and the rusty carcass of an abandoned car missing its wheels and a host of other parts.

There was trash in the bushes—the usual shit like cigarette butts and plastic bags, but also used condoms. Like maybe people had driven out here to fuck and just couldn't wait. Shaking his head, Nick kept walking. Overhead, he heard the distant cry of some sort of bird—a hawk, maybe, or a vulture. Something that sounded like it belonged in the desert.

At the end of the road, Nick came to a little shanty of a store with a folding sign outside that said “Rocks and Jems—big Sale.” the misspelling and random capitalization should have put him off, but he was feeling bored and uncaring and the blazing white heat of the sun was relentless.

He stepped inside and felt the arctic blast of a cheap air conditioner that growled overhead like a rabid dog. There was a strange, sour smell like old, decaying wood, and Nicholas looked around doubtfully, trying to decide if he wanted to leave and head back to the car or not.

"Hi there," said a badly sunburned man sitting at the register. "Can I help you?"

"I'm just looking."

There were bins of all kinds of rocks. Semiprecious stones you could scoop into a fraying velvet bag for five bucks. Tiny glass jars filled with gold suspended in liquid solution. Prospecting kits. *Kids' stuff*, he thought dismissively, moving to examine the things in glass cases. There was something that looked like a cluster of brown barnacles, like one of his dad's expensive sculptures. "What's this?"

"That's a gypsum rose," said the man. "A whole lot of it. You'll find it around here if you're lucky. They sell balls of them for about one, two bucks each at most of the stores around here. Rarer to find it in clusters like that."

I could get it for Jay. She had a rock collection and Nick was pretty sure that she didn't have anything like this lying around in her room. Studying it, he asked, "How much?"

"Three-eighty."

It had the sound of a man feeling out a price and Nick suspected he could have bargained himself down from the tourist sucker charge, but he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Fine."

His dad was probably done by now, anyway. Wondering where he was. Or else he'd driven off and left him here in the desert. Wouldn't that be a trip to remember.

Nick paid the man and left the Rock and Jem store, heading back down the road, sweating a little in the heat. His father had taken Vlad's place, who was now sitting at the wheel, and was leaning against the door, smoking a cigar and radiating sexual gratification.

"I wondered where you went. You didn't run off and leave the girl hanging, did you, Nick?" At the tight, contrary shake of his head, his father nodded, eyes drifting down to the bag in his hand. "What's that you have there?" he asked, blowing out a leisurely smoke ring.

"A gift for Jay."

“Ah. How sweet.” Apparently finished, his father crushed the cigar into the dirt beneath his leather shoe. “I’m sure she’ll be appropriately grateful. I need to get that mother of hers something so she doesn’t bitch at me. We can check out some of the pawn shops in Vegas.” He glanced at the bag. “I don’t suppose they sell jewelry in that store you went to for your sister?”

Nick thought of the turquoise bracelets and quartz earrings. “Not the kind she’d wear.”

“Damn. Well, I suppose it’ll just have to wait until we make the drive back down. It’s on our way home, after all,” he added, with a self-effacing laugh. “I had no idea how quickly that woman would take to the high-life, or that the more I sank into her, the more her personality would worsen. It’s really quite a shame.”

“She’s a gold-digger,” said Nick. “What did you expect?”

Nick thought he might be in trouble for insulting his stepmother—his father was always saying that a man’s wife was a pale reflection of himself—but all his father did was lean over and ruffle his hair. “Usually money makes women more biddable—not less.”

“Right.” Nick turned towards the car but his father didn’t seem inclined to go in.

“You’re close to Justine, aren’t you, Nicholas?”

Why did he always call her Justine? Guardedly, Nick said, “Yeah, she’s fine. I like her okay.”

“Yes.” His father drew the word out in a way that made him recall a time that didn’t seem so long ago, when he had asked, “*What was your sister doing in your room last night?*” This conversation had the same feeling of a trap slowly snapping shut. “She’s very good at getting people to like her. But I didn’t ask if you liked her, Nicholas. I asked if you were close.”

“Not that well,” he admitted. “Not since she went away to college.”

“She’s a strange girl. Her mother named her after a book by the Marquis de Sade. Have you read it?” Nick shook his head. “It’s about a sweet, sanctimonious little girl who invites her own ruination because she never learns how the world really works. It’s ironic, almost cruelly so—especially since Danielle never actually read the book. She just liked the name.”

“Her mother's an idiot,” said Nick, latching on at last to something solid.

“Yes,” his father said thoughtfully. “But Justine, in her own way, is also an idiot.”

“No, she isn't,” Nick said, forgetting himself. “She's not like her mother at all. She has a college degree. She speaks fluent Spanish. She volunteers at—”

“Nicholas.” His father's voice halted his furious torrent of words. “I'm not denying that she has her charms. I'm sure she'll even marry for them someday, and possibly even well. But she's vulnerable in a way that you and I will never be, because you are part of a legacy and she is the daughter of a whore. And yet, she lacks the self-awareness and the gratitude that would allow her to properly overcome her faults. She is arrogant, and willful, and blind, and *that*,” he said, with something almost like anger, “will be her downfall.”

It's your job to protect her. Something went cold in Nick's chest. “I'm not sure what you're telling me to do.”

“Nick.” His father's voice was firm. “I'm not telling you to do anything. I'm merely saying that you have a lot to fall back on and Justine has only herself. If something were to happen to her, she would only have you and I to turn to. Her mother is trash and any kind of investigation would only cause her sordid past to get out. I am merely intimating that a reminder might be beneficial.”

His father's words haunted him on the drive home, and no matter how loud Nick turned up his music, he couldn't push them from his mind. They kept floating back, because everything his father had said about Jay was true. She was always telling people what they should and shouldn't do, getting her panties in a twist over some perceived injustice. And her words did bother him. Sometimes for weeks because the implications—that he was a burden, that he didn't know what real work was, that he was intolerant, that he was a childish annoyance—filled him with anger that churned like a black and vicious sea, because it all hit a little too close to home.

And for that, he couldn't quite figure out if he was angrier at himself or at her.

As he watched her tilt her head up and warmly thank Yelena for dinner, he could feel that uncertainty crystallizing, becoming sharp and deadly.

Look at me, he thought, filled with desperate want, helpless anger, and countless other emotions too dark and tangled to name. *Why don't you ever look at me?*

Jay did look at him and her smile faded. She looked down at her plate, rolling up the sleeves of her sweatshirt to bare her tanned forearms and her hair slid forward to hide her face. "What did you do today?" he asked, and it came out sounding like a challenge.

"I, um, had drinks with Quentin Ho." Aware that she was being watched, she glanced around the table uneasily. "He's running the Bayview for his dad," she added unnecessarily.

"James Ho is an excellent businessman," his father said, looking hard at Jay. "His father built the hotel when this was all still mostly orchards to house the money men who came through to buy and sell. He understands what needs to be done to succeed and prosper."

"Yeah," Jay said quietly. "Quentin's great."

"How's Courtney?" asked Nick.

Jay threw him a look of disgust. "Still dating Lance Nguyen."

"Hey." He threw up his hands. "I didn't say I wanted to date her."

"So," Danielle said, drinking her second glass of wine. "Did you have fun in Vegas?"

"We lost money," said Damon, sliding a box towards her. "But I got you this, my dear."

"Oh," said Danielle, quickly becoming mollified as she opened the box to reveal a diamond-studded Cartier bracelet. She slid it over her wrist and held up her hand to admire it. "Look, Justine. Isn't this simply gorgeous? I think I saw this very one in *Vogue*, only in rose gold."

"Neat." Jay rubbed absently at the back of her hand.

"I didn't forget about you, Justine," his father said, which made her fingers jerk. "But they didn't have anything that would appeal to your niche tastes. It's a shame you don't wear the jewelry you're given. There are women who can only dream of having wrists like yours."

Jay's mother stopped admiring the bracelet to glare at Jay, who put her hands in her lap. "Jay," she said. "Stop slouching. Sit up straight or you'll

pinch your diaphragm.”

“Can I be excused?”

“You may,” his father said. “Don't bother with the dishes. Yelena will get them.”

Jay ignored him, picking up the dishes and emptying the uneaten remains into the green waste before popping them into the dishwasher. They all heard it slam shut before she slipped out. “Perhaps she's upset about something,” his father said thoughtfully. “A boy, perhaps.”

“I don't know what's going through her head,” said Danielle. “She's so moody.”

Nick slipped away while his parents talked, but he was aware of his father watching him leave. He stopped by his own room to get the bag before going to her door, which was closed. When he knocked, he heard her voice say, hesitantly, “Yes? Who is it?”

“It's me,” he said. “Can I come in?”

Nick heard the sound of the lock as the door swung open. Her hair was gathered in a ponytail and she had swapped out her shorts for track pants. She looked beautiful.

Wordlessly, she pushed the door open wider for him to enter.

Her cat was asleep in its basket, clutching a toy in slumber. Her collection of rocks was still on top of her bookcase and stacks of CDs were cluttered on her desk. Artists he didn't know. Corrine Bailey Rae, Frou Frou, Jewel, and Jem on the top. Beneath those, but not dusty either, were Souls of Mischief, Usher, and Nas. She kept her room neat. Everything was put away.

Nick glanced at Jay, who was shifting from foot to foot.

“What do you want?” she asked, not unkindly.

“I got you a present in Nevada. I didn't want to give it to you at dinner.”

Her dark eyebrows shot up. “Oh. Thank you. But, uh, why?”

“I'm going to college,” he said. “It'll be something to remember me by when I'm gone.”

“God, Nick. That makes it sound like you're dying.” Jay accepted the bag from him and began carefully peeling the tissue paper away. She always did that. It had driven him insane when he was younger. *Just open it,*

he had wanted to shout at her. *Why are you torturing us by drawing it out?* Now he found himself wondering how it would feel to have those careful fingers dancing along the skin of his throat as she slowly unbuttoned his shirt.

There was something to be said for torture.

“Oh,” she said again, hefting the stone out of the bag. “Wow. What is it? Is it a statue?”

“You don't know what it is?”

“No.” She frowned. “Should I?”

“It's a gypsum rose,” he said. “A stone found out in the desert. You named your cat after it.”

“Oh.” There was a hidden shard of enthusiasm buried in the exclamation. “That's amazing.”

She likes it. “I thought you'd like it.”

“I do. Where did you get it?”

“In a pawn shop,” he said cagily. “They had lots of weird things people pawned to pay for gambling. I didn't think you'd want a Cartier bracelet or a purse.”

“This is really, really thoughtful.” She went to her bookshelf and began moving some of the stones aside to make room for the gypsum. “Thank you so much, Nick. I love it.”

She turned and he saw her eyes flare in surprise at how close he was standing to her, the pupils wide and dark. For a moment, she had the same trapped look that she'd had outside the kitchen, but then she stepped forward and carefully hugged him. He was wearing an old band T-shirt and the weight of her breasts against the thin cotton made him draw in a breath. *She's so soft*, he thought, putting a hand on the small of her back. *She smells like apples.*

“Jay,” he said harshly, and she stiffened as his hand slid down the grooves of her spine.

“Thank you for the gypsum.” She stepped back from him, eyes sliding away. “I should—”

“I'm in love with you.”

Jay sucked in a breath. “What?”

"You heard me." Nick folded his arms. "I love you."

"But you—" Jay flinched, looking up at him as if only just realizing how tall he was. He saw the muscles in her throat work, tissue-thin beneath the skin. He wanted to kiss her there, in that soft hollow beneath her ear. Kiss her hard enough to leave a mark. "Nick," she said at last, in a slow, careful voice he didn't care for, "you're only eighteen."

"So? I'm legal. I'm not a virgin anymore," he added carelessly. "In case you're worried about despoiling me."

"You're my *brother*."

"No. I'm your stepbrother. We're not blood relatives. And to be honest," he said, taking a step closer that had her skittering away from the bookshelf, "living under the same roof kind of does it for me. It's so much easier." He paused. "Kinkier."

Jay fell on her mattress. "I need you to go now."

"It's not just about the sex," Nick went on quickly, walking towards her bed. "You're all the shit that other girls are supposed to be but aren't. You're sweet and charming and caring and smart. All of it—and I love it." He crouched, cupping her face in his hands. "I love *you*. And I want you so fucking bad I really can't stand it, Jay. I think about you at night."

"Oh my God," Jay said faintly. She wrapped her fingers around his wrists, pulling back. "Nick, please stop. This can't happen."

"Why not? Is it because you don't want me?" Nick let her move his hands away. "Or is it because you're afraid to fuck me? Do you think it'll hurt? I wouldn't hurt you. Or do you think it's wrong?" he demanded abruptly. "It isn't. I looked it up and it's perfectly legal to f—"

"*Nick*." She had gone white. "Stop. No. I'm saying no."

"No," he repeated, staring at her. "Why, *no*? You owe me that much."

Jay rose from her bed. That shattered expression was still on her face but now she looked angry.

"I don't owe you anything. Me being under your roof doesn't automatically make me available for your . . . pleasure and I'm really sorry to hear that our relationship has just been *that* to you, because it was never that to me. I thought things were different. That *you* were different." Her eyes slid to the bookshelf and she let out a breath. "I thought you were

different from your dad. I thought you were actually capable of being kind instead of—”

“Instead of what?” he barked.

“Instead of trying to buy people,” she said. “As if they're *things*.”

“God, you sound so naive right now. What do you think your fucking mother does, huh? You think she has problems with being bought? I really don't think it's the end of the world you seem to think it is.”

“Get out,” she said, in a breathless, angry voice.

“Unlike you, I know how the world works and it's not nice, and it's not kind. You could be drowning in a room full of people and all they'd do is lean over and spit in the water. It's a fuck or get-fucked world out there, and if you don't see that, it's because you're the one being bent over.”

“That's a horrible thing to say to me.” Jay blinked and looked away. “That's your problem. You're so entitled, you think everyone just exists to serve you. That there aren't any consequences for what you do. If you can't get something from someone, it's like—it's like they aren't even real to you. You want to know why I'm not attracted to you, Nick? It's because of your personality. No matter how many times you take your shirt off, the way you talk about anyone you consider beneath you is still really, really gross to me, and you don't even seem to care how you sound and it's just . . . such a waste. *You* are such a waste,” she added bitterly. “You could do so much good with what you have and you don't, and I just want you to leave.”

“Really,” Nick said, in a tone of deathly calm. “Is that what you think? I'm just a waste of space to you?”

“That's not what I said.”

“But it's what you mean. You think you're better than me, Jay? Is that what this is? Do you think you're some kind of fucking saint? I know a few things about you that could raise some eyebrows. You're not the perfect little angel that everyone thinks you are. I know you can be bad, too.”

“Stop it.” She raised her voice, trying to speak over him. “I never said —”

“Shut up, Jay. Shut up and listen to me, because I'm only going to say this once. Nobody gets to make a fool out of me—not even you. Enjoy the victory. Fucking savor it. Because one day, I'm going to come into my own, and then I'll have power and you'll still be you. We'll see how the scales tip

then because I'm not going to forget this. I'm going to bring you to your knees.”

The sadness dripped out of her eyes, leaving them cold. “Get out of my room.”

“To your knees,” he repeated, stabbing a finger at her chest that had her falling back against her bed.

And then he whirled out of her room and the door slammed behind him, echoed by his heart.

Chapter Twenty-Five

2008

■□□□□■

After her confrontation with Nick, Jay threw herself into the task of finding a job. She downloaded a template for her resume and made sure it was up to date, padding her meager college positions until her stint as a cashier and a waitress made her look like a plucky restaurateur who excelled at middle management. She read and reread it, sending a copy each to Cori and Jessi to look over and read.

I'd hire you in a heartbeat, Jessi wrote back immediately. And Cori, several hours later, said, *YOU GET THAT JOB*.

Their enthusiasm made Jay feel a tiny bit better, so she applied to a whole bunch of positions nearby, including a couple she wasn't interested in at all, figuring that maybe a quarter of them would call her back at least, and of those, maybe three or four would be genuinely appealing.

Nothing happened, though. None of the places called her back, not even the ones she'd thought she was overqualified for, like receptionist for a local daycare, which stung.

It was like nobody even wanted to give her the time of day.

Maybe try name-dropping your stepfather more. He still has most of this town in his pocket.

Jay shivered and her stomach went hard and tight as she remembered the weight of his hand on her bare knee. The careless way he'd grazed her breasts when plucking up her necklace.

I am sure you would rather have me as your ally than your enemy.

The comment he'd made about her wrists made her want to throw up. No way was she turning to Damon for help. It sickened her that Quentin would even suggest it, that he thought she was the type of girl who would run right to a man whenever things got hard.

But Nick had implied the same thing.

Jay couldn't believe Nick had said what he had to her. The betrayal of it was enormous, shattering. She had cared for him when she was young, had hoped that the strange protectiveness she felt for him might evolve into some deeper friendship when he got older, but he had willingly ingested his father's poison and allowed it to transform him into—whatever this was.

She didn't like it, but that brief flash of hurt in his eyes had still scored her soul. And when she had seen it freeze over, becoming cold and jagged like ice, she had felt the first spark of fear because those were not the eyes of a man inclined towards forgiveness.

Jay stared bleakly at the job website she was scrolling through and abruptly sat up. The Bayview Hotel was hiring an office assistant? But Quentin had told her they weren't hiring.

Maybe the listing is old, she thought—but, no, it had gone up two days ago, just one day before she had met her friend for drinks. And if he was acting manager, he would have *known* that it was up.

Remembering his strange expression at lunch, she found herself wondering if maybe he had known. But then, why didn't he want her to know about the job?

Her fingers were dialing the number for the hotel almost before the suspicion in her mind had even taken shape. Some part of her subconscious warned that she wasn't going to like the answer, and that maybe it was even better not to know, but by the time that line of logic had solidified, the phone was ringing and she had convinced herself that she needed to know.

“Hello?” said a pleasant-sounding female voice. “This is the Hotel Bayview. How can I help you?”

“Hi there,” said Jay, affecting the snooty voice her mother liked to use now. “I need to speak to Quentin Ho immediately, please. It's regarding an extremely private, extremely *urgent* matter.”

“Hold on,” the woman said, sounding a little less pleasant. “I'll transfer.”

Jay waited, her heart pounding in her ears.

“Hello,” Quentin's voice came floating through. “This is Quentin Ho. How can I help you?”

“Quentin,” said Jay. “I—I saw the job posting. What's going on? Do you not want me working for you?” *Am I embarrassing?* “Why would you lie to me?”

Quentin sighed. “Look, baby cakes. I hate to be the one to tell you this, but Beaucroft put a moratorium on anyone hiring you. It's nothing official, but he made it known that he wouldn't fund anyone who had you. You know

I like you a lot, but we can't afford to have your dad pull out as an investor. It would kill us—especially now. I'm sorry.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” *Why didn't anyone tell me?*

“I figured it was because he was training you in the family business and didn't want anyone poaching you away. A non-compete clause.”

Oh my God. Jay felt her throat squeeze with tears. *I am so screwed.*

“Why are you looking for a job, anyway?” Quentin sounded puzzled. “It's not like you need to work. Your stepfather is literally the richest man around for miles.”

“Thanks Quentin,” Jay said. “Thanks a *lot*.”

She hung up before he could respond. Nothing he could have said would have made the situation any better. It was like the house was an iron corset strangling her, making it harder to breathe, and everyone wanted to pull the laces.

Drinks with Michael didn't help. They went to one of the mid-tier wineries, Esperanza by the Bay, which specialized in Spanish-style wine. Michael got a flight and Jay had a single glass of albariño. She wasn't sure why she'd gone. Maybe she was looking for comfort or maybe, deep down, she just wanted to feel wanted. But for the right reasons, not the wrong ones.

She was disappointed, though. Michael hadn't changed at all. “Give us another chance,” he said to her. “My parents adore you, Jay. Our fathers do business. There's no reason we shouldn't be together. You're the perfect girl for me.”

But are you the perfect man for me? Jay wondered.

Somehow, she didn't think so, and she came home feeling angry and bitterly disappointed.

Her mother continued to go out, blithely ignorant to the cold waves of hostility that shuddered through the house. Or maybe, Jay thought, she *did* notice, and going out was just her means of escape. Jay was incredibly aware of Damon's cruel study, but she was even more aware of Nick, who looked at her as if she were something distasteful.

She tried to console herself. *He's going away for college in less than a month and he can't really do anything for me. Not like his father.*

But normal eighteen-year-old boys didn't have Nick's money. Or his viciousness.

She decided to avoid him. When he entered a room, she left it. She began staying away from the pool entirely, no longer going outside to read by the lilies. The only place she couldn't escape him was at dinner, where her mother would chatter at the silent room, either enjoying the attention or compulsively filling the silent void.

Damon ate the food Yelena prepared in silence and Nick would just look at her, the sharpness of his gaze making her feel like her heart was being shredded in her chest.

Enjoy the victory.

She didn't feel like she'd won. She felt like she'd lost everything.

Fortunately, Nick was gone most of the time. Out with his friends, going off to orientation, cleaning his room to purge it for college. Boxes of things began migrating out to the curb, which Yelena lugged out through the hall, red-faced and sweating. Old magazines and ancient playthings began to pile up in front of the house.

When Nick and Damon were out, which was often, Jay helped when she could. Yelena was getting on in years and really shouldn't have been doing the heavy-lifting. The fact that he left the task for her to do anyway despite his able-bodiedness was just another example of his blatant selfishness. There was no reason he couldn't take his own things out himself.

Jay ran into him while carrying out one of the boxes, spotting him too late. He'd come home early from his outing with Jake. His arms came out to grab the box, steadying it and her while keeping it from colliding with his chest. Suddenly, the heavy box in her arms felt weightless.

She looked at him unwillingly and found herself the subject of his study. Her jeans and T-shirt had felt modest before but the way he was looking at her now made her feel dirty.

"Are you with the help now?" he asked, in an icy tone of restraint. "I didn't think you were that desperate."

Jay tugged on the box. "You know, you could take your own shit out to the curb."

“I think I'll leave it in your capable hands.” He let his grip falter and gravity, and the box, made her shoulders sink as she frantically tried to keep from dropping it. “How's the job search going?”

Does he know what his father did to me? “It's great. So, so great.” *You asshole.* “I can't wait to get out of this house,” she said viciously, swerving to avoid him with the box. “As soon as I do, I'm never coming back.”

She could feel his eyes on her as she left. Even though there were more boxes, Jay abandoned Yelena to the task and fled to her room, where she stayed with the door locked until dinner, trying not to think about the way Nick was trying to intimidate her with his body. He was her stepbrother and until recently, she had seen him as her younger brother: a boy.

It was like that moment at the resort all over again, this time in reverse. Her stepbrother was a man now, with a man's body and a man's desires—and she wasn't sure she could unsee that, nor could she force out the images that came to her mind, unbidden.

Quentin's words came floating back. *There's no law that says you can't fuck him.*

The next day, Yelena came knocking on her door, wringing her chapped hands. “Hola, hija. Por favor, necesito ayuda para mover la mesita afuera de la casa.”

“Nick's low table?” Jay asked. “¿La mesita baja? Ya voy. Um. ¿Está Nick aquí?”

“No en este momento.”

“Okay.” If he was out, she didn't mind helping. Jay got up from her desk, where she had been applying to more jobs, and knotted her sweatshirt around her waist. “Let's go.”

Yelena led the way down the stairs, through the den. Jay hadn't been in Nick's room in a long time. The bed was still in the same place it had been when he was a kid, with the desk squeezed next to it. Half-nightstand, half-workspace. *All mess*, thought Jay, eyeing the piles of paper and trash. It looked like he'd been attempting to tidy things up, there were several plastic bags on the floor, all filled with garbage and waiting to be taken out.

Naturally, it hadn't occurred to him to do it himself.

His computer stood in the middle of it all, headphones dangling precariously on the edge of the monitor. She reached out to straighten them

automatically and the monitor flickered on. She glanced at it, and then away, not wanting to see something she shouldn't.

Jay quickly moved to the low table, which had once held Nick's camera and other equipment but all of that had been relegated to the desk. Looking at the Nikon he had used to take her photograph at graduation mere days ago made her throat tight. She gripped one edge experimentally and tried to lift it, grimacing a little. "Es tan pesada," she said to Yelena, who was standing in the door, watching her worriedly. "Necesito dos personas. ¿Lista?"

"No," said Yelena, fingering the hem of her blouse. "Siento."

"Yelena?" Jay asked, feeling suddenly very nervous. "¿Qué—?"

"Hi, Jay." She stiffened as Nick moved to stand next to the smaller woman, who suddenly looked as if she would rather be anywhere else. He was wearing sweatpants and a faded raglan shirt that drew attention to his broad shoulders. "Thanks, Yelena," he said pointedly. "You can go now."

"What—" Jay felt her voice shrivel in her throat when he closed the door. *What are you going to do? What the fuck was that?* The two questions warred in the back of her mouth and she couldn't get either of them out. It felt as if she might choke if she tried. "What was that?"

"I told her that you'd been avoiding me," Nick said, taking a few steps deeper into the room. "That we had a fight. I asked her to get you alone because I knew you wouldn't come to me if I asked. I don't think she really believed me, though—she made me promise not to hurt you." He glanced at her. "You're her darling little *mija* after all. And yet, that didn't stop her from selling you out for a price. Everyone has their price. I wonder what yours is."

Jay's heart knocked against her chest. "I don't have one."

Nick stepped closer and she felt the computer chair brush against her legs. "We'll see."

Jay took another step backwards and just when it occurred to her that sideways might have been better, Nick caught her by the arms and kissed her.

Jay's protest cut off as his mouth sealed over hers, their noses bumping. She tried to turn away, and but he moved with her, catching her by the chin to correct the awkward angle and devour her as he'd been aching to do for years. Nick's hand nearly trembled as his thumb stroked over her throat. *She tastes sweet*, he thought. *Of course she tastes sweet*. It was like the first, illicit sip of his father's scotch burning down his throat with the taste of the forbidden.

When his hand fell to her breast, she jerked from him, uttering a hoarse scream as she lost her balance and fell into his computer chair. It started to spin lazily until he bent a leg and stopped it with his knee. For a moment, she looked as if she were about to leap up, but he was still standing very close and her face was level with his hips.

He watched her realize that as the color fled from her face.

"You know," he said, looking down at her as she squirmed and looked anywhere but at him. "You talk to me like I'm your kid brother, but I'm not your brother, blue jay. I'm the next Mr. Beaucroft and I'm a man who's at the end of his fucking rope. Because of you. And who are you, anyway? You're nobody. Anything could happen to you and no one would care."

Jay said nothing, but the tendons in her jaw were standing out in relief.

She flinched again when he moved, but all he did was take a step back and turn the chair back towards the desk. "Are you threatening me?" she asked. "Just because I wouldn't—"

"Look." He cut her off, unwilling to hear her give voice to his grievance in those low, wounded tones. She tensed as he leaned on the back of the chair, close enough to stir the wisps of hair clinging to her neck, as he dragged the mouse. "I want to show you something."

"Well, I don't want to see i—" She paused. "What's Jay.mp4?"

"I thought you didn't want to see it."

"Play it." There was a catch in her voice. "Play it now."

He played the video. He'd seen it before, many times, so he watched her face, which went ashen. When the color returned to her skin, it was in red blotches that spread from her cheeks to her throat.

"No." She let out a rough breath that made him hard as she looked away. "Oh my God."

“See?” he whispered, letting his eyes drift to the screen. He watched her fingers slide beneath her top. A few minutes later, when she moved below her waistband, the motions would be the same: urgent and ungentle. “Not so innocent. As far as videos go, it's not that explicit, but that's what makes it so hot.”

“You sick fuck,” she said. “How the hell did you get this?”

“Well,” he said, “off my camera, obviously.”

Jay lunged and he backed off, throwing up an arm to defend his face. But she had been going for the mouse. Before he could stop her, she had the video deleted, and the trash emptied.

“*Fuck you.*” She glared up at him heatedly, breathing hard, before swinging up from the chair.

Nick sat back on his bed, watching her stalk to the door. He couldn't help it—he laughed. “Did you really think it would be that easy? That's not the only copy I have.”

Jay stopped walking. “What?”

“What you deleted—that was a copy. I have the original on a flash drive. God, you're naive. No wonder you have everyone in this fucking town fooled.”

“Give me the flash drive,” said Jay.

“Does Quentin know your mom's a whore?” he asked idly, crossing his legs. “Does Michael? Their parents both work in a reputation-based industry; they aren't going to want you dating their sons. Especially not if they find out just how much like your mom you really are.”

She spun around. “My mom,” she said fiercely, “is not a whore. She was a dancer.”

“That's not what people are going to call her when they find out.” He glanced at her face, which was pale and grim. “Or you. You'd be surprised how many people in town really aren't a fan of sweet, perfect Jay—or how eager they'll be to rip you apart. People like Angela, who want to tear you down. People like Jake, who want to make you feel dirty. And plenty more. It turns out, most people find perfection really fucking annoying.”

“What do you want?”

“I thought you didn't have a price,” said Nick. “Isn't that what you just told me?”

“It's not my price,” Jay snapped, folding her arms. “It's yours. Tell me what it is.”

“I want those snowy white wings of yours,” he said. “You think I'm such an unattractive, entitled piece of shit? Fine. I'm willing to pay with my silence, but you'll have to give up some of your morals in return. I don't want to fuck an angel.”

Jay flinched again. Her eyes looked too bright, like she was going to cry. “You're pathetic,” she said biting. “You're literally ruining my life because I wouldn't sleep with you.”

“Pathetic?” he repeated, glancing at her. “No, Jay. Pathetic is burning all your bridges and then acting like a wounded deer when you're caught holding the gas can. Leave if you don't like it,” he said coldly. “Otherwise, you can take your top off and kiss me.”

She looked at him, hesitating for so long that he thought for sure he'd overplayed his hand. He had savored the idea of making her suffer, incensed by the idea of her wanting to leave—but the thought of *hurting* her was unpleasant. There was no pleasure in possessing something of value if it came in shattered fragments and what he was proposing would break her, he knew.

It had never really occurred to him what he might do if she refused.

“A kiss,” she said. “That's all you want?”

“For now,” Nick said. “You were careless, blue jay. The video is just the tip of the—”

“That's enough.” Jay crossed her arms to pull her shirt off, muffling her voice. “*Fine.*”

He studied her hungrily as she looked down at her hands. She had a curvy figure, not quite thin, with a thickness in her hips and belly that gave her body an enticing softness. His eyes drifted up her waist, to her ill-fitting bra. “The bra, too. Give it to me.”

Jay threw it at him, taking it off quickly and folding her arms before he could get much of a look. She came towards him on shaking legs and pecked the corner of his mouth before trying to pull away, but Nick was expecting that and managed to grab her by the hips and pull, lifting her beneath her backside as he did so she ended up spilling into his lap.

Holding onto herself the way she was, there was no way for her to push him away and she ended up loosely straddling him, with her back to the floor. She yelped, and for a few disoriented seconds, her arms slipped, giving him a brief but unimpeded glimpse of her breasts.

Nick leaned in. "Don't give me that schoolyard shit. Kiss me."

Jay wouldn't look at him. She could clearly feel his erection and it was making her very uncomfortable, because she was shifting all her weight to her knees in an effort to keep herself off his lap. He turned her face towards his and kissed her again, stroking along her jaw as he coaxed her lips open with his tongue as he pushed his way into her resisting mouth. She remained still, so he let his hand spread, caressing her neck.

When his fingers drew over her nape, she shivered, and he whispered, "Like that?"

Her shoulders immediately hunched. "No," she hissed, her voice full of venom.

"You're a terrible liar." Nick stroked down the silky skin of her back and her eyes drifted again, fixating on something over his shoulder, even as her skin jumped under his touch. He pressed his mouth to hers again, still cupping her throat. "Your heart's pounding. I can feel it."

She gave him a look that seared him to the bone. It was filled with anger, and gave her clear, hazel eyes the stultifying power of a calefacient.

"You know why I wanted you?" he spoke against her mouth, running his hands up and down her sides as her bare arms prickled with goosebumps. "You've never been like the other women in this town. They know they're going to marry rich and everything they want is given to them, so they don't try to be interesting. They don't want to save the world or see the sights; the only thing they care about is framed in their bedroom mirrors."

Jay pulled her head back, squirming in his lap in a way that left him breathless. "I don't want to hear this."

"But you need to hear this, Jay." He kissed his way up from the corner of her mouth, across her jaw, until he reached her ear. She let out an unsteady breath when his teeth grazed over the tender shell of it. "Your mother is one of those women. She fits right in with the rest of that sorry fucking crowd. But you—you surprised me from the very first day. You're

so goddamned good. Really. I hate your mother but I'm also so glad she married my dad because she brought you home . . . to me.”

She was still stiff, arms tightly folded. He gave her a cool smile and spread his hands along her ribs, trying to cup her breasts. Jay folded her arms tighter, shaking her shoulders to shrug him off, grinding against his hips in a way that had his breath coming out in a shuddering gasp.

“What are you—” Jay bucked, horrified, as his arm tightened around her waist, keeping her pressed against him with one hand knotted loosely in her hair as the dampness of his come seeped into her jeans through his sweatpants. “Oh my God,” she said. “You're disgusting.”

“Get used to it,” he told her, tugging at her lip. “Next time I come, I'm going to be inside you.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

2008

■□□□■

Jay fled from Nick's room, pausing only to zip herself into her sweatshirt before flinging herself into the den. Her lips were burning and her jeans were—no, she wasn't going to dwell on that, or the terrible things he'd said to her, the way his hands had felt on her back, the way he'd looked at her—

God, the way he'd *looked* at her.

People often told her she was pretty. Sometimes it was the first thing they said to her, and they often said it in a way that suggested that looking the way she did made her face and body theirs to comment on. Whether it was a woman saying “I wish I had your skin” or a man shouting “nice ass” out his car window, it always carried a vaguely possessive tone, as if she were something they could acquire, even if it was in pieces.

Nick had looked at her as if she were already his.

Don't think about it, she instructed herself. Just run.

It wasn't until she was safely locked into her bedroom that she realized he still had her shirt and bra. In her blind panic, she had forgotten to take them. Instinct and nebulous suspicions made her suspect she probably wouldn't want them back now.

With a shudder, Jay stripped off her remaining clothes and took a long, hot shower, trying not to think about why her skin felt so sensitive under the beat of the spray.

Next time I come, I'm going to be inside you.

When would that be? He was having a party on Saturday to celebrate the end of summer and his acceptance to his top choice. Damon and her mom were going to Vegas to renew their vows or something stupid like that. It had been her mother's idea and she wasn't sure why Damon had agreed, since he obviously didn't love her mother anymore if he ever had, but neither would be back until Monday, which meant she'd be stuck here alone with him.

And he—*Nick*—was going to fuck her.

Jay wondered if he was going to do it before or after the party. Was he planning on giving his friends a play-by-play of her performance? The

thought made her eyes prickle with unshed tears as she punched her arms through the sleeves of the ratty old sweater she liked to sleep in.

It's going to hurt, her brain whispered. He said he'd destroy you, and this time, he will.

She checked her email again but none of the places she had applied to called her back and there were no messages or phone calls either. She was so disheartened that she closed out of her pending applications without finishing them. If things were this bad *now*, no one was going to want to have anything to do with her at all if Nick followed through on his threat.

Her phone buzzed. She looked at it dully. Quentin. *I'm sorry Jay.*

She put the phone down and didn't respond.

Through the door, she could hear Yelena calling up for dinner. Jay stayed in bed. She didn't think she would be able to meet Nick's eyes and see the expectation in there.

Yelena knocked on her door. "Jay? Mija?"

You sold me, Jay thought. You sold me to him.

"¿Estás bien?"

Jay said nothing, rubbing her face, unconsciously tracing the path Nick had blazed with his mouth. *No, she thought. Nothing is ever going to be okay again.*

Yelena eventually went away, presumably to report to her family that she wouldn't be coming down. Her phone buzzed a few minutes later and she picked it up in irritation, thinking it was Quentin and another one of his useless apologies. She nearly dropped it.

Are you hiding from me?

Nick. The last thing he had sent her had been a heart, which unnerved her enough that she hadn't responded. She could see it there in the history, mocking her. How quickly he flipped from "I'm in love with you" to "I don't want to fuck an angel."

She stared at his message for a long time, trying to read the tone. Was it a taunt? Did he feel remorse? Or was it a reminder that she was trapped here and that for her, there was no escape?

Leave me alone sounded too pathetic. *Go away* was too confrontational. And *fuck you* sounded like a challenge. In the end, Jay said nothing, which probably only proved him right.

She *was* hiding.

Jay went to her computer and booked a room for the weekend at the Bayview. If Nick thought she was just going to lounge around and wait for him, he was wrong.

When it came to hiding in plain sight, she had ten years of practice.



The next morning, Jay noticed her booking had been canceled because the charge had been declined. That made her angry—Damon oversaw their accounts and she had never been one to make wasteful purchases. The last thing she'd gotten that had exceeded \$100 was her graduation dress. In college, most of her budget had gone towards school materials and food.

Jay pulled on jeans and a tank top and the sweater she'd slept in. She'd used to wear her hoodie around the house, but now she no longer wanted to. She pulled her hair into a tight ponytail as she went down the stairs. The kitchen was empty, except for Yelena, who was doing the dishes. Nick was nowhere to be seen, which meant he was probably still asleep, and her mother was outside in the garden.

Jay knocked on the door to Damon's office. "Come in," she heard him say.

I can't believe I'm doing this. She entered, mapping out all points of escape. Damon was sitting at his desk. "Justine," he said, smiling in a way she didn't care for. "What a surprise."

Yeah, she thought. *I just bet it is.*

"Go ahead and close the door."

"I'd rather not." She leaned against it instead, ready to bolt. "Did you cancel a pending charge on my card?"

She could tell he didn't like the defiance or the accusation. He set down the pen that he had been toying with, a Montblanc, leaning forward to study her in a way that made her fold her arms over her chest. "Yes," he said. "I did. Why would you need to go to a hotel?"

"For a girls' weekend," Jay said defiantly.

“Well, I'm afraid you'll have to cancel or postpone,” Damon said, leaning back. “I need you here to keep an eye on Nicholas and his friends.”

A hysterical giggle bubbled up her throat. She swallowed it back down. “He's eighteen. He can keep an eye on himself. And I'm twenty-two. I should be able to make my own purchasing decisions.”

“I would agree,” Damon said, very slowly—as if *she* were slow. “If it were your own money.”

“Well, you certainly took care of that, didn't you?” Jay had told herself that she wasn't going to snap, but she found she couldn't help it. All of her anger was boiling over like a pot of water left too long on the stove. “I'm not staying here alone with your son. He's been inappropriate.”

Damon made a sound. “Really, Justine. Inappropriate? What does that even mean?”

“He touched me,” Jay said, forgetting to keep her voice low. “He said he would—”

“Justine.” His voice was cold. “I've made you a part of this family.” *No, you haven't.* “I've put up with your disrespect. I've even paid for your college education. And you spend my money on whatever you wish, which I permit to an extent, but ultimately, the final call comes to me.”

Shaking with fury, Jay took a step forward. “But—”

“But,” he said, cutting her off, “I won't have you making up lies about my son, lies about this family. Words have consequences, my dear—legal consequences, in some cases. You can't just go around telling people these kinds of vile, outlandish stories whenever you don't get your way. One day, Nicholas will inherit the company and I don't want any scandals in his past that might compromise the business.”

“The business,” Jay repeated. “But *you*—”

“That's enough.” He stood up from the desk and Jay immediately moved closer to the door. “I've tried to be patient with you, but frankly, Justine, your behavior leaves much to be desired. You've become willful, ungrateful—” his eyes flicked over her baggy sweater in distaste “—and slovenly. It's a disgrace, what that school has turned you into. The last thing this world needs is another man-hating little bitch. A good girl stands behind the men in her family.” He folded his arms, regarding her coldly. “You are a good girl, aren't you, Justine? You used to be.”

“No,” she said.

“That is a shame. I’m afraid I have no use for a petulant child who refuses to listen to her betters. Even your mother knows when to back down, because she knows she is entirely dependent on my financial support. As are you.” He took a step towards her. “Now, I suggest you forget whatever Nicholas said to you that set you off and do as you’re told.”

Jay felt a cold chill wash down her spine. “You’re whoring me out to him.”

“Don’t be so crude,” said Damon. “You’re still a lady—barely—and it isn’t becoming.”

“Oh, so swearing bothers you, but the fact that you and your son are both sick fucks, doesn’t?” Jay stammered, trying to remain calm. “You can’t do this to me. I’m going to go out and tell *everyone* what really goes on in this h—”

Damon slammed his fist against the door with a bang that echoed through the house.

Jay jumped, glancing at his arm, inches from her right cheekbone. When he pulled back, she saw blood on his knuckles; it had left slight discolorations on the splintered paint he’d buckled with his fist. “You will do no such thing if you want to keep that pretty face.”

Jay fell back against the door trying to avoid him when he reached for her. His hand was clammy, like raw meat. She had to set her teeth to keep from screaming.

“You’re an adult, as you were quick to point out, which means you can do anything you want. But being an adult means you pay for it. I suggest you think hard on what that means and how it pertains to our previous conversation. You’ll get no further assistance from me, so do not come to me about this again. You won’t like the consequences.”

He pushed her out of the office, making her stumble at the touch of his hand at her lower back. She twisted, spilling into the hall, and whirled around just in time to see the door closing.

“Perhaps Nicholas can be moved to pity you. You two used to be so close.” The door closed behind her with a click. She could still see the brownish smudge on the door.

Used to.

Stunned, Jay walked into the kitchen to get herself a glass of water. The ice clinked into the glass, echoing the dissonance of her thoughts.

Being an adult means you pay for it.

Now go be a whore for my son.

“What's the matter, little bird?”

Jay jumped, causing the ice to shiver in the glass. Slowly, she turned to see Nicholas leaning against one of the bar stools. She glared at him, despite the lump in her chest. *Little bird?*

“Don't call me that.” She turned back to the blinking light of the ice dispenser. “H-how long have you been there?”

“Long enough to see you stumble out of there like a drunk at closing time.” He slid off the stool in a sinuous movement that had her whipping back around. “Didn't work when you ran to Daddy? But then, he's not your Daddy is he?”

Jay's fingers tightened on the glass. “You were eavesdropping on me.”

“No. But it wasn't exactly subtle that you were trying to narc. I knew you would. Poor blue jay. I could have told you he doesn't give a shit about who I'm fucking.”

She made a sound, like she'd been punched in the diaphragm. “We're not fucking.”

“God, it sounds so prim and tedious when you say it.” His hand brushed her face, barring her escape. “You're not going to bore me, are you, Jay?”

“Yes. It's going to be awful.” She swallowed. “You'll hate it.”

“I doubt that.” His lips moved against hers in something too fleeting to be a kiss. He was wearing a shirt but it was clinging to his chest in a way that made the fabric look damp, outlining all those ridges of muscle. “I think I'm going to find you very, very exciting.”

Fear bubbled through her again, as bright as a sparkler, as he fingered the strap of her tank top possessively. “I heard a slam. Did my father hurt you? There's a dent in the door.”

“Why do you care?” she asked woodenly. “It's like you said. He's not my daddy.”

“No,” he said, the low register of his voice sending a chill through her that was colder than the glass in her hand. “He isn’t. But I could be. I’ll be your Daddy. You can tell me what’s bothering you and I’ll make it all better.” His hand covered her left breast, flattening over her pounding heart. “I don’t let people mess around with what’s mine.”

Jay jerked her shoulders.

“So.” Nick moved even closer, crowding her against the fridge. “When do you want to fuck?” The contrast between the searing heat of his body and the cold metal at her back was making her chest tight. He ran his hand down her side, the way he had in his bedroom, touching her in that alarming way that traversed the boundary between reverence and degradation. “I’ve been feeling pretty mouthy. I think you need to come over and convince me to shut me up.”

Her hand trembled and then she remembered the ice. With a gasp, she sloshed it into his face and he threw up his arm, cursing, giving her just enough time to run.

She fled up the stairs and into her room, locking the door firmly behind her. Her insides felt as if they had been replaced by hot liquid and every drag of the rough weave of her sweater made the tips of her breasts ache. She could still feel the hot impression of his hand, as if it had been branded into her skin. *I can’t do it*, she thought, feeling as if she were about to fly apart. *I can’t*.

One way or another, this was going to break her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

2008

■□□□□■

It had been a while since Nick had thrown a party at his own house. His father didn't like the noise or the mess and the step-bitch was always lurking around with her tits hanging out, trying to mack on his friends, and it was usually more trouble than it was worth anyway to have a bunch of strangers in his house, fucking with his shit.

Nick wasn't really sure why he'd bothered. Maybe because it felt like it was his last chance to have one of those old school house-shakers before the demands of college. Maybe because he was bored and wanted to feel something. He set down the Jack and Coke he'd been drinking. So much of it had melted that it tasted like the dregs of an watered-down soda fountain. He set it on the bar counter, wiping his hands on his jeans. He felt something, all right.

Frustrated.

Jake and Alonzo were both excited for college. For Jake, it meant pussy, and for Alonzo, it symbolized freedom. But Nick was thinking that for him, it was just going to mean more work. He had decided to declare Finance as his major, and his schedule was already making his head ache. Financial Analysis, Statistics, Econ, and one of the required undergrad English classes, of which there were two parts. *Like one isn't enough*, he thought grimly. He hated writing.

Math, he didn't mind as much. There was only one right answer, and it was just a matter of getting to it fast enough. Logic was cold-blooded, full of sangfroid—just like chess, which he'd played a handful of times with one of his tutors who thought it would help him focus in Calculus. He hadn't minded that, either, not that he could tell anyone. You couldn't play that game without getting yourself branded as a nerd just like Jay.

Nick thought Jay would be pretty bad at chess. She didn't take loss well. She would probably scramble around the board trying to save each and every piece, while her opponent plowed through her defenses, and because she was so trusting, she would fall for every trap.

She'd always fallen for his.

The thought of her made him stir a little. So had the way she'd looked at him earlier—that wide-eyed, fearful look filled with injured dignity and the slightest hint of anger. It was the last Nick had seen of her all day. She thought her cute little ass was safe in her room.

She had no idea how wrong she was.

You could come downstairs and join me, he messaged her, keeping up the illusion. He didn't really expect a response. The odds of her coming down here in a tight dress and picking up a drink were about the same as him going to a church and becoming a priest.

After shrugging off someone who tried to get him to go into the pool, he noticed Jake. He started in that direction, annoyed to feel a pull on his arm. “Come on, Nick,” the girl said. “A bunch of us are going to do water wrestling. Weren't you on the swim team?”

“I'm not wearing my trunks and have other stuff to do. You go ahead. What, Jake?”

“Where's the food, man? There's no fucking food in your house. I'm starved.”

One glance at his reddened eyes and Nick could guess why. “Have you been smoking Dave's shit in the house?” he asked, folding his arms. “I told you how my dad feels about weed.”

“N-no,” said Jake. “Only out by the pool. Like you said.”

“Good.”

“Is there food, though?”

“Go bug Dave,” he said impatiently. “I'm getting the food.”

Nick pulled out his cell phone and ordered a few pizzas, and asked Yelena to pick up soda and chips from Hollybrook Grocery, which earned him a cool stare and a muttered phrase in Spanish. He supposed she was still mad at him for enlisting her to trick Jay.

Oh well. She'd get over it. It wasn't like he'd forced her to take the money. She'd agreed to sell Jay out. He looked at her closed bedroom door and his heart hardened a little bit.

You're going to find out exactly how much your soul costs, little bird.

He'd roped off the staircases to keep people from fucking in the bedrooms and roped the liquor cabinet in his dad's study shut, too, in case people decided to help themselves. People often did. He'd stocked a pretty

good bar in the kitchen, full of top and middle shelf booze, and someone had brought a lot of Ciroc. There was an open case of Four Loko, too, but he wasn't going to be touching that.

Nick glanced at his phone as he headed outside. Jay hadn't responded. It was that easy for her to look away and pretend he didn't exist. *A waste.*

Outside, someone had started playing Kings of Leon's "Sex on Fire." He went out through the lounge, where the doors had been thrown open. The deck was wet from people coming in and out of the pool. There were a bunch of people he didn't know, but a couple of them waved, so he waved back absently on his way to the detached garage. *Probably Dave's friends.*

He let himself in with the keys, closing the door behind him. They didn't really keep much out here. Stuff for the pool, holiday decorations, a big freezer that was supposed to be for meat but since they never grilled anything, it was mostly just mildewed and empty. The step-bitch and her lover liked to fuck on it. The circuit breaker was out here, too, and next to that was a little wooden box mounted on the wall that kept the spare keys to the house.

Nick grabbed the one he wanted, attaching it to his key ring, and left the garage.

"Hey, Nick," some girl said, grabbing his arm. "Drink this."

"Smells like drain cleaner," he said. "Looks like drain cleaner, too."

She giggled. "It's called Sex in the Driveway. Wanna try it?"

"Maybe you should give your Sex to someone else," he suggested, and then his eyes flickered, catching a glimpse of a red and white van. "I have to go."

He answered the door and paid for the pizza, which he set in the kitchen with the booze. He was beginning to remember why he didn't do the party shtick. It was fucking exhausting.

"Great party, my man," said Dave, who was lurking in wait for the box like a stoned vulture. "I'm gonna miss your ass when you're working the grind. Is that the 'za? I could go for some 'za right now."

"Literally no one calls it that," said Nick. "You fucking weirdo."

"Food!" Jake said, like he hadn't been gorging on chips earlier. "You're the best, Nicholas."

“Yeah, I am,” said Nick, raking a hand through his hair. “Now I have to go take care of something upstairs, so if you really want to show me I’m the best, keep everyone down here and don’t bug me for about an hour or so unless the house is on fire. Comprenez-vous?”

“What, gotta go rub one out or something?” Jake asked, mouth full of cheese.

Nick gave him a look. Jake swallowed hard.

“No one upstairs,” he repeated. “Got it. Have fun doing your thing.”

Nick clapped him on the shoulder just a bit too hard. “Good man.”

And then he slid under the rope and went upstairs.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Danielle and Damon had left that morning with Vlad, who was driving them to LAX.

Jay, ensconced in her room with a hoard of granola and water bottles, settled in for a long, miserable wait. She had thought reprisal would be swift and vicious, but Nick had done nothing to her for throwing the ice into his face. Maybe he planned to exact the cost of it from her flesh.

Money didn’t seem to make parties better, just louder. From the stereo downstairs, she heard the heavy blast of a bass line. Rap or hip-hop, she thought. Nothing else had that kind of beat.

At one point, her phone buzzed. *You could come downstairs and join me.*

Yeah, thought Jay. *How about never.*

It had been a pretty dull day so far. She’d updated her Livejournal, scrolled around on a few forums on the fansites of some authors she liked (on the Mercedes Lackey one, she was PegasusWarrior11). She’d tried to read but couldn’t really focus; her mind kept wandering.

To him.

Curious, she watched a few of Nick’s guests arrive through the window. She had seen some of the guys before at the house, including that walking sleazeball, Jake, but she didn’t recognize many of the girls. They were all incredibly beautiful, wearing skin-tight clothes with easy confidence and

makeup that seemed to make them glow. Had they gone to HHS or were they from other schools? She could only imagine how they knew her brother.

Watching them sway up to the door, some of them in thin cover-ups over their swim suits, others in club wear, Jay found herself wondering what it was like to walk around with that much confidence. Had she ever been like that? Maybe when she was younger. It had been so long.

Someone turned the volume of the music up and she actually recognized this one. “Gimme More” by Britney Spears. Ugh. Jay rose from her bed, stretching her stiffening joints, and turned on her own CD player, popping The Sundays's “Reading, Writing and Arithmetic” album.

Her room filled with the mellow sound of faded guitars and soft female voices. She relaxed.

When she sat in her desk chair, Gypsum, who had been lurking at her feet, immediately hopped onto her lap. With people coming in and out of the house, Nick had turned off the AC and it was a bit hot and sticky to have a cat on her lap, even with the breeze coming from her window. She took a sip of water, troubled, as she ran her fingers through the cat's silky white fur.

She had only seen Nick once this morning. He had been wearing faded jeans and a tight black T-shirt splashed with a vividly colored dragon. Ed Hardy, she thought, or one of the knockoffs. He had glanced at her and the look in his eyes—a hot, calculating look that slid over her entire body to scald her with its heat—had frightened her. Even though she'd been wearing another one of her light, crocheted sweaters, it had left her feeling naked.

I need to get out of here. Out of Hollybrook. Out of L.A.

But how was she supposed to do that without any money? Damon's words echoed menacingly in her ears—*being an adult means you pay for it*.

What, exactly, was it that she was paying for? Not wanting to marry a creep who was twice her age? Touching herself in her own room and forgetting to lock the door?

Jay shook her head. Even if she pawned all her jewelry, anything she got would be eaten up by rent and travel. And how was she going to get a plane ticket if Damon kept canceling her charges in the stupid joint account he'd set up for her when she was still underage? Before, she would have had

a friend buy it for her—but now, she was questioning her friends. Both Yelena and Quentin had been so quick to sell her out. If she couldn't trust them, who could she trust?

Jay leaned her head back against her chair while Gypsum purred. She drew in a deep, long breath as the breeze rifled the curtains and fluttered her posters. A soft click made her lift her head and then she jumped up so suddenly that her cat hissed and fled underneath the bed.

“W-what the fuck are you doing in here?”

Nick was leaning against her bedroom door, arms folded, with one foot pressed against the paneling. “Do you mean why am I here? Or how did I get in? If it's the latter, it's because I know where we keep all the keys to every room in this house. And if it's the former—” He let his sneakered foot fall to the floor. “I think you already know.”

She skittered out of the way when Nick crossed the room, but his goal was her CD player. She stared at him in confusion, as well as annoyance, when he popped the disk out and replaced it with one of her older CDs. Slowly, he began inching the volume up.

“What are you doing?” she snapped, grabbing the back of the chair when he toed his shoes off. She recognized them—they were Converse, but from a limited edition partnership with John Varvatos. His were black leather. She swallowed, looking up at him. The edges of the dragon were outlined in gold and throwing off metallic sparks that were only slightly less fiery than the veins of red in his dark hair. “I was listening to the other thing. Put it back and get out.”

“It's too quiet.”

“What?”

“I don't want anyone else to hear you.” He crossed his arms to pull off his shirt. “When we fuck.”

Jay felt her heart spasm when Nick started walking towards her, bare-chested. Stalking her. *Like he's going to attack.* Fear lit up her insides in shimmering red waves as the beat of the music he'd put on pulsed in her ears like a second heartbeat. Her grip on the chair tightened.

“Are you going to make me chase you?” he asked, looking at her intently. “Or do you just really want me to bend you over that chair?”

The muscles in his triceps twitched before his shoulders did and Jay yelped and pushed he chair at him before sprinting for the door. Nick was faster, though, and caught her around the waist, holding her tightly against him like a prize with her back squeezed up against his front.

“It's almost like you're trying to provoke me,” he said. “Deleting files off my computer. Throwing cups of ice at me. Making me chase you. Being a bad girl is exactly what got you into this position in the first place—or have you already forgotten what's at stake?” His breath was hot against her ear. “Do you need to watch the video again?”

“I'll scream,” said Jay, shivering when he pushed her hair aside and kissed the back of her neck.

His laugh, low and deep, turned her knees to water. “You do that.”

There was a sharp yank that had her instinctively raising her arms. He tugged her sweater and tank top off, tangling her hair up in the process and causing it to frizz. She immediately hugged herself again when he put his hands on her waist and turned her around to kiss her.

It was like he was trying to devour her. The way he touched her body was a little clumsy but he was a good kisser. That disturbed her; it felt like information she shouldn't have. Jay tried to edge back and he looped an arm around the base of her spine, jostling her closer as he recaptured her mouth and stroked his tongue over hers in a shivering series of caresses that made her mouth tingle. He'd been drinking; under the sharp sting of alcohol, she could taste a sweet and cloying syrup that lingered on his tongue.

“You're not very good at this,” he murmured, with a tilt to his mouth that made her heart pound even harder. He ran his knuckles down her face, along the underside of her chin. “I hope you fuck better than you kiss.”

That stung, piercing through the fear and anger in a venomous barb of humiliation. “What do you know about it?” she said angrily. “You're just a boy.”

His eyes drifted over her in a leisurely examination that disturbed her because something about it was so *adult*. “I know what good sex feels like.”

“Then why are you here?” she asked. “Go to *her*. Or did you blackmail her, too?”

“My first time was with a whore. Dad drove me to a brothel in Nevada.” He traced slow, feathering strokes down her back, up her sides,

winding her tighter with each unhurried caress. Against her folded arms, her nipples hardened. The cold dispassion of his words while he was touching her like this was jarring, but that didn't seem to be stopping her body from responding to him anyway. Smiling a little sharply, he added, "You came this close to being my first."

"That's horrible." Jay choked on the words. "I can't believe Damon would just—"

"What?" He was frowning now, and it rendered his chiseled, patrician features brooding.

"Take his teenage son to a brothel." Jay shook her head, feeling like she was about to cry. "Your first time should mean something. You shouldn't—you shouldn't pay for it."

"Oh?" Nick's gaze became hard. "Is that how it was for you, Jay? What, did you get fucked in a sunflower field or something? Who was your first, anyway? Was it Quentin or Michael? I was never entirely sure which of them you were screwing. Or was it both? I hear Quentin's bi."

"It's none of your fucking business," Jay snapped.

"Fine. Don't tell me." He ran the back of his hand down her backside before giving her a squeeze between her legs that left her feeling weak. "It doesn't matter anyway. You're mine now."

Still holding onto her, Nick reached around to unzip her jeans. Torn between covering herself and stopping him from going further, Jay hesitated only a moment before grabbing his wrist.

His eyes dipped to her breasts before rising to meet her gaze with arrogance. His hand flexed in her grip. With a painful throb of awareness, she realized that the only reason she was still holding onto him was because he was allowing it. "Is there a problem?"

"I—" Something hit the backs of her legs. The bed. "I don't have protection."

"I do." His hand slid out of hers. She felt the burn of his palms on her sides. Touching her too much. Making her feel feverish. Her hips bucked weakly when he ran his fingers down her belly, into the open fly of her jeans. Pressing through her underwear. "Lie down."

Jay stood, paralyzed. Unable to focus on anything but his fingers. *He planned this.*

Nick sighed harshly and slid his hand out of her jeans. He scooped her up beneath her backside. She cried out when her back hit the mattress with a creak of springs that had the cat shooting out in a white blur and made a second, more desperate sound when Nick swung himself on top of her. His belt was hanging open and she could feel the cold drag of the metal on her stomach when he leaned over her, pushing her hair out of her eyes with his knees on either side of her hips.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “Look at you.”

When he bent to her, she pressed herself against the mattress, squeezing her eyes shut. He kissed her cheek, her neck; he sucked hard at her throat, as if trying to leave a bruise. She made a sound of protest as he kissed down her ribs, exhaling, before gently biting the underside of her breast. Her nipples hardened; he kissed those, too. The heated pull of his lips as he circled her pinned flesh with his tongue made cold moisture bead between her thighs.

“You're so beautiful.” Nick ran his hand over her hip. “I've always thought so. Sometimes I don't think I can stand it.”

“Don't,” she said.

“Beautiful,” he said again, “and sweet—but not to me. Why aren't you sweet to me?”

Their bodies began sliding together in an oddly deliberate way and she opened her eyes, sucking in a breath when she realized he was working their pants off. She pushed against his broad chest, which was firm and smooth beneath her fingers, girded by lean muscle. Immovable.

“Nick, *please*,” she said, which made him glance at her and slip his hand between her legs.

No. She tried to close them, and he wedged a knee between her thighs. Her eyes flicked up to his, which were dark and assessing; the pupils were like black holes suspended in their pale irises. “Seems like this is doing something for you.”

He parted her and began to stroke her with a soft, strumming pressure. Jay squirmed, feeling shameful, wilting a little under his intense stare. She'd been touched before, but not while watched. Not in bright sunlight. Not like this. She looked away but she could hear his breathing pick up, and the friction behind his touch softened, becoming as smooth as molten glass.

Oh God. “No,” she blurted.

“Liar,” he whispered. “I know that look.”

Jay's eyes flew open in outrage and she lifted her leg, twisting to deliver a jab with her knee. His face shifted—not to anger, no, but something hotter and darker. He leaned back, out of striking range, and reached for his jeans on the floor. Before she could struggle upright, he was over her again, on his knees, sliding a condom over his considerable length.

That made her look away, but not quite fast enough, and when he kissed her again, letting more of his weight fall against her body, she could feel him—all of him—cradled between her thighs. A pressure that she knew would blossom into pain. When she shifted against him, the pressure became even more persistent. Uncomfortable.

“No.” Jay grabbed him. “Wait. I don't—”

“What?”

“Please.” Jay was breathing so hard, it took a moment to speak. “I'm scared,” she said, in a small voice. His eyes snapped to hers and she looked at the curtains, not knowing how to deal with that face, speaking all in a rush. “It's going to hurt and you're—I haven't . . . *please.*”

“Shh.” She felt his lips brush her cheek, almost tenderly, and relaxed an inch thinking he might let her go. “Stop crying.”

Was she crying? She squeaked when he shifted against her and he let out another harsh breath. The weight of him was compressing her lungs and it felt like the room was going dark. There was a ringing in her ears that was as loud as shrill sirens. “Please don't hurt me.”

“Jay,” he said. “Open your eyes and look at me.”

Slowly, her eyes slid to his—in the sun-drenched room, they were the color of arctic ice.

“Nick?”

“Yes. I'm right here.” His mouth covered hers in another one of those slow, deep kisses that made her feel like she was drowning. His lips tasted like salt. Jay dug her fingers into his shoulders and felt the skin of his back flinch, but if it hurt, he didn't say so. “My sweet little blue jay. Just relax. You're safe with me. I'm not going to hurt you. I'll be so, so gentle.”

Gentle? Her panic, which had been receding, flooded back in a deafening torrent as she felt the muscles of his thighs tauten as he cocked

back his hips. “No—” Her voice broke into a shattered cry that rose over the deafening music.

With a single thrust, he was inside her.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

2008



Sex with the whore of The Cherry Orchard had been easy—painless. She'd done exactly what he'd told her to do and she had done it well, and she'd seemed to enjoy it—or at least, she hadn't hated it. Nick figured the experience wouldn't be that much different across other people, like driving a car. Same parts, same basic rules.

Sex with Jay was neither easy nor painless. Sweet, soft-spoken Jay scratched up his back like she wanted bone, swearing at him in between each heaving breath. She did not look like she was enjoying it much at all, despite his best efforts. She looked like she wanted to hurt him.

She fucked like she wanted to hurt him.

Finally, he'd been forced to rip her hands from his shoulders and pin them to the sheets as he finished, and she'd fought him enough that he'd had to work a little to keep her pinned. When he came, Nick felt so dizzy with lust that it was like his head had been packed with cotton. *She's all mine*, he thought, as he thrust into her a final time, burying his face in the crook of her neck, inhaling the floral scent of her hair. *She doesn't need to love me to give me what I want.*

When he opened his eyes again, hers had closed and her fingers were clenched into fists that were tight enough that he could feel the tendons popping out against his palms. Her heartbeat thrummed against his chest like something trapped and hunted.

Nick pulled out of her and saw her throat move as she suppressed some noise too quiet to be heard over the CD, which had repeated in the player. There was a bit of blood on the condom. He looked at it for a long moment before peeling it off and pitching it into the trashcan she kept by her bed, feeling her body tense as he leaned over it.

It hadn't been an hour but he was in no hurry to leave. He felt rather agreeably tired, except for his back which was studded with oozing welts. Not deep but painful. They would probably hurt even more once the endorphins wore off. The thought of wearing her marks beneath his clothes sent a pleasurable frisson through his groin. “Oh, blue jay. That was so good.”

Jay said nothing, but one of her arms had come up to cover her breasts.

Shifting to one shoulder, he carefully slung an arm around her waist. When she still didn't move, he gathered her hair over one shoulder, baring the smooth expanse of her back. "So good," he repeated, dipping his head to brush his lips over that one spot at the nape of her neck that made her shiver. Goosebumps broke out over her arms as he ran his fingers down her spine, raking his nails over that flawless skin just hard enough to leave faint white trails.

It made her bow forward, pressing over the bar of his arm as if she sought to escape his touch. "So we're finished," she said tonelessly. It was the first thing she'd said since they'd finished fucking, and in the break between songs, painfully clear.

"Yeah," said Nick. "Unless you want me to do something else."

"I had sex with you," she said, letting her arm fall. "Now delete the video. I want to watch you do it."

Nick stared at her as warm contentment bled out, yielding to a sudden chill. "I don't think you understand how this works."

"I'm not an expert in blackmail," she shot back, "but I gave you what you wanted."

"You sure did." He reached over to squeeze her breast before letting his hand drift down her belly. "But you're not giving it to me to delete the video, Jay. You're giving it to me to keep my mouth shut. You didn't think I'd only want to fuck you once, did you?"

Jay went stiff as he kissed her ear. "What?"

"That's how this works." He ran his fingers over her thigh. "Put up and shut up."

She looked at him like she hated him, then. It tore at him a little, even as it got him hard. "How long?" she demanded, with a slight hitch. "How many times?"

Christ, was she going to mark it on a calendar? She probably would—like a fucking chore to be checked off. Nick slid from the bed, tugging on his boxers and jeans. He picked up his shirt from where he'd dropped it over by her bookcase, wincing as the threads of the fabric caught on shredded skin. "I don't know," he said coldly, bending to eject the CD player as he slid on his shoes. "I'll have to think about it."

She watched him buckle his belt, clutching one of her pillows to her body like a shield. "Why are you doing this to me? Why do you hate me?"

"I don't hate you. I have to go back downstairs now." Impulsively, he added, "Come down with me. I'll make you a drink."

"Are you forcing me to go?"

Nick paused. At her obvious reluctance, the urge to humiliate surfaced, sharp and hot. He knew how to do it. He could have her put on one of those dresses she hated, one of the ones that made her legs look endless. She hadn't worn anything form-fitting since she was a teenager. Now it was just endless sweaters and hoodies.

He glanced at Jay, who waited, watching him with a miserable expression like she could see every dark thought in his mind and had already surrendered. She would do it, too, he knew instantly; she would wear a tight dress and she would hate him all the more for it.

"No," he said wearily.

"Then I want you to go."

"Don't be like that."

She glared at him in a wounded, self-righteous way that really pissed him off.

"Okay. Be like that." Nick sat on the edge of the bed and she leaned back in a way that sent a twinge curling through his stomach. "Kiss me," he said, "and I'll go."

Jay leaned up, falling back on one arm as he tilted her chin up to his mouth with his thumb. When it was done, she made a show of wiping her mouth off like he disgusted her. Maybe he did. But it was pretty fucking hard to look down on someone while you were underneath them.

"I'll be back later," he warned her, before letting the door swing shut behind him.

A lot of the guests had already left. Since the bedrooms were off-limits, the drunk and horny ones had gone elsewhere to fuck. *So Jake actually listened.*

Except for a few people out in the back, swimming in the pool or dancing on the deck, it was mostly just people he knew. Nick made himself a drink, a stiff one, and walked into the den to find his friends playing with

his X-Box. Dave looked half-asleep and Jake was still eating. Alonzo, who Nick guessed had driven them here, was the only one who looked sober.

“Hey,” he said, looking up at Nick, where he leaned against the wall. “Wanna play?”

“I’m fine watching.”

“You were gone a while,” Jake said, a little sulkily. “People kept asking where you were.”

“Like I said, I had to take care of some shit.”

“Where’s your sister?” Jake asked, so abruptly that Nick swung around to look at him. Faltering under his stare, he went on, nervously, “Is she—uh—still around?”

“She’s in her room.” Nick took a long, bracing sip of the concoction in his hand. The alcohol was so strong, it made his lips numb. “She hates this kind of shit and she’s sick anyway, so don’t count on her coming down.” *Or at all*, he thought darkly, tightening his grip on the cup.

“That’s a shame,” Alonzo said. “I always liked her.”

“Yeah. Everyone does.” He sat on the arm of the sofa, trying not to move too much. The fabric of his shirt was really starting to chafe against his shoulder blades. “Jay’s great.”

Dave glanced up at him. “You seem tense and fidgety, man. You wanna toke?”

“You have got to be joking. What did I tell you when you got here?”

“Oh. Right.” Dave blinked. “I wasn’t supposed to smoke in the house.”

“Now I’m going to have to get the couch cleaned.” Nick growled. “I’m going to *end* you.”

Dave swallowed nervously. “Uh . . . I can pay for it?”

“You better.” Nick leaned back and hissed through his teeth. “I’ll bill you. You can pay for it with your fucking drug money.”

“Hey,” Dave said defensively. “Some of that is from honest living.”

“Really couldn’t care less.”

Nick kicked everyone out around nine, citing a need to clean up and a concern for the neighbors, though he really didn’t give a sideways fuck about either. He wanted to take his damn shirt off. He grabbed the aspirin

from his medicine cabinet, popping two himself, and then grabbed a cold bottle of water from the fridge before going to Jay's room.

She had locked the door again. Rolling his eyes, Nick switched the items to one arm and unlocked it before stepping inside. Jay, still in bed, but now wearing pajamas, jumped. She'd been reading a book—one of her fantasy ones. He could see the bright colors on the cover.

“Party's over,” he told her, not missing how she gathered her robe tightly around herself as he approached. “Thought you might like to know in case you wanted to come down.”

He set the water and the aspirin on her nightstand and she stared at them, drawing her bare legs away when he sat down on the bed. He didn't miss the flicker of anger on her face, or the wince. “How are you feeling, blue jay? Still sore? I hear it usually hurts the first time.”

She did look up at him then. “Get out.”

“If it makes you feel better, I'm feeling pretty sore myself right now.”

“Get *out*.”

“I've got news for you, little bird. You're not the one calling the shots.”

“Stop calling me little bird,” she said. “It's stupid.”

“But that's what you are. You're Daddy's little bird.”

“What?” the word seemed to be ripped from her lips. “No. Stop saying that.”

“You'll get used to it—just like you'll get used to the feel of my cock.” Jay made a sound of disgust and he laughed a little, tugging at the collar of her robe. “If you really want to get me off, you'll call me Daddy when you fuck me. Otherwise, I'm going to make you say it. By punishing you. Sexy punishments.” He pressed a kiss to her neck, just above the collar of her shirt. “But maybe not-so-sexy ones, too. Remember, *little bird*. I can ruin your life.”

She tried to hit him and he caught her fist, studying her hand in his. The sleeve of her robe had fallen back, baring her forearm. Nick found himself thinking, suddenly, of that strange remark his dad had tossed off about Jay's wrists at dinner. At the time, it had seemed like his father was trying to put the step-bitch in her place for being such a prig about the bracelet, but now he wasn't so sure. The thought of his dad noticing Jay the way he did was . . . unpleasant.

Nick slid his hand down until his fingers were encircling her wrist. Her arms were slim, still tanned from the sun, but there was a wiry strength there. Jay was neither a small woman, nor a passive one, which suited Nick just fine because he had no use for either. No, underneath all that cool reserve of hers was something hot and bright that he wanted all to himself, something that infused her moral correctitude with a warmth that belied her restraint.

He looked up to find her watching him and very deliberately pressed his mouth to the back of her hand before allowing her to free it.

That was the price. Control—or the absence of it.

He was going to make her lose it all.



Jay thought Nick would get bored and abandon this cruel game of his, as he had tired of so many of his other passing whims, but he wouldn't leave her alone. The house that had seemed so big when she had moved into it at fourteen had become a cage that housed them both.

He called her *little bird*. He made her call him *Daddy*. She hated this, found the whole thing utterly humiliating and wrong, and at first she had pleaded with him not to make her say it, to not call her *that*, which had been a mistake, because her pleading had only seemed to stoke the flames of his tireless will and make him even more insistent that she do exactly as he asked.

And he asked for a lot.

He ignored her around his friends and acted more or less the same around their parents as he always had, although she thought she detected a new chilliness in the way he spoke to his father. It was hard to tell. He had never been warm. She found herself watching people's faces, dreading seeing the knowledge of her activities there, the leering judgment, but Nick didn't seem to have said a word to anyone and when she Googled herself, the results were always clean.

One night, he grabbed her on her way out of the kitchen and started kissing her so hard, she couldn't breathe. "Beg," was all he said to her, before working the buttons of her blouse. He didn't even take her into his

bedroom; he pushed her over the couch in the den, where he had taken her from behind while fingering her, until she gasped, *Daddy, please, no, someone might see*, which made him groan a little in approval, even though her despair hadn't been feigned.

The only one looking at you is me—and I like you a little slutty, he'd whispered, right in her ear, and she had covered her mouth as she came, trying to muffle the gasps that were coming out like sobs as he filled her so deeply that her insides seemed to pinch. *Arch your back and take me deeper, little bird. You've been a bad girl and now I'm going to fuck you like one.*

She felt sick afterwards, straightening her top and pulling up her jeans, his running stream of filthy commentary burning her ears like acid. Over the pounding in her head, she'd heard the clatter of footsteps moving around upstairs. Yelena cleaning. She could have walked in on them at any moment. And Nick's father—the thought of him looking over that wall and seeing her like that left her feeling cold. *You don't know the thoughts that go through a man's mind when they see a girl who looks like you*, he'd told her, inside that bar, and at the time, she hadn't.

But she did now. Jay stared blindly at the television screen with her pulse buzzing around in her throat like an agitated hornet. *Oh God*. She looked up at the wall, which had a clear view of the couch, and Nick glanced over at her, tightening his arm around her waist. “What's wrong?”

“Don't mess around with me out here.” She met his eyes unflinchingly. “I don't want your dad to see us.”

Nick leaned back against the couch, twisting his torso to prop his elbow against the back. “Why?”

“Because what we're doing is sick enough without an audience. Please.” Jay looked down at her hands. “I'm begging you.”

“Are you? Are you begging me, Jay?” His face became unreadable then. He picked up her hand and looked at her, running his thumb over her palm. “Has my dad ever touched you?”

Jay let out a hiss. “What?”

“You said you didn't want my dad to see us. Not our parents. Just my dad.” He leaned closer, creeping towards her until she was half-bent over

the cushions. "My dad—who thinks you have nice wrists. Don't think I haven't noticed how you cringe when he's around."

"What are you insinuating?" she said. "I never let him—"

She broke off, realizing she'd said too much when he looked at her with that searingly intent expression that seemed to be boiling parts of her away. "So he tried," he remarked. "And I bet you gave him that same pretty speech you gave me about how you don't have a price." Nick made a sound of grim amusement. "I bet he loved that."

Jay could feel herself growing clammy and pale beneath the layer of sweat still sheening her skin. "It's not *funny*," she gasped, feeling the stab of tears at her eyes.

"It kind of is," Nick said, in that same dark voice. "God, he doesn't know you at all. I bet he thought you'd be some biddable dumb bimbo he could buy off with a sparkly necklace just because you don't say much and you have a nice rack."

"*Nick*," said Jay. "Stop. You're being—"

"Terrible," he finished for her. "Yeah, I know. I have a terrible personality and you hate it so fucking much. Don't remind me. Is that why my father hates you now? Did you go off and sermonize him when he wanted to fuck you? Did you tell him he was a waste?"

Jay jerked her hand and his grip tightened. "I told him," she said fiercely, "to fuck himself."

A disbelieving laugh escaped his lips. "You did, didn't you? Fuck, Jay. For one of the smartest people I know, you can be really dumb sometimes." His voice was hard; there was no trace of laughter in it now. "You really don't want to fuck with him."

"So it's my fault." Her voice sounded stiff and cold. "I brought this on myself."

"No. But the thought of my father popping a stiff one doesn't really do it for me, so thanks for the mental imagery." He released her hand, combing his fingers through his hair in agitation. "Believe it or not, I'm really not all that interested in supplying my dad with wank material."

Jay gripped her hand where he'd touched it, watching him lean back. "Gross."

“Yeah. I've seen him post-coitus. You really dodged a bullet.” He glanced at her and something in his face softened, which made her wonder what he'd seen in hers. “You can relax. I won't fuck you out here again. You can come to my bedroom or I'll come to yours.”

“Thanks,” she said sourly, as she drew in a shuddering breath. “You're a real prince.”

“He's screwing with you, isn't he?” He flicked at her arm with his fingers. “That's what he does when he doesn't get what he wants. If it ever gets bad, you can come up and see me. Just let me know. My roommate's a total nerd and he's wired so tight, I think he'd snap if I yelled at him. They paired me with some little 5'4” shrimp who has a haircut his mom gave him. He nearly pissed himself when I shook his hand. I bet I could make him leave for a night or two.”

“That's so cruel,” said Jay. “Why would you do that? Do you like messing with people?”

“Yeah, I do, actually. To be honest, it gets me off a little—finding out what people's buttons are and pressing them. Waiting them out. Watching them squirm. It's such a rush.”

Jay felt her mouth go dry. She hadn't expected an answer that brutally honest. “That's sick.”

“You asked.” Nick smiled mirthlessly. “Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to, Jay. Unlike you, I have nothing to hide. I know exactly what I am. I don't share, either. So if you think me going off to college means a free pass, think again. I'm taking a copy of the video with me and I'll know if you've been unfaithful.”

“We aren't dating, you freak. I can't be unfaithful.”

“I mean it,” he said. “You don't want to test me on this because you'll lose. If I find out you've been seeing other men, you're going to be very, very sorry.”

“Screw you.” She gave him a cold look, trying to quell the rush of disquieting agony that threatened to be her undoing. “If you think you can just keep me here on retainer like some brothel girl, I'm going to want to see a test before you touch me.”

“A test,” Nick repeated, looking thrown. “Like an STD test?”

“Yes,” she said. “That kind of test. I’ve heard you’re familiar with them.”

His eyebrows shot up and some of the intensity faded from his expression. “What you’ve heard about me is wrong,” he said coolly. “I don’t sleep around.”

“Sure,” said Jay. “All those girls in school were making it up.”

“They were. Most of them have seen me in a Speedo, so they can lie pretty convincingly.”

It took her a moment to grasp his meaning. She felt her face burn. “Why would they lie?”

“Lots of reasons. They think it gives them social cache or that it might catch my eye or make somebody else jealous. But I don’t date anyone and if I fucked as many girls as people say I do, I’d have a fractured pelvis.” Watching her carefully, he said, “I’ve only been with one person other than you. But if you want a *test*, that’s fine. I’ll get one. Just for you.”

“Charming,” she said flatly.

“I can be.” He tugged at a strand of her hair, turning back to the screen, letting his arm slip back around her waist. “Did I ever tell you Dad hired me an etiquette tutor when I was nine? He thought it might come in handy in case I ever had somebody to impress.”

“She failed,” Jay said flatly.

“It was a man.” He sounded smug. “His name was Alan Bates. *Master Bates*, I called him.”

Jay stared at the cartoons on the screen. An etiquette tutor. Suddenly, she felt drained. “This isn’t normal,” she said, speaking into the silence. “None of this is normal.”

His fingers traced just under her breast, as if daring her to move. She was wearing a button-down shirt—pink plaid, shot through with silver threads—and the touch of his hand through the thin fabric was like flame on her skin.

“I would have given you anything you wanted, you know.”

Jay shook her head, turning her face away.

“Anything,” he repeated insistently. “All you had to do was say yes.”

“I don’t want anything you have, Nick.”

Nick didn't speak again and Jay didn't move. They stayed where they were until they heard the heavy steps of Nick's father coming down the stairs. Only then did he let his arm fall.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

2008



Jay told herself she hated it—the sneaking around, the simmering anxiety before he touched her, the fear of getting caught. And while she did, it was starting to become only half-true; as much as she despised Nick for what he was doing to her, she was starting not to mind the way he made her feel when he did it.

Her mother didn't appear to notice anything was wrong. She continued going out with other society women, clinging desperately to the fringe of Hollybrook's social scene, and when she wasn't doing that, she seemed to spend a lot of time outside. Talking to the pool guy. It seemed to be harmless flirting but since nothing her mother did was without cause, Jay wasn't sure.

“Oh, yeah, they're fucking all right,” Nick said, when she brought it up with him one night. He wouldn't tell her how he knew, though, which either meant that he was lying or that he'd seen them doing it himself. And since Jay didn't want a play-by-play of her mother's infidelities, she didn't ask. What if he had a video of it? It was just better not to know.

Damon, on the other hand, watched her in a way that made her wonder if he knew exactly what they were doing. It was a speculative, sinister look. Assessing. Libidinous.

He'd looked at her that night in the bar. It scared the shit out of her.

How's the job search going? Jessi asked. You beating the recruiters off with sticks, yet?

Jay looked sadly at her phone. She desperately missed Berkeley. Sometimes she dreamed that she was still on campus, buried somewhere in the silent, sweeping library stacks or sleeping under a tree in the quad between classes, and she would wake up happy until she remembered where she was and that her days of answering to no one were over.

Because Nick had done to her exactly what his father had tried to do. He had just done it more cunningly, not making a move until any mode of retreat was gone.

She didn't think she could ever forgive him for that. Especially since he was about to go away in less than a week himself and leave her here, alone,

at the mercy of his father, while lording that video over her head like a child playing keep-away with a ball.

And since she could say none of that to Jessi, she didn't respond at all.

She'll give up soon, thought Jay. *Cori already has. They both have their own lives.*

Jay brushed her teeth and changed into pajama pants and a tank top with a pink sweatshirt from American Eagle. The house was always cold. Damon kept the air conditioner cranked up to full blast in the summer, so Jay often fell asleep with her hood pulled over her face and the covers pulled up to her nose.

She crawled into bed, shivering a little, and curled into a ball beneath the quilt. *Tomorrow I'll apply to more jobs*, she thought tiredly. *Even if I have to go far away—I'm getting out of here.*

It was a dreamless sleep. Jay remembered reading somewhere that everyone dreamed and people who thought they didn't have any dreams just didn't remember the ones they did. She'd had vivid dreams when she was younger but now it was like being spilled out into consciousness while suspended in dark syrup. She groaned, shifting on her pillow, a patchwork of hot and cold.

An uneasy breath escaped her and her body jerked—not out of reflex, this time, but fear: she was unable to move her legs. She reached down and grabbed what felt like a muscular thigh and a nervous cry escaped her. “N-Nick?”

His mouth brushed hers, soft and teasing in the dark, before covering hers completely. Without meaning to, Jay relaxed beneath him and felt his hand stroke her cheek. “Hi, blue jay.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was lying in bed . . . thinking of you.” She felt him lean closer and her hand tightened on his leg. His chest was bare. “And then I remembered I could just let myself into yours.”

Jay let out another, rougher breath when he kissed her neck, pinning the flesh with his teeth and sucking hard enough that she knew she'd have a mark. “I wish you wouldn't.”

“Haven't you ever wanted to fuck in the dark? When the lights are off, nothing matters.” He bent to kiss her sternum, and then her belly, following

no linear path. In the fuzzy darkness, the only indication of where he'd be was the light puff of his breath on her skin. "You could do anything," he added, "and no one would know."

She began to anticipate that warm pressure, breathing a little harder as he dipped lower, nipping at the sensitive skin above her waistband. "That sounds . . . twisted."

Nick laughed quietly. "I thought so, too. But I think you're a little twisted yourself, Jay. You're just better at hiding it than most. But I see it. I see everything." He bit gently at her hipbone. "You should let me take a picture of you. Something to look at . . . when I'm all alone."

"No." Jay dug her fingers into the mattress. "You keep that fucking camera away from me."

"Funny you call it that. You should see what I have on there." He pulled at the tops of her pants with his teeth before trailing a series of light bites to the other hip. "You'd be shocked."

Jay shot up, gasping. "Of me?"

"No." Nick pushed her back against the bed. "You're not the only one I have dirt on."

Jesus Christ. Jay gritted her teeth. "How many people are you blackmailing?"

"Just you." She felt his hair brush her ribs as he looked up at her. "Feel special?"

"No."

"Well, you should. You're the only one with anything I want." He pushed her top up higher and began kissing her breasts until her nipples were sore. "I've never made anyone come with my mouth," he whispered. "Have you ever let anyone eat your pussy, Jay? Or am I going to be the first?"

A low growl left her throat, even as something hot and shameful pulsed through her.

"Good," he whispered darkly. "I can't wait to put my tongue all over it."

He levered his arm under her hips and jostled her up, yanking her pants all the way off. She jumped at the touch of his hands on her legs. He was

kneeling between her thighs and it was dark and she couldn't tell what he was about to do and that was fucking terrifying.

“What are you doing?” she asked nervously, when he lightly gripped her calves.

“This.”

“*What—*”

Jay clapped a hand over her mouth, smothering her startled yelp as he yanked her twelve inches down the bed and hauled her legs over his shoulders. *Oh my God*, she thought, trembling with nerves when she felt the warm seal of his mouth between her thighs.

At first, it didn't feel particularly good—not bad, but not as good as when she got herself off. He was too rough. That gave her a perverse sense of satisfaction, as if she had thwarted him in some way. But as Nick mapped out her body in the dark, he began to shift his approach. The blunt laps became light, fluttering caresses that soon had her squirming against the insistent pressure of his lips, and what he lacked in skill, he made up for in enthusiasm.

“Like that?” he whispered, barely grazing her.

Jay pressed her lips together, but when she drew in her next breath, it choked her.

“What does that mean, Jay?” He tightened his grip on her thigh when she squirmed. “Does it mean, 'yes, please touch that with your tongue'?”

Jay soon found herself breathing very hard and she squirmed again, pushing against his head. He let himself be moved and she could feel his breath fanning against her tingling skin before he bent again and grazed her with the tip of his tongue in a rough, flicking motion that made her breath catch and her back arch. “Nick,” she croaked. “*Please.*”

He kissed her again, bearing down with his lips and his tongue, and her hips lifted as he sucked, hard, and something in her body her seemed to give, making her insides collapse like a house of cards. Jay let out a soft moan, going limp, and heard Nick swear.

Then there was the telltale blue glow of a cell phone.

“Oh my God. Are you—” She gulped air. “Are you taking a *fucking* picture?”

“No.” He glanced at her, his face pallid and demonic in the harsh light. “I’m putting on a condom. Why? Do you want me to take your picture, Jay?”

“Give me . . . your fucking phone. *Now.*”

“It’s actually your phone,” he said, handing it to her obligingly as the light flickered off. “I just borrowed it. Who’s Jessi and why are you leaving her on read? You think she’d like to know what you’re doing right now?”

“You *bastard*—”

She dropped the phone with a clatter as Nick slid into her with terrible ease, causing her voice to die in her throat as he began fucking her with heavy strokes that slammed her back into the mattress while her body was still singing from his touch. Each time he grazed her tender clit was torture, and she found herself grabbing at him for leverage.

“No,” Nick panted, holding her hands down beside her face. “No scratching. I have practice.”

Jay curled her fingers. “Embarrassed?”

He made a rough sound of amusement. “No. It’s the chlorine . . . it fucking burns.”

She closed her eyes as her hips fell into an easy rhythm that matched his. She could feel guilt gnawing at the edges of her pleasure—that she was wrong for doing this and worse for enjoying it. But for whatever reason, it was easier in the dark. Easier not to see his face. Easier not to see herself. She could just lose herself to the sensations and forget about the cause of them.

“Tell me who your Daddy is,” he said, speaking just louder than a whisper.

“You,” she said, crying out. “Oh god. Please.”

“Shh. Not so loud.” He turned his head, as if glancing at the door. She could feel the muscled wall of his chest working against hers, as if he were fighting her for air. “Say it. Beg.”

“Daddy,” she said, speaking into the void. “Please.”

“You’re all mine—and you love the way I fuck you, don’t you? Even if you’re afraid it might hurt.”

Jay frowned at that, even as her breathing quickened. “I don’t know . . .”

“Yes, you do.” She could feel the heightened tension in him, hear it in his voice; he was close. If she gave him what he wanted, this would stop. “You’re my little bird. Say that, too. I want to hear it.”

“I’m your bird, Daddy,” she said, and he shuddered into her, pressing a clumsy kiss to her face as he let his weight sink them both into her bed. He released her hands and she felt him tense as she ran them over his spine, relaxing in degrees as her fingers swept harmlessly over his skin.

“Fuck, I’m going to miss you.” She could taste herself when he covered her mouth with his, sharp and musky on his tongue. “You’re the only one in this fucking town worth more than the air that you breathe. You know that, blue jay?”

Jay wasn’t sure what to say in response to that. The muted affection in his words sent something sharp cutting through her and her tongue felt weighed down by the shadows. She let her eyes slip closed, slipping back into the warmth when he pulled her against him, and when she woke up, she was alone. She might have thought it had all been a dream, if not for the fact that her body ached and her pants and underwear were both thrown on the floor.



Several days later found Jay sat on the sofa in the den, watching the science channel on the television with her hands curled around a mug of tea and the throw pulled over her lap.

Her mother was out with some of the other women and Damon was work. She could hear birds outside, just barely audible over the television, and Nick was throwing things around in his room as he packed with his usual carelessness. He was going away to college tomorrow and Jay wasn’t sure how she felt about that. It wasn’t quite dread and it wasn’t quite relief, but it had elements of both, and left her feeling very tired.

Eventually, the door clicked open and Nick came out in sweatpants and a wife beater. He glanced at her for a long moment before disappearing into the kitchen. Jay let out a slow breath, trying to focus on *The Crimson Wing* but found herself tensing when Nick sat next to her, sliding beneath the throw. He still smelled like clean sweat.

“What's this?”

“It's about flamingos.” She stared at the screen, no longer seeing any of it. “All packed?”

He turned her face towards his, eyes studying her intently. “Today's my last day.”

“I know.” She hesitated. “Do you think you could . . . talk to your dad?”

Nick was studying her thin sweater with obvious disapproval but now his eyes rose to her face. “About what?”

“I don't know. Tell him to . . . not sabotage me. To leave me alone.”

“That's not a good idea.” He paused. “What do you need the money for? To leave?”

Yes. “No,” she lied. “I just want some independence. I miss having my own life and I don't like having to use *his* money to do it. It seems to make him think I owe him.”

“Talking to him would make it worse,” Nick said decisively. “He doesn't like it when people talk back to him or question his decisions. And it's not like you really need to work, anyway.”

“Funny how people keep telling me that,” Jay snapped. “I *want* to work. I *like* working.”

“I wouldn't want you working. It suggests a man can't take care of the women in his life.”

“Is that more of your father's sexist garbage? You're always parroting him. Do you even realize that? Sometimes you sound exactly the same.”

“I'm not my father, Jay,” Nick said. “He wouldn't let you talk to him the way I let you talk to me.” He arched his eyebrows. “He doesn't believe in marriage, outside of what it means for appearance's sake, and he thinks the ideal woman should be passive and ornamental, like a doll. Would you be surprised to learn that I don't agree?”

“I don't know what you think,” Jay said. “And right now, I don't really care.”

“You should care.” Beneath the throw, his hand slid up her thigh. “Don't mouth off to my dad while I'm gone. You apparently have no self-preservation and I don't want him touching you.”

“That wouldn't be a problem if I could get a job.”

“Don't worry about it. I'm going to take care of you.” His fingers slid into her pants. “Just like you always took care of me.”

Jay clung to the throw staring unseeingly at the pink-feathered birds and tropical blue water on the screen. “What does that mean? Do you think we're going to get married or something?” He didn't respond and she let out a sound that was part-sob, part-sigh as his searching fingers found her clit. “You're never going to delete those things you have on me, are you?”

He watched her through hooded eyes and folded her free hand over his erection, scooting closer until they were hip to hip. “You know if I did, you'd leave.”

Had she done something to bring this upon herself? She had tried so hard to push him away, but nothing she had done had worked. And even though she knew objectively that none of this was her fault, she couldn't help but feel responsible anyway. Because she was the *older* one.

She was supposed to know better.

According to society, it was always the woman's fault.

“You would leave,” Nick repeated, accusingly, when her hand stopped moving.

“Yes.” She saw no point in denying it. Staring ahead bleakly.

“I'd find you.” He pushed her hand away and finished getting himself off, arching in a way that seemed to be for her benefit, before peeling off his wife beater and coming in that with a low moan that made her look away. Nick tossed the soiled garment aside and slid to the floor, shirtless now, stretching out his long legs. With a contented sigh, he reclined so he was cradled between her thighs. “I'd bring you back, blue jay.”

“What are you doing?”

“I strained something while lifting my shelf. The fucking thing is solid mahogany.” He looked behind him, still breathing heavily. “You want to rub my shoulders?”

“Not really.”

“Well, it wasn't a request,” he said coolly. “Do it, Jay.”

Jay sighed in irritation when he pressed against her. *The illusion of choice*. His skin was like hot silk. An unspoiled canvas, save for the faint healing marks that had come from her own fingers. She ran her nails down

the lines of muscle chiseled into his skin as she shuddered, imagining ribbons of gouged skin peeling away. The visceral salience of it startled her a little, and so did her own bloodlust. She'd never seriously considered hurting anyone before.

"You don't need to be so gentle." He glanced at her, upside-down, scratching absently at the stubble on his chest. He'd started shaving it again for swimming. "I won't break," he added.

She stared at the vulnerable arch of his throat, as if hypnotized, and slowly began to rub his shoulders. His gray eyes slipped closed, and he leaned further back, causing his dark hair to feather against the couch. She looked away from him abruptly, studying the baby flamingos on the screen with clinical interest, watching them stumble around on their ridiculously long legs.

"I know," she said. "Nothing ever touches you or your father."

"You really hate me, don't you?" he said, in that same cool, reasonable voice. "For not letting you go. You hate my dad, too, but it's different kind of hate. With me, it's personal."

Jay kept watching the TV and tried to tell herself that she felt nothing but her body felt as if it were not her own. His breath warmed her thigh through her pants, sending tingles shooting up her leg. She could feel the dulled flutter of her own pulse between her legs, and the pull of fabric over her sensitized skin made her keenly aware of his every movement.

She was about to let her hands fall away when he mumbled, "I only wanted you to stay."

Blinking back tears, Jay looked down at his sleeping face. Even at eighteen, almost nineteen now, there were still pockets of baby fat that hadn't yet been chiseled away. He had the same heavy patrician features as his father, but elevated—higher cheekbones, a sharper slant to the nose. His mouth wasn't like his father's at all and neither was his hair, so Jay supposed both of those things must have come from his mother, whoever she was.

She had probably been beautiful, Jay thought. Not just because that seemed to be the only thing Damon really cared about in women, but also because her son was, too. In sleep, purged of its jaded insensitivity, his face was almost painfully attractive.

He sighed and hugged her leg, nuzzling against her. *Just like when he was a boy*, she thought, feeling a lump forming in her throat. Nick used to cling to her when he was small with the possessive affection of a feral dog. As if nobody had ever hugged him before in his life.

Knowing what she knew about him now, it was possible that nobody ever had.

She wanted to feel nothing. She wanted to feel unmoved. Instead, she felt everything. It was as if her heart had been opened up and everything was pouring out.

Damon came home a few minutes later, halting at the edge of the checkerboard tiling where it yielded to the white carpet of the den. Jay saw him take in the scene: Nick asleep, with his face pressed against her knee, the TV on low. It wasn't exactly indecent but for some reason, the way he looked at her made it feel like it might be.

"Aren't you two cozy?" he said, in a way that made her feel cold. Like he'd caught them fucking instead of whatever this was. "Didn't you just come to me with wild, hysterical accusations about my son, Justine? Saying that he was touching you—inappropriately?"

"I . . ." Words froze in her throat like barbed shards of ice. *It's not what it looks like*, she almost said, but that, in and of itself, implied guilt.

You will do no such thing if you want to keep that pretty face.

Her heart began to beat harder as he set down his briefcase. Freeing his hands. To hurt her? She glanced uncertainly at Nick, somehow still asleep. "W-we're just watching television," she said in a strained voice. "He fell asleep."

"I used to find the two of you on this couch all the time." The hairs on her arms prickled in alarm as he stepped into the room. "He looked up to you. There was a time when he refused to believe that you could do any wrong."

He's behind me.

She felt a tug on a strand of her hair. "What did you say to him?" she asked, hugging the throw to her chest. *How did you turn him against me?*

"I simply told him the truth. Women always disappoint—even you, Justine." She saw him step into her periphery, still twisting that captive

strand of hair in his fingers. “A simple reminder to be grateful goes a long way towards correction.”

Correction. “You mean you—” Jay couldn't bring herself to say the words in her head, afraid that giving voice to them would make them real.

Being an adult means you pay for it.

“What a disappointment you were,” he said, tugging on her hair sharply enough to make her eyes water. “Such a beautiful girl, and you squandered it all on ambition.”

Jay drew in an unsteady breath. “You can't keep me here.”

“Perhaps not. But I can make it very difficult and very painful for you to leave. And so can Nicholas, who sees things much more clearly than you, with your short-sightedness, ever could.”

He leaned down and Jay began to tremble hard enough that Nick frowned and began to stir.

“Let me give you some advice.” The strand of hair fell harmlessly to her shoulder as he tilted his head towards Nick, so that his mouth was level with her ear. “If you're going to lie to me about fucking my son under my own roof, don't mark him up first, *little bird.*”

Chapter Thirty

2008

■□□□□■

If you're going to lie to me about fucking my son under my own roof, don't mark him up first. Jay went rigid, feeling as if she could no longer draw in enough air to breathe as Damon followed that up with other comments. Ones that made her throat burn hot with bile.

She wasn't sure when the documentary had ended, but when she found herself looking at the screen again, it was ink-blank. She could see her reflection in it, thin and distorted in a world filled with murky shadows. She was in so much trouble.

"Your father knows," she said to Nick, as soon as he had woken up. "He knows we're—he called me *little bird*," she said, her voice breaking a little. *He saw us. He saw me.*

Oh God, he'd seen her. What had he seen to make him look at her like that?

"That's all he said?" Nick asked, rubbing at his eyes.

"No. He said . . . other things."

"Like?"

Even the most unsound horse alive knows not to mount the colt before the stallion.

"It was disgusting. I don't . . . I don't want to repeat them."

It made her feel so sick, the idea of him seeing her like that. Enjoying it. *It must have been that time on the couch*, she thought. *He must have looked over the low-wall and seen us.*

"Don't worry about it." There was a dangerous gleam in Nick's eyes that scared her. "It will all be fine. He won't do anything to you. And if he does, let me know. I know a thing or two about what he's been up to that I don't think he'd appreciate getting out."

"Like what?" she asked desperately. "Tell me."

"I can't." Nick patted her cheek. "You'll ruin my plans, blue jay."

With those frustrating words, he had gotten up to change for dinner, leaving her on the couch. *What plans?* She'd wanted to scream after him, *How are you going to fix this?*

It was the exact same way he'd always been, though. Even as a child. Secretive and vague and utterly disdainful of the consequences. Whether it was being rude to the housekeeper or sneaking liquor out of his father's cabinet or blowing through the girls at school, Nick had never really put a lot of thought into the effects of his actions on others.

He's a boy, Justine. A boy doesn't fuck like a man. Not even if you call him Daddy.

Nick had come to see her before he left, letting himself into her room and pulling her into a tight embrace. *Like we're a couple*, she thought bitterly, as he kissed her forehead. "Text me."

No, thought Jay. *You can text me if you want to talk to me so badly.*

He'd be gone for two months before his next holiday break. Jay didn't go to see him off, not wanting to be trapped in a car with Damon. Life immediately began to feel more like a prison. She stopped texting her friends back because she got tired of telling them over and over again that nobody wanted to hire her and she had the distinct impression that they were secretly relieved to have her negativity pruned from their life as if it were an infected branch.

Nick didn't text her at all, which didn't surprise her. She hadn't messaged him, either. He was probably off fucking some rich society princess who came from Big Tech money.

Jay almost felt sorry for her, whoever she was. She was going to get her heart ripped out.

Damon didn't touch her again but the way he looked at her made her feel as violated as if he had, and she made herself sick imagining what he could have seen. All of it?

Somehow, the thought of an audience made what they were doing feel even filthier.

Jay asked Yelena if she could have her meals an hour earlier than Damon and her mother did and Yelena acceded without comment, even bringing them to her room. Probably still feeling guilty over allowing Nick to put a price on her loyalty, Jay thought uncharitably.

It had been a cruel favor he had done her, showing her how quickly the people she had once considered friends and family would hurt her if they thought they might benefit from it. She couldn't even really blame Yelena

for doing what she had. Not really. In the house hierarchy, Jay was firmly at the bottom. Yelena might have liked her just fine, but she was afraid of Nick, and fear brought more urgent results than love or loyalty did. Jay did not exactly instill the decisive need to obey in others—but Nick's father did.

And so did Nick.

She spent long hours out of the house trying to make herself feel better. There were plenty of things to do that didn't involve jobs, she told herself. She volunteered for the adult literacy program at the library. She went to the one thrift store in town and thumbed through all the CDs until she could have picked out the titles by the gumminess on their cases alone. She joined a few hiking groups and went out on a few of the trails, until some of the men got too creepy.

At one point, she tried to sign up for classes at the local community college and was unsurprised when the charge was once again canceled. God forbid she try to do anything to keep from melting into ooze. She pushed back from her computer so angrily that she ended up propelling herself nearly halfway across the room in her chair.

So he thought he could keep her trapped her because she couldn't be bought off? Jay threw together all the jewelry Damon had given her as a teenager—Nick's words, *dumb bimbo*, kept clanging in her ears—threw it all in her most expensive purse, and went to a pawn shop on the outskirts of town that was literally on the other side of the tracks.

She sold everything for \$2300. It wasn't much, but it was more cash than she'd ever actually held in her hands in her life, and it was \$2300 more than what Damon wanted her to have. She nearly stashed it under her mattress, but she thought that might have been too obvious. For years, she'd kept her diary there, and she'd noticed that it looked like it had been moved.

So she Googled ideas about hiding valuable items in plain sight and then, when she was done, she wiped her whole search history just in case someone was checking that out, too.

Jay glued one of her old Mercedes Lackey hardcovers together, sealing all of the pages shut so it opened and closed in two large pieces. She hollowed out the center with a sharp cutter she'd gotten from Nick's room, carving out two large rectangles to make a chamber where she could store the bills. Carefully, she replaced the book on her shelf, where she checked

on it a couple times a week just to make sure the money was still there. It made her feel a little safer.

I have money now, she thought fiercely. *You can't control everything I do.*

It wasn't a lot, but if she ever needed to flee, it would be enough to get started.

Before she knew it, September had become October, and October had turned into November. The leaves began falling from the trees and there was a chill in the air that had nothing to do with the AC, which finally got turned off. Nick arrived on a flight from SJC to LAX the day before Thanksgiving.

Jay, in her room, heard him come home. He always slammed the front door too hard and it rattled all the pictures on the wall, making that eerie jellyfish sculpture shiver.

She tossed her book on the bed and went downstairs just as her mother screeched from her room, "Nicholas? Is that you?"

"Yeah." His booming voice sent a chill rippling down her spine. "It's me."

"Your father wanted you to call him when you arrived. I don't know why—it's not like he wouldn't notice you sitting at the table." Her face poked out of her doorway when there was no response and her eyes landed immediately on Jay. "Justine, did you get the mail?"

"I did." She glanced at Nick's open bedroom door. "There was nothing for you."

Nick appeared in his doorway almost before she'd finished speaking, wearing jeans and a red Stanford shirt with a long black coat. Jay felt something in her stomach drop when he looked her up and down. "Jay," he said, in a way that made her know this wasn't over, "come here."

She walked towards him with deliberate care, thinking he was going to hug her. His hand slid out of his pocket. She caught a gleam of something silver. A necklace? She tried to look at it, but he kept his fingers clenched around the pendant so all she could see was the glitter of the chain. Her dread increased. "You didn't need to get me anything." *I wish you hadn't.*

"I wanted to." He reached around her neck, fumbling a little with the clasp in his large hands. "I got this in Santa Clara. We were coming back

from dinner and I saw this store. My friends thought it was hilarious, gave me all kinds of shit. Asking me if I was whipped. And do you know what I said?" he asked, stirring the strands of hair around her face.

Jay looked at his bowed head. "No."

"I told them that the girl I was giving this to would be wearing this, and only this, to greet me when I got back." Nick slid the pendant down the chain, giving her a glimpse of the little jeweled bird, before allowing it to fall gently against her throat. "They asked to see pictures."

"What *pictures*?"

"Exactly." The chain dragged against her skin as he centered the necklace.

Jay stepped back. "You talk about me to your friends?"

"Not really. They only know I'm seeing a girl back home."

"We're *not* dating, Nick. You're blackmailing me."

"Would you rather I told them the truth?" Nick closed the distance again. "I didn't tell them your name and the only photo I have of you isn't one I'm willing to share around." His arms looped around her back, pulling her into his open coat. She could feel the weight of his hands at the base of her spine. "It's a gift, Jay. Don't be so uptight about it."

"I guess I don't exactly feel comfortable taking gifts from you right now." She leveled a look at him through her hair, feeling her anger rise at the casual reference to the video. "Especially not expensive ones."

"You took them from my father," he said. "You wore that bracelet for years."

"That was different," Jay said, struggling to form words, "And I regret it."

"Justine!" Her mother shouted down the stairs. "I think I saw the UPS truck. Can you check?"

Jay stepped away from Nick, grateful to have an excuse that wouldn't make her look weak. "What is it with her and the mail today?" she wondered aloud. "She won't stop harping about it."

"It's probably something for the pool boy." Nick stretched against his door, touching the top of the frame. His shirt lifted, baring the tops of his boxers and a strip of tan skin. "Isn't that just fucking typical. Fake tits,

shopping sprees, and adultery. She really ticks all the boxes for the sad, aging trophy wife, doesn't she?"

Jay stormed past him to the door, where the UPS man was waiting. "Hi," he said, smiling at her. "Mrs. Beaucroft? I need you to sign here."

Mrs. Beaucroft. Jay's smile faded. "No. I'm her daughter. I'll sign for it. Do you have a pen?"

The man handed it to her and she scribbled her signature while he watched. Then his eyes flicked to something over her shoulder and he quickly wished her a good afternoon and left. Jay dropped the package on the end table, puzzled, and nearly walked right into Nick, who had apparently been standing there, looming quietly behind her.

"Mrs. Beaucroft," he sneered.

"What?"

"He was flirting with you."

"I really don't think so."

"I know that look. I see it on the faces of a lot of the men who look at you."

"I don't know what you want me to say to that," Jay said coldly. "I can't help the way I look. You want me to take out a billboard and tell people not to look at me?"

"You know what I want." With a crumpling sound, Nick pulled a paper out of his coat. There was some kind of grid on it, printed with numbers and letters she couldn't make sense of.

Whatever it was, Jay made no move to take it. "What is that?"

"It's my test." He looked at her unsmilingly as she blanched. "You told me I wasn't allowed to touch you until you saw one. Well, here it is. Take a look."

"Justine!" her mother called. "Was there a package?"

"Yes!" She snatched the box off the end table, looking away from Nick and his test. "I'm bringing it now." She swerved around him, heading towards the stairs. She could feel his eyes following her, his unspoken anger making the air feel pressurized.

"Thanks, baby." Her mother was lounging in bed with a copy of *Memoirs of a Geisha* and some sort of herbal tea that she'd gotten from one

of her new-age friends. She had a whole group of them: they all wore expensive quilted skirts from Anthropologie and spent their mornings doing hot yoga while talking about the benefits of essential oils and juice cleanses.

“What, um, is it?” Jay asked curiously, hovering,

“Oh, nothing,” her mother said, too gaily. “Just something I ordered off Amazon, Kitchenware.”

That smacked of a lie. Her mother never cooked. Shit. Nick was probably right. “Okay,” Jay said slowly. “Well—be careful.”

“Did Nicholas call his father?”

“Not yet.”

“He never listens to me. The disrespect, I swear. You've heard the way he speaks to me. It's like he thinks I'm a whore, Jay. He's not like you, baby. You're so obedient.”

Jay winced internally. “Thanks.”

“Be a lamb and remind him, won't you?” Her mother smiled at her. “You're the only one with any control over him.”

“Yeah,” Jay said faintly. “I'll ask.”

Jay left the master bedroom, trudging down the hall. The door to her bedroom was open a crack and she was displeased but not entirely to surprised to see Nick sitting on her bed, now coatless, with Gypsum coiling around his spread legs. He looked up, leaning back on the bed.

“Lock the door and strip for me.” As he unbuckled his belt, he added, coldly, “I left the test results on the nightstand if you want to take a look before we begin.”

Control, Jay thought weakly, gripping the hem of her shirt in her hands. *Right*.



Stanford had been nice—he loved the open, sprawling campus. The freedom. His roommate, Philip, left him the hell alone, which he liked, and he'd met a couple people in the dorms he thought were okay. He worked harder in class than he wanted to, taking a grim satisfaction from wrenching the cold, hard solutions from the smatterings of data in lecture hall.

Before he knew it, those two months were gone in a whirlwind, and he was booking a flight through SJC. Returning home. To Jay.

He had his friends and wasn't lonely but sometimes at night he found himself rolling over and feeling restless. Missing the drag of her curls across his chest or the way her firm little ass felt against his cock when he held her afterwards. As the nights grew colder, he'd spent a lot of time thinking about how soft and warm she was, and how much he missed her mouth and all of the strange, bitter things that came out of it whenever she snapped at him.

She hadn't messaged him once since he went away.

Maybe I should have ordered her to, he thought, watching her take off her clothes. She did it very quickly, as if wanting to get over with, looking anywhere but at him.

And that was unacceptable.

“Bed,” he said, standing up. “On your knees.”

Nick saw her shoulders hunch but she did as she asked. He looked at her for a moment, feeling like he couldn't breathe, staring for so long that she looked over her shoulder at him. Whatever she saw there made her quickly whip around, her shoulders going even more tense.

“Did you miss me?” he asked, a little mockingly, wanting to hear the answer regardless.

Jay said nothing, still clearly angry with him. That was fine. He could work with anger.

His cock was so hard that he didn't need to touch himself at all. He took her from behind, going slower than he wanted because she made a distressed-sounding cry when he entered her. When he reached around to stroke her, she didn't feel very wet and he had to force himself to go slowly, letting her get used to his size as he touched her the way he knew she liked.

As he played with her, he said, almost absently, “You never wrote to me.”

“Neither did you.”

The accusation hung. Nick tightened his hands on her hips with a rather grim expression on his face and finished fucking her in silence, digging his nails into her backside as he came. She bucked a little but he knew she hadn't really enjoyed it, and that annoyed him.

Nick stripped off the slick condom and wiped himself off with a tissue with quick, agitated motions before tucking himself back into his boxers. Jay was sitting on her bed with her legs angled demurely and her hair draped over her shoulders in two tangled sheaves to hide her body.

He tugged off his shirt and handed it to her. "Here," he said shortly.

She looked at it with a sigh and pulled it on, yanking it down to her thighs. He liked the way it slid down her shoulder, revealing a glimpse of the necklace. He collapsed beside her, swinging his legs up on the bed without bothering to do up his jeans. His flight had only been about an hour long but suddenly he felt like he'd flown all the way from Japan.

"Come here," he said, groping for her, pulling her body against him as he'd been wanting to do for months. She didn't resist. "You could have visited me."

"Your father is doing his best to make sure I can't go anywhere," she said coolly, primly tugging the hem down where it had ridden up. "I can't even buy a bus pass."

"I'll send you tickets. If you don't want to kick poor Philip out of his room, I'll put you up in a hotel, too. We can go out to dinner. Wherever you want," he added, closing his eyes. "There's a steakhouse up there so fancy that even their garnishes have garnishes. I'll take you there."

"You can put me in a hotel and buy me a steak dinner, but you can't get me out of here?"

"God." Nick sighed, letting his hand rest high on her hip so that his fingers were pressing into the crease of her inner thigh. "You're so frustrating. I don't want it to be like this between us."

"Maybe you should blackmail me into feeling what you want."

"We have an arrangement, blue jay. I have something you want and you're paying me for it with something I want. Quid pro quo." She made a muted sound and pulled her hips away. Nick opened his eyes to find himself staring at her turned back. He scooted closer. "The terms might be stacked in my favor, but that doesn't mean I don't care about you."

"I'm pretty sure that's exactly what it means," she said. "Normal people don't blackmail people they care about into having sex with them. Because normal people don't *have* to."

That made him flinch, and he hated himself for it, as well as for the brief flash of guilt that chased it. Angry himself now, he swung out of bed, letting her fall back against the sheets. Shirtless, he prowled her room, aware of her study and not liking it.

There were plenty of girls who'd expressed an interest in him. He considered telling Jay that, but he knew she wouldn't care. Not for the reasons he wanted her to care. He had the feeling that if he did fuck around, she would just sit there silently and judge him, and that pissed him off because he cared a lot about who she fucked around with.

The very idea of her being with someone else made him want to hurt someone, actually.

Looking at her, wearing his shirt and his necklace, but very much not his herself, was gutting. So he looked away, scanning her belongings. Walking to her bookshelf, he let his eyes flick dismissively over the titles crammed in there, studying her rock collection.

Almost immediately, he noticed something was missing. "Where's the gypsum rose I got you?" he demanded, folding his arms. "I don't see it."

"I had to sell it." She sat on the edge of her bed, tugging his shirt over her lap. Her long hair swung forward as looked up. "I had to sell a lot of my things."

"Why?"

"I told you why. Your dad won't give me any money. He rejects all my purchases."

"I would have sent you some if you'd asked. You have a fucking phone. You can text me. Anytime you want. You're not *poor*. You don't need to hock your shit like you're—"

"What? One of the rabble? A poor relation?"

"Don't you fucking start." He ran his fingers through his hair. "You have choices. You can come to me for help. You can come up to Palo Alto, or I'll send you money. Or you can sit there in your little silk princess sheets and whine. Just don't sell shit around here without asking."

"You're the one who told me I should sell things I didn't like."

Nick winced again, and felt another flood of anger that he was letting her get to him this way. That she *could* get to him this way. "I'd watch it, if I were you," he told her, in a tight voice. "Your mom's this close to going

down in flames and if you aren't careful, you're going to burn up right along with her. I'm all you have."

"What do you mean?" she asked, paling. "What's going to happen to my mom?"

"I mean, I'm pretty sure my dad knows what's been happening at the pool."

"Oh," she said. "Like he knows about you and me?"

"Not the same thing. You're mine and he isn't going to touch you."

"Why not? Because of this? Is this supposed to protect me from your dad? Are you marking your territory?" She clawed at the necklace. "My God, Nick. You really are daddy's little boy, aren't you?"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean, Jay?"

"It means you're a bully," she said fiercely. "Who doesn't care about anyone but himself. I've begged you to help me and you tell me you will, and then you sit back and refuse me. Don't pretend you care about me. We both know you only care about one thing."

Nick stared at her books. "If I didn't care about you, I'd tell everyone what you really are."

She stood up so fast that she startled the cat. "And what am I? A whore? Is that what you were going to say? Is that what I am to you? If I am, it's because *you* made me that, Nick." She poked at his chest, hard, just above his sternum. "You forced me to bargain myself, piece by piece, and now I don't even feel like I'm myself anymore—and I *hate* you for that."

Nick looked down at her hand and she hastily yanked it away as he backhanded her rock collection, making her stumble back from him as a shower of semiprecious gems rained over the carpet in a rainbow of colors. "Hate me, then," he breathed. "Break yourself into a thousand pieces and deny me each and every one of them. Because I am never letting you go."

Then he left, slamming her door shut behind him.

For a moment, he leaned against it as his heart thumped wildly in his chest. The front door opened and his father walked in, wearing one of his suits, briefcase in hand.

Oh great.

"Nicholas," he said, glancing up at him. "You were supposed to call me."

“Yeah.” Nick walked down the hall. “I know. I got distracted.”

“I know your stepmother reminded you.”

“I’m busy.”

His father scoffed, glancing pointedly at Jay's closed door. “I can guess doing what.”

Growing up, his father had seemed like a remote, powerful figure. Mythical and godlike, it was an image he had curated carefully but now it was starting to fray apart at the seams.

Nick stopped about three feet away from his father, right under that Chihuly sculpture that had always reminded him of a twisted balloon animal wrenched from the deep. “I hear you like to watch now.” He tilted his head. “I like to watch, too.”

“Nicholas,” his father said, in a reasonable tone, “you don't want to fuck with me.”

Nicholas folded his arms over his bare chest. “If you mess around with Jay again, I will.”

Chapter Thirty-One

2009

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Things changed after Thanksgiving, which was a disaster. Her mother babbled into the silence. Damon studied her the way one might study an exotically colored beetle, trying to decide whether it was a curiosity or a pest. And then there was Nick, who just looked furious at everyone. After his loss of control in her bedroom, she found herself feeling frightened of him.

Break yourself into a thousand pieces and deny me each and every one of them.

The sex had been rough and desperate; he'd forced her to be more vocal, which she hated. She let him do whatever he wanted and told herself she was glad when he left. But then he started texting her. *Are you wearing your necklace? Send me a picture.* They trickled in slowly at first and then more frequently—two or three times a week, often late at night.

She didn't like that he was thinking of her late at night.

Knowing he probably expected pictures with cleavage, she purposefully wore it with turtlenecks and drab sweaters. It might have been resting on a display case for all the pleasure he'd get out of it. He never responded to her photo texts, but after a few days she'd get a request for another one. A couple times, she'd get one asking, *What are you doing?*

Sitting in this house because I can't go anywhere else. Jay sighed and wrote, *Reading.*

Nick sent a photo of one of her favorite books. *Look what I found at the campus bookstore.*

It was such a blatant attempt at manipulation that it made her angry. *Wow, a book,* she typed sarcastically. *You're great at finding things.* He wrote back but she plunked down her phone on the nightstand and stopped responding. That seemed to irritate him because he sent her a volley of text messages, followed by a phone call. When she scrolled through them the next day, she was unimpressed to see that the most recent one said, *I'm coming home for Dad's party.*

That stupid party, thought Jay. Ever since Damon had announced the January holiday party for his company, Jay knew she was going to be

forced to go. And she really didn't want to.

Her mother took her out shopping for dresses and since Jay hadn't liked any of them, her mother and the sales assistant had wrangled her into a couture gown the color of rose gold, sewn all over with crystals. It made her feel like a glass of sparkling champagne and when she said as much, the sales assistant beamed as if she had said something clever and complimentary.

Her mother, however, recognized her tone of voice and shot Jay a dagger-like look as she fingered the transparent cap sleeves. There were small pink pearls sewn over the shoulder, making it look as if the dress was held up by magic. Jay knew she wanted the dress for herself but there was no way it would fit. She towered over her petite mother and her figure was much fuller. They hadn't been able to wear the same size clothes since Jay was fifteen.

"Mom," Jay said, clutching the bodice. "I can't wear this. It shows *everything*."

"She's shy," her mother said, rolling her eyes at the sales assistant, who nodded knowingly. "We'll take it."

"Mom," Jay said again. "No."

"*Justine*."

The night of the party, Jay tried to plead sick, and her mother had yelled at her so colorfully and cuttingly that Damon hadn't needed to say a word.

The three of them were already dressed. Her mother was wearing a silver, spangled gown cut to display as much of her cosmetically enhanced breasts as was tasteful for an office party. Damon and Nick were in formal suits—not rentals. Damon had some Italian brand Jay had never heard of brought down from the attic in a box, and Nick was wearing one he'd gotten himself.

Having the three of them watch her trudge up the stairs like a child being sent to her room was—humiliating. There weren't many instances in her life that came close, except maybe for sitting topless in her stepbrother's lap while he came in his pants. That might be worse.

Or her stepfather hitting on her in a bar after touching her thighs and breasts and telling her that her mother was little better than an expensive

whore.

Looking at her reflection in the mirror, tugging at the bodice that seemed to get more revealing with each adjustment, Jay found herself close to tears. It felt like her mother had forced her to get this dress precisely because she *didn't* like it—but what kind of mother would do that?

In her clutch, her phone buzzed. *Are you wearing your necklace?*

Jay started to type a furious reply and then deleted it.

Seated next to him in the limo, she could feel the heat coming off his body. His jacket had been tailored to fit his broad shoulders and nip in at his slender waist, and the pants showed off the streamlined silhouette of his long legs. It was a three piece suit, like his father's, but the suit vest was a deep oxblood, and so were his tie and pocket square.

Demon prince, she thought. *Only, he looks the part, now.*

Nick didn't touch her but the look in his eyes as they raked over her made Jay feel as if she were being burned slowly alive, especially when they dropped to the silver necklace at her throat, and then lower, lingering on the beaded decolletage of her gown.

It hurt to look at him then. It hurt to breathe.

Nobody who saw him look at her like that could harbor any doubts about what was going on between them. Jay looked away from him. Her eyes bounced off her mother, who was sipping from a glass of champagne, and skittered away from Damon, who was watching them both with lewd amusement as he nursed his own glass of Cristal.

“Where did you get that necklace, Justine?”

Jay wished she could shrink into herself. He'd all but admitted to staring at her chest and there was a chill lurking in the spaces between his words, giving them the force of an arctic blast.

“I gave it to her.” Nick crossed a leg over his knee in a gesture that put him a little closer to her. With his arm stretched along the back of her seat, only a few inches lay between them. He glanced at her, lips parting into a sardonic grimace. “A jay for a Jay.”

“You have such a pretty name, Justine,” her mother said, looking away from the window. “I wish you would give up that childish nickname. Jay is a man's name. It doesn't suit you at all.”

“I think it does,” said Jay. “I've never liked the name 'Justine.’”

“Let's not fight about it now,” said her mother. “Not before the party. I'll get wrinkles.”

Damon patted her mother's hand in a way that seemed condescending. “No. This is a night for celebrating financial and filial success—and our beautiful children, of course.”

Filial success? Her eyes flicked to Nick, who looked grimly sardonic.

“So much to celebrate.”

What is going on?

“Don't you agree, my dear?” Damon asked, and Jay's stomach flipped, but he was talking to her mother this time, giving her the smile of a very polite shark.

Her mother was wearing new earrings—big crystals that made her look like a Vegas showgirl with deep cleavage. “Yes, of course, baby,” she said. “Whatever you say.”

“You can't say it, can you?” Nick bent the arm sprawled along the back of the seat, using it to prop up his head on his fist. “You can't even tell your daughter she's beautiful.”

“What?” her mother looked at him in irritation. “What are you talking about, Nicholas?”

“Nothing,” he said, leaning back. “Absolutely nothing at all. You dumb fucking cunt.”

Her mother's jaw dropped. “How dare you talk to me with such ugly words,” she hissed. “You oversized brat. Just where do you get off?”

Nick started laughing. “You want to know . . . where I get off? Really?”

“Nicholas,” said Damon. “This is unacceptable. You will apologize at once.”

“No.” Still chuckling, he said, “No, I don't think I will. Is there any champagne left in this car? I feel like I could use a drink.”

“You're nineteen.”

“Right. I forgot. Jay, do you want a drink?”

“No,” she said. “I can't.”

This is a nightmare, thought Jay, as the car continued up the dark road. She wished Vlad would turn the car back around to the house. At least that was a familiar hell.

The party was on the top floor and rooftop garden of a Los Angeles skyscraper. The garden was filled with topiaries and Jay thought it was a little ominous to see all those gigantic leafy animals all but floating against the deep navy sky like creatures in a Japanese monster movie.

As soon as she and her family stepped off the elevators, the music hit Jay like a wall of sound. It was like slightly edgier mall music, so there was lots of Maroon 5, La Roux, and Katy Perry, with older artists that everyone liked thrown in so as to not upset the conservative older crowd. In the garden, it was quieter, with light 90s jazz emanating from hidden speakers as people escaped the dance floor and buffet area for a quiet, bracing drink.

Jay might have enjoyed herself if she hadn't been with her family and if she hadn't been in this dress. The food was good—lots of canapes on clear plastic plates cut to look like crystal—but men kept asking her to dance, looking at her in a way that made her want to cry and be angry, all at the same time. A number of them were Damon's age. They probably worked with Damon.

The fast-paced pop song ended, yielding to a slower jazz song. Nick crossed the room to her and palmed her waist, whirling her away from a skinny old man in his fifties who had slowly been working up the nerve to approach so that the two of them were face to face. The blue lights made his eyes look like ice. “Dance with me,” he said.

Jay put her hands on his shoulders, giving the illusion of compliance while also allowing her to hold him at bay. But it wasn't far enough to be comfortable. His chest kept brushing hers and his fingers seemed to scorch her through the open back of her dress.

“Dad went off somewhere,” Nick remarked, when he caught her scanning the dance floor. He took one of her hands off his shoulders, clasping it in his. “And your mom's upstairs taking advantage of the open bar. Flirting with one of the bartenders.”

“I didn't know you could dance,” Jay said, trying not to think about his words or his hand.

“I told you I had an etiquette tutor. Dance lessons were a part of that. My father didn't want me to embarrass him at parties if some girl asked me to dance.”

Jay shifted her weight and his grip tightened minutely.

“You're trying to lead.”

“This is just how I was taught,” Jay said defensively. “There weren't that many guys in Dance, so they usually had me lead.” She tried to turn and he blocked her with a hip. “Stop that.”

“I'm leading.” He hedged her forward with a series of quick steps. “Submit to me.”

Jay tore her hand away from him to press against her bodice as he dipped her backwards, making her breasts shift in her gown. “Nick,” she said. “Stop.”

“You can't even see anything beneath the beading.” Her jaw hardened as he peeled her wrist away and clasped her hand in his own, although he didn't dip her back again. “It suits you.”

Jay said nothing else as he swept her around the floor. In the heels her mother had helped her pick out for the dress, she was only three inches shorter than he was. Having his face hovering so near to hers made her nervous: this close, he missed nothing, and she was afraid he might kiss her. “What the hell was that in the car?”

“I'm tired of bullshit. I don't want to deal with bullshit anymore, Jay.”

He spun her around and she nervously glanced around. A few people were looking their way, including some of the men she'd turned down. “I still have to live with them.”

“Not for long,” said Nick.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I told you about my photography hobby.” His fingers tightened over hers as if he thought she might try to pull away. “You asked me if I was blackmailing anyone else.”

Her stomach plummeted. “I remember.”

“That's changed. I told my father I plan to propose to you when I graduate.” Jay stumbled. He caught her, tugging her up until she stopped dragging her feet. Somehow, both of her arms had ended up around his neck and she was clinging to him like a mast on a sinking ship. His hands rested just over her backside. “He's always said that fucking a married woman is like eating the leftovers out of another man's fridge.”

“That's disgusting.”

“He didn't like that,” Nick said idly. “He's still hot for you. He called you and me a lot of names until I told him I'd punch him if he didn't stop. Then he threatened me, so I told him I had photos of him fucking his secretary inside our house . . . and out of it. I've never seen him go so pale.”

“Nick,” Jay said faintly, “What the *fuck*?”

Nick smiled. It was not a nice smile. “That's what he said, too. Word for word.”

“You're blackmailing your father?”

“He's furious,” Nick confided. “I'm pretty sure he was looking for the pictures in my room. It was all torn up—not that he'd find anything. I'm not an idiot. I left them back at Stanford.”

“No wonder he was so mad in the car,” Jay whispered. “Oh God, Nick—*why*?”

“It's like I said,” Nick told her. “I am so fucking done.”

“Well—I'm not going to marry you. You can't threaten people into doing what you want. They'll despise you for it—they might even hurt you for it. I think your father could actually kill you,” Jay added nervously, remembering the way he'd slammed his fist so close to her face. “There's something seriously wrong with him.” *And with you.*

“You both have four years to get used to the idea.”

“Oh my God,” Jay said again weakly.

“Marry me,” said Nick. “It solves all your problems. You'll have money. You'll have my last name. My dad won't mess around with you anymore. And your mom can go fuck herself when my dad's divorce lawyers drag her through the cleaners.”

“You blackmailed me,” said Jay. “You threatened to drag my name through the mud in front of everyone in town. You forced me to have sex with you. You filmed me without my permission and you still haven't deleted the video—or were you planning on doing that as a wedding gift?” She drew in a painful breath. “What made you think I would possibly want to marry you?”

His dark eyebrows angled down. “Are you going to refuse me again?”

“Yes, I'm going to refuse you again,” she hissed. “Because this is *stupid*.” Her chest was rising and falling with her anger and she could begin to feel her palms sweating against his wool jacket. “It's stupid,” she

repeated, her voice breaking, “and it's never going to be enough. You're going to try to own me and it's not going to stop until one of us is completely broken.”

“And would that be so bad?” She felt his nails scratch gently down her spine and it nearly made her stumble again. “Would it?” he repeated, more softly. “It wouldn't even have to be violent, Jay. I think the right words would do it. I've seen how you come apart.”

She could feel his breath teasing her lips and turned away, bowing her head towards the floor against that all-too familiar tide of shame.

Yes, she knew better than anyone how words could shatter the soul.

“Seriously, Jay. Marry me. I'm all you have. Men like Michael and Quentin look at you and see someone pure who needs protecting, but you and I both know that's not what you want.”

What I want. Jay slid her hand out of his, placing it back on his shoulder.

“You know what the really stupid thing is? I never really cared about Michael and Quentin never cared about me. I don't even talk with Angela and all of my old friends have moved on. I cared so much about what everyone thought that it paralyzed the part of my brain that should have been saying *fuck these people, Jay*, and I just—gave in to you. I gave you whatever you wanted until I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror and I don't know why.”

She let out a breath.

“Go ahead and tell everyone in Stanford and Hollybrook that I'm your little whore. I might be that—but I won't be your wife.” Jay tore at the chain around her neck, wincing as it cut into her flesh before snapping. She dropped it into his hand, closing his fingers over it. “We're done.”

“Where are you going?” His voice was low. “People are watching.”

“I don't know. Away from you.”

The song ended and Jay stepped away from him, turning down the hall to where the bathrooms were. Feeling like she desperately needed a good, hard cry. There was a line, though, and so she kept walking, passing dark rows of empty offices with windows like blind eyes.

I did it, thought Jay. I'm free. So why doesn't it feel good?

Her throat felt raw where she had ripped the necklace off. Her heart, even more so.

She had never felt less free.

Jay paused at the end of a hall, standing between a conference room and a fire escape, wiping a few tears from her face. That was when she heard a sound—soft and quiet, like a muffled cry. “Is someone there?”

The sound cut off abruptly and Jay could feel her heart pounding into the silence. *Someone's here*, she thought, staring into the darkness of the conference room. *Something's wrong*. She groped for a light switch, plunging the scene into a stark, sick, fluorescent tableau.

It was Damon, and he had some poor woman bent over the conference table with his hand clapped over her mouth. Jay had never seen her before, but she had loose, feathery brown hair and glasses, which were all fogged up and sliding down her nose. When she looked up at Jay, her eyes were red. *Like she's been crying*, thought Jay. *That sick fuck*.

Jay backed up, tripping as her heels got caught up in her skirts.

“Justine.” Damon stepped back and Jay looked away but not fast enough. *Oh my God, that's his cock*, she thought, which was enough to send her running. Behind her, she heard him swear.

She wasn't sure where she was going, only that she needed to be far, far away from here, and that someone—she wasn't sure who—needed to be told. A hand grabbed her arm and Jay was flung into the wall, back-first. She gasped, winded, throwing up her arms to cover her face when she saw something fly towards her.

But Damon's goal wasn't to hit, but to entrap. Her body jolted as his free hand slammed against the wall, caging her in. “Justine,” he said, nearly snarling her name. “You've been busy.”

Jay shot her knee into his groin. She heard him gag and curse, the hand on her arm convulsing. “Let go of me,” she cried out. “Let go—you rapist!”

“No,” he rasped. “That's just a little game we like to play.”

“She was crying.” Jay felt like she could barely stand. The hand wrapped around her arm felt like a fleshy manacle. “I'm calling the police.”

“The police?” Damon grabbed her clutch with his free hand and threw it so hard that the clasp broke on the first bounce off the tile, spilling her things down the hall. “Who the fuck do you think you're talking to, little

girl? I own the police. Nicholas grew up with Sheriff Van Hoff's boy and our money runs this town."

Damon ripped her away from the wall.

"And speaking of Nicholas, I suppose I have you to thank for his revived interest in photography. Did you put him up to that, you little bitch?"

"N-no!"

"Did you think you would get away with it? You're worse than your mother." He yanked on her arm, pulling it hard up her back. Fabric ripped and beads scattered. Jay went limp as she stumbled along next to him. "Don't fool yourself into thinking you hold any sort of sway here because you let my son bend you over a couch."

Oh God, no.

"Tell me," he said, in a calm voice that chilled her. "When did your Mrs. Robinson act begin? Was Nicholas underage when it did? I saw him take you into his room when he was fourteen. Did you touch him when he was twelve? You want to fucking come for me, Justine, and I will slap you with statutory rape charges so fast you'll be gagging on lawsuits."

"I didn't touch him," Jay cried. "I would never—oh God. He was a *child*."

He was taking her back to that empty conference room. She began to kick and struggle, but he had some of her hair tangled up with her arm and she couldn't straighten up enough to really fight. Not without eliciting a sharp burst of pain that made her eyes water.

Jay hit the table, rattling the plastic basket of pens and notepads in the center of it. Damon looked at her coldly and she felt her pulse throbbing so hard in her throat that it seemed on the verge of bursting out. She fumbled to hold her ripped dress closed.

"What—" She groped behind her with her free hand, wincing at the soreness of her arms, and closed her fingers over the basket. "What are you going to do?"

"You fucked my son, who then fucked me—so it seems only fair that I fuck you. God knows, I've waited for it long enough." He reached for his belt buckle, breathing hard. "And you're going to be a good girl and do exactly what I tell you. You can even call me Daddy."

“No,” Jay said faintly.

“You will,” he promised her coldly. “Because if you don't, I'll make sure the whole town knows just how fond you are of our youth. The younger the better— isn't that right, my dear?”

Jay threw the pens at him with a cry and yanked the door open. *I have to get away.*

She flew right into Nick.

“No!” she cried, as his arms tightened around her, keeping her immobile. “Let me go.”

“What's the matter?” he demanded. “What happened to your dress?”

“Your father—” Jay gasped, as he released one of her hands. “I need to . . . oh.”

Damon skated out into the hall in his polished shoes. “Justine,” he roared. “You get back here right now, or the whole town will know what you've done.”

Nick didn't move and Jay found herself wondering if he was going to give her *back*. Just hand her over to his father like a discarded plaything because she wasn't any good to him.

“My father did this.” It wasn't a question.

She clutched at the ripped seams of her gown with her free hand, scattering more beads with her squeezing fingers. “Please . . .” she heard her voice crack. “Don't give me to him.”

“Never,” said Nick. He shrugged off his coat, snapping it out to drape around her shoulders. The wild, vicious crack of it made her flinch and for a moment, his face seemed to crack too, baring glimpses of something raw, like the exposed soft tissue in a deep lesion.

And then he walked over to his father and he swung.

It was . . . awful. Jay had never seen someone get punched in the face before. It wasn't like the movies. It wasn't clean. There was a sick, wet sound. A crunch. Blood splattered onto the wet tile as Damon's teeth shredded his lip. *Who knew the human face had so much blood?*

When her stepfather spat, Jay heard something solid clink off the tile. A tooth.

She shoved her arms into Nick's jacket and grabbed his arm from behind with both of hers as he cocked his fist back for another blow. "Stop!" She hung onto his bicep, terrified at the resistance she found there. "Stop. You're going to kill him."

Damon crumpled to the floor like a heavy sack of flour and Nick let out a rough breath as he turned around. The knuckles of his right hand were covered in syrupy-thick blood. The sight of it made her gag. She could smell it. It smelled like old, dirty pennies.

"You're crying," said Nick. "He made you cry."

No, thought Jay. *You did*.

Shaking her head, she turned from him and ran. She ran and ran and *ran*, telling herself that as long as she could get away, she would never look back.

And for eight years, she never did.

Chapter Thirty-Two

2017

■□□□□■

He made you cry.

Birds were singing in the trees overhead and the sun was hot and punishing, but for a moment she was somewhere else—somewhere sterile and cold that smelled of carpet cleaner.

And blood.

She was in Nicholas's lap, straddling his thighs. There was something seriously messed up about that: sitting in the lap of the man who had used her so badly, crying while he held her. Even on the verge of falling apart, she was mindful enough to recognize that.

Something to add to the list of things to tell the therapist.

It was a long list. She had never seen one. Therapists were expensive and she lived paycheck to paycheck. Anything that wasn't covered by her insurance, she sought to treat herself.

Everyone in that house had hurt her in some way. Damon, she had never trusted. But Nick—

I fucked up. I fucked everything up.

He still smelled exactly the same—grapefruit, and the clean smell of his own skin. It made her want to run even as it seeped her of any desire to. When his hand smoothed up and down her back, she pressed her face into his shoulder and then he stopped stroking her entirely and just held her. Cradling her in the same arms that he'd used to hold her down.

I am never letting you go.

Suddenly, she felt trapped—she pushed at him, expecting those arms to constrict around her like a cage. And for a moment, they did, only to fall away. When she looked up at his face, it was expressionless through the haze of her tears. Despite the gentleness of his hands, the seeming rawness of his words, she could detect no emotion from him at all.

After a while, he said, “My legs are starting to burn. Let's go back.”

Jay unfolded herself creakily from his lap, brushing dust and debris from her clothes. Her eyes were burning and the white-hot sunlight was

only making it worse. She slid her shades down and stared resolutely ahead. But something had changed.

Perhaps irrevocably so.

They walked back down the trail in silence, startling a line of quail on their way downhill. Jay could feel Nick looking at her: quick, assessing glances. She wished she could read him as well as he seemed to be able to read her, but whatever he was feeling, he hid it well.

Overhead, a red-tailed hawk circled lazily, looking for prey. They were the largest types of hawks and Jay found it fascinating that their eye color changed as they got older, from gold to brown. She loved red-tailed hawks, and had ever since picking up the *Animorphs* books as a kid, intrigued enough by the animals mentioned inside that she'd started going to the library to check out books about them.

She remembered wishing so badly that she had something special that set her apart from everyone else. A secret that nobody else knew about. She glanced at Nicholas, and her stomach sank when their eyes met. *Be careful what you wish for.*

Nicholas turned on the AC as soon as they were in the car. As he backed out of the dusty lot, Jay took a last look at the hills. It had been a dry spring and everything was brown. In a certain slant of light, they could sometimes look like glowing sand dunes. The city wasn't like that; living there could leave you starved for the sight of trees.

He drove fast—faster than she would drive, if it was her behind the wheel. She always went the speed limit; he seemed to add 10MPH by default, confident that he wouldn't be pulled over.

In this town, she thought, he probably wouldn't be.

She rubbed at her face. Her cheeks felt stiff and chapped from crying and when she checked herself out in the side mirror, she could see that her eyes were bloodshot.

“Are you hungry?”

The question made her instantly defensive. Part of her wanted to refuse as a matter of pride but having her stomach growl after lying to him would just add further insult to injury.

“I don't want to go inside anywhere right now,” she said, after a moment.

She saw the brief flash of his sunglasses. “You don't have to. I will. What do you want?”

That's a good question. She leaned back against the seat as the cool air washed over her heated face. “Something unhealthy.”

He stopped at Bubble Trouble, the boba cafe she'd used to go to all the time with her friends in high school. Jay was surprised that it was still open. The paint job looked pretty faded and it seemed to sag a little under its own weight. Jay knew how that felt.

She must have dozed off because when she was opening her eyes, she could smell hot, oily food and Nicholas was getting back into the car, shoving his wallet back into his pocket.

“What did you get?”

He'd taken his sunglasses off and his eyes looked even paler than usual with the pupils all shrunken from the sun. “Sweet potato fries and an oat milk matcha latte for you.” He popped the glasses back on. “Deep-fried octopus and a Fruity Pebbles smoothie for me.”

She glanced at the rainbow drink and then at him, mildly surprised that he would order something so juvenile. It seemed unmanly. “Lots of sugar,” she said.

“I love sugar,” he said, in the same mild tone. “I'm twenty-seven and have nineteen fillings. I'm going to die a toothless old man.”

Jay almost smiled, which made her angry. She tugged at a lock of hair that had escaped her bun and looked out the window, trying to discern what was new and what had stayed the same, just as she had on the way she had on the trip to the Afghan place. But her heart wasn't in it.

After a moment, she picked up her drink and took a sip.

“Do you like it? I can go back and have them make it again.”

“Don't do that,” said Jay. “That's such a waste.”

Nicholas frowned. “It's a waste to pay for something you don't want.”

“I like it,” she said, too quickly, because he looked like he was about to turn the car around. There was a strange, frenetic energy buzzing around him. Guilt? Anger? Shaking her head, she said, “I don't need you lecturing me about my spending habits.”

“I'm just surprised you've gotten so comfortable,” he said. “You used to race around filling up the soap bottles with water to make them last. I

thought that was so weird.”

“You’ve never been poor,” Jay said quietly. “You don’t know what it’s like, knowing that you could lose everything you have in a single moment. There were days when a school lunch was the only meal I’d have all day. My mom used to bring me home bar food leftovers for dinner. If she came home at all. Sometimes she didn’t and I’d wonder if she was ever coming back, and I was lucky if she remembered to buy the damn soap at all.”

“I don’t know what it’s like to be poor. But I know what it’s like to feel alone. My father made it clear from the beginning that his care for me was conditional.”

You’re so like him. Jay’s fingers bit into her thighs repressively, no longer certain if it was true. At the very least, he no longer seemed to parrot his father’s words. “You were so young.”

“Children know,” he said, which halted her next words in her throat, because she could still remember all those sleepless nights back in the Tenderloin. Crying herself to sleep.

Of course, she’d cried herself to sleep in Hollybrook, too.

Watching Nicholas carefully, she said, “So he wrecked the company.”

“Yeah.” She saw his fingers curl around the wheel, the slightest fraying of his control. “Nearly tanked it. The embezzling was bad. So was the sexual assault case. When I took over after his death, I thought I was going to have to sell it off piecemeal to a corporate raider.”

“I’m surprised they didn’t come after you.”

“I was the one who supplied the prosecution with the photographs of his other victim—the woman at the holiday party, she was his secretary. My father told her he’d fire her if she didn’t sleep with him. He had her coming by the house a couple times. That was how I got the photographs. I saw them. I thought she was another one of his whores.”

“Why did you start photographing people like that? It’s a little sick, isn’t it?”

“It didn’t start out sick. I started out taking pictures of trees, birds. The usual shit. People were more dynamic. Interesting. I suppose initially it was about the intimacy of getting to know someone through the lens. And then it became about the thrill of catching their exploits on film.”

Jay’s mouth flattened. “I’m surprised your father didn’t disinherit you.”

“How was that going to look? His only son? He had his pride—that was another part of his conditions, that need to save face. No, it was always going to me.”

What an arrogant psychopath. Nicholas parked in the driveway and Jay hopped out of it, holding onto her drink like she didn't know what to do with it. “I guess it's good your disgusting hobby benefited someone in the end.”

“I'm actually a very good photographer,” said Nicholas. “If you're willing to sit for me, I can take a professional head shot that would run you about \$100 in a studio. You should take me up on it. Your current LinkedIn picture looks like a missing person poster.”

Jay shot him a dark look. “You're going to be a missing person if you come near me with a camera.”

Her words elicited a feral grin that had her fingers tightening around the cup. “Feisty,” he remarked, in an appreciative tone. “Do you want to eat inside or outside?”

Thoroughly unsettled, Jay nearly said, *Outside*, until she remembered that would mean eating by the pool. “Inside is fine,” she said.

She thought he laughed, but when she looked in his direction, his face was carefully impassive. They went into the kitchen, where he dropped the cartons unceremoniously on the counter with the bar stools, instead of going into the dining room like she expected.

Though she was relieved not to eat in that coldly formal room, Jay didn't miss that he'd chosen the stool in the middle, giving her little choice but to squeeze in next to him unless she wanted to grab her food and run.

After breaking down and crying in his arms, she wanted to do exactly that. But she had her pride, too, and sometimes pride meant being stupid. She climbed onto the stool that faced out into the aisle across from the fridge, which made her feel a little less trapped than the corner.

He slid her box at her. The sweet potatoes had turned golden brown at the edges with frying and had been lightly dusted with sugar. It was a riot of grease and delicate sweetness—exactly what she wanted after a hike and a cry, and even better with a creamy iced tea. She couldn't help closing her eyes a little, wanting to savor it, and when she opened them again, she realized she was being watched.

Nicholas looked away abruptly, dragging her eyes to him, and then to his food, which was already gone. Even the crumbs. Incredulous, she glanced at his drink, which had been sucked down to the dregs. "That was fast," she blurted. "You still bolt your food down like a little kid."

"With some things." He reached over and helped himself to a handful of her food, to her annoyance. "Once in a while, I find something I really want to savor." Without breaking eye contact, he slid one of the fries into his mouth, in a way that made her avert her gaze.

She stared at her fries balefully as her glum mood returned. "Is this where you order me to come to your room?" she asked, trying to sound like she really didn't care.

He reached over again, this time brushing a lock of hair out of her face. A ripple of sensation cascaded down her neck as he tucked it loosely behind her ear. "I want you to kiss me."

Jay felt another piece of herself fracture and threaten to break off. She nodded slowly and leaned forward, surprised when he pushed back against her chest.

"Only if you're willing."

"I have a choice now?" she said dubiously. "I thought you got off on extortion."

"I didn't realize you put that much thought into what gets me off," he said, dusting his knuckles down the front of her top before allowing his hand to fall to his knee.

"What makes you think I'd want to kiss you?"

"For starters?" He looked at her for a long moment before letting his eyes fall to her mouth. "The way you're biting your lip," he said, which made her snap away from as if shocked.

"No," said Jay.

Nicholas grinned. "If you don't like extortion, Jay, how do you feel about bribery?"

Jay swallowed the fry she had been eating. "What?"

"Would you be willing to kiss me if I knocked an hour off your debt?"

"Yeah," she said sarcastically. "I really want to stick my tongue down your throat now."

“Three hours.”

“Nick,” she said.

Nicholas arched an eyebrow. “Four hours.”

She let out an uneasy breath. That was \$20,000—he was willing to pay that much to kiss her? “Eight hours,” she said.

His other eyebrow shot up. “Really.”

“Someone foolish enough to pay someone twenty thousand dollars to kiss them would probably be foolish enough to pay forty thousand.”

“Jay, you bad girl.” A smile curved his mouth, slow and predatory, and he pushed his empty cup and carton aside. “Are you trying to shake me down?”

“Actually,” she said, putting her hands in her lap, “I think what I’m doing is called bid rigging.”

Nicholas laughed but his smile dangerous. This was the ruthless, take-no-prisoners side of him that she saw at work. “Eight hours,” he agreed, “if you kiss me right now.”

“Fine.”

She tugged off her baseball cap, loosening her bun. She saw him draw in an anticipatory breath as she scooted towards him on the stool. He still wasn't quite close enough to kiss, so she braced herself by putting her hands on his thighs and leaning in to cover his mouth with hers.

It felt different being the one to make the first move. Even her ex had usually been the one to kiss her first instead of the other way around. She opened her eyes to find him looking at her and snapped, “Close your eyes.”

“For forty grand, I should be able to look at what I bought,” he murmured, but his eyes slipped obediently closed. Jay looked at him for a moment, studying his face. Even in his late twenties, it was still a little boyish, but the curve to his mouth was more arrogant than mischievous and his smiles never seemed to meet his eyes.

Despite that, or maybe even because of that, he was an incredibly attractive man.

Jay kissed him again, taking a hand off his thigh to cup his face with her fingers and her belly flipped when he leaned into her touch. She traced gentle fingers down the hollow of his jaw as his mouth, which had been still, began to move against hers. She could feel him holding himself back

and that scared her, because she could still remember what he was like when he didn't: it was like plunging headlong into deep water and being unable to breathe.

All of that dark passion was roiling beneath the surface and she could feel it now, waiting to consume her if she'd let it. When she tremblingly allowed her tongue to enter his mouth, he made a sound that appeared to be involuntary, low and forbidding, and then his hands were on her waist and he was kissing her back as if a dam inside him had burst and all of his restraint were pouring out in a hot and violent torrent. His tongue stroked over hers in a vicious sweep, turning her mouth into a lake of hot, dizzying sensations that had her hand clenching into a desperate fist on his thigh.

He pulled back, catching her lower lip between his teeth and sucking on it gently, before again pressing his mouth to hers with a scratch of stubble that stung too sweetly to be pain, parting her lips and proceeding to subsume her wholly. When Jay opened her eyes, he was watching her with half-open eyes, a dull gleam sparkling in their frozen depths that looked nearly drug-induced; the intensity of his gaze under the lights was arresting.

"Kiss me like that again," he whispered, "and I'll knock off half the debt."

Jay let out an alarmingly unstable breath. "That's five million dollars."

"I know." He began unbuttoning his shirt and she stared, paralyzed, at that widening triangle of sun-bronzed skin and dark, curling hair. When it was open to his collarbone, he shot her an arch look before yanking the fabric over his head and letting it fall to the floor.

Her fist jerked and she felt his hand close over it, and her other hand, which was hanging uselessly in front of her legs. He placed her hands on his body as he leaned in to kiss her, which made her shudder a little because his chest was warm and firm, all hard planes and sharply defined edges beneath that light dusting of coarse hair, and touching him felt good. She could feel the muscles beneath his flesh contracting under her touch and by the time she reached his stomach, her fingers were shaking and seemed to have gone numb at the tips.

"Nick," she whispered.

He pulled her into his lap, making the stools wobble dangerously. He stood, still holding onto her, and set her down on the counter, and the chill of the granite on her ass through her track pants sent a shock pulsing

through her. He stepped between her spread legs and freed her hair from its tight bun, dropping the scrunchie on the floor with his shirt as he wove his fingers through her hair. Jay had forgotten how good it could feel to be consumed—so good that you didn't feel the pain of it until you were already long gone.

She let him take her shirt off, and he broke from her just long enough to get it over her head, leaving her shivering in just her sports bra. His palms rasped against her skin and each touch seemed to slough part of her away. Her nipples were hard and aching, and he touched them, so roughly that she found herself whimpering, melting under another incredibly forceful kiss as he slowly lowered her back against the counter until she was pinned beneath his hips, with his chest bearing down on hers with each heavy breath, and her desire burning as hot and golden as a candle.

He looked down at her, tucking that strand of hair behind her ear that had first captured his attention. She might have thought him unmoved, had she not been able to feel the press of him against her belly or see how large and dark his pupils were as his eyes swept over her face.

“I'm leaving now,” he informed her, as she struggled to breathe. “Not because I want to, but because I need to, and because I want you to remember this when you come to me—because you will come to me, and when you do, I want you to fuck me the way you just kissed me.”

Jay stared at him uncomprehendingly as he bent to grab his shirt from the floor and, after flashing her a closed-lipped smile, left without looking back.

When she heard the creak of his footsteps on the stairs, she heaved out a breath that felt like a shard of glass as she stared up at the can lights over the bar.

Fuck.

Chapter Thirty-Three

2017

■□□□□■

Jay stood in front of her bathroom mirror, adjusting her clothes. She was wearing her favorite high-waisted skirt, this time paired with a polka-dot blouse that had a bow above the keyhole neckline. It was sleeveless, so she wore a sweater over it, doing up just enough buttons so the ruffly bow peeked out like a jabot. She fiddled with the loops, trying to make it sit exactly right as she avoided her own eyes in the mirror.

Last night, she had touched herself while thinking of *him*.

She knew it was terrible of her, but body memory was an entirely separate faculty from reason and she had been sorely lacking in reason for years, it seemed, because that ardently possessive kiss had left a searing tension in her lower belly that wound inside her like a metal cable. When she finally slid off that counter on unsteady legs, she felt like she might snap.

So Jay had locked her door, sticking a chair under the handle for good measure, and stripped down to her underthings in bed. Covering her mouth with her free hand to ensure that she couldn't be heard, she had brought herself to climax several times, hips bucking beneath her sheets in something too desperate to be pleasure. It had almost been enough.

She had showered afterwards, changing into her pajamas and going downstairs. She made herself dinner as if nothing were out of the ordinary, within a stone's throw of the counter that he had nearly fucked her on, and when he had come into the kitchen to heat up his own meal, she managed not to look over at said counter, carrying on a discussion with him in a normal voice. And even though it had been disgustingly civil, there had been a strange undercurrent rippling through all of their interactions as if he knew exactly what she'd been doing on the other side of her door.

She fed Carbon and grabbed her purse, heading downstairs. Nicholas was dressed in the outfit he had worn when he sat down with her in that vegan diner and first outlined his Faustian bargain. The charcoal jacket and black pants even made him look a little Mephistophelean.

I want you to fuck me the way you just kissed me.

It was so easy to hate him when he was a bastard. When he was playing mind games, when he was being arrogant and cruel, and mocking her in that voice that could shift to cold just as easily as it could to scalding, it was so, so easy to hate him—and hate him, she did. A lot.

But when he commanded her to do bad things in that same voice, with just the faintest hint of tenderness lighting up that rich darkness like a midnight sky fading to the dawn—

Then it was a lot harder not to give in.

She no longer had a strong foundation to stand upon from which she could safely hate him. After years of living apart, he no longer felt like a brother, and he would likely leave her in tatters when he was through with her. She could already feel her resistance crumbling to rubble all around her. She would be crushed under her own meek attempts at defiance.

“We’re having an all-hands meeting this afternoon to discuss our OKRs,” Nicholas said, in lieu of a greeting. “When we get to the office, I’m going to send you a PowerPoint presentation to read over, and then I want you to double-check the spreadsheets. No need to correct any of the formulas—just let me know if anything looks wrong, or if one of the slides doesn’t work.”

“Um, sure. I can do that.”

His eyes flickered over her, from her hair to her heels, and she instinctively braced herself for the inevitable taunt. “All of the figures I’m going over are from last quarter, so none of the acquisitions you’ve fielded for me are included in this data set. But I’ve been glancing over some of the preliminaries and I have a feeling that the numbers will be much, much better next quarter.” Her chest began to flutter as he walked closer, in a way that struck her as distinctly predatory, but he bypassed her, picking up his briefcase from the counter. “Nice work.”

She folded her arms. “I told you I was a serious professional.”

“So serious,” he said, with mock solemnity. “Sometimes when I look over at you, sitting at your desk, you look like you’re planning on strangling someone.”

Jay glanced at him. “Maybe I am.”

Nicholas grabbed his keys and herded her out the door. “You always did like it rough.”

Jay coughed and began spluttering. "Excuse me?"

"No need." She saw his cheek lift, like he was smiling, as they walked out to the car. Clearly enjoying himself. "I don't mind," he added, swinging in behind the wheel. "If you want me to fuck you a little harder while I've got my hand around your throat, you don't have to be coy."

"I don't," she said, in a barely contained voice.

"Oh, did you want to put your hand around my throat? That might work. I'm just not sure how you could maintain a good enough grip while I'm g—"

"Nobody's hands are going *anywhere*," she said, coloring when he gave her a sideways grin.

"Now that's just a lie, blue jay—unless you want me to tie you up again."

Her water bottle crinkled as her hand tightened on it, and she saw that he noticed, too. She let out a breath and stared angrily at her lap, feeling much too hot, while he laughed.

"This isn't funny and I don't appreciate you winding me up before we get to the office."

"You're thirty-one," he said, still chuckling. "And you're still such a fucking prude."

"Shut *up*."

That just sent him into a fresh gale of laughter. Jay decided to ignore it, cranking down the car window to feel the breeze upon her face. "You are such a bastard," she said, tugging her hair to one side so it wouldn't get all windblown. "I don't even understand how you can run a company when you're such a child."

"You'd be surprised how often people think about that," he said, sobering.

"No, I wouldn't."

"It comes up all the time in negotiations. It doesn't matter that I wear a bespoke suit, or that I went to the West Coast equivalent to an Ivy—I consistently get clients who don't expect me to read the contracts they give me and then try to fuck me in the fine print."

"Like that man who tried to give you half a percent?" she asked, finding herself reluctantly drawn into the conversation. At least he had

moved on from the subject of her prudery.

“Just like him.”

Jay stared out the window. “So what do you do about it?”

“I fuck them back.” He rolled up her window, his eyes never leaving the road. “I’m not sweet about it, either. By the time I’m finished, they’re usually hurting. After that, we either renegotiate on my terms or I send them on their way. Nobody ever underestimates me twice.”

It took Jay a moment to speak. “That sounds a little like a warning.”

Nicholas parked the car but he didn’t respond right away. He seemed to be thinking over what she’d said. “You still see me as a younger brother,” he said eventually. “I think that’s the excuse you give yourself to hold me at a distance: telling yourself I’m still a boy. But I’m not.”

“I know you’re not a boy,” she said, her voice tight. “You’ve made that resoundingly clear.”

“I’m a man,” he said, as if she hadn’t spoken. “With a man’s goals and a man’s desires.” He paused. “And a man’s burdens.”

The click of his seat belt was deafening in the silence. She sat in her seat, feeling ready to run, but Nicholas made no move towards her. Right now, he wasn’t even looking in her direction, although she knew he was aware of her presence. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Do you really need it spelled out for you?” Nicholas asked, tilting his head to regard her with an expression that made her painfully aware of her heated face. He’d looked at her like that when he kissed her—faineant and worldly, like a jaded lord. “You can’t still be that naive.”

“Well, you talk in circles,” said Jay. “Everything you say sounds like a riddle.”

“Then let me lay it out on the line for you, my squawking blue jay. I want more from you than I think you’re prepared to give to me within the framework of our little understanding, but I’m going to try to get it from you anyway—and I’m very good at getting what I want.”

“What else do you want?” she whispered, suddenly terrified. “You already have me.”

“I have the version of you that you give everyone else. I want the you that no one sees.”

The car felt entirely too small, as if she were about to be crushed. “No more riddles,” she said hoarsely. “Why did you really bring me here? If it isn't revenge, what is it?”

“I just told you.”

I want the you that no one sees.

What did that mean, the part of her that no one saw? Did he think he could sift through her consciousness and pan for what he wanted like a prospector looking for gold in a river? Jay grabbed at her own chest, her eyes desperately seeking escape.

She still remembered with painful clarity what had happened the last time she refused him.

“Oh.” All at once, she straightened as her eyes focused beyond the window. “Shit. You drove me to the office—you forgot to drop me off at the Starbucks.”

“Did I? How careless of me. You can go on ahead,” he said, unconcerned, leaning back in his seat as he pulled out his phone in a way that made her wonder if he'd forgotten on purpose. “I'll sit in the car for a few minutes and answer some emails.”

Jay slid out of the car a little unsteadily, feeling as if all of her organs were plummeting without her into freefall as she did, and closed the door, backing from the car before someone could see. Nicholas looked up, flashing her a brief smile, mouthing something she couldn't make out. She thought it might have been “Bye, blue jay.”

Turning sharply on her heel, Jay walked determinedly towards the building. Nicholas got to the office so early, she was pretty sure that most people weren't even here, yet. Small blessings.

Not a boy, she thought, with each drumming click of her shoes. I already knew that.

So what did he want with her now?

Obi, on his way back from the kitchen, greeted her casually. “Did you try making the jollof yet?”

“No.” She smiled, trying not to let her fraying nerves show. “I just bought ingredients.”

“If you like it, let me know,” he said. “I know an excellent recipe for vegan efo riro.”

"I'm not sure what that is, but I bet it's wonderful."

"It's spinach stew, and it is. Good morning, Mr. Beaucroft."

Nicholas paused, staring at the two of them for so long that it began to feel awkward. "Good morning," he said eventually, before striding away.

"Don't worry," said Obi. "I was nervous, too, at first. But he really isn't so bad."

Jay hadn't realized she'd been staring after him until she swiveled to look at Obi. "What?"

"The CEO," Obi said patiently. "He seems intimidating, but I think it's nice that he walks around and talks to people. But you report directly to him, so maybe it's different."

Jay felt her phone buzz. "I'm not really sure what to think," she said, which was true enough. "Thank you for the jollof recipe. I'll take a photo when I make it to show you."

"Please do." He smiled at her. "Have a good day, Jay."

She gave a smile at him that immediately faded as she looked down at her phone. *I sent you the PowerPoint and the spreadsheets. Have you taken a look at them?*

I haven't even gotten to my desk yet. I'll look in a moment.

Jay sat at her desk, slinging her bag to the ground as her phone vibrated noisily on the table. Annica looked over at her, giving her one of those tense little smiles, but didn't greet her. She never did and Jay knew she didn't approve of her constantly being on her phone.

I see your fan club has a new member.

For God's sake. *Yes, he was in my orientation group. He's very nice.*

Jay saw the message go to 'read.' There was no response. When she looked up at him, in his little corner on the second floor, she saw that he was on the phone.

Good. She pulled up the PowerPoint and clicked through all the slides in preview mode, testing all the graphics and effects, and visiting each hyperlink. *It looks fine*, she shot off to him in an email. *Numbers look good, too. They match the spreadsheet.*

Then she scheduled all of his appointments for the day, leaving him with a gap for lunch and a thirty minute window before the all-hands to

prepare for his meeting on the quarterly reports.

Is that what you like, Jay? Nice?

There was a pause and then he messaged her again.

Do you want to fuck him?

She glanced at him nervously, half-expecting to find him staring at her like a creep. He wasn't, but she was still unnerved enough that her fingers had difficulty hitting the right keys.

That's inappropriate, she wrote, stumbling over the letters. *And you know it.*

She saw it go to 'read.' Now he *was* looking at her, and while he was really too far away to make out the nuances of his expression clearly, she saw enough that she found herself picking up the phone again, propelled by feelings too dark and too dangerous to name.

Are you jealous?

Once again, it went to 'read.' Jay saw him get up from his desk for a meeting she'd scheduled, sliding his phone into the pocket of his blazer.

He never responded.

■□□□■

The all-hands was tedious at first. The auditorium was packed with all of the other employees of the company who looked as bored as she felt while Arthur Hartwell droned on and on about “health” and growth.” Some people looked engaged, but in a bright, fake way that made Jay suspect that it was probably just an act. Nobody was that excited about metrics.

Nobody except Nicholas, apparently.

When Arthur handed the mic over to Nicholas, who had been sitting in the first row like her, but much farther down, there was a palpable shift in the room. She soon saw why. Watching him click through the slides as he paced back and forth like a panther, talking about month-over-month growth, customer acquisition costs, and key performance indicators for the new quarter, Jay realized that Nicholas really, really liked what he did.

And perhaps even more shockingly, that he was good at it.

He was magnetic. The same intensity that rendered him so unapproachable made him compelling to watch and his voice carried well over the mic: deep and intimate, with a gravelly edge that made it seem as if he were on the verge of a dry laugh. At the end, when he asked if there were any questions, a number of hands went up, many of them belonging to women.

At one point, his eyes slid to her and she forgot how to breathe as he answered a question she no longer remembered, asked by a person whose name she did not know, talking about customer retention while looking her dead in the eyes as she tried desperately not to squirm.

And then he smiled and moved on to the next person, leaving her utterly sidelined.

His employees clearly respected him, and more than a couple appeared starstruck in his presence. When she'd left the auditorium, she'd glanced over her shoulder to see him being mobbed. Jay felt a little stunned as she slid back into her desk chair. This was entirely different from the group of sycophants he had cultivated back in high school. This was admiration.

There were no new messages on her phone and when she remembered what she'd sent him she nearly felt bad, until she also remembered that she was still mad at him for being such a bastard to her in the car—and in the office, which was worse, because this was her livelihood.

When all of this was over, she *needed* a spotless record in order to survive.

Maybe she hadn't realized that Nicholas was good at what he did, but he still seemed surprised sometimes to find that she was capable of any thoughts that might pose contrary to his.

A ping popped up and she looked at it, surprised to see that it was Meghana from HR.

Hi Jay, it's Meg. Can you come to my office for a quick chat.

A chat. Jay's heart went cold. Especially when she saw Nicholas sit down at his computer with his laptop still under his arm and frown at something on his screen.

He set the laptop on his desk and began walking down the stairs.

Towards her.

Oh no. A muscle in her throat spasmed. She got up from her desk before he could corner her there. Pitching her voice low, she said, “Did Meghana send you an email, too?”

“Yes.”

Jay glanced around. A few people were looking at them curiously. “Is it because of the text I sent?” She folded her arms. “Oh God. I'm sorry. I didn't think they would—”

“Jay,” he said, cutting her off. “Relax. HR can't read your phone. It's going to be fine.”

“But—”

“It's going to be fine,” he repeated. “I promise. Let's go.”

Jay followed him, feeling bleak. She didn't think it would be fine.

Meghana was at her desk, which was decorated in a way that was probably supposed to be comforting to the people who came in here and found out that they were getting put on performance improvement plans or fired. Little yarn decorations, photographs of her family and kids in gilt frames. *Sorry you have to leave the company*, Jay thought, a little wildly, *but just look at all the pretty yarn.*

She jumped when Nicholas closed the door behind them. He swung into one of the chairs directly across from Meghana's desk. When the HR director glanced at her, Jay, trembling, made herself sit down next to him.

“Do you know why I've called you both in here?”

Oh God. Jay stared at her fingers, where they were digging into the fabric of her skirt. Someone must have seen them together. Maybe at the store, when he'd hugged her from behind.

Nicholas, unbelievably, still looked calm. “Have we done something wrong?”

Instead of answering, Meghana leaned forward. Her face was grave and Jay's heart sank further. “I got a call from someone informing me that the woman you hired on as your new assistant is actually your sister.”

Jay choked.

Nicholas glanced at her. There was a warning in that look. “From whom?”

"I'm not at liberty to say," said Meghana. "However, it was not a pleasant phone call."

"Ah," said Nicholas, leaning back in his chair. "That was probably my stepmother. She's been harassing me at work about my late father's will. I've had to notify security."

"Is Jay your sister?"

"She is. My stepsister, actually. I didn't think that was a problem."

"It isn't if it is disclosed prior to the hiring process. Precautions should be taken when hiring relatives to preclude any appearances of favoritism." She paused. "Especially coming from so close to the top."

"Jay does good work," Nicholas said neutrally.

"So I've heard." Meghana looked at Jay and her face softened a little. "I have a solution to this. I'm going to swap Jay with Annica so you, Jay, will now be reporting to Arthur Hartwell, the CFO. Nicholas, Annica will now be reporting to you."

"And what about my work?" Nicholas demanded.

"I'll input the changes into the company org chart and mirror their ShiftWare credentials so no work should be lost and neither executive will be adversely impacted by the change. You won't even need to move desks," she said to Jay, consolingly.

"Um," said Jay, still trying to process. "Great."

"I'll let Annica and Arthur know as well, so please don't speak to either of them about this until I've called them both in here for a chat." Meghan steepled her fingers. "Do you have any other questions?"

I'm not fired? Jay's heart felt like a speeding hummingbird. She looked at Nicholas, whose face was unreadable. "No," he said, unfolding his leg.

"Excellent. Then I'll let you both get back to work. Thank you for being so accommodating and go ahead and finish up any pending assignments you've agreed to for today, Jay."

I'm not fired. Jay let out a breath and nodded. *But I think I'm still in trouble.*

When she got back to her seat, her phone buzzed.

Yes, was all it said.

Chapter Thirty-Four

2017

■□□□□■

Jay did excellent work and Nicholas had gotten used to how smoothly she had his days running. Everything scheduled before noon, coffee brought quickly and grudgingly, and profiles on all of his acquisitions that would make an amateur detective cream their pants.

He didn't want to give her up, especially not to Arthur, and especially not in exchange for Annica, who was about as pleasant as a wasp caught up in a skirt, but there wasn't a damn thing that he could do about it and that annoyed him.

Nicholas watched her pore over her files through that glass divider, sitting so close to her computer that he wondered if she'd finally succeeded at ruining his eyes with all those books. Her final text message to him—*Are you jealous?*—mocked him from his phone, reminding him that there were other ways that she was only his on loan.

Yes, he typed, hitting send before he could think better of it.

And then he leaned back in his chair and sighed.

At least the company all-hands had gone well. He was always satisfied when the quarter earnings were good, and despite Crystal's numerous fuck-ups, the Acquisitions team had done a good job courting clients who would bring in solid revenue. The pulse of the company was beating strong.

Below, he saw Jay pick up and look at her phone. He could feel her looking up at him and pointedly ignored her as he typed out an email to Annica, detailing his typical routine.

She wrote back quickly, but all it said was, *Will do*.

When a message flashed across his screen, he assumed it was Annica with a follow-up question, or perhaps Meghana to see how everything was going, or maybe another kiss-ass from Acquisitions trying to curry favor by telling him how his report was *so great*.

Glancing at the message, Nicholas was disturbed to see that it was from none of those people. It was from Renata Rossi, the company's head of legal counsel.

The last time he'd sat down with her was when he was cleaning house after his father's embezzling, which had been about five years ago. What the

hell did she want with him?

Can you come see me at your earliest convenience?

Fuck. Nicholas pushed back from his desk. This couldn't be good. Lawyers didn't call you up for brief friendly chats. Not while they were on the clock. Maybe they needed him to sign something. The last thing he needed right now was another problem.

Renata's desk was on the second floor. She had her own private office and it seemed like she spent most of the day locked in there, surfacing occasionally for the odd coffee trip. He could see one on her desk now, half-melted. What appeared to be the third of the day, judging from the two empties. Nicholas closed the door behind him and said, "You wanted to see me?"

Unlike Meghana, her desk wasn't decorated with cutesy little knickknacks and she didn't beat around the bush. "We've been in contact with the lawyer of one of our ex-employees, Crystal Yost."

"I know who she is," Nicholas said grimly. "She's my ex-administrative assistant."

"Yes, well—now she's suing you and the company. We've been served."

He wished he could say he was surprised. After that temper tantrum on her way out of the office, it didn't shock him at all that she'd chosen to be vindictive. "Wrongful termination?"

"No, actually. Sexual harassment."

The floor seemed to vault beneath him. "What?"

Renata watched him slide into the chair, her sharp eyes missing nothing. "Specifically, quid pro quo harassment. Ms. Yost is claiming that you fired her from her position because she wouldn't sleep with you."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me. She was fired because she was bad at her job."

There was a silence. He bit the inside of his cheek but he didn't apologize. If expletives were bullets, Nicholas suspected that the walls of this office would look like a *Scarface*-style shoot-up.

"Okay." He blew out a sigh. "So what does this mean for us? What are the next steps?"

"Do we want to settle?"

“No,” he snapped. “We don’t. Because I didn’t do it.”

Renata shrugged. Nicholas looked hard at her, but he couldn’t immediately tell what she thought of that outcome. She was the one person in this office that he couldn’t read.

“So they’ll subpoena pertinent communications—emails, phone records, the like. There will be a period of discovery. And then it could go to trial, depending on what happens.”

“And then what?”

“And then we’ll see.”

Nicholas raked his hand through his hair while she tapped her pen against her desk. His eyes were drawn to the familiar silhouette; it was a Montblanc. Once, his father had had one exactly like it. He wondered what happened to that pen. Maybe one of the junk haulers he’d hired to trash his father’s shit had run off with it. “She’s retaliating because I fired her. Isn’t that illegal?”

“Malicious prosecution is what you’re alluding to,” said Renata. “And yes, you could counter-sue for it but from a PR standpoint, that’s not a good look in the age of #MeToo. Especially not from an executive lashing back at his alleged victim.”

“Alleged victim,” Nicholas repeated.

“I understand that this is difficult to process.”

Spare me the pragmatism of lawyers. “Our stock is going to fucking plummet,” said Nicholas. “They’re going to eviscerate me and the company on social media.”

He’d seen it happen before, from the other side of the aisle. This was exactly what had happened to his father. Only, for him, it would be worse—his father’s trial had happened before there was a hashtag for everything that people could skim instead of reading the news. Courting international clients would become exponentially difficult if he was in the middle of a messy lawsuit. People would take one look at his name and immediately jump to conclusions.

“I recommend going dark,” Renata was saying. “And of course, not talking about the pending case here or on your phone.”

“That goes without saying,” Nicholas said coldly. “Is there something else?”

Renata leaned back in her seat. A classic power move Nicholas was well familiar with and didn't appreciate seeing at his own expense.

"I understand your stepsister works here. I have a note here from Meghana—Justine Varens, correct? I'm not sure how close you are, but I'd avoid discussing the case with her, either. There is a slim possibility that she could be called to testify against you."

There was a ringing in his ears. It took him a moment to realize it wasn't real.

"I'm representing the company's interests," said Renata, over the latent sound of his shock, "but you might want to consider hiding your own lawyer if you think you need to."

"Yeah," Nicholas said distantly. "I'll do that."

■□□□■

The drive home was awkward. Jay was not sure what to say to Nicholas, who seemed tense. He had switched on his stereo to play music off his iPhone with questionable lyrics that Jay could only think of as "fuck boy rock." She didn't like it, but his eyebrows were drawn and his jaw was tight. It didn't really seem prudent to pick a fight with him over the music when he was in this mood.

Jay sat in silence, picking at the stitching in her sleeves as he drove in silence. Was he mad at her? *Sorry I'm not your assistant anymore* would have sounded petty and sarcastic in her own current mood and Jay wasn't even about to touch his mystifying admission about being jealous of her very platonic conversation with Obi. She refused to cave to his pathological jealousy.

What right did he have to be jealous when it came down to it? It wasn't as if they were dating and he had never explicitly told her that she wasn't allowed to see anyone else.

But she knew she was kidding herself if she thought he wouldn't lose his shit over some unwanted competition for his *little bird* when he was paying insane amounts of money just to kiss her on the mouth. She knew he thought of her as his and she knew what he was like.

If I find out you've been seeing other men, you're going to be very, very sorry.

When they pulled up in the driveway, Nicholas turned off the stereo. “I need to make a phone call,” he said, twisting a key off his key ring and dropping it into her hand. “Go ahead and let yourself into the house. I’ll be in eventually.”

Who are you calling? She wanted to ask. Why do you look so tired?

But they weren't close enough for such questions and just now, Jay wasn't sure she even wanted to know the answers to them, so she just folded her fingers over the house key and said, “Okay,” and left him sitting in the Tesla in the dark.

Eventually turned out to be a long enough time for her to make herself a quick meal and eat it before going to bed. She heard him come in while he was brushing her teeth—she had left the key on his nightstand where she knew he kept his wallet and his phone while he slept.

Jay spat, and heard the door of his room close. Was he waiting for her to go to him?

Maybe he'd gotten bored, Jay thought, changing into pajamas—normal ones, not the skimpy, lacy ones he'd gotten for her. Could he really be bored with her already? After the way he had kissed her in the kitchen, she wasn't sure how he could be. The idea that he could kiss anyone like that and not feel a thing made Jay feel slightly sick.

She stabbed her toothbrush into its little cup, nearly cracking the glass, and wondered if she was really daring enough to go into his room of her own volition.

What if she did and he laughed at her? Or hurt her? Or both?

And if he was willing to pay \$40,000 to kiss her willingly, what would he shell out to fuck her if she could convince him that she wanted it?

It annoyed her to be thinking in this cold and mercenary way, and that was something else to blame him for, but she couldn't seem to make herself stop. Under these new, bizarre terms of his, she could be free. She could leave in days instead of years. She could go back to San Francisco.

Where she belonged.

Jay pressed her door closed, listening to the buzzing silence outside the door, before making her way to her bed. When she woke up, she was tired

and irritable without really being sure why. She tugged on her pants and boots and added a tunic top that wouldn't clash with her purse, checking her phone as she clomped down the stairs because a calendar invite had popped up.

Lunch with Justine.

“Oh,” she said surprised. For a moment, she thought—

“What?”

Nicholas appeared beside her with messy, unbrushed hair that tumbled in a fall into his eyes. His shirt was only half-buttoned, the tie hanging around his collar like a limp snake, and he had his coat slung over his arm. She stared at him and his lip curled sardonically. “I overslept.”

“I can see that.” She put the oat milk back in the fridge. “It's almost seven. Rough night?”

“Something like that.” He leaned against the door jamb, drawing in a breath that made her eyes drift to the open throat of his shirt. “Make me some of the swill coffee, will you?”

Jay put her mug down, bristling a little as she grabbed the bag. “Why do you even own swill coffee if you think it's swill?” she demanded crabbily, pouring the grounds into the filter.

“For when I'm desperate.” He watched the dark liquid drip into the cup as he did up his shirt buttons, his eyes gleaming with a haggard rapacity. “Why did you say 'oh'?”

“Oh. Uh. Arthur Hartwell invited me to lunch.”

“Yeah, he does that.” Nicholas dumped his things on the bar counter as he struggled with his tie. “He thinks slumming it buys loyalty. It probably does. People like his open door, open office policy. They think he's a saint for not strictly adhering to the chain of command.”

Jay watched him continue to bungle the knot. “Why don't you?”

“It wouldn't work.” Nicholas glanced briefly over at her, before turning his head back down with a grimace. “He can get away with it. He's older—a kindly old grandfather.”

“He looks like he's in his early forties,” Jay pointed out. “Hardly a grandfather.”

“He's also married,” Nicholas said deliberately, swearing under his breath at his tie.

"I don't care if he's married or not." Jay pushed his hands out of the way and fastened his tie. "Idiot," she said, catching sight of his expression. "I'm not going to strangle you."

"What kind of knot is that?"

"I don't know," she said crossly. "It's a knot. I used to do it for my—"

"Who, Jay?" His eyes gleamed dangerously. "Your ex?"

"Yes. He was a waiter. He couldn't tie his own ties. I helped him."

Nicholas laughed, but it wasn't a very nice laugh. "You tied my tie like some waiter?" he asked, sounding just like he had when he was a bratty fourteen-year-old.

"If you don't like it, I'll undo it," she snapped, grabbing at his shirt collar. "I was just trying to—" She broke off when his hands came around her waist, pulling her into an incredibly intimate embrace that had her pressing flush against him. "What are you doing?"

"Leave it," he said roughly, his eyes drifting to her mouth.

And then, inexplicably—he recoiled.

Just as suddenly as she'd been embraced, Jay found herself released. The coffee was done and Nicholas stalked over and drained it with such violent thirst that she winced, half-expecting him to spill it all down the front of his white shirt. "Swill," he said, slamming the empty cup down. "Are you ready to go? I don't want to be late for my shift at the Olive Garden."

"God, you're such a dick." She snatched her purse, wondering at his weird mood. Her breasts were still prickling where they had brushed up against his chest and the tips of her fingers felt like they'd been shocked. *What was that reaction?* "Is this because of that phone call?"

He ignored her question. "Are you going out to lunch with Arthur?"

"Yes," she said. "And then obviously, I'm going to try to fuck him."

Nicholas glanced at her: it was a cold, unamused glance. "Take pictures," he said, to her fury, and then switched on the stereo. Tantric—one of his old post-grunge bands that he'd liked as a preteen. She'd heard this and others blasting through his door whenever he was in a mood.

"You are such a child. I hope you're taking Annica somewhere that has a decent kids' menu."

"I'm not taking Annica anywhere," he said ominously. "But if you don't cut it out, I'm pulling this car over and everyone in the parking lot at Sizzler's is going to know my name."

That ended the conversation pretty abruptly and Jay felt a little stung when he dumped her at the Starbucks. She straightened her pants and walked to the office, her shoulders stiffening when she heard some creep call out from his Ferrari, "Hey, long legs—how tall are you?"

About as tall as your dick is short, I bet.

Her mood had thoroughly soured when she made it to the office. She could see Nicholas sitting at his desk, intently focused on whatever was on his screen. Annica didn't look at her at all, but this time it felt deliberate. Jay wondered if she was mad about the switch.

Jay logged into ShiftWare and looked at all of Arthur's pending appointments, which had replaced Nicholas's in the system, trying to get a feel of what his schedule was like before she began setting up the appointments. He certainly didn't seem to be as busy but if what Nicholas had told her was true, his schedule might just be way less structured.

Which could be problematic for scheduling. She looked over at Annica, buried in her work, and wished the other woman was more of a conversationalist. She had so many questions.

A meeting popped up with her own name. *Meeting with Justine Varens.*

Jay walked up the stairs to one of the conference rooms, which took her past Nicholas's desk. He gave her a brief flicker of a look that made her feel strange.

What is his problem? she wondered again, closing the conference room door behind her.

Arthur Hartwell was in his early forties with brown hair that was just beginning to go gray at the temples. He was the nice-looking man she sometimes saw Nicholas walking in with.

She couldn't believe Nicholas thought he was *old*.

"Hello, Justine."

"It's Jay," she said. "Nobody calls me Justine." *Except my mother.*

"Jay it is," he said equably, sitting down in one of the chairs. "I understand that you were reporting to Nicholas before. He runs a pretty tight ship. Mine is more of a leisurely cruise." He laughed self-

deprecatingly, but it seemed charming rather than affected. “As long as you keep all of my appointments and validate my spreadsheets every day before 2pm, I really don't need much.”

No wonder Annica hates me, Jay thought ruefully. *I stole her cushy job.*

“I'm happy to take on additional work, Mr. Hartwell. Really.”

“Arthur, please.” He leaned forward. “Where would you like to go to lunch, Jay?”

“I'm vegan,” she said, a little shyly. “But not super strict. Anything vegetarian is fine.”

“Vegan, hmm? That's interesting. You'll be happy to know we just recently started carrying oat milk in our kitchens. Before that, we only had soy.”

“Yes, I know,” said Jay. “I put it in my coffee.”

“It was Nicholas's idea, surprisingly. I didn't think he touched the stuff.”

Oh. Her nape prickled. “You said recently?”

“Just before you came,” Arthur confirmed with a grin. “Lucky you.”

Yes, thought Jay, wondering why she felt so terribly sad. *Lucky me.*

For lunch he drove her all the way to Ridgeview. They went to a place called Just Avocados, a vegetarian specialty restaurant that used avocados in all their food. Jay was inspecting some of the cupcakes, smiling a little at one dusted in rainbow sprinkles, when she heard a man say, “Jay?”

She turned in surprise to see an Asian man her own age wearing a suit and tie. “Quentin?”

“What a trip. Justine Varens, in the flesh. I thought you skipped town,” he said, pulling her into an embrace that felt stiff. “I'm so sorry about what happened with your stepfather. That was messed up.”

“Yeah.” Jay folded her arms and stepped back. “Messed up doesn't even begin to cover it. Are you here on business?” she asked, looking at the paper in his hand.

“I am.” He seemed almost pathetically grateful for the change in subject. “I run the Bayview now. We're hosting a conference and I'm supposed to meet with the caterer. She's late.”

“That's a shame,” Jay said awkwardly. “Well. Anyway. I should go—”

“How long are you going to be in town?”

“Um.” She frowned. Did he want to meet up or something? “I’m undecided.”

“Amanda Strife said she saw you and Nicholas together at the grocery store.”

She turned back around to look at him. “And?”

“It made me wonder—about what you told me that afternoon in Accia. That you thought he had feelings for you.” His dark eyes regarded her intently. “Are you staying with him now?”

“That is *none* of your business, Quentin,” Jay said, glancing over her shoulder to make sure Arthur wasn’t close enough to overhear. He wasn’t. *What is Amanda telling people?*

“I’m sorry, Jay,” said Quentin. “I didn’t mean to offend.”

“You essentially just asked me if I was screwing my stepbrother,” Jay hissed. “You don’t see how that’s offensive? Since when do you talk to Amanda, anyway? I didn’t think you were friends.”

“Since she got into PR.” He held up his hands in a *please don’t shoot* pose. “She oversees some of our ad programs and handles our reputation management company.”

“Well,” Jay said unsteadily. “How very nice for you both.”

Quentin paused. “Nicholas is one of our investors.”

“Oh, are you afraid I’ll narc on you to my secret lover?” she asked bitterly. “Don’t worry. I won’t.”

To her disgust, he actually looked relieved, although he tried to hide it. “I didn’t mean to offend you, or imply . . . anything,” he said nervously. “Nicholas was loyal to you after you left. It made people curious because everyone thought he’d hate you—but he just doubled down.”

“Really?” She glanced over at Arthur again. “How so?”

“During his father’s trial, when he provided testimony for that woman, he also mentioned some of the things that, uh, his father had tried to do to you. He spent a night in jail for punching Jake Van Hoff in the throat after he called you a slut. Put him in the hospital with a bruised trachea. After he took over his father’s firm, anyone who spoke out about either you or your reputation got dropped, so nobody did, because they were all terrified of Nicholas.”

He laughed a little.

“They still are.”

“I had no idea.” Jay stared at that stupid cake. “No one told me. I didn't have any ties here. To be honest,” she went on flatly, “I didn't really want any.”

Quentin looked at her. “I didn't want to stop being friends. You just stopped talking to me. You stopped talking to everyone.”

“That's not true. I came to you when I needed help. You forfeited our friendship when you chose to bow to my stepfather.” It felt like her heart was being squeezed out of her chest like toothpaste. “You didn't help me. *Nobody* did.”

You left me all alone.

“I'm sorry, Jay,” said Quentin. “Really, I am. You didn't deserve what happened to you.”

“Deserve,” Jay repeated. “You realize that saying that implies that some people *do*.”

“Look,” said Quentin, sounding impatient now. “I said I was sorry, and I truly am. But that was all eight years ago—and it isn't like you told anyone what was going on. You didn't let anyone in. Maybe if you had, things would have been different. You really can't understand the pressure of what it was like dealing with Nicholas's father. He *owned* this town. He could have ruined us on a dime. I had no choice.”

“I understand plenty,” Jay said coldly. “Believe me.” It looked like Arthur had finished ordering and Jay's weight shifted in that direction. “But I'm also here on business and I need to get back to my boss.”

Jay saw his eyes flare in recognition at the sight of Arthur Hartwell. “You work for—”

“Goodbye, Quentin,” she said, with an air of finality to the words.

With that, she made herself walk away.

■□□□■

Nicholas met with the lawyer on his lunch break while Jay was out with Arthur. He'd found a decent one with good reviews a few blocks away

from the office.

Jon Wick was a man in his early thirties who worked in a small and cramped office. More storage shed than office, if Nicholas was being honest, crammed with books and binders. *If he wins as much as he allegedly does, he should have a bigger office*, he thought, looking around.

“Hello,” said the lawyer. “Nicholas Beaucroft, correct?”

“Yeah,” said Nicholas, shrugging off his jacket and slinging it over the back of the chair. “Is Jon Wick your real name? Or did you change it because you murder the opposition?”

“I’ve never heard that one before,” Mr. Wick said dryly. “And yes, it’s my real name.”

Nicholas sat down. “I’d like to keep this brief, if possible. I have someone threatening to sue me and my company for quid pro quo harassment and I need someone to represent me.”

“May I ask if you have other counsel representing you?”

“Only from my company.” Nicholas smiled grimly. “I understand there’s a potential divergence of interests there, though.”

“And have they discussed next steps with you?”

“Yeah,” said Nicholas. “Settle or fight and see it end up at trial. I’m not settling.”

“The case might not even end up at trial,” Mr. Wick said, leaning forward on his hands. “Cases get thrown out all the time for a variety of reasons and I wouldn’t write off settling at this stage. What’s the allegation?”

“I told you, sexual harassment. But I didn’t fucking do it—”

Mr. Wick held up his hand. “I don’t need to know if you did it, Mr. Beaucroft. My only job is to try and argue your case as favorably as possible. I am willing to represent you. But I typically bill four hundred dollars an hour, in addition to payment for today’s consultation, if that’s acceptable to you.”

“That’s fine.” Nicholas pulled his checkbook out of his pocket and began writing, wondering how his life had come to this. “Why don’t you have a nicer office if you charge so much?”

“What’s the point?” Mr. Wick asked, taking the check and folding it into his pocket. “I’d rather have a nicer house.”

“Fair.” Nicholas slung on his coat, fighting back an unexpected wave of dizziness. He was really feeling that missing lunch hour. “I guess we’ll be in touch.”

“I guess we will,” Mr. Wick said mildly. “Have a good day, Mr. Beaucroft.”

Nicholas threw himself into his work back at the office, looking over at Jay and Arthur when they returned. Jay was holding a little paper sack in one hand and looked happy, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear as she smiled at her new boss, who looked just as fucking delighted with her.

He ran his thumb over the knot in his tie, recalling Jay’s taunt from that morning. She had obviously been trying to provoke him, because nobody as moral as she was would ever fuck around with a married man. Had she been trying to get a response? He liked her vicious. He could be vicious, too. He’d been so close to giving in to his urge to tear open her blouse and mark up her throat like he did when he were young and she he had been his everything—

And he had been her jailer.

Christ. What was wrong with his head? He’d been feeling dizzy and weak all day.

There wasn’t time to worry about it or feel sorry for himself, though, so he went back to the metrics, tweaking the formulas until they did exactly what he wanted.

Numbers were unbending entities of logic, but even they could be manipulated.

When he finished working, most of the lights in the building had turned off and the office was empty except for a handful of engineers doing site maintenance. Jay was in the kitchen, reading a book with the paper bag sitting next to her.

“How was lunch?” he asked, watching her slide the bookmark in place. The fluorescent lights were flickering and it was making his eye twitch. “Did you have fun?”

“We went to a vegan place in the next town over. It’s called Just Avocados. All of their menu items are made with avocados.”

“Cute.”

She reached into the paper bag and pulled out a plastic box. “Here.” She thrust it at him. “You didn’t have to request oat milk for me, you know. I could have brought my own from home.”

Home. His chest hurt as he stared at the box. “What’s this?”

“It’s the vegan equivalent of your fairy bread,” she said, her tone gently mocking. “Vegan cupcakes with rainbow sprinkles. It’s made with apple cider vinegar and avocados in the batter. I bought it for you, even though you’ve been such an asshole, because I didn’t—”

Her voice faded away. Nicholas said nothing, waiting her out. She hated being stared at, and he could already see her beginning to squirm under his gaze as she fought the impulse to look away. He’d always found it curious how someone so beautiful could be so averse to being watched.

Jay folded her arms. “I didn’t realize that you were looking out for me. *Not* that I need someone constantly looking over my shoulder but—what you did . . . keeping people from talking about me . . . that was,” she hesitated. “Surprising.”

Nicholas watched her shift from foot to foot on the tile. “Who told you?”

“Does it matter?” She looked at him in a way that made him want to demand even more answers because her caginess meant that it must have been a man. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We aren’t exactly confidants.” He looked around the dark, spotless kitchen. The janitors always cleaned it up every night around six. “I’m sorry.”

Jay stopped. “For what?”

“Today has been terrible.” He looked down at the box and half-smiled. “But so have I.”

She said nothing as she shoved the box into her purse but he could see the struggle on her face. Only the security guard remained in the hall to wave goodbye as they left. “What was terrible? Did one of your business deals go sour?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I just have to fix it.”

“Are you in trouble?”

“Possibly.” Nicholas opened the door for her, giving her the box back to hold on her lap. Overhead, the stars seemed to shudder. “I can’t get into it

with you.”

She frowned and didn't push, but he knew what that look meant. “Is it because of me?”

“No.” Nicholas pulled slowly out of the lot. He could feel her eyes on him, knew she was wondering why he was driving so slowly. He stared at the white lines whipping beneath the car and shook himself as they began to blur again, tightening his grip on the wheel. “You're perfect.”

He couldn't quite keep the bitterness out of his voice and heard her clothes rustle as she made some sort of involuntary movement. “Nick,” she said. “Don't.”

“Come on, blue jay. What's the worst thing you've ever done, apart from me? Touched yourself and liked it? Made a few grown men cry?” He laughed humorlessly. “I do both those things at least a couple times a week and I've never lost any sleep over it.”

“You haven't been sleeping well lately,” she pointed out.

“Yeah,” he said, bringing the car to a rough stop. “I haven't.”

“Maybe that's your conscience.”

“Maybe it's yours.” Exhaustion slammed against him like a claw hammer as he slid out of the car. He slumped, bracing himself against the roof. “What do you want for dinner?”

“Are you all right?”

“I'm fine. Just tired. How's Thai?” He took out his phone and immediately dropped it on the walkway. He swore and nearly stumbled as he reached for it. “Fuck.”

Jay stooped to pick it up but he noticed she put it into her pocket instead of giving it back. When he grabbed for it, she caught his hand, and he let it splay over her hip. “You're pale and your hands are freezing,” she said, sounding a little worried. “What did you eat for lunch?”

“Nothing. I had a meeting.”

“For breakfast?”

“Another meeting—and coffee.”

She muttered something under her breath, looping an arm around his back. “Give me your keys,” she said, and he handed them to her, his cock stiffening when her breast grazed him.

“Arthur must have let you down gently.”

“Don't make me drop you,” she hissed.

Nick laughed and pivoted for the stairs, but Jay turned him around towards the kitchen instead, standing there obnoxiously until he lowered himself into a chair. He did, grudgingly, swinging his legs into the cramped space. “You like taking care of people, don't you?”

“Not really.”

“Yeah you do. You like managing people's schedules. Sorting them out like a proper school mistress. You've always been like that. Bossy and lecturing. You used to call me in sick when I was little,” he said, leaning back. “You never stayed home with me, though.”

“Because I had school.” She glanced at him. “And you were a brat.”

Little bird, he thought, watching her flutter around the kitchen. He didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until he felt her warm hand shaking him.

“Why are you doing this to yourself?” she asked as he pulled the soup she'd placed in front of him towards himself. “This isn't like you.”

He ate the soup in three swallows. “What is this?”

“Carrot soup with coconut milk.” She looked pointedly at the empty bowl. “Why?”

“It was good.” He got up unsteadily and leaned against her. “Take me to bed.”

“Don't say it like that, you dick,” she snapped, which gave him the first real laugh he'd had all day as they walked out into the hall. After so little sleep and sustenance, he felt almost drunk.

“Relax, blue jay. I'm too tired to fuck. But you can still sleep with me if you want. Just like old times.” He tried to leer but his eyes ended up closing again and he felt her grip on him tighten. “I always felt safe with you. Falling asleep in your arms felt so . . . mmm.”

“Wake up.” Her voice sounded faint. “Look. Here's your bed.” She tugged at his jacket, working it off his shoulders. Despite his words to the contrary, he got a little hard when she slid his tie from around his neck and loosened his collar. “Lie down.”

“Take my belt off,” he breathed.

Jay looked down and her eyes flared. “Take your own belt off.” When he laughed again, this time a little hoarsely, she pushed him back against the mattress.

Nicholas caught her by the wrists, tugging roughly enough that she ended up beside him when he toppled, landing with a startled bounce. He immediately wrapped his arms around her. “You’re staying with me,” he informed her, shifting her to one arm as he worked the buckle of his belt one-handed, sighing in relief when the pressure abated.

“I’m still wearing my boots. You’ll ruin your sheets.”

Nick let the belt fall to the floor. All her struggling had caused her shirt to become untucked, revealing several inches of her bare stomach. He spread his fingers over it. She was warm and soft and when he hooked a leg over one of hers to keep her still, he felt her freeze.

“I really don’t give a fuck about the sheets.”

“Oh,” she said, when his hips pushed against her. “Well, that’s charming.”

“Blue jay.” His mouth brushed the warm skin of her neck and she shivered, which made him smile and run a hand over her front. “You need someone to take care of you.”

“No, I don’t,” she said. “I can take care of myself.”

“Mm-hmm.” He traced the open throat of her blouse. “But do you want to?”

Jay went very still as his arm resettled underneath the hem of her shirt and he let his head fall until his nose was pressing into her hair. It still smelled like apples.

Within seconds, he was asleep.



Jay eventually managed to extract herself from Nicholas’s grip, which was surprisingly strong, even in slumber. She thought her wriggling might wake him, but he was completely passed out. Sighing, Jay threw the covers over him before yanking off her boots in the hallway outside his bedroom and limping to her bedroom where Carbon was prowling anxiously.

She tossed the shoes towards her closet. Her neck still prickled where he'd kissed it. What the hell was that? And what kind of trouble was he in that he would forget to eat or sleep?

You need someone to take care of you.

Easy for him to say. He'd had people taking care of him his entire life. Maybe the people in his life hadn't loved him, but he'd never been *alone*. He'd never known what it was like to feel yourself falling and wonder if you'd ever hit rock bottom. But she did, and she had.

She could feel herself hitting it now.

The next morning, Jay watched for him, sitting up when he came into the kitchen. He didn't look quite as disheveled as he had the previous morning—not that she'd been hoping for another glimpse of his chest—but the stubble around his mouth and jaw was just a few days away from becoming a beard, and there were dark smudges under his eyes.

“You want to make me some coffee?” he asked, in lieu of a greeting.

“No,” said Jay. “I dragged you up to bed and made you dinner after you treated me like shit. I'm not making you coffee. Make it yourself or have Annica do it when you get to the office.”

“Annica doesn't make me coffee.” He gave her a pathetic look. “I barely know how to use that fucking machine. It's European. Some kiss-ass gave it to me as a Christmas gift.”

“That's too bad.”

“I'll pay you.”

“Do you see a barista in this room?”

Nicholas leaned forward, looking up at her. “I'll knock an hour off your debt.”

Jay shot a look at him before storming belatedly over to the machine and popping open the top. “Coffee's really worth an hour of sex from a whore at a good brothel to you?”

“Right now, it is.” He gulped it down as soon as she put the cup in front of him without even waiting for it to cool. “Thanks.”

“You're going to get esophageal cancer if you drink your coffee boiling hot.”

“Uh-huh.” He grabbed the cupcake box. “You going to lecture me about peristalsis next?”

Jay leaned back against the counter. “I’m surprised you remember that.”

“You know I’m a fan of swallowing.”

“Creep.” She scowled as he began to devour the cake in a way that shouldn’t have looked quite as attractive as it did. “How is it?”

He licked icing from his lip. “Sweet.”

It became so quiet that Jay could hear the ticking of a distant clock. Nicholas closed the box with a screech of plastic that had her jolting with wary readiness as he got up to toss it into the recycling. Her skin was already prickling like he’d touched her and she was ashamed to realize that a part of her actually wanted him to.

“So,” said Jay, fighting to keep her voice steady. “If a cup of coffee runs five thousand dollars now, how much are you willing to pay me to fuck you?”

His back was facing her, so she couldn’t see his expression, but she saw his shoulders jump beneath the fabric of his shirt a heartbeat before he turned to look at her. “What?”

“How much,” she repeated, “for me to fuck you? I want to renegotiate.”

“Do you,” he said, in a tone of deliberate calm, stalking towards her in a way that filled her with a terrible need even as it made her want to flee. His eyes drifted over her again as he bent over her, resting a hand on the wall over her head. “Are you sure you want to play hardball with me, Jay? I told you what I do to people who try to fuck me.”

“I don’t like having the same hourly rate as the swill coffee.”

“Isn’t that just so fucking sad for you,” he remarked, as a dark smile marred the seductive fullness of his mouth. “What do you think you should be paid?”

“I don’t know,” she shot back. “Why don’t you tell me what you think I’m worth?”

Nicholas paused and Jay sensed that she had surprised him in some way. She wished she knew how; it suddenly felt important to know.

“More bid rigging?” he asked, drawing his fingers along her jawline in a way that made her remember how they’d felt wrapped around her throat.

“When did you get so corrupt, Justine? Didn't you used to be everybody's little angel?”

Jay couldn't remember the last time he'd called her *Justine*. Not since he was ten.

“Actually,” said Jay, looking up at him, “I believe this is technically profiteering.”

His eyes flashed and then his mouth was over hers, knocking her head back against the frame. There was anger in that kiss, though it didn't appear to be directed at her; she could feel it smoldering, partially tamped-down like embers capable of being raised anew to flames. It was devastating; he still tasted like sugar, and the lingering flavor of it gave his rough attentions a potency that was impossible to resist. She was so tired of resisting.

She gripped the back of his neck as he peeled her away from the door, his hands kneading into her backside through the clingy material of her skirt with enough force that she nearly lost her will to stand. “You are a bad girl, aren't you?” he whispered.

Yes, some dark part of her brain whispered as he molded her body against his in that possessive embrace, and he pulled back to look at her with such desire that she thought she might burst into flame. Nobody had ever looked at her like that—as if she were filled with such lethal sweetness that craving could be synonymous with ruin. *But only for you.*

Nicholas bent his head. She could feel each breath glancing off her skin as he unbuttoned her blouse, his forehead resting against her cheek. “What—are you doing?” she asked, too far gone to feel any shame at the cracks riddling her voice like something about to shatter.

Her blouse was half-unbuttoned and he pushed it open. “Giving you a hickey.”

When she felt his mouth on the skin that had been covered by her shirt collar, she heard herself moan, “*Why?*”

“Because as cute as it is seeing you to take advantage of me, I'm still going to punish you for it.” His voice, so low, sent a curl of flame licking through her abdomen as he began to kiss her, sucking hard enough to make her wince. He folded the cups of her bra down beneath the weight of her breasts and pinched each of her nipples hard enough to make her cry out. “I told you it wouldn't be sweet,” he whispered, spinning her around in his

embrace so that her back was against his front. “That it would leave you hurting.”

He slid one of his hands under her skirt, pressing his knuckles against her underwear before tugging them aside and sliding his fingers between her legs. There was a quiet kissing sound as he parted her, and that embarrassed her enough that she halfheartedly began to struggle, but the arm around her waist was strong, and he thrust two fingers into her, breathing against her throat as he pushed as far as he could go.

“You said—it wasn't a warning,” Jay gasped, doubled over his forearm, clawing a little at his shirtsleeves.

“No, I didn't.” And then, after that sank in, he began to fuck her with his hand.

It was brutal, and it made her come with such breathless abandon that she was left stunned. At some point, his grip shifted higher, and one of his hands slid inside her blouse. Jay arched back against him, pushing her breast into his palm, her head tilted slightly to one side to give him access to her neck. When he licked it, tasting her sweat, she shuddered.

“You really want to know how much I'd pay for a night with you?”

He let her back from him, sore and tender between her thighs, and she turned just in time to see him lick her from fingers the way he'd sucked the icing from his lip.

Jay fumbled for her blouse, holding it closed. “Yes.”

“I'll knock five million dollars of your debt if you come to my room before that mark on your throat fades.” It throbbed, as if in response to his words. “That gives you about a week to decide, Jay, because this time, there are conditions. You have to come to me wearing the clothes I got for you. I want to fuck you with the lights on so we can both watch me take them off of you while you tell Daddy how sorry you are for trying to screw him before you fuck him.”

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Nicholas left to take care of himself after that, leaving her leaning against the counter. The image of her, undone and completely at his mercy,

would get him through many nights to come, he thought. That cry she made whenever she was losing her mind—there was nothing like it.

When he came back into the room, Jay had refastened her blouse to her throat and tucked it into her skirt, and she looked just as buttoned-up and untouchable as she always did, only her face was now suffused with color and her hair was tangled where he'd grabbed it.

One day, he was going to take her out in a tight little dress. Something cut low enough to make other people wish it was lower still. She wouldn't want to wear it but he thought he could probably persuade her into it. The thought of having her on his arm at a club, a little tipsy, a little loose, made him hard. It would be worth waiting for her to sober up before fucking her.

"You covered it up." Nicholas plucked at her collar. "I wanted to look at it."

"Get used to disappointment."

The lines of her body seemed to grow more pronounced as he turned towards her, which sent something twisting in his gut that had little to do with arousal at all. He put an arm around her, pressing her to him in a light embrace that was very different from the way he'd held her before.

"You never disappoint me."

Jay glanced up at him distrustfully.

"Thank you for the cake. I liked the soup, too."

"Is this your way of asking me to cook for you?"

"No." He blinked, surprised. "I wouldn't ask you to cook for me. You're not—" *Here for that*, he nearly said, which had the same implications he was trying to avoid.

"A servant?" Jay supplied for him, somewhat ironically.

"I wasn't going to say that." He released her, slinging on his coat. "But thank you for reminding me. This place is a mess. I need to put out an ad for a new housekeeper."

"A new one? What happened to Carmela?"

"I fired her," said Nicholas. "Ready to leave?"

Jay clutched her bag. "Why did you fire her? I thought you liked her."

"It's about the job. She overstepped." Nicholas drew a finger down his cheek in thought. "I'd prefer to go with someone a little more open-

minded.”

The color fled from her face. “You fired her because of me?”

“Such a bleeding heart. Would it bother you, if I had? That was part of it—I have no use for someone who is unable to keep their thoughts about my house guests to themselves.”

“Oh,” said Jay, looking down at her hands.

Once he had dropped her off at the Starbucks, the whole day seemed to go downhill. Annica was a drudge who did what he told her to, but nothing more. Nicholas had the feeling that she resented any extra work he gave her, though she was careful never to express this to him.

He didn't particularly relish her company. Their meetings were usually silent, unless he was talking, and then she took notes. In emails, she was brief as possible, and as soon as her shift was over, she was already racing out the door. It felt . . . vaguely dismissive. Malicious compliance.

Jon and Renata gave him constant updates about the case. The lawyers were parsing through his documents, scouring his phone records and his emails for any traces of inappropriate conduct with his former assistant. It made him angry, which made him feel tired—he wanted all of this to be over, and even though he knew it would be, right now, he could see no end in sight.

The stress of his father's lawsuits were what had ultimately led to his father's fatal heart attack and while there was nothing wrong with his, Nicholas could sometimes feel the looming specter of his own dread as if it were a physical presence gripping him by the throat.

He had so much more to lose than his father did.

Jon was painfully blunt about his circumstances. Statistically speaking, he said, accusations of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct were rarely fake, and the defense would have to be constructed carefully and in such a way that it didn't demean or trivialize the very real pain of men and women who suffered at the hands of their abusers every day.

“In other words,” he said bluntly, “it's going to be hard to call her a liar.”

Nicholas pressed a hand to his head. “What am I supposed to call her then? Her name?”

“Quite frankly, unless something shows up to miraculously exonerate you, she has you by the balls,” Jon confided to him. “It doesn't help that you're white and privileged and in a position of power. You're precisely the type of person that people feel comfortable hating, and pitting you against a crying woman who is only 5'4” and maybe one-twenty pounds soaking wet isn't exactly going to inspire feelings of sympathy from a jury.”

“Who said anything about a jury?” Nicholas asked. “I didn't think this was going to trial.”

“I'm just telling you, you should mentally prepare yourself for the worst possible outcome, whether you did it or not,” he added, anticipating his usual protest. “If you fight this, you might very well wish you had decided to settle instead, because I can guarantee you that there will almost certainly be tears and they're going to make you look like a cold-blooded abuser.”

“If I settle, I look guilty,” said Nicholas, “and the company looks negligent.”

“And if you lose, you go to jail and you still look guilty and you won't have a job.”

Nicholas grabbed his coat and punched his arms into the sleeves. “I didn't realize I was paying you four hundred dollars an hour to make me feel like shit.”

He left without saying goodbye, seething the whole walk back to the office.

A few days later, a meeting popped up that Annica had scheduled with Renata, which made him wonder if he'd been fired as a client. Maybe Jon had gotten tired of putting up with him.

He did wonder what Annica was making of all of this and if she suspected anything was wrong with all of his recent meetings with legal. He supposed he should be grateful for her taciturn nature. Even if she wasn't friendly, at least she wouldn't be tempted to gossip.

Nicholas walked to Renata's office and felt Jay's eyes on him. It had been several days since he'd fingered her in his kitchen and she still hadn't come to his bed. He had hoped the promise of freedom might be motivation enough but it seemed as if she was so put off by him that not even the princely sum of five million dollars could make her willing. If she had any

inkling of his current situation, she'd never want anything to do with him again.

He still remembered her desperate words—*let me go*.

He closed the lawyer's door behind him. By this time, the smell of stale coffee and pungent markers was getting too familiar for comfort. “Yes?” he said, already braced for the worst.

Renata had a stack of papers on her desk and a sour look on her face. They looked like the script of a play: lots of colons, all of it printed out in what looked like old typewriter font. Some of the lines were highlighted. She stabbed at one of them with a manicured nail.

“I found something troubling during discovery,” she said, without greeting. “It's not exactly relevant, but could prove problematic down the road. These are from your phone records. Read the transcripts, starting with *Come down to the pool*.”

Nicholas pushed the file away, feeling his face heat. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had made him blush—not since he was a teenager, probably. “I know what it says. I was there. Why is this relevant? That isn't Crystal's number.”

Renata slid the papers back at him. “No. It's the phone number of another employee we have on the roster here. Who was *also* your assistant.” She glanced at him, her eyes flashing under the lights. *She thinks this is sick*, he realized, recognizing that look on her face for what it was. “If the prosecution finds out about this . . . they will skewer you.”

“HR already transferred her,” he heard himself say calmly. “She no longer reports to me.”

“According to these timestamps, you were seeing her while you had a reporting relationship.” He noticed that she didn't even say Jay's name, almost as if she couldn't bring herself to. “Let me tell you something, Nicholas. This looks really, really bad—for you, and for us. And worse, it establishes a pattern of behavior and not just a one-off.” She folded her arms. “I suggest you show this to the lawyer I assume you have and construct a solid defense for yourself because if this takes off the ground, we're going to be so busy doing damage control that you may find yourself being forced to resign.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

2017

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Forced to resign.

The words had the finality of a death knell—which they were, essentially. The death of his career.

It wasn't as if he really needed the money. His father had left him everything, and there was even more tied up in assets. *Everything that's left*, he corrected himself, because some of those assets, like the Rolexes and the scotch, had been destroyed. But there was still plenty left to sell.

Yes, if he wanted to, he could have flipped Beaucroft Assets the middle finger, sold the house and the company to one of a dozen prominently enterprising developers in the area, and fucked off to the Bahamas, retiring at the ripe old age of twenty-seven. He'd thought about it but didn't really want to do that. Once he had started, he found out that he actually enjoyed working. It made him feel as if he had some intrinsic value beyond the numbers in his accounts.

He emailed Jon when he got back to his desk requesting another meeting. Jon and Renata had been working together on this case so it was highly likely that he knew about these damning transcripts and had some thoughts on them already. Jon would probably advise him, again, to settle. He had been doing that more and more, lately, giving the impression that he didn't think Nicholas had a chance. "It would be highly detrimental to your case to have you on the stand," he'd told him at the last meeting. "You're intimidating and unlikable."

So what the fuck was he supposed to do then? Just give up and let his reputation be ruined?

On the car ride home, he found himself looking over at Jay, sitting beside him in the car. Sedate. Thoughtful. Likable. Everything he wasn't. If she were on the stand, she could win over any jury, but Nicholas had a hard time imagining that she'd ever done a bad thing in her life. What he had leveraged against her seemed unfathomably petty in comparison to his own alleged crimes and the irony of being in a similar set of circumstances to those he had put her in eight years ago wasn't lost on him: now he, too, would have to choose between pride and reputation.

Sometimes, he found himself replaying that moment over and over, remembering the pleasure he had derived from Jay's horror. She had been ready to cry and it had gotten him hard, because he had been so fucking furious that she wouldn't love him the way that he wanted to be loved that her humiliation, and her embarrassment, had brought him instant gratification. He had wanted to hurt her and so he had, because he was good at hurting people and she was very easy to hurt, because she had always worn that ragged little heart of hers on her sleeve.

This time, there was no excuse for what he had done, except selfishness: he had wanted to see her again and knowing that she would never come to him willingly, he had resorted to the same blend of intimidation and trickery to make her return to Hollybrook—and his bed.

And, just like before, this time it was him who had been caught.

And her, who had been devastated.

Jay turned her head, looking at him. “What is it?” she asked warily, tugging her skirt down her knees.

“I'm stopping somewhere for dinner. Do you have a preference?”

“Oh. How about Japanese?” she suggested. “I could go for pickled plum.”

“You can have whatever you want. Just remind me before I go in.”

“Aren't I coming with you?”

“I thought you didn't like coming in.”

“Yeah,” she said. “When I'm *crying*.”

“Okay,” he said impassively. “Then come in with me.”

It was late when they finally arrived home. The line had been long. Most of the patrons were kids from the public high school holding some kind of fundraising event. He'd casually looped an arm around Jay's waist when he noticed an older man sitting in the corner nearly breaking his neck trying to get a look at her, feeling satisfied when the man looked away.

At the table, Nicholas watched her break the wooden chopsticks and begin mashing up the wasabi paste into a packet of soy sauce with fidgety deliberation before dipping her rolls into the gloppy mess. “I know it's not traditional,” she said, catching his eye. “But I like it.”

She hadn't been able to decide between pickled plum, pickled daikon, or avocado and mango, so he'd gotten her all three, in spite of her protests.

Sitting with that comically large pile of rolls in front of her, she looked like a grim-faced tactician sitting before a strategy board. Nicholas felt his mouth beginning to curl and turned his attention to his own mixed tempura.

“I'm not judging you.”

“That's something I don't get,” said Jay. “You have enough money that you could literally eat anywhere. Why do you only seem to go to small diners? Why not somewhere fancy?”

“My father's ex-colleagues move in those circles,” said Nicholas. “I don't care for it.”

“Are they mean to you?”

“Mean to me?” Nicholas repeated, with a laugh. “They can't wait to suck my cock.”

“Wow,” said Jay. “Homophobic.”

“Some of them are women. Cock-sucking is an equal opportunity undertaking. If you want me to take you out somewhere nice, I can send my dinner jacket out to be drycleaned.”

“I wasn't angling for an invitation,” said Jay. “Do you actually own a dinner jacket?”

“I do.” At the look on her face, he allowed himself a smile. “I look good in it.”

Jay shook her head. “I think I'd rather eat egg foo young out of a box than talk to your father's friends. That was the one thing I missed about L.A. while I was in San Francisco. Asian cuisine is so much better down here. Fancy sushi. *Good* Chinese food. Korean barbecue. Oh—and the Mexican food is so good. I love the Mission so, so much, but I love the food in L.A.”

“I'm glad you're enjoying yourself,” he said, which made her look at him strangely.

“Hollybrook needs improvement. It's still too white. Everything you have here still tastes like it was bought at a strip mall. People here think Italian food is exotic.”

“Spoken like someone who's never been to the wild forests of Rome.”

“Oh, and you have?”

“No.” He smiled. “There aren't any wild forests in Rome. I almost went there.”

"When?" she asked. "I don't remember that being on the table."

"In college. But it seemed like too much effort to learn another tongue."

"So you never made it to the French Riviera."

"I've never been to France."

Jay set down her roll. "You *speak* French."

"Je suis en train d'oublier tout ce que j'ai appris."

"Nager dans la chatte," she said coolly.

If he were a different sort of man, he might have blushed. "No, actually."

"Really," she said skeptically. "Not at all?"

"Not much," he amended. "But not abroad. Mostly in L.A."

"Why L.A.?"

"Because it's anonymous and it was easy to find what I thought I wanted."

Jay pulled a strip of radish out of one of the rolls with a chopstick. "Which was?"

"Control," he said deliberately. "And someone willing to give it to me."

"Any girlfriends?"

"I don't date."

"Sounds lonely."

Lonely. He watched her eat, and then his eyes drifted lower to the bites he'd left on her neck. She'd covered them at the office with a high-necked sweater, but now, with the sweater draped around her chair, he could see the faint bruising every time her hair drifted to one side. "Maybe a little," he conceded. "Did you ever travel?"

"No," she said, surprised, and a little defensive. "I couldn't afford to."

"I should take you somewhere. Spread your wings a little." Nicholas leaned back in his chair. "We could drive up to downtown L.A. or spend the whole day at a beach."

"As part of the debt?"

"Because I enjoy your company."

Jay stared at her rolls. "It feels like you're trying to bribe me. What do you really want?"

"A smile would be nice."

Jay stiffened. "Why?"

"Because you're beautiful when you do," Nicholas said, which made her fingers close tightly around her chopsticks. "And I'm tired of seeing you unhappy."

"I'm so sorry my unhappiness is such an inconvenience to you."

"What do you want?" he asked. "Do you want me to let you go? I'll put you on a plane right now. Wherever you want." He picked up his phone. "Name the place."

That gave her pause. "N-now? But I . . . I'm not packed. My job—the debt—you—"

Nicholas looked at her as he slowly set his phone back on the table. "Yes?"

"You made your terms very clear," she said quietly. "I can't just leave. It's cruel to tell me I can when you and I both know that I can't."

He picked up another piece of tempura. It was starting to get a little cold, the breading congealing with grease. He'd already picked his way through all the shrimp, octopus, and squash. Only the broccoli were left. "I'm willing to talk terms."

"You still haven't given me anything in writing. I have yet to see a single invoice and you never did come up with a contract." Jay had begun consolidating her leftover rolls in a box, but she looked up at him with burning eyes. "You haven't been keeping track at all, have you?"

"Generally speaking, the person performing the services keeps track of the invoices."

Jay flinched. "Services," she repeated.

"Have *you* been keeping track, Jay? If there's a discrepancy, I'll pay it. I trust you."

She stared at him, with that hunted, agonized expression he knew far too well. "No," she said at last, bitterly. "I haven't been keeping track. I . . . didn't want to. It made me feel cheap."

“Well,” said Nicholas. “That is unfortunate, because I haven't been keeping track, either.”

The Styrofoam creaked as she closed the lid. “Why not?”

“Because I'm usually thinking about something else. But you could still come to me, little bird.” He pushed his uneaten food aside. “You know what I'll give you if you do.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I know.”

They finished eating and he cleared the table, separating out the cardboard from the compost. Before she left, he rested his hand on her shoulder, and she looked at him before heading up to her room, where he heard the door close. Slowly, he walked up to his.

What was he doing? He wondered, for the thousandth time in the last couple weeks.

People had said that twenty-two was too young to take on a company, but it seemed like maybe twenty-seven was the perfect age to fuck up his own life.



He had strange dreams that night. The kind where you felt like you were falling until you woke up with a jolting gasp in your own bed. Nicholas shot up, with his heart beating out a desperate tattoo in his head, and inhaled again, this time for a very different reason.

A hot, electric sensation buzzed up his arms when he felt something soft and heavy pressed against him. A woman's body clothed only in a very thin layer of heated silk and lace.

With steady hands, he touched her—warm and solid and real.

“Blue jay,” he breathed. “You came to Daddy.”

“Yes,” she said, in a very small voice. “I'm here.”

She was jostled a little as he reached for the lamp. It was one of those folding ones with the flexible neck. After a pause, he turned the shade around to the wall, letting only a few beams escape to suffuse their bodies in the semidarkness.

Jay was wearing the ice-blue dress with the paneled skirts. His eyes fell to the sheer bodice, with its motif of lace roses, before going to her face. It was the most expensive thing he had ever bought for anyone other than himself and she looked beautiful in it.

Before she could speak or have second thoughts, he captured her mouth in a slow kiss, letting his legs fall open so that she fell gently into the cradle of his hips like a pale and trembling leaf. He smoothed his hand down her back as she began to respond and her fingers dug into his ribs as the tension began to leave her body like water trickling from a melting block of ice.

She began moving against him, which became a kind of torture because he could feel her bare hip pressing against his stomach through one of the slits in the skirt. He grabbed her backside, squeezing, before dipping his fingers between her legs. She wasn't wearing underwear.

With a low oath, he rolled her onto her back and wrapped her fingers around his cock before flicking open the small buttons on the front of her nightgown. The bite he'd left low on her throat taunted him and he could feel the thrum of her pulse as he kissed her there, before nuzzling her hair away until he had uncovered her ear, which he nipped at until she let out a sharp breath and turned, giving him access to the soft hollow of her throat.

"Like that?" he whispered, and to his pleasure, he heard her choke out "Yes."

Nicholas leaned down and felt her hands slide away from his hips as he bent his head to her exposed skin. She followed the contours of his body the way someone might trace a road atlas with a fingertip. When he swirled his tongue over her nipples, he felt her fingers stumble over his ribs like a small explosion and her grip on him tightened.

Her hands kept getting forced higher as he moved lower—his back, his shoulders, his neck. By the time he had her dress open, and his face buried between her legs, her fingers were twisted in the dark locks of his hair. She yanked sharply, arching under him as he used his tongue on every part of her except for where she wanted. Her thighs were squeezing his face, and he pulled away, keeping them spread when she tried to close them with a whimpered, "*Please.*"

"Tell me why you came to me."

"The de—"

“Instantly wrong.”

She stared at the ceiling. “Because I wanted sex.”

“No.” Nicholas slid his boxers off his hips and prowled up the length of her body, still half-kneeling between her spread legs. She tried to close them again and he pushed them wider with his knees as he smiled down at her. “You can get sex from anyone, Jay. You came here because you wanted to be fucked. By me.”

“Whatever you w—”

“Don't.” Nicholas slid the condom on, tapping her beneath her chin to get her to look at his face. “It's a yes or no, Jay.”

“Yes, Daddy,” she whispered, letting out a sigh as he entered her.

His cock jerked. He closed his eyes briefly, listening to her harsh breaths. “What a good girl you are.” He shifted some of his weight to his forearms. “My girl.”

Jay said nothing, but the small sounds of exertion coming from her throat were enough.

“Do you know why I call you my little bird?”

“Jay,” she gasped.

“No. It's because you were so elusive . . .” He fell into the sharp, staggering pace he'd set, wrenching another sweet cry from her tortured throat. “Everywhere I looked—there you were. And I wanted you . . . my sweet songbird. I love how soft you feel under my hands.”

A delicate shudder tore through her as his mouth fleetingly grazed hers.

“And now here you are.” He quickened the movements of his hips, forcing her to work to keep up. She wasn't as athletic as he was and seeing her falter beneath him, panting, as she struggled to match him sent a hot bolt of arousal spearing through his belly. “My poor exhausted little bird. Mine at last.” He wondered if only he registered the bitterness in his words.

The squeeze of her thighs wrapping around him pushed him over, and he came the way he did when he was alone—that floating, heady sense of gratification, chased by a pleasure so intense that it was nearly painful. Like a shot of cheap hard liquor, followed by a sickeningly sweet chaser. He stayed inside her, and he could feel the muscles of her body contracting around him in a delicious wave of thrumming vibrations and snug heat.

I love her, he thought, looking down at her sweet face. *I really do.*

“Why Daddy?” she asked, with the slightest edge of antagonism.

“Hmm?”

“I'm older than you. It's . . . weird. Is it about dominance? *Do what Daddy tells you.*” the pitch of her voice deepened as if in mockery of someone—himself, he assumed—but that dark and biting tone still made him stir a little inside her. “I don't get it.”

“I don't know why I like it, but I do.” Nicholas slid out of her, rolling to one side, and gently flicked her nose. “You don't need to get it to turn me on. All you have to do is crawl up into my lap and say it to me. I like the way you say it—sweet and guilty, all at once. It's so hot.”

He reached down for the sheets and tugged them over their nakedness.

Leaning into her, Nicholas ran his hand down the length of her, through the blankets, following that slight dip between her ribs all the way down to her pubic mound. “Do you hate it?” He did another slow pass. “Calling me Daddy and being my little bird?”

“It's embarrassing.” She clung to the sheet. “It feels wrong.”

“The kind of wrong that's a little exciting?”

“I wasn't excited,” she said defiantly.

“Mmm. But you seem to enjoy it when I make you say it. I can tell.” To his delight, her cheeks were turning pink. “Don't think I didn't notice how wet you were when I tied you up.”

“What does that have to do with me calling you . . . that?”

“Because you don't want to give me what I want,” Nicholas said. “You're a little bit bratty, blue jay. I think you enjoy punishment. Because I think you're a little bit of a bad girl.”

“No,” said Jay.

“Maybe I'll tie you up and finger you for a while,” he said idly, watching her face change from pink to red. “And punish you if you make a sound. I'd have to do your legs, though. Otherwise, you'd squirm in that way that you do when you're trying to get yourself off. That will be fun for me. You have nice legs.” He squeezed her hip. “And a nice ass.”

“That's another idea. I could get you a short little dress to wear for me that shows off your ass. Short and low-cut, with nothing underneath. You'd hate that,” he added, with a dark laugh, “especially if I took you out in it and made you bend over to pick something up off the floor.”

“Nick,” she gasped. “No.”

“That's the one. That look—what is it? Shame and arousal?” he tugged at a strand of her hair. “I want to see that look on your face when you're wearing your new dress.”

Jay rolled over to face him, pulling the strand out of his fingers. “Where do you get these ideas? Are they things you've done before?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you jealous? If you want a number, Jay, I'll give you one.”

Jay let out a hiss of air between her teeth. “I really don't want to hear about your exploits. I was just curious.”

“It's not a large number.” He slung an arm around her unwilling form, until they were nearly nose to nose. “Most people disappoint me. And since you're so keen on knowing, I think up a lot of what I do to you in the mornings when I'm horny and jerking off.”

“Maybe other people weren't the problem,” she said irately.

Nicholas laughed throatily. “That's what I like about you, blue jay. You never let me get away with anything. When you hold onto me like this, like you think I'll protect you from myself and all the bad things I want to do to you, it makes me want to lose my mind.”

He kissed her nose as she sighed.

“I love it when you're bad.”

“I'm not bad,” she said sleepily, which made him pull her close.

“Only for me.” Nicholas smoothed back her hair. *And I only want to be good for you.*

Jay fell asleep in his arms but was gone when he woke up. He wondered if he had upset her again. The thought pained him. This time, he had gone out of his way to be tender.

Nicholas slid out of bed, pulling on his boxers and some pajamas. She wasn't in her room, which was concerning, until he noticed the flicker of blue light from over the half-wall. Peering down, he could see her huddled in one of those shapeless sweaters, legs thrown over the arm of the sofa, remote in hand. *Just like when she was a kid.*

He went downstairs, glancing curiously at the TV. She was in the middle of a documentary about something called tardigrades. Something

softened inside him and he glanced down at her sleepless face for a moment before gently taking the remote from her and sinking on the couch.

Nicholas finished the documentary while scrolling through his phone, glancing over at her sleeping form every so often. She remained asleep through the next one, which was about small primates, and the one after that, which was about melting glaciers in the arctic. He had just started the fourth when he felt the seat shift. Groaning, Jay pushed herself up—and froze.

“How long have you been sitting there?”

“A while,” he allowed.

She glanced at the TV. “You were watching this?”

“I’ve been drifting in and out. Answering work emails. Ordering your dress.”

“My dress?” She blushed when he held out his phone. “I can’t wear that.”

“If you liked it, it wouldn’t be a very good punishment, would it?” He looked at the picture, admiring the backless cut. “You’re going to look great in this.”

She swung upright, straightening out her clothes with an air of dignity that amused him. He wound his arm along the back of the couch and was gratified when she didn’t immediately press herself against the opposite end of the couch. They finished the documentary together and when it was over, he turned the TV off and leaned back, letting his arm fall.

“Are you hungry? We can go out.”

“*Out* out?”

“Yes. Get dressed.”

“What time is it?”

He glanced down at his phone. “Ten.”

“Okay. Um. I’ll go feed the cat and change.”

Nicholas watched her go before getting up to his own room. Inside, he felt strangely empty as he did up the buttons of his shirt and slung on a leather jacket. He folded his sunglasses over where the fabric buckled at his open throat and ran a comb through his hair.

He knew what he needed to do.

Jay was waiting in a pink and navy plaid dress that swung down to her knees. "I'm taking you to Accia," he informed her, shoving a hand into his jacket pocket.

She laughed nervously. "Wow, what a throwback. The last time I was there, I got kicked out."

"You?" he said dubiously. "For what?"

"I was with Quentin. He called some snooty old woman a cunt and she complained." Her face fell for some reason, a pensive look crossing her face.

"I think that's the first time I've ever heard you say that word," he said dryly. "I'm surprised you didn't fucking stammer over it."

"I swear," she said, with the cool primness of an angry schoolmarm. "I just don't usually see the need to. I wonder if they'll even let me in," she added, in a slightly less frosty tone.

"Of course they will." She headed for the door, but he took her by the shoulders and turned her to the side. "Let's go out through the garden. It'll be more festive."

"Okay," she said slowly, as they walked past the sofa and coffee table before heading out through the door that led to the pool. The lilies of the valley swished softly in the morning breeze, while the grape leaves climbing over the trellis rasped and fluttered. He could smell his mother's jasmine and rose bushes flourishing, although at night the jasmine would be stronger.

"I forgot how pretty it was out here," Jay said.

Nicholas locked the door. "My mother designed it."

"Really?"

"She was an architect. Or wanted to be. It would have required a lot of travel. My father wanted her to stay at home. So she compromised by working on the house. It became her passion project. A lot of the features—the half-wall, the raised planters, the double staircase—were hers."

"And the flowers?"

"Also hers."

"What happened to her?"

“She died when I was young.” He unlocked the car. “Brain hemorrhage. It was fast.”

“Do you remember her at all?” she asked curiously, as he opened the door for her.

“Not well, no. Just little flashes. Touching my hair. Feeding me soup when I was sick. I remember what she smelled like. When I was eight or so, I caught a whiff of it in some mall. Chanel No. 5 was her perfume. For a moment, I thought she had come back and even though I knew it wasn't true, the reality was a little like losing her all again.”

“Oh,” said Jay softly. “That's so sad.”

“It spooked me badly enough that I started to cry. It's the only time I can remember crying. My dad yanked me out of there by the arm pretty quickly and told me to be a man.”

Jay's face darkened. “I'm glad he's dead,” she said viciously. “He was an awful man.”

“What about your dad? You never talk about him. Is he dead?”

“I don't know who he is.”

“Your mother never told you?”

“All she said was that he was tall and dark, and that he had green eyes. I guess he was a musician or something and they hooked up when she was young. She said he used to sing to her. She said he sang to me, too, but I'm not sure that's true. Any of it. It could all be a lie just because she liked the sound of it,” she said bitterly. “I figured the reason she never told me his name was because he was married or dead.”

Nicholas made a noncommittal sound as he drove, though he figured this was probably true.

“Why did your dad even marry your mom?” she asked suddenly. “From what you said about her, she doesn't seem like she was his type.”

“His type was female and alive,” Nicholas said, “and preferably beautiful, although I don't think even that mattered as long as he felt like he was in control. His marriage to my mother was arranged by their parents and I think he probably resented that. He told me once that he had a thing for some townie with a light skirt who gave good head and my mother wouldn't put up with other women. She and her father really put the pressure on until he broke things off. So not a great start. He often said that

my mother wouldn't have had the hemorrhage if she hadn't worked so hard."

"That's a sick and messed up thing to say to a kid," said Jay.

"Yeah," Nicholas said slowly. "It is. Both of our parents were pretty messed up."

Jay folded her arms. "My mother was a lot of things, but she wasn't a rapist."

"No. But I watched her spent our entire childhood fucking with your head and I don't think she ever lifted a finger to help you. I wonder if that's why you ended up the way you are."

"How's that?" she demanded coldly.

"Aloof. Untouchable. Hollybrook's little ice queen." He parked the car outside the bar but made no move to unfasten his belt. "You wouldn't let anyone near you. God knows, people tried. It was like you decided anyone who got close to you was only going to disappoint you, so you'd preemptively cut them off before they could."

"That's not true," said Jay.

"Name one friend you kept from high school," he shot back, watching her face pale. "Or college, even. Those two girls—you liked them. Where are they now? Or that woman from your office—Lily, wasn't it? Have you texted her recently? Or have you already started freezing her out, the way you always do?"

"Shut up, Nicholas."

"And there it is," he said. "You care too much, blue jay. I don't care at all. And now we're both alone." When she stumbled out of the Tesla, his hand closed over hers. "Isn't that sad?"

Jay looked down at his hand and then at his face. "I'm not alone," she said uncertainly.

"I've never heard you tell anyone you loved them. Not once. Anytime someone seems like they're getting close, you run. You ran from Michael and from all your friends, and I bet that's why you broke things off with that waiter boyfriend of yours. You even ran from your mother."

Her eyes were wide, fathomless, like an autumnal spring shaded by trees. She seemed unable to move and he felt her fingers tighten reflexively around his.

“Come on then,” he said, after a pause. “Before you try to get away from me.”



They were both seated right away at one of the tables in the back. It was so quick, despite being a populous brunch destination, that Jay privately wondered if they had recognized Nicholas and didn't want to cause offense. The table was nice, too, next to a potted dracaena and shielded from the kitchens by a wooden Chinese screen. Even though it was out in the open, it was cordoned off in a way that felt—she swallowed—private.

“You said you were here before.” Nicholas picked up the menu, making the leather in his jacket creak. He looked good in it and she noticed a few of the women around them shooting him discreet glances. “What do you recommend?”

“That was eight years ago,” she said. “The menu is completely different. It's *embossed* now. My God, this used to be a brunch spot for women who wanted to get tipsy.”

“Seems like it still is,” Nicholas said, glancing around. “Now they just have to pay more.”

“I have no idea what to get. You're on your own.”

“Let's make it interesting. Pick something for me. I'll order for you. Drinks, too. Whatever you think I'd like. I'll do the same.”

“What if I hate what you order?”

Nicholas slapped the menu closed. “Then we try again.”

“That seems like a waste of money.”

“I have money to waste.” He leaned back against the booth, propping his elbow against the back, and she felt something inside her catch and slide free. “Better hurry up, blue jay. I already know what I'm getting you and I know you're going to like it.”

It was so disturbing how his smile could tug at her heart.

The waitress arrived and Nicholas said, “I think we're ready to order.”

“What can I get for you?”

"I'll have the caprese skewers, but can you substitute the mozzarella for either tofu or avocado or both? I don't really care which. Oh, and to drink, I'll have a blueberry mimosa."

Her face! Jay nearly laughed. "And for you?" the waitress asked.

"Seafood paella and sauvignon blanc, please," said Jay, glancing at Nicholas and then away when she saw how intense his face was. Stuffily, she added, "In fact, go ahead and bring the bottle."

The waitress left with a carefully blank expression and Jay felt a giggle escape her. "Oh my God. Did you see her face. She thinks we're crazy now."

"She's going to spit in your glass," Nicholas said dryly. "Ms. Bring-the-bottle."

"Well, it's your glass now," said Jay. "So I hope you enjoy your spit garnish."

He cracked a smile that made her stomach clench. "Was that supposed to sound like me?"

"I can't make my voice as deep as yours," she said. "But you sound pretty awful when you're trying to be." She picked up her phone, eager for an excuse to look away from that pensive stare, and felt a pang when she realized that she'd never responded to Lily's gentle teasing.

Hey, she wrote, hesitating for a moment. Didn't mean to ignore you. How are you?

"Who are you talking to?"

Jay set the phone down. "Lily," she said quietly. "I forgot to write back to her."

Something in his face shifted. "Good."

Their drinks came and Jay watched the waitress open the wine bottle and pour her a rather small glass of the sloshing golden liquid. Nicholas topped it off after she left and swapped their glasses.

"Blueberry for the blue jay," he said, sliding the mimosa towards her. "Enjoy."

Jay sipped it cautiously. It was dry and a little sweet and would go well with the balsamic reduction on the caprese skewers. "How are you?" she asked hesitantly. "You've been so stressed but you seem better now. Were you able to fix the problem?"

“No,” he said, sifting his glass to watch the pale liquid tilt in the light. “But I’ve reached a decision.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“We’ll see.” His smile was enigmatic. “I’m surprised you didn’t order me steak.”

“I wasn’t sure what to get you. You don’t seem picky but I figured since I’ve seen you eat octopus, seafood probably couldn’t be wrong. People who order seafood don’t usually do it because they can’t think of what else to get. It’s a life choice.”

He laughed—and for once, there was no malice in it.

“*Would* you have gotten steak?”

“No.” A shadow slid over his features. “You’re right. It is a life choice. I’ve been trying to avoid red meat since my father’s heart attack.”

“Oh, right.” She swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” He sipped his wine calmly. “You just told me you were glad he’s dead.”

“Okay, no. He was a bastard and I’m not sorry he’s dead.” She stared at a floating blueberry in her sugar-encrusted glass. “I hated him for what he did to me.”

“They say living well is the best revenge.”

“Yeah.” Jay took another sip of drink. “How long have you been managing Beaucroft Assets? It can’t be that long now. You started . . . pretty soon after his death, right?”

“Five years,” said Nicholas. “Since my graduation. I’d rather not talk about work.”

“What do you want to talk about, then?”

Nicholas stared at one of the fans twirling on the ceiling, with his wineglass cradled in his hands. She had the feeling that he wasn’t really listening to her.

“You know,” he said, after a moment, “it’s funny. I never really got the impression that my father really liked me all that much. He spent all this time and effort trying to mold me, to make me more like him, and I used to think that maybe that was how he showed he cared. But lately, I’ve been thinking that it was just that I was his fucking vanity project.”

His eyes flickered, the same icy gray as his father's.

"The day they read his will, I poured out all his scotch. One of them cost twelve hundred dollars. The one he kept in his drawer—do you remember?" he asked suddenly. "I showed you. He had the same bottle for twenty years and I just dumped it down the drain like expired milk."

Jay felt an icy blade of dread slide into her stomach. "Why?"

"I suppose because it felt a little like killing him. He did love his things—his furniture, his liquor, his watches. I rented a sledgehammer from someone and smashed up his shit. All of that ugly cabana furniture and the things in his bedroom. His watches. His liquor. His porn. I destroyed everything."

Jay clutched her own glass. "Why?"

"Because he tried to destroy you." His wineglass was empty now and Jay watched him refill it with a steady hand, feeling sick. "And because he tried to enlist me to do it for him and I nearly did. He was very clever in how he made me hate you. It took me almost seven years to figure out what he had done. You were innocent, you couldn't help it. But everything he did to me, I let him do."

Jay was saved from responding by the appearance of their food, but she could feel her heart beginning to pound with dread. "The moment of reckoning," said Nicholas, as he swapped the plates out. "Bon appétit, mon petit oiseau."

"Nick," she said. "You're scaring me."

He held up a hand as he bit into the paella. "This is very good. Especially with the wine. I think you might win." His fingers dipped into his pocket and for a bizarre moment, Jay thought he was going to give her money, like she'd won a bet. Instead, he handed her his keys.

"I plan on getting drunk," he said, sliding them over to her. "I need to do something and I can't do it sober, so you're going to be driving us home."

"What are you going to do?"

"Jay," he said, smiling. "Don't look so worried. I'm not going to drink the whole bottle."

He drank most of it, though, and by the time they had paid and were walking to the car, he wasn't walking the way he normally did. Anxiety

pinched her gut. He drove an expensive car and she hadn't driven at all since leaving Hollybrook for good. In the city, she hadn't needed to.

"Are you okay?" She gripped the wheel so hard her fingers were white.

"I'm so drunk," he said. "So ready for all of this to be over."

All of what? His life? Please, not his life. "Please tell me what you're going to do."

"It's a surprise," he said. "Now drive."

"My license expired!"

"So don't get caught," he said, leaning back. "Simple."

Simple.

She was shaking by the time they parked in front of his house and looked at him anxiously. He unbuckled his seat belt, swearing as he fumbled the fastenings, and then he left, leaving her with little choice but to chase after him as he headed towards the pool.

Was he going to jump in? She flew at him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Don't."

For a moment, he didn't move, and then she felt his hands come down on her arms, tightening briefly before gently pulling her away. "I'm surprised you don't push me in and hold me under." He tilted his head towards the pool and her heart stopped. "You must hate me."

"Nick," she said, helplessly. "No."

"Liar." She saw the ghost of a smile on his lips. "You've told me you do. You're very honest. You'd be a terrible lawyer." He laughed humorlessly. "I would know."

"Let's talk about this inside," she said nervously. "We can sit down and talk about thi—"

"No."

"But *Nick*—"

"Ruin me."

This was so far from what she was expecting him to say that she let out a slight gasp. "What do you mean?"

"Don't worry about our little deal. I'll write a check for ten million dollars. You can put your mother's name on it, take it for yourself, give it to charity. I don't care. It's yours."

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m telling you to hurt me,” he said, slurring a little. “Don’t you want to? If you aren’t feeling up to murder, you could tank my career. I’m being sued for sexual harassment. Your name came up in the call logs. If you join up with the prosecution and tell them all the horrible things I made you do for me, they’ll have a pretty solid case. Even though we’re technically family, you can still be called to testify against me. I’d probably be fired.”

Jay couldn’t breathe. “Why do you want me to hurt you?”

“Because I deserve it,” he said simply.

She shook her head, taking a step backwards, and nearly fell into the plants. The sharp leaves poked and scratched at her through her back as she scrambled upright. He watched her sink down on the edge of the planter with a strange, feverish glitter in his eyes.

“I wanted to see you again—and since I figured that you hated me, I used your mother against you. I used *you* against you.” He folded his arms, ambling closer. “I never stopped loving you, you know. Ever since we were kids, I loved you. You were the only person in my life who tried to sort me out. You gave me medicine when I was sick and you sat with me when I was lonely and you believed in me when I was just a screw up. And I let my father take that and fuck it all up and then I hurt you and once I started . . . I just never stopped because it would mean—”

His voice broke.

“It would mean having to admit that something was lost.”

He fell to his knees before the planter, pressing his face against her skirt as he wrapped his arms around her legs. “Do whatever you want to me, my darling bird. Whatever it is, I deserve it. Ruin me, take everything, and tell everyone what a terrible man I am—because it’s true. You were the best thing that ever came into my life and I’ll take whatever you want to give me.”

And then, to Jay’s horror, Nicholas began to cry.

Chapter Thirty-Six

2017

■□□□□■

For a moment, Jay was unable to move. She could feel his breath through her skirt, the strength of his arms beneath that leather jacket. The sun was blazing down in bright golden rays but Jay had never felt colder in her entire life.

Ruin me.

She squirmed, trying to rise, and heard him whisper, “Please don’t leave.” And it was like the last broken shard of her shattered heart had finally worked itself free from its frame and fallen, slashing her all up on its way back down.

Remembering the menacing restraint of the man who had come to retrieve her from the city, Jay found she could not quite reconcile that image with the man who knelt before her now. When she tugged up his chin, he bared his throat willingly, leaving her with the sickening suspicion that if she had whipped out a knife, he would have gladly let her slash him with it.

He leaned into her hand, as if craving her touch, and it made her remember—with a painful jolt—how he used to fall asleep on her when they watched TV together, curled into her side as if she and she alone, could offer protection from whatever unpleasant specter haunted his fears.

When had it all gone bad? What had set them firmly on the path to . . . this?

“I’m not going to hurt you,” she said at last, feeling weary. “That’s not what I want.”

“What do you want?”

“Get up,” she said.

Nicholas stood unsteadily, but obediently, swaying a little as he rose to his full height. She did feel a pulse of resentment then. Even with red-rimmed eyes, he still looked beautiful.

How many times had he made her cry? When he forced her to strip in the restaurant. When he treated her like an escort girl. When he filmed her and made her watch it. When he broke into her room. When he fucked her. When he broke her heart.

When he made her feel things she shouldn’t.

She had cried over this man for most of her adult life and nobody would judge her for it. They would only judge her for being stupid enough not to leave. She drew in a breath that made his eyes flick to her and she realized it had sounded like she was about to speak.

Please don't leave.

Wordlessly, Jay headed for the door and he followed her like a large puppy, waiting while she unlocked the side door with his keys. From there, he trailed after her up the stairs. She had to help him. He was too drunk to manage the steps alone.

When they got to his bed, he clumsily kicked off his loafers as he struggled out of his jacket. His sunglasses were missing. They must have fallen out of his shirt. "Do you have your wallet and phone?" she asked, and he looked up from fumbling the buttons of his shirt to pat himself down and hand her both, and once she had divested him of his things, she said, "Listen to me."

He blinked up at her.

"I want you to delete everything." She spoke slowly and clearly, wary of the glaze over his eyes. "Everything you have on me. Photographs. Videos. Anything. Delete all of it, right now. Wipe it. Shred it. While I watch you. I'll bring you what you need."

"I already did."

"What?"

"I deleted the video." He rubbed at his temples, frowning deeply. "I lied in the restaurant. There's no flash drive copy. There's no flash drive. Not anymore. I didn't . . . want my father to find it."

Jay bit her lip to swallow down her sob. The thought had never occurred to her and she was suddenly, achingly glad it hadn't, or it might have driven her mad. "And the photograph of Ivy?"

"Gone." He leaned back against the bed and his shirt fell open. "I shredded the physical copy in the airport and created a file to override the virtual one I had on my laptop. Then I deleted the file and compacted the disk."

"When did you destroy the virtual copy?"

"The day after you slept with me."

Jay slapped him and he let out a low growl that made the hairs on her arms stand on end.

“You bastard,” she whispered. “You deleted everything—and you didn't *tell* me?”

“You would have left.” Nicholas pressed his hand to his cheek, breathing hard enough that his chest was heaving and she had to look away from him. “And no—not everything. I kept the photos of your mother fucking the pool boy.” His eyes fluttered closed. “You want those, too?”

“What else do you have?” she demanded stonily.

“Photos I took of you. I kept the ones of you in your prom dress.”

“The one I went to with Michael?” He nodded. “Why?”

“Because you looked like an angel.”

A slightly hysterical laugh burst from her lips before she could stifle it. “I thought you said you didn't want to fuck an angel.”

“I lied. I wanted to make you feel dirty; I thought it would make you more willing to fuck me.”

“You—” She froze as his eyes shifted to her hand, which she had raised unthinkingly. “You're trying to provoke me,” she said. “You're still fucking with me, even now.”

Nicholas gave her a smile she might have called remorseful, if not for the carnal edge.

“I like fucking with you,” he said. “It gets me off.”

She paced back and forth several times, trying to control her emotions. How dare he yank her around this way, with such blatant attempts at manipulation. Fucking her, taking her out to lunch, letting her think he was going to hurt himself—and then asking her to do it. Her throat tightened and she found herself wondering if this was yet another trick.

Whirling around, she turned to face him again. He'd dragged his legs onto the bed and had managed to arrange himself into a position of careless repose. And he was watching her.

“I still have things from the private investigator,” he said, unprompted.

“Why are you so obsessed with me?” she asked helplessly.

“You're beautiful,” said Nicholas, “and interesting, and cryptic. You made it hard to get to know you—made it feel like a challenge, and when

you stopped talking to me, the only way I could get to you was through trickery, deceit . . . or force.”

“That's sick,” she said.

He looked at her. There was a lot in that look, none of it good for either of them. “You have no idea,” he said. “No idea what I've done . . . how far I'd go. If you think I'm sick now—”

“Stop talking.”

She wondered, even as he fell silent, if she should have let him keep going. What *had* he done? Pawed through her underthings? Watched her sleep? Worse?

Jay darted a look at his solemn, tortured face and thought, *Worse*. “Why did you do it?”

“I wanted you . . . so fucking much.” He scrubbed his hand over his eyes. “Nobody makes me feel the way you do. You make me want to be a good man.”

“And so you acted like a psychotic one?”

“I never said I wanted to be a rational man,” he said, with a brief flash of lucidity.

She turned from him, her eyes falling on his curated bookshelf with the glossy spines and its matching curios. That's what this was, she realized—a glossy, soulless life. For a glossy, soulless man. “Did you do the things they're saying you did to your employee?” she asked slowly. “To the one who's suing you?”

“I fired her because she was bad at her job.” He let his hand fall. “I'm not my father.”

Jay sat down on the edge of the bed. “You're not,” she said. “I don't know what you are, but you're not your father. You're something else.” *I'm just not sure if it's better.*

“We were entertainment for him,” Nicholas said. “He called me a backyard breeder—his family bred horses, it's an insult—and then he offered me an advance on my inheritance if I filmed myself fucking you and sent him the tapes. That was why I started blackmailing him.”

“Oh my God,” Jay said, feeling sick.

“I wanted to protect you,” said Nicholas. “And I did—from everyone except myself.” His eyes flickered, watching her lean forward on her knees.

“What are you going to do now?”

“You're starting to sound a little more sober.”

“I'm not. The room won't stop spinning.”

With a sigh, Jay stood up, and scooted a trash can to his bedside, turning to look at him warily when he clumsily swiped for her hand. “Don't run.”

Jay took her hand back and swept out of the room, closing the door behind her.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Nicholas woke up with a throbbing headache around eleven at night. Blearily, he checked his phone, unsurprised to see that he had messages from both his lawyers. *It's over*, he thought, heading down the stairs. His eyes felt sore. *Soon all of this will be over*.

He made himself dinner, which he ate with a full bottle of water. He grabbed another on his way back to his room, looking at Jay's closed bedroom door. There was no light underneath. He went to his room and got out his checkbook, writing a blank check for ten million.

Whatever else he might be, he was a man of his word.

Jay hadn't locked the door and when he opened it, he saw her curled into the sheets in one of her little band T-shirts. He set the check on her nightstand and quietly tiptoed out of the room.

He wondered if she'd still be here in the morning.

When he woke up again, his head felt like it was packed with sand. He got dressed briskly, studying his reflection in the mirror. *Probably time for a shave*, he thought, fingering his beard. He gave himself a quick trim so he wouldn't look like a fucking werewolf when he met with the lawyers, resolving to wake up early the next morning so he could take care of it.

As he grabbed his wallet and phone off the nightstand, he encountered a small, neat pile of shredded paper. He recognized his own handwriting on it: the check.

She didn't take the money.

She was downstairs, waiting in the kitchen with her purse on her lap while she flipped through her phone. She was wearing that wrap skirt with the bow that he loved, and with her legs crossed on that bar stool, it rode just high enough that he could make out the lacy tops of the stockings she wore with it. She glanced at him and deliberately tugged the hem down.

He immediately went hard. “You’re still here.”

“Where else would I be?”

Nicholas glanced at her legs again before turning to the fridge. “I thought you’d run.”

“I don’t have another job lined up yet and I want to watch you shred those files.”

She’s not leaving. He almost smiled. “I’ll shred them all. You can watch me do it.”

“After work.”

“Whatever you want,” he said, a little mockingly. “We’ll pick up dinner on the way home.”

“This isn’t funny,” she said, which made him grin. “Why are you smiling at me like that? You hired someone so you could have me followed. That is seriously messed up.”

“I thought we’d already established what a sick fuck I am.”

She let out a defeated-sounding sigh. “Yesterday, you were begging me to forgive you. Now you’re back to—this. What is your problem? Do you just not care?”

“I know that you’re upset and that it’s my fault.” He went to her, gratified that she didn’t immediately flinch away. “I also know that feeling sorry isn’t going to fix what I did—and that you’re not cruel enough to demand tears or blood for it, however much you might like to.”

He ran the back of his hand down her face.

“Look at me. I’m a snake in a suit, and I’ve got you all caught up in my coils. But I’m going to make it up to you. Even if I’ve got to get on my knees to do it, I’ll find a way to make things right.” Her eyes flickered away when he touched her mouth. “I care about you so fucking much.”

She shuddered and looked away. “Don’t say that to me right now, Nick.”

Nicholas let his hand fall and took a step back.

Jay plucked at the strap of her purse. "What's going on with your case? Am I going to be involved?"

"It hasn't gotten that far," said Nicholas. "I only learned about the call logs a few days ago."

"Because I looked up sexual harassment cases this morning and if they really think I'm relevant to the case, it looks like they can compel my testimony and even lock me up for obstruction if I refuse. I don't want to take the stand and talk about us."

"I meet with my lawyer this morning." Nicholas closed the fridge. "I'll find out. If I can keep you out of it, I will." He hesitated for a long moment. "Even if I have to settle out of court."

"But you said you didn't do it. You'd just give them the money?"

"I'd do anything for you."

"Anything, huh?"

"Tell me what you want. It's yours, if you stay."

Jay sat on the stool looking down at her phone. After a moment, she slid off her seat, tugging at her skirts. "We should probably go. You wouldn't want to be late."

He dropped her off at the Starbucks, which was beginning to feel like an unnecessary ruse at this point, and walked into his company building, trying to shake off the voices telling him that it was the last time he would ever do so. *So what if it is*, he decided. *I'll leave. Fuck all of them.*

It wasn't like he had any real ties to this place. There was only one that mattered.

Renata was on her first coffee of the day when Nicholas walked into her office. He watched her sip it. This was the first meeting he could remember having with her when the ice in it wasn't already melted. "Lay it on me," he said, when she didn't speak. "Tell me how fucked I am."

"The case got thrown out."

He nearly fell over. "What?"

"She hired a lawyer who wasn't really a lawyer. He'd been disbarred. One of Jon's paralegals was looking into him and found that he'd lost his

license for commingling funds. It's a pretty common way to lose your law license. You're supposed to set up a trust account."

"So I'm done." He was unable to believe it. "I don't have to go to court."

"No. But I would take this as a warning from the universe, given what we last spoke about. You were very, very lucky. Speaking frankly and off the record, if your ex-employee had been slightly more diligent, she could have ruined your life."

"Anything else?"

"Just close the door on your way out." A tense smile. "Please."

Nicholas pulled out his phone. *You're going to be fine.*

What do you mean? Did you talk to your lawyer already?

It's all over, he typed. Nothing is going to happen. Case dropped.

There was a long pause. *How lucky for you.*

Nicholas didn't believe in God but his whole life had revolved around a warped and twisted perversion of divine right. His father had taught him that the "haves" were categorically different from the "have nots," and he had gone through life taking everything in it as his due.

But maybe Fate, like Jay, believed in second chances.

The rest of the day was like a slow-moving river, catching him up in its lazy current. He wrote his last check to Jon, relishing the end to those numbing sessions where he would sit in that fucking storage closet of his office and have his character systematically demolished.

Annica scheduled him an appointment with HR, where he found out that Meghana had enrolled him in sensitivity training. "Given the pattern here," she told him grimly, "it's either this or being forced to resign. I suggest you take it."

Nicholas signed up for the training, knowing it was going to be miserable. Like traffic school for the politically correct. God, how tedious.

But worth it, for the cost of his life.

His thoughts shifted back towards Jay and how she had reacted to his confession. Part of him had expected her to start whaling on him, although he wasn't sure why he had anticipated that reaction given that she was so

sickeningly nice. He wasn't sure what to make of her behavior now. She hadn't left—was it possible that she loved him?

Poor little bird, he thought. *She deserves better.*

Pity for her, he wouldn't give up without a fight.



Jay was tired when she got off work.

She wasn't sure what to make of Nicholas's latest series of texts. Part of her was relieved that it was over and part of her was annoyed that he had managed to shirk the consequences of his behavior. *He leads a charmed life*, she thought, glancing up at him. *Nothing bad sticks.*

Arthur was overly solicitous in a way that made her wonder what, if anything, he might know. Gen and Stacey were as friendly as always but Jay had the impression that both of them were trying to pry, to figure out why her reporting duties had been swapped and what was going on. “How is Arthur?” Gen asked pointedly. “I hear he's much less of a firebrand.”

“He's fine,” said Jay, evading the question. “They're both fine.”

So many people were relying on her to be her cheerful, upbeat self that sometimes it almost felt like she wasn't allowed to experience normal emotions like anger and sadness.

She kept her smile in place all day as she scheduled appointments and answered the phone, signing off on the financial spreadsheets that Arthur had sent him and even making a coffee that he hadn't asked for but accepted graciously, but inside, she felt drained.

Her thoughts kept going back to Nicholas and everything she felt for him.

He'd stayed late today. By the time he finally got off, the office had emptied out and she was alone in the kitchen with a book she wasn't reading, wishing that all she felt for the man was mere loathing. Wishing that she didn't feel that drop in her stomach and that prickle between her thighs every time he looked at her like she were something he could devour.

“Hey, blue jay,” he said, glancing at her. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“You're a free man,” she retorted, meeting his eyes with poise. “How does it feel?”

“Like I'm ready to get the hell out of this office.” He went to the fridge and stuffed something into the briefcase that looked like a paper bag. “You ready to go?”

“What's that? A fifth of whiskey?”

“God, no. I can't stand the shit.”

“Quoth the child alcoholic.”

“It's not like I was drinking whole shots of the stuff,” he said mildly. “I just wanted a taste of what it felt like to be bad. It was honestly pretty disappointing. I told you I thought it tasted like Windex.”

“Then why the tour to show me what a demented little bad-ass you were?”

“You were pretty,” he said, shrugging. “I wanted to impress you.”

Jay wasn't sure what to say to that.

“You want to do dinner again?”

“Sure.” She hitched her purse up. “The case really got thrown out?”

“Yeah. I've been signed up for sensitivity training but I get to keep my job.”

“So you can go back to buying up huge swaths of California.”

“Maybe.” His fingers drummed restlessly over the wheel. “Arthur thinks we ought to take the company international and do some foreign investing.”

“What would that entail?”

“You shift your most profitable investments to the countries with the lowest tax rates and report losses in countries with the highest tax rates. It's like playing a shell game.”

“Seems shady.”

He made a grim sound of amusement. “I'll leave that to the legal team.”

Jay made a face. Her near brush with the law had satisfied whatever passing curiosity she might have had about the legalities of business for a while.

“Maybe it's stupid,” she said, after a pause, “but I didn't realize you were so good at what you do. Your all-hands meeting was impressive. I

don't know if I ever told you."

His mouth twitched. "Was that a compliment?"

"I misjudged you," said Jay. "I didn't think you really cared about anything at all."

"I care about some things."

"Yeah," she said. "I know."

Nicholas pulled up in a strip mall. Jay recognized it right away. They had stopped in front of the Afghan place he'd taken her to after their first night together. He kept his arm around her waist as he ordered, just like he had before, stroking her through the thin blouse.

"I remember you," said the man at the counter. "You two are a couple?"

Nicholas glanced at her, his gray eyes glinting under the lights. He squeezed her a little tighter. "Yes."

"I thought so," said the man, with a wink. "Second date?"

"Officially, I think it's the third."

Jay could feel her face heating. "Nick."

"She's shy." His knuckles glanced off the side of her breast. "Get whatever you want for us, little bird."

"Um." She stared at the menu, feeling the heat coming off her face in waves as both men looked at her. "Is the golden lentil soup made with coconut milk?"

"It is," said the man.

"Then could we get that, the tabbouleh, and the hummus, with some pita?"

"Of course."

"I'll also take some baklava," said Nicholas, reaching for his wallet with his free hand. Jay told herself she wasn't disappointed when he removed his arm to slip out a card. "Two pieces."

"Baklava on the house this time," said the man, with another wink. "For a pretty girl."

Nicholas glanced at her, an amused smile tilting his mouth. "That's very generous."

“Thank you, sir,” said the man, glancing at the tip, before handing Nicholas two sticky pieces of the flaky Middle Eastern pastry.

They sat in the waiting area, next to a plant. “He'd be so disappointed if he knew you weren't eating it,” Nicholas murmured. “If you want to taste it, I'll kiss you after I take a bite.”

When she looked at him, he was popping one of the pieces into his mouth. He ate the second piece much more slowly, without breaking eye contact, pausing to lick a drop of honey from the corner of his mouth. “You're going to like it.”

As soon as the food was packed into the car, he did kiss her, pulling her against him and sliding his tongue into her mouth, until the cloying sweetness of the honey and the herbal note of the pistachio were all she could taste. She did like it. She liked it too much. Jay heard herself make a noise, breathless and full of wanting, and felt him smile against her lips.

“Sweet,” he said. “But not as sweet as you.”

He kissed the corner of her mouth.

“You're wound too tight, though.”

“Screw you, Nick.”

He laughed as he got behind the wheel, sounding a little manic. *Oh God*, she thought, as they drove past the turn-off that would have taken them home. *What now?*

“Where are we going?”

“Taking a little detour.”

“Where?”

“Eden Hill Mall.”

“It's still around?” When he nodded absently, she said, “Won't it be closed?”

“Probably.”

The big gates soon loomed before them. All of the storefronts were dark.

“Nick.”

“Out of the car, Jay,” he said cheerfully, grabbing his briefcase.

It was creepy walking through the silent buildings at night. All those cold steel beams and empty glass windows gave her the chills. The night

sky was cold and clear, with only a thin sliver of moon. She shook herself and raced after Nicholas, who was walking ahead like he knew exactly where he was going, which was probably nowhere good.

“You're not planning anything illegal, are you?” she asked worriedly.

“No, blue jay,” he said. “I'm not.”

They stopped in front of the big jumping dolphin statue, which as too ostentatious for the mall. The water features had been turned off but the bottom glimmered with a silent sea of coins.

“Why are we here?” Jay asked, staring at a yuan coin. “You want to make a wish?”

Nicholas reached into his briefcase and handed her the paper bag. “Open it.”

She slowly peeled the bag back. “It's . . . a cupcake.” She stared at him suspiciously and then at the plastic box in her hands. “You drove to Ridgeview to get me a cupcake?”

“The other day,” he said thoughtfully, “you called my house 'home.' I don't think you even realized what you'd said, but I did—and I do want Hollybrook to be a home to you.”

Her heart began to beat faster. She stared at the box, frowning. *What is that?*

“That's all you ever really wanted, right?” asked Nicholas. “Someone to love you?”

Jay opened the box with fingers that were beginning to feel numb. There was a little silver something in the cake. The jeweled bird charm he'd given to her when he was nineteen, ripped from her neck in a fit of anger. He'd gotten rid of the chain and had it welded to a ring base.

It fit her perfectly.

Her breathing stopped.

“Are you—”

“I don't expect a decision right away. All I ask is that you don't leave until you make a decision. I would like a chance to personally persuade you to stay.”

“After what you did, do you think I would?”

“You tore up the check, didn't you? I found the pieces on my nightstand. You could have taken the money and gone. Ten million dollars is more than enough money to disappear.”

“It was never about the fucking money,” she whispered. “Not to me.”

“I know.” He closed his briefcase up. “You're so disgustingly moral.”

She closed the box. With a screech of plastic. “And you're a nasty little creep.”

“I'm *your* creep,” he said. “And I'd be honored to have you as my wife.”

Wife. He hadn't even said that word the last time he'd proposed to her. It hadn't been about her at all. He'd acted as if he thought he were doing her a favor.

Something had changed. *But is it enough?*

“Let me love you,” he whispered. “If you let me in, I promise I'll raise you up and keep you safe and I'll never, ever leave you. You're my everything.”

A small sob escaped her.

You left me all alone.

When he held out his arms, she let him fold her against his chest.

“Why did you propose to me in a mall?” she asked in a muffled voice.

“Because this is where we were when I realized that I was in love with you. I had a good time that day. Taking you out. Seeing you happy. It was the last good moment I ever had with you before you went away. I'd like to have more.”

“You really are a bastard,” Jay whispered. “I should push you into the fountain.”

A flashlight beam cut through the darkness. Nicholas pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes and tucked it behind her ear, sneaking in a quick kiss as someone shouted in the distance, “Let's go home,” he said, covering her hand with his. “This time, I won't ask you for anything.”

And then, in a whirl of shadow and starlight, they clasped hands and ran for the car.

The end

Ack!(knowledgelements)

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Nenia is one of those “millennials” you hear about in the news. When she’s not penning smutty bodice-rippers, she’s hanging out with her romance group online or else roaming the streets of San Francisco.

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