



Sine
QUA
Non



A NOVEL BY NENIA CAMPBELL

SINE QUA NON
by NENIA CAMPBELL

OceanofPDF.com

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IN MEMORY OF MY DAD

*I wouldn't have wanted you to read this book
but I wish you were here to celebrate it with me.*

Thank you for making the cover.

I miss you, so, so much.

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PLAYLIST

Salvatore // Lana Del Rey

Lose Myself // SWIM

Bitter Almonds // Labyrinth Ear

Drawing Pins // Nothing But Thieves

Erode // TENDER

Bitter // Palace

Trouble // TENDER

Who Do You Want // Ex Habit

Faded // Crypto

Cities // Toby Mai, Two Feet

Die For You // The Weeknd

sine qua non // Johnny Rain

boys, bugs, and men // Paris Paloma

Daddy Issues // The Neighbourhood

abuse me // Ex Habit

Violet City // Mansionair

Lips On You // Maroon 5

We Could Leave // Mansionair

Dangerous Hands // Austin Giorgio

You Were Mine // Tami Neilson

Secrets // OMIDO

Doesn't Rain in Hell // Elvis Drew x AVIVIVAN

Unmade // Thom Yorke (end credits)

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W A R N I N G

This is a work of dark fiction and contains content some might find disturbing. This includes but is not necessarily limited to: past recounts of abuse and neglect, on page emotional abuse from a parent, dubious consent, toxic relationships, blackmail and extortion, alcohol use, degradation (consensual), family trauma, references to sex work, and people acting in immoral or unideal ways that I do not personally condone. Please do not read this book if any of these subjects would be upsetting to you. Your mental health is paramount.

Thank you and have a great day.

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Prologue

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This could be a ticket to a new life if I play our cards right.

Danielle Beaucroft could still see it all now—the whirlwind courtship of meeting him at the club, thinking he would be the prince to save her—the dazzling lights of the Vegas Strip that glittered almost as fiercely as the diamond he placed on her finger—being fucked better than she could ever remember in her *life*.

Well, almost, she corrected herself, but that thought brought pain with it, and she swiftly pushed it aside.

Her ex-husband had bought her steak dinner, paired it with Champagne. Now, what did she have? With a violent cry, she swept the remnants of the Thai takeout she couldn't really afford into the satin-lined jute trashcan. Cold noodles doused in sauce.

It had all come down like a sack of bricks, thanks to her ungrateful child.

She had seen a picture of her the other day. It must have been a slow news day because *The Hollybrook Herald* had run a puff piece on some save-the-children benefit gala. Her stepson, Nicholas, was in the foreground, wearing a suit that looked like it cost as much as the car she'd been forced to sell, and standing beside him was Justine, who was doing that tucked-in thing with her shoulders that she'd done whenever she'd been forced to dress up as a child.

"Relax your arms, Justine, for god's sake. Do you want to look like a hunchback?"

She also recognized the necklace nestled into her daughter's cleavage, the bracelets as heavy as handcuffs around her wrists. Those diamonds had used to be *hers*. But Damon had left his first wife's jewelry to Nicholas in his will, and now apparently they were just medals to be awarded to any Beaucroft whore for her service.

She never could manage herself, Danielle thought uncharitably, remembering the low-cut Grecian gown with a flicker of envy. *All that money, and she can't even find a dress that fits her properly.* Not that she was likely to have picked it out herself. Danielle had been around enough

men to recognize that look, to know when a man had decided to take it upon himself to do the managing. She could see it in Nicholas's eyes when he looked at her daughter.

The little hypocrite.

Danielle breathed into the palm of her hand and wrinkled her nose. Onions. The onions were a mistake. That was what she got, for calling the first place to hang a sign on her door. With a roll of her eyes, she headed into her en suite bathroom. It was the *only* bathroom in her one-bedroom apartment, but en suite sounded better. Classier. She needed to manage herself, too.

Unlike Justine, she was good at it. It was why the men at the Beat & Tease had always asked after *her*, instead of those trashy nineteen-year-olds with their ill-fitting heels and ugly brown lipstick who got drunk with customers and flirted with the bartenders like they were there to party.

They weren't just dancers. They were selling a *fantasy*. She understood what the men were paying for and had played the role as well as any actress. And like all good actresses, there had been trophies, awards. She'd gotten Damon—

Until Damon had gotten her.

God, it sucked. How many men had she been forced to blow or screw to get to where she was now? And how many of those men had hightailed it just as soon as they found out that there was a kid in the picture? Oh, they were happy enough to buy her off with a nice dinner or some money to cover gas, but deep down, every man wanted to believe he was the first and only.

There was no bigger mood killer to these men than staring at the reminder of another man's prowess from across the kitchen table as she asked you crossly to pass the Fruit Flakes.

She hadn't asked to be a single mother. She supposed very few people *did* ask for that, but most people didn't have her streak of bad luck. Most people were stupid.

She saw how they looked at her, as they took in her box-blonde hair and the boob job that had cost two months' rent and had her and her kid eating plain-wrapped mac-n-cheese that tasted like yeast and sawdust. She didn't get offered the kinds of jobs where people gave a shit about what was

going on inside her brain, not like her *daughter*. They all thought she was some cheap bimbo.

Stop frowning, she told herself, as she savagely brushed her teeth. You'll get wrinkles.

She, Danielle, had done the work and made sacrifices to get them out of that crappy little apartment in the Mission. And all she had asked of Justine was to return the fucking favor for once. She'd grown up in that house just like the rest of them, draped in designer labels and gold jewelry, toting around a real Louis Vuitton purse. And she'd been happy enough to go to that hoity-toity UC school on their dime, too, attending protests that she'd allowed herself to be tagged in, paint on her face, holding up signs protesting the 1%, which had sent Damon into a rage.

“Who does that ungrateful little bitch think she is?”

Danielle had said nothing, because there was really no point. She didn't know, either. All her life, she'd been the dutiful little daughter, clinging to mommy's hand, never letting her just *breathe*. Then it was like she'd lost her little mind, getting involved in scandal after scandal, ruining their name, their family, their brand. Which she could have fixed by coming back, but she never had. Not until *she*, her mother, had been forced to beg Nicholas, hands out. Little Miss Don't-Mind-Me was the only one he had ever heeded. And when she'd spoken to him, he had made it very clear—obscenely clear—that there would be no money without Jay.

After running away and leaving everyone else to deal with the fallout of that dreadful party and its aftermath, Danielle felt like coming back and dealing with her brother was the very least Justine could do. Damon never would have disinherited her if Justine hadn't wound him up.

But eventually, her daughter had stopped calling and Danielle was tired of waiting, of catering to the child who still dared to talk to her like a disappointment when she was very clearly fucking her own stepbrother.

She picked up her old cracked iPhone with its dangling strawberry charm and dialed Justine's number. It rang several times, which made her realize that she had no plans about what to do if her daughter didn't pick up, but then she heard a *click*.

“Hello? Mom? I'm at work. What do you need?”

That's a lot of attitude from a girl who's got her tits out on the society

pages. She snorted delicately. “Put your brother on the phone. I need to talk to him about the money.”

There was a pause. “I really don’t think I should do that. He doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“It’s a business number, isn’t it? We have business. He knows it.”

“He doesn’t want your business.” There was a note of coldness in Justine’s voice now.

“What about the lawsuit?” Her tone rose pleadingly, becoming almost girlish. She used to talk to her regulars like this. She still did. “Remember, baby? He said he’d ruin me and you know he will. I need that money to protect myself.”

“Nick is willing to drop the lawsuit as long as you leave him alone.”

So it’s Nick now that he’s got you posing as his little escort. “Well, you didn’t tell me that. You aren’t answering any of my calls.”

“I did tell you,” her daughter said grimly. “But you kept asking about the money.”

“Well, it is *my* money. If your father had lived long enough for us to talk things out, he would have changed his mind. I have expenses. I can’t live out on the street. I mean, for God’s sake, Justine. I’m calling you on an iPhone 4 with a cracked screen.”

“It’s his money, Mom. He can do what he likes with it, which I told you before.” She sighed. “I’m sorry about your phone, but you’re not going to end up on the street because of a cheap phone, are you? I mean, you have an apartment, right? You told me you did. And rent’s paid?”

Danielle said nothing, too angry to speak as her daughter rambled on.

“If it gets really bad, maybe you can sell some of your jewelry to buy yourself some more time. Apart from that, I really don’t know what else to tell you.”

That was rich. The girl was barely into her thirties, with a mansion roof over her head and a cushy office job where she sat on her ass all day filing papers, and she was going to tell *her* how she ought to manage her money?

She forced herself to take a calming breath. “Baby, you’re my daughter. Don’t you care about me?”

“Yes,” Jay said, in such a wavering tone that she thought she might have won. “But my hands are tied. Nick isn’t going to budge on this. You made your choices and the will was settled by all the lawyers involved years ago. I can’t change that.”

“But he *listens* to you,” Danielle protested. “You can *make* him give me something can’t you? Just ask him nicely.”

“No,” Jay said sharply. “I can’t do that. Not with him.”

“Justine—”

“I have to go. Bye.”

The phone went dead in her hands.

Danielle stared at it incredulously before throwing it against the wall with a scream.

She calmed down a few moments later. Catching a glimpse of her red face surrounded by her mussed and unbrushed hair in the vanity mirror was quite the shock. *Who’s that witch?* Danielle thought with horror, before realizing with a sobering jolt that it was her.

Justine had pushed her to this.

But the show had to go on. Despite what her daughter believed, she did have bills to pay and she was a month behind on rent.

Lucky for her, she could work from home like any tech executive.

Danielle unscrewed a jar of Korean cold cream and began doing damage control.

After Damon had passed away, Nicholas had wasted no time in kicking her out. He hadn’t even done it face to face, like a man. He’d waited until she’d gone out on one of her shopping trips to have the locks changed. She’d come home from Anthropologie to find all her shit piled out on the curb, and when she’d slammed on the door, swearing and raising hell, he’d called the cops on her, and she’d spent the night in jail. Now she had a fucking criminal record, thanks to him.

Since then, she’d done what she could to get back on her feet. She’d tried hawking essential oils for a while but then her manager had started

harping at her to buy more product before she'd even sold what she had, and she was not going to end up in the hole.

Bolstered by the ylang ylang and a box of white zinfandel, she'd Googled "strip clubs near me" in a fit of desperation, which was when she had learned about something called "camgirling." From what she had read, it wasn't that much different from stripping. And it was safer, too. When you were behind a screen, there was no danger of men getting handsy.

Danielle had turned her bedroom into a studio and strung it up with fairy lights from Target. With her dwindling funds, she purchased a lacy white duvet and a good-quality camera. For a couple hours a night, spending a few hours a week doing what she had used to do for dinner and gas got her a steady stream of panting men.

Her mouth tightened briefly, remembering how Justine had used to insist upon waiting up for her during those nights at the strip club, like an aggrieved little saint.

She used to like the idea of being a mother, that was the sad thing. Back when she thought it would be a package deal arrangement, with a husband and a nice house. But even after that, when she had looked into the girl's dark eyes for that first time, and thought, *I made this*, she had felt a surge of pride. All the nurses had said, "Oh, she's *beautiful*," and she had been filled with an unexpectedly fierce burst of joy. *Of course she is*, she had thought. *She's mine*.

But now, every time she looked at the girl, she could only see her father —Anthony: a musician from Trinidad and Tobago with distant Chinese ancestry. Anthony, who had serenaded her with a reggaeton version of Black Magic Woman on a beach in San Diego that still made her misty-eyed when she thought of it now. She'd been working on the boardwalk to save for college but he had been far more interesting than scooping ice cream for snot-nosed brats.

She had spent an entire golden summer with him and his three roommates. In that beachside bungalow they were all renting for less than nothing because one of them knew the owner, they worked odd jobs and lived hand to mouth. One of them had been red-haired and sunburned, an ex-surfer from Australia who'd broken his shin and now worked on boats in the marina. The other guy ran a kiosk for tourists with his common-law wife, but most of his income seemed to come from weed, of which they had

all smoked plenty.

Danielle had listened to Anthony busk at the boardwalks as he sat beside a boombox that was almost as big as his guitar, and she had basked in the glow of his attention as she danced and swayed to his music. They had gotten more free drinks than they had known what to do with whenever he performed at bars, and everyone had wanted to know their names.

I could live like this forever, she thought naively. *Right here on this beach.*

And then, one day, Anthony disappeared.

When she thought to look him up years later, she had discovered that he'd had a heart-attack. Only thirty-two. What a fucking waste. You really couldn't depend on anyone other than yourself. They'd always leave you, one way or another. Her mouth twisted bitterly.

Even your own children could turn traitor.

She looked a lot like him in certain lights—the ringlets in her curly hair, the sharp jut of her slightly crooked nose, and the way her forehead wrinkled when she frowned. That was all him. But it was in the face, too. Anthony's face had been incredibly expressive and she had loved that about him, but seeing it on her daughter pierced like a fucking knife.

Men had started looking at Justine before she'd even started high school. Hell, some of her regulars even hollered at her, while Jay ducked her head, pathetically clinging to her skirt. *She's going to get eaten alive on the streets*, she remembered thinking, looking at her daughter's beautiful face and feeling a distant sense of alarm. *And they aren't even going to wait for her to grow up first.*

But bringing Justine had gotten her sympathy from her clients and better tips, so she had tolerated and, yes, sometimes even encouraged the drunken teasing. Better she find out now what men were like than to grow up sheltered and naïve.

Marriage was supposed to fix all her problems. Rather than having to entertain the appetites of multiple men all at once, only to come home to a sagging apartment and a sullen child, she could focus her efforts on *one man*, in a beautiful house big enough that she could choose to avoid her daughter—and her stepson—completely, if she so desired. And she did desire.

She was very, very tired of being both virgin mother and whore.

When Damon Beaufort had whisked her away to Las Vegas's hotel and casino scene and fucked her so hard that she couldn't walk straight the next day, she had convinced herself that she was in love. So he was older, so what? He had a full head of hair and a big dick, and the ice on her finger was big enough to blot out some of his less favorable qualities, like his wandering eye and his tendency to threaten or intimidate waitstaff.

She had almost convinced herself that she had finally found the happiness that she had been chasing since her late teens, wanting to be that girl dancing in the sun with a boy who chose her.

Until she'd noticed how her new husband looked at her kid.

People thought she was stupid. *Damon* thought he was stupid, even after the lid was blown off her ruse. Maybe she didn't read crusty old books for pleasure while wistfully languishing away in a tower, but that didn't mean she couldn't see what was right in front of her own damn face.

Since Damon wasn't around anymore, she got all the blame for it. She heard the whispers, calling her a whore and a bad mother. But she'd kept Justine busy and out of the way while playing the role of glamorous society wife for her ungrateful pervert of a husband. Had he thought she really wanted to go to all of those awful Historical Society meetings? Only mimosas and petty gossip had made them even remotely tolerable. It was about networking.

Damon was too smart to shit where she ate—or so she thought—so she just dressed a little younger even as her husband continued buying Justine gifts and calling her "my dear," like he didn't break his neck looking at her ass whenever she left the room. But when she noticed the same look in her stepson's eyes, she had wanted to scream until the windows shattered and every single member of her screwed-up family had blood coming out of their ears.

She wasn't sure when Nicholas and Justine had actually started sleeping together. Her daughter was such a little miss that she hadn't even believed *Damon* when he had first brought up his suspicions. "As if she would," Danielle had scoffed. "A nun could make that girl blush."

But Damon had been insistent and wildly angry—irrationally angry. Less concerned father, more jealous lover. "She has you fooled, too, then.

Not that it's hard. Your daughter's a back-stabbing little whore like you. She's let my son fuck her all over his house, and she won't be getting penny from me now, even if she comes crawling back to me on her knees."

"You sound jealous," Danielle had spat, though the mental picture he'd painted disturbed her. "Why is that, Damon? Did you ever touch my kid?"

Damon had laughed nastily (but not refused, she couldn't help remembering; wouldn't an innocent man have refused?). "If I had, I would have done it when she came onto me at the resort."

"What?"

"Oh, it was shameless. She was hanging around the bar in a flimsy little sundress, like a lost lamb in a den of wolves. When I attempted to take her back to her room, she asked me for things I don't even think she was sure she really wanted. God only knows how she got to my son. She's had him wrapped around her finger since before he could even drive."

Danielle's stomach twisted. "Jay didn't even date until she was eighteen."

"And perhaps this is why. Nicholas is still an impressionable young man. He doesn't have my fortitude or experience. If a pretty girl told him what he wanted to hear, and promised to satisfy his passing whims, I think he'd give her anything."

That feeling in her gut intensified. "You're lying. Jay wouldn't do that. She's such a goody two-shoes."

"Perhaps she used to be." He gave her a coldly amused look, clocking her disgust. "But you didn't exactly help with that, did you, my dear? Where do you think she learned how to misbehave? While you were out there fucking every pool boy in sight, she's been warping my son's mind with her little games. She calls him Daddy, as if that makes him any less of a boy, when what she really needs is a man to take her firmly in hand and "

Danielle had slapped him and he, enraged, had reached for one of his scotch bottles and thrown it at her. It smashed against the wall over her head and that was when she began to really be afraid. When his eyes studied her, dark and dissatisfied.

When he said, "You've grown old, Danielle. And boring."

The broken glass had crunched beneath her heels as she walked out that same evening, with two suitcases and a cab ready to take her to the Bayview Hotel, where she wouldn't sleep a wink as it occurred to her that her husband's descriptions of their children suggested that he had stayed and watched them.

That conclusion hadn't yet reached as she packed, but the sickeningly awful feelings of the encounter surrounded her like a toxic miasma, and she could feel tears forming in her eyes.

"How appropriate." Nicholas stood watching her leave with the same cold grey eyes as his father, shirtless, arms folded. She shot him a wary look, trying not to imagine her daughter pinned beneath him.

"What's appropriate?"

"You, spending the night with all the other cast-off mistresses in town." As if sensing her discomfort, he put his hands on his hips, daring her to look. "They call it the Payview Hotel."

"You're one to talk." The words came out before she could think better of them.

The glint in his eyes reminded her of the quicksilver flash of a knife blade sliding violently out of its wooden block. "The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means, I know why my daughter really left." Her hand tightened on the door knob and she moved a little closer to it as his weight shifted like he was about to spring. "You always thought you were such hot shit. Mr. God's Gift to Women. Well, it seems like I'm not the only cast-off."

His mouth twitched—not into a smile, but an expression utterly alien to her, cold and terrifying. A predatory grimace.

"Get out."

But this was the first response he'd ever given her after years of flouting her authority and she wasn't about to back down now.

"I've seen a lot of men like you. They think that just because they've got money to burn, they're worthy of everyone's time. But trust me, everyone thinks they're a fucking joke. Or didn't you think I'd seen you going through your sister's things? Sleeping in her bed? You pathetic little creep. No wonder she left."

For a moment, she saw real pain there, hot and raw and satisfying. Then his face became hard and stony—just like his father's.

“Get out,” Nicholas repeated. “Or I’m going to hurt you.”

It’s not your house, she had nearly said, but something in his face had stopped her—a cold, collected menace that struck her as being very adult. It belonged more on a man his father’s age than on a boy in his late teens. *He really would hurt me*, she realized. *In a heartbeat*.

Anyway, her cab was waiting, so she turned her back on him despite every instinct in her body screaming at her not to and she spent the night in her hotel shaking from a chill that could not be appeased by the down comforter as she turned her husband’s words over and over in her mind.

(she calls him Daddy)

That had been the last real conversation she’d had with Nicholas until the death of his father, when he had kicked her out. It wasn’t until she’d called him up for money that they’d spoken again.

Danielle had been shocked when she had looked him up, and seen not the scrawny, punk-eyed little shit that she remembered, but a younger, handsomer version of his late father. Despite the scandal of Damon’s sexual misconduct, and the ensuing lawsuit, Nicholas had somehow managed to walk away from the worst of the rumors mostly untouched. At the funeral, she had been astounded by the sheer volume of money she wouldn’t be seeing a cent of: he had given it all to Nicholas, not that he seemed to care. She supposed he wouldn’t have to, looking like that.

Ten grand, just to *talk* to her daughter. The last time a john had handed her that much cash, she’d walked home with a sore ass and sticky cleavage. She couldn’t even imagine what Justine had done to him to make him that fucking desperate.

(she’s had him wrapped around her finger)

Damon was probably laughing himself hoarse down there in hell.

But the joke was on all three of them, because she was tired of living in her daughter’s shadow, forced to beg for scraps of what belonged to her. It was time to take matters into her own hands.

Someone knocked on the door. Danielle let out a harsh breath and smoothed her hair back from her face before adjusting her thin lace-edged

tank top, making sure the edges lay flat over her flowy harem pants. Her eyes landed on her half-melted Thai tea and she moved to throw that away, but not before fishing out a piece of ice and holding it briefly against each of her nipples.

She checked through the peephole, and yes, it was exactly who she was expecting: her slightly tarnished white knight, here to save her.

Pasting on a smile, she threw open the door. The younger man on the step was holding a cheap bottle of wine, and she saw his weaselly eyes widen in what appeared to be excitement, if his tented jeans were any indication. She stood a little taller, making sure to push out her breasts.

You don't think I'm old and boring, do you, baby?

"Wow," he said, his voice hoarse as he looked at her tits. "You look—"

"I know, baby. It's good to see you, too." Pushing off from the door, she stood on tiptoe to reach his mouth, making sure she could feel the press of her body against his skinny torso as she leaned into him. When she reached down to squeeze his cock through his jeans, he whimpered.

"I just got off work," he protested, which pleased her.

"Is it the job you told me about? The one you took for me?"

"Yeah. Five grand."

"You promised me a discount."

"Down from seven," he protested. "He wouldn't go lower."

It would have to do, she thought.

She felt him shudder and smiled as she took him by the hand and pulled him into the house, sliding the straps of her top down and stroking viciously through his jeans, until his pants dampened. "Fuck," he cried out, but she silenced him with a kiss.

"I hope you brought your camera. You wouldn't disappoint me again, would you?"

Chapter One

“Nicholas? It’s Arthur. I know it’s the weekend but I thought you should know that our VP of Operations resigned.”

“Eileen did?” Nicholas sat up at his desk. “Why?”

Arthur paused. “She cited creative differences. Off the record, she’s very Christian.”

Nicholas closed his eyes.

“And with the scandal—”

“I can imagine.” He cut the other man off, not wanting to hear any further recriminations, real or speculated. “I suppose we’ll just have to grin and bear it until we can hire somebody else.”

He scrubbed his hand over his face, staring up at the ceiling. *Fuck.*

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.”

“No, thanks for letting me know. I’m about to have a video interview with a cleaner, so we’ll have to wait until Monday to discuss this further. We can plan a course of action then.”

Nicholas set his phone down on the desk. His fingers began to tap in agitation and he growled in annoyance when he realized that he was unconsciously copying the cadence of the clock mounted on the office wall. It was his father’s, purchased at auction from some dwindling estate. He wished he’d thought to remove it before. Too late now.

The video app on his computer flickered into focus and he arranged his face into a picture of something approaching civility as a disgustingly earnest-looking girl in her early twenties appeared. She adjusted her tennis headband like she heard there had been a casting call for a reboot of *The Virgin Suicides* and was afraid that she had missed it.

Nicholas didn’t think she looked very much like a maid.

“Mr. Beaucroft,” she said eagerly. “Hi! Thank you so much for this opportunity to work with you.”

With him? He nodded tersely, bristling. Why was she talking like she’d already gotten the job? Who was this excited to clean somebody else’s toilets? Did she think they were going to collaborate over fucking

Fabuloso?

And he was only going to have to go through a higher stakes version of this with the interviews for the Vice President position. The sales and marketing team were such fucking parasites.

“Do you have any prior housekeeping experience?”

“Well, I used to work as an au pair for this family in Paris.”

“This is a bit different from watching some French brats paddling around in the Seine. I own a very large piece of property and I’d expect every inch of it cleaned. Do you know how to polish granite?” he demanded abruptly. “Clean hardwood? Can you dust?”

Her smile faltered. He wondered idly who had put her up to this.

“Let me guess,” he said, when she continued to falter. “You don’t have any maid experience.”

“I’m a fast learner.” She sounded defiant, which suggested she had done this to herself. They weren’t accepting any interns, so if someone were conniving and desperate, Nicholas supposed they might seize upon a job for a cleaner and try to upgrade it a paid entry-level position. “I have a college degree,” she was saying now, “I could do filing, type up papers—”

“I have a secretary. What I need is a maid.”

“But I—”

Nicholas ended the video call, cutting her off mid-protest. What a waste of his time. Six applicants so far, and not a single one of them fit the bill. Competence and discretion, that was all he asked. If only Carmela had kept her snide comments about his houseguest to herself. Then he wouldn’t be here, subjected to graspingly ambitious college students.

And now, *Eileen* had quit.

He stood so abruptly that his chair shot back a few feet, edging around the sharp corner of the desk to yank the clock bodily from the wall. The nail it had been hanging on tore through the plaster, shedding bits of drywall on the bloodred fibers of his late father’s carpet.

Take that, asshole, he thought.

Carrying the clock under his arm like a football, he marched down the hall, up to the front door, blinking into the harsh sunlight. The air was

redolent with dust and pollen, shimmering in the spring heat, though there was still a saline nip in the breeze from the nearby ocean.

He continued down the dusty walk to where the trash cans waited at the bottom of the hill rise for Friday pickup. He slammed the clock into the gray bin, and when he replaced the lid, the ticking sound was finally silenced. Only the throbbing of his own pulse remained to taunt him.

As he headed back into the house that he had inherited from his father, he looked up at the Chihuly sculpture hanging from the ceiling. When the sun passed through the glass, it glowed a violent neon. Over the years, he had grown accustomed to its organic and vaguely menacing silhouette whenever he came in through the main door. Bathed in translucent shadow, however, visitors often revealed a flicker of unease as they looked up at it, over his shoulder.

Jay, he knew, didn't like it. To her, it was a relic of his father. But when he had talked casually about its replacement, she had given him a disappointed look. If she were here, she would have stopped him from throwing out the clock, and probably gotten angry at him for being rude to the interviewee, but she wasn't here. She was at the farmers' market. He had offered to drive her but she said she wanted to walk.

But he knew the truth. She didn't want him to take her because she didn't want to be seen with him in public. She had turned down ten million dollars for his sake, but she hadn't fully accepted him. Part of her was still closed off, and he could see that remove every time she looked at him with a caution she didn't try to hide.

His ambling steps took him to her bedroom. The door was closed, to keep the cat in. When he opened it, her dark gray cat poked its head out from beneath the bed, watching with reflective eyes.

It smells like her in here, he thought wistfully, closing the door behind him.

Apple freesia, coconut, dusty sunshine.

He tilted his head, taking in the mirrored closet, the padded window seat, the faded sunflower motif on the walls. Most of her belongings were still boarded up in her San Francisco hovel, which was now leased in his name, so the room was a strange, frozen blend of the way she had left it in the late two-thousands and what she had brought back with her from the

city.

His eyes lingered on the nightstand crammed with fantasy novels and old romances. She'd been reading one; it was face-down on the nightstand beside her Kindle and a pair of tortoiseshell glasses that he hadn't known she owned.

They had been apart for nearly nine years and she was the same in so many ways that it was always startling to find something that had changed. Once, he had known her better than anyone. It was disturbing to realize that this might no longer be the case.

But when she turned down his proposal, she had said, "I'm going to need some time to think about this."

He had been taken off guard. She had decided to stay. As far as he was concerned, that was a tacit declaration that she was ready to be his.

"What's there to think about?"

"You're asking me to uproot everything I've done on my own to spend the rest of my life with you and I don't know if I can do that." She had lowered her eyes to the box in her hands, holding it with a care that hurt like violence. "I need to think about my answer."

How long? he nearly demanded.

They had been in the car, and he had floored the gas, gripping the wheel in a stranglehold.

How long are you going to make me wait?

"Nick." Her voice had been wary—frightened. "You're going too fast."

With a glance at the odometer, he hit the brakes with a screech, bringing the needle back down from the 90-mark.

"Nick?"

(Please don't hurt me)

"Take all the time you need." The words tasted like sawdust. He couldn't look at her again until they got home, which seemed to fill her with pity because she had chased him down in the hall, and said, "Wait" in a tone that had made him think she was about to change her mind, so he turned, expectant and ready for victory, only to have Jay press her lips against his.

"Why?" he'd asked, stepping back from her in the shadowy dark hall,

and she had responded, rather harshly, “Because I want to.”

Had she slept with him that night because she pitied him? As he surged between her thighs beneath that ghostly sculpture, with the marble steps leaving divots in their flesh that became lilac bruises worn beneath their clothes, had she already been thinking about when she would leave?

“God, I don’t think I can move,” she had said afterwards, her hair a tangled smudge against the stark white marble. “You haven’t been that rough with me since that night at the pool.”

“I didn’t realize you paid such close attention to how I fuck.”

Jay rolled on one arm to look at him. “What’s gotten into you?”

You, he thought, but he knew better than to say that, so he said nothing as he played with her hair, so focused on the rich texture of it that Jay frowned and pulled his hand away. Her expressive eyes traced his face with a familiarity that was scalding, sloughing away all but the sorry core of his being. He looked away with a frown as she touched his face.

“Are you all right?”

She doesn’t want you. The words in his head were his father’s voice, cold and amused. *Drink it in, boy. This is all you’ll ever have.* Unwillingly, his eyes dropped, taking in the moon-bathed contours of her body, her full breasts. “Yes. Let’s go to bed. I’ll carry you.”

“Okay, but be carefu—oh my god! Nick!”

She grabbed onto his shoulders in alarm as he swept her up easily, and the sensation of all that warm, bare skin against his own zipped through him like wildfire, leaving him bereft.

She doesn’t need to love me to give me what I want.

It didn’t matter that she was in his bed. They might as well have been separated by glass.

As she fell asleep, and all the stiffness melted from her limbs like glacial ice, he pulled her against him, burying his face in her hair with a sigh.

“Don’t leave.” There were still some things he wasn’t ready to say to her face. Not with the phantom scores of old hurts still blistering on his heart. But he could say it to her now as he breathed her in, drowning in her sweetness. “Please, stay for me. Love me. I want you to love me.”

She hadn't responded, which was fine. He told himself he didn't need an answer.

But he did. He needed "yes."

Shaking his head at his foolishness, Nicholas left her room, making sure to close the door behind him. His eyes went to the swinging jellyfish that they had made love under the night he proposed. Here or not, there were traces of her everywhere, and now that he had freed her from their bargain, his need for her throbbed like an infected wound.

If she left again, it would destroy him.

.....

Birds chirped to one another as they swooped and swirled over the little blue tents that had been set up to provide shade to the farmers and small business owners selling their wares on Main Street. Both sides of the street had been closed for the day, lined with kiosks and food trucks. The sun was shining through the haze of pollen in the air.

It's much too beautiful to feel melancholy, thought Jay.

A man cleared his throat noisily and she realized she had been standing in front of a table filled with bottles of raw milk and plastic-wrapped wedges of cheese. "Sorry," she said, scooting out of the way. An all-too-familiar flutter of anxiety asserted itself as people bumped up against her shoulders, making her cardigan stick to her skin.

She had grown up here and yet she had never felt more like a stranger. She kept seeing faces turning her way. Not quite staring but looking long enough to make her wonder what, exactly, it was that they thought they were looking at. Had they read about her stepfather in the *Hollybrook Herald*? Pulled up chairs to see if any dust would rise from the fallen rubble?

How many of them were living off of Nicholas's largesse, like serfs paying fealty to a fickle young lord, each thinking that they were getting the better of him, not knowing that he would let them all burn in a heartbeat?

(You're the only one in this fucking town worth more than the air you breathe)

Troubled, she walked over to a less crowded stall advertising itself as

vegan and dairy-free. There were plates of macarons made with aquafaba and filled with coconut cream, applesauce banana bread, and big wheels of cake glossed with shiny layers of glaze. The woman behind the counter watched her closely. “See anything you like? Prices are on the board.”

Jay followed her manicured nail and was nearly shocked, until she remembered that she could afford this now. “The vegan chocolate cake is forty dollars?”

“We also sell it by the slice if you can’t afford the whole cake.”

That wasn’t what she’d meant, and color rose in her cheeks. Resisting the urge to look down and check her outfit, she kept her smile pasted on as she fished for her credit card in her purse. Nicholas would like it. The candied raspberries were basically fruit sprinkles, and in all her life, she’d never seen that man turn down anything that had sugar on it.

“I’ll take a whole one.”

Maybe a peace offering would lift him out of the sour mood she’d left him in.

Children were playing on the grassy field across the road and Jay tracked them as the cashier rang up her purchase and began wrapping up the cake. She envied their carefree joy, the ease of their small bodies. It made her ache to protect them, too, because nobody had protected her, and look where her naivete had gotten her.

She found herself facing a camera lens and blinked rapidly, her breath coming in a startled rush. The man had iron-grey hair and was wearing a chambray shirt that had gone dark with sweat beneath his arms. *He’s just taking pictures of the event*, she told herself, over the ringing in her ears. *That’s all*. But then she heard another man’s voice whisper, *That’s the look*.

(I don’t want to fuck an angel)

“Jay? Oh my god, Jay? Is that you?”

She tore her eyes away from the photographer who had moved away to examine the booths. With her heart pounding the way it was, she didn’t notice how badly her hand was shaking when she accepted her credit card from the cake seller as she turned to see who had said her name.

“It *is* you.” The female voice was resonant and a little smug, and when Jay craned her neck, she found herself looking at a glamorous-looking

woman with long dark hair frosted with chestnut highlights.

“Hi?” Jay said, slightly panicked.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten us already, Jay. It’s *me*. Angie. Angela Diamante. Well—” she gave a practiced-sounding laugh “—it’s Angela Valdez now.”

That name hit her like a sledgehammer. “Valdez,” she repeated. “As in —”

“Michael, that’s right. You couldn’t possibly forget him.” She spoke the words like a challenge, and maybe they were. *You used to make out with my husband, Jay. Remember?*

“Wow, that was so long ago,” she babbled noncommittally. Something nudged her back—the cake, oh thank god. She took the box awkwardly, aware that the vendor was listening in eagerly, which was all the more reason for her to get the hell out of here. She tried to shuffle away but Angie, anticipating escape, hedged her off with an aggressive sidestep.

“Come over here, it’s way less crowded. It’s been an age, hasn’t it? Michael and I just had our firstborn. I would have invited you to the baby shower—and the wedding—but nobody knew where you were. It was like you had dropped off the face of the earth!”

Jay said nothing.

“Well.” Angie pretended to cough, glancing at the box at Jay’s arms. “What have you been up to after all this time? It looks like you’ve got something to celebrate.”

“Nope. Impulse buy.”

“This place is dangerous that way.” Jay nodded silently, looking desperately for an opening in the crowd that she could disappear into. “I saw you on the cover of the *Hollybrook Herald*. That looked like Oscar de la Renta. It was, wasn’t it? And just look at your *nails*.”

It took all of her effort not to yank her hand back when Angie grabbed her by the wrist. She’d hit a sore spot. As soon as she had agreed to go to the children’s cancer benefit gala—because it was for sick children, how could she say *no*?—he’d surprised her with an appointment at a salon and told her it was nonrefundable when she tried to insist that she could do her own makeup.

The building was completely empty when she arrived, except for the staff, and she thought there had been a mistake—until said staff greeted her with champagne and gold-leaf covered pastries that looked more expensive than her purse. Then she realized: it wasn't that they were lacking in customers; Nicholas had bought out the place. The whole time she was there, Jay had been terrified that they were judging her for her Target blouse and chewed-on cuticles, but whatever ungodly sum he'd paid them had made them compliment her within an inch of her life.

She had been so angry that night, it had been all she could do to keep it together in his arms when he dragged her out from behind one of the massive centerpieces and onto the dancefloor. *You knew what I wanted*, she thought, feeling self-conscious and betrayed. *And you did this anyway*.

"I've had six people pull me aside to ask me who you are, Jay. You have to dance with me. I just donated fifty thousand dollars to this event and my plus-one isn't allowed to hide behind a fern. I don't see what the problem is," he added callously. "I told them you're my sister."

Jay didn't bother telling him that two of those people he was referring to had found her already and asked for the name of her "agency." That with the expensive jewelry and lack of wedding ring, there was only one assumption people would make about a woman in a dress like hers and it involved getting paid by the hour by men who would absolutely lie about her being their sister.

A twinge of guilt went through her as she remembered how the smile had died from his face at her continued silence.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

And she had turned away. "I want to leave."

(You don't know the thoughts that go through a man's mind when they see a girl who looks like you)

"Where did you get them done?"

"I'm sorry?" Jay blinked into Angie's looming face.

"Your nails."

"Oh, La Vie, I think."

"Aren't they by appointment only? You must be doing better than everyone thought if you're going to places like that." She smiled, like she

hadn't just insinuated that all of their old friends thought she was a loser. "Oh, I see Michael. He'll want to say hello you, too. *Michael!* Come over here, honey. You'll never guess who I just found. It's Jay. *High school Jay.*"

Shit. Jay looked over at the man Angie had singled out. It wasn't hard to spot him: his hair had receded a little and his middle had thickened, but otherwise, Michael Valdez looked almost exactly the same as she remembered him. Light brown skin, curly hair, and a slightly perplexed expression that had always reminded her of a well-trained dog awaiting approval.

"Wow, Jay," he said, looking her over in a way that had her stepping back, and folding her arms. "You look amazing. I mean, uh, wow. Amazing that it's been so long. It's great to see you."

Angie shot him a sidelong look that he didn't notice. "It is good to see you. I think you were just about to tell me where you've been hiding yourself away this whole time."

"San Francisco. But I'm back for now. Anyway, it's been so good to run into you both and, um, congratulations." Jay realized she was twisting a strand of hair around her finger and hastily lowered the offending hand. "I should really go—"

"I heard you moved back home. Are you living with Nicholas?"

You're really doing this here, Angie? Jay clenched her teeth behind her smile. "Why not? It's a big house. He offered and I said yes."

Not to what he wanted you to.

"Well, I'm glad you two could make up after all of that horrible business with your dad." Angie gave Michael an expression of exaggerated sympathy. "It took the whole town by shock."

"Stepfather," Jay said. "He wasn't my father."

"Michael felt so guilty." Angie put her hand on his shoulder and while he didn't shrug her off, Jay saw him visibly tense. "He always talks about how close we all used to be, and how he wished there was something he could have done."

"I don't know why he felt guilty," Jay said, which made his eyes slide away from hers. "We only went out for about a year. Our parents just did business together. It had no reflection on *him*."

“How is Nicky, by the way?” Angie asked sweetly. “Is he seeing anyone? I heard you were his plus-one for the gala.”

Damn you, Nicholas. “We don’t really talk about his relationships.”

“Our housekeeper sees him at the supermarket. He’s always alone. Even at parties, he never brought an escort. I always thought that was so sad. It seemed like nobody was good enough to meet his standards. But at least now he has you.”

Jay swallowed. “I suppose.”

“You two should come by for a visit sometime.” She plucked a business card from her pants pocket, sliding it into Jay’s hand. *Diamante Dining Group.* “I own some of the businesses downtown—two restaurants, a bakery, and a bar. Michael built them, if you can believe it. I can’t, even though it’s how we got together. Though not much is getting built now.”

“There’s no land.” Michael still seemed to have trouble looking at her, but Jay didn’t think she imagined the tightness in his voice. *Sore spot, maybe?*

“And weren’t we lucky we seized upon what we had when we had the chance, babe?” Angie arched her eyebrows at Jay as she plucked her phone out of her purse. “Looks like the babysitter needs to leave, and so do we. I’ll bring the car around. And seriously, stop by the bar for a chat sometime, Jay. We can catch up on everything we missed over drinks while the boys have beers.”

“Yeah, that sounds great.” *That sounds horrible.*

“I just can’t wait to hear all your secrets.” Angie patted Jay on the arm. She flinched.

With a smile that felt more like a baring of teeth, Angie flounced off to the gravel parking lot. She paused halfway, her shoulders tightening when she noticed that her husband hadn’t followed.

Because he was still standing right there.

“Sorry about her.” Michael scratched at his neck. “She’s always been a little competitive.”

“You should go after her.” Jay watched Angie swivel around, with an expression of hurt anger on her face that was painful to look at. “She looks upset.”

"That's all you have to say, after disappearing for nine years?" He rocked back on his heels, staring at her like she was a ghost of herself. Maybe to him, she was. *High school Jay* had never talked back or criticized. "You could have asked how I'm doing."

"Okay, it's nice to see you. Congratulations on your kid. How are you and your wife doing?"

He sighed. "So it's going to be like that, is it?"

"I'm not really sure what you want from me."

A stone scratched against the pavement as Michael toed the loose rocks with his tasseled loafer. Nicholas made fun of shoes like that. He said loafers were for men who bought boats but were terrified of water, which really shouldn't have been as funny as it was.

"She doesn't own me, you know. We were all friends before any of us started dating."

You were friends. I was just the outsider you let hang around because my stepfather's last name looked good on business agreements. "People grow up. They drift apart. That's normal."

"It isn't normal. You left without a single word to anyone. Not even your mom knew where you went—and believe me, people asked." Michael shook his head, making Jay wonder if he'd been one of them. The thought of what her mother might have said about that night made all the warmth drain out of her. "You missed the ten-year reunion. You abandoned this place."

"Because there was nothing left for me here!"

"Wow, thanks, Jay. I'm so glad you thought we were all nothing." Michael glanced over his shoulder to check the lot, but Angie had already left—to get the car, Jay imagined. If there wasn't a fight on the drive home, she'd be very surprised. "Was it me?"

"It didn't have anything to do with you."

"Well, then can you tell me what happened? Because I've been trying to understand." He moved towards her hesitantly, lowering his outstretched hand when she just stared at it. "I want to understand. At least let me take you out for coffee. Maybe I can help."

Jay stepped back. "I really don't think that's a good idea."

“My wife’s bar, then. She invited you. You can come by when she’s working, and I’ll buy you a drink. It’s the twenty-first century, Jay. Men and women can go out as friends and have a drink or two. I thought you were a feminist.”

I’m a feminist, you know, one of those men at the gala said as he stared at her in a way that made her want to crawl out of her skin. *I’ll treat you the way a man should treat a woman.*

She couldn’t quite manage to hide her distaste. “Jesus, Michael.”

“What? I wasn’t making a move.” He laughed nervously, his eyes shifting. “I just hate that things between us ended the way they did. I really liked you.”

“I’m sorry,” Jay said automatically.

“Yeah, I know you didn’t feel the same way. But that’s fine. You look great. You always did. I’m glad that things worked out so well for you and Nicholas. His mother’s jewelry suits you.”

The bitterness in his voice was sharp enough to sting—as if he thought she were some grasping trophy wife. He strode towards his wife’s waiting black Solara. The windows were rolled down, so she saw her smack his shoulder when he got in, too roughly to be entirely playful. Their heads bowed together briefly and Jay could only imagine what Angie was saying.

You look amazing. She ordered an Uber one-handed, not wanting to walk back with the cake. Who said that to another woman in front of his own wife? Did he think she would *agree*?

Jay slipped gratefully into the weathered Honda Civic that pulled up to the curb. “Justine?” the driver asked, and Jay nodded, not bothering to correct her. She also pretended not to notice the woman goggling at the mansion when they pulled up at Nicholas’s house. With all those ostentatious white columns, and the paned glass windows, it *was* an imposing sight, even from the street, when viewed from behind a barren driveway and row of crooked trash cans.

Frowning, she shifted the cake box to one arm and began to straighten the lids. One kept popping back up. Something beneath wouldn’t let it seal. When she peeked under the lid, she saw a rather elaborately carved wooden something. Was that a clock? The one from Nick’s office? It was still working—she could hear the ticking sounds. Why had he tossed it out?

Why does Nick do anything?

She continued up the porch, leaving the discarded clock ticking sadly away in the bin. The lazy spring breeze carried the scents of chlorine and jasmine, and a little shiver arced down her spine as she used the spare key to open the door and found herself stepping into that familiar haze of blue light that was the first thing to beckon her into this house that was not quite a home.

“I’m back!” she called out redundantly, setting the cake out on the counter. There were traces of Nick, but he wasn’t in the living room, and the door to what had been his father’s office was wide open and obviously empty. “Nick? Are you home?”

“I’m home.” She looked away as he walked barefoot into the kitchen, busying herself with the dishes in the sink. “How was the farmers’ market?” He leaned an elbow on the counter, tilting his head to lean into her periphery. His biceps made the sleeves of his old T-shirt strain dangerously. “Did the yokels turn out in droves?”

She scrubbed harder. “You’ve never even seen a yokel. And yes, it was basically a schmaltzy who’s-who-in-Hollybrook event playacting as a country jamboree. You would have hated it. How was the interview?”

“She wasn’t a good fit.”

He sounded irritated. She couldn’t tell if it was at her. Maybe she should have let him come along, like he’d offered, but having him run into Michael and Angela would have been a disaster. Nicholas was dangerous when bored, and liked to sow chaos for his own amusement.

Setting her shoulders, she went on, “I actually ran into Michael and Angie there.”

Nicholas moved closer. Her skin prickled. “Michael, as in your ex?”

“Yes. He’s married now. They have a kid.”

He rested a hand on the counter. She could feel the warmth of his chest through the back of her thin sweater. “You sound disappointed.”

“I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“Then why did you bring it up?”

Some dark note in his voice made her turn over her shoulder. He had a thumb through the belt loops of his designer jeans, his gaze laser-focused

on hers.

“Was I supposed to hide it?” She kept her voice light.

The chill on the back of her neck increased; it was his breath, stirring the fine hairs at her nape. “Interesting that you would come to that conclusion. Do you still carry a torch for your ex? I’ve seen him negotiate. It’s pathetic. If you asked him to tie you up, he’d run to his father for help.”

“Don’t.” She leaned forward, bracing her palms against the granite top as if she could absorb strength from the stone. “I’m not going to talk to you if you’re going to be like this.”

“Like what?”

“You know what you’re doing.” Jay spun around again. “I don’t belong to you, Nicholas. You don’t own me just because I happen to live under your roof, and you certainly don’t get to hound me about who I’m talking to, like some kind of jealous hus—” She broke off.

“No, go on, finish that sentence. I want to hear what you were going to say.”

Jay bit her lip.

“I agreed to give you time. All the time you need.” His eyes went pointedly to her throat, where she was wearing the ring around her neck on a slender silver chain. “But you don’t get to throw my proposal in my face like it’s a fucking glass of water.”

“You’re right,” she said, looking away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“You never do, little bird.” He plucked at the strap of her tank top. “So who *did* old limp-dick marry? Someone useful to daddy’s business, I’m assuming.”

“Angie.”

“Well, well. Not even subtle on the rebound.”

Jay jerked her shoulders away and picked up a dish.

Nicholas sighed. Then she felt his hands on her waist, crushing the fabric against her skin. His palms seared her through her clothes but she pretended to ignore him, loading dishes into the expensive, new-fangled dishwasher that she barely knew how to use.

“Jay.” The bubbles in the sink blurred as his hands moved. “Put down that plate and look at me.”

“Why?” she asked, holding herself very stiffly. “Is the outcome of whatever this is going to change if it happens face to face?”

He ran two fingers over the band of midriff where her top had ridden up. She jerked again, and with the hand not still wrapped around her, he reached forward to shut the water off. She was pressed flush against the counter now, her pelvis cutting into the granite. She could feel the gouge of his hips against the rounded curves of her ass.

“I’m talking to you.”

A shiver went down her spine at that familiar dark tone. She reached for another plate anyway, but her hand was unsteady and he caught her by the wrist, turning her around slowly without moving back an inch, so she felt every inch of his body as he hauled her up against him.

“Why are you breathing like that?” The words were rough against her ear. “Is this turning you on?”

“Screw you.”

With a grunt, he bent down and slid his hand beneath her ass, dropping her onto the counter so roughly that her breasts bounced. He put his hands over hers, caging them loosely against the stone as his face hovered in front of hers. She tried to look away, but he freed up one hand to tilt her chin up, his fingers gently impressing the hollow of her jaw.

“What is this?”

“Nothing.” Her eyes flicked away. “Do whatever you’re going to do.”

His eyes narrowed speculatively. But before she could speak again, he got to his knees and tugged down her pants so roughly that she nearly slid off the counter. “Nick—”

He slid his fingers inside her, spreading her wide as he knelt between her legs and used one of his shoulders, and his braced forearm to keep her thighs open.

“Whatever I’m going to do?”

The kiss of his fingers moving inside her made her look away in shame, though she couldn’t deny the slow burning heat licking its way from her belly any more than she could hide the soft sounds of her pleasure. It

made her desperate, how much she wanted this.

It made her afraid.

(You must be doing better than everyone thought)

She twisted like a hooked fish, and Nicholas's hands tightened, intent on bringing this scenario to its one natural conclusion.

(his mother's jewelry suits you)

"Michael asked me out," she gasped.

"What?" It came out as a snarl, hitting a register that sent a chill down her spine.

"His wife was right there. He asked me right in front of her and it made me feel like I was—oh, god—*Nicholas*—"

With a feral growl, he yanked her forward, burying his face between her thighs and kissing her swollen clit so hard she bit her lip from the shock of it. Her hips lifted, rising to meet the insistent pressure of his tongue, prompting him to slide his hand beneath her ass to keep her at an even tilt.

It felt so good, it was like punishment. It probably was. Jay gripped the counter, trying to shift her hips, but he wouldn't let her move.

"Nick, please."

"What's wrong? Does it hurt?"

Jay tried to respond and a moan came out instead.

"Oh, I see. You're just embarrassed that you like fucking Daddy's face."

His cruelty made her ache in places too deep and dark to reach. She grabbed for the cabinet with one hand, her free one still tangled in his hair as she slid precariously closer to the edge.

"Fuck, oh my god—"

"This is what you do to me, Jay." She felt the cool enamel of his teeth and then suction that, combined with the soft pressure of his tongue, tipped her over and made her come for the second time with a raw sob. His low sound of approval rocked her like an aftershock. "Doesn't it feel good to fall apart?"

She surged forward with a cry, her fingers flattening against his scalp as she held onto the cabinet's rough underside until her fingernails were

throbbing. Her clit was a white-hot star under the unhurried strokes of his tongue, everything burning away to raw, trembling nerves.

“Again. Show me how my beautiful little whore likes to come.”

“I can’t—please—”

He kissed her again, a little harder, a little crueler, and she unraveled with another sob. This time, he ran his fingers down her back, his forehead resting just below her navel, his breathing fast and light. *God.* Her fingers tightened around the fistful of hair she still held. *Nick*—

“Please.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Please.”

“This is mine.”

“Oh god.”

“You are mine.”

“Nick—”

“I could kill him.”

The words, as clear and bright as winter ice, were impossible to misunderstand. But Jay did, blinking rapidly as the hazy fog of her orgasm rapidly dispersed.

“W-what?”

“Your fucking ex.”

Every bead of sweat went cold against her skin. “No,” she said, edging back from him, knowing even as she did that it was only because he was letting her. “Don’t say things like that. Not even as a joke. It isn’t funny.”

“No, what’s funny is that he thinks he can talk to you like you’re a high-priced escort.” He looked up at her thunderously. “Is that what happened? Did he touch you?”

“No! It wasn’t like that.” She grabbed for her jeans, hitching them up her hips. “Nick, it’s not just him. It’s this whole town. Everywhere I go, it feels like people are looking at me. Judging me. Judging us. At the gala—” She hesitated, the sharpness of his words—*I could kill him*—making her change direction. “People see a man like you with a woman like me and they—”

“What?” His voice was low, dangerous. He was still on his knees but his eyes—oh, god, his *eyes*. She goaded him into being cruel, taunted him

into punishing her, and now she was no longer certain if he was playing or if it would even be her blood on the line. Not with eyes like that.

“They don’t think you’re letting me stay here for free,” she finished warily.

The dark gleam in his eyes winked out. He got up, dusting off his pants as she tugged her clothes back into place. Now that he was no longer touching her, she was more keenly aware of how well he weaponized his size and stature, and how easily he wielded both against her.

It bothered her how much she sometimes liked it when she did.

She did not want to be just another possession. Even if it was a prized one, put in a place of honor. Possessions could be thrown out like old clocks. Just because she liked surrendering control during sex, that didn’t mean she wanted to be a submissive wife.

“Do you understand?” she pressed, when he didn’t speak.

“Perfectly.” He licked his fingers in a way that made her falter as he tilted his head towards the hall. “My room. Now.”

“Tell me you’re not going to do anything stupid to Michael.”

His eyes narrowed. When he lunged, she didn’t even have time to dodge. He swung all five feet, ten inches of her up in his arms before she even had time to react or scream. That came in a belated burst as he carried her down the hall and up the stairs like a brute, kicking the door to the master bedroom open in blind haste, before tossing her down on the mattress roughly enough that she felt the memory foam kick up against her back.

He crossed his arms and tugged his shirt over his head, balling it off to the side. Catching her glance, he undid the button of his fly and dragged down the zipper.

“Take your clothes off. All of them. I don’t want to hear his name again.”

Jay stared at him as he waited, then glanced at the door. They had played out this game before—if she ran, he would chase her; if she fought him, he would hold her down. The line of consent ran so thinly between them that sometimes, Jay couldn’t see where it was at all.

Still on the bed, she squirmed out of her pants and underwear, heat

suffusing her face when he didn't look away. "I didn't even sleep with him," she said, gripping the hem of her star-printed tank top before pulling that off, too.

"I know."

She unhooked her bra, folding her arms. A cold shiver snaked down her naked back as he walked closer. Her heart rate kicked up another notch when he reached beneath the bed and took out the handcuffs. When he pulled her hands away from her chest and nudged her backwards with the heel of his hand against her ribs, she felt like her stomach had gone into a heated freefall.

She stared at the ceiling as he shackled her to the wooden posts with their detailed bevels and scrolls. This part was always gentle, even if what came after it wasn't. After fastening her left hand, he pressed a kiss to the back of it, as he had done so many other times before while restraining her.

"Why do you do that?" she asked suddenly.

"This?" He leaned over to kiss the back of her hand again, this time letting his teeth catch on her skin before pulling away. "Because I think you're sweet."

Sweet. The word felt like a thorn in her throat. People had called her that in high school, but it felt like a status that could be revoked at any time. Every time Michael had asked—pleaded, really—for her to sleep with him, she had said no, terrified that if word got out, she wouldn't be the sweet girl. She'd be the girl who did *those* things. The sort of girl whose name got carved into bathroom stalls and blew boys beneath the bleachers.

You're just like your mother, part of her brain had always whispered. When she let her stepbrother fuck her while wearing his dead mother's diamonds, that voice had been deafening. It had screamed, *Good girls don't take off their clothes for men*.

"I'm not sweet," said Jay.

"You are." She jumped when Nicholas swung over her hips. The coarse hair on his chest and thighs prickled against her sensitive skin as he leaned down, using his weight to push her into the bed. He bent to one of her nipples, biting gently. "You're the sweetest girl I know."

"No," said Jay.

He glanced at her before turning to her other breast. “I bet he thinks so, too. Probably while jerking off to the pure little angel he secretly hopes you still are.”

Jay clenched her hands, forcing herself to take a deep breath. To not arch into that kiss that stung like a bruise. “Why are you so jealous?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Nicholas swirled his tongue over the skin he’d bitten, now tight with gooseflesh. Jay heard the tear of a condom wrapper, followed by a sound of low, masculine pleasure as he entered her on an agonizingly slow thrust. “He had you when I didn’t.” His hand slid down to grip her hip, biting into the girdle of bone. “You were his.”

“I *didn’t* sleep with him.”

Her voice came out harsher than she’d intended, and his eyes lifted. His expression scared her and she pulled nervously at her restraints. When he was naked, she could sense the untrammelled power that hummed beneath his skin; the tension he carried in those powerful shoulders and those long, strong legs. Some men looked smaller without their clothes.

Nicholas looked bigger.

Jay shut her eyes, breathing harder as his hand shifted to her hair, pushing the loose strands out of her face before caressing her cheek, her chin.

It’s what you’re here for.

“You’re shaking.” His thumb trailed over her lip. “You don’t want to look at me?”

Of all the things he could have said to her, this was what broke her wide open.

The sound she made gave him pause. And then he sighed. “Shhh. Relax, little bird. I’m very close. You don’t have to do anything.”

Adrenaline shot through her veins, and she was still heady from that potent rush of fear when his lips crushed against hers, making her gasp into his mouth at the next hard stroke.

“That’s it—” He traced her jaw possessively. “You’re so beautiful.”

No, thought Jay. *I don’t want to be.* Eyes still shut, she turned her head, this time tilting it back in invitation, and only someone who was very familiar with his body would have noticed the brief pause before he

collared her throat with his fingers.

“No,” she said, shuddering. “Daddy, no—”

He groaned, and pressed his mouth to her temple. The heavy weight of him was smothering, and Jay gasped as he finished inside her, his body covering hers completely. She could feel the thrum of his heartbeat against her breast.

There was nothing to hide now, not like this. Not with that familiar ache blooming in her belly as he took what he wanted from her, the most satisfying lover she’d ever had. And the cruellest.

The cruellest thing he’d ever done, though, was telling her that he loved her.

She opened her eyes and saw him watching her. His pupils were large and dark, nearly eclipsing the grey. He was still inside her, and she was struck, suddenly, by his closeness, and how neatly his body aligned with her own from chest to hip. She could feel his heart pounding.

His mouth tilted into something too somber and severe for a smile, and he nipped gently at her earlobe before kissing her ear. “Who do you belong to?”

Jay parted her lips and felt him reverently trace their shape. His fingers still tasted like her.

“You, Daddy.”

Chapter Two

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“You seem distracted.”

Jay pushed her hair out of her eyes and looked away from the far-too-many tabs she had open. “Hi, Arthur. No, I’m fine. I’m just—” *burned out from playing society darling? Sore from fucking my stepbrother?* Her eyes skated over the jar of candies on her desk, the mug that said ‘World’s Best Cat Aunt.’ “—busy,” she finished lamely. “Did you need something?”

His smile was horribly sympathetic. “You missed our two o’ clock.”

But that meeting isn’t until two, she thought nonsensically. She swerved to look at her open calendar and there it was, highlighted in red. *Arthur & Jay: 2PM.*

“Oh god,” she said. “It’s two-thirty. I’m so, so sorry—”

“It’s all right, Jay.” He glanced at Annica, who was pretending she wasn’t listening. “There wasn’t really anything we needed to go over anyway, and I was thinking about canceling it.”

Jay didn’t believe that for a minute. “It won’t happen again.”

“Even the best workers deserve a day off.”

“You’re right. I’ll be sure to do that as soon as I have the time.” *A time when I haven’t just royally screwed up.* “Thank you for letting me know.”

His smile turned slightly wry. “You sound like Nicholas. No wonder you got along so well. You’re cut from the same cloth. The two of you would both work yourselves right into the grave, given the proper incentive.”

Jay stared at the back of his suit as he strolled back towards his corner office on the second floor. *Cut from the same cloth?* she wondered, stunned. *Nicholas?*

She could see him on the phone with a client, elbows splayed on his desk. As she watched, he reached one-handed for his coffee cup, only to set it down in a way that suggested he’d forgotten it was empty.

I guess Annica still doesn’t ‘do’ coffee, she thought, smiling unconsciously.

Just as quickly as it surfaced, her smile faded.

It had been forty-eight days since he'd shown up at her job in San Francisco to blackmail her into coming back. Two weeks since he'd proposed to her in that empty mall.

Three days since their fight.

Cut from the same cloth was a funny choice of words, since even though they shared no blood, they'd been raised together like brother and sister.

When she shot down his first attempt to complicate their relationship further, he had taken the rejection personally. He had become obsessive, dangerous.

Her own personal tormentor.

For a whole summer, she'd been at his mercy—which was unfortunate, because he had none. He had taken her innocence and then, later, her soul.

Now, he was after her heart, as well.

When he had shown up in her life again, she had been terrified that he was going to humiliate her as revenge for her leaving all those years ago. His little blackmail mistress, take two. But, confusingly, he had given her a job. And rather than chase her around the desk like she feared, he had been a consummate professional about it.

Professional, but not nice, no. As his assistant, he'd kept her running around the office, getting his coffee, but also handling client files and sourcing out new clientele. She'd never had that much responsibility at her previous job and even now, working under Arthur, she often found her pace of work to be rather slow. With Nicholas, he had forced her to rise to the challenge. To prove to him—and herself—that she wouldn't just roll over in defeat.

It had never been enough for him to have her on her back, after all.

Her face heated and she looked down at her lap.

She'd slept with him every night this week.

They didn't exactly advertise their relationship but people talked. Just the other day, a group of women had been in the breakroom gossiping about how Nicholas went through assistants as if they were disposable.

"He's had three secretaries this year! Can you believe it?"

“Maybe he’s screwing them and paying them off.”

“Madison!” The third woman’s eyes darted in Jay’s direction.

They had laughed the nervous laughs of people who knew they’d gone too far when they realized she was in the room.

“Good morning, Jay,” the third one had said, too brightly, while the others stared into their coffee, and Jay had said, “Hello,” in what she hoped sounded like the voice of someone who would never screw her employer.

Despite what he thought, he *would* resent her if she ended up costing him his job or turning him into a joke. Maybe he didn’t think he would now, while the bloom was still on the rose, but she knew better than anyone how quickly love could turn to resentment or even outright loathing as soon as you were no longer what the other person wanted.

She was going to have to give him an answer at some point. She just didn’t know what to do. He saw her in a way that nobody else did, with a clarity that often felt obscene. She didn’t have to pretend with him but that sort of honesty came with strings that tied you down, and after years of seeing her mother wither under the control of his father, she was reluctant to give Nicholas the same power over her if it meant a tragic ending.

He said he’d wait for me. So why do I feel like I’m running out of time?

Across the room, she saw Nicholas get up from his desk and jog down the stairs. She sat up. Her panic mounted as he headed in her direction, but instead of speaking to her dead on, he circled around behind her. A sudden pressure on the back of her chair suggested that he was casually resting one or both arms there. If she leaned even slightly back, her head would touch his chest.

“What—” she began, only to fall short as he spoke past her, to Annica.

“Did you get the files I sent you?”

Annica lifted off her headphones while Jay stared very hard at her screen. “Yeah.” The other woman glanced in her direction and did a slow double-take. “I haven’t looked at them yet. Can I review them by the end of the day?”

“I’d prefer it be done as soon as possible.” The nape of her neck prickled as Nicholas began to toy with a curl of her hair. “I need it for the investors I’m meeting with at four.”

The screen blurred in front of her eyes. *Oh my god.*

He caught himself before she could bring herself to say something, clothing rustling as he straightened. The chair resettled with a squeak that seemed too loud. “Can you take care of it?”

Annica stared over Jay’s shoulder. “I’ll do it now.”

“Good.”

Not trusting herself to speak, Jay got up from her chair abruptly, drawing both their eyes as she headed for the bathroom. One look in a mirror revealed that her cheeks were flushed and she cursed, quickly locking herself away in one of the stalls as she tried to calm down.

Shit, shit, shit, shit.

Two women entered while Jay deleted the text message she had started to type out to Nicholas, that began, *You promised you wouldn’t touch me in the office.*

She knew what he would say. *It’s not like I bent you over the desk in front of Accounting.*

The exterior doors swung open with a bang. Jay let her hand fall back from the stall door as a group of women walked in, talking so loudly that their voices echoed off the tile.

“What time are we meeting for drinks tonight?”

“Five on the dot. Stacey’s been after me all day for not meeting quota last week. At this rate, I’m going to be double-fisting before seven.”

“Stacey’s not so bad. Steve Jensen’s a lot worse and I heard Mr. Beaucroft actually made someone scream. Security had to escort her out.”

“I wouldn’t mind if he made *me* scream. He’s fine as hell. I can’t believe he isn’t married.” The women got into adjoining stalls, several rows down. “Speaking of, who’s the woman he comes in with every morning?”

Jay froze.

“What woman? I’ve only ever seen him come in alone.”

“They drive in together. He waits in the car for like five minutes and comes in after her. It’s weird. They leave together, too. One night I forgot my purse and security had to let me in after hours. When I passed by the window, I saw him leaving—with *her*.”

“Ohhh, I know who you’re talking about. Tall? Curly hair? That’s his sister—Kay.”

“The *secretary*?” The first woman scoffed. “They don’t look related.”

“Not his real sister. His stepsister. Their whole family is super weird. Supposedly the mom was some kind of porn star and the dad was in a sex scandal.”

“And how would you know that? You didn’t even move here until like a year ago.”

“There’s this guy who comes into the bar where my sister works at. Some creep they went to school with who won’t shut up about the glory days.” Her scoff echoed like a reprimand. “When he’s not busy hitting on older women, he says that Mr. Beaucroft was always super possessive of his sister. In, like, a really weird way.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go around telling people that.” The stall door slammed closed. Jay heard the sound of running water. “I heard he just got out of a lawsuit. You could be next.”

“Yeah? Good luck with that. I can barely afford rent.” Their heels echoed off the floor. “I hope they actually remember to charge us happy hour prices this time,” the other woman said, her voice fading. “Make sure Mary-Beth pays up this time. I can’t drop twenty dollars apiece on drinks again. Maybe the dives have it right—even if they are full of sad creeps with mommy issues.”

The door swung shut with a bang and Jay was alone.

She washed her hands and went back to her desk, blinking under the too-bright lights. Someone said hello to her and all she could manage was a wave and a tight smile. “*In, like, a really weird way.*” She couldn’t get the woman’s snide, knowing tone out of her mind.

The rest of the day passed in a sort of fugue. She found herself listening in on conversations, wondering how many other employees had suspicions about the real nature of her and Nicholas’s relationship. When Arthur told her to have a good evening, briefcase in hand, she jumped. Annica had already quietly slipped away and now, except for Nicholas—and Arthur—she was all alone.

“Don’t work too late,” Arthur said. “Remember what I said, Jay. Even

the brightest stars only work half the day.”

Actually, stars never stop burning until they die.

Jay waved goodbye, glancing up at Nicholas’s office. He’d turned his light off but she could see him in silhouette doing something on his computer in the dark. She wondered how that meeting with his investors had gone. HR had been keeping a tight rein on him after his misconduct.

I should ask him. She dug for her phone in her purse, wondering if there had been a text since she’d last checked. He usually told her how late he was going to be. Jay didn’t mind waiting, though. The later he was, the fewer people there were around to see them leave.

She *did* have a new message, but it wasn’t from Nicholas. It was from her mother.

How can you treat your own mother like this? You used to be such a good girl.

You selfish, ungrateful little brat.

Nicholas had threatened to bankrupt her mother, who didn’t have the funds to fight him in court. Her mother had pleaded with her to intercede on her behalf, which made Jay wonder how much she really knew about what had really gone on between her and her stepbrother.

Had she known what he’d had done to her and sold her out, regardless? It was a terrible thought, but one she kept coming back to, over and over again. No, ‘hi, how are you, how did it go?’ It was as if she didn’t want to know the details.

Or, Jay thought, with a little twist in her heart, as if she knows them already.

Nicholas had offered her ten million dollars to stay with him forever. She bitterly wondered what her mother would do if she found out that she refused the money.

“Jay?”

She jumped guilty, hand tightening as she unconsciously tilted the screen towards her chest. Nicholas was holding his briefcase in one hand and his car keys in the other, standing just a little too close. She backed away in her wheeled chair so his hips weren’t quite so level with her face.

“H-hey.”

“Hey.” He looked a little tired around the eyes. As a concession to the lateness of the hour, his tie was gone and he had a bit of five o’ clock shadow. “Ready to go?”

“Yes.” She began to gather her things, the words *super possessive* volleying through her mind as he loomed over her. “Just let me lock my computer.”

Nicholas pulled out his phone while he waited. “Who were you texting?”

“It’s my mother. She’s been after me all week. I haven’t responded.”

“Good.” He tapped something on his phone. “Don’t.”

“I think she’s still fixated on the money.”

“Of course she is. You’re such a good little investment opportunity.”

“Don’t talk about me like that, like I’m tradable. I know you hate her but don’t diminish me like that to do it.”

The ice in his eyes thawed a little, although his mouth remained a solid line. She wondered if he was thinking about his proposal. If so, he wouldn’t bring it up here. He was far too proud to let any of his peons be privy to even the slightest chance of rejection.

“It was a slight against your mother,” he said, a little coolly. “Not you.”

“I know what you meant. You think I’m a pushover just because I don’t announce my anger to the room the way you do. I can handle my mother.”
By avoiding all her calls.

Nicholas slid his phone back into his pocket. She couldn’t read his expression at all now. When he wanted to, he could make himself unreachable.

“If you’re finished, we can go,” he said.

“Fine,” she said tautly.

She started walking, hitching her purse up her shoulder as they passed the silent rows of dark monitors. The sharpness of his gestures suggested he was irritated. That made two of them.

Nicholas punched the alarm code for the door. “I thought we’d grab dinner on the way home. I didn’t have time to eat today and I don’t believe you did, either.”

Still annoyed, she said, struggling to keep her voice civil, “Where did you have in mind?”

He closed the door. The parking lot was frosted in orange from the streetlights. Crickets chirped in the bushes and she could hear the distant roar of the freeway. His Tesla was the only car in the lot. She edged a little closer as they approached his car in the darkness.

“Accia,” he said.

The most expensive and visible restaurant in town? Jay nearly protested, then thought better of it. In his current mood, he’d only take it as the start of another fight.

He might even be trying to start one now.

For a man who had over ten million dollars, a \$100 dinner was just 0.001% of his total assets. A far more comfortable indulgence than someone like her—who had perhaps \$30,000 to her name, including her 401k—could fathom, when a \$6 burrito was 0.02% of her total net worth.

She worried that Nicholas had done a similar calculation in his mind. That some of these latest efforts of his weren’t just courtship attempts, they were a buy-out.

“Accia’s fine,” she said, suspecting this would annoy him.

“They have a new vegan carpaccio.” He started the engine without looking at her, but there was tension in the tanned skin of his face. “It’s made with watermelon radishes and beetroot, with an almond butter and soy yogurt sauce.”

She felt herself falling into the silence that followed and gripped her battered old purse as if it were a lifeline. He was looking at her, as if for her approval.

Let him take care of you. The voice sounded like her mother’s. *It would be easy, and he wants to. Would it really be so bad?*

“Did they pay you to write their ad copy, too?”

“No, blue jay.” He sounded amused, even though her attempt at light-heartedness came out sounding flat and hostile. “I just know you too well.”

The car hit a divot and his ring bounced off her collarbone, striking her sharply on the chin.

“Great,” she said again. “I can’t wait.”

Of course it will be easy. And as soon as it becomes hard to love me, he’ll stop.

Nicholas parked the car. They were downtown and he’d parked on one of the less busy streets. They were far from the glowing street lamps throwing Main Street in a constant blaze and the neon sign from a closed sushi bar was the only source of light, the red neon gleaming off his profile.

“What’s gotten into you?”

“I’m fine.”

He leaned over the center console—as if he were going to check, she thought, hysterically. His palm slid up her leg, calluses catching on the thin silk. He snapped the strap of her stockings against her inner thigh. “Stop saying ‘fine.’ You’re not fine. Is this about your mother?”

She tugged her skirt down. Over his hand, because he didn’t move it. Her stomach felt like it was going into freefall. “No. I missed a meeting with Arthur, that’s all.”

Nicholas didn’t look convinced. “An unimportant one?”

“That’s not the point. I’ve been distracted, making mistakes. I don’t want—”

Her voice broke off when she felt him touch her through her underwear.

He doesn’t care about your problems. He just wants to fuck his mistress.

“Come here,” he said.

She leaned reluctantly into the wavering band of neon separating them. In the shadows, his mouth curved before he closed the rest of the distance. *Oh god,* thought Jay, gripping him tightly by the back of his neck as he tugged her bra down through her blouse. Cool watery silk rubbed against her bare skin, sending a pleasurable frisson of sensation to her nipples.

“Tell me what’s wrong, little bird.” Nicholas spoke against her mouth, squeezing her breast and kissing her so deeply that responding became impossible. She felt him begin to undo the small buttons of her blouse. “Why are you distracted?”

Because of you. She thought of those women, and the way that Angie had looked at her with such dry, knowing amusement.

They were probably envisioning something exactly like this.

“I feel like such a failure,” she sobbed.

“You’re not a failure.”

“Then why do I feel so *awful*? ”

“I don’t know.” Her skirt had ridden up again, exposing her garters. He put his hand on her upper thigh. The pressure of the seat on her swollen clit made her shift her hips as he bent to her again, pushing her shirt open as his lips grazed her bare throat. “Maybe I can kiss it better.”

An unsteady breath left her just as a shadow floated over the car and she realized, with a cold wash of horror, how *shameful* she looked with her legs splayed, skirt pulled up to her hips, blouse undone. What if someone was out there watching, while she was offering herself up to him like a—her brain short-circuited as she felt his breath stir against her exposed left breast.

(*slutty girl*)

She sat up, their heads nearly colliding as she tugged her bra back into place. Undeterred, his mouth brushed over her jawline, down the side of her neck. She felt the soft pressure of a bite as his fingers slipped into the leg of her panties. And then, a harder one as he slid inside her.

“Don’t!” She gripped his chin, lifted it. He had her necklace between his teeth. The sight sent an arrow of desire shooting through her belly. “Don’t do that. Not here.”

The ring thudded against her chest, still damp. “It might relax you a little.”

“I’m plenty relaxed!”

“Sure you are, blue jay.”

“This isn’t a game.” She wished she didn’t sound so breathless. “People talk about us. I’ve heard them discussing us living together and how we get out of the same car every morning.”

His amused smile disappeared. “Who the fuck is talking about that?”

“I don’t know all their names.” She was afraid to mention the women

she'd seen at work earlier. His face was starting to shift into an anger she recognized all too well. The potential for violence ran through him like a dark river. "People."

"People like your old friends?"

"What? No." She'd denied it too quickly. He looked predatory now. "Nicholas, it wasn't Michael and Angie."

"Jay," he said warily.

"I don't want to discuss this. Let's just go have a nice dinner and forget we ever did." She reached for her shirt buttons, her fingers fumbling. "We can still salvage the evening."

"Someone said something that upset you and I want to know who it was."

You know what he really wants. That voice was back, shrill and mocking. *Distract him.*

"Nicholas," she said, too loudly, a warning as much for herself as him. "Drop it."

"Was it someone at work?"

"No."

"I don't believe you."

"Then it doesn't matter." She saw his chest hitch slightly as she pulled her hair back and out of the way, fastening it with a clip from her purse. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

"Jay," he said, a growl in it this time. But he was getting distracted, watching her hands. "I am trying to talk to you."

"What if we didn't talk at all?"

She wrapped her fingers around the sizable bulge in his wool trousers. He was big enough that she knew to pull back on the zipper, as well as down, so she wouldn't catch skin.

"What if I did this instead?"

"Jay," he said again, in a thick, tight voice.

They were close enough that she felt his breath stutter when she grazed the veiny shaft of his cock. He filled her hand when she wrapped her fingers around him and traced the entire length, from the wrinkled, velvety base, all

the way up to the slick, blunt head. She saw his teeth clench as a shiver rolled through his massive shoulders.

“For fuck’s sake—”

“Yes, Daddy?” She leaned closer and he stared at her helplessly. “Do you want me?”

His hips jerked. A strange, almost glazed look descended over his face as she used her wrist to further part his fly. She managed to get his pants half-open and had only just begun to lower her head to his lap, before he yanked her hand away, fingers biting into the underside of her wrist.

It hurt, but when she tried to pull away, his hand tightened until it felt like a shackle.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he demanded harshly.

Jay licked her lips and saw his eyes register the movement. “I was going to suck your cock,” she said, the words hard and unfamiliar in her mouth.

“You were—Jesus *fucking* Christ.” A bead of pre-come rolled from the head of his cock to his frenulum, sliding down his shaft, only to soak into his fly. “Fuck,” he hissed. “Goddamn it.”

“Nick—”

He shook his head viciously. She saw his chest rise and fall in quick succession. With a grimace, he adjusted himself in a way that was fascinatingly vulgar before zipping his pants back up. The way he released her felt like a reprimand. “Get out of the car, Justine. Now.”

Her full name hit like a slap falling off his lips.

Look what you did. You pissed him off.

But another part of her whispered, *He’s even better when he’s forceful, isn’t he?*

Jay slid out of the Tesla, shivering a little at the bite of the cold. She pressed her lips together, determined to endure the chill, but Nicholas noticed. He noticed everything.

With a face like stone, he shrugged out of his suit jacket and draped the warm wool around her shoulders. “Thank you,” Jay said, in a small voice, and something sharp lodged in her throat when he didn’t respond, turning to

lock the car. Without a word, he closed his fingers around her bicep and steered her firmly towards the sidewalk.

“Nicholas—”

“Don’t.” The word fell into the silence like ice in a glass.

She glanced at the bulge tenting his slacks and said nothing, hating that she felt so guilty now when, once, none of this had felt like it was her fault at all. By the time they had gotten to the restaurant, he was calmer, and even managed to dredge up a smile for the hostess that didn’t reach his eyes. But Jay could feel the tension in his body and knew this was far from over.

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He was finally nearing the end of his fucking company-mandated “sensitivity training.” For several hours a week, they locked him in a room with a bunch of sad old men who had gotten caught playing grab-ass with their secretaries where they watched PSA videos featuring third-rate Hollywood actors and sat through apology tour seminars with guest speakers who talked about “microaggressions” and “accountability” while he discreetly checked his phone whenever the proctor turned away to adjust the tracking on the VHS player or hand out quizzes.

He had been furious when one of Meghana’s flunkies had floated the idea of him taking on a consulting position. The man even had the balls to bring up his father, as if what he had done was on the same scale. He had gotten up and left the room, because he knew that if he stayed, something—or someone—was getting tossed from the second-story window.

The meeting with today’s investors had been the first time in weeks that he’d been allowed out of his cage. He’d been surprised by how much it exhausted him. As he listened to their various pitches, while Annica took notes for him to review for later, he could barely bring himself to pay attention. Why should he? He’d heard it all before. Everyone thought their mission statement was the most important. They all believed that they were *entitled* to his money.

Nicholas cast a sullen eye towards Jay, who was sipping her blueberry mimosa. Her hair was mussed from his fingers. Even now, just thinking about her stockinginged thighs was getting him hot.

Yes, Daddy?

His jaw clenched so hard that pain rocketed down the side of his face.

“It’s not too crowded for dinner,” she said, lips parting into wavering little smile, like she hadn’t just offered to blow him with that mouth.

He stared at her. The smile flickered and she squirmed in her seat, looking so guilty that he would have been amused if she weren’t the reason for the throbbing ache in his pants.

“I, um, meant to ask earlier. How did your meeting go?”

“Probably as well as you think it did.” He leaned back in his chair, spreading his thighs to relieve some of the godawful pressure.

She licked some sugar from the rim of the glass and another ache speared through his belly as he thought once more of the blowjob he’d denied himself. “Was it really that bad?”

“You remember what my meetings were like. Wealthy men, approaching hands-out, wanting to trade money for money. Then we all try to brutally fuck each other until someone yields.” He shifted in his seat impatiently. “The negotiation process never changes. Just the stakes.”

A veiled look settled over her eyes. “That’s crude. I thought you were good at it.”

“I am.” He scrubbed his unshaven face with his hand. “But I think I’m losing my taste for it.”

The waiter arrived with their appetizers. Jay had gotten a mustard greens salad with a vegan coconut cream dressing and he had ordered braised scallops.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said, and he found himself watching the way her lips folded over each bite. “I thought you liked your work. I admired that about you, actually. Seeing how you turned yourself around to manage your father’s company—it was impressive.”

The scallop on his tongue felt as heavy as lead. He forced himself to swallow and took a long, bracing drink of wine. “I’m sorry to have disappointed you again, then.”

“Oh, Nick, no. That wasn’t what I meant.”

Wasn’t it? He set down his fork and knife, leaning back to let the waiter

refill his wine. He had to strongarm her into being seen with him in public. She wouldn't touch him unless they were both alone, in the dark. What was that, if not shame?

His eyes went to the ring that she had started wearing around her slender neck. The little rhinestones twinkled in the dim lights so fetchingly that he found himself longing to see it on her finger. But he knew her silence on the matter meant he wouldn't like what was going on in her head. It had been weeks since he had proposed. Fucking weeks.

How long did she plan on making him wait?

"So what I'm hearing is that your meeting was bad and you had to deal with some people you didn't like." She tilted her head. "Did anything else happen today?"

"Your landlord called. He's giving you thirty days' notice before he sells the place."

"My landlord? For my apartment in San Francisco?"

"Yeah, seems like there was a rent hike and he wants to cut and run." He picked up his wine, watching her over the rim. "Looks like you'll be needing somewhere more permanent to stay."

"Why did he call you? How does he have your number?"

"Because I bought out your lease. I told you I would."

"Yes, but I didn't think you'd actually gone through with it. You never mentioned it again." Her face became troubled. "When were you going to tell me you owned my apartment?"

Anger flickered through him. "I didn't want you to worry about it while you were here."

"Did you forget why I'm here in the first place?"

There was an ugly silence. He watched her chest rise and fall beneath that prim little blouse, and it shouldn't have turned him on, seeing her so pissed at him. But it did.

Whatever she'd been trying to do in the car, this was all her. The *real* her.

It made him want to push her further.

"I was going to pay ten million dollars just to fuck you, Jay. That

should give you an idea of how ‘forgettable’ I think you are.”

She went rigid and he was immediately sorry.

“Ma’am? Your plate?” The waiter took in the alarm on her pretty face, and quickly became ingratiating. “I didn’t mean to startle you. Are you finished? Can I take this away?”

Jay nodded tightly. The waiter hovered, asking if she wanted another drink, if the meal was to her liking. Jay said yes, with an edge of defiance that he knew was intended for him.

“You’re being very cruel,” she said, when the waiter finally left. It was all she said, but he felt the sting of it like a lash, all the momentary satisfaction he’d felt flaking away like factory paint on fake leather. It made him feel worse—and that made him angry.

“You started this in the car.”

Their main courses came before she could reply. Her vegan carpaccio looked like a Jackson Pollock painting, with bright circles of root vegetables drizzled in sauce. His own plate of sea bass looked rather staid and dull by comparison, even with its overabundance of herb garnishes.

“You’re right.” She spoke stiffly. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I think we both know what you were thinking.”

She looked away, color suffusing her face. “Is there a point to this conversation? Or did you take me out to dinner just to fight?”

“Marry me,” he said.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Marry me. I’m so fucking tired of this. I’m tired of waiting. I’m tired of having to sneak around. Say yes to me. I want you to be my wife.”

“I told you I needed to think about my answer.”

“It’s a yes or no question.”

“Marriage is a lifetime commitment,” she said. “And it’s supposed to be a partnership between two equals. *Equals*, Nick. I’m not so sure you see me that way. Not when you treat me the way you do, like I’m an object you can just move around as you please.”

“I don’t see you as an object. I can afford to take care of you. There’s a difference.”

“But I don’t expect you to take care of me. I don’t want to be a kept woman and spend the whole day at the historical society or the salon. I’m not my mother.”

He laughed humorlessly. “Finally, we agree on something.”

Jay set her jaw. “See? That right there. You have so much disrespect for other women. I don’t like it. I don’t want you talking about me like that.”

“You could dance topless on every stage from here to Vegas, little bird, and you’d still have more class in your little finger than that dried up old c —” Catching the dark expression on her face, he cut himself off. “The bottom line is, I’m not looking for an armpiece I can shut away in a drawer. I’m not my father. I want someone who can keep up with me, challenge me. Someone who cries for dying planets she’ll never see. I want you.” *I always have.*

She looked down at her lap. “It’s not that simple.”

“Yes, it is.” Even though he’d lost his taste for it, he dipped a piece of fish in its pool of lemon butter. “How’s the carpaccio? Do you like it?”

“It’s very good.” She sighed. “But you don’t have to give me things to make me like you.”

He flinched and despised himself for it, because it felt like she’d won. “So we’re going to argue about the nail salon again, now?”

“It wasn’t just a nail salon. You got me a \$20,000 dollar makeover that I didn’t want and then you paraded me around in front of all your rich friends as if I were a brand-new car.”

“And did you hate it?” he pressed. “When I clasped that necklace around your throat and you walked into that party on my arm, can you honestly tell me that part of you didn’t take to it as easily as breathing because you belong here just as much as I do?”

Jay didn’t respond.

But she didn’t need to, because he remembered that night perfectly. Until she’d decided to hide, she had been graceful and stunning. And when they had danced together—completely respectfully—while the other guests looked on none the wiser, he had studied her in that shimmering dress that poured over her curves like tropical water and thought, *this, forever.*

He reclined in the chair, slinging an arm over the back. “What is it

that's really bothering you, Jay? Do you think I'm trying to mold you into a trophy wife? Do you think I'm not going to let you work? If you want to continue to be Arthur's assistant while you're with me, that's entirely up to you. It really makes no difference to me."

"You didn't used to believe that."

"I've changed. I can enjoy fucking you and buying you things—"

"Nicholas—"

"—and still see you as my equal," he finished. "I know you're not after my money. You've proven it time and again. But that doesn't mean that you're not free to enjoy it. I like seeing you happy. And," he paused, "you deserve to be."

Her face softened and he felt that tightness in his chest ease.

But then she said, "So if a woman marries a man for his money, she's not his equal?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake." He slammed down his wineglass, splashing a few drops on the white tablecloth. "We'll get a pre-nup if it bothers you that much, though I don't see why it should even be relevant. I'll give you whatever you want."

"It's relevant because my being equal to you is apparently contingent on this completely arbitrary pedestal of virtue you've put me on."

"There *is* no pedestal. You won't even wear my fucking ring. Not properly." He let out a heavy breath. "Maybe we shouldn't even be having this discussion. It hardly matters what we do or don't do if your answer is going to be no."

"I haven't said no. I just need time to think. Surely, after everything you've put me through, you can give me that?" She glanced at him, her face hot and flushed. He sipped his wine and decided not to answer. Jay, looking sorry herself now, said, "How was training?"

"Wonderful," he said flatly. "They lectured us about microaggressions and then handed us all little dollies and told us about personal bubbles like we were all in fucking kindergarten."

"Sensitivity training isn't a joke, Nicholas."

"Could have fooled me." He topped off his wineglass, deciding he wasn't drunk enough for this conversation. "They suggested I step down."

Her face fell. “God, I’m so sorry. You really are good at your job—even if you are a callous toad.” She toyed with her necklace absently, which had him remembering how her breasts looked bathed in neon as the silver flared with red sparks. Her eyes flicked up to his. “Is that why you’re in such a weird mood? Are you angry at the board and taking it out on me?”

Nicholas pushed his plate away. “Our VP of Operations resigned. Arthur and I are picking up the slack for now. It was only just announced to the other executives. Officially, it’s because she wanted to ‘change her career path,’ but really, she has an issue with how I handle my business.”

Jay pressed her lips together. “She doesn’t like your fuck or get-fucked approach?”

“Something like that. But the board liked her. They like that new marketing director who’s driving me crazy, too. The first thing that dick-for-brains did was march into my office and demand to see all of our OKRs from the last ten years. I had Annica make him copies of the files and leave them in his office. I’m waiting to see how long it takes before he comes crawling back to me and admits he can’t make heads or tails of them without context.”

Jay gave him an exasperated look but the corners of her mouth were twitching. *I saw that*, he thought, and the tightness of his lungs finally abated. “You’re such a bastard.”

“We can’t all be sweetness and light like you.”

“Instead of fighting with people below your paygrade, why don’t you at least pretend like you’ve learned something from your training? Humble yourself a little. Pilot a company initiative to put the spotlight on some of your diverse staff or implement some culture workshops. Then tell HR that you got the idea because of them. They’ll fall over backwards with joy.”

Nicholas paused. “That’s brilliant.”

“You don’t have to sound so surprised.”

“I’m not surprised that it’s brilliant. I’m surprised that you can be so calculating.”

“I guess I’ve changed, too.”

Nicholas watched her swirl her mimosa glass, catching one of the little blueberries in a vortex. *You have*, he thought. *And every fucking day, you*

make me more and more in love with you.

“What are you going to do about your apartment?”

“I don’t know. Hire a mover? It’s just something else to deal with. I’ll figure it out.”

A prickle of irritation crept down his neck as he wondered if *he* was one of the things she felt like she had to “deal with.” “Take some days off to handle it, then.”

“I can’t miss work.”

“You have PTO. Arthur can manage on his own—he has before. I’ll arrange the U-Haul and book your flight. You can put your things here when you get back.”

“You’d let me go?” she asked warily.

The look in her eyes left him chilled. It looked desperate. “You’re not my prisoner. I thought I made that clear.”

“You keep changing the rules. I don’t know what your expectations are.”

She chose me, he reminded himself. *She chose to stay.*

“Will you be coming back?”

“Yes, Nick..” There was a slightly bitter note in her voice. “Of course I will.”

Chapter Three

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After that emotionally charged argument they'd had at the restaurant, the two of them circled around each other like wary cats in that big house. Nicholas seemed to know he was in the wrong; he'd arranged for a grocery delivery of some of her favorite things the next day. She would have rather had an apology but he'd always been bad at that. Even when he was a boy, he'd been overly solicitous, nearly transactional. Something else he must have learned from his father.

She suspected it was less that he was sorry for what he'd done and more that he was sorry she was mad at him. And that should have made her angry—god, it had made her so angry when she was younger—but now it just made her sad, because it meant that nobody in his life had ever loved him enough to show him that forgiveness didn't need to come with strings attached.

You're one to talk.

Jay rubbed at the back of her neck, futzing with Arthur's schedule for the twentieth time. After her last screw up, she was taking no chances, double-checking *all* her work. Which meant that she was often completely drained by the end of the day, but it was worth it to remain in good standing.

She wouldn't have felt so awful if there hadn't been another text message from her mother waiting for her that morning. *Don't bother responding to this message, Justine. I can see you're doing just fine without me.*

It hadn't occurred to her that her mother would be reading *The Hollybrook Herald*, though of course, it should have. Her mother would have recognized those diamonds instantly.

Maybe she was more like her mother than she'd thought. After all the times she had accused Nicholas of trying to buy her, she had sunk to the same manipulative depths by turning his desire against him. It had been easy. And it had *hurt* him—that was what surprised her most.

The betrayal in his eyes. The *anger*.

As they had driven to work that morning, she had gotten the sense that

he was still angry with her. She had worn a keyhole blouse and a short skirt, and all he had done was glance briefly at her legs at a red light until she had made a show of tugging down the hem in the parking lot.

Then he made a low sound in his throat, which could have been approval or rebuke.

Before she could escape the car, he reached over and snapped one of her stockings against the back of her thigh right in the middle of the lot. Hard.

Jay yelped and glanced over her shoulder accusingly. He had one arm draped over the steering wheel. The other was resting on the center console, flexed like he might just grab her again.

“Don’t think you can get out of this by flashing your garters at me.”

Jay was pretty sure she had stopped breathing. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Is that how you’re playing it?” He gave her a slow once-over that made her think of all the times he’d yanked her into dark rooms and shoved her up against the wall. “Or maybe you’re tired of discretion and want Daddy to throw up your skirt where everyone see.”

It felt like he’d doused her in cold water.

(You used to be such a good girl)

When she slammed the door on his laughter—*damn him*, she thought angrily—her face was flaming, and when he came in a few minutes later, she couldn’t bring herself to look at him.

Coward.

She was relieved when the time came for her morning 1:1 with Arthur, if only for the reassurance of hearing one person tell her that she wasn’t a total fuck up today.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she told him, with a light laugh to cover just how relieved she really was. “And there’s no other opportunities that I could work on? I know you’re handling a lot of international clients right now. I could handle some of their portfolios if you want.”

“Everything’s fine, Jay. It’s all done and dusted. Was there anything else?”

“Um, yes, actually. Is it okay if I use about a week of PTO?”

“Of course. Have you taken my advice to heart and finally booked yourself a relaxing vacation?”

“I don’t know how relaxing it will be.” She fiddled with her notepad. “I’m going back to San Francisco for a few days. My old landlord wants my things out so he can sell the place and strike while the iron is hot.”

“That’s too bad. Where do you live?”

“South of Cesar Chavez, by Bernal Hill.” She blinked and caught herself. “I mean, Mission. It’s where all those murals are, if you’ve been.”

“Yes, a long time ago. I had friends who lived in the Haight. I’ve heard the city’s gotten quite expensive.”

“It has. There’s too many people and not enough affordable housing.” Jay thought wistfully of the anonymity of the city, and how refreshing it had been to walk through crowds unnoticed. Her only regret was that there had never been enough time and money to stop moving and *enjoy* it. She sighed. “It’s really too bad. I liked it there.”

“Good luck on the move. I hope you manage to enjoy yourself at least a little bit while you’re away. There’s certainly plenty to do.”

And I can afford it now, she thought guiltily. Even without Nicholas constantly spending money on her, living with him rent-free was saving her a ton. She’d never had this much in her accounts in her life. Damon had been as controlling with her allowance as he had been with everything else.

“You can go ahead and put your PTO in when this meeting is over,” Arthur said, cutting into her thoughts. “I’ll approve it by the end of the day. Oh, and since you’ll be leaving us for a little while, I’m adding something to your schedule. It was supposed to be for next week, but you can just move it up, timeline-wise, if you want to participate.”

Her phone buzzed. “The Administrative Lunch?” she asked, glancing at the notification.

“Yes, it’s part of the quarterly offsite budget. All you have to do is save your lunch receipts and send them to accounts receivable. Since you and Annica are the only C-suite administrative assistants, you’ve been placed on the same ‘team.’ It’s thirty dollars per person.”

“Wow,” said Jay. “That’s generous.”

“It was Nicholas’s idea.” Arthur leaned back in his chair, closing his laptop. “It’s a slow day and I don’t have much on the schedule. You might consider going today.”

“Thanks, Arthur.” Jay tried to sound upbeat as she walked out, privately wishing that she could have postponed the lunch until after she’d gotten back.

So you could sit and stew at your desk?

She had always wondered if she should have asked Annica out for coffee to thank her after her orientation, but her demeanor didn’t exactly invite confidence, and any overtures of friendliness that she had tried to extend that went beyond bland corporate professionalism had been rejected, so eventually, she had stopped trying because it was making her feel pathetic.

Nicholas referred to Annica as “the automaton” at home, which was just another example of the way he demeaned the women around him. When she’d told him that was cruel and that if he did it too often, he might call her that to her face, he’d said “beep beep” in a dead monotone.

Don’t think about that, she thought, shoving that thought from her head before a nervous laugh could escape her.

She scooted her chair over an inch, tilting her head so she was hovering in Annica’s periphery. Her eyes flicked in her direction and she reluctantly removed her headphones. “What?”

“Do you want to do lunch today?”

Her eyebrows came together and her mouth pursed. For a moment, it almost looked like a sneer, but it disappeared so quickly that Jay wondered if she had imagined it. She typed out something on her screen and asked, without looking at Jay, “Why?”

Oh my god, she’s going to say no. How humiliating. She straightened her mug and candy dish, trying to speak around the nervous lump in her throat. “For the offsite? It’s supposed to be next week, but I’ll be on PTO. Arthur suggested we move it up,” she added, embarrassed at this feeble attempt to inject authority into her request.

That seemed to sell Annica on the idea. She minimized the window on her screen that she had been typing into. “Okay. We can get sushi.”

Jay wasn't really in the mood for the inevitable oshinko or avocado rolls, but since Annica seemed to know what she wanted, she wasn't going to argue. She was mostly just relieved that she hadn't refused point-blank to go. "Do you want to go now?"

"Give me an hour. I'm working on something for Mr. Beaucroft. We can go at noon."

"Okay," Jay said. "An hour it is. I can't wait."

Annica put her headphones back on.

She kept them on until 11:59, when she abruptly grabbed her purse off the floor and stood up without any pretense. Jay, who was going through a document, looked up, startled. She barely had time to lock her computer and bolt down the hall as Annica headed for the door.

As they went through the main work area, she threw a glance towards Nicholas's office, noting with surprise that his desk was empty. *He must be at another meeting.* She was relieved. That was a good sign. Maybe they were starting to see him as less of a liability. The news that the board had been considering replacing him had been a terrible shock.

She turned back to Annica cautiously. "I don't think we've ever gotten lunch before."

"You haven't been here very long."

"No, I guess not." Jay started to fold her arms, then caught herself and lowered them to her sides. *What does that have to do with getting lunch?* "I grew up here, though."

"You look like you grew up here." Making a face, she stepped around a spill on the sidewalk, bumping against Jay. She didn't apologize. "I grew up in Ridgeview. It's different."

"Oh, my favorite vegan restaurant is there. Ridgeview's really nice."

"Not the part I lived in. It was a real dump. I hated my apartment. One of my friends referred me to this job. She works in Acquisitions, under Stacey. Her name's Samantha."

Jay shook her head, though the name sounded familiar "So you live in Hollybrook now? Do you like it?"

"I mean, it's a job. The pay is competitive enough and the benefits are good. But nobody wants to be a secretary forever. My goal is to be in

management.”

She stopped walking. They had arrived at Dragon Sushi. Jay looked at the sign and then at Annica, smiling uncertainly as the bell clanged over their heads to announce their arrival.

Did she . . . just insult me?

Maybe she hadn’t meant it the way it sounded, she told herself, not really believing it. Standing behind Annica in line while she ordered something called “the dragon roll” and observing her posture, Jay thought she seemed almost angry. It reminded her of how her mother would come home in a bad mood when the tips were bad, as if her problems had to be everyone else’s.

As she and the cashier hashed out toppings, Jay tried to remember if Annica had ever told her about anything about her personal life at all.

“What can I get you today?”

She smiled quickly. “Just a plain avocado roll for me, thanks.”

The man arched his eyebrows. “*Just* an avocado roll? Your friend got the dragon roll. Are you sure I can’t persuade you to try something more adventurous?”

“I don’t know.” She saw Annica’s shoulders stiffen at the word ‘friend.’

“We make all of our sauces in house,” he wheedled.

Annica was scrolling on her phone while the guy behind the counter made her rolls. Jay had the sneaking suspicion that she wouldn’t be happy about waiting, but when she tried to catch Annica’s eye, she refused to look up.

“I’m vegan,” she said hesitantly. “That’s going to be difficult.”

“We’ve got vegan mayo and sriracha in the back. I can make you a customized red dragon for the same price, as long as you like it hot.”

“As long as it won’t be too much trouble . . .”

“It won’t be,” he assured her eagerly.

“Okay.” Jay dropped her change in the tip jar after he rang her up, embarrassed by his enthusiasm. “Thank you.”

“That was nice.” Annica’s voice was flat as Jay joined her by the fish tank. “Is he a friend of yours?”

“No.” Jay tugged at her skirt. “I really didn’t expect him to go through all that trouble.”

“I don’t think he sees it as trouble.”

They locked eyes briefly before Annica turned away to study a fake Chinese scroll mounted on the wall. The hostility of her unspoken accusation crackled like electricity against her skin.

Jay glanced back at the counter, her discomfort ballooning when she caught the cashier looking at the two of them. “I can’t believe I haven’t heard of this place.”

“Mhm.”

“The décor is certainly a choice, though.”

“I think it’s fine. They’re a sushi restaurant.”

Wow. *Okay, then.*

“Orders thirty-eight and thirty-nine!”

They walked up together to get their boxes. *Oh no*, she thought, looking down at her receipt. *He put his phone number on it*. She crumpled it up discreetly as they walked out, hoping Annica hadn’t seen, but then she remembered she needed it to get her refund back.

“Where do you want to eat?” She flattened the receipt out again, folding it into a square. “Outside? Inside? If we sit near the window, we can people-watch.”

“Actually, I’d rather just eat at my desk.”

“Oh,” said Jay. “Okay. No problem.”

“Thanks.”

She hates you.

Arthur looked up as the two of them came in. Jay thought he seemed a little surprised to see them back so early. Annica immediately slid her headphones back on and Jay gloomily noticed the pictures tacked up around her monitor—she was into sports.

Nicholas came out of his meeting while she was picking at the fillings of her last roll. She ate the last tasteless bite and dropped her empty package into the wastebasket beneath her desk.

His eyes slid in her direction like he’d sensed her attention and Jay

shifted uncomfortably in the too-hard seat, crossing her legs as she recalled his earlier threat. That was a mistake; his smile sharpened. If a wolf could smile, Jay thought, it would look a lot like Nicholas.

Then someone called his name and he turned away and she could breathe again.

A message popped up on her screen from Arthur. *How was lunch?*

Great! she lied. *Thanks again for letting me move the date up.*

Annica got up and Jay watched her go before reaching absently for her bottle of mineral water. It slipped from her fingers and spilled—all over her desk and keyboard. Because of course it did.

“*Shit.*” Jay lifted the keyboard out of the creeping path of liquid before it could short out. There was a roll of paper towels they kept between their desks, next to the tissues and the sanitizing wipes, and she tore off a generous wad as she began mopping, much to the amusement of her nearby neighbors, and probably Nicholas, too, since he saw and noticed everything.

I’d better make sure I didn’t get any water on Annica’s desk.

Annica hadn’t bothered to lock her computer before leaving and as Jay leaned over to clean the dividing line, she could see that she had a group chat open. *That* was a surprising rebellion for a woman who acted like a buzzing phone was an unforgivable noise violation.

I shouldn’t read that, she thought, but her eyes had already focused on the window.

The weather in Palm Springs is AMAZING. Bride is being a total B, though. How’s work on your end? Still caught up in the grind?

Wow, Annica had friends. Looks like she passes the Turing test, after all, Nicholas.

Her amusement quickly faded when her eyes caught on the next line.

Ugh, don’t ask. Was almost forced to eat with LMS today.

I’m sorry, her friend wrote back. *Fake-ass bitches are the wooooorst.*

You should see her with our boss. So disgusting. “Yes, Mr. Beaucroft?” while wearing the shortest skirts you can imagine. He was actually playing with her hair the other day.

The friend had sent a frowny face. *Maybe little miss slutshine will get*

her slutty ass fired.

I have a whole week free of her, Annica had written, less than five minutes ago. She just put her PTO on the work calendar today. Thank GOD.

Down the hall, Jay heard the telltale bang of the bathroom door. Annica was coming back.

Jay tore off another sheet of paper towels and got on her hands and knees to catch the spills that had started dripping from the edge—and then remembered the throwaway comment about her short skirt. She scrambled upright just as a man from sales, hovering near the copier, swiftly began walking away like he hadn't just been looking at her ass.

Annica paused, looking down at her with a frown. Gauging the distance between her and the computer screen, and clearly wondering what she'd seen.

All of it, Jay thought, sliding the graying paper towel along the edge of her desk. I saw all of it.

"Do you need help?" Annica quickly leaned over to minimize the chat window.

"No." Jay barely recognized the sound of her own voice. "I've got it."

Her eyes flicked to the raised mezzanine. Nicholas had an elbow propped on his desk, and was leaning over to watch her. When she glared at him, he picked up his phone.

Hers buzzed. *The wet T-shirt contest was yesterday.*

I'm not in the mood, Nicholas.

She set her phone face-down firmly where he could see it. She felt miserable, sick, and hot.

Little Miss Slutshine—was that really what they were calling her?

She dropped the wad of paper towels in the trash and plopped back into her chair, opening up the spreadsheet of international clients that Arthur had insisted were fine not to check.

Little Miss Slutshine, she thought again, miserably. It was so awful, it was almost funny.



Whoever had upset Jay was clearly someone whose opinions she valued. Otherwise, she wouldn't have gotten nearly so upset. Which meant that whoever was spreading rumors was either his charming stepmother or someone at work, or else she'd lied to protect her friends.

Ex-friends.

His anger at the stunt she'd pulled in the car shifted into irritation that she felt the need to hide things from him. To *manipulate* him. Maybe his sweet little bird wasn't quite as sweet as he'd thought. But then, he'd always gotten a different side of her than everybody else. Nicholas suspected that very few people had gotten a glimpse of the bitter Jay revealed by her journal.

He did a few laps in the pool to clear his head, sharpening his focus. He could see her moving beyond the clear glass windows, heading for the kitchen. She'd taken off her stockings and now her legs were bare beneath that slinky little skirt.

The air became colder and soon, his muscles began to burn. As he sliced through the water, he imagined her bound on one of the recliners, water beading on her cold, wet skin. Those long, beautiful legs wrapped around his waist as he—

Dammit. He stopped with a grimace and stepped out of the pool, toweling himself off on the deck as the cold air deflated his erection. He dropped the towel on the floor of the sunroom while latching the door, rounding the two corners that led to the kitchen. Jay had moved to one of the bar stools. There was a sweet, yeasty smell coming from the oven. She glanced up at him before glaring down at the pages of her book.

“It smells good in here.”

“It’s pumpkin manicotti.”

“Mm. Sounds good.”

“Who says you’re getting any?”

“Don’t be cross with me, blue jay.” He bent over her, running his hand down her thigh as she pushed the book aside to keep it from getting wet. “I said I was sorry.”

Jay snapped the book closed. “You didn’t, actually. You tried to bribe me with a grocery order and then you took your shirt off. Now you’re getting water all over the floor.”

Nicholas spun her stool around. Her eyes widened as she took in his bare chest and tight, damp trunks. Those seemed to be of particular offense, from the way her color heightened.

Apparently, the cold hadn’t been as effective as he’d thought.

“I’m sorry.” He brushed his lips over hers before kissing her full on the mouth. When she relaxed into the kiss just a little, he gave her bare leg a light smack before shoving his hand up her skirt and grabbing a full handful of ass and thigh, growling into her ear, “You little tease.”

Jay yelped when he pushed his hand beneath her underwear, tugging at his wrist. He let her push him away, watching her chest heave as she shot him a furious, thwarted look.

“I am not a *tease*. I was crossing my legs.”

“You know what you were doing.” Nicholas went to the fridge and took out a cold water. “Don’t tease me at work again or I’ll do things that will make you blush.”

It had been intended as a playful warning but only seemed to rile her up further. She was standoffish all throughout dinner, sipping at the very expensive wine he’d brought up from the cellar in a nervous, dissatisfied way, evading all of his attempts at real conversation.

And whatever satisfaction that had sparked in him at finally seeing his stepsister look at him like a man was occluded by the knowledge that every time he had her, he was driving her further and further away.

Fuck it, Nicholas thought.

(What if we didn’t talk at all?)

He caught her on the way to her room that night, wrapping his fingers around her slender wrist and tugging until she was forced to turn around. “If you don’t want to talk to me, there’s other things we can do.” Her eyes flickered up to his, wide with blown-out pupils and she made a sound like she might protest. “You don’t even have to look at me.”

Jay shivered. He hadn’t wanted to manhandle her, so his grip on her wrist was loose enough that she could have pulled away if she wanted, but

she didn't. She let him drag her into his bedroom and push her on the bed, her unresisting body belied by the defiance on her face.

"Are you just going to lie there?" He mocked her gently as he pushed up her shirt and kissed along the underside of her ribs. "You're only here because you want to be. Making me do all the work doesn't make change how much you love being Daddy's little slut."

That seemed to throw a switch; her eyes flashed in the gloom, and she really looked at him for the first time since they'd started. Acquiescence suddenly became violent, active participation. She bucked beneath him so forcefully that it had taken some effort to pin her down, and she fought him on every thrust, making it impossible to be gentle.

On some level, he knew that this behavior was concerning. He should have stopped. A good man would have stopped. But he was not a good man, so he fucked her the way she seemed to want him to and then held her body against his in a crushing embrace when it was over and she let out a raw, heartbreakin

g sob.

"Shh," he whispered. He ran his fingers through her hair as she trembled, face buried in his shoulder. His other hand smoothed up and down her spine in small, soothing circles. "Shhh. It's all right. Poor little blue jay. I'm sorry. Daddy didn't mean to be so rough."

"That's how I want it."

Nicholas stilled, uncertain if he'd heard her correctly. He could feel her heart fluttering against his chest, like the wings of a small desperate creature. As his fingers traced back up her vertebrae, he felt her flinch, as if his tenderness was worse than his brutality. "You cried."

"Yes." Her voice was muffled. She still wouldn't look at him. "Isn't that so screwed up?"

"Not if that's what you want." He cupped the back of her head, stirring the warm roots of her hair. Her breath exploded against his prickling skin in a harsh burst as he resumed his gentle caresses. "Do you need something, little bird? Or do you just want this?"

"This." The word was effortful, like it had to be dragged from her.

"All right." He rested his chin on her head, rubbing the silky skin of her back. "I'll just hold you." She shuddered and he felt her nipples pebble

against his chest. “Just relax,” he said, letting his fingers drift up to the back of her neck. “I’ll be right here.”

He wasn’t sure which of them had fallen asleep first. But when he was spurred awake in the middle of the night by the urge to take a leak, she had already slipped away and she would barely look at him at all in the car ride to work, and he did not know what he had done to cause it.

But he knew one thing he could do to fix it.

Nicholas removed his sunglasses as he strolled up to Accia, tucking them into his open shirt collar. The bougainvillea flowering along the sides of the building were in full bloom, perfuming the air with a heavy, familiar fragrance. Unlike when he’d come here for dinner with Jay, many of the outdoor tables were empty, and those who were here appeared to be having business brunch.

He was running ten minutes late: late enough to make someone wonder if he wouldn’t show up at all, while still leaving himself enough deniability to blame the whole thing on parking.

Tilting his head, he peered through the glass windows shrouded in their natural curtains of ivy and thought he could just make out the silhouette of his intended victim. It looked like he’d already ordered a drink, which probably meant he was nervous and wanted something to do with his hands.

This is going to be fun, thought Nicholas.

“Two for Beaucroft,” he told the host. It was the same girl from the other night and she eagerly showed him to his table. The relief on Michael’s face was palpable as he sat down.

“Hey, man. The parking on this street is terrible, isn’t it? Thanks for setting up this meeting. I thought maybe you wouldn’t remember me. You were just a kid the last time I saw you.”

Flipping through the menu, Nicholas said, “Oh, I remember you.”

He lifted his eyes to study the other man and was pleased when he saw a brief flicker of unease on Michael’s face. “Oh,” he said. “Well, good.”

Not for you.

Nicholas flagged down a waiter and ordered himself a glass of wine. Michael demurred, sticking with what appeared to be iced tea. *Either he’s cheap or he’s watching his health.*

“What are you having?” he asked, not really caring.

“Iced tea. The wife thinks I drink too much.”

“You’re married?”

“Yeah. Do you remember Angie?”

“No,” he lied, taking a sip of wine.

“I’m surprised to hear that. She was really popular in our grade.” Michael picked up his glass of tea, pulling a slight grimace. “Angie was friends with Jay. We started dating after college.”

Nicholas repressed a sneer. *Friends, my ass.* “After Jay.”

“Uh, yeah. After Jay. I guess you’d call it a whirlwind courtship.”

He wondered how many blowjobs Jay’s old ‘friend’ had had to give out before enough blood left Michael’s brain for proposing to sound like a good idea.

Michael had been slim and athletic in high school, with a whole head of hair that was now slowly receding. A small paunch strained the buttons of his Hugo Boss dress shirt. Only someone petty-minded and shallow would call him unattractive and Jay, unfortunately, was neither of those things.

“Are you married?” Michael asked.

“No. I haven’t had time to tie the knot.”

“Enjoy bachelorhood while you can, then.”

“I’ve been too busy to enjoy it.” Nicholas stared into the depths of his wine, displeased, and not quite sure why. “Running my company consumes most of my time.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard your business has been doing very well.” Michael took another compulsive sip of tea. “Quentin mentioned that you kept his hotel from going under during the housing crisis.”

Nicholas shrugged, though it was true that he had—after slapping the man with interest rates so high that they bordered on cruel. He owned Quentin’s ass. And knowing the men who had once courted his beautiful stepsister through the glossy centerfolds of their perfect lives were now completely at his mercy brought him no end of pleasure.

“I also heard from Amanda Strife that you’re the one who’s been

buying up all that open land. Apparently, her old company sold its lot to you.” There was a question burrowed in there like a tick. Nicholas set down his wine glass firmly.

“As fun as it’s been wandering down memory lane, what did you really want to meet with me about? You mentioned you had a business proposition for me. Spit it out. Go big or go home.”

Michael paused, and then moved his own glass carefully out of the way, too. It was called mirroring, which was appropriate, because its effects were just as revealing.

In a beautiful display of timing, the waiter chose that moment to come over and Nicholas was treated to the sight of seeing Michael stammer his way through his order while trying to mentally prepare his hard sell.

“I’ll have the carrot hummus and the Belgian endives,” he said easily, when the waiter looked at him. He’d carefully studied the menu beforehand. “You were saying?”

“Uh, well, as you know, our fathers did business together. They had a contract, which lapsed a few years ago. Just before your father’s death, actually.” Nicholas kept his face blank. “He funded a lot of our development projects in Hollybrook, which was great when the economy was booming. It really delivered on the returns. But now things are tight and there’s less to build. We’ve had to make significant cuts and you own a lot of the prime real estate in the area that’s currently zoned for business. I checked the property records.”

“Did you.”

“It’s my business to know,” he said, a little defensively. “This town may have become a bedroom community but there’s a lot of people who would be very interested in taking advantage of some of those light commercial zones.”

“Nobody goes to the mall anymore?”

“Exactly.” Michael nodded, like he hadn’t just been slighted. “I was hoping you’d honor your father’s business deal with us and front the money in exchange for a generous return on your investment and an offer for one of those empty lots. We could probably add some stock options, too.”

“I thought you said nobody wanted to build. Are you sure this project

of yours wouldn't just be bringing coal to Newcastle?"

"There's an LA tech firm that would like to make use of that open space. Quentin's cousin is married to their CEO. They want to turn it into an administrative hub. They're thinking it might incentivize some of their executives to remain on as consultants when they're put out to pasture."

"Assuming I sell it to you." He took another sip of wine. "At a steep discount, it sounds like, given your significant cuts."

Michael had the grace to blush. "I would consider it a personal favor, from one friend to another."

"I'm surprised you didn't ask Jay to come to me when you saw her at the farmers' market since you two were such good friends."

Their lunches arrived. The distraction was not enough to prevent the look of surprise, and then wariness, that flashed across the other man's face. "She mentioned that? We didn't talk for very long. The babysitter needed to leave, so my wife and I were in a bit of a rush."

"Too busy for a personal favor, from one friend to another?"

"She was never all that interested in discussing business. I always thought that was strange, because our dads were so close. Most of the other kids in school were friends because of who their parents were. I thought that was why she went out with me, because of her stepfather. We made sense. But she always got upset whenever I tried to bring it up."

You goddamn fool. "Jay isn't that type of woman."

"Look, I don't know what she told you about what happened, but Jay isn't exactly an open book. She left here without telling anyone." He paused, glancing warily at Nicholas, who said nothing. "She must have gone through some shit. Her face—it's not the same. When we talked, it looked like she could use a friend."

"And you thought you could be that friend?" Nicholas speared an endive viciously with his fork. "Comfort her while she cries? I wonder what your wife would think about that."

Some of the color leached out of Michael's face. "I really think you have the wrong idea about me. I love my wife. Jay and I are over."

"I've seen a lot of men like you in the industry. You love your little development projects until you decide the upkeep is too much trouble and it

becomes cheaper just to scrap the whole lot and start over. That's why I own so many empty lots, Valdez. Because men like you get bored."

He leaned forward, steepling his fingers together.

"I'll sell you your lot, but on one condition—stay the fuck away from my sister."

"What?"

"Jay." The word fell like a rock in the silence. "Keep her name out of your mouth. If you see her coming, head the other way. Your wife, too. She's never liked Jay, despite what you think."

"No, no, that's not right. Angie and Jay were friends."

"No, they weren't," Nicholas said coldly. "And neither are we."

Michael blinked rapidly, looking around—as if the waiter would save him, Nicholas thought, allowing himself the privilege of a smile.

"Did I do something to piss you off?"

"I thought my offer was generous."

"It's insane." Much to his amusement, Michael was holding his steak knife like it was a sword. "Did she put you up to this, or was this your idea?"

"The fact that you have to ask just shows how little you really know her."

"Because nobody knows her as well as you?" Michael shook his head, full of self-righteous disgust. "We always thought it was weird, how possessive you were of her. It went beyond obnoxious tagalong younger brother. You looked at her like—"

Like you used to? He smiled cynically at the other man. *Like she's the only one that matters?*

"My god." Michael raked a hand through his thinning hair. Damp patches were beginning to form underneath his arms. "When I asked her why she left, she said it was because there was nothing left for her here. That people changed and moved on." Michael looked at him sharply and he kept his face composed, even as he felt some dark piece of his soul fracture. "Was it you?"

"Was what me?"

“Were you the one who made her leave? She was wearing your mother’s jewelry, Nicholas.”

“So?”

“So some people think that means that she’s also sharing *your* bed.”

He lunged forward and Michael leaped from his chair with a yelp. But his goal was not the other man’s throat; it was his own wineglass. He swept it from the table with a single, well-placed knock and it shattered rather beautifully on the tasteful tiled floors with a sound that seemed to take at least a couple of years off Michael Valdez’s pointless existence.

A waitress immediately bounded over with a dustpan. “Are you all right, sir?”

“I’m fine. We’re *both* fine,” he said, flashing a disarming smile at the woman while his eyes flicked to his pale companion. “I can pay for the glass.”

“Oh no, there’s no need,” she said. “It happens all the time. I’ll go get you another.”

Nicholas maintained his smile until she brought him the second glass, topped off with a more than generous pouring of wine. Only when she was gone did he allow it to fall like the vast curtains of a stage, along with the last of his restraint.

“That was a very stupid thing to say to me.”

Michael looked away. “I didn’t mean it.”

“I believe you did, actually—because you’re still not over her. After all these years. How pathetic.” Nicholas studied Michael over the rim of his new glass. “I might not be my father, but I am my father’s son. And I will shatter your fucking face if you speak to me—or her—like that again.”

“I . . .” His mouth worked silently. “I understand.”

“I don’t think you do.” Nicholas took a long, slow drink of wine. “Not if you’re asking me questions like that. In the future, I suggest you keep your suspicions to yourself. Otherwise, you and your family won’t be able to show your faces within fifty miles of here by the time I’m through with you, unless it’s in a hobo camp under some freeway overpass.”

Michael pursed his lips. “You know you can’t buy everyone. Your father found that out.”

“I don’t need to buy everyone. Just you. Now, take the deal. Don’t be stupid.”

The other man looked as if he wanted desperately to say something but couldn’t bring himself to do it. “Fine. I’ll get the contracts drafted up. My lawyer can have them ready to go by Monday morning. He’ll think it’s strange but . . . I’ll make sure he doesn’t talk.”

“And?”

Michael grimaced. “I’ll speak with Angie and stay away from Jay.”

“Good. It’s been a pleasure doing business with you. I’m sure your father would be so proud.” He dropped his napkin on top of his plate, slapping down a sizable stack of twenties beside it. As he passed, he clapped Michael on his shoulder, digging his thumb right into that tender axillary nerve. “I’ll be waiting for that phone call with bated breath.”

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Chapter Four

When he asked how Jay day was, she said, “Fine,” with a subdued caginess that reminded him of those first few days following her return, when every one of her responses had felt forced. It seemed engineered to provoke him and it very nearly did, but his triumph over Michael made him feel generous.

Today had been a pyrrhic victory. He was not going to lose it all now by fighting in the car.

As soon as they were over the threshold and the front door was closed, he walked her down the hall, tossing his keys into one of the decorative bowls on the credenza before taking her face in his hands. “Tell me what’s wrong. I know something is.”

She gave him a weary look. “You can’t fix everything.”

I can, actually, he thought, but he knew she wouldn’t want to hear that.

Jay tensed when he kissed her and then her shoulders dropped into complacency when he fished out the condom he now always kept in his wallet. The kissing became purposeful as he began undoing her blouse, fumbling the small buttons until she took his hands away and did it herself with an efficiency he found both seductive and beguiling.

“Nick—”

But he didn’t let her finish. He hitched her up over his knee and yanked aside everything in his way, spearing her against the side of the rightmost staircase and fucking her rhythmically against the wall. There would be marks. He was being careless, kissing her too hard.

(That’s how I want it)

“Oh,” she breathed out, head back, eyes closed. “Oh god.”

“That’s it.” He slid a hand behind her head, to cushion it from the wall. “Fuck me. Give me everything.”

You can’t imagine . . . all the different ways I’ve fucked you in my head.

Jay cried out softly, reaching between them to massage her clit as he covered her mouth again with his own. The urgency of it reminded him of when they were younger, and they’d had to be quick to avoid being caught.

Jeans could be pulled down, and sweaters pulled up, both of them so close that he wouldn't have to hold back his own pleasure when she submitted to him so beautifully the way she always did, as if they were fighting a war that she knew she'd already lost.

If you only knew the things I'd do for you.

The papers from Michael's lawyer came the next morning. Express delivery, which amused him. The little fuck must have been really running scared.

That was one problem fixed but the troubled look hadn't left her face, and he'd seen the wary looks she cast about the workplace and suspected he knew the cause for it. But if he'd told her what he'd done, she would be angry. If he pressed her, she'd be angrier still.

So he kept his silence, but he watched and wondered. And he planned.

Meanwhile, the days continued to drop away like dead flies until finally it was the night before she'd leave for the city. He had ordered dinner but the conversation was stilted, broken up harshly by the clink of silverware on china. Every time their words petered out, her eyes would drift towards something in the distance that he couldn't see, and she'd toy with the necklace around her throat, worrying the ring that should have made her his.

(She said there was nothing left for her here)

A cold chill gripped him. He pushed back his mostly-uneaten plate and the scrape of the plate on the wood seemed to jolt her from wherever she was as she looked at him the way he imagined someone might look at a wild beast in the woods.

It made his voice harder than he wanted when he said, "I want you in my room tonight."

Her eyebrows scrunched together. "Wow, okay. Should I bother getting dressed? Or would clothes be too inconvenient for you when you push me up against the wall?"

"I just want to see you before you leave. It's hardly the rape of the fucking Sabines." The look on her face became pained and a hot lump wedged itself into his throat. *Fuck.* "It's up to you," he said, angry with himself now. "Come or don't."

She stared at him. Several expressions flashed over her face in sequence, too quick to read. Then she nodded, and the silence between them swelled until she'd gotten up from the table and disappeared. Packing, he assumed, as he went to bed with his laptop. Telling himself he was going to work but really, he was straining for the sounds of her footsteps.

When he heard the stealthy creak outside his door, he closed his computer and set it down on the floor beside the nightstand, tugging off his T-shirt in anticipation. He'd been waiting for her but his breath still caught at the first swish of her skirt before the rest of her followed.

"I want to kiss for a little while." She wouldn't meet his eyes. "Can we do that?"

"Yes," he said hoarsely.

He'd kiss the air from both their lungs if it meant that she'd belong to him and him alone.

The sharp edges of the little jeweled bird pricked at his fingers as he turned the small ring over to study it in the waxing light while Jay slept. He could just make out the engraving inside and wondered if she'd seen it yet. With a sigh, he let the ring drop back onto her breasts.

She had belonged to him long before the rest of their town had staked its claim on her. Before her smiles for him had slowly last their warmth, he had truly believed that she could do no wrong.

His father? Yes, his father had been more than capable of hurting him, but the fact that *Jay* could had been a knife that slipped right through his defenses.

She had gutted him. Unable to eat or sleep, he had mulled over her rejection for days as it festered in his heart. Then he remembered the exchange he'd had with his father on the way back from Vegas—he had called her willful, *ungrateful*—and he had thought that yes, maybe Jay needed to be humbled a little, after all. He'd thought that if she lost that angelic shine, she would come crawling to him willingly when he dragged her down into the gutters.

But then he'd seen the way she looked at him afterwards.

There was no love in that look.

He thought he might die when she looked at him like that. For a while,

after she'd gone, it felt like part of him had. And when he'd found her again, and seen the terror in her eyes in that dinky little soap shop, it was like she'd killed him all over again.

I've ruined this, he remembered thinking. *I've ruined her.*

Maybe it was a mistake to let her leave. There was the possibility that she might not come back. Putting on his favorite dress and fucking him goodbye was exactly the sort of thing that a woman like her might her might do before she left for good.

Fuck.

He held her tighter, squeezing her body to his until she made a small squeak of protest from her reddened lips. "Don't run away." His words buzzed in the silence, stinging like angry wasps. "Please."

I'll let you do anything to me but leave.

He kissed her neck, filling his arms with her warmth and softness. Jay was not a tiny woman and he loved how she felt when she was flush against his larger frame and all those soft, sweet curves molded to the hard planes of his body, hopelessly intertwined with hundreds of memories where he had felt cared for and loved.

"I wish it had always been this way between us. From the very beginning. *This is how it should have been.*" He gave one of her breasts a squeeze. "You should have been mine."

You will be soon.

"Nick?" she murmured sleepily.

"Yes. I'm right here."

"I thought you said something." She snuggled against him in a way he felt everywhere as her fingers smoothed absently over the hair furring his forearms. His cock stiffened in his pants at the sound of her throaty sigh. "Mm. Warm."

He let his hand glide down her front, over her jutting hip until lace yielded to skin. He let his hand settle in the crease of her thigh exposed by the slit in her dress and had to fight back a shudder at her heat. "You up for some fun?"

"No," Jay whined sleepily. "I don't want to run."

He laughed involuntarily, which made his balls throb. *Goddamn it.* “I didn’t say run. Daddy wants to roll your lazy little ass over and fuck it.”

“Sore,” Jay said.

“I hope that’s a request,” he whispered in her ear. “As in, ‘Leave me.’”

“Sleep.”

“Are you even awake, Jay?”

There was a long pause. Then she let out a quiet snore.

Nicholas leaned back, contemplating the rather dire state of his semi before sliding out of bed and getting dressed to the light of his bedside table lamp. Jay slept on, her body dipping into the space he’d left. Seeing her look so peaceful twisted his gut.

There was a Vietnamese place that opened early and did vegan spring rolls and coconut cream ca phe nau. He placed an order, then fed Jay’s cat, shooing it out of the way with his foot as he bent to grab its kibble bag. The annoying thing followed him around the room, tail up, rubbing against his bare ankle as he filled the bowl that still looked full enough, to him.

He had already arranged for her U-Haul and the plane ticket, ignoring her protests when he upgraded her to first class. She still thought this was about past debts, but he had never given a fuck about money beyond using it as a tool to get what he wanted.

This time, he thought, things would be different.

He checked on her again: she was hugging the pillow, the embroidered flowers of her nightgown glistening like ice where the fibers caught the light, sharply contrasting with the deep brown of her skin. He ached to photograph it, to trap the moment like a butterfly in amber, part of him fearing that this was the last time he’d see her waking up in his bed.

With a ragged sigh, he closed the door.

She began stirring right around the time that he answered the door for the food delivery. As he set out the various cartons on the counter, he heard the creak of the beams, then the pad of her footsteps coming down one of the staircases.

“What’s all this?” Jay blinked as she walked in on him plating, folding her arms over her robe.

“I wanted to see you off properly.”

“Wow.” A little bit of color tinted her cheekbones as she slid onto one of the barstools. “That’s so sweet, Nick. You really didn’t have to go through all this effort.”

Sweet was for candy and children. He glanced at her sideways. “I wanted to.”

“Well, thank you.” She rolled up her sleeve to reach for a roll, dragging his eyes to the deep V where the fabric gaped along the neckline. “This looks amazing. And you remembered—no fish sauce.” She took a slow bite and his dick twitched. “Oh my god, it tastes amazing, too.”

“I enjoy taking care of you.” He brushed her shoulder as he reached over to steal a wayward piece of carrot from her plate. “We got pretty good at taking care of each other before.”

She swallowed hard. “Yes. But that was a long time ago. We’re not children anymore.”

“No. Now I can do things for you that I couldn’t then. And you, my sweet, beautiful bird, don’t have to carry the weight of everyone’s expectations.”

“Just yours.”

He leaned forward on the counter, his arms straining against the tight sleeves of the old t-shirt as he reached over to flick her necklace. “Just mine.”

She nudged her plate away and sipped some of the Vietnamese coffee, her eyes drifting towards the fridge. “Aren’t you eating anything? I can share if there’s not enough. There’s plenty.”

“I’ll have something after I swim later. I’m not hungry right now.”

“You’re just making me a little nervous, the way you’re staring at me.”

“Good.” He gave the belt of her robe a yank. “You should be.”

Jay yelped, covering herself with a modesty he found very amusing as the terrycloth slipped down her bare shoulders. “Give it to me,” she said, when he pulled the cord taut between his hands and snapped it with playful menace.

“Give it to you?”

“You—” She made another one of those little yips when he grabbed at her, trying to back away and push off from the counter bar at the same time. The stool wobbled dangerously and hit the tiled floor with a clatter, while Jay fell right on her luscious little ass. “*Shit*—”

He walked over and extended his hand, grinning.

“You *ass*.” She gripped his palm a little too tightly as he pulled her up. “I don’t know why you’re such a—” He casually reached for her other hand and jerked both up behind her back, cutting her off mid-phrase as he looped the cord around both wrists. “Nick, what the fuck?”

He cinched the terrycloth cord around her bound wrists with a flourish. “You can’t see it, but that’s called a bowline,” he said innocently. “I used to spend my summers sailing.”

“Fascinating. Untie it.”

“If only you’d gotten up earlier. Maybe I’d be less distracted.” Without the cord, her robe had fallen open. When he looped his arm around her, he could feel her heart pounding rapidly and the soft weight of her breasts. He rubbed his forearm back and forth and felt her nipples harden through the thin lace. “Tell me more about what you’re going to do in San Francisco.”

Jay threw an unamused look over her shoulder. “Murder you.”

“And after I booked you into first class.”

“It’s a one-hour flight.”

“You can do a lot in an hour.” Nicholas let his other hand drift to the slit in her nightgown. Her bound hands convulsed as he moved up to her inner thigh. She hadn’t put on underwear. “Are you going to see your old roommates?”

“No.” Her breathing became unsteady. “We don’t talk anymore.”

“Does that include your ex?”

“Yes—*fuck*—including him. Oh my god.” She jerked again as he slid two fingers inside her. “Are you jealous?”

“Of some waiter who couldn’t even get you off?”

“His name was Dante, not ‘some waiter.’ And he didn’t—”

She broke off into a sharp cry that made his dick rock hard. Still thumbing her clit, he sucked hard on her throat. “What didn’t he do, Jay?

“Make you come so hard you couldn’t talk?” He crooked his fingers until she was sinking back against him. “Did he let you call him Daddy?”

Jay flinched. “I can’t believe you’re giving me such a hard time about this when *you* have way more experience in that department than I do.”

He breathed out against her throat, displeased. “Not with anyone who mattered.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Why? It was just sex. The drinks I had in the hotel lobby made me feel more than any of them did. It wasn’t anything like what I have with you.”

“Oh, god, Nicholas.” Her voice broke on the second syllable of his name and he pressed harder with his fingers, until the third syllable died into a hiss. Panting, she whispered, “I can’t listen to this.”

“You brought up my past flings.” Bored with the game now, he untied her wrists, snapping the cord loosely against her arm before handing it back. “Do you want a head count? Or do you want to know that you’re the only one who ever got to call me Daddy?”

Jay folded her arms. “Was that really all you expected from women? Sex and a drink or two before you just tossed them out of your house like tissue paper?”

His house. “I never brought any of them home. I was too fucking obsessed with *you*.”

Defiance flared in her face and something in him surged in response. Before the conversation could spiral out of control further, he covered her mouth with his. She tasted like cilantro and sweet herbs, and something that was just . . . her.

“Just you.” A harsh breath sailed past his lips. “I don’t want anyone else. I never did.”

“No matter who else gets hurt.”

“You’re the only woman I ever cared about enough to hurt me. That’s what love is, isn’t it? Handing someone your emotional knife and trusting them not to draw blood with it? But you do, Jay. You take that fucking knife and you plunge it into me again and again—”

He drew her hand to his chest, spreading her fist out flat against his

heart.

“You hurt me,” he finished, just barely above a whisper.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Nicholas,” she said desperately.

“No?” He leaned in and felt her fingers claw through his shirt, as if she would gouge at him even as he spoke against her trembling mouth. “Then why are you so good at it?”

Why did you leave on the night I promised you everything?

She stared, as if reluctantly fascinated, as he dragged her fingers down his abdomen, all the way down to the waistband of his sweatpants. When he wrapped their fingers around him, she looked away—as if she weren’t the same woman who had said, *I was going to suck your cock*.

“God,” he said hoarsely, remembering. “You’re so fucking good at it.”

“Sometimes you’re still such a selfish boy.”

“I think it scares you, how much you want this.” He gave her hand a squeeze for emphasis. “It doesn’t exactly fit into your precious rulebook, does it? The strait-laced good girl isn’t supposed want to fuck her brother. Even if they’re not actually related, and there’s no blood shared between them. Even if he makes her come harder than anyone’s ever made her come in her life.”

“Stop it,” said Jay.

“It’s a real fucking shame, watching you deny yourself just to win good-person points in this imaginary little game you’re playing alone. Because I could make you very, *very* happy, Jay. If you let me, I could fuck you *so well*. But what do I know?” He released her hand. “I’m just a boy.”

“Nick.” Jay retied the sash around her waist—covering herself up to her throat, he couldn’t help but notice. “Please. It’s so hard to talk to you when you’re like this.”

“It’s Nicholas. You only call me Nick when you’re trying to push me away.” He ran his fingers through his hair in agitation after a glance at his watch. “I suggest you get ready. Your car’s coming in an hour and I know you’ll want to do your hair before you leave.”

“I don’t want to fight with you.” She put her hand on his arm—and yes, she had *that* look in her hazel eyes, the one that tugged at his insides like a fishhook and made him feel like a monster. “But what you said—it isn’t

true.”

“You think it is.”

Jay blinked, and part of him softened unwillingly when a tear slid down her cheek. “You have no idea how hard it is for me to do what you’re asking me to do.”

“To, what? Fuck me? Love me?”

She shook her head and started to turn away, but he stepped into her path.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry. But if you want a future with me, you need to understand: I’m not a boy anymore—I play to win.”

“You did win,” she said hollowly.

“I didn’t win shit, Jay. You fuck me in the dark. You have to come to me in the light where I can see you. Where *everyone* can see you. I want people to know you’re mine. You’ve owned me for years—body and soul. I’ve been a slave to your fucking ghost.”

She stepped back from him, gripping her throat. And then she turned and fled, her skirt kicking up in a swirling cloud as she took the steps to her room two at a time.

The door slammed behind her, echoing hollowly in his chest. Nicholas drew in a deep breath, rolled his shoulders, and began putting away the mostly-untouched food. His eyes kept flicking to the staircase, involuntarily tracing the path she’d taken as she’d fled from him once more.

It felt like she’d taken his heart with her.

■■■■■

You have to come to me in the light.

Jay hefted her suitcase off the baggage carousel with more force than necessary ignoring the pain that flared along her shoulders. A man in a business suit gave her a look she ignored.

The moment she stepped off the plane, she had felt the blast of the cold bay breeze through the gaps of the jetway. It whipped through her curls, filling her nose with the familiar briny scent of the cold Pacific ocean, detectable even over the caustic burn of jet fuel.

Just like that, her brain was inundated with thousands of half-forgotten memories. Lying about why she couldn't have her friends over so they wouldn't see the pole in the living room. Constant feelings of envy when they would go over to each other's houses, attended to by their very normal parents, and feeling infuriated that she would never, ever be able to reciprocate.

Waking up in the cold apartment alone, hoping her mother would remember to bring home dinner and terrified that she wouldn't come all.

The way the men at the Beat and Tease stared.

The predatory eyes of those men in the strip club had followed her throughout childhood, threatening a violence she could never properly put to words until her stepfather had laid it out for her in very stark terms just five years later. Then, she understood far too clearly.

I've been a slave to your fucking ghost.

She gripped her wrist, feeling the phantom weight of a bracelet that had doubled as a manacle. Nicholas's mother's diamonds had been that heavy, too, when he'd fucked her in them.

Her heart began to pound as she walked fast down the terminal, dodging the slow-moving people around her as she wheeled her suitcase. She was wearing jeans and a hoodie, and yet she kept catching people staring. Looking at her—almost as if they *remembered* her.

But the city didn't remember anyone. It paved right over you with all of that concrete anonymity. That had been its appeal when she came here almost ten years ago. She had wanted to lose herself in the hustle and bustle of the crowds, to find a place where she could forget the bad things that had happened to her and just fucking *move on* with her life.

But instead, the path she had been running on had dead-ended to Nicholas, and he had brought her back to the same beautifully gilded hell from which she'd been trying to escape.

I'm home, she thought, staring at a mural of the familiar cityscape painted on the wall. The Transamerica building, Russ, St. Regis, and Jasper. She knew their shapes and silhouettes by how they pierced the sky, but looking at it no longer *felt* like home. It no longer felt like anything.

There was a French word, *jamais vu*, for when the familiar began to

feel alien. Jay, as she turned from the mural and made her way back out to the street, thought of how many times she had spent breathing this very air, and wondered why it tasted so strange on her tongue now.

I grew up, she thought sadly, and it grew on.

In the past, she would have simply taken BART home from the airport —their station was right there—but Nicholas had given her cash for a cab, and heading down the dark, concrete enclave of the taxi stand, she was glad for the extravagance. Remembering the purse snatcher who had attacked her on her way to work, Jay held her bag and suitcase tighter.

One of the taxi drivers had his lights on and the ID prominently displayed. Jay leaned into the open window and asked if he'd take her to the address of her old apartment.

“Sure thing,” he said, popping the locks on the door.

She looked at her phone while the driver loaded her suitcase into the back. Nicholas had already sent her a message. *It says your plane landed. Are you through customs yet?*

He was tracking her flight? Oh, who was she kidding? Of course he was.

I'm flagging down a taxi now.

Good. Send me a picture when you get home.

What kind of picture?

The kind where you have your clothes on.

Heat crawled up her throat. As she began her response, she must have been making a face, because the taxi driver was watching her in the rearview mirror when she looked up again.

“Who are you messaging?” he asked casually. “Your boyfriend?”

It felt like fishing to find out if she was alone. Some of the men at the strip club had done that to her mother—*How does your husband feel about you doing this? He's a lucky man, having someone like you at home.* Jay gripped her phone tighter, tilting the screen towards herself. “My husband,” she lied. The words felt a little too comfortable rolling off her tongue and she wouldn’t let herself think about why. “My flight was late. He wants to know where I am.”

The driver made a sound of amusement and she saw his eyes flash briefly towards the mirror again, filling her with the urge to check her hoodie and make sure it was still zipped. “Lucky man,” he remarked. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to have you back.”

(someone like you)

“Um,” said Jay, keeping her eyes on her phone. *Are you still there?*

Yes.

My driver is making me uncomfortable. He just asked if I was texting my boyfriend and I don’t like the way he’s looking at me. Will you talk to me until I get home?

Send me a photograph of his license. I can get him fired.

I don’t want you to do that. I just want you to talk to me so I don’t have to talk to him.

The text bubbles hovered and then disappeared.

Fine. Text me whatever you want and let me know when you’re home.

It sounded like a brush-off and after the way they had parted, it probably was. She swallowed back the raw feeling swelling in her throat, wondering why she felt like crying.

She stayed glued to her phone, playing her favorite cat game as the driver, who was apparently feeling chatty, continued to make conversation. She answered his questions about what she was doing in the city and how long she’d been married with clipped, monosyllabic answers, though that didn’t seem to slow him down at all and she was too afraid not to respond.

She wished she hadn’t given him her address. At least the complex was large, and on a fairly busy street. You couldn’t even access it from the outside without a key unless someone else let you in. For a girl on the run, that had been a major appeal.

The driver put her suitcase out on the curb with an unnecessarily loud grunt. Jay tipped him 20% even though she knew Nicholas wouldn’t have wanted her to. But it was worth the please-don’t-axe-murder-me money just for the peace of mind.

Which reminded her.

I’m home, she texted Nicholas, shifting her suitcase to one hand so she

could juggle her phone and the key with the other. The smell—oh god, it was exactly the same, wasn’t it? Cheap lemon carpet cleaner and the musty backwater smell every building in this area got during rainy season when all the pipes backed up.

She climbed the steps to her apartment, grumbling a little as she tried to juggle all her things. She dropped her phone twice, swearing before looking around guiltily. The walk had never seemed this length before. And the stairway was so . . . small and narrow. Nearly claustrophobic.

When she finally got to her door, she threw herself into it with relief—and then she stopped, and stared, feeling the open space at her back like a great, sucking void.

Her room looked smaller than she remembered.

She did up the latch, chain, and deadbolt, leaving her suitcase by the door to take in her old space. The answering machine was blinking angrily (“I can’t believe you have one of those,” Lily had said, the first time she had seen it. “Who uses a landline in this day and age?”).

Over by the window was her favorite blue chair, positioned in front of a statement wall she had carefully assembled by thrifting at the nicer shops in the Haight. Her rock collection was on the window sill, so the crystals would glitter in the pale sunlight, and over in the corner, folded up, was the little card table that doubled as a dining table because she ate all of her meals alone.

Jay fell back into the chair, letting herself be absorbed by the plush suede. She was vaguely aware that her hands were shaking, that a cold spot had formed on the very tip of her nose. She unzipped her hoodie and balled the yellow fabric up as she kicked off her old Converse, before bringing her knees up to her chest. As if that could fill the emptiness.

She had tried running away but glaring reminders of the past were everywhere she looked, standing out like colorful bricks in an otherwise white wall. Whether it was the gypsum rose that Nicholas had bought for her or the CD he had fucked her to during that very first time, he had cast his net wide and thoroughly trapped her in it.

What did it say about him that he chose to remain in the house where both of them had suffered so much? How could he stand it? Even after purging his father’s belongings in a gratuitous display of violence, he still

slept in what had once been his father's bed.

If he were a very different type of man, Jay might have called it martyrdom, but Nicholas's particular brand of destruction had always radiated outward, not inward.

Staring out the window, past her rocks and into the alleyway, Jay thought, *I don't know if I'm strong enough not to be consumed by him this time.*

Her pocket buzzed, right on cue. *Where's my picture?* he demanded.

Jay shook out her hair a little and snapped a blurry selfie. *Creep.*

I'm your creep, he responded easily. *You look hot. Is that what you were wearing in the taxi?*

A lick of shame went through her as she adjusted her old Adidas tank top, belatedly realizing that her bra straps were showing. *Not that it makes any difference, but no. I had a sweatshirt on.*

You still should have sent me his license.

No, Nicholas. What are you doing? She glanced at the clock. *You're up late.*

Just signing some documents in bed. Is that your apartment? It looks small.

It's one small CORNER of my apartment, yes.

Nicholas sent a picture of his master bedroom. She fought back an eyeroll when she saw that he'd purposefully included the sitting area and en suite bathroom. It looked like he'd been drinking alone. There was an open wine bottle on the low table and beside it, a dirty glass.

You live in a mansion. We are not the same. Now wash that glass and pick your pants up off the floor. You're a grown man.

Funny, I thought I was a selfish boy.

Ugh. Jay set down her phone and went to the bathroom to wash the airport germs off her hands. Then she unzipped her suitcase and changed into a pair of comfy shorts, but she didn't bother packing. She wouldn't be here very long. While she was deleting messages off the answering machine she thought she might actually get rid of, her phone buzzed again.

How many square feet is your emotional support shack?

God, could he be any more annoying? It's not about the size. Location is the most important thing here. I live in a very good spot in the Mission. Everything in the city is small.

That explains so much about your ex.

I don't know what you expect me to say to that.

Tell Daddy how much you're going to miss him tonight when you're sleeping all alone.

Jay set the phone down. This time, her hand trembled. She brushed her teeth savagely, noticing with some moroseness that the mildew problem in the bathroom had returned in her absence.

There was another message waiting for her when she returned. She opened it half-heartedly, and then sucked in a sharp breath.

He'd sent her a shirtless picture of himself lying in bed. His dark hair was mussed by the pillow, which he'd propped up against the headboard to work. He had his free hand under his jaw, in a calculated pose of study, which was doing interesting things to the flexed muscles of his hirsute chest. The picture cut off just above his abdomen and the dusting of hair trailing down from his navel, but it wasn't hard to imagine what was—or wasn't—beneath the border of her phone screen.

If you beg me, said the accompanying text, I'll send you the uncensored version.

I guess that's why his pants were on the floor, she thought.

She often wondered if Nicholas only wanted her because he didn't know how to be with anyone else. He'd confessed to her once that he thought it was hot that they lived under the same roof, and though he'd walked that back quickly enough after gauging her reaction, it had held the ring of truth to it. Proximity made her easy; it made her his *ghost*.

To her knowledge, he'd never had a real girlfriend. And despite his intensity, he never let people get close. Except for her. Then he was too close, all the time. Like a haunting.

God, the way he *looked* at her—

She might have called it adoration, if it weren't for the undercurrent of a violence that ran through those glances like a livewire, shocking any remnants of sweetness into cringing submission.

She looked down, guiltily, at her screen, and saw that he was typing.

Quid pro quo, little bird. You can leave the necklace on.

Jay could imagine it—that was the worst part. How easy it would be to take off her clothes for him, as she had so many times before. To do what he told her to do.

All their lives, their relationship had been tainted by their respective need to prove to one another that they were more than their parents, even as they fell into that selfsame cycle of dominance and capitulation. If he wanted her to meet him halfway, it had to start from a place of mutual respect and not because she was convenient or biddable.

Nicholas needed to understand that if he really wanted to love her, he couldn't bully her into submission every time she did something he didn't like.

She might have actually believed it, too, if she weren't currently saving his photo to her phone.

Goodnight, Nick, she wrote. *Don't stay up too late.*

It went to 'read' immediately. And though she waited, there was no response.

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Chapter Five

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After Damon came onto her at the resort, Jay had avoided coming home as much as possible. College had been great for that but the dorms shut down for the holidays, forcing students to vacate, and so she had been forced to endure several Thanksgivings and Christmases at home, which she spent barricaded in her room with the door locked and a chair wedged under the doorknob just in case.

They pretended to be a normal family at their so-called family dinners. It was as if there were cameras embedded in the walls, zooming in on her mother's forced happiness, while Damon bragged over her about his latest business conquests, and Nick just sat there in silence watching everyone else with an expression of complete indifference.

He stayed away, too, but unlike her, he had a big group of friends, courtesy of his father. The phone was always ringing off the hook from people who weren't important enough to have his cell phone number, and Nick was more than happy to let the maid get it.

"Why don't you answer your own phone calls?" Jay had said once.
"They're your friends."

"Them?" He'd looked at the phone with a scoff. "They're nothing."

Which had angered her more than it should have, because she often felt the same way about herself. That nothing she did would ever be good enough by any order of magnitude because nothing was still nothing regardless of what you multiplied it with.

As soon as she felt like she safely could, Jay fled to her room, aware of her stepfather's leaden gaze boring into her back. *You fucked up*, his eyes seemed to say. *You should have chosen me*.

You're nothing.

When she heard the heavy knock on her door, Jay's first horrified thought was that it was him.

That he was going to force her to choose him.

"W-who is it?" she had asked, in a high, wavering voice, and Nick had responded through the door, in a tone of deep disdain: "Me."

She almost didn't let *him* in, either, but it was Nick. She had known

him since he was a boy and except for that awful day at the beach, he had never tried to do anything to her that would warrant a fear response like this. He was her brother, for god's sake. Well, almost.

It's just Nick.

Jay opened the door and he brushed past her, giving her a whiff of citrus aftershave as he swung into her computer chair backwards like it was his, leaning his ropy forearms over the top so he could prop his chin on them. He was wearing a white undershirt beneath a green-checked button-down and had recently started gelling his hair. Jay thought that he looked like he belonged on TRL, but he pulled it off anyway. Confidence, she supposed, could make anything look good.

"What do you want?" She leaned against the wall by her door, keeping an ear out for the sounds of their parents' footsteps. She didn't want Damon catching her with Nick in her room.

"To get away from *that*." His eyes flicked past her, towards the door. "What else?"

"You have your own room," she pointed out. "It's even larger than mine. You're always telling me so. Remember?"

His dark eyebrows shot up and the look he gave her made her walk across the room to fetch her old Berkeley hoodie. "What's with you?" he asked, sounding distracted.

You tried to kiss me. She zipped the sweatshirt all the way up over her thin white V-neck. *Don't you remember?*

"What?" Jay tried to keep her voice light. "You're the only one allowed to be in a bad mood?"

"You don't have bad moods. You're the perfect one."

Jay bit her lip. After her slip-up with Angie about the whole stripper thing, she'd learned to bury her real feelings and playact the grateful rags-to-riches princess they all wanted her to be. But hearing that from Nick—hurt. He, of all people, should know her better than anyone.

"At least you only have to deal with them for three more years." Jay sat on the edge of her bed at a slight angle, so they were facing. "Then you can leave."

"Like you did?" His tone was almost accusing. "You've changed."

“So have you, metal boy. It’s called growing up.”

That brought the ghost of a smile to his mouth. *He looks different when he smiles*, Jay thought, surprised by her surprise. He looked less like his father, and more like himself.

“Dad called you a bra-burning bitch the other night,” Nick drawled. “He said he isn’t paying almost ten grand a quarter for a bunch of communist pricks to teach you how to hate men.”

“I don’t hate men,” Jay said tightly.

“Not yet.” Nick kicked his feet against the wheels of her desk chair. “If you do burn your bra, just make sure you’re not wearing it when you do. Or better yet, go to one of those cool protests where they don’t wear anything on top at all.”

“Please stop talking about my underwear,” said Jay.

He gave her a sideways glance. “You used to like it here. I remember you almost creamed yourself when you saw your bedroom that first time. Now, it’s like you hate it.” His eyes narrowed and she squirmed uneasily as his expression shifted so minutely that no one else would have noticed but her. “Did your mom say something to you before you left?”

“What? No.”

“My dad?”

Her heart froze, making the rapid pump of blood feel sharp and painful. She stood up abruptly from the wall, folding her arms over her chest. “It’s nothing like that. I’m just busy. That’s all. Sometimes, it’s just a little overwhelming, dealing with all that pressure.”

“What,” he began, getting up as well, “do you know about pressure?”

“I work hard,” she said defiantly, wondering why she felt frightened. “I always have. Coming from nothing, and being forced to prove myself again and again—that’s pressure.”

He stalked towards her in a way that felt deliberately predatory and as she tilted her head up to maintain eye contact, she realized, with a jolt, that he was now taller.

Nick seemed to realize that, too. A shadow passed through his slate-gray eyes as he looked down at her face. “You don’t deal with pressure, blue jay. You run from it. My dad thinks so, too.”

“Your dad’s an asshole,” Jay said hotly. “You can’t trust anything he says.” Anger flickered through her, hot and unsteady. She swallowed it back. “Especially about women. I don’t—”

“Jay.” Nick leaned an arm against the wall, bending close enough to see the flecks in his gray eyes, and their fringe of thick, sooty lashes. Her voice died in her throat as she glanced at his arm. “You’re deflecting.”

“Shut up, Nick.”

“Hollybrook’s little angel,” he mocked gently. “What are you running from now?”

Still caught in her dreams like a snare, Jay was not sure where she was, or even *when* she was. All she knew was that she wasn’t in her sunflower-dappled bedroom or Nick’s austere master suite, and for some reason the light was wrong, and the air was cold and stale—

Terror filled her lungs, white-hot as a blade fresh from a forge. *You’re alone*, that awful voice whispered in her ears, and she grabbed at the mattress. *You’re nothing. No one loves you.*

“Mom?”

Alone.

“Nick?”

Her memories hit just as the panic attack did, both of them battering her like a rogue wave against a cliff. A sob left her lips and she thrashed so violently that she woke herself up for real.

She was in her apartment, tangled up in the vintage patchwork quilt she had purchased at an estate sale because it had so much personality that she couldn’t bear to leave it there to molder. Fake plants lined the top of her clumsily painted dresser, their plastic and rubber leaves throwing out sinister shadows that stretched over her face like long fingers. Catty corner from that was a photo collage of people she used to hang out with, so faded from the sun that she could barely make out their yellowed faces.

(*What are you running from now?*)

I don’t know. Jay slid out of bed, bracing herself against the edge of the mattress as the ringing in her ears subsided. Her stomach turned and tilted, and she found herself swaying as she stood upright on that nubby old carpet and forced herself towards the kitchenette. *Maybe everything.*

She began to brew a pot of coffee to go with her breakfast and then remembered as she looked into her odorous fridge that she had given most of her food away to a neighbor before leaving for LA. There was a box of Kashi in her cupboard, still sealed, and she ate it dry from the box while some only-slightly-stale coffee dripped into the pitcher. It smelled like it came from a gas station, but Jay didn't need fancy coffee. She'd survived on far worse.

With her non-eating hand, she scrolled through her phone, checking her work emails and what little social media she had. There were no texts from Nicholas, but that wasn't entirely surprising after she'd refused to play into his weird little sex games.

There was a message from her mother, though. Another one.

Don't think I've forgotten you hanging up on me at the office. Do you really think that you can just abandon your own mother like this whenever it suits you? What gives you the right?

She must have been getting desperate. Her mother had never been this interested in her before. Not even when she was a child. There was an entire column of missed calls, some with messages attached. Jay wouldn't let herself listen to them, knowing that whatever they said would hurt.

(You're too clingy, Jay. Nobody is going to want you around if you pester them all the time)

Jay had put out some boxes from her last move in anticipation of the packing but seeing them all surrounding her felt suffocating. The air itself seemed to drain from the room. When she breathed in, she imagined she could smell her mother's Bath and Body Works body spray and the stale cigarette smoke that came from the strip club.

I need to get out of here.

She picked up her now-cold coffee, which somehow managed to taste even worse than it smelled, and settled into her chair with her phone. The packing could wait, she decided. It wasn't like she could do much anyway, not while she was like this.

Her hands were shaking so badly that she could barely manage to bring up her contacts list.

Who are you going to call, Jay? You don't have any friends.

(You care too much. And now you're alone.)

Then her eye landed on Lily's name.

Hey, she wrote, before she could second-guess herself. I'm in SF. Want to meet up?

Probably nothing would come of it, but at least she could walk to the corner store or—

Her phone buzzed almost as soon as she had set it down.

Oh my GOD, can this be JAY? JAY VARENS? Because I'm pretty sure Jay is dead. Otherwise she would have TEXTED ME instead of turning into a literal ghost.

That stung. She heard Nicholas's whisper: *Have you texted her recently? Or have you already started freezing her out, the way you always do?*

(a slave to your ghost)

Shaking her head, Jay wrote: *It's really me, Lily. I'm so sorry, I've just been busy.*

Quick—tell me something only SHE would know so I know you're not a pod person.

You got in trouble with security for writing Mrs. Jungkook on your work badge in sharpie on April Fools' Day last year.

Pffffft. Anyone could know that.

You're allergic to cats and bees, and your favorite K-drama is Coffee Prince.

OH HI JAY. SO NICE TO SEE YOU. WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN? <3

Jay scrunched a few locks of hair, wincing at how dry they felt. That's what she got for neglecting her hair care routine. *I'm sorry I didn't get back to you sooner. It's the new job. I'm still kind of settling in. They've been working me hard.*

A turn of phrase she regretted almost instantly as the image of Nicholas bending her back over the kitchen counter while going down on her like he had something to prove popped into her head.

(Quid pro quo, little bird)

Oh, RIGHT, Lily wrote, continuing to abuse her screaming caps-key. How's the new gig with Mr. TDaStSooY? Has he fallen in love with his favorite new secretary yet?

Jay choked.

It's good, she wrote, after a shaken pause. I'm just using some PTO to tie up some loose ends.

Well, lucky for YOU, I happen to be available. Do you want to meet up in the Mission?

Sure. Let's get burritos. I've been craving them.

YAS. BURRITOS WITH MY JAYRITO. I'm so glad you're not dead, bestie. <3

Jay set the phone down again, throwing her head back with a loud sigh. *Fuck, Lily*, she thought, amused and exasperated and drained, all at once. She didn't need someone to tell her that her life was royally screwed, because she knew it was. It always had been.

Screwed up was basically her normal.

But the cost of that was that she had always needed to hold people at a distance, to stop them before they could ask the difficult questions. Nicholas had never seemed to care what people thought of him but she did. It was like a game of smoke and mirrors: you could never let anyone get too close or they'd see the rips and snarls that marred that illusion of perfection.

She had unthinkingly packed for the warmer So-Cal weather, so she delved into her yet-to-be-packed-up closet and pulled on one of her old sweaters and a pair of tight-fitting jeans. This time, she did take BART—because Nicholas didn't run her life—and as soon as she got off on Sixteenth and Mission, she was assailed by the all-too-familiar sight of homeless people begging in the station courtyard.

Jay skirted the edge of it, avoiding someone who was shooting up—what a shock *that* would be to the historical society matrons, Jay thought. *They'd probably throw another fucking charity ball for it.*

As she walked deeper into Mission, it gained a cozier, almost residential feel. Lots of couples, some of them with children, and hipsters wearing the latest street fashions. Other places, they stayed inside you. But when you left the city, it was like ripping off a scab. It simply grew back

over the raw place you'd left, sealing up like a wound.

She found the rather uncreatively named Mission Burritos Lily had texted her. She'd never even heard of the place before, but in her brief tenure in the city, Jay had found that the less creative the name, the more delicious the food. It was always those pop-up places with the cutesy, punny names that ended up giving you the runs.

"Jay!" Lily jumped up from her seat, causing several people around her to look around, perplexed. She was wearing jeans and a cute little striped top that looked vintage and, knowing her, probably was. She wrapped Jay in a hug, who stiffened and then returned it slowly, putting her arm around the smaller woman and tentatively squeezing back. "You made it!"

"I hope you weren't waiting long. BART was late, as usual."

"Not at all." Lily grinned. "Nice beach tan."

"I'm always tan." Jay rolled her eyes, following Lily to the ordering counter. "So what's new with you? Give me the elevator version first."

"Well, I got promoted. To senior executive assistant!"

"Wow, that's awesome. Congratulations."

"I'm pumped," Lily said, pausing to take a breath and place her order. "Though *obviously* I miss your face. Sheridan hired a new assistant and I'm pretty sure he hates me."

"Who could hate you?" Jay said. "It would be like hating a puppy."

"See? That's why you're the best. So tell me. How is *your* job?"

Jay glanced at the menu and ordered the vegan chorizo. "It's looking pretty permanent. Like I said, I'm just taking some personal days to box up my things. Then I'm going back."

"To LA?"

"Yeah." Jay scratched at her neck. "I actually lived there for a while, so it feels pretty familiar."

"Extra ancho chiles, please—Jay, that's so awesome! Is your work hooking you up with a place?"

Emphasis on the hooking, her brain whispered.

"Sort of." She managed a watery smile. "It's a culture shock for sure but so much of it's changed. Not like here." She asked for an horchata,

propping her hip against the counter as the server grabbed a plastic cup. “I grew up here. In the city. Did I ever tell you that?”

“I think so, but it’s been a while so I don’t really remember.” Lily cradled her foil-wrapped burrito like it was something precious. “Tell me more about the guy. The hot one who came in. Do you know him? When you went skipping out of there, you looked like you’d seen a ghost.”

“I know him.” She took her burrito carefully. “He’s my stepbrother.”

“Wait, really? Your brother? I thought he might have been—” Lily blushed. “Your ex.”

Probably because I’ve fucked him more than I ever did any of my exes.

Jay took a desperate sip of horchata to cool the burning in her throat. “We grew up together. After I left SF with my mom, that is. She married his dad. He’s younger—four years younger,” she reminded herself.

“Wow, and now he’s your boss? That must be awkward.”

“No, he just owns the company. I work for his CFO, who’s really nice.”

She watched Lily take that in. “Do you like it?” she asked eventually.

“Yeah, I do, surprisingly. I never thought I’d get involved in the family business.”

“You don’t work for the mob, do you?”

Jay laughed. “No. Nicholas is an investor. Not a killer. I don’t even think he owns a gun.”

Lily tilted her head. “Not to belabor the point or anything, but, what’s going on there? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you mention a brother before. Are you close?”

“Not that close,” Jay mumbled.

Liar.

(Why are you making that sound, little bird? Is it because it hurts? Or do you like it when Daddy fucks you rough?)

A memory of him biting her neck while he sank into her from behind popped into her head, sharp and visceral. It nearly left her breathless.

(Such a good little slut)

“You’re not close and he flew all the way across the state to offer you

a job?"

"It's complicated." Her voice came out sounding a little strangled. "We have . . . history."

"Ah. I get it. Things are kind of weird between my mom and aunt, too." *Are they, though?* that obnoxious voice in Jay's head whispered. "They don't like each other, but my mom would drop everything to fly back to Asia in a heartbeat if anything ever happened to her."

"Yeah," Jay said faintly. "I guess it is a little bit like that."

(you've owned me for years)

There was a lull in the chatter of the restaurant, and Jay could hear some female pop artist playing in the kitchen as the fry cook cleaned. It made her remember a different kitchen, where her fourteen-year-old self had once eaten a hamburger with a pretty young stripper named Honey.

"You know," Lily said, a little self-consciously, "I was never sure you wanted to be friends."

"What?" Jay covered her mouth, hiding the bite she'd just taken as her mouth fell open.

"You were just so quiet and kind of distant." She toyed with her bright purple straw. "I figured we were pretty good work friends, but it didn't seem like you wanted to be more than that."

"I'm sorry." Jay set down her food. "I've never been very good at reaching out."

"No kidding." Lily wiggled her brows to soften the bite of her words. "I didn't want to lead with this, because I didn't want to freak you out, but I actually have some cousins who live in the OC. Sometimes we all rent a house in Malibu and spend a few weeks by the beach. So, if you want, you could come and hang. All you'd have to do is pitch in for rent."

"That would be amazing. I'd love that so much."

"See? Yes. Now it needs to happen."

Jay smiled and shook her head. "So what else have you been doing? You got an amazing promotion, and that's awesome. Do you have anything else going on?"

"Well, I've been seeing this guy. I met him at an art show. They were

doing a Yayoi Kusuma exhibit at the SFMoMa—you should totally go, Jay, they have an exhibition on *ephemeral art*—and we got to talking in the infinity room. He was wearing an OK Go hoodie so I knew he was going to be cool. We ended up going for drinks and desserts in the museum café.”

“Wow,” Jay said, a little longingly. “That’s like something out of a movie.”

“I know.” Lily grinned. “What about you? Seeing anyone?”

“Um.” Jay flicked her aluminum wrapper. “Kind of.”

“Jay! What’s he like? Is he hot? Tell me everything.”

“Well—” Jay stared at the wall, worrying her lip between her teeth. “He’s very attractive—and he knows it,” she added, her face softening unconsciously. “But he’s very contained. You wouldn’t know it at a glance, because he looks like a stereotypical jock, but there’s a lot going on beneath the surface. When you’re close enough to him, you can almost feel his mind working. Like it’s buzzing right against your skin—”

(You’re the sweetest girl I know)

Jay broke off.

Watching her closely, Lily asked, “Is he nice?”

“No—I mean, he tries. Sort of. But he’s bad at it.” Jay sighed ruefully. “He’s kind of an asshole.”

“Oh.” Lily frowned. “That’s not good.”

“It sounds worse than it is,” Jay said. “He’s not cruel to me.” *Low bar, Jay.* “He really tries to give me what he thinks I want. In some ways, he’s a product of his environment. His father was a wealthy man who used his privilege to hurt people or buy them off, and that left an impression.”

“So, a typical late-stage capitalist.”

Jay breathed out a reluctant laugh. “Something like that. I worry that I’m just an outlet for him, though. An easy source of affection he can come to and then leave. You know how it can be—some people treat their relationships like they’re a glass of wine at the end of the day.”

“Jay, if a man is drinking you down like a bottle of good red at the end of the night, I’d say you’re in a better position than most straight women.” She tilted her head. “I mean, as long as he’s not hurting you. He’s not

hurting you, is he?”

“No,” Jay said, aghast. “No, of course not.”

Except for that one time.

“Then I don’t see a problem as long as you’re happy.” Lily shrugged her shoulders. “Let him give you the princess treatment. Nobody said you can’t use someone back for using you.”

Use Nick.

The conversation switched to lighter topics with longer pauses as they ate, but Jay kept thinking about Lily’s words. Even on the ride back, when she was sitting with her legs crushed to one side so her feet wouldn’t touch the man who was aggressively splayed out in the seat across from her, she found herself thinking of how good it had felt to abandon her scruples and just *take* for once as soon as he laid his ungentle hands on her body.

When she closed her eyes, she could forget who he was and what he’d done. She could focus on those slow, deep kisses that made her feel like she was drowning, and the hard and desperate fucks that sometimes left her feeling too limp to even stand. She even liked the gifts, usually, though she was afraid that if she didn’t put her foot down over his rampant spending for those, the sheer amount of them would increase to terrifying extremes.

But was that love? She was pretty sure it wasn’t, just as how she was equally sure Lily’s “girl, you get some” enthusiasm would wane if she found out that the man drinking her down like a good red was her own stepbrother.

Jay hitched her purse more tightly against her body as she slid her ticket into the reader for the turn gate, watching it get sucked in and spit out.

That was the problem, though. In his single-minded pursuit of her, Nicholas never stopped to think about how other people would look at them when—if—their relationship came out. His privilege had insulated him from the stark realities of his own desires.

She knew exactly how it would be. It was already there in how Meghana and Renata, Nick’s general counsel, looked at her. Or *didn’t* look at her. It was the disappointed look of finding out that someone was actually a much worse person than you thought they were.

Everyone would look at them like that if she married him. Marriages were a part of the public record—she had looked that up—and all of their colleagues and old friends would think they were out of their minds. Or, like Damon, they'd turn it into something salacious and assume that they'd spent their teen years ensconced in each other's bedrooms.

Worse, they'd make her out to be some kind of predator. She couldn't bear that—because it *wasn't* true. She didn't want to see suspicion and rumor tarnish Nick's reputation and the way he ran his business, either. He'd become a laughingstock and so would she.

And he would *hate* her for it.

Jay touched the bird ring she wore at her throat and a chill zipped down her spine as she passed a parked Mercedes. She stopped and looked over her shoulder. The street outside of her apartment had the usual amount of foot traffic, and nothing seemed amiss, but the cold spot hadn't left.

She had the strangest sensation that she was being watched.



"I noticed your calendar was blocked off all morning. Were you in that meeting with the software development company?"

"Yeah." Nicholas stabbed his fork into his chicken kebab, silently cursing the obnoxious tech CEO and the sensitivity training session that had preceded it. "He got weaselly about the interest rates and said he 'wasn't sure our reputation was compatible with his family-owned business.'"

"Was this about the misconduct allegations? I thought that rumor was put to rest."

"Apparently not." *Among other things.* "Maybe he heard we lost our VP."

Arthur shook his head. "How would they hear about that? They're multinational."

"I guess he knows how to Google." Nicholas grimaced. "I looked him up—he's on his third wife. So unless she started out as his secretary, their business is about as family-owned as the mob." He felt his face heat as it belatedly occurred to him that his words could just as easily apply to himself and his own "family business."

“I’m assuming you turned him down then.”

“I said if he couldn’t afford our rates, perhaps he was right and we weren’t a good fit for him.”

Arthur smiled into his doogh. “I’m sure he loved that.”

“Yeah.” Nicholas looked around the Afghan diner, taking in the empty seats. It was the same one he had taken Jay to after their first night together, and then again just before he’d proposed. He’d seen the owner’s eyes widen with recognition as he came in before scanning the rest of the room—*searching for Jay*. He eyed his picked radish salad, feeling as if dozens of tiny bristles were sticking him in his spine. “He’ll be back, though. They always are.”

“They do say hindsight is twenty-twenty.” Arthur picked up a chicken skewer so heavily dusted with paprika that it looked red. “How’s Jay doing, by the way?”

“Jay?”

“She put in about a week of PTO to go back to San Francisco.” Arthur paused with the skewer halfway to his mouth. Nicholas saw the man’s eyes flick over his face. “I figured you knew. She mentioned a rent hike. Is everything all right?”

“She’s just settling up her old life before she moves here permanently,” he said guardedly.

“I’m glad to hear it. Between you and me, she needs the break. She stays later than I do. As late as you, I think.” Arthur paused again and Nicholas felt himself tense in anticipation.

“Jay works hard.”

“And seamlessly. Doing my own scheduling is turning out to be quite the novelty. It’s been years since I touched some of that software she uses. She makes it look so easy.”

“You can borrow Annica while she’s gone. I’m used to running my own schedule.”

The other man chuckled. “As kind as that is, Annica’s no Jay.”

“I thought you liked her. You hired you, didn’t you?”

“I did, and she does good work, but she’s not particularly . . .

personable.” Arthur coughed into his napkin. “She has a group chat with some of her friends at the company. I’ve seen some of the messages that were flagged by our monitoring software. They weren’t always kind.”

The robot has friends? Interesting.

“By the way,” Arthur said. “Out of curiosity, did you limit Annica’s lunch hour?”

“Hmm? No. Why?”

“She just seemed a little rushed during her paid lunch with Jay the other day. The two of them came back very early.”

“If she did, that was all her. It makes no difference to me how long she takes as long as she does her job.” Something else to file away for later, he thought distractedly. “How’s your wife?”

“Leah’s great. Thinks I work too hard. We’re overdue for another vacation, although the problem with a vacation is that then you need another vacation to recover from your vacation.” He went back for more of his yogurt drink, face pink from the spices. “That offer for dinner is still open, by the way. Bring your sister. Leah would get on with Jay like a house on fire.”

Your sister gave him pause. “Everyone does. In high school, she was everyone’s little darling.”

“Leah was the same way,” Arthur said, a note of pride in his voice. “Women like that—they just shine.”

“How did you end up with someone like that?”

It came out sounding like an insult but Arthur, gazing inward at the happy memories only he could see, didn’t appear to notice. “I ask myself the same question, to be honest. I like to think it’s because I swept her off her feet. But she says it’s because I make her laugh.”

Is that so.

The owner was manning the cash register as Nicholas walked up to settle the bill. “Where’s your pretty girlfriend?” he asked, smiling in a way that he probably thought was friendly. “I have been saving my best baklava for her.”

“She’s not here,” Nicholas said shortly, and the man eyed him in disapproval.

“That’s too bad.”

Fucking unbelievable. He was getting judged by someone who worked in a kitchen?

When he got back to the office, he had a follow-up meeting with HR. They wanted to review his progress and discuss “what he’d learned.” Remembering what Jay had said, he swallowed back his true feelings and parroted a bunch of nonsense about growing as a person that Meghana and her lackey seemed to eat right up.

With no Jay to drive home, he scheduled a client dinner he’d been putting off with a tech executive. This one, young and edgy—he’d self-described as an iconoclast—wanted to sample the local bar scene, so they went to The Shack, which was basically a dive bar that lived with its very rich parents. It was the sort of place he tended to avoid at all costs.

Nicholas ordered a beer and half-listened while the man talked up his business. He still wasn’t sure what his company did exactly, but their CEO was convinced that they were going to be the next unicorn. The way he was pounding back hard seltzer wasn’t helping his fluency. When he pushed back from the table with a belch and excused himself to the bathroom Nicholas tried not to roll his eyes, turning away from the table to scan the crowd as he took a deep swallow of stout.

“Nick?” a man’s voice said in his ear. “Hey man, how’s it hanging? Long time, no see.”

Nicholas turned, and found himself staring into the face of his ex-friend. Shock was quickly eclipsed by anger and disdain. He picked up the half-empty bottle again, taking a heavy draught. “Probably because you got me sent to jail.”

Jake’s eyebrows drew together, briefly disconcerted, and then he laughed. It annoyed Nicholas that his laugh sounded exactly the same, horsey and loud. “Yeah, because you fucking punched me, Beaucroft.”

“And you deserved it, *Van Hoff*. Payback’s a bitch, or so I’m told.” His attention shifted, flicking between the muffled music and ambient bar chatter. “That seat’s taken.”

Jake’s smile flickered. He’d already started to sink down on the executive’s vacated stool. “What are you doing here? I thought this place was too good for you.”

“My client felt like slumming.” He set down his bottle. “What are you doing here?”

“Me? I’m a regular. Though now that I’m a kept man, I don’t get out as much.”

“Good for you.”

“Don’t you want to know who?” Jake asked, his voice sly.

“I really don’t care who you’re fucking.” Nicholas glanced in the direction of the bathrooms and then away. “I’m not in the mood to catch up, either.”

“That’s right, I hear you’ve become a real family man ever since Jay came back home. Wining and dining charities for little children—that’s real nice. She was always really into that charity shit, wasn’t she? I remember you used to make fun of her for it. Saint Justine, I think is what you used to call her. Though I’ve never seen a saint with tits like that.”

“How’s working for your washed-up uncle going? I heard your dad drop-kicked you to the curb like some deadbeat after losing his last election. Must suck to suck.”

“You haven’t changed at all.” Jake laughed again, but this time there was a nasty edge to it. “You always did act like you were better than the rest of us, but you and I have more in common than you think. Remember that, the next time you decide to go full psycho for your hot sister.”

“Don’t think I won’t throw you through that fucking window,” said Nicholas.

Jake flipped him off with a nasty smirk, though not, Nicholas noted with sardonic amusement, before stepping hastily out of reach. “See you around, Nicky. Tell Saint Jay I said hi.”

A growl built in his throat as the other man turned away. But he could see the executive making his way back across the floor, still fumbling with the zipper of his tailored pants. *That little fuck*, he thought, unsure whether he meant Jake, the executive, or everyone in this whole fucking bar.

“We’re leaving,” Nicholas said, as soon as the drunken executive was in hearing distance. “Email me your decision Monday or don’t bother.”

By the time he got home from the man’s hotel, he was bristling with irritation. He shrugged off his jacket and tossed it on the back of the sofa in

the den, working his tie loose one-handed. He unbuttoned his shirt but left it hanging open as he poured himself a glass of wine and started to reach for another glass before remembering—*she isn't here*. His dark mood plummeted and he opened his phone, scrolling until he got to the photo that he'd made her send him last night.

She was sitting in an ugly blue chair (*blue chair for the blue jay*, he thought), and the top she was wearing had frayed straps. Her face was bare and she was looking at the camera with an expression he was well familiar with, and he knew she'd sent it to him exactly like this just to prove a point, but he undid his pants anyway, sliding his hand into his open fly with a weary sigh.

You make her laugh—his brow furrowed as his head tipped back—but *I make her come*.

But was that enough? God, even that little fuck Van Hoff had found someone to warm his dick at night.

Just once, he would have liked for her to loosen up rather than constantly making him work for it. Fuck if he wasn't imagining Jay with those frayed straps dangling around her arms and her dark nipples peeking through the loose curls of her hair. Touching herself. A hint of frustration in those big hazel eyes. Hot for him and ready to beg for it.

Yes, Daddy? Do you want me?

Nicholas shuddered violently and then swore as the seeping warmth of his own come soaked through the wool of his dress pants to kiss his thighs. “Fuck.” He leaped up from the chair so suddenly that he spilled wine on both himself and the carpet. “Fuck! Goddammit.”

He stormed into his bedroom and heard a distant howl—the cat. He'd forgotten to feed her fucking cat. Muttering a litany of curses under his breath, Nicholas rinsed the pants off in the bathroom sink and left them hanging over the edge of the counter to dry as he stormed down the hall to Jay's room, where the cat was now clawing at the door. When he returned to the living room, now wearing sweatpants and nothing else, and his hands reeking faintly of whatever slaughterhouse floor sweepings went into the cat's food, his mood was completely shot.

He threw open the window with a crack, letting in a gust of cold night air tinted with jasmine. That, and the faint and familiar tang of chlorine,

soothed him somewhat. He sank onto the loveseat and glowered at the pool, thinking of Jay and what he had done to her in it.

It enraged him that she could leave so easily while everything inside him burned with such raging fury. The pain of it was a shallow echo of the mindless wrath he'd experienced shortly after his father's death when he had swept through the house room by room and destroyed anything the old man had cherished or loved, propelled by the thought that he and his father had driven the only person in his life who had ever mattered away forever.

That hadn't helped, though, and he knew deep down that he would willingly endure her torture until his world imploded, because when she smiled at him with that shy approval, it felt like nothing in the universe could ever go wrong again.

His father's ghostly laughter mocked him.

(She's got you wrapped around her finger, boy)

He picked up his phone and looked at the photo for a beat, before tapping back to messages.

How's the packing going?

She didn't respond right away. When she did, he got a picture of some sealed cardboard boxes with her neat handwriting laddering up the sides. *U-Haul came earlier. Had to meet the driver down at the end of the street because he got lost. He was nice, though.*

Nicholas didn't want to hear about how nice the U-Haul driver was. He imagined that any man greeted by a sweaty, glowing Jay would probably be very fucking nice indeed.

I hope you weren't cleaning all day.

No, I had lunch with Lily. How was your day?

Nicholas bit back a bitter laugh.

How was his day? Fucking wonderful. He was going to have to Google "how to get come out of dress pants" and spend his evening scrubbing wine out of the white carpet so it didn't stain, and if he got one more "urgent" work email after nine o'clock, he really thought he might kill someone.

But please, Jay, tell me how nice that U-Haul driver was. Tell me how he tried very politely not to look at your perfect saintly tits.

He wondered, with a dispassionate sense of curiosity, if this was what madness felt like.

I had a lot of meetings and a business lunch with Arthur at that Afghan place I take you to. Then I had business drinks with a client. He invited us to dinner to meet his wife, by the way.

The client? she asked, and he thought *brat*.

No, Jay. Arthur.

As a couple?

No.

She never let him take her anywhere unless it was completely proper. Six inches apart, no touching. There were middle school dance chaperones were more lenient than Jay. When she'd been wearing that barely-there dress at the gala, he'd positioned his hands on her body so carefully when they danced that she might as well have been made of brittle crystal.

And even then, she'd gotten angry and demanded to leave.

That would be nice. I like him and I'd love to meet his wife. Have you met her?

Once. I don't think she likes me very much.

Do you think she'll like me?

He could imagine the worry on her face. She'd always been a people pleaser.

Nobody in their right mind could meet you and not fall in love with you.

As they had chatted, the wine had gradually relaxed him—and so had she. He was enjoying their conversation, imagining her expressions and gestures so clearly that she might as well have been sitting in front of him. But as soon as he'd sent those words—those damning fucking words—his fingertips went cold.

Fuck, he thought again, sitting up so quickly that he nearly upended his wine a second time.

It was too late. She was already typing. *Do you mean that?*

Yes, Nick. Go ahead, he imagined his father's voice sneering. *Tell her how you really feel.*

Something inside him burst. What, precisely, was wrong, he could not say. Only that being here in this room with the smell of wine still emanating from the carpet, taunted by the phantoms of the father he despised and the woman he wasn't allowed to love, he felt like he might go mad.

And now, knowing the violence that he was capable of and terrified that she might glimpse it and push him away, he couldn't trust himself to tell her anything.

She'd already ripped his heart out once.

Nicholas picked up his half-full glass of wine and hurled it into the kitchen trash, the shatter resonating with the dark impulses that clawed beneath his skin. If she were here, he'd *show* her what he meant. He would throw her down and tell her with his body what he couldn't say with words, making her come until she fucking screamed.

She'd asked him once why he always kissed her on the hand before he tied her up, and though the words had eluded him then, it was because he wanted her to know that he loved her so goddamn desperately. That even when she was on her back taking him like Daddy's eager little slut, she was still his sweet, perfect blue jay: the woman who made him feel as if he mattered even without the gilded trappings of his life.

He set the phone down on the window seat and shucked off what remained of his clothing, diving into the pool nude. His body sliced through the surface like a white-hot iron cutting through sheets of ice as his limbs made the mirror-like surface roil with violent waves.

Swimming had been more satisfying when he was younger and the thrill of competition had made it feel vicious. Now it was just something to pass the time until he wore himself out.

After four laps, he stopped counting and just gave himself over to the emptiness. And when he went to bed, drenched and exhausted and empty, he left his phone downstairs.

Chapter Six

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That party still haunted her dreams.

Half-blinded by her own tears, Jay had woven her way through the startled guests, who stared at her and her tattered dress as if she were a battered Cinderella fleeing the ball. Nobody asked if she needed help—that was what she remembered later. All those men who had asked her to dance had stood idle with their hands in their pockets, watching her run as the beads from the torn bodice scattered like hail and the women in attendance had all turned away, one by one.

It was surreal. In that part of her brain that was slowly processing all of this, and would replay it over and over again in her nightmares for years to come, she had been shocked that nobody had even cut the music. It wasn't like the movies. There was no collective gasp, no dramatic silence. She had run from her old life while 90s elevator jazz played in the background. Someone had even laughed: a woman, brassy and high-pitched. It sounded like her mother. She hoped it wasn't.

Danielle hadn't called her for weeks afterwards. Her mother's silences could feel as enduring as a harsh winter when she was angry. *It must be a mistake*, she had told herself. *Damon must have told her another lie*. But when her mother had called, it was because she was looking for her driver's license and wondered if Jay had somehow taken it in her purse.

She didn't seem to care about what had made her leave at all.

"Where are you, baby? You know you're embarrassing us all, leaving like that. People are asking questions. Come home. We can fix this. Don't be a foolish child."

Ignoring the cab driver's staring, Jay had held what remained of her beaded bodice in place, staring fixatedly out the window with eyes that now felt too dry to cry. But she wasn't seeing the cracked leather interiors or the buttery yellow lights in the assembly line McMansions. All she could see was Damon's blood smeared over Nick's knuckles. The violence in his eyes as she pleaded with him to stop.

He's never going to let me go, she thought. Never. He'll destroy us both before he'll free me.

Her belongings were already partially packed from when she had tried to book into that hotel. Before Damon had put a freeze on her credit cards. Before—she swallowed hard—everything else.

Knowing that there was a very good chance anything she left would be thrown out or destroyed, Jay packed her journal, her favorite clothes, her beloved rocks. Even the gypsum rose Nick had given her. She told herself at the time that she could sell it later, the way she planned to sell her jewelry, but part of her had known even then that this was a lie.

With her backpack on, weighed down by the cat carrier and her largest purse, Jay left the house for what she thought would be the last time and waited for the taxi that would take her to the Greyhound station. She jumped at every sound, every crunch of gravel, every rasp of the trees, terrified that Nick—or Damon—were out looking for her already, ready to march her back to that hateful house and all that it represented.

The last bus left at eleven. Jay had gotten there at a quarter to, just in time for the overnight. “No pets,” the driver said, and Jay, clutching Carbon’s carrier, had burst into tears, which had made the driver shoo her along towards the back with a look of exasperation. She spent the next eight hours squashed between an older woman doing her knitting and a solemn-faced mother and son.

When she disembarked at last, and the bus pulled away in a cloud of acrid smoke, she found herself thinking that the city looked—different . . . but the same. She recognized the smell: stale urine, rainwater and exhaust, old concrete and new steel.

She had checked into the cheapest motel she could find, which wasn’t very. With a view of the buzzing neon sign outside her window, Jay booked nine apartment tours for the next day. She had needed to sell one of her purses to afford the advance her new roommates wanted for the next month’s rent, but they had all seemed nice. And one of them—Dante—had helped her get an interview at the restaurant he worked in, where she had ended up staying for the next three years while attending night classes at the local community college for an administrative certificate.

Jay sometimes wondered if Dante thought she had slept with him out of a pathetic sense of gratitude. Part of it was that. He had taken care of her at her lowest and she went weak in the hands of a capable man. But he was also nothing like Nicholas and that had been part of it, too. She needed to

prove to herself that she could get off with a normal man.

That she could *be* with a normal man.

But when she had asked him, on their very first night, if he could put a hand around her throat, Dante had looked at her with such sympathy that she felt like he'd shot her in the head.

"Jay, who hurt you?"

Everyone, she had wanted to respond. *Everyone hurt me. You just did too.*

"No one," she had lied. "It was just something I wanted to try."

"Well, I don't." And then, as if in an attempt to soothe, he'd added, "Nice guys don't."

Nice guys. For years, she had hated Nicholas for warping her that way. For every faked orgasm with her nice boyfriend, and the dreams that had her waking up breathless from things that *nice guys* weren't supposed to want. For making her want things *she* shouldn't want.

Talking with Lily had made her realize how much stock she had put into living her life according to what other people thought she should be doing. She had been the good girl, even when she didn't want to be. Even if sometimes, she actually wanted to be *bad*.

Especially with him.

Jay looked up and saw that her aimless walk had led her not to BART, but the old restaurant where she had used to work. Out of sheer habit, she'd taken the same path from the apartment she'd shared with Dante and his friends.

Gill's.

Wow, she thought. *I can't believe it's still here.*

She looked up at the peeling façade and felt a vague sense of disappointment. She wasn't sure why. Had she expected some sort of epiphany? Or that it would be completely bulldozed away? It was honestly amazing that it was still open. There had been rats in the storeroom that the fry cook had needed to shoo away and it didn't look much more sanitary now.

Jay swayed towards the doorway, tempted. But what if someone she

had known still worked there? What if one of those waitresses in the little pink aprons that they had all been made to wear still had their makeup done like it was the 90s, with their brown lipstick and blue eyeshadow, and hair that reeked of Sun In, and they looked at her, and said, “Jay, is that you? You haven’t changed at all.”

Part of her would splinter and break off.

No, it seemed safer not to go in. The restaurant, and her tenure there, could remain exactly where they were: frozen in time. Leashed safely away, where they couldn’t hurt her.

So much of her past still could.

I’m not the same, she thought, continuing down the sidewalk. *I can’t go back to what I was.*

The tension didn’t leave her shoulders until the buildings miraculously perked up a few blocks down, and she started to see little strings of fairy lights in the fenced-off courtyards designed to shield restaurant patrons from the street traffic. Various appealing smells wafted from their cracked-open windows, to dispense with the humidity and heat of the kitchens, saturating the narrow sidewalk with the scents roasted garlic, baking bread, and cooked meat.

Her stomach growled: a reminder that all she had eaten today was bad coffee and stale cereal. She went into the nearest bistro and ordered an extremely overpriced salad: arugula topped with red and gold beets, sliced walnuts, avocado, and olive oil and balsamic vinaigrette. The place was packed and looking at businessmen and -women in their smart, pressed suits.

(you belong here just as much as I do)

“Arugula salad for Jay?”

Jay jumped. “Yes, thank you.” She had thought she might eat on the patio but everything felt too close and too loud, and the traffic noises were making her ears ring.

Clutching her salad, she walked the remaining six blocks to her apartment, dodging people and sidewalk trash. When a man lunged at her, she nearly screamed—and her breath only left her when she realized that he had merely tripped over the uneven pavement. They shared an awkward,

panicky look and then Jay dashed away.

She'd allowed herself to become secluded, hiding away in Nicholas's big mansion like a princess in a tower. Every time she set foot outside, she felt as if her every step were being tracked by people who wished her nothing but the very worst.

She'd heard the rumors circulating. They all thought her mother was some kind of porn star, her stepfather an embezzler and a sex fiend. She was damaged goods, a bad seed. Just like her mother. A *whore*. The only reason Nicholas—the town's new golden scion—could *possibly* take her back was if she was screwing him. And she couldn't even get deny it, because it was *true*.

It was all true.

Safe in her apartment, Jay managed a few bites of salad before she gave up and put the rest away. She opened a dusty old bottle of cheap wine that she'd had for god-knew how long and sloshed some into a red Solo cup that she had to rinse the dust out of, frowning down at her reflection in the murky dark liquid.

Perhaps that was how Nicholas saw her, too. Not an expensive red, after all, but a cheap table wine to be pulled down and consumed, and then poured out or forgotten. He hadn't bothered to respond to her question when she asked him how he really felt, which was just as good as an answer.

He might not want to fuck an angel, but everyone wanted to marry one.

Even men like Nick.

A sound escaped her, high and unhappy. She stood, and realized her cup was empty when she wobbled unsteadily.

Very rude of the floor to keep moving.

Gritting her teeth, Jay filled the cup again, bracing herself against the counter. The alcohol was making her too hot, so she stepped out of her pants, kicking them beneath the card table as she walked the dozen or so steps it took to get to her sleeping area.

The strap of her bra slid down her shoulder when she dropped down on her bed. Jay started to adjust it automatically and then froze, glancing at her phone, remembering—

(quid pro quo)

She set her cup of wine on the stack of hardcovers that served as her nightstand and nearly fell off the bed. Breathing a little harder, not letting herself think too hard about what she was doing, she began undoing the buttons of her blouse.

The dim orange lighting in the room was soft, shadows fuzzing the farthest corners and leaving dusky shadows on her skin. She could see herself in the cheap IKEA mirror propped up against her closet, shirt hanging open around the fancy French underwear Nicholas had bought for her and the body she had never let herself love.

She touched herself experimentally, running a hand over her torso, closing her hand briefly over her own neck before sliding her fingers down her front, all the way to her waistband.

Feeling ashamed (but not ashamed enough to *stop*), she clumsily opened her lock screen and swiped through the photos until she came to the one that she had saved. Nicholas, and his swimmer's body, with those too-broad shoulders and those lean washboard abs.

She had dreamed of him—before. God, she had hated it, because she hadn't hated it enough. Dreams where he'd sneak into her room and tie her to her bed, torturing her with his hands and tongue—you *really thought I'd let you get away?*—before impaling her roughly on his swollen cock. She would wake up feeling as achy as if he had fucked her, with arousal clinging to her thighs, and she would turn and gasp to her boyfriend, “Danny, I need you, *please.*”

He'd thought that was so cute, that she called him that. He thought she was sweet. What would he have thought of her if he knew that she was picturing another man on top of her during those sweaty, feverish sessions where they were both still sleepy enough that *Daddy* could still sound like Danny, and maybe he wouldn't notice if she lifted her hips and took him *deeper*, urging him to a more forceful cadence that still left her so unsatisfied that she wanted to scream.

But she had stayed with him, because she was a good girl, and he was a nice boy, and she wasn't supposed to crave the things that would rip her apart.

(Not if that's what you want)

Her nipples had grown painfully stiff. She plucked at one through the lace, arching into her own hand, and as she closed her eyes, she imagined it was his stern mouth against her skin. His hands dipping into her panties, rolling over the slickness of her clit—*you beautiful little whore.*

She shuddered violently.

Sex with Nicholas had always had the faint sting of punishment. She remembered being so surprised the first time that she had been with another man, just how little she felt afterwards.

She wanted to feel. She wanted it to hurt.

Who hurt you, Jay?

A slow, drunken smile tilted up the bitter corners of her mouth as she watched her own hand move on the screen. Watching herself fuck herself.

You did.

Nicholas never seemed to know what to do with her when she was the one in control. Just because he was 6'4" and had more money than any one person could possibly need in a single lifetime, he thought he could do whatever he pleased.

A drink and a fuck, thought Jay, pushing her hair out of her face. This time, when her bra strap slid down her shoulder, she didn't bother to fix it. *How's that for quid pro quo?*

She wondered if any of the women he'd hooked up with had ever sent him photos.

Had he ever looked at them and anticipated the long night ahead? Or was he cold and indifferent, the way he was in his business meetings?

She thrust two fingers inside herself and gasped.

He wouldn't be cold for me.

She didn't recognize the woman framed by her phone screen. Her hair tumbled over her shoulder in a heavy fall, hitting just above her heaving breasts, where the balconette bra was doing wonders for her cleavage. Even her round stomach and dimpled waist, which she normally couldn't look at, seemed soft and pleasingly feminine.

She cupped herself between her legs and pushed out her chest, tilting her head down and to the side. *Lift up on your thighs, Justine*, her mother

used to tell her. *You have child-bearing hips and they make you look fat sitting down.* She gave the camera lens a defiant look as she sat on her folded legs, deciding not to give a fuck if it made her stupid ass look big.

Click.

Her heart pounded as she typed out an accompanying message, one that would hit him well below the belt. She nearly dropped the phone, her hands were shaking so hard.

Oh my god, a panicky part of her brain whispered as she hit ‘send.’ What did you just do?

I don’t care, said that stupid, defiant part of her brain. *Fuck consequences.*

Beyond that muted flare of panic, Jay was too drunk to fully pay her alarm heed. The danger, like the wine, was too seductive. She wanted Nicholas rattled, wanted to make him feel something close to the way she did. It was only fair, when he’d kept her off-balance for nearly nine years.

The ceiling began to spin and she leaned back, setting the phone beside her. The phantom scent of citrus filled with the back of her throat and she sighed, closing her eyes, relaxing for the first time all night as she surrendered at last to her intoxicated stupor.

“Nick . . .” she mumbled. “Daddy . . . please . . .”

By the time her message finally went to read and her ringtone began to chime, she was already passed out cold.

The fucking wine had given him a headache.

Nicholas dumped the bottle out in the dirty sink while the bread toasted. Jay’s cat wailed from her room upstairs and he growled under his breath as he slathered butter over the bread and doused it in sprinkles before cramming it into his mouth. As he walked up the stairs to feed the fucking thing, he wondered if the butter he’d used was starting to go off.

The cat was waiting for him. As he nudged it out of the way with his foot, it rubbed against his leg ingratiatingly. He leaned down and scratched it above its tail, the way he’d seen Jay do so many times. It purred, ears flexing as it peered up at him like it wanted something.

Nicholas had a pretty good idea what that something was.

“You know,” he told it. “I always wanted a dog.”

The cat blinked.

Leaving the creature to its meal, he went to his own room to change, buttoning himself into one of his work shirts and a tie he selected blindly from a drawer. After stepping into a pair of pressed pants, he fastened his Bulgari watch around his wrist and picked up his phone to check the time, realizing as soon as he did how fucking inane that was.

Because you see it as a status symbol, he could imagine Jay saying. *Not a timepiece.*

This town was all about appearances. It was why Michael was being paid out in installments instead of a lump sum. It was why he had a PI on his payroll to look into anyone who caused him grief. It was why Jay wouldn’t touch him where anyone could see.

She thought he saw her as a status symbol, too.

The morning dragged. It usually did but normally he got a modicum of satisfaction from telling old colleagues of his father “no.” He didn’t imagine they heard *no* very often, and the frustration on their faces when they saw how they couldn’t change his mind, even if they begged, always gave him a bit of a high.

Not today, though. As they filed out in the fancy suits picked out by their mistresses and wives, trying to hide their disappointment in an attempt to save face, he felt absolutely nothing.

Annica shut her laptop and hovered until he motioned for her to precede him. She had done nothing wrong but he was still annoyed with her. The terse responses and general hesitation to do anything but what she had been explicitly asked didn’t help.

“She’s like a fucking automaton,” he’d told Jay once. They had been eating dinner, and the talk had shifted, naturally, to work. “She doesn’t do anything that isn’t already in her programming.”

Jay had gotten a funny look on her face and told him that wasn’t very nice.

Is that what you like? he wondered grimly. *Nice?*

Then why do you like it when I fuck you so hard that you cry?

He raised his coffee cup to his lips and then lowered it in disgust when he realized it was empty. Arthur might be fine with his employees talking back to him, but he wasn't.

He was getting tired of Annica's bad attitude.

As if she had radar built into her mousy head, a ping popped up on his screen.

Mr. Beaucroft? Can we talk?

Nicholas eyed the chat log. Maybe she was quitting. God, he hoped so.

Yes, I'll reserve a room.

Glad for the distraction, he clicked over to reserve a room. It was a shame that he'd have to hire a new secretary. HR would be all over his ass to make sure he hadn't done anything to this one—and wouldn't that be fun? With such short notice, they wouldn't have time to backfill the position right away. Jay would have to split the difference and pick up some of the slack.

He missed the disapproving glares she'd level his way whenever he worked someone over a little too hard. Which he did, often—he had enjoyed showing off for her, and seeing her respond to the way he flexed his control. She may have looked like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth in those fitted skirts and pretty collared blouses, but she always had her legs crossed in their meetings.

Almost, he thought, with dark amusement, *as if she didn't trust herself to open them.*

But he could ponder that later, when he was alone with a glass of wine and could give Jay and her thighs the proper consideration they deserved.

Right now, he had to deal with Annica and this.

Whatever *this* was.

She was taking her sweet time, lingering over adjusting her headphones. Nobody was that compulsive. He watched her slow approach through narrowed eyes, taking in the khakis and the preppy stewardess blouse.

She looks like a fucking J. Crew ad.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, even before she was fully through

the door. She gave him a look before snapping it emphatically closed. He wanted to roll his eyes but instead, he kept his face carefully composed. Jay would have been proud.

“I want to discuss my title.”

Nicholas frowned as she seated herself in one of the chairs across from him, pulling at her pants to shake the wrinkles out. “What about your title?”

“I’ve been here for over two years. I think my title should reflect that.”

“We don’t promote people for warming chairs.” He leaned back in the seat, crossing one long leg over his knee. “Tell me about some of the contributions you’ve made lately. Any innovations you’ve come up with to improve the company’s workflow or morale. That’s what we promote on.”

Annica’s eyebrows shot downwards. “My workload has increased significantly since I was assigned as your assistant. I’ve been here twice as long as Jay and now I’m doing twice the amount of work, but we both have the same title. That doesn’t seem fair.”

“That’s your benchmark for defining your performance?” he kept his tone careful, deliberate. Inwardly, he was seething. “The work of other employees?”

“I’m not saying I think that she’s a bad employee,” Annica said, which suggested she thought this plenty in private, “but my duties are extensive, *and* I have seniority, so I think I’m at least entitled to a discussion about becoming a Senior Administrative Assistant—or what I need to do to get there. Since I was assigned to you, we’ve never discussed my career growth.”

I wonder why. He remembered Arthur casually asking if he had limited Annica’s lunch hours, saying that her lunch with Jay had seemed rushed. He’d forgotten to look into it, not really caring enough to dig into details that didn’t concern him, but as he watched Annica fidget in front of him, he found himself now considering other, possible implications of her behavior.

Could Annica have been the one spreading the rumors that Jay had overheard?

Still pleasant, he said, “So what you’re saying is, you’d like my feedback.”

“Yes.”

“My honest feedback.”

A wary expression crossed her face. “Yes,” she said again, though less surely. “Why? Is there an issue with my work that’s keeping me from moving ahead?”

“Meeting expectations isn’t a guarantee for promotion. It’s doing the job we pay you for. If we go by your logic, Jay should have been making more than you when she was first hired—for doing twice as much work. And if that’s the case, perhaps we do need to revisit the description of the role. But in the meantime, I’d like to see more of a team player mindset from you.”

Nicholas didn’t think he imagined the flash of anger that crossed her face. “Define team player, please,” Annica said tautly. “I don’t think I understand what you’re asking me to do.”

“You’ve told me what you’re doing to meet expectations, but you did so at the expense of another employee, whose workload and performance is, quite frankly, none of your concern. I’ve also been informed that you seem reluctant to participate in work events.”

She definitely looked angry now. “So you’re saying I have to participate in work events even if I don’t want to, or don’t find them to be a good use of my time?”

“No. I’m saying that your efforts are satisfactory but don’t exceed expectations.”

Annica let out a harsh breath. “With all due respect, I don’t think your assessment of my work is particularly impartial or fair.”

“Oh? Why not?”

Tell me. Give me a reason to fire you.

I’ll fucking do it.

She flinched when their eyes met but didn’t back down. “I think you know why.”

“I don’t.” He continued to meet her eyes levelly as he leaned forward, bracing his hands on the smooth wooden tabletop. “Tell me.”

The industrial clock on the wall ticked. Annica licked her lips before looking back down at the table, breaking eye contact at last. “I’m sorry I wasted your time with this discussion. I’ll just get back to organizing your

schedule for the day before I write down those figures for Harold.”

That’s what I thought, you little sneak. He leaned back in the chair as she spun around in clear irritation, all but stomping back to her desk. Arthur had mentioned a group chat. He wasn’t in the habit of spying on his employees, but perhaps he ought to get James to monitor it. If she was playing fast and loose with rumors in the office, she might also be committing other violations.

He picked up his phone and began to scroll through his emails. Then it buzzed in his hand and a notification blocked the top of his screen, which annoyed him until he saw that it was from Jay.

After that shitshow of a conversation, he’d left her on read, unsure of how to respond and aware that the longer he waited, the more likely it would only spiral into another argument. She could have written to *him*, but she hadn’t, which pissed him off. What the hell was she doing up there that was so important that she couldn’t be bothered to check in with him?

There was a photo attachment. Curious and vaguely apprehensive, he tapped to open it—and then his breath left him in a rush and he dropped his phone.

“Fuck,” he growled, as he bumped his head on the table trying to retrieve it. The photo was still on the screen. With a glance at the security cameras, he thumbed it dark and shrugged off his jacket, draping it over his arm and slightly in front of himself as he walked briskly to the executive bathrooms. *What the hell does she think she’s playing at?*

He slammed the door behind him and locked it, leaning against the door briefly before heading towards the stall. There, alone at last, he unlocked his screen and squeezed his thigh bracingly as he took in her flushed face, and the unbuttoned blouse thrown open to reveal lingerie so sheer, it was nearly an afterthought.

The zipper track of his pants pressed uncomfortably into his erection as his cock swelled. She had a hand between her legs, inside her see-through-fucking-underwear, and though she was shielding herself from his view, he could still make out the slight shadow of her pubic hair, and the shape of her sex. And her fingers—

Her fingers were fucking *glistening*.

With a groan, he freed himself from his pants.

He had always held himself back with her. How could he do otherwise, when she dragged herself to his bedroom like an innocent martyr approaching the executioner's block? But this version of Jay looked as if she could quite literally fuck him within an inch of his life.

Did you really think you could send me this and get away with it? He drew in a rough breath. *I hope you're ready to finish this game you've started.*

He sent her a video call. She didn't pick up.

Aware that this came dangerously close to violating his promise not to touch her in the office and far beyond caring, he sent her another message.

Pick up the phone. There are consequences for being a bad girl.

Jay didn't respond. She also didn't pick up the phone. The text had been received but it hadn't gone to 'read.' If she was near her phone, she was purposefully not looking at it.

Annoyed now, Nicholas tried calling her, but after eight rings, he only got her voicemail.

"Hi, this is Justine Varens. I'm so sorry I missed your call. If you'd like me to get back to you, leave your name and number, and I'll reach out as soon as I can."

God, I wish you fucking would.

He closed his eyes and stroked himself as he called her phone again, savoring the sound of her voice. He fucking loved her voice—low and throaty, and yes, just a little cold. But he knew how to make his little snowbird melt, and she always sang for Daddy.

Nicholas fell back against the tank, fisting his straining dick in earnest now as he swiped back to the picture she'd sent him. Her skin glowed, all those curves she buttoned away now on full display for his greedy eyes. From the sharp rise of her collarbones, to her dimpled thighs, to her sweet and beautiful face, he felt transfixed. Hypnotized.

It reminded him of the video he'd taken of her all those years ago, and the way she had looked while she had gotten herself off in her room. Arching her back and lifting her hips while she touched herself beneath her clothes, unaware that she was doing so for a rapt audience.

Well, she's certainly aware now.

Nicholas sank his teeth into his lip so hard that he tasted blood as he came, metallic and sharply bitter. Panting, he swiped off his bloody mouth with the wrist of his come-slicked hand.

“Fuck,” he said again, eyes rolling back. “*Fuck*.”

He had been in love with her for his whole entire life, but it was his lust for her that had proved to be their undoing. No love, no matter how pure, could remain so in a man like him.

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Chapter Seven

There are consequences for being a bad girl.

Jay cleaned her apartment furiously but no matter how many dishes she wrapped up or clothes she folded, she remembered the photo she had sent Nicholas and his response. Or rather, his *responses*. He'd called her twice. One had been a video call. It hadn't even been six yet, so he would have still been at work. Possibly even at his desk.

Heat crawled up her face at the thought.

Especially when, this morning, there had been yet another message.

Don't think this is over.

God, what had he been thinking, opening that at work? What if someone had seen it? No matter if the mental image of his control splintering in public made her breath come up short—it was his *job*. Not that she was blameless. She had been so fucking stupid, sending that to him, of all people.

Do you want him to blackmail you again, Jay?

She leaned back against a box of things she had wrapped up from her sleeping area. She had been about to tackle her books and some of her smaller knickknacks, but her hands wouldn't stop shaking and her current predicament wasn't helping. Thinking about the past had rekindled her conflicting feelings for Nicholas and the alcohol had only added fuel to that fire.

For years, she had lived under the threat of his blackmail, never quite knowing if he would follow up on his threat, and now she'd just *handed* him the means to control her again.

It's the excuse you wanted, isn't it? To come back and never be able to leave.

No matter how hard or how fast she ran from the past, it always caught up to her. It was the monster chasing her in her nightmares, but it wore a seducer's face.

Fate really was an ouroboros. Even her mother was back to her old games. It wasn't enough to have the last word, she needed to hound her, lay down the guilt card. Remind her that it had been *weeks* since they'd talked

—like they had weekly fireside chats over cocoa, instead of continual demands to exploit her stepbrother for money.

Jay had scrolled through her mother's texts with a sinking heart, even the ones she hadn't let herself look at. They were worse than she thought. With every word she read, she could feel pieces of herself flaking away.

You took me by the hand and led me to my own ruin, Jay wanted to tell her, in addition to so many other things. *You told me I would be safe.*

The fastest way to put out her mother's rages was to starve them of oxygen. But her mother was tenacious. She could wear away at you like sandpaper until your resistance was raw and bloody. No, Danielle Beaufort had clawed her way out of the mid-tier strip club she'd worked at for far longer than she should have, and married a man who had draped her in diamonds and designer clothes. Nothing, for her, would ever be enough.

All those years she had defended her mother's choices, but now she just felt like a fool. She had let herself be demeaned and used, and hadn't even noticed until Nicholas himself had pointed it out. Which was a big fucking irony, since he had demeaned and used her, too.

She'd just half-convinced herself that she liked it when he did.

And now, thanks to her, he could do it all over again.

There was still no food in the apartment and she didn't really feel like shopping. Cooking had been her go-to means of self-comfort, the smells of caramelizing food and spices giving her a nostalgia for a homelife she'd never had, but Jay didn't feel like standing over a stove, either. When she got hungry enough, she bought herself some red curry from a food truck parked down the street, but she felt the invisible tug of her mother's impatient words with every step.

You aren't walking away from this, Jay.

Desperately trying not to think about Nick or her mother, Jay boxed up half the living area, using some of her old sheet sets and throw pillows to cushion the rocks from her collection so they wouldn't break or shatter during transit. But when she came back from the bathroom to find yet another missed call from her mother, something inside her snapped.

Because she had never gotten to walk away, had she? Only her mother had.

Arming herself with the remainder of the wine from last night, Jay took a long swig right from the bottle as she sat down in the blue chair and dialed her mother's phone number.

"Justine? Is that you?" her mother's voice was distant, like she had the phone on speaker. "It's about time you called. I was beginning to think I didn't have a daughter anymore."

"Are you driving?"

There was a pause. "No."

Jay combed a hand through her hair with a sigh. Faced with the prospect of a confrontation, she could feel her courage rapidly deserting her. She was pretty sure her mother was lying but she needed to choose her battles carefully and that wasn't what she wanted to fight about.

"Why do you keep calling me?" she asked at last. "What do you want?"

"I didn't think you cared. It's been weeks. I was starting to worry."

"About me?" Jay asked, as she kicked her legs over the arm of the chair and stared, upside-down, at the entryway to her apartment. "Or the money you keep asking me for?"

"Don't be ridiculous, baby. You're my daughter."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Of course I care about you," her mother said, with a stiff air of injured dignity. "Even after you said you would help me before leaving me out to dry. Not that it seems to matter to you that your brother was going to take me for everything I was worth and leave me out on the streets."

Middle class living is not 'the streets,' Mom. But apparently this was the narrative her mother had committed herself to, and she seemed to like the sound of it. As if she were some suburban Blanche Dubois, languishing away in genteel poverty.

Jay drew in a deep, angry breath, blinking away the sight of all the piled-up boxes in her apartment. Thinking of all the times she wasn't sure if she was going to make her rent payment for the month, and the nightmares she had about being forced back to the place she'd run screaming from. Thinking of all the tears she had shed from feeling so fucking alone.

And all this time, her mother had flounced around, doing whatever she

wanted. Only calling when it suited *her* and *her* needs. *She never even asked me what happened that night*, Jay realized, the knowledge hitting her like a splash of icy water. Even Nick, as callous as he was, had asked.

She's looking for a reaction from you, a voice like Nick's whispered. *Don't let the bitch think she's made you weak.*

"Why did you ask me to go to Nicholas?" It was the first time she had put her nebulous suspicions into words, and the sound of them in the silence was ugly and jarring. "What did you think I could possibly do that would make him change his mind?"

There was another pause, longer this time. Jay thought she heard murmuring in the background. "Because you were close." Holding onto the phrase she'd chosen before, the first time she'd called Jay at this very same apartment, she went on, "You were the only one he listened to."

"Not since he was ten. I hadn't spoken to him for almost nine years when you—is there someone there with you?" Jay asked abruptly, as the sound of voices rose again.

"No," her mother said shortly. "I'm just out. Running my own errands —like a normal person. Perhaps you've forgotten what that's like, now that you're back living at that house. You didn't exactly check to see if it was convenient to call first."

"And you did during the fifteen times you called me?" Jay said. "Answer the question."

"Don't raise your voice at me, Justine. My god, you always did think you were better than me, didn't you? Resenting me, looking down your little nose at me just for doing what had to be done."

"You mean marrying Damon? Wow, great job on that one. Maybe one of the songs in your sets should have been 'Stand By Your Man.'"

Her mother scoffed. "At least I got paid for it."

Jay made a sound like she'd been punched. She sat up so suddenly that the floor jolted. As she put her now-unsteady feet down, she struggled to hold onto the wine bottle and anchor herself against the tumultuous maelstrom her apartment had become.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I think you know damn well what it means. You're not that innocent."

There was a burst of static as her mother breathed out an angry laugh. “Do you think I’m blind, as well as stupid? Maybe you didn’t see what he was like when you left, but I did. I *knew*. That wasn’t a man regretting the loss of his *sister*.”

Jay set down the bottle. It fell over and rolled, sloshing wine over the carpet, but she didn’t notice. “What are you accusing me of?”

“He denied it, too.” She sounded smug now. “But men don’t shell out ten grand for something they don’t think they can ride or screw.”

Someone next door pounded on her wall in reproof. Possibly because of the shouted ‘fuck’—she knew they had children. If she were slightly distressed, she might have been embarrassed. But right now, she felt as if she were trapped inside a glass box and the walls were slowly closing in, squeezing every molecule of air from her lungs.

At least I got paid for it.

“Even when he was a child, he was a nasty little freak,” her mother was saying. “You could tell what kind of man he was going to be by the way he would just stare through you. Sometimes I looked into those empty eyes of his and I knew that he was dead inside. But he loved you, didn’t he? You made him love you.”

“Oh my god, are you jealous? Jealous of *Nick*? You were supposed to love me, Mom. You were supposed to protect me. From them. From everything. And instead you—” She broke off, struggling to draw in a choked breath. Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Did you throw me at him like some kind of sacrificial lamb? Is that what you’re telling me? You used me as a pawn to get your fucking money because you saw me as some kind of—burden?”

There was another one of those staticky bursts. “He was never going to hurt you.”

(Don’t defend her. She sold you to me.)

Pain exploded in Jay’s right hand. She could feel the plastic of her phone resisting, ready to crack. That made two of them. “And that makes it better that you sold me out?”

“Don’t act like we were on the same side. It was always the two of you against me. You were embarrassed of me and he—he just hated me. But he

was never on your side, either. Men like him and his father only care about one side on a woman and it's the same one you turned on me."

Oh my god.

"I suppose he didn't give you anything after all that. I figured he wouldn't, when I didn't hear back from you. He really is his father's son." She laughed angrily. "A cheat and a liar, screwing everything that moves. That's his real inheritance."

"That's not true." The words felt like shards of glass in her mouth. "Nick's nothing like his father. Damon was a fucking monster. Nick is—"

"Yes, that's right, go ahead and defend *him*," her mother said nastily. "Make *me* the villain. You'll only end up on your ass just like I did. A stupid little whore, just like your whore mother—that's what you always thought of me, wasn't it? Oh, how I *embarrassed* you in front of your little friends. But a smart whore gets paid, Justine. That's the difference between you and me."

Jay was suddenly, incandescently angry. "How dare you. He *loves* me. He loves me and he offered me everything—the whole ten million—all of it. He cut me a check and put it right in my hand. He even—" a shaky laugh escaped her "—god, he even said I could give it to *you*."

There was a charged pause. "What?"

"I told him no, obviously." Jay rubbed at one of her eyes. "I tore it up and told him I didn't want it and that I didn't want you to have it, either, and do you know what, Mom? I am *so glad* that I did. I'm not going to be bought and sold like a fucking piece of jewelry."

"You tore up the *check*?"

"Did you ever love me? Or was I just another stepping stone on your quest for a better life? Never mind," she said abruptly. "Don't answer that. I think I already know."

"Justine—"

"Have the life you deserve, Mother. I won't be in it. Screw you."

She hung up on her mother, tears running down her face. She swiped them away, fruitlessly, as more rushed in to take their place.

"Shit," she said, in a small, broken voice. "So that's it then."

As terrible as Damon had been, she had always been able to hold onto the hope that maybe her mother hadn't really known what he was like. Her mother was selfish and vain, but she was also desperate, and her life *had* been hard. Both of their lives had been hard.

And after all those years of watching her mother cultivate an air of girlish innocence that she'd never really had, Jay had told herself that it was *desperation* that caused her to want to hold onto a cruel and distant man. Desperation that made her turn away when everything came to a head, and Jay had found herself in her stepfather's crosshairs.

Not hatred.

Not *resentment*.

Nausea rose in her throat, bitter and hot, as that memory of blood and darkness and cheap holiday glitter slammed into her like a wrecking ball. All this time, she had seen Nicholas as the fox in the henhouse, the surprise traitor. But apparently her mother had been picking feathers out of her teeth for years.

What did it say about her now that her first instinct was to turn to *him*? Despite everything, the soothing sound of his low voice in her ear had lulled her back to sleep from the very nightmares he'd helped cause, and she had never felt as safe as she did when she was in his arms.

(*I wish it had always been like this between us*)

I do, too, she thought desperately. *God help me, I do.*

Even if it wasn't good for her, he was the only thing she'd ever had that was just hers.

Jay picked up her phone again, swiping away the text her mother had already left, not wanting to see the words before they could burn themselves into her brain.

I talked to Mom. She typed before she could think better of it. With her eyes blurry with tears, it was easy to ignore what she had sent him before. *She knew, Nick. She KNEW this whole time.*

Jay stared ahead unseeingly at her wall.

You were right about her. You were right about everything.

She closed her eyes briefly, before swiping at them again with the back of her wrist.

I don't know what to do.

She set her phone down and that was when she noticed the wine. With a curse—that's coming out of your deposit, Jay—she picked up the bottle and swallowed down what was left, before tossing a wad of paper towels on top of the spill to absorb the worst of the stain.

Her phone didn't light up. After a while, she stopped expecting it to.

Instead, she crawled into her bed and she cried herself to sleep.

.....

“How was the sensitivity training?”

He resisted the urge to make a remark about deprogramming as he toyed with one of Meghana's yarn figures. “As I said before, it's given me a lot to think about. Particularly with regard to some of the shortfalls in our company.”

The corners of the HR director's mouth tightened. “Such as?”

“Such as an emphasis on the diversity our company claims to want to champion.” His suit creaked as he leaned forward. “I'm sure we have data on the demographic makeup of our employees. We've sent out enough opt-in surveys. Someone should do a deep-dive into that and work on some spotlight panels for cultural inclusivity.”

Meghana's frown deepened thoughtfully. “That isn't a bad idea.”

“Of course it's not. It's a very good idea—it was Jay's.” He watched her expression become guarded. “She has a lot of good ideas that aren't being utilized as Arthur's secretary.”

“I believe the role is called ‘administrative assistant.’”

“Don't we have a VP role open?” he mused, keeping one eye trained on her face. “What are the optics of having her run for it?”

“Does she want to run for it?”

“Yes,” he lied. If Jay hadn't considered it already, he would see to it that she did. His conversation with Annica had been good for one thing: it had given him an insight into how other people viewed Jay's role in this company, and how that might be perceived if her relationship with him were outed while she was still a lowly subordinate.

If she was going to marry him, she needed a better job.

Meghana sighed and rubbed at her temples. “It wouldn’t look particularly good considering your history, but it’s not completely unfeasible. She’s a very good employee and came highly recommended from her previous employer.” She shot him a look that said, *Don’t get any ideas*. “The endorsement would look better coming from Arthur than it would from you.”

“I understand.”

“And there would have to be paperwork.”

Nicholas nodded, barely listening. Arthur would endorse her—he loved Jay. He thought she shone like his wife. And while Meghana seemed hesitant now, promoting a woman from within always got corporate hard. His father’s conduct had left a visible taint on the company’s reputation that they were all desperate to scrub off, and Jay, with her squeaky-clean image and genuine warmth, had the authenticity that corporations desperately craved.

And she won’t be a “kept woman” if she’s netting a cool six figures of her own, will she?

Yes, he thought, with satisfaction. This solution was going to fix everything.

“Speaking of signing—” Meghana slid a paper across the desk “—I need your signature on this form. It’s your notice of completion, for our records.”

“And then we’re done. No more sensitivity training.”

It hadn’t been a question but Meghana chose to treat it like one. “Yes, this marks your program as officially complete.”

Fucking finally. “Good.” He scrawled his name on it and asked, “Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

Nicholas swung out of the chair eagerly, grateful to be out of that too-colorful office and its oppressively correct and sterile atmosphere.

His phone lit up with a text and his mouth curved into a smile when he saw it was from Jay.

There you are, he thought. Couldn't stay away from me, could you, little bird?

I have big plans for you.

She'd probably finished packing early and was texting to let him know she was returning home. He could arrange her transportation, see to it that she had dinner and a warm bath—and then pay her back for that photo that she'd sent him in her underwear.

Maybe I'll tie her to the bed and fuck her tits, since she's so eager to show them off, he thought, stirring at the mental image of a bound and helpless Jay spread out over his sheets.

His smile disappeared as he scanned the texts. "Oh, fuck."

"Mr. Beaucroft?"

He looked up. Stacey was staring at him with a look of concern. "It's nothing," he said gruffly. "I just forgot to pick up my dry cleaning."

What the hell did she say to you? he typed.

Jay didn't respond.

He called her phone.

It went to voicemail.

"Fuck," he said again, glancing around surreptitiously. So she wanted to play *this* game, did she? Running away, the way she always did. Icing him out. *Not this time, Jay.*

He grabbed his briefcase off his desk and began cramming papers into it one-handed, keeping his phone pinned between his cheek and shoulder as he made a call to the nearest airport, wondering, even as he did, how much it would cost to have his stepmother put in an oil drum and buried alive somewhere in Coachella Valley.

A police siren woke her up.

This sound was a familiar part of the city soundscape. Growing up in San Francisco in the 90s, Jay had often stared up at her water-stained ceiling in terror wondering if it was her mother that was being taken away. Her mom always laughed it off, of course—"Nothing's going to happen to

me, Jay, don't be so dramatic"—but how was she supposed to turn off her worries just like that when her greatest fear was being left alone?

It had been different in the house. She had woken up there, too, but Nicholas would take her into his arms and whisper, "It's all right, blue jay. Daddy's here" and stroke her until she fell asleep.

His tenderness had awakened something inside her that threatened to devastate, even as it promised to satisfy the deep-seated craving she had to be loved with a savagery that bordered on ruthless. And if she let herself accept that love, she would also have to live with the fear that it could be taken away or wielded against her.

She turned and banged her hip on the corner of a box, making the contents rattle. She lurched to straighten the fulgorite, imagining, as her fingers traced over the rough, brittle surface, the lightning that had caused those minerals to crystalize. She could almost picture the flash of blinding brilliance jettisoning from the heavens, only to be imprisoned between layers of dull, dead rock.

It made her cry, actually, which was so stupid.

Because all of this was her own damn fault.

A knock sounded on her door just as the tears started running down her cheeks.

She jumped like she'd been shocked, glancing at her clock. Past ten. Who could it be? She barely saw her neighbors and didn't even know their names—she certainly knew none of them well enough that they would be pounding on her door to summon her this late.

Her unease from before returned, backed by fear. She made sure to keep the security chain latched as she cracked open the door, which didn't have a peephole, and found herself staring into a familiar pair of piercing grey eyes that left her feeling faint as the owner of them slowly came into focus.

"Oh my god, N-Nick?"

He put his hand on the wall, next to the jamb, like he was considering forcing her way in.

"Open the door."

Jay stared at him dumbly, unable to process the sight of her tall,

wealthy stepbrother standing in the dilapidated hallway of her not-so-cheap apartment. He was wearing distressed dark-wash jeans and a blazer that was perfectly tailored to his broad shoulders. A backpack hung loosely over one of them and in his other hand was a yowling cat carrier. That was what broke through her glaze of shock and made her fumble to undo the chain. *Someone might see—*

“What are you doing here?” she asked, stepping back, as he shoved the door open with a bang that made her wince. “Shouldn’t you be at the office?”

“I took some personal days.”

“To come here?”

He set the carrier down, fixing her with a look. “What do you think?”

Jay did not know what to think, so she stepped past him to shut the front door before bending to undo the one on the carrier, half-expecting him to grab her. He didn’t, but just him being in the room had her shaking so badly that it still took her two tries to undo the latch.

Her poor cat immediately darted under her bed. Jay wanted to hide, too.

Conscious of the tears on her face and Nicholas’s silent anger, Jay removed the top of the carrier, and took the three-quarters empty jug of cat sand out of the front hall closet to fill the now-converted litter box. She was glad for the task. It bought her time, because she could feel his eyes on her, heavy and accusing, and she was not sure how to speak around the lump that had formed in her throat. Too much lay between them and the thought of broaching any of it left her feeling paralyzed, especially while he was looking at her like that.

“I asked you a question, Jay.”

“I—I d-don’t know.”

You know how to beg, though, that voice in her head whispered.

She glanced up sharply from filling the box, all of their exchanges from the last week filling the silence that hung between them. He was still watching her and the muted fire in his gaze made her instantly aware of the fact that she was on her knees in front of him, clad only in her sleep shorts and a threadbare shirt with no bra.

Jay swung to her feet so quickly that she got a bit of a head rush. “If this is about what I said earlier, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have overreacted—”

His hands shot out to grab her, spanning beneath her ribs. Her voice faded into a croak. She wanted to back away, but there was nowhere to back to, so she put her hands on his chest, flat. To push him away, or so she told herself, though once she touched him, neither of them moved.

“You know why I’m here.” He breathed in once, deeply. The look on his face shifted from anger to something she was far more familiar with, that made her fingers bite into the fabric until she could feel the minute shift of his pectoral muscles. “Let’s not play games for fucking once.”

“I wasn’t—”

“You are.” His voice was quiet, vicious. “You’ve been crying.”

She did push at him then, and he gripped her tighter.

“I came here because you called me. Because I care about you.”

The floor jerked beneath her feet. “Nick, I—”

“I really don’t want to hear your excuses, Justine.”

The cold authority in his voice, and the way he lingered over her full name, did strange things to her body. *Why is he calling me that?*

She swayed slightly when he removed her hands from his chest and brought them to her sides. His grip was loose, but Jay was pretty sure he wouldn’t let her get away if she tried to run. Just to be certain, she gave an experimental wriggle and his fingers tightened, accompanied by a forbidding hum in the back of his throat that caused her pulse to spike.

Still holding onto her wrists, he gave her a nudge backwards. “Sit down.”

She backed obediently as he herded her to the tiny loveseat that sat catty corner to her favorite blue chair. Then he pushed down on her shoulders with the same practiced shove that he used on her in bed. Her legs buckled as if primed, and she collapsed on the faded cushions. The sound that left her was a little too harsh, and it made him look at her again, slow and speculative.

Jay hunched her shoulders, trying to hide how hard her nipples had gotten.

“I just got out of that fucking airport and you—” He paused, and she folded her arms. “I need to decide what to do with you.”

“What?” she scoffed. “Are you going to punish me?”

“Yes.”

Yes? He shrugged off his blazer and tossed it onto her chair. Their eyes met. Her fingers dug into her own flesh as she tried to control her breathing. He didn’t approach, though. Instead, he went to her kitchen nook and began rooting through her cupboards. The old T-shirt clung to his body with each twisting movement, highlighting the flex of heavy muscle beneath.

She stared at his arms. “What do you mean, yes?”

“I’m going to punish you.”

Jay willed herself to be angry. She wanted to be angry. How dare he come bursting into her kitchen with all his talk about punishments?

Pain flared on her forearms; she’d gouged herself with her own nails. Jay grabbed a couch cushion, hugging that to her chest instead. Sweat was making her top stick to her arms and back.

“What are you going to do?”

He didn’t respond.

“What are you looking for in there?” she continued, settling on a hostile tone that she hoped hid how thoroughly unsettled she was. “Maybe I can help you find it.”

He glanced over his shoulder briefly before ripping open a teabag. That look made her throat tighten until it felt like she was breathing in through a straw.

“It’s my apartment,” she went on recklessly. It was as if she were unable to stop, even though she knew she was making things worse. “I know where everything is. You could ask me instead of bulldozing around my kitchen.”

With more emphasis than necessary, Nicholas dropped the teabag into one of her mugs, which he filled with cold water and then put it into a microwave. Watching his hands on her things, imagining them on her body, was making her antsy. God, why wouldn’t he say anything?

“I have a water boiler,” she blurted. “You don’t need to do that.

Nobody who's civilized heats tea in the microwave."

"You fucking ran from me."

The words fell like blades, looming between them until the microwave bleeped. Pulling his eyes away from her at last, Nicholas topped the mug off with more cold water before carrying it over to her, and she tried not to flinch at his nearness.

"I wasn't running."

"Oh really? Is that why you fucked me like you were saying goodbye? And then sent me a picture to bait me, like you *wanted* me to have something to use against you?"

The glacial calm scared her more than his anger did, because there was nothing there to fight against, only a cold, hard truth that had her sliding down towards the inevitable as he pressed the warm mug into her hands.

Mistaking the cause for her alarm, he said, "Oh, we'll be discussing the photo, too—after you tell me what your mother said to you to get you so worked up that you decided to go full no-contact."

"Nick—"

"Don't *Nick* me. You've been giving me the runaround for days and I'm not putting up with it now." He paused. "Not until I get to fuck it out of you."

She nearly dropped the mug. The sting of hot tea on her bare thighs made her hiss. Nicholas took it from her trembling hands and set it on the end table.

Fuck it out of me. The cushion slipped out from beneath her arm.

Nicholas took that away, too, tossing it aside as he knelt in front of her. She backed from him and he put his hand on her bare knee, looking up at her from his spot between her legs.

"Tell me what your mother said."

The left knee of his jeans was frayed and she wondered if it was intentional or he just liked the pair too much to throw them away. "I don't want to," she whispered, staring at the threads.

"I didn't fly almost four hundred miles for *I don't want to*, little bird."

"You're going to be angry."

"I already am." He drew his thumb over her kneecap. It sent goosebumps soaring up and down her legs, eliciting a dull throb from her clit. "Tell me anyway."

Feeling winded, Jay gasped out, "She called me—a . . . a whore."

"And?"

She glanced away, rubbing at her tea-dampened shorts. Her eyes were stinging and far too warm. "She said I was just like her, only w-worse because I was t-too stupid to get paid. She hates me," she cried out, her voice rising. "She sold me to *you* because she—h-hates me."

Her voice broke into a raw sob, tears escaping before she could stop them. His face was too blurry to see his expression but Jay recognized the offensive set to his shoulders.

"Oh, god—" her voice came out sounding clotted and pathetic "—don't
—"

"That dried-up old *cunt*."

"Nick!"

"You're really going to defend your mother to me now?"

"N-no, but—"

"Your mother, who gave me your number and home address for less than it costs to buy a fucking *car*, because she knew damn well what would happen if I showed up on your front step and maybe," he finished, moving slowly to circle behind the couch, "she even wanted it to?"

There was a terrible silence, so loud it was nearly deafening. Her breathing left her in a shaky rush when one of his arms slipped around her waist from behind.

"She knew what I wanted to do to you."

The words slid into her like a knife.

That wasn't a man regretting the loss of his sister.

"No." She jerked, breathless. "Stop it. I don't want to hear this!"

"All right." Jay stopped breathing when he dusted his knuckles over the front of her shirt. "Then let's talk about what you sent me at work."

Her breasts tingled. She pushed against him and he tightened his arm.
"I was drunk."

“You know what I think, Jay?” He let his free hand fall to her lap, pressing hard enough that they could both feel how wet she was now. Jay lurched forward again, and he spread her through her shorts, putting pressure on her clit until she gasped. “I think it turns you on to fuck with me.”

“It doesn’t.”

He blew into her ear: “Liar.”

Heat shimmered over her skin in a rolling wave as he slid his fingers against the crotch of her pants, soaking her through both layers of cotton. God, this was familiar. The shame. Her fingertips throbbed. Everything throbbed. She grabbed the arm around her waist and tried unsuccessfully to remove it from her body. “Why are you being such a bastard?”

“Because I don’t know what’s going on in your head. You still look at me like I’m a monster. The only time I know when I’m making you feel anything is when I’m i—”

He broke off, and when he withdrew, it was like a slap. “Fuck,” he said, almost too quietly for her to hear. And then slightly louder, as he stepped back into view, facing the direction of her cardboard boxes, “Fuck.”

“Nicholas, don’t—”

“I don’t know what I—” His eyes scanned the boxes, an expression on his face that she would almost call trapped. Then he did a double-take. Jay, following the direction of his eyes, felt her heart sink as he walked towards the box that held all her rocks. “What is that?”

The word *don’t* rose to her lips again, but she wasn’t sure what it was that she wanted to tell him not to do.

He picked up the gypsum rose, and Jay nearly protested again, except that he held it as carefully in his large hands as he had the night he’d given it to her as a present.

Before everything had gone so terribly wrong.

“You told me you sold this.”

Jay looked away. His startled expression disappeared, and whatever vulnerable, desperate emotion she thought she’d glimpsed hardened before her eyes, just like stone.

“So, you really can be cruel.” He ran his thumbs over the florets before

setting it carefully back into the box, in a way that made her throat ache. It wasn't until she'd released the breath that she'd been holding that Jay could admit to her fear that he'd been going to throw it. "You must have hated me."

"I did," she agreed, her voice a broken whisper.

"Not enough to sell the rock, though."

Jay looked at her hands, willing them to stop hurting. Willing everything to stop hurting. "How could I? It was the only proof I had that anyone in that house ever loved me."

"I still do." Nicholas hovered over the loveseat, impossibly tall, before swinging onto the cushions. She scrambled back as he crawled towards her on his hands and knees. The rough denim of his jeans abraded her bare skin and the sensation of it pulsed like an electric shock between her thighs. "I tore myself apart when you left and I am not going to lose you again."

The arm of the couch hit her back. She looked up at him, breathing so hard that she felt like she might choke on the sheer abundance of air in the room.

"Jay." He leaned closer—she could see the stubble dotting his cheeks and chin, the bursts of color caught in his pale grey eyes. "We've wasted too much time trying to hurt each other."

Jay shot him a trapped look, her fingers digging into the plush. The rasp of his breathing was all she could hear over the ringing in her ears. "No," she said, denying them, denying this. Her heart was on the verge of implosion. "Nick, please—"

"Why won't you love me?" he asked, his deep voice cracking.

Unable to put distance between their bodies, she turned her face away, bracing herself for the force she was sure was coming, the punishing grip on her wrists, but when it didn't, and she glanced at his achingly familiar face, something inside of her cracked, and everything came pouring out.

"You want to control who I am," she cried. "You want to . . . remake me. You're always trying to put me into clothes I don't want to wear or buy me things I don't need, forcing me do things I don't want. And I've tried to talk to you about it, but you don't listen. It's like you want me to be an accessory, like the watch you wear around your wrist—"

“That’s not what I want.” He ripped his shirt off impatiently and the graze of his bare shoulder against her bent knee sent another glittering jolt of desire racing through her. “I want the Jay who sits like a little princess at her desk and has everyone in her thrall, and this Jay—” He yanked at her shorts and underwear, causing her hips to buck involuntarily. “The Jay who claws my back up when I fuck her too hard and loves to call me Daddy.”

Jay looked at him—that was a mistake. Because the sight of Nicholas bare-chested and on his knees, looking at her body like a condemned man looking at his last meal, stole what little breath remained in her lungs. *You’re the sweetest girl I know*, he’d said, but sweet things got consumed until there was nothing left and she already felt like she was gone.

She tried, one last time, to protest, but the sound that left her seemed to snap what restraint he had remaining and he didn’t let her try a second time, hauling her legs up over his shoulders and doing things with his mouth that made her remember pitch-black bedrooms and passion as fatally bitter as cyanide. When his lip caught against her damp skin and she felt the cool press of his teeth, she bowed against him so desperately that he pressed on her abdomen to pin her down.

“Nicholas,” she cried out. “Oh god.”

“Fuck,” he said, in a slightly breathless tone that let her know that he wasn’t as unaffected as he was pretending to be. “I’m almost sorry to do this.”

“W-what?”

He pulled away, eliciting a frustrated groan from her as he unzipped his jeans. His erection sprang out of his pants, the head already swollen and glistening as it curved towards his belly.

“This.” He slid his fist up his cock, in smooth, quick jerk. “Take your shirt off.”

She gripped her t-shirt by the hem, trying to ignore the stickiness on her inner thighs, and the desperate ache building in her belly as she slowly peeled it off. Her nipples, already hard, puckered under his gaze, and her breasts felt sore and heavy.

Nicholas prowled up her body like an animal and kissed her so hard that they both fell back against the couch, making her aware of every dip and ridge in his hard, lean torso, and the drag of his heavy cock against her

bare stomach. “I told you what would happen if you teased me at work.”

With a final tug at her lower lip, he took her hands by the wrists and at first she thought he planned to tie them, which sent another bolt of fear rushing through her like an icy river. But he put the heels of her palms on her breasts instead, compressing them beneath his own until she understood that he wanted her to keep them there.

“Nick,” she said, her voice small and uncertain.

The hard pressure of his hips was immobilizing and the unexpected intimacy of what he was making her do made her suddenly very desperate not to look at him.

But when she turned away, he put two fingers to her cheek to tilt her head back.

“Eyes on me.”

It was an addictive feeling, shame. Heady and disorienting, it poured through her like hot whiskey. She was a moth in a lantern, caged by the means to her destruction, and god, right now, she wanted to shut herself up with that flame and burn.

“Did I make you come at your desk?”

His eyes narrowed and he thrust harder, hitting her mouth. “Kiss me.”

Jay leaned forward and covered the blunt head of his cock in an open-mouthed kiss. A guttural snarl tore out of him as he ground his hips against her breasts, pushing his impressive length deeper into her mouth. Jay tongued him so viciously that he jerked back with a savage breath, his chest heaving. She wondered if he’d looked this feral when he was in his office, buttoned into his suit.

“Did you ruin your pants?” she asked.

Nicholas stared at her like she was a stranger. Then his jaw hardened and he thrust forward again, watching her mouth open as she took him in. There was fresh tension in him now, and she could sense his resistance in every fiber of his beautiful, stubborn body.

Who’s not very good at kissing now?

He must have felt her smile because he leaned down, pushing all her hair back, gathering all those coils in his fingers like it was precious gold, before holding her face in his hands.

“Are you enjoying this?”

“No,” Jay said, around his cock, and she heard him hiss as she traced her tongue over the sensitized glans. His eyes rolled back and she saw a muscle in his throat jump as he tried to fight his response, but his fingers traced down her jaw until he caught himself and pulled away.

“I don’t believe you. But right now—” He gripped the arm of the loveseat for better control as he slowly pumped his hips. His gaze began to drift and a muscle in his cheek tautened. “Right now, it feels so good that I really don’t fucking care.”

He’s close, thought Jay. She could tell. It was written in the line between his straight black brows, and the slight hollowing of those arrogant cheekbones.

When he came, he looked like he was in pain.

“Fuck,” he said again. His eyes swung towards her, and it was like watching light come in through a gothic window, spearing through all that terrible, twisted darkness. “Do you want to give me what I really want? What I fucking *crave*? ”

She gave a short jerk of ascent, her body braced beneath his.

“Tell me you love me.”

It was like he’d slapped her. “No,” Jay gasped.

“But that’s what I want,” he said, withdrawing. “I want you to be all mine. And I’d be so good at pleasing you, and making you happy. And all you need to do—is tell me yes.”

Fear wound through her, and so did something else; it was hot and feverish. This was the most dangerous game they had ever played, and its potential to destroy enthralled her.

“I d-don’t know how to give you what you’re asking,” she protested, hating that she was naked and on display like this, when she already felt so exposed. “I—I don’t know *how* to love someone. It’s like I’m broken. If I told you I loved you, it m-might be a lie.”

“Then lie to me.” He thrust again, bruising her ribs. “It’s not like I’m asking for your soul.”

But you are.

Jay squeezed her eyes shut, unable to look at him. He didn't seem to like that. He pinched one of her nipples, and the stimulation made her groan. "Please . . . don't make me."

"Do it," he said, each word falling like a stone. "Or I'll show that picture around the office and everyone will know what you're like when you take off your prim little office clothes."

Oh god. Her head spun, leaving her dizzied by the rush. It was so familiar, so addictive, that she felt lost in it. She missed the bitterness in his voice, and with her eyes shut tight, she didn't see the way he was looking at her. All she could think was, *he wouldn't really do it*, but also, how cruel that he would threaten to, especially now. *I should hate him*, she thought, and not for the first time.

"You wouldn't do that," she cried. "I'd hate you."

"Say it, Jay," he said. "I won't ask again."

The weight of him, the heat, the salty citrus of his skin—she couldn't bear it. Her desire for him was like a knife twisting in her belly, as lethal as it was inevitable.

They had both grown up and yet still, she could deny him nothing.

She craved the knife.

"I love you, Daddy. I'm sorry I was bad."

The sound he made—Jay shuddered as the seeping heat of his pre-come spilled over her collarbones and down her throat. That was why he'd pushed her hair back, she realized. So he wouldn't get it in her hair. "Fuck," he said hoarsely. "Yes."

The slick head of his cock pressed against her parted, trembling lips as he fell forward again.

"Say it again." She could see the strain in his arms, the tendons popping out along his wrists. His eyelashes were a dark sweep against his swarthy cheekbones, and through the narrowed slits, his pupils were so large that his irises were nearly black. "With your mouth on me."

"I love you," she choked, struggling to speak around him as he finished in her mouth. The control must have cost him dearly. She had to shut her eyes again, unable to look at him any longer. It was like staring down a blaze from across the dark hallway of her soul.

Her stepbrother. Her demon prince.

The man she couldn't let herself love.

"I love you," she said again, sobbing the words. "I'm sorry, Daddy. Please. I'm sorry."

His sigh came from somewhere deep in his chest and he thumbed some of the tears from her damp cheek with an absent affection that pounded through her body like a stake in the heart.

"I know, little bird," he said, his voice rough and hoarse. "I am, too."

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Chapter Eight

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I love you.

Three simple words. He had forgotten how good they felt to hear, coming from someone who meant everything. Someone who knew all of your sins and accepted them—and you—anyway.

Nicholas sighed and worked his shoulders. Her bed was ridiculously small. He'd spent most of the night with his back against the wall, keeping his legs bent so they wouldn't dangle off the edge of her twin. Jay was curled against him, with her face buried in the crook of his arm. Her hair was spilling over her shoulder, brushing his nose. It still smelled like her shampoo.

Her cat was balled up behind his knees, its purring the only sound in the room.

Can you love me, Jay? He wondered, broodingly. *Or is that why you can never bring yourself to look me in the eyes when we fuck?*

Wherever she'd been mentally last night, it hadn't fully been with him. Even after he'd gently cleaned her with a damp towel, and combed his fingers through the tangled locks of her hair, there had been an absent look on her face. It reminded him of the first time, when she'd frozen him out, too horrified by what they had done to even look at him.

That familiar coldness took root in his chest. "I didn't mean it," he had said, feeling clumsy as he spoke into the silence. "What I said about the picture, and the office."

Jay didn't respond.

He leaned forward, cupping her throat in his hand, one of his fingers pressed against her lips. She let out a ragged gasp as he forced one of his knees between her legs, shifting until she was cradling all of him between her rounded thighs. "I didn't mean it. I wouldn't do that to you."

"I know." The words were hollow and far from reassuring.

That icy sensation sharpened, becoming knife-like. "Are you all right?"

It took her a moment to speak. Maybe she wasn't sure if he meant *now*, or *before*. He wasn't entirely sure what he meant, either. Only that he desperately wanted the answer.

He felt the cords of her throat shift beneath his fingers as she sighed and fell back against him in the dark. “You didn’t let me finish.”

It took him a moment to understand, because for once, sex was the farthest thing from his mind. But then he did, and then his hips became a cradle of heat.

“Do you want to?”

“Yes, Daddy,” she whispered.

With a grunt, he leaned over and groped for his jeans, fishing out the condom he kept in his wallet. She was as smooth as glass when he entered her, and when he reached around her hips to keep her spread open around his thrusting cock so he could massage her clit, she was already wet.

The marks she’d left on his arms still stung.

His eyes flicked past her now-sleeping form to his phone, which he’d set on her “nightstand” of precariously stacked hardcovers. It was on silent but the screen was lighting up with alerts.

More emails, he thought, threading his fingers through her tangled hair until they caught while he leaned forward to grab it. Every time someone at Beaucroft Assets took a shit, someone CC’d him on an email informing him about it. The CEO of that “family” company had folded, though, just like he’d known they would.

Everyone always did if you waited long enough.

Nicholas looked at Jay again, her face mostly angled away from him. He released the lock of hair he’d been toying with and slid carefully over her hips before vaulting from the bed.

The cat stretched and joined him.

He looked around her room, surprised by how small it was. Half-bedroom, half-kitchen, it wasn’t even half the size of his garage. There was a line of mismatched fake plants on her dresser and a pile of fake chenille blankets in the corner. In case she got cold, he supposed.

Impulsively, he snapped one open and draped it over her bare shoulders.

Walking over to his backpack, he pulled out a pair of shorts. As he tugged them over his hips, his wandering eye caught on a photo collage, faded from age. He scowled at the image of a younger Jay with a short

Latino man. The waiter, probably. His arm was draped possessively around her waist and she was hunching, trying to look shorter.

Did you fuck him with the lights off, too?

Her cat sped past his legs as he walked into the kitchen area. Her fridge had an ancient box of baking soda that had probably come with this dump and a few bottles of half-empty vegan hot sauce, but not much else. There were takeout cartons in the trash and a bottle of wine, but it didn't look like she'd been eating much. The only thing in the pantry was a single can of corn.

He couldn't imagine living this way, in a room so small that there was barely room to hear yourself think, dimly lit, filled with the constant blare of noise from the streets.

It was fucking unconscionable. She'd thrown him over for *this*?

That's how much she despised you, that voice in his head whispered. *She'd have rather lived like this, than with you.*

Nicholas shook that voice off and yanked on his T-shirt. She wasn't going to live like that now. He couldn't make this place any less of a shithole, but he could get some decent food into her. He popped in his earbuds and shoved his wallet into the back pocket of his shorts. It took him a moment to find her keys. He eventually located them in a small ceramic dish shaped like a cabbage leaf. The sight of it put a catch in his throat.

She had a life here and I was never intended to be part of it.

There were several grocery stores nearby, according to his phone. As he walked out of her complex, he nearly hit an older man lurking around out front. The man looked at him and then quickly away, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his blazer as he headed down the street.

Nicholas eyed him frowningly, watching as he disappeared around the corner.

With metal cranked up in his ears, he jogged along the city streets, dodging pedestrians. The morning air was clear and sharp, carrying with it unpleasant smells he didn't care to know the origins of. Did Jay take this path—alone? Homeless people were shooting up in the middle of the public square and every second building seemed to have a dull, tired cast to it. Most of them had bars over the doors and windows. So did Jay's apartment.

When he'd first hired that PI, the first thing he'd wanted to know was whether or not she was living alone. If he could find that out, anyone could.

He slowed as he approached the corner store. It was awash in grayish fluorescent lights and had a smell like old dishwater. 70s pop was playing from the speakers overhead. Nicholas grabbed whatever he thought he might have seen Jay eating before, reading the labels before dropping them into the basket. The little nerd had harped enough about gelatin and lard that he felt like he was basically vegan, once removed. As he went down the health aisle, he picked up a box of condoms.

(I don't know how to love someone)

He was scowling by the time he dropped his basket on the conveyor belt and began unloading. The cashier bushed when she scanned his items, unable to look him in the face after she put the box of condoms in the bag. "Did you, ah, find everything okay?"

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Thanks."

"Have a good morning," she said, clearly by rote, before making a panicked face as she clearly realized just how *good* his morning might be about to be.

It almost made him smile.

Nicholas slung the bag over his wrist and headed back to Jay's apartment. The homeless people were still there, much to his consternation, and now there was a man playing jazz on a sax. A regular fucking Broadway, this streetcorner. All it was missing was a siren.

Jay's apartment was like a bubble of silence after those impossibly loud streets. She was still asleep, hugging the pillow in a way he found very sweet. *Did I wear you out, little bird?* He set a bottle of water on the nightstand, studying her sleeping face, and wondering what to do.

He had his plan regarding her career. And as for her mother, she had to be stopped. They weren't children anymore and they could do as they damn well pleased. It was his fucking house, not hers, and so was everything inside it.

Including her daughter.

Whatever leverage Danielle thought she had over Jay was gone.

He'd be the one to take care of her now. And as soon as they got back

to Hollybrook, he was going to make sure Jay knew that.

The only family they needed was each other.

.....

Jay woke up alone.

She wondered, with a sick bolt of dread, if she'd dreamed last night's encounter. Just thinking about it—*I love you*—made her squirm in discomfort. Groaning, she sat up and realized as soon as she felt the muted throb in her lower belly that the discomfort wasn't entirely due to her imagination.

Shit, she thought.

Her eyes flicked to the other side of the bed. *He* was gone, but he'd come back long enough to leave a bottle of Evian on the stack of books that served as her nightstand. She uncapped it, noticing that there was a folded shirt on his side of the bed. When she unfurled it, she recognized it as the one he'd been wearing last night.

She traced the peeling logo on the front—Avenged Sevenfold—before pulling it over her head. The scent of him suffused her senses; he'd been wearing the same aftershave since he was a teenager and the sharpness of it sliced through her thoughts like pith.

(You've been a bad girl and now I'm going to fuck you like one)

The sound of her bathroom door opening made her look up sharply as Nicholas padded out as comfortably as if this apartment was his. He was sweaty, like he'd been running, wearing mesh shorts and a snug T-shirt that was nearly sheer where the white material plastered against his skin.

He hadn't noticed she was awake yet. Music was blasting from his earbuds and she thought she could make out who it was even at this distance. She was pretty sure she even knew the song: it had been one of his favorites to fuck her to.

She watched, incredulously, as he went right to her fridge and began loading things into it from a plastic bag. That propelled her into motion, walking across the room so quickly that it nearly left her dizzy as she tapped insistently at his arm.

He straightened up in surprise.

“What are you doing?”

It came out accusatory. She hadn’t meant it to. Luckily, he hadn’t seemed to have heard, eyes dropping to her legs in an automatic once-over as he pulled the buds out of his ears.

“Hmm?”

Jay repeated herself, resisting the urge to step out of reach when he leaned over the barrier of the fridge door. The front of his shirt was a near-transparent veil. Beneath the clingy material, she could make out the shadow of his chest hair.

“I asked what you were doing.”

“You didn’t have any food. I went ahead and took care of that for you.” Drops of sweat scattered from his hair as he shook his head. Wet, the dark strands had a slight curl to them. “What have you been eating? Your fridge was empty.”

“I’ve been getting takeout,” she said defensively.

He raised one eyebrow. “Just takeout?”

“Not that I need to justify my purchases to a literal billionaire but I didn’t see the point in buying groceries when I was just going to be leaving again.”

She saw his eyes flick to the trashcan and wondered, with a flash of anger, if he’d *gone* through it. If he had noticed the empty bottle of wine and the very discernible lack of takeout cartons.

“You should have woken me. This isn’t the best area and your watch is expensive. People prey on rich boys like you.”

His face, which had started out stern, relaxed into something approximating amusement as he closed the door with a decisive click and sidled closer, propping his fist against the wall over her head. Her eyes went to his arm, which wasn’t quite barring her escape, and then to his face. A lock of hair had fallen into his eyes and shifted distractingly every time he blinked.

“Are you worried about me, blue jay? That’s so sweet.”

Jay hiked her chin up. “You could have gotten mugged.”

He laughed. “Yeah, right.”

“I was mugged. The day you barged into my office, someone snatched my purse. And then you came in and I—” Jay broke off, not finishing. But she thought, *You brought it all back.*

All traces of humor vanished instantly from his face. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Why would I?”

There was a leaden pause as he took that in. Then he made a bitter sound. “I see.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Although she had, a tiny bit. When he had first brought her to his home, she had been determined to give him as little of herself as possible.

He already fucked her like he owned her; she didn’t want him to walk away thinking that he actually did. Not when he held so much else over her head.

From a very young age, this man had been raised to be a wolf in a room of sheep. Everything about him spoke of power, whether he was in the boardroom or the bedroom. Part of that was in the way he carried himself, but most of it was thinking that the world was his to own if he could open his jaws wide enough to devour it.

A sulky expression was stealing over his face. It made him look less like an entitled billionaire and more like a pissed off teenager, and she found herself softening in spite of herself.

Oh, Nick.

She reached up and smoothed the lock of hair that was bothering her out of his eyes, and he stared at her in a way that would have made her laugh if she didn’t already want to cry.

“Thanks for doing the shopping, you idiot.”

“I said I’d take care of you.” His eyelids shuttered as she trailed her fingers down his unshaven jaw and she felt him lean into her touch. When he looked at her like that, with those downcast eyes, she felt hunted. “I meant it.”

She flinched a little. “I can’t afford to depend on people.”

“Normal people do, blue jay.” His strong fingers stroked over her knuckles, coaxing them flat as he brought her hand to the broad plane of his

chest. “It’s like a leap of faith.”

She watched him carefully. “You know, we’ve never really talked about finances, religion, family. That’s something people usually discuss before they get married.”

“So?”

“So, don’t you want a family? Your values were always more traditional than mine and I don’t want kids.”

“I know. That doesn’t matter to me.”

“How would you know that?” Jay demanded. “I know I never told you.”

“You wouldn’t bring anyone else into a world that’s already broken your heart.”

Fuck. That stung and tears stabbed at her eyes with a blinding sharpness. She stepped back from him and hit the wall with a thud that reverberated throughout her entire body. “How fucking dare you,” she gasped out. “What do you know about heartbreak?”

He sighed. “Don’t cry, Jay.”

“No. You do *not* get to say shit like that to me and then tell me not to cry.” Jay swiped at her eyes, wanting to storm out, to leave, but that was the problem with a small apartment like this. The only place to escape to was the bathroom—and he was blocking it with the body she couldn’t let herself look at, because it would mean having to admit that she wanted to.

“Why is this so hard?” she asked pathetically.

“It doesn’t have to be. It could just be . . . easy.”

Nicholas stepped closer and she froze, breathing a little harder. He gave her a minute, but it felt more like a cat toying with a mouse when he leaned in and slid his palm down her back, her hips, all the way to her ass.

“You look good in my clothes.”

Jay eyed him, wanting to be angry. He flicked the hem of his shirt, giving her a little teasing grin, and it was a tantalizing glimpse of what normal could look like, for them. No cruel games. No fronting. Just a man who looked at her as if she were his first glimpse of sun in a world of darkness.

(You have to come to me in the light)

Her face must have changed, because whatever he saw there made him put his fingers between her legs. She still wasn't wearing underwear and he watched her suck in as he gently traced the swollen edges of her pussy, dipping just deep enough that there was no denying she was wet.

You hurt me, she thought, her breasts rising and falling beneath the peeling decal on his faded T-shirt. You hurt me and you made me like it, and I know you're going to do it again.

His gaze dropped to her lips, which had already parted, but he was the first to pull away.

"Did you want to hang around here all day or are you going to show me the city?"

Jay swallowed around the catch in her throat as he absently wiped his fingers on his shorts. "Really? You want to see it? I—I thought you were here to drag me back to Hollybrook after fucking me to my senses."

That made him frown and she almost regretted saying it. "I rented you that U-Haul for at least a week." His eyes passed over her empty cabinets assessingly. "It looks like you've gotten most of it done already. I think you can afford to take a break."

Jay didn't want to admit that she owned so little, she'd barely even begun. She had already caught him glancing around in disbelief, like he thought she lived in a slum. "I wasn't expecting to play tour guide but sure, I suppose I can think of some places to take you to."

"Good, because you stood me up the last time I tried to show you a night out here."

Jay gave him a harsh look, leaning away. "You were going to fuck me in your hotel."

"Yeah, but I was going to buy you a really expensive dinner first." His mouth shifted into what she could only describe as an obnoxious fuck-boy grin. "And lots of shots."

"Charming."

"I can be." Nicholas gave her ass a light swat that had her drawing in a ragged breath. "I'm sure you'll be a very satisfactory tour guide. Where do you usually go to have your fun?"

“Probably nowhere you’d be interested in, if Turkish nightclubs are your scene.” Jay tugged the shirt down defiantly. “I seem to remember you partying your way through most of high school, though, so this must be a natural progression.”

“And you used to do just about anything your friends told you to do.” His smile had a dangerous edge that made her heart beat faster. “You pounded the shots back, too, even if most of them did end up being water. And I remember everyone would stop to watch you dance.”

“Well, I don’t do that anymore,” Jay said sharply, aware of every point of contact between them. Of the heat pouring off his body like a furnace. The way the tackiness of his shirt made the fabric mold to his chest, showing every line of muscle, and—fuck. She took a step back, crowding against the wall. “I’ll take you to the art museum. Lily said they have an exhibit on ephemeral art.”

Nicholas watched her with obvious amusement. “I think the last time I went to a museum was for a fundraiser at the Getty. I was so busy dodging people with clipboards that I didn’t have time to look at the art.”

“I really doubt anyone’s going to be chasing you with a clipboard at the SFMoMa, unless it’s me and I’m beating you over the head with it.”

That made him swat her ass again. “We can go to your museum but if I have to look at a bunch of paint smears for an hour, we’re getting drunk at lunch and I get to stare at your ass as much as I want.”

“Oh my god, you are such a cultureless swine.”

“What? I have art at home.”

The sheer arrogance of those words made her jaw drop, and when he started laughing, she realized, with a furious blush, that he was trying to provoke her on purpose.

“Asshole.”

His smile became less teasing, more rapacious. “You owe me a slutty punishment dress for making me come down here to get you, by the way.”

“I don’t remember agreeing to that.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m putting you in something short and low-cut.” He kissed her, his hand coming up to cushion the back of her skull as he jostled her up against the wall. “I want to see leg.”

"I want to see leg," Jay repeated. "Are you serious?"

"Daddy loves it when his cold little bird looks a little slutty." He thrust his tongue into her mouth, squeezing the back of her neck. "It gets me hot."

"What doesn't?" Jay muttered, turning her face away. "You just enjoy tormenting me."

"Just like how you enjoy begging me to do it." Unbothered, he tugged at her shirt, making her scramble to hold it down over the front of her thighs. "Come shower with me."

God, Jay thought dazedly. Who is this man? "It's an old shower. You might be too tall for it."

Nicholas flicked her tongue against her ear. "Then I'll kneel."

Jay nearly fell over when he released her.

Fuck, she thought.

.....

Nicholas had told himself that it was just sex that he wanted, but it was the moments before and after that he really craved: watching her comb out the tangles that he'd put in her hair by pulling on it, the feel of her fingers against his chest when she unbuttoned his shirt.

These little moments of forced tenderness were the closest he'd ever been to love.

One night when both their parents were out, he let himself into her room. She had been relaxing in bed with a book, though she shot bolt upright when she saw him. The way she covered herself, using the book as a shield, was like an arrow in his chest. The pain made him feel helpless, which made him angry.

"What do you want?" she asked, in an icy tone that didn't quite hide the fact that her bare shoulders were shaking.

"Come shower with me. You don't even have to fuck me," he added, hating how much it sounded like pleading but too desperate to care. "Just wash my back while I get off."

He could still remember the look of disgust on her face. He'd told himself it didn't matter how she looked at him when her clothes were off.

Not when she belonged to him in all the ways that mattered. But she hadn't, not really. When he pulled her in for a kiss beneath the steaming spray, it was like kissing a statue of a girl. He'd taken everything from her but what he really wanted.

Nicholas peeled off his T-shirt, blinking away those memories of his younger self. They clung to his skin like a film as he took in the small shower stall with its mounted showerhead that didn't appear to be adjustable. That was unfortunate. He'd planned to use it on her.

Jay worried at the hem of her shirt before yanking it off in a quick gesture. Blood immediately rushed to his cock, but he pretended at nonchalance as he fiddled with the knob of the shower. There was some kind of paint on it, to make it look like granite, but it was flaking off. Left for hot, right for cold. He cranked it to the left, lathering up some of her shampoo and running it through his hair the same way he had when she was at college and he had stolen into her room, desperate for a piece of her.

It still smells the same.

Jay slipped in beside him, her shoulders up to her ears. She appeared to be sucking in, like she was trying to make herself smaller, but she wouldn't look at him. He could hear her breathing quicken every time his hard cock grazed her back.

He turned the water warmer, noting the goosebumps on her arms. The smell of apple freesia was heady as it rose up on soft clouds of steam, causing the baby hairs around her temples to frizz. Bending, he whispered, "Hot enough for you?"

Jay turned to look at him with one arm barred over her chest. Water clung to her long eyelashes, sliding down her cheeks like tears when she blinked. "It's fine."

"You know how I feel about fine."

She flushed. "I remember," she said stiffly.

Nicholas pulled her arm away from her body. "Are you sure?"

Her eyes immediately dropped from his and she turned back around to stare at the wall. His mouth pulled down, dissatisfied, as he took in the smooth, stiff lines of her back.

She's afraid.

Jay let out a squeak when he put his hands on her shoulders. He waited a beat before fanning his fingers out, working his thumbs into the muscle until he felt her unkink. Standing as close as he was, he actually *felt* her shuddering sigh as he smoothed his hands down her arms.

“What . . . are you doing?” Her voice was a little high.

“Playing with you.” He drew her hair away from her nape and she tensed again as his cock rubbed against her ass. “You’re so skittish. Come back here.”

He looped his arm around her waist and kissed the back of her neck, stroking the soft curve of her belly. A shiver wracked her body, causing water to cascade over them both as he partially unblocked the spray. “Nick,” she said, sounding frightened.

“Just relax while Daddy has his fun.” His bite had her arching, and her nipples were tight when he ran his hand possessively over her front. Playfully, he bumped her ass with his hip, and she yelped again before covering her own mouth in a way that made him laugh. “I promise I’m not going to fuck you.”

The breath she let out was unsteady as she reached for the shampoo. “Stop messing around.”

Nicholas relinquished his hold on her curvy waist, leaning back against the tile as he watched her lather the soap into her curls, breathing in the sweet steam. When she tilted her head back, tossing her damp hair over her shoulders as she rinsed, he said, casually, “Did you ever let your nice waiter boyfriend fuck you in the ass?”

Her fingers stumbled and she made a strange noise, like a backwards wheeze.

“No?” he said, satisfied. “Oh, good.”

Jay spun around to glare at him, which was a mistake on her part, because it gave him an unobstructed view of her body, and he was far from being too polite to stare.

“You are—” She shook her head angrily. “*Unbelievable.*”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” he said lazily, watching her angry blush suffuse her cheekbones with pleasure. “Did you get all the soap out of your hair?”

Jay folded her arms. “Why?”

“I want you up against the wall.”

“*Why?*”

“Because I’m going to tongue-fuck that sour expression right off your cute little face.”

Her mouth fell open. For a moment, she was too flustered to respond. When he pushed off from the wall, she backed to the other side and began to stammer, “You c-can’t say things like that in here. My neighbors share a bathroom wall with me.”

It only took a single step to close the distance. “So?”

“So they can hear you,” she hissed up at him.

“Oh? You think your neighbors might find out how eager you are to ride my face with my fingers inside you? I think so, too.”

“Nicholas! They have *children!*” Her blush had migrated down to her chest. Apple-red and light brown, like polished jasper. *Beautiful*, he thought, and then his eyes dipped lower.

“Spread your fucking legs. Now.”

She gave him a defiant look but her legs edged just the slightest distance apart, and that was all the encouragement he needed to drop to his knees and shove her thighs the rest of the way open. Her angry little lecturing voice morphed into a whimper when he pulled her forward by the hips.

With a satisfied sound, he hitched one of her legs over his back and sealed his mouth over her. “Oh my god.” Her voice went faint as she canted towards him. “Nicholas—”

“Look at you, trying to climb my face. You always did love my mouth.”

She yanked his hair for that. Vicious little bird. He approved, rasping his tongue over the hood of her clit until the skin of her thighs trembled beneath his touch and she fell back against the tiled wall, panting, as hot water dripped over her bare skin like a clear coat of glistening paint.

He moved with her, giving her a fiery kiss that had the tension melting from her spine as his hand slid up her thigh to cup her ass in his palm.

“Yes,” she moaned, “oh god, right there.”

With a sigh that made her tremble, he slid his fingers into her cunt and began pumping his hand in time to his mouth: slow strokes that nearly had her doubling over his shoulder with her arm looped around the back of his head. Her stomach muscles flexed as she struggled to breathe steadily, and all those little sounds she was making hummed right against his temple.

“If you keep moaning like that, everyone’s going to know what a slutty girl you are.” He pitched his voice low. “Your room number’s on your door. All your neighbors will find out exactly how the beautiful little whore in 215 likes to get fucked.”

“I don’t care.”

She bucked against him, as if for emphasis, and when he finished her off, she blew apart like one of those exploding stars from the documentaries that had used to make her cry.

“Fuck,” she panted, head tipping back. “Oh—god—Nick—”

“Yes.” He trailed kisses up to her navel. “You’re so pretty when you come for Daddy.”

Her fingers clenched and then relaxed against his skull, the tight grip yielding to a gentle sweep that put an unnamed ache in the back of his throat.

“Tell me what you are.”

“Your bird.”

“Mine,” he agreed, the word dark and possessive as he pressed his cheek against her belly.

When she dragged him up by the chin for a kiss, it wasn’t like before; as he hauled her up against him, crushing her breasts flush against his chest as he wrested back control, she fit against him like she was made for him—and she was so responsive.

She broke away, looking up at him with a deer-in-the-headlights expression while he fought the urge to seize her mouth again. “You’re good at that.” He tapped at her swollen lip. “I almost never count out my paycheck stubs when your mouth’s on me.”

Her eyes flashed with anger. Then a look stole over her face that was as strange as it was familiar, and by the time he placed it as the one from that

photo, she was already on her knees.

Nicholas inhaled sharply as she sucked the droplets of water from his abs. *Oh, fuck.*

She gripped his cock in her slender fingers and touched him so gently that he shuddered, before taking as much of him as she could into her mouth.

“Fuck.” Sparks burst against his visual field as his head cracked against the tile. His hips jerked, thrusting into her throat hard enough that she gagged and pushed him back, pinning him against the shower wall by pressing hard against his thighs. And dear god, her mouth—

She worked her tongue over the crown of his cock as he fucked the plush softness of her lips, sucking him off the way she had on her loveseat..

It feels so fucking good.

“What are you thinking about now?” There was an edge to the honey-sweetness of her voice and the challenge in it pushed him over, making him come with a violence that startled them both.

Drool and come slicked his shaft as she pulled away, leaving him prone to the hard water pressure that now felt like needles on his sensitive head.

Nicholas turned from the spray and nearly hit his head on the spigot when he saw her looking up at him, watching him with something that looked a hell of a lot like desire.

“Fuck, Jay.” He reached for her and she jerked back from him, making a muted sound as she grabbed a towel and fled. Stunned, he watched her now-towel-clad ass depart through the door at a fast clip like the hounds of hell were at her heels.

He *did* bang his head when he turned around a second time and he swore at the sting, running a hand through his hair as he bent to shut off the water. He grabbed one of her yellow towels and slung it around his shoulders as he followed her back into the one-bedroom.

She had thrown her own damp towel on her bed and was buttoning herself into a dress—a matronly, ruffled thing that made her look like somebody’s preschool art teacher.

A very fuckable preschool art teacher who gave amazing head and could set him on fire with a glance.

When she bent to buckle her boot, revealing a slit in the skirt that showed off just a hint of leg, he cleared his throat. Loudly.

“Oh my god!” Her eyes swung towards him, moved down, and then immediately away. A blush began to bloom over her cheekbones, which was fucking hilarious after what she had just done to him in that bathroom. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Not that long.” Hiding a smile, he knotted the towel around his hips. “Did you already call the taxi?”

“Um.” She grabbed a purse off her counter. “I thought we’d take BART.”

“Wasn’t that how you got mugged?”

“I got mugged after I got off the train, actually. While I was walking to work.”

Nicholas grabbed a pair of boxers out of his backpack and stepped into them before tugging some slacks over his narrow hips. “We’re still taxing a taxi.”

She watched him reach for his shirt with an anxious expression. “It’s going to be expensive.”

“I think I can afford it,” he said dryly.

The fare seemed reasonable enough to him but Jay’s eyebrows had shot up, which made him wonder if he was being subjected to a tourist tax. He still tipped the man, mostly because Jay would have, though he didn’t miss the way the driver’s eyes lingered on the shape of Jay’s legs.

The art museum’s stone façade surrounded a central atrium, looming over the park across the street and its adjoining mall. They went through a side entrance, which involved going up a staircase with a big glass window that reminded him of a racketball court. It looked into a lobby area with photographs and paintings displayed prominently on the wall.

He studied their reflections in the glass as they made their way to the big double doors. The bohemian florals swathing her curvy body were a stark contrast to his own lean solid build and sober colors. Nobody, he thought, would ever think that they were siblings now.

“Did you come here often?” he asked casually, putting his hand on the small of her back.

“On free days. And sometimes special occasions, too.”

“What special occasions were those?”

“Um, well. I saved up to see the Magritte exhibit. He’s that Belgian artist, the surrealist. He painted the man in the bowler hat who had an apple for a face.”

“And here I thought you’d go for the impressionists.”

“Wow,” she said. “Am I being schooled on aesthetics by the man who has a mutant jellyfish hanging in his foyer?”

“If you don’t like the Chihuly, I can sell it. We can buy anything you want.”

She stared at him incredulously. “Are you seriously offering to buy me art?”

“Yes,” he said. “Why? Do you want a Magritte? We can hang it in your room.”

Her cheeks colored as someone nearby glanced over at them with raised eyebrows. “No, Nicholas. Oh my god, I can’t even imagine what that would cost you.”

“I think I could afford it,” he said, and she stared at him, as if realizing that he actually could.

He paid for their tickets while she fiddled with the latch of her purse. He was happy that she didn’t try to pay, although he suspected that she wanted to. She was so fidgety. Or was she nervous? He’d never seen her this agitated when she was talking with anyone else.

Once they had their admission stickers, they went to examine a map by one of the stairwells. “This floor is photography, if I remember right,” she was saying. “And there’s a living wall and some mobile sculptures. I’m not that into photography, so we can skip that unless you are—oh.” Some of the enthusiasm drained from her face. “That’s right, I guess you are.”

“We can skip it. Let’s go to the fifth floor and work our way down.”

Jay nodded tightly and turned towards the elevators. He followed, regretting the brief moment of ease that had slipped away between them like sand through his fingers. Knowing she was thinking about the past and not being able to do anything about it made it feel as if a hot ball of lead were burning in his gut. Especially when he realized her hand was

trembling in his.

The elevator doors opened, spilling them out into another gallery. Jay squared her shoulders, giving a nod of acknowledgement to one of the guards stationed by the wall.

Nicholas tightened his grip minutely, lacing his fingers with hers. He didn't recognize any of the artists, and the vast empty rooms with their reverberating echoes didn't exactly inspire confidences. "This place is certainly spacious."

She eyed him. "Mario Botta is the architect. He designed the Evry Cathedral in France, too. They both make use of truncated cylinders in their designs."

"Sounds hot."

She swatted at him with her free hand and he gave her trapped one a squeeze, which she returned after a brief pause. By the time they had made it into the third room, her shoulders had relaxed again and it was as if the subject of photography had never been brought up at all. But there would be other pitfalls going forward. Other mistakes.

Sometimes when they were in bed together he would do something that would make her freeze and he would see the light in her eyes die, consumed by a storm of dark memories.

Maybe that's why she keeps them closed.

Nicholas shoved that unpleasant thought from his mind, burying it deep, and smiled down at Jay's too-serious face. "Show me your favorites."

She tried to hide her enthusiasm but he knew her too well and recognized the little gleam in her eyes when she turned back to the gallery as she decided where to lead him. Despite her claims to the contrary, she gravitated to paintings with bright colors—fantastic dreamscapes, neon palettes, impressionistic swirls. The colors glowed the way she did, like she fucking belonged in flower fields and pools of sunlight.

But not with him. No, there in his bed, she closed her eyes and confined herself to self-inflicted darkness, enduring his demands in a way that was beginning to make him wonder how much of her pleasure was real. She wouldn't look at him until he told her to. He knew she liked his body, but as soon as he was inside her, parts of Jay became so remote he was

afraid he could never reach them. A fool's journey, paved by the best sex of his fucking life.

"Do you like that one? The abstract impressionist?"

Her low voice took him from his thoughts and he blinked, realizing he had been glaring at a painting. He glanced at the placard dismissively and said, "No, not particularly."

"Are you having a bad time?"

"No," he said gruffly. He wasn't.

"You look angry," she said cautiously.

"I'm not angry. I'm thinking about work."

"You work yourself too hard, Nick." She sounded sympathetic now, which was worse than betrayal. He didn't want to be pitied. "Even Arthur thinks you are. He told me."

"Arthur isn't holding up the company on his shoulders. Of course he can afford to be cavalier."

"He's not cavalier. He just has a good work-life balance. And so should you." She ran her thumb over his knuckles and an electric need arced down his spine. "Try to enjoy the art. It's supposed to be a reset for your brain. Like looking at nature, or listening to classical music."

"I don't need a reset," he grumbled. "I just need people to do what I pay them for."

"They do."

We'll see.

He swept her into another room, no longer wanting to look at that bleak painting with its dark smears of abstract color. Jay didn't seem to mind holding hands but he suspected that was because there was no one here to see.

It was only when the clothes started to come off that she lost that outward façade of bossy control and yielded to him the way he wanted, giving him everything but her heart.

Nicholas darted a wild look at a sculpture made of metal and plastic. Thinking about her slow, tongue-heavy blowjobs made his knees feel watery. She was cruel the way she did it, too. Lingering over his stomach as

she kissed her way down to his dick. Teasing him with her very breath until the anticipation of the act built up to a deep throb in his belly.

They were good at hurting each other. Had perfected it with a lifetime of careful brushstrokes that demonstrated a mastery rivaling any one of these framed paintings. But he was tired of coupling their passion with violence.

He just wanted to be fucking loved.

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Chapter Nine

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It surprised Jay, how *attentive* Nicholas was in public. His eyes were always on her, every time she looked. Or else he was offering his arm, his coat. Such old-world manners came as a shock from a man who was as ruthlessly exacting as he was, and it was a little unexpected just how much she found herself liking them.

In high school, he had been so cruel to the girls he'd been with. They were never good enough to bring home. He'd meet with them beneath the bleachers or in other people's upstairs bedrooms, only to abandon them as soon as he'd gotten what he'd wanted, leaving them to the ruthless grind of the high school rumor mill.

Hurting people came to him so easily; it always had. Another thing he had learned from his father.

When her hand shifted uneasily in his, he squeezed her tighter and didn't let go.

They were getting stares as they walked down the corridors. Most of the stares were directed at him. Nicholas was a very tall man with the sort of profile that could have been chiseled in marble, as noble as it was severe. The Cerruti suit he wore was the color of tempered steel, tailored to reflect both the leanness of his build and the lack of padding required to accentuate his shoulders. His body, much like his temperament, was a demonstration of absolute control.

And maybe his manners were, too. Whether you were pulling out a chair for someone or tying them to it, the intent was still the same.

Ownership.

Possession.

She blushed, and saw his face turn towards hers again, measuring her responses. They had never walked like this, hand in hand. She could feel her palm getting sweaty. She hadn't been this nervous since her teen years, with her first crush, and feeling that way—with *him*—was terrifying.

They had reached the special exhibition on ephemeral art and she tried to focus her attention on that, but it only made her feel worse. As she looked at the timelapse photographs of the silent audience of melting human ice

sculptures in Chamberlain square, or Yoko Ono's apple imprisoned in plexiglass while it began its slow rot, Jay felt tears begin to form in her eyes.

"Since when did trash become art?" Nicholas asked skeptically, startling her from her gloomy reverie, which was just so him that she almost laughed, even though she felt so broken inside.

"Stupid," she said, sniffing a little. "It's supposed to show that beautiful things don't last."

He glanced at *her* then, which she didn't want. Not while she felt like this. Not when every single facet of her life was a glaring reminder of why this wouldn't work.

Even if she wanted it to.

As if he could read her thoughts, his expression softened. "It's just a picture, blue jay."

And we both know how much damage a picture can do.

She stared at the browning apple until her eyes hurt, aware of the steady pressure of his hand. *It's just Nick*, she told herself but her pulse wouldn't listen, and when he ran his thumb along the inside of her palm, it accelerated to a buzz in her ears.

In the next gallery, an older, European-looking couple were gazing at paintings. The man was wearing suspenders over his button-down shirt and the woman was wearing a loose linen dress that looked casual and expensive at the same time.

Jay kept her eyes on the paintings but her cheeks heated with an all-too-familiar shame as the man and woman turned to look at them. Nicholas's hand tightened further over hers, his fingers lacing with her own until she felt as if she had been neatly shackled.

"Quel charmant couple," the woman murmured. "Il est si grand. Et elle est tellement belle."

"Plus jolie que moi?" Nicholas spoke up, surprising all three of them. "Je le pense aussi. C'est pour ça que je l'ai épousée."

The man and then, more self-consciously, the woman, laughed. "You're just darling," she told him, smiling with dimples. Then she turned to Jay, who felt like her face was on fire, and said, "What a charming husband you

have.”

Husband?

Husband?

“*What did you say to her?*” Jay demanded, the moment they were out of hearing.

Nicholas smirked. “She said you were pretty. I asked if she thought you were prettier than me.”

Jay suspected this was not the full truth but wasn’t sure how to call him on it, afraid it would trigger another conversation neither of them were ready for.

He gave her hand another playful squeeze. “Are you ready for dinner?”

“Yeah,” she said, feeling a flicker of regret that the afternoon was being cut short. Then she looked at her phone and realized that they’d been here for three hours. Despite his initial reluctance, Nicholas hadn’t complained at all.

He called a taxi as they walked out of the museum. The car met them out in front and took them to the Ferry Building, which was a ten-minute drive because of all the traffic, even though it was only a couple blocks away. They exchanged a glance when a sleek Mercedes cut them off and the driver began to swear.

“We should have taken BART,” said Jay.

“I don’t mind the wait. Did you have a good time?”

“I had a great time.”

This time, the smile he leveled at her—one of his real ones, the one with the dimples that he never showed anyone—made her stomach flip. “Good. I’m glad.”

They went to dinner at a Vietnamese fusion restaurant and under the dim lights, at a table beside a cold glass window that offered a view of the bay, they had cocktails and pho while the sun slowly sank below the rippling surface of the water and the fog rolled in on ghostly fingers.

This was a side of the city that Jay had rarely gotten to enjoy: the sparkling underlayer that catered to the exclusive elite. It was the lifestyle her mother had dreamed about when she took her clothes off for other men,

letting the stars in her eyes blind her to the trash in the street.

Jay despised herself a little for wanting it, too.

“Is something wrong with your food?”

She looked down at her untouched bowl and smiled guiltily. “No, the view is just so amazing, I’m trying to take it all in.” Her shoulders dipped as she looked at him through the flickering candlelight, an accusatory thought sweeping through her head: *you take your clothes off for this man, too.* “This was such an amazing day.”

“We can have more. A lifetime of them.”

She laughed nervously, fingering the stem of her cocktail glass. “You didn’t even know if I wanted kids. We grew up together but we don’t know much about each other now.”

“What do you want to know?” The neck of his shirt dipped lower as he unbuttoned his cuffs and began winding up the sleeves over his forearms, drawing her eyes to both the agile movement of his hands and the flex of tendons beneath the skin. “I’ll tell you anything.”

“You told me you didn’t date.” She hesitated, cowed by his intensity and the curious intimacy of seeing his arms bared in public. When she finally dared to look in his eyes, his expression was as potent as the drink in her hand. “Do you know what you want out of a relationship?”

The old Nick would have rolled his eyes and told her that none of that would have mattered as long as he could provide, before parroting his father’s sexist bullshit. But the man across from her considered her question thoughtfully, shifting so the light caught on the watch at his wrist.

“I don’t want to be alone anymore. Coming home to an empty house year after year—it wears on you. I want to see the world but only if there’s someone to see it with me. I’m fine traveling alone but I don’t really want to. I like having someone to come home to. Someone to take care of.”

“Lots of people could give you that,” Jay whispered.

He leaned forward, covering her hand with his. “But they aren’t you.”

The world around her seemed to come to a juddering stop and Jay could have sworn that part of it broke off and shattered. In the silence that followed, she could hear the tick of his watch.

“I—” She broke off, struggling to find the words she wanted while he

was looking at her like that. “I didn’t know you felt that way. The first time you told me you were in love with me, you made it sound like it was all about sex.”

“I was eighteen, Jay. I was a fucking idiot who didn’t know how to love you.”

The harshness of his admission made her reel back. Their fingers broke and Nicholas looked down at his hand before drawing away and taking a long, deep drink.

“So,” he said gruffly. “I saw the photo collage in your room. I thought you weren’t into photography.”

Jay blinked, disconcerted by the mercurial change in topic but perversely grateful for the reprieve. “I don’t really consider that photography,” she said at length. “It’s more like a scrapbook. I wanted to remember the good times, because sometimes you don’t realize how good they are until they’re over.”

“That sounds sad, blue jay.”

“Maybe it is.” She thought wistfully of her middle school friends, the nice strippers at the Beat and Tease. “I’ve let so many people pass me by and now I can’t even remember their faces. I didn’t want to forget anyone else.”

“You’ve never photographed me.”

Because I could never forget you.

Flushed from the alcohol in her drink, Jay considered him from across the table. The candle was throwing sinister shadows over his handsome face, giving him a distinctly villainous cast.

Was he jealous?

“What?” Nicholas said. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Impulsively, Jay lifted her phone and snapped a picture of him before he could arrange his face. She looked at her screen, and smiled in spite of herself: frozen in mid-motion, with his eyes widening in shock, and a sullen tilt to his otherwise inviting mouth, he looked about as real as she’d ever seen him.

“There,” she said. “Happy?”

“Do I get to look at it?”

“No.”

A glint appeared in his eyes. “Do I get one of you?”

“You have one of me.” She spoke without thinking and his eyebrows shot up.

“I only get one?”

“You only have the one?” Jay retorted, and he gave her a wicked grin.

“I thought that subject was a sore point.”

“Oh my god, you totally do.” Jay took a bracing sip of her drink.
“You’re such a little creep.”

“I think you actually find me quite charming.”

“What gave you that impression?” she demanded, setting her drink down hard.

“Because you’re smiling.”

She touched a hand to one of her too-warm cheeks, aware even as she did so of the fading light, the closeness of the fog, and the exotic blend of spices permeating the restaurant. It was as if the two of them were inside a glass bubble, ensconced within their own private world. She had never been this relaxed with him—partially, because he had never given her a reason to be.

Somehow, Nicholas had tricked her into going on a date with him and having a very good time. She had gone out with him before, when he had blackmailed her into returning home, but when he dragged her to those places, Jay had gotten the impression that he was only doing it to show her that he could, leveraging the threat of his power over her. It hadn’t been like this.

Nothing they had done had ever been like this.

She picked at a cilantro leaf, shaken by the realization that, in his own manipulative way, he had taken her concerns about their twisted power dynamic to heart. “I guess I am.”

“Smiling?” he persisted. “Or charmed?

“Both,” she said quietly, wondering why the answer made her sad.

He picked up his own drink, knocking it back. “I deleted the one you

sent me, by the way.”

She didn’t have to ask which one. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. My reasons were purely selfish. I don’t want anyone else seeing you like that. You didn’t answer your own question, though. Do you know what you want, Jay?”

Thoroughly off-balance now, and a little flustered, Jay shook her head. “I used to dream of having this glamorous big city life. But living on my own cleared that up pretty quick. Now, I’d settle for a quiet life. With someone kind. Who will treat me with respect and step up when things get hard and—just . . . love me without any strings attached.”

She looked at her drink as she spoke, not wanting to see his face and terrified that he’d see the lie in hers and know just how close she was to giving in, strings or no.

When the waiter came by and asked how what they were doing, Jay felt as if she’d been woken up from a dream. Nicholas ordered another Old Fashioned and Jay, feeling uncharacteristically brooding, got herself another fruity cocktail even though the first one was already going to her head.

We’ve done it again, she thought, reaching into her bright orange cocktail and eating the rum-soaked cherry while he sipped his drink and watched her with the eyes of a tired wolf. *We’ve hurt each other and I don’t even know how.*

He drained his second glass in several swallows, shaking himself like he thought he could cast off his sobriety. “We can go whenever you’re ready.”

Jay eyed her half-empty glass, noting the fuzzy edges. “I’m ready.”

Desire strobed through her like lightning as they walked out of the restaurant and he draped his jacket over her shoulders. On the briny sharpness of the bay breeze, she could just make out the citrus sting of his cologne suffusing the fabric that pooled around her narrower shoulders.

Walking with him, with the city lit up in fog-muted neon, Jay felt as if her veins were filled with the sparkling incandescence of champagne.

She would have fucked him, if he’d asked. Hazy from drink and a sea of warm, dark feelings she didn’t care to explore too deeply beneath all the

wounds, she would have gotten to her knees and blown him until all he could say in that deep, terrible voice was “yes” and “slutty girl” and “fuck.”

But he didn’t ask, when they returned to her apartment, and as she changed into her pajamas with the faint beginnings of a hangover blooming behind her eyes, that was almost as troubling as the realization that she wanted him to.

The bathroom door opened, spilling light over her face. Nicholas walked out of it wearing basketball shorts and an old T-shirt. As he swung onto her mattress, she rolled up against him, and he put his arm around her with a low chuckle, breathing in against her hair. A stab of pure, raw desire went through her like an iron spike when she felt how hard he was.

“Are you going to fuck me?” she whispered, feeling braver than she ever had, filled with alcohol, and shrouded by that dark velvet abyss, unable to see his face even if she wanted to.

He went very still. “You’re drunk.”

“Mmm.” She nuzzled against him and felt his cock twitch. “Yes, Daddy. So drunk.”

“Jay—” she had never heard him use that tone before; it thrilled her “—don’t.”

“Why? You can do whatever you want to me. Use me, hurt me. Make me be bad.” She clasped his hand and dragged it to her chest, feeling a surge of satisfaction when he allowed her to press his hand flat over her breast. “Just make it feel good.”

His chest hitched against her back. When he traced her nipple through her thin tank top, she moaned, and the sound of it startled them both. “Jay,” he growled. “No.”

She rolled over to face him and found herself staring at his back. “Oh, so you’re mad at me.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“You don’t like it when I’m in control.”

Nicholas laughed at that, which made her angry.

“I like nice guys. I only ever dated nice guys before you.”

“You’re a mean drunk, blue jay. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“I like nice guys,” she repeated, like a dare. “I like the way they fuck me.”

The mattress creaked ominously. When he wrapped his hand around her throat, she heard herself make a sharp, thin noise as he leaned over her, his dark hair throwing his eyes into shadow.

“No.” His thumb stroked over her suddenly frantic pulse. “I don’t think you do.”

Oh, she thought, head swimming. I like this.

“You like that, Jay?” It was as if she’d spoken aloud. Maybe she had. He gave her neck a squeeze and she wasn’t even sure she was breathing anymore, she was so turned on. “Is that what nice girls like when they’re getting fucked by their nice boyfriends?”

“No,” said Jay.

“No, it isn’t,” he agreed. “Because you don’t want to be fucked by nice guys. You want to be fucked by me.”

“Yes,” Jay whispered. “Fuck me, Daddy.”

He stared down at her. She couldn’t quite make out his expression in the dark but she could feel his erection digging into her hip. When his hand flexed, just grazing her nape, she had to repress a shudder.

“Fuck me. Please. I want you to.”

“Jesus,” he said, taking his hand away with a hiss. “Fuck.”

Jay stared, vaguely incredulous, as he turned back to the wall. Her heart was still pounding. She could still feel the bite of his fingers in her skin. Jay put her hand on his bicep and he jerked, as if he were going to shrug her off. “Nick?” her voice came out small.

He didn’t respond and she felt a lick of fear.

(alone)

“Da—”

“Don’t,” he snarled. “Don’t test my control. Not right now.”

“But I—” Tears formed in her eyes and she let her hand fall. “I’m sorry.”

“I bet you are.” When he sighed, there was a hint of a growl in it. “Go to sleep, Jay.”

She rolled on her other side, aware of his big body at her back. It made her feel safe in a way that none of her first few nights back in the city had been, and when she dreamed, they were absent of nightmares. Or she thought they were.

Her eyes snapped open and it felt like the tight knot in her belly had sprouted thorns that had worked their prickling way throughout her entire body. Her head was throbbing and the darkness was spinning. *Nick*, she thought, looking around wildly. And then, *Where am I?*

Her half-packed up room popped into recognition just as she became aware of Nicholas breathing heavily beside her. The bed was moving—that must have been what had woken her up. He had slipped his cock from his shorts and was jerking himself off, arching into his own hand with an urgency that was frightening because she recognized the cadence.

He fucks me like that, when he can't wait, she thought, and a dull throb went through her belly.

Eyes squeezed shut, he was making sounds in his throat. They were guttural and muted. So much so that she didn't immediately recognize that most of them were her own name.

■■■■■

Nicholas didn't bring up what had happened the next morning, which relieved Jay. She felt terribly embarrassed about drunkenly begging him for sex, and even though she couldn't remember the exact exchange of words between them, she recalled the blind wanting, and how cold his rejection of her had felt after feeling the weight of his large hand around her throat.

God, the way he'd been touching himself afterwards—

But Jay pushed those thoughts away, the way she did everything else. Just push it back, push it under. Let the past stay buried and gone. That had been her motto.

Until the past had come back to haunt her personally.

Seeing Nicholas wandering around her apartment was so odd. Whether he was parked on the loveseat with his laptop in one of his old T-shirts or hauling her things out to the curb, muscles straining, the domesticity of it all made her feel shy with him. She tried not to look too long or too hard—a

hang-up that wasn't shared by her neighbors. One little old lady circled the block three times with her exhausted little spaniel, just to watch a shirtless Nicholas stacking boxes.

Jay walked out to her enclosed balcony and looked down at the U-Haul, seeing herself twenty years ago, tossing out all the things her mother had branded as "too low-class" for their new lives.

(You're still your mother's daughter, Justine)

She unlocked her phone, scrolling mindlessly, before sliding it back into the pocket of her hoodie. No new messages from her mother. Strange. It wasn't like her to give up like that.

I guess she doesn't like it when I fight back.

Nicholas set down a stack of folded plastic dining chairs with a clatter that made Jay look back down at the street. The chairs were painted teal and so badly faded that the metal beneath was showing in places. She'd gotten them for company and then never used them. In this neighborhood, they'd be gone by the end of the day.

He'd taken his shirt off and now his back was glistening with sweat. As she watched, he pushed his hair out of his eyes with the back of his wrist. And of course, there was that little old lady, clutching her poor dog's leash like her life depended on it, staring at him like he was a god.

Nicholas noticed the old woman and waved—*mean*, thought Jay, recognizing the mockery in the gesture—and then he looked up and caught her eye. He lowered his arm, and stood with his hands at his hips, letting her look. Jay's legs twitched and she gripped the rail more tightly.

"I'm coming up, blue jay," he called out. "Let me in."

Jay was pretty sure she didn't imagine how the other woman's shoulders sank dejectedly.

Shaking her head, she went to the fridge and took out one of the bottles of green juice he'd gotten for her at the store, before going down the stairs and meeting him at the door. She could smell the sweat on his skin, dewy and animal, like wet hay. He wiped his palms on his shorts, blinking sweat from his eyes, radiating heat. "Is that for me?"

"You looked hot."

He laughed involuntarily as they walked into her room, his chest

hitching with the movement. The bands of muscle along his sides rippled.
“You think I look hot?”

“That wasn’t what I meant.”

“Are you blushing? That’s so cute.” He unscrewed the cap and took a deep swig before making a face. She wasn’t expecting the wrinkled nose, or the sheepish grin, which somehow made him even more attractive. “And that’s the bitterest fucking thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“Sorry. That’s the kale and spirulina. It’s all that’s cold.”

“Don’t apologize.” He took another bracing sip, not quite able to hide his distaste. “Are you ready to move out tomorrow?”

“I think so.” She leaned back against the chipped Formica counter, wondering if her landlord would spring to replace it now that she was leaving. “I thought it would be harder to leave, but I’m starting to realize that there was nothing keeping me here but memories of things that don’t really exist anymore.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” He gave her arm a teasing little flick. “I like having you all to myself.”

“Thanks, Nick.” She pretended to study the box on the counter marked KITCHEN, trying to force out the thought that she was essentially packing herself up like a possession, too. “What do your clients think about you being AFK like this?”

“They have my number if they really need to reach me.” He handed the bottle to her. “Don’t worry about that.”

She turned the bottle over in her hands. “I’m worried about your job. I mean, you only *just* got through sensitivity training. You really don’t want to upset your investors.”

“Fuck the investors. And fuck sensitivity training.” Nicholas picked up his shirt from where he’d discarded it on the counter and dabbed his face with it. “I want you to be happy.”

Happy, she thought. But on whose terms? His? Would he throw his career away for that?

And would she be expected to throw her freedom away in return?

“I know that look.” Nicholas dropped his now-sweaty shirt back on the counter, which nearly made her protest until she realized that they wouldn’t

be her counters for much longer. “As soon as we get back to Hollybrook, you’re going to expect us to keep up the façade that I don’t want you, so you can feel better about whatever *this* is.”

He made a gesture, flicking his fingers between them. Jay glared at him, to hide how badly rattled she was that he had perceived her so fully. “That is not what I was thinking.”

“You have no game face, blue jay. I can see right through you—even when you lie.” His voice was nearly seductive, she thought, except for a mocking lilt of cruelty. “You keep accusing me of keeping you around for a quick and dirty fling, but I’m not the one who fucks with my eyes closed.”

Jay felt the counter slam up against her back. Her panic, and his knowing, bitter smile, took her breath away. “Shut up, Nick.”

“Have we moved on to denial already?” He stepped closer, putting his hands where hers had fled. “That was fast. Usually, I have to fuck you first.”

She drew in an angry breath. “You don’t understand—”

“No, Jay. You don’t understand. Every time you ask what people will think, you’re framing our relationship around the fact that we grew up together. And we did. But then I grew up—and I wanted you. I wanted you so badly that I used to think it would drive me fucking crazy. It was like I couldn’t breathe. Have you ever wanted something that much?”

She opened her mouth, but he didn’t give her time to respond.

“If it were up to me, I’d have dragged you to the altar myself. But I waited—for you. And if your plan is to dick me down before sending me on my way like some callow pool boy, you should know that I’m not going to give you up without a fight.”

“I’m not *dicking you down*.” Jay was aghast at his choice of words, at the cruel comparison to her mother and her younger lover. *Although isn’t it the same? She hid him away, too.* She clenched her fists, wishing she could fight the voices, and banish the pain that threatened to subsume her heart every time she looked in his eyes. “You blackmailed me. You took things from me that I will *never* get back.”

“Then why,” Nicholas said slowly, “are you still here?”

“Because I *live* here.”

She knew it was a stupid thing to say, but his laughter still made her angry, and so did the ripple of muscle contracting along his chest and abdomen because also, how fucking dare he look like *that* while she was angry at him, but this time, when she swatted at him, his fingers shackled around her wrist.

“Oh, Jay,” he said, and she hated the way he said her name, the way it curled up around her insides like plumes of fragrant smoke. “You don’t even realize I’ve got you up against the wall.”

“I’m not going to stand here and be lectured by a—by a walking Oedipus complex.”

He stepped closer, and the sinuous lines of his body blurred before her wavering vision as she felt the heat coming off his skin, and the clean smell of his sweat filled her nose.

“Do you really mean to tell me that you’d leap into my arms if I were a stranger at a bar? Somehow I doubt that. You like making people work for it. That’s why you never fucked any of your high school boyfriends. They didn’t have the stamina to jump through all your hoops.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“From the moment that you jumped up my ass about that cat in the tree, I knew you would be a breath of fresh air from all of the surface-level bullshit artists surrounding me. You were so authentic, so *you*. And so beautiful—my fucking god, I used to have these dreams—” He let out a harsh breath, which was when she realized that she had been holding hers. “I wish you had been my first. I wanted you to be.”

“Yes, well, your father took care of that, didn’t he?” The words came out before she could think better of it.

“Yeah, he did.” Nicholas reached around her to pick up his shirt, and she felt a wash of guilt when he glanced at her with regret rather than anger. “That was too bad. I would have waited for you. You could have shown me how to touch you.” A catch entered his voice. “I would have enjoyed that.”

Maybe she was more like her mother than she’d thought.

Jay side-stepped him, needing Nick-free air. The awful things he was saying were not nearly awful enough, and she was having trouble remembering why he could not be hers.

“You didn’t wait. You took.”

“I know.” He knotted the fabric of his shirt in his hands. “But I *am* waiting now.”

Jay stared at the peeling juice label. Her restless hands had nearly pried it free. She wanted to protest, to find the words that would make him realize that this was wrong, but while Nicholas’s father had never taken him anywhere near a church, it seemed he’d found another way to practice his zealotry on his knees. And god, if he had been patient, if he had come at her like *this*, he might have been able to wear her reservations like a tide lapping away at stubborn granite.

“Think about that,” Nicholas said, with a knowing tilt of his head. “Deep down, you’re still that ruthless little Amazon looking for the one fight worth winning.”

Goddamn you, thought Jay, as he turned away.

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Chapter Ten

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Usually, someone was chasing through the house—a man who wanted to hurt her, his face drenched in shadow, the familiar hallways warped like funhouse mirrors—but this time, she was trapped in the pool. There was some kind of party going on, like one of those Golden Age Hollywood bacchanals, and although people kept walking by, none of them could hear her screaming. None of them could see that the water was already frozen, and that beneath that score of big band jazz, her screams were fading as she drowned.

I'm all alone, she thought. I'm going to die down here.

And then someone grabbed her arm—

“Jay.”

She woke up with a choking gasp, tears running down her face. When she realized that heavy hand she remembered had been pulled with her from her dreams, she jolted forward in the dark, a shrill cry escaping her lips. “No.”

“It's time to get up.” The owner of the hand leaned forward, more shadow than man in the dark. But she recognized that silhouette and her body relaxed before her heart did.

“Oh,” she said. “N-Nick. It's just you.”

She saw his head tilt, as if he were taking in her expression and posture. “Did I scare you?”

“N-no. Just a bad dream.” She fell back against the mattress. “I'm going back to sleep.”

Nicholas yanked the covers off, making her yelp. And then she abashedly clapped her hand over her mouth, belatedly remembering the neighbors.

Like they don't recognize the sound of your screams by now.

“Get up,” Nicholas said, and she was grateful that it was too dark for him to see her blush. “Or no coffee.”

“What coffee? I packed the machine.”

“Coffee that I went out and bought for you.” He waved a cup beneath

her nose that smelled utterly intoxicating. Where had he gotten that? It wasn't gas station swill and Jay didn't know if any places in this area that were open before—God, what time was it? She reached for the cup and he pulled his arm back. "Get dressed and you can have it."

Jay grumbled but slid her legs out of bed, letting out an involuntary expletive when Nicholas snapped the light on. He quickly retreated out of swatting distance, leaning back against the wall with her drink in hand as she reached for her skirt. *He* was already fully dressed, she couldn't help noticing, and irritatingly awake.

"Do you mind?" she asked irritably.

His smile widened. "Not at all."

"Dick."

She turned her back on him to change into the business casual outfit she had laid out the night before—when she had been so furious with his head-fucking that she'd burned off her rage by finishing off what remained of the packing.

Ah yes, *now* she remembered why she was so annoyed with Nicholas. Mr. That's-Why-You-Never-Fucked-Any-of-Your-High-School-Boyfriends was a fine one to talk, when he'd never dated anyone long enough to even know her middle name.

Anger made her fingers clumsy, and though she refused to look at him, she sensed that Nicholas was very amused as he watched her struggle to hook her own bra.

Finally managing the last hook, she began buttoning up her blouse as quickly as she could without looking like she was trying to rush, making sure her skirt was zipped before folding her pajamas into her large purse. She braced herself before turning around.

"Coffee." She put out her hand. "Now."

Nicholas handed her the cup, and then gave her ass a smack that had her whipping around to glare at him as he grabbed a second drink from the kitchen counter. "Does anyone else know what a grumpy little bird you are in the morning, or is that something you save for me?"

"It's still dark out, you monster."

"So it's only Daddy you won't play nice with."

“Fuck you, Nicholas.”

“If we didn’t have a plane to catch,” he said, “I would.”

Jay set her teeth. The U-Haul driver Nicholas had hired had left with her things very early in the morning, and he had booked a red-eye flight back to LA. Red-eyes were cheaper but money, of course, was no object to him. He just wanted to get her back to Hollybrook, and his bed, as soon as possible. The energy surrounding him was so palpable that she could feel it against her skin.

He’s planning something, she thought. And I’m pretty sure I’m not going to like it.

She hitched her purse up higher on her shoulder and grabbed her carry-on. Carbon had already been loaded into his carrier, she noticed, and was now caterwauling in the hall. Mildly impressed that Nicholas had managed to coax him out of wherever he’d been hiding, Jay looked around her empty apartment and tried to dredge up some sort of emotion. This place had been her refuge for years; surely, she thought, staring at the blank walls and scuffed floors, she should feel *something*.

“Taxi’s waiting,” Nicholas said, breaking into her thoughts.

“Well, let’s not keep him then,” Jay said tautly.

“Considering what I tipped him, we probably could fuck for a good solid hour and go out for breakfast afterwards, and he’d still be here waiting.”

“Oh my god.” Jay took a mutinous sip of coffee and headed for the door. Then she thought better of turning her back on him and reached behind her, catching his wrist before he could spank her again. “Smack my ass one more time,” she said threateningly, “and I’m breaking this off.”

Nicholas chuckled and twisted out of her grip. This close to him, she could read the writing on his cup, which appeared to be a quad-shot latte with at least six pumps of sugar. Just reading the label made her feel like she had high blood pressure. When she looked up at him, his eyes were alight with wicked mischief. “Next time, I’m booking a later flight.”

She didn’t fully get that until they were on the stairs, and then she missed a step.

The driver only seemed a little grouchy as he loaded their things into

the back and it was a quick drive to the airport. The sun hadn't even breached the horizon yet and the sky was a deep midnight blue. Jay watched the skyscrapers tumble past while Carbon napped at her feet in his carrier, marveling at how those big glass windows reflected the stars so clearly.

Nicholas scrolled through his phone, reclining against the seat with his legs spread. His thigh was resting against hers. Every time they hit a pothole, the feel of his wool trousers rubbing against her bare calf sent a troubling current pulsing through her legs. One of his arms was draped over the back of the seat, and she was aware of his hand, resting mere inches about her left shoulder. Toying with her hair. Making her skin feel too tight beneath her clothes.

"Do you do this often?" she asked desperately.

He lowered his phone, circling it to indicate the car. "What, this? Travel? No, not as often as I used to. Why?"

"I had no idea you were such a morning person."

"It was all those morning swim meets in high school and college. I got used to being an early riser, burning off all that extra energy before dawn in cold, *cold* water. It turned out to be the perfect boot camp for international travel." He flicked her shoulder and goosebumps rippled down her arm. "Two years ago, I went to Asia and stayed at the fanciest hotel in Singapore. It had everything—laundry service, five-star restaurants, an infinity pool that looked out over the whole city. But the whole time I was there—I was wishing that you were with me. Especially at night, on those ridiculous silk sheets."

"Nicholas." A harsh breath escaped her. "God. The driver."

"Don't be such a prude, Jay. I'm sure people fuck in this backseat all the time."

"Some of the drunk ones try," the driver said, making Jay jump. "If see 'em, I kick them out."

"That's the lesson." Nicholas slid his hand up her thigh. "Don't get caught."

Jay took his hand and flung it back at him. *I'm still mad at you, she reminded herself. Stop it.*

“I should take you there,” he mused, looking at her thoughtfully.

They pulled up at the drop-off point and Jay looked away from Nicholas’s smirk, cheeks flaming. She gauged the traffic instead. There was plenty of movement but it was far from busy. Nobody was honking or jockeying for space. Although at this ungodly hour, who had the energy for a fight? Jay luggered her carry-on onto the curb and heard Carbon let out an angry yowl.

“Speaking of not getting caught,” Nicholas said, stepping onto the curb with the cat carrier, “one of our VPs left unexpectedly, so that role should be opening up soon. And when it does, I think you should apply for it.”

“At your company?”

“Yes, Jay,” he said, with a little laugh. “My company.”

“I don’t know,” she said dubiously. “I’m not sure I have the experience.”

“I happen to know that Arthur thinks you would be perfect for the position, too.”

“Really? He does?”

She must not have been fucking up as badly as she’d thought, if Arthur was talking her up like that to Nicholas—although how had the subject of her future with the company come up? After the dinner invitation? Before it? She glowed at the approval, but wasn’t sure about how to feel about Nicholas’s involvement.

She tightened her grip on her suitcase. *With his penchant for overstepping, probably alarmed.* “How would that work? Most people want decades of experience.”

“We promote based on merit, not tenure. Otherwise, people think they deserve a raise just for showing up.” A harsh edge snaked into his voice.

“Wouldn’t I be working directly under you then?”

Nicholas paused, and Jay cringed inwardly, her eyes instinctively scanning to see who was going to be around to hear the filthy joke he was undoubtedly about to make at her expense. But he just slung his backpack down on the counter and began to undo his belt and then his brogues. “Technically, no. You’d be working *under* Arthur—” God, thought Jay “—but you would also continue to report to me. Because everyone eventually

reports to me.”

Jay dropped her necklace in one of the bins with her shoes and purse. “That sounds like the sort of job where one of the implied prerequisites is ‘don’t sleep with the CEO.’”

“Secretaries also aren’t supposed to fuck their bosses,” Nicholas pointed out. “If you’re going to be fucking me either way, why not take the pay raise and fuck me as a vice-president? RSUs, equity, a six-figure base salary—Jay, I thought you were a feminist.”

“That is *not* feminism. That is like some sort of morally bankrupt welfare capitalism.”

Nicholas chuckled. “I suppose that’s one explanation for sticky wage theory.”

“Oh my god, Nicholas,” said Jay, and he laughed hard enough that several people looked over.

“But seriously, Jay, the role *is* perfect for you. Give it some thought, at least. Arthur will be reaching out shortly, but I thought you’d appreciate a warning. You always did like to overprepare.”

One of the TSA agents beckoned him over impatiently and Nicholas walked in that direction unhurriedly, tossing over his shoulder, “Just between you and me—you’d probably get it.”

Would I? She thought about that as she toed off her shoes so they could dust for explosives or whatever it was that they looked for in shoes. She took pride in the quality of her work but it was true that people often dismissed her role out of hand—like Annica said, *Nobody wants to be a secretary forever, right?* There were too many Harlequins and old pornos about secretaries who had fallen by the wayside. She distinctly remembered a fashion spread that she had seen in one of her mother’s magazines back in the 2000s, advertising office clothes by showing a woman seducing her boss in varying states of undress.

It would be nice to have a job where people actually took her seriously. Even if they *should* be doing that now, in her current role, she had accepted it as an inevitability a long time ago, and she was tired of defending the necessity of what she did to people who couldn’t even begin to understand the skills required for her job and didn’t even want to.

God help her, she was tempted.

They got through the rest of security without a hitch and boarding was the fastest she'd ever experienced. There were so many empty seats. When the flight attendant walked them to the front and asked them if they wanted to have anything to drink, Jay shook her head.

"Champagne for me." Nicholas swung himself grandly into his seat.

With the second course of his liquid breakfast brought to hand, Nicholas pulled out his laptop and immediately began fighting with people over email.

Jay shook her head and leaned back in her seat. The frenzied typing, peppered with the occasional editorial grunt, was oddly soothing. It was nice not to be alone. Undemanding companionship—that's what they had when they were young, occupying the same shared space like two small doomed planets revolving around a pair of unpredictable suns. Molten fire and icy darkness. It made her think of that documentary that they had watched together before everything had grown so muddled.

Back when she had been his prisoner, and none of this had been her choice.

But I don't feel like his prisoner anymore.

Very distantly, she was aware of Nicholas declining the offer of an in-flight breakfast. "Can I get a blanket?" he asked, and Jay thought, *Mm, a blanket sounds nice.*

When she felt something soft drape over her bare legs, she thought she was dreaming.

She cracked open her eye and saw Nicholas adjusting the blanket over her lap. He had the softest expression she'd ever seen on his face, so vulnerable and open that it just about broke her heart. She didn't dare move, the weight of his eyes like a physical stroke. When he reached up to smooth the hair back tenderly from her face, she nearly jumped.

(I'm not the one who fucks with my eyes closed)

His fingers stroked down her cheek, lingering like he couldn't bear to stop. *Oh, Nick.* She struggled to remain still, unwilling to betray herself and end this prematurely and wondering if he could feel her fluttering pulse. *Please don't.*

Feigned sleep must have turned into real sleep because when she opened her eyes again, Nicholas was shaking her and his touch wasn't gentle at all.

After another parade through security and a much shorter wait for their taxi, followed by a much longer drive, Jay was back to where she had started: at his big house with the ridiculous colonnades that still made her heart skip when she saw it rising up on the hill like a mirage because it looked so much like a cage. The sun was rising, filtering through the leaves of the mulberry tree she had once climbed as a child, and the fragrant smell of jasmine and roses drifted on the morning breeze like a balm. *What a pretty cage it is, she thought. And what a seductive jailer.*

There was just enough time to shower and change. The Chihuly sculpture swayed menacingly overhead from the current they'd let in, making her remember the night that Nicholas had taken her beneath it on the stairs like some sort of satyr the night he proposed, and how it had turned the moonlight on their bodies a ghostly blue.

She would never be free of him.

And she wasn't sure she wanted to be.

Unable to do her hair the way she wanted, Jay worked mousse into her curls and scrunched them up with a t-shirt between blow-drying after her shower. It felt very high school, back when everyone had wanted those loose waves that looked wet. Her mother thought it was wasted effort. "Why don't you just flat-iron your hair?" she said, and so for several years, Jay had.

Jay thought her blouse was looking a little rumpled, so she changed into a black blouse with translucent sleeves, and a sweetheart neckline that melted into more that same sheer tulle that fluted around her neck like a ruff. When she got to the door, she saw Nicholas had changed, too, with his shirt left open to reveal a hint of his collarbones.

He didn't talk much as they drove to the office, turning on his music instead. More fuck-boy rock. She watched his steady hands on the wheel. Did he dream about the past, too?

"I missed you," he said, when they pulled up in the parking lot and he had cut the music. "The house didn't feel right while you were gone."

She looked at him.

“I meant what I said before, too.” His eyes flicked from hers. “On the phone.”

It took her a moment to remember, and then she did, and it felt like going into freefall.

Jay pulled him back when he reached for the door and kissed him. He groped her through her blouse while they gasped and panted like teenagers and she let him tug and pull at fabric, until the ache building between her thighs was almost as desperate as their kissing.

“That’s enough.” Nicholas sounded breathless as he pulled her hand off his chest. A slight hint of mockery entered his voice. “Someone might see.”

“Oh god.”

“Go.” He popped the locks. “I need a moment.”

She glanced up at the second floor as she got out of the car, smoothing back a lock of hair. The parking lot was empty, but she hadn’t known that in the car.

What are you doing, kissing him like that?

The breeze felt like ice on her too-hot face.

Arthur and Annica were chatting in the kitchen when she came in. They went quiet when they saw her, which she told herself was fine.

“Jay!” Arthur said. “Welcome back.”

“Welcome back,” Annica echoed. Jay hazarded a look at her face: it did not look very welcoming.

“It’s good to be back. I don’t think I could stomach another red-eye.”

Arthur looked aghast. “Don’t tell me you flew in this morning.”

“It was—” *Nick’s idea*, she almost said. “No big deal,” she finished awkwardly. “There was more to do in San Francisco than I thought. I needed the extra time. It’ll be fine.”

“If you’re sure,” Arthur said, not looking convinced.

“I was actually just about to get a second coffee, if you’d like one.”

Annica shook her head, even though Jay hadn’t exactly been offering to her, but Arthur’s eyes lit up. “I think I’ll take you up on that. A flat white would be great, as well as whatever you’re getting for yourself.”

"No, it's okay," Jay said, rejecting his proffered card. "My treat."

"Assistants treating their bosses," Arthur said. "What is the world coming to?"

Annica looked as if she thought it were coming to a very bad place, indeed.

Jay looked up at Nicholas's office and wondered if anyone had ever treated him. He seemed to think that everyone wanted him for everything *but* who he was. It would explain why he had so much antipathy for intimacy, and why he was constantly trying to court her affection with gifts.

His head turned her way and Jay whirled around, conscious of the many office cubicles all facing her way. "I'll just go get those coffees then," she said, too-brightly, as Arthur came out of the kitchen and headed towards the stairs that took him to his corner office.

He gave her a little puzzled wave.

Bravo, Jay. Very smooth.

It was a nice day, so Jay decided to go a little further than her usual Starbucks stop, heading to a little indie place with a curated photo wall and gently-used thrifted armchairs. The menu was handwritten in chalk, very fancy, though she had to squint to read the cursive.

"What's the sweetest drink you have?" she asked the barista, who pursed her lips.

"The sweetest? Probably the white mocha frappe. I've been told it tastes a lot like white chocolate candy."

"Do you have sprinkles you could put on it?"

"We use them for the donuts, but sure, I can put some on the whip and charge it like a topping, if that's okay with you?"

"That would be great!" said Jay. "I'll have that and a flat white and an oat milk latte. Make the white mocha and the oat milk decaf, please," she added, remembering Nick's quad shot from that morning.

The man behind her stepped up in line, forcing Jay to squeeze out of the way and off to the side with a little hop before he could press up against her. Ugh. She felt a flicker of impatience and unease, which she quickly suppressed, knowing that if either showed up on her face it would be worse. She studied the sparse remnants in the pastry case instead, keeping an ear

out for her order.

She heard the man pay, noting that he didn't say thanks. *Jerk*, she thought, her frown deepening when he approached to join her at the case. There was something familiar about the way he held himself. She stiffened and pulled out her phone.

There were no good reasons that she would remember a man of her stepfather's age.

"Are you a fan of sweets?" he asked, looking at her boldly.

"No, not really. My boss is."

"Oh? Where do you work?"

Little alarm bells went off in her head. She'd heard this line of questioning too many times before when listening to how men talked to her mother.

"Not that far," she said evasively. "I'm just doing a coffee run."

Tweed Creep smiled. "My wife doesn't drink the stuff. Doesn't see the need to get a coffee machine, either. I have to sneak out of the house to get my fix."

Jay smiled tightly, doubting if there even was a wife. She hadn't missed the once-over he'd given her in the reflection of the glass case when he thought she couldn't see, or the casual way he'd fished for her place of work.

"Enjoy." She kept her tone brisk. Not friendly but not annoyed, either. Men seemed to take both of those things as invitation. In the corner of her eye, she could see her order being placed in one of those drinks carriers and hurried over, waving her receipt before they could call out the name that was on her credit card. "That's mine! Thank you."

She slid a tip into their jar as she hurried out, clutching the carrier to her chest. The man wasn't following—yes, she'd checked—but her heart was still going a mile a minute, the way it did whenever she thought of Damon.

Maybe you've forgotten how to talk to people, that voice that sounded like her mother said. *All you do is hang around with Nicholas, and he's not exactly Mr. Social.*

And that was true. But after spending seventeen years traumatized by

her stepfather's attempted grooming, Jay had learned to trust her gut whenever her gut said "run."

She sagged into the office, giving a tired nod to the receptionist as she flashed her lanyard. "Thanks, Jay," Arthur said, when she handed him his coffee. "You're an angel."

(pure little angel)

Setting her shoulders, she walked down the hall to Nick's door. It was open for once, but everyone was giving it—and him—a wide berth.

He looked up when her shadow fell over his desk, and that stern glare melted into a slight half-smile when he saw that it was her. Turning sideways in his chair, he propped one arm up on the desk to lean on his chin.

"And what can I do for you, Ms. Varens?"

She found herself looking at his fingers drumming on the armrest for a beat too long. "I brought you a coffee," she said stiffly. "It's half-chocolate, all sugar. You'll love it."

Nicholas blinked.

Nudging aside his empty mug, she placed the cup on his desk. Some of the whipped cream had melted on the walk over and the sprinkles had made it a runny rainbow mess, but he looked at it with the same bewildered expression he'd given her when she had brought him the cupcake from Just Avocados.

"Thank you, Jay."

That was when it clicked—the man, the one from the coffee shop. Tweed Creep. He'd been the photographer at the farmer's market—the one she'd seen while buying the cake.

She hadn't recognized him without the bulky camera around his neck. Maybe his interest in her hadn't been prurient, after all.

Nicholas cleared his throat. His eyebrows were raised. "Was there something else?"

"Yeah." Jay bent towards his neck, and he sucked in an anticipatory breath that made the seams of his suit audibly strain around his shoulders. "Wash your disgusting mug before it gets mold in it," she whispered in his ear, before taking a quick step back. "Enjoy the coffee."

She walked back to her desk with a swing in her step, feeling his eyes hot on her back. Annica stared at her with obvious judgement and Jay, uncharitably, found herself thinking, *Oh, go cry to your sad little group chat.*

Her phone buzzed. She glanced up at the mezzanine where Nicholas was leisurely sipping his coffee in a way that looked downright indecent.

It tastes almost as sweet as you will later.

.....

For the fourth time in her life, Jay found herself moving things into her old childhood bedroom. It was surreal, shoving aside bubble hem dresses and skinny belts to make room for her adult clothes as she sidestepped her agitated cat. He raced around the room, alternating between sniffing at the boxes she was unpacking and yowling his unhappiness.

Jay felt sorry for him. Change upset her, too.

Perhaps it would have been smarter to insist upon her own apartment, but her heart wasn't in it. It would feel too much like him setting her up as his mistress, and she knew he would fight her on rent, which would defeat the whole purpose of having her own place.

Nicholas may have freed her from her imprisonment, but now, in the absence of those barred walls, she felt as if she'd lost all the hard edges that had defined their relationship in this place.

And then there was his confession: he *loved* her, and wanted to marry her. If she left again, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she would be taking his broken heart with her. She didn't want to hurt him but staying here was a tacit promise of the very sort of possession that he had initially tried to obtain by force, and she wasn't sure how to navigate *that*, either.

It didn't help that part of her *wanted* to be here. The cruel boy who had used to fling her own confused desires back into her face like a knife-thrower at a carnival had become a man who could charm her into holding those selfsame blades at her own throat.

Things were different now, and he seemed to sense that, too. He hadn't even come to her room and she had been listening for him, braced for the familiar tread of his footsteps outside her door.

It won't last, she told herself. He's not patient, he's never had to wait.

But he didn't come to her, and when she dragged herself down the stairs, poorly rested and haunted by the nightmares of a not-too-distant past, she felt hunted by the way his eyes tracked her through the kitchen, and how they lingered on the engagement ring she still wore at her throat.

She owed him an answer and could feel the unspoken deadline drawing nearer and nearer. For the first time in her life, she had control, and the thought of giving it up was terrifying.

Work was her only normal. From the moment she stepped out of his car, to the moment she walked over the threshold of his mansion, she was simply Justine Varens, administrative assistant. Not her stepbrother's mistress. Not a stripper's daughter. Not a member of the deposed elite, shaded and scorned by her betters. She was Jay. *Just Jay.*

And she was good at being Jay.

She just had to figure out the rest of it.

A calendar invite popped up on her computer screen with a cheerful chime. Jay looked away from the bullet points she was putting together for one of Arthur's upcoming presentations to the Finance team. A meeting? Quarterly evaluations weren't until next month and they only met every other week or so to discuss tasks and projects too detailed to fit into an email.

Hey, did we have a 1:1 that I forgot about?

No, Arthur responded. Are you available for a quick chat?

There were few words in the English language as terrifyingly euphemistic as "a quick chat."

A cold feeling washed through her as she mentally sped through her performance over the last month and all the ways she could have failed.

Okay, sure, I'll be right there.

She was being fired, clearly. They knew about her and Nick and this was the final straw. And it wouldn't be sensitivity training for *her*, no. She wasn't important enough to rehabilitate. They would just replace her with another assistant and she would be back to where she was before, living off of Nicholas's charity and having to see the awful triumph of having her at his mercy in his eyes.

Arthur was waiting for her in one of the conference rooms on the second floor. She had to walk past Nicholas's desk to get to it and was aware of his head turning to follow her shaky progress. In a company this small, word spread like wildfire. God, that fucking woman in Acquisitions had noticed that Nicholas waited for her inside his own parked car.

With a trembling hand, she closed the door behind her until it latched with a little click. *This is the end, Jay. The privacy is just a formality in case you cry when you're fired for being a whore.*

"So," Arthur said, in a voice that did not contain nearly enough disgust for how shameful she felt sitting in front of him. "Nicholas tells me that you're very interested in the VP role that just opened up, which I have to admit was a bit of a surprise."

Jay gaped at him, trying to understand. *I'm not being fired* collided full-force with *Nicholas told you WHAT?* It felt like her brain had just short-circuited and was shooting off sparks.

"Why don't you tell me a little bit about what prompted your interest in the role," Arthur suggested, when she continued to stare at him stupidly. "This isn't a formal interview, of course, but I'm curious what made you want to apply, and also how you envision your future at this company. You've been here for a while and we haven't yet discussed the prospect of growth."

Arthur thinks you would be perfect for the position, Nicholas had said. Apparently that meant, *I think you're perfect for it, and I always get what I want so I'm going to meddle in your life.*

Her fingers dug into the armrests as she forced herself to smile and nod.

I'm going to kill him, she thought.

Not now, though. Later, at home. In private. She might have wanted to wrap her hands around his big stupid neck and squeeze, but she didn't want to get him fired. Between the near miss of the lawsuit and his total disdain for workplace harassment, something like this could well be the breaking point.

"I like it here," Jay said, though this didn't feel very true at the moment. Her mouth was dry from fear and she could hear her heart pounding in her ears like a timpani drum. "And it seemed like it would

mesh with my current skillset. I have experience in overseeing projects and delegating assignments. And I work well with people—even if they’re difficult to work with.”

Even if I’m going to kill them later.

She glanced at Arthur’s face. It gave away nothing.

“I, um, also enjoy a challenge?”

“Directing is quite different from providing administrative support,” Arthur said.

Hearing her own doubts spoken out loud by someone else, no matter how gently, was devastating. Why had Nicholas done this to her? It was just another way she was going to fail.

“I know I don’t have a lot of experience but sometimes that can be a good thing,” she said, a little desperately. “When there’s no expectations, there’s no bad habits to break. You can just grow naturally into the role and pick up all the new skills like it was made for you.”

“I suppose that’s true.” He considered her, not unkindly. “Assuming one can step up to the task.”

And I’m not. Her shoulders sank despairingly. She was reading that loud and clear.

They discussed the role a little more. It was a very polite rejection. He kept emphasizing the word “expectations,” as if to drill in the fact that she wouldn’t be able to fulfill them, while Jay nodded and smiled and longed for nothing more than to flee from the room.

By the time the “quick chat” petered out into actual small talk, she was exhausted. Arthur asked her questions about San Francisco, and though she answered, she couldn’t remember anything she actually said. She thought she might have heard herself telling him about crying at the apple picture, which would have been even more humiliating, but at that point it was hard to be sure what she was saying because her brain had shut off from panic overload.

“I’ll reach out with next steps, Jay,” he said, concluding both the meeting and her silent torture. “But I really do appreciate you raising your hand for this role. I always tell people that you have to be your own advocate. Nobody else will make that push for you.”

I know one person who would. Right off a cliff.

She looked hard at Nicholas as she stumbled out of the room. He was on the phone but making no attempt to pretend like he wasn't watching. If he even *was* on the phone—she knew that he faked his own phone calls when he didn't want to be bothered. Evil, meddling *bastard*.

What the fuck? she mouthed at him, and he gave an insolent shrug, pointing to the receiver in a way that made her absolutely certain that he was not taking an actual call.

Even Annica looked over as she walked back to her desk, unlocking her computer one-handed and typing in her password, while scrambling for her phone.

Too busy to answer me, huh? But not too busy to mess around with my employment. How DARE you go over my head like that to Arthur. I don't need you to micromanage my career. Not when the one you SHOULD be worrying about is your OWN.

She opened the list of bullet points and began line editing furiously.

Her phone lit up.

You said you didn't want to be a kept woman.

I fail to see what that has to do with this situation.

Nicholas hung up his phone, putting an end to the charade.

If you're a VP, you'll be an executive.

Jay stared at her phone incredulously. *And you think handing me the job like I'm one of those nepo babies is the solution? People are still going to think I fucked you for it.*

I'm not handing it to you. You have to earn it.

Unbelievable. She shook with anger, and a deep, deep sense of disappointment. *I can't believe you.*

Why is it unbelievable? You went to one of the best colleges in the country. The only reason you didn't get snapped up after college like everyone else was because you allowed my father to make you think you were nothing without his name. I could put you in any position at this company and you would be too stubborn to fail, because that's the kind of woman you are.

Jay stared at her phone.

In his twisted mind, he wasn't meddling. He was removing barriers from her life to clear the road to—what, exactly?

Himself?

She could feel her anger rapidly draining away, even as she struggled to hold onto it. He really thought he was doing her a favor.

I'm a grown woman, she wrote. I don't need you to manage me.

She glanced up at his office, but he didn't respond.

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Not all transactions were quick and painless. How many times had he been absolutely certain that the deal was closed, only for the other party to get cold feet? Or worse: greedy. There were always more demands to be made, more money, more time, more *everything*, and he had gotten very good at saying “yes, and?” or “no, but.”

Regardless of what Jay thought, the interview with Arthur would work to her advantage. If his own conniving secretary could harbor such ambitions, why not Jay?

Her anger had lost its edge already. They had driven home in cold silence but she had grumbly accepted his apology before disappearing into her room and closing the door—a dare, he thought, amused. He invited her to go out wine-tasting with him instead. The museum and dinner date had been a success, and he had enjoyed himself. She had, too. He could tell.

And that was good. He wanted Jay to enjoy spending time with him; he wanted her to *need* it.

When she had drunkenly begged him to fuck her after that date—to hurt her and make it feel good, god, did she have any idea what she *did* to him?—it had been hard to refuse. But he had, because he understood now what he hadn't when he was young: that Jay was so married to her morals that she would destroy her own happiness as long as she got to believe she was good.

She would fuck him, and be his slutty girl for the night, and then she would accuse him of wanting her for her body and things would devolve into the same tired argument that they'd had so many times before because,

yes, of course he fucking did, but he also wanted *her*.

And Jay did not think she was good enough to be wanted.

Birds chirped in the trees overhead and a breeze rifled through his hair. The picturesque vineyards and rustling cypresses formed a pastoral background that could have belonged in a children's book, which was ironic, because his thoughts right now absolutely could not.

Jay was on the fourth wine in her tasting and he was watching her get increasingly flustered and silly and hoping she wouldn't notice that the sleeve of her sweater had slipped down to bare her shoulder and the very low-cut neckline of her top.

"I forgot what I'm supposed to be drinking right now," she said, "but it tastes like cherries."

"It's a rioja." He took a sip from his own wineglass. "They all taste like cherries."

"Not the one before," she protested, a flush in her pretty cheeks. "That tasted like pears."

She tilted her head back to watch the birds in the branches. One of them, drawn to their charcuterie board, got bold and fluttered right down on the table. He started to shoo it away, but Jay grabbed his bicep with a look of pure delight.

She just fucking lights up, doesn't she?

"Oh my god," she said. "Look how cute. It's right *there*."

"Yeah," he agreed, focused entirely on the press of her fingers through his sleeve and the soft weight of her breasts through that lacy camisole. It looked like the one she'd been wearing beneath her sweater in San Francisco. *When I made her cry.* Guilt flared through him, hot and stinging. "So it is."

"I think it's a pygmy nuthatch," she said. "I used to see them at the school. I missed them."

"Give it a nut or something."

"Okay!" She leaned over him to grab one of the seed-studded crackers and crumbled it, giving him a look down her top that had him taking a deep drink of wine while she flicked a few morsels the bird. It hopped back and eyed them both with a head tilt before plucking up a piece with an editorial

chirp and flying back into the trees. “Off she goes.”

“You need to eat.” He slid the wooden board towards her. “You’ve got the voice.”

“What voice?”

“The one you get when you’re wasted.” *The one you had when you begged me to fuck you.* “And you’re losing your sweater.”

“Shit.” She yanked the sleeves back up her arms in a show of defensive prudery that made him chuckle.

“A little bit of tasteful cleavage isn’t going to get us kicked out, you know.” He slid his arm around her waist and squeezed. “I like it better when you’re not quite so buttoned up. Even when you’re mouthing off to me or talking about birds or cylinders.”

Or driving me insane.

“Mmm.” She let her head fall against his shoulder. Letting go of the sweater, he noticed as he traced his fingers over her soft stomach. “Mom always said I talked too much.”

“I think you talk just the right amount.”

She smiled at him. Then her face clouded. “I don’t think she ever loved me. I think all the things she said to me were just reasons she made up for herself for why she couldn’t.”

He forced his hand to relax as he reached for his wineglass, letting his other hand fall flat over the slight swell of her belly. “Well, she would know.” He kept his voice toneless. “No one was more unlovable than her, except for my father.”

Jay shuddered. “I never understood how you could stay with him. It was like he wanted to snuff out everything that was good in you and make you more like him.”

“I stayed because it was easy,” Nicholas said. “And then, later, I stayed because I liked seeing him slowly realize that I was going to take everything that he had built and destroy it.”

“Including who he wanted you to be,” Jay murmured. He looked at her sharply.

Oblivious, she stared up at the trees. “Michael took me here once. He

kept telling me how pretty I was, and how *perfect* we were—like it was my face and your father’s money that made us work as a couple, and absolutely nothing else. And I hated him a little that day, Nick. I really did. Because the person he kept describing to me, the girl he thought he was in love with—the person he wanted me to be, who was uncomplicated and easy—sounded so vain and shallow.”

“Don’t take it personally. He only sees what his father tells him to see.” Nicholas set his glass down, still disturbed by what she’d said about him and his father. “I know where he works. We could run him over with my car.”

She laughed uneasily. “You’re such a bad person, Nicholas. You shouldn’t joke like that.”

“I’m my own person. Good or bad—it’s all subjective in the end. We’re what we make of ourselves.”

“Uh-huh,” said Jay. “That’s why you run your father’s business from your father’s house.”

“Let’s not talk about our parents.” He poured the remnants of her wine into his glass while she was distracted. “Tell me more about you.”

“Oh, you’re going to be like that?” Jay picked up a date and growled when he tried to take it from her. “Get your own.”

“Those have honey on them, you drunk nerd.”

“Honey’s not so bad. It helps the bees. Agave is bad for the rainforest, anyway.” She began chewing it, looking at him through narrowed eyes. “I forgot how you can be.”

“What?”

“I mean, you were always smart—that was clear in the way you used to lead your little group of friends around. But I didn’t realize you could be like this.” Her face shifted to a soft, sad expression that turned the wine bitter on his tongue. “It makes me want to say yes.”

His heart pounded. “Yes to what?”

“How are you doing over here?” their server interrupted, and he wanted to strangle her. “Are you ready for the next pour?”

Jay frowned and looked for her glass. Nicholas gave a brief shake of his head, letting some of his irritation show.

"Oh, uh, actually, I was wrong," she stammered. "Looks like there are no more pours. But I can give you a small taste of dessert wine."

"I thought there would be more," said Jay.

"Not for you. Tell me more about what you were saying before."

"I don't remember." She wiggled against him, like she hadn't just fucked with his head and heart as casually as one might say the sky was blue. "Did you know that the barnacle has the biggest dick-to-body ratio of any animal on earth?"

Nicholas paused. "No."

"Up to eight times their body length—that would be forty-eight feet in humans. Imagine that."

"I am," Nicholas said, in a warning tone she cheerfully did not heed.

"How many inches is that?"

"About five hundred and sixty-seven more than you'd know what to do with," he growled, and she gave a little yelp as he pulled her onto his lap. "Stop teasing me."

"Here's your wine." Their server blushed and looked away. "I'll, uh, just set these both here on this side then?"

Nicholas wrapped his arm more firmly around Jay's waist. "Perfect."

When the other woman walked away, Nicholas leaned in to Jay's face and kissed her pretty, wine-stained mouth hard enough that she squeaked. "You need to eat something before I take you home and sober you up." He layered a piece of dried fruit over the crackers and pressed it against her lips. When they parted for him, the graze of her teeth against his thumb sent a shiver arcing down his spine, and he found himself watching her mouth with a frozen fascination.

There was no way she couldn't feel what she was doing to him, sitting where she was, but she didn't seem to care. And even though they were far from alone on this vast patio, she seemed content to remain on his lap with his cock nestled against her ass.

His throat grew tight and he knocked back his port, letting its fiery sweetness consume him and hoping it would wash away the images of things he could not do with a drunk Jay.

“Here,” he said, passing her the second, smaller glass.

“Oh my god, that’s so good.”

I know. And I want it all.

When the server came back, he handed her cash for the tasting and the tip, before asking for a bottle of water.

As they walked along the dirt road that led back to his car, Jay had her cold bottle pressed against her throat. Her other hand was in his. “That was nice,” she said guilelessly.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

Trees formed a living tunnel over the path leading back to the crude parking lot. A dirt shoulder separated the tarmac from the property itself, though the owners had allowed it to become overgrown. Her sweater was dangling around her elbows, and the leaves were making patterns on her bare arms as the wind made her curls bob around her face in a way he found enchanting.

Jay’s head whipped towards the shrubs and bracken when a high-pitched whine filled the air, the satisfied, slightly sleepy smile disappearing from her face.

“There’s something in those bushes.”

“Probably a snake or something.” He tugged on her wrist and she lurched unsteadily in his direction. “Let’s get you to the car.”

“It sounds *hurt*.” Before he could stop her, she dropped her water and stumbled for the greenbelt.

Nicholas stared after her incredulously—“fuck”—before giving chase. Drunk Jay was surprisingly agile, and although he was faster than she was, she had a head start. By the time he caught up to her, breathing lightly with exertion, she was already stooping down, offering her hand to god-knows-what. “No,” he barked, making her jump. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“It’s just a baby.” She bent to scoop up what appeared to be a mound of brown and black fluff. “It’s not even running away.”

The fluff uncurled, and he saw a face, two eyes, and a pink tongue. Somebody’s dog, he thought, though it looked too matted to be newly escaped. A *stray dog*, he thought, eyeing the puppy’s grotesquely large paws. *And it’s not going to be a small dog.*

Jay looked at him with a pleading expression that was so similar to the puppy's that he almost laughed, but he'd just had his car detailed and getting a dog was not in his plans.

Jay lifted up a dirty paw and waved it at him.

“Please?”

(it makes me want to say yes)

His *no* died in his throat as he realized he couldn't remember the last time she had directly asked him for something that he would be able to give her.

“Fine,” he said tightly. “Hold onto it. *Both* hands.”

He remembered his father saying, *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.*

But Nicholas had never seen any woman smile at his father the way Jay smiled at him.

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Chapter Eleven

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Nicholas walked her in through the door, one hand planted on her lower back. After settling her on the couch, he disappeared with the dog. “Where are you going to put it?” she asked, kicking off her shoes, and Nicholas answered, a little grimly, “I’ll find somewhere.”

To anyone else, the words would have been alarming, but the dog’s tail had been wagging as the two of them walked away, and she had seen the way he’d looked at her when she’d been holding the puppy. It made her remember a time that felt very long ago now, when she had walked past Damon’s office and heard Nick asking for a dog and his father telling him, no, that pets were a lot of work and wasted time that he would be better off spending elsewhere.

Still a little buzzed, Jay picked up the remote and tapped a few buttons. The landing page was full of nature shows and she landed on a live-feed of a camera somewhere in the deep ocean, with murky green water the color of a raw aquamarine.

She paused, transfixed by the sight of a shark weaving its way above a coral reef.

“This is all the algorithm shows me now, because of you.” Jay jumped, clutching the remote guiltily as Nicholas pushed off from the wall. His sleeves were rolled up and as he got closer, she saw little marks that must have been from the dog’s scrabbling dirty paws. “What’s this one?”

“It’s one of your ancestors. Cold-blooded, predatory, and always on the hunt.”

His eyes narrowed and then his shoulders twitched. She screeched when he vaulted over the back of the couch, causing the whole thing to shake so alarmingly that she felt a flicker of real fear when the springs shrieked beneath them as he tackled her.

“Nooo! Nick!” She half-gasped, half-laughed as she brought her legs to her chest, shoving at him ineffectively with her bare feet. He pinned her wrists down, despite her protests, and started biting at her face and throat. “Stop it! What are you doing?”

“Marking you for later.” A dull ache rocked her to the core as his teeth

grazed the skin beneath her ear before he closed his lips over the base of her throat and sucked hard. Gripping him the way she was, she felt the low rumble of his laugh like a caress. “So I remember to eat you.”

Oh my god. Her hips suddenly felt as if they had been filled with hot lead. Giving her a slow, seductive smile, he tugged her sweater off her shoulders and bit her just above her left breast. Jay jerked with a gasp, her eyes swinging instinctively to the low wall over their heads.

“Is there a bird fish?” he whispered hotly.

“There’s a bird wrasse.” She pushed at him nervously and he growled. “Nick, seriously. I can’t go into the office with marks all over my throat.”

He gave a tug at her top. “Who said anything about your throat?”

“Stop it now.” She grabbed his wrist as she sat up, and he allowed her to push him backwards so that he was leaning against one of the arms, sitting sideways. “Where’s the puppy?”

“I put him in the garage.” His eyes kept flicking over her, like he found it impossible to stop. “I’ll take him to the vet tomorrow. They’ll see me without an appointment.”

Jay shook her head at the arrogant tone. His eyes were softer in this low light, though, and framed by those dark sable lashes, that icy gray almost looked warm enough to melt. “Are you sure he’ll be all right in there?” she asked worriedly. “There’s chemicals—and he might get lonely.”

“There’s no chemicals out there. Just a bunch of old Christmas shit. I’ll bring him into the house after he’s chipped—and washed.”

She put her hand on his chest. “Thank you.”

“Saying no to you wasn’t really an option.” His torso rose and fell beneath her palm. When she moved lower, he sucked in. “You have a history of picking up the strays.”

“Does the cold, ruthless millionaire have a heart, after all?”

“You tell me.” His lips parted as he watched her trace over his abdomen. Still stained faintly with wine, they were all the more tempting for their chiseled cruelty. “You’re the one who told me I didn’t have one.”

“I was wrong.” She leaned closer, bracing herself against his arm as she leaned up towards his mouth. “You weren’t what I thought you were.”

Jay felt the flinch of muscle through the thick waffle-knit and then he pulled away, sliding off the couch completely. She stared up at him, with her hands braced between her legs, confused and a little hurt. His face was unreadable.

“I’m going to make some coffee.”

Jay grabbed the throw blanket off the back and wrapped it around her shoulders. “I thought you didn’t know how to use the machine,” she called out, feeling vulnerable and small in the silence of the empty room. Her eyes darted warily to the wall where that spider sculpture had once sat. It was gone now—sold, she imagined. Or destroyed. “Wasn’t that why I had to make it?”

“I printed out the instructions in French.”

He was holding two full mugs when he came back. They smelled like the honey whiskey he had kissed off her body, and that realization nearly made her drop her cup when the scent hit her nose. “I’m not trying to get you drunk,” he said, a little coolly, watching her reaction.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to. I know that look.” He leaned back against the arm, stretching out his long legs. “The last time we drank out here, you accused me of trying to drug you.”

Jay took a defiant sip of coffee and the warmth spread down her throat like a hot blush. “The things I say and do don’t just occur in a vacuum, you know.”

“I know.” Nicholas set his cup aside and her stomach flipped when he put his arms around her waist and hauled her up against his chest so she was sitting between his raised knees. Reaching down for his mug again, she heard him take a sip. “But I want you to feel safe with me.”

Jay froze.

They had cuddled like this when they were younger, but it had been different then. Innocent. The way her body reacted when he ran his hand down her arm before pressing his mouth to the back of her neck was not innocent. Nor was the way that she clutched her mug in white-knuckled hands, struggling to maintain easy breathing as he slid the straps of her top and bra out of the way to kiss across her bare shoulders.

“I missed this.” The words were so quiet that if it hadn’t been for the rumble of his voice against her back, she could have convinced herself that he hadn’t spoken at all.

She shivered a little. *Me, too*, she thought, swallowing hard. “I was always a little surprised that you never came after me.”

He made a soft sound as he traced small circles over the soft skin beneath her navel. It felt almost as good as it did when he kissed her there while he was on his knees. “Why were you surprised?”

“You were so obsessed with me. I couldn’t believe you’d let me go.”

“Would you have come back?” She felt his hands lace over her stomach, as if even now, he was driven by the urge to claim and possess. “If I had tracked you down and shown up at your door five years ago, six years ago, would you have returned here with me?”

“N-no,” she admitted shakily. “I would have run.”

“That’s why I didn’t.” His fingers dipped beneath her top. “I don’t like to rush and I didn’t want to scare you.”

“No, you just sent a private investigator to take photos of me that you did god-knows-what with.” Jay twisted around to look at him. “What if I had been seeing someone?”

“I would have persuaded him to give you to me instead.”

“And you think that’s rational? You think that’s something ordinary people just *do* to other people because they feel like it? Trade them like fucking stocks?”

“Anyone who would give you up either doesn’t deserve you or can’t afford you, and since supply informs demand—” He flicked his fingers over her bare hip, each touch a sparkling constellation of fire and heat. “It looks like I control the market *and* the supply.”

“I find it insulting that you think I would have just stood around passively and let you do this absolutely insane thing you just said.”

Nicholas laughed. “You just told me that all your exes liked you because they saw you as pretty and uncomplicated, and how much that pissed you off. But that’s not why I like you, Jay. And you’ll never have to fight against your own happiness to prove yourself to me.”

I don’t even remember the last time I was happy, thought Jay. Except

that she could, and it had been today.

With him.

She shoved against that thought so viciously that she physically recoiled. “I didn’t realize I was being publicly traded.”

“You traded ten million for me.” He flicked the snap of her jeans. “Turnabout is fair play.”

Fuck. She squirmed again and this time, his arms tightened, holding her firmly within the cradle of his spread thighs. “You put me on a pedestal,” she said haltingly, feeling much too hot under these too-bright lights. “Maybe you can’t help that. But the way you love me—I’m not perfect. I’m nobody’s angel. And you’ll begrudge me for not being the person you want me to be when public opinion of me drops.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Nick—”

“No, Jay. I’m telling you right now, *it doesn’t work like that.*”

He nudged at her shoulder, making her look back at him, where she was greeted with a kiss so thorough that the alcohol coating her tongue seemed to catch fire. When he lifted his hips, she was forced into an ungainly sprawl, and when she rolled over to steady herself, she kicked the blanket to the floor and nearly knocked over her mostly-untouched coffee.

Nicholas looked up at her heatedly, and the flexing of his thighs beneath hers caused a ripple of sensation that pooled like ice between her legs and made her breath come shorter.

“You’re perfect,” he breathed, “for me.”

“No,” Jay said. “I’m not.”

Both his hands were under her top now. Slowly, he drew his thumbs over the tips of her breasts, his eyes firmly trained on her face. “Too bad. I want you anyway.”

“Nick—” It came out as a gasp.

“That’s why I said you could hurt me.” He sucked hard on her neck, stroking her nipples until they began to feel tender. “Nothing you could do to me would hurt more than leaving.”

“I want to stay,” she breathed.

The realization hit her like a slap, and so did this strange rush of power when she saw the desperation in his face as she got to her knees.

I can make him do what I want.

It was an ugly thought—her mother’s thought—and she winced from it, peeling her top off and unhooking her bra. “I want to stay,” she repeated. “You love me, don’t you?”

She felt Nicholas start beneath her, his eyes taking in her body. And then with an almost mocking gesture, he crossed his arms and tugged off his own shirt. “I can’t get you out of my fucking mind.”

When he fisted her hair, she felt an answering clench in her lower belly as her eyes swept over his lean and powerful build. He pushed up with his hips and the exquisite pressure between her legs, and the eagerness of his rough, biting kisses made her moan into his mouth.

“That’s why I was willing to pay so much to watch you come,” he whispered.

That should have terrified her. But she was so tired, and her resistance was no match for his desire. It had pulverized into fine dust. He pushed her hair back and kissed her jaw, his fingers spanning over her face, her throat, and she wondered if he would at least be gracious in victory.

Or if he would just consume her whole.

Nicholas growled when he felt her sag towards him. Then his lips seized hers again and there was something desperate about his kissing, an aggression that nearly felt anxious. She wondered if he’d ever kissed any other woman like this. And if so, whether any of them had ever suspected that they were trying to free a man who wanted to sink deeper into his obsession like a stone plunging into a dark sea.

“Open your eyes.” He breathed in harshly against her skin, every point of contact between them like a heated star in a fracturing constellation. “Look at me.”

“I can’t close my eyes?”

“If we’re going to do it with the lights off, I want to know you’re there with me.” Forehead resting against hers, he breathed, “I feel like I’m always chasing you through the dark.”

Jay felt her body flush from hot to cold and back, as if her nerve

endings were breaking.

“Why won’t you look at me? Is it because it hurts?” She felt him run a hand down her spine, tender and possessive and so, so familiar. “Do you want me to be gentle?”

“No.”

The harshness of her voice made him blink at last.

“I don’t want that.” Jay looked away from his penetrative stare, clutching at her bare arm. “I don’t want gentle. I told you. I like it . . . when you’re rough with me.”

His hand closed over the back of her neck and he pulled her in for a possessive kiss that had her shifting in his lap. His eyes went to her face, seeking confirmation.

“Rougher,” she whispered.

Nicholas relaxed his fingers, tracing along to the front of her throat. She wasn’t expecting him to yank her forward by her necklace. The chain bit into the back of her neck and her eyes flew open as his mouth fiercely covered hers. He put his hand on her back to keep her pressed against him, even as the force of his kissing drove her backwards.

“Oh god,” she said, struggling to catch her breath. “Nick—”

She reached for him and he brought her hand up behind her back.

“Beg for it.” He bent his head to kiss his way down her ribs until she hissed. “Tell me you want it.”

“I do.” She choked on the words. “I want it. I want *you*. Just you. Please.”

He let go of the necklace, letting it swing back against her collarbone. And now his free hand was touching her everywhere, and his surprisingly callused hands painted her in swirls of fire with each caress, causing her desire to unwind like a molten cord in the pit of her belly.

“You’re so beautiful.”

Touch me, thought Jay.

“Daddy’s little bird.”

A desperate sound escaped her as his hand slid down her hip.

“Did you have a good time today?”

“W-what? I—yes—” She barely got the word out, distracted by his mouth, and the gentle slide of his fingers as he put his hand inside her jeans. “I mean, yes, Daddy.”

“You had fun?”

“Yes, but—”

“I want to take you out again tomorrow.” He was almost touching her where she needed him to, and Jay set her teeth to bite back another gasp, squeezing her eyes shut even more tightly at the sudden rush of pleasure. “When I come back from the vet, let’s go for a hike. And then we’ll grab lunch from some hole-in-the-wall. Wherever you want.”

“Whatever . . . I want,” Jay panted, feeling increasingly desperate as he dropped a featherlight kiss on one of her nipples while his fingers *just skirted* her clit.

“How does that sound?”

“Sure, but—” She blinked in foggy confusion when he pulled away, sober enough that she sensed a trap. “You—”

“What?” His full mouth parted into a predatory grin. “Oh, you thought you were going to get to fuck me? You should have kept your eyes open like I told you.” His eyes flickered over her as he leaned back on the couch. “I’ll still let you suck my cock.”

“Oh my god, you’re such an arrogant—” Jay broke off irately, grabbing at her top and pulling it back on. “Asshole,” she said. “Why am I even surprised? Everything’s always a game with you.”

“Poor little bird. I’d feel sorrier for you if I didn’t know you’d be getting off in your room later with the door closed to that picture of me you still have on your phone.”

“Fuck you for going through my phone.” Jay rose on shaky legs, breathing far too hard, while he leaned back to watch his effect on her with obvious amusement. “I *know* what you’re doing.”

He picked up his shirt and pulled it back on, rolling the fabric over his magnificent torso. She looked away, but not fast enough. His grin widened.

“Don’t worry, Jay. I’m sure you can work off all your frustrations on tomorrow’s uphill climb.”



Nine years of scouring the internet for any traces of her presence.

Five years of fighting with his father until the old man obliged him by dropping dead.

Four years of living in this fucking house alone.

So many sleepless nights. So much pent-up rage.

Sometimes Nicholas tallied up all that lost time until he thought it would drive him mad.

He'd murdered his father in effigy when he turned this mansion into a soulless shell of its former glory, but that wasn't enough. No, what he really wanted to destroy was whatever it was that still made Jay look at him like he was the monster from her dreams.

If he could reach inside himself and pull it out, he would. He'd offered her the chance to do it herself, though the rot had burrowed deep. Long before he'd resorted to blackmail, he'd spied on her, photographed her, and raided her room, desperate to find any keys that might unlock her soul.

She would hate him even more if she knew all the depraved things he'd done. The fantasies, the stalking, the fucking obsession. That he had used her shampoo to jerk off and stolen her clothes, her lipstick. That when she wasn't around, he had sometimes lain in her bed and imagined what it would be like to touch her the way she said she'd wanted to be touched in her journal.

And of course, he had watched her touch herself. Every catch of her breath, every discreet rustle of fabric, every teasing glimpse of brown skin —he had seen it all, and taken it as a sign that not even Jay was immune to pleasure. And, more importantly, that *he* could give it to her.

He could be the one to make her come.

The first time his stepmother had called him to beg for money, he had been thinking of Jay. She was in his thoughts constantly, like a fluttering dark moth drawn to the bright flame of his obsession. The sharpness of his rage at finding her gone the night of his father's party had slowly dulled over the years, and in that well-lit gnawing emptiness, a lead-like desolation had begun to form that sometimes felt like it might drag him down to his knees. Nothing could fill that sucking void.

Desperate, he had set up a Google Alert for every variant of Jay's name that he could think of but it hadn't turned up much. Just fleeting ghosts of the past turned up by old web trawlers. One day, he'd got an email notification about one of her old high school awards. But then a Livejournal post written by one of her little hipster friends had allowed him to trace her to San Francisco, and he had felt a surge of victory chased by frustration and thwarted rage.

So close, he had thought. Just over an hour away by plane.

It had seemed a crime that she had been so close after all this time. A taunt. How fucking dare she.

He had no way of contacting her then but the private investigator had been able to provide him with some more leads: a list of her favorite places, the business where she worked, and photos of her looking impossibly, devastatingly beautiful.

She could be seeing someone. Nicholas had studied her large dark eyes in the photograph he liked best, the one of her in the café, and remembered their once-defiant glitter. *I'll tear him apart if she's fucking him.*

Hearing Danielle's shrill voice had made all those violent impulses resurface, and he was perversely that his loathing for his stepmother was almost enough to distract from the thoughts of Jay spread out like a feast beneath another man.

"Nicholas, don't hang up. Your secretary put me through."

He let out a hoarse, disbelieving laugh as he toyed with the pen in his hand. "What the fuck do you want?"

"I'm broke." Her nasally voice was like the whine of a mosquito. "I'm about to lose my apartment."

"I'm not running a charity. And even if I was, you'd be the last person to benefit."

"Would you be willing to talk to Jay?"

His fingers hovered over the "end call" button. "Is she there?"

"No, but I can give you her number." She sounded smug now, but still spoke quickly, as if she thought his interest might wane. "Her address, too. For ten grand."

"You think I'm going to pay you to have my estranged older sister give

me a talking-to? That's really how you want to play this? I'm not ten years old."

"I know you've been looking for her."

The words fell into a silence that was a little too telling on his part. *She must have heard the rumors.* "After what you did, I'm surprised she's still talking to you."

"I'm her mother," Danielle said haughtily. "She trusts me."

"And you'd sell her to me for ten grand." Not bothering to keep the disgust from his voice, he said, "What if I hurt her?"

"You wouldn't."

"Would you care if I did?" Suddenly, he was furious, blinded by his loathing for this woman. "No, I don't think you would. You've been jealous of her your whole fucking life. You'd love it if she got what was coming to her, you fucking Judas cunt."

"Don't talk to me like that—you—you oversized brat!"

"I can talk to you however I want," Nicholas countered. "You want my money, you dance to my tune. You want to sell Jay to me? Do that. But call it what it is when you give me her information. You're not her mother, you're her pimp."

"How dare you."

"I'll write you the check as soon as I've determined both are valid. Forgive me," he added coldly, "for not trusting you."

He hung up on her while she was still swearing at him, which normally would have been good for some amusement. But as he stared at the wall with his framed Stanford diploma, all he could think about was that photograph of Jay in the café with that lock of gray hair dangling in her eyes.

I'm going to possess you, my little blue jay. And I'm going to make you love it.

Nicholas had to hand it to the old step-bitch. She'd waited a full week after that initial phone call before hounding him for more money (after he'd told his secretary he didn't want to talk to her, no less), and then threatening to sue him for all he was worth if he didn't give her what she wanted. As if he'd been the one to get her disinherited. She'd violated her own fucking

terms by cheating on his father.

Nicholas ran his hand over the desk in what had been his old bedroom, shaking the memory of that day from his head. Perhaps he had her mother to thank for making Jay into what *she* was: a woman who ran from her potential because she thought the spotlight would burn.

“Dried up old whore,” he muttered, and then laughed.

Oh, the fucking *irony*.

He knew exactly how he was going to make her pay.

Nicholas left the converted office, taking care to close the door behind him. Jay’s room was still shut, so he headed out through the sun room to the detached garage. The weather was fair, with puffy clouds rolling slowly across the cornflower blue sky. He could see them reflected in the serene surface of his pool.

The puppy had been waiting for him. As soon as he had the door open, there was a whine, followed by several high-pitched barks. A shiny black nose appeared in the gap.

He bent down and scooped up the dog. It immediately began to wiggle. The sight of those comically large paws cycling at nothing in the air made one side of his mouth turn up as he headed back into the house. Carbon’s carrier was still in the front hall, and he eased the reluctant dog inside.

Whines drifted from the crate all the way out the front door and into his car. Nicholas tried to put on music, but Puscifer turned the whimpers into anguished howls so he shut off the radio with a sigh. “You have shitty taste in music,” he told the dog.

The receptionist at Hana Vet Clinic wanted to be chatty, asking him if he had any plans for the day, but he wasn’t in the mood to play nice. He answered her questions with clipped answers while looking at his phone, knowing he was being rude and not caring.

“I’ve entered you in the system,” she said, sounding cross. “It should be a short wait.”

He wasn’t seated for five minutes before the door opened and a woman in scrubs poked her head into the waiting room. “Mr. Beaucroft, wasn’t it? I’m Dr. Jennifer. You had that charity dinner last year, didn’t you? For the city?”

"I just sign the checks," he said, standing to follow her into the examining room.

She lifted her ponytail to loop her stethoscope around her neck. "Don't be so modest. Some of that money got us new surgery lights and an ultrasonic scale. We're very grateful." When he didn't reply, Dr. Jennifer bent down to the crate. "Who's this handsome little fellow?"

"Maynard."

"What an unusual name."

"Mhm." He looked away from her hunching backside, walking over to examine a sign on the wall that said, *CAN DOGS EAT HUMAN FOODS? No nightshades*, it said underneath. *No xylitol*.

"Is it French?"

"No idea." Nicholas looked over his shoulder. The vet was looking into the twitching ears, the nose. Even lifted the tail for a quick look. "Is he all right?"

"He's a healthy boy." She ruffled the dog's ears. "It looks like he's already been neutered and chipped but his coat suggests he's a little malnourished. Was he a rescue?"

"I found him in some shrubs." He paused. "That is, my girlfriend did."

"Oh." Her smile dimmed a little as she gave the puppy another pat. "Well, that's not uncommon, I'm sorry to say. Sometimes people fall in love with the idea of a puppy more than they do with the actual dog. Then it grows up and becomes too much of a handful. Especially with big breeds like this."

Nicholas thought again of Jay's mother. His jaw tightened. "What breed is he?"

The vet glanced at the dog. "Without genetic testing, it's hard to be certain, but at a glance, I'd guess he's a king shepherd, or a mix."

"Does he need any shots? I'd like to get him all taken care of today, as well as a new chip."

Dr. Jennifer seemed a little taken aback. "Generally, you'd need to set up another appointment for that. This is just a check-up."

"I'm sure other parts of the building could use new surgery lights,"

Nicholas said.

An hour later, and a few grand lighter, Maynard was back in his crate, a little dopey from his chipping, and Nicholas was back behind the wheel of his car. He stopped by the Afghan place again to pick up some takeout before their hike. Thankfully, the nosy owner hadn't been there.

Knowing Jay, she was only just starting to get up.

He thought of how cross she'd been in her apartment, how it colored her cheeks and gave her eyes a vicious glint, and made her stand just a little taller when she faced up to him.

Grumpy little bird.

A satisfied smile curled his mouth.

He was looking forward to it.

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Chapter Twelve

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It was getting harder to remember why she wanted to push him away.

Last night, when she heard the creak of his footsteps outside her door while she was getting herself off to the memory of his touch on her skin, she had decided that maybe she didn't care if he heard her. Maybe she even wanted to moan a little louder, so that he would hear.

The footsteps stopped and Jay had waited, but he hadn't come in.

She knew he was listening, though, and no, she hadn't been quiet.

All those poor nice boys she had dated couldn't hold a candle to what she really wanted. *Who* she really wanted. A man to take her by the hand and hold her tight as they walked along the edge of what was safe and what was threatening.

A man would never let her fall but still made her want to.

Jay rose from her bed, folding her arms as she stood in front of her closet awkwardly. All of her things were here now and she had no shortage of clothes to choose from. After a moment of deliberation, she pulled a pair of galaxy leggings off a hanger that she still unironically liked, and a stretchy purple spandex crop top.

Since her hair was still damp from her shower, she tied it up in a high ponytail, using one of those soft satin scrunchies that were supposed to keep her from pulling her own hair out. The wet curls fell to the top of her spine as she released it.

She made herself her morning coffee, noting Nicholas's absence from the kitchen. Was he in his office? Working? The door was closed and she wasn't sure if she should knock.

(Men don't like women who cling, Jay)

An image of her mother standing in front of her mirror popped into Jay's head. She had been about nine or ten and it had been another one of those nights when her mother hadn't come back at all. Upon her return, a younger, smaller Jay had wrapped her arms around her mother's waist and begged her in tears not to leave her alone again.

But she did, Jay thought morosely. Every time.

A key rattled in the lock. Then she heard footsteps, followed by a familiar whine. Nicholas appeared, holding a brown bag in one hand. The other was clenched around Carbon's old carrier, where the puppy peered out balefully.

"Oh, wow," said Jay. "I thought you were in your office."

"Have you eaten?"

"Not yet. I was literally just about to make something." Jay got to her knees as she bent down to the crate. "Poor baby, wearing the cone of shame. You took him to the vet?"

"Vaxxed and chipped. They managed to squeeze him into their very busy schedule." A strange smile flickered over his mouth as he leaned over to unlatch the carrier's door. "They think he's a king shepherd, which means he's going to be huge. His name is Maynard."

"But he's so *little* now." The puppy bounded immediately for Jay, who lifted the dog aloft and laughed as it immediately began trying to lick her face. "I don't remember agreeing to *Maynard*."

"I paid for him."

Jay scratched the puppy's ruff, watching the dark brown eyes roll back in exuberant joy. "So because I wasn't there, you named him after your favorite metal angst lord?"

"You remember?"

"Of course I remember. You're always blasting Puscifer in the car."

"I'm pretty sure I used to fuck you to it, too." With his back to her, he opened one of the containers and began ladling out golden lentil soup. "Rev. 22-20 was practically our song."

Flustered, Jay abandoned the puppy, who began to chew on the door of Carbon's cage. She hovered uncertainly, watching Nicholas dish food out onto plates. *Our song*, gave her a funny feeling in her gut. What they had been doing back then hadn't been romantic. He'd put the music on so their parents wouldn't hear what he was doing to her in his room.

"You always did have bad taste," she said lightly.

"Better than your 90s strip mall college rock shit." Nicholas swung over the stool and patted the one next to him. "Come here."

Jay sighed and stepped forward, grabbing a plate and a bowl. Even though her stomach was doing flipflops, she made herself eat, aware of his heated glances streaking across her skin like meteors. “If you don’t like Spiderbait and The Sundays, there’s something wrong with you.”

Nicholas chuckled, but it lacked the usual hard edge that his laughter frequently contained.

She wondered what it would be like when he came to her again. When she told him in the den how she liked to be touched it was as if she had unlocked a door inside herself and now that it was open, any manner of things could come tumbling out.

They talked a little while eating but Jay got the sense that Nicholas was intentionally skirting certain topics. When they were done with their meal, he pulled his mirrored shades out of his pocket, popping them on his nose with the same careless gesture that he’d been practicing since high school. It was much smoother now, but so was everything else about him.

But it also meant that she couldn’t see his eyes.

“It’s a nice day.” He cranked the air on, to cool down some of the midday heat that had built up in the car. “Maybe we can walk the dog later when the sidewalk cools down.”

Jay looked up from her folded hands, curiously touched that he’d thought of the dog’s soft paws. “You got him a leash already?”

“I got him everything. I’m thinking of taking him on my morning runs.”

Jay grimaced.

“What’s with you and running, Jay? I thought vegans were supposed to be health nuts.”

“I like *hiking*,” Jay said. “I just hate how I feel after a run. I’m all sweaty, and I get stitches in my side—” She shook her head violently. “I’d rather use the pool.”

“One of these days, I’m going to use that knowledge against you, little bird.” He made a low sound, as if whatever he was imagining pleased him, and a little frisson of not-quite-fear trickled through her. “Use the pool, all you want. I might join you. I could help you with your form.”

“You haven’t been swimming lately,” she pointed out.

“I do it early. Before you wake up. I like it when the water’s cold.”

“God, why? You used to swim in the afternoons like a normal person.”

“Well.” Nicholas shifted his grip on the wheel, looking almost self-conscious. “You would read out by the pool in the afternoons.”

“Oh.” Jay stared out at where an old gas station had been, remembering how she had used to lie out by the water, desperate to get out of that house and her stepfather’s oppressive gaze. She’d barely noticed Nicholas was there at all. “God. I was so fucking blind.”

“We don’t have to talk about the past.”

But we can’t avoid it, either.

They pulled up at the dirt parking lot with a crunch of grit beneath the tires. Despite the late start to the day, they were still there early enough that some of the good spots were still left.

Sunlight speared through the live oaks, catching on silvery motes of dust. This time of year, everything was still mostly brown and dry, but there was still some residual green from the too-brief rainy season when the heat made plants hoard their moisture as jealously as any miser.

Looking out the car window, Jay spotted a manzanita, which made her remember the last time she had hiked down this trail. She and Nicholas had had a big fight, after which she had cried like a baby in his arms. Both of them were so broken that their edges had turned sharp; and just like that California boxthorn withering in the blazing heat, it seemed like every time they got close to each other, someone always drew blood.

She slid out of the car as the door opened—Nicholas holding it open, of course. The chime of the locks engaging sounded overly loud in the silent space, broken only by bird calls.

“How did the interview go?” Nicholas shoved his keys in the pocket of his shorts. They nearly hit his knee, revealing well-muscled calves sprinkled with coarse dark hair. Oblivious to the dark yearning of her thoughts, he said, “You were so cross, I wasn’t sure I should ask.”

“It wasn’t an interview, it was a meeting. And I was *cross* because you arranged that meeting behind my back by throwing your stupid weight around.” Jay kicked a big rock out of her path and then felt bad when she startled a little lizard into darting into the brush. “You’re such a bully.”

“So you’re not going to tell me?”

“I think that would be a conflict of interest.”

“I could ask Arthur.”

“Then ask him.”

Nicholas gave her a dry look. “Don’t you want a promotion?”

“I want one, yes, but so do a lot of people. Some of them have been working at your company for years. It feels wrong to get one just because I . . . know you.”

“That’s not why.” His mirrored shades flashed as he studied the landscape, a hardness to his mouth making her wonder if he had seen the manzanita, too. “I was given everything I had but I still had to work for it. That doesn’t mean I’m not worthy. It doesn’t mean that *you’re* not worthy.”

“It’s not the same.” Jay tugged on the brim of her hat with her free hand, shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun. “Listen, when I graduated from Cal, I thought I’d get a job right out of college. That’s the promise, right? Go to a good school, get a good job. But I had zero work experience and nobody wants to hire someone who majored in Sociology, even if it was at UC Berkeley. I ended up going back to school to get an administrative assistant certificate from a community college just so I could have a fighting chance in the job pool I wasn’t even qualified for. And I kept thinking, your father would have laughed to see me fall so hard. The girl everyone voted as ‘Most Likely to Succeed’ filing office memos for a company that sells soap.”

“It doesn’t matter what my father would have thought.” Nicholas’s voice was sharp. “He’s dead. What does any of that have to do with my promoting you?”

“Because you don’t *really* think I’m qualified for this job. You made fun of my previous one—you called me a cute little secretary who worked in a soap shop.”

“You are a cute little secretary who worked in a soap shop.”

Jay watched a ruby-crowned kinglet flutter by as it scanned the chaparral for insects. The orangey-red crest on its head looked like a dyed mohawk, and it looked so silly that she drew in a deep breath, her anger spiraling away as she remembered their winery date and how sweet he’d

been with her. It gave her something to hold onto while he was pissing her off now.

“Why do you think I need help from you?” she pressed. “Why are you so busy trying to assign me extra value if you think I’m already worthy?”

“Because I think you’re fucking exceptional. Everyone in our family got to where they were by pretending to be something they weren’t. But not you. You never had to pretend to get people to love you. The only thing that ever held you back was you thinking you weren’t good enough.” His jaw set. “You might be content to sit and play the long con, but I’m not. Think of it as me accelerating the process so you don’t get stalled by your devaluation of yourself.”

“You told me it didn’t matter.”

“It didn’t then. Our parents were never going to let us outshine them. But things are different now. I can help you and I *want* to.”

A warm breeze ruffled their hair. Jay could smell the dusty sweet smell of the sun-dried grass and the crisp mineral bite of the earth itself. “Why?” she asked, suddenly needing to hear it.

“Because I love you.”

Jay stopped walking. His face was solemn—at least, she thought it was. She reached up and carefully removed his sunglasses, folding them into the neck of his shirt as she looked up into his familiar eyes with their shrunken pupils.

“I’m not sure I’m a good fit for this position.”

He stepped closer, and Jay felt the rough bark of a tree dig into her bare back. She wasn’t sure which of them initiated the kiss, but it was her hand fisted around his shirt, and in the thin, galaxy leggings, she could feel just about all of him riding up between her thighs.

“You’re a great fit,” he said.

“Nick.” Her forehead rested lightly against his as she spoke reproachfully, willing him to understand. “You can’t fuck me into this job.”

“I can coach Arthur on what to say.” He pushed back against her, driving her back against the trunk with his hips. “I can coach you, too. And I still have enough influence with this company that if I make my preference known, the hiring team will pick whoever I want to keep me

happy.”

Jay took his hand off her hip and felt a flicker of defeated amusement when he pinned it over her head instead. “This is so fucked up.”

“What?” The words burned against her lips.

“Us. This. You trying to twist the arm of your hiring managers to get me promoted, and us LARPing through our parental abandonment issues with sex.”

“But it’s such good sex.”

Jay shoved at him with her elbow. “I call my stepbrother *Daddy*. That’s not normal.”

“So? Embrace it. Send me a father’s day card next time you fuck my brains out. ‘Thank you, Daddy, for always giving me that good dick. I love taking your big cock until I’m sore. Thanks for all the orgasms. Love, Jay.’”

Jay stared at him in horror, a rusty sound escaping her before she doubled over, laughing so hard that it almost hurt because she couldn’t stop. She was aware of Nicholas releasing her arm as she bowed forward, her face pressed against his chest. She felt it heave in surprise.

“Jay, it was just a joke.” He sounded concerned.

“No.” She pulled back, still wheezing. “Oh my god. No, that’s . . . so sick. Not funny.”

Nicholas studied her face, his smirk slowly returning. “Seems like you thought it was pretty fucking funny.”

“Only because it’s so awful.” Jay straightened her clothes and wiped at her eyes. “God. *Why* do I end up crying every time we come out here? I hate it.”

“Because you’re so used to being everyone’s perfect little angel that you hold everything in until you break.”

She eyed him. “I’m not perfect, Nicholas.”

“Yeah, I know. But that doesn’t stop you from throwing yourself up against that wall. In case you hadn’t noticed, that’s kind of your thing, blue jay. Punishing yourself.”

A branch snapped somewhere nearby. Jay hopped back unsteadily, breathing in a lungful of dusty, pollen-laden air, not realizing how stiff all

her limbs had become. “I don’t punish myself,” she said hotly.

“Yes, you do.” He swatted at a horsefly. “You set yourself up for failure on purpose so you can tell yourself you never had a chance when you’re disappointed.”

“Thanks, Dr. Nick. What about you? You have enough baggage to fill an entire airport.”

He grinned again, revealing boyish dimples. “You’re so cute when you’re mad at me.”

“Oh wow,” she said. “That’s not problematic.”

“I’m not the one who’s trying to be perfect,” he informed her dryly. “I’m allowed to have flaws.”

“Oh my god.” She gave him a shove. “How are you this annoying?”

“Because I didn’t have you to put me in my place.”

Jay smiled reluctantly and his eyes lit with triumph.

As they walked back to the lot, Nicholas pointed out some wild cucumber and even though she knew he was manipulating her, turning up that charm full blast—that he didn’t *really* care about what the plant was—she decided to pretend that he did. She told him the name and that it wasn’t edible, and he grinned predictably when she added that it was sometimes called “manroot.”

He never used to smile, she thought wistfully, watching him. *He was always so angry.*

That was his flaw, she realized. She was terrified of disappointing people; Nicholas had decided that everyone else had already disappointed him.

They were two sides of the same fucked-up coin.

More people were on the trail now, including families. She heard the distant whoop and scream of kids, followed by the lower warning shouts of their parents not to stray too far. The parking lot was full to bursting and Jay hoped that none of those other hikers had been close enough to hear them on the trail, when Nick had been talking about *father’s day* and *good sex*.

A car slowed, noticing them approaching Nicholas’s Tesla. The lot had filled up while they were gone. Nicholas squeezed between a silver

Mercedes parked beside them to open the door for her, waiting for her to slide fully into her seat before closing it again.

Like a gentleman, she thought, except that he wasn't.

And she was starting not to mind.

Jay couldn't remember the last time she'd been inside a church but this one was filled with sprays of white flowers. The cloying scent of them was like drowning in perfume, and as Jay walked slowly up the aisle, she could feel herself becoming sick with dread.

This is supposed to be the happiest day of your life, a voice whispered as she stared unseeingly into the amorphous sea of faces watching her walk down the aisle. *You'll never be alone again, now.*

She was wearing the dress her mother had gotten married in: a sequin-covered monstrosity that revealed more than it concealed, just barely clinging to her shoulders. *Like mother, like daughter*, she thought. Even the diamonds around her throat looked garish being paired with them, but they were real. She recognized them. They had belonged to Nick's mother and during that benefit gala for sick children, she had worn both the necklace and the bracelets.

Now, they were hers.

Unwilling to look at her new husband just yet, her eyes swept over the church. It was Our Lady of Perpetual Grace, the Catholic church in Hollybook that none of them had ever attended. The stained glass was blinding in the sunlight, aggressively colorful even, and Jay, looking closely at some of the painted statues of the saints, noted both the flaking gilt and their blank, dead eyes.

"You may now kiss the bride," said the priest, and her new husband lifted her veil.

Jay looked up, just as she caught a whiff of heavy, familiar cologne, and a hint of rot that not even the flowers could conceal—and let out a terrified scream when she found herself looking into Damon's cold eyes, icy gray, but with a whitish glaze that could only come from death.

"Be a good girl," her stepfather said, in his son's deep, resonant voice,

“and give Daddy a kiss.”

Jay shot up with a gasp, looking wildly around the room. Gone were the stone floors and varicolored lights. Greenish-grey light filtered in through her voile curtains, making the faded sunflowers stenciled on her walls shimmer. She straightened her tank top with a shudder.

It was just a dream, she told herself. It's not real.

But thirteen years ago, it could have been.

Still trembling, Jay got dressed for work in a sensible A-line and a backless embroidered blouse. As she pushed her arms through the sleeves, she tried to shake off the filaments of nightmare still clinging to her skin like a spider’s web.

On the other side of the door, she heard Nicholas’s heavy tread. That man was like a bull, the way he charged up and down the stairs. Unlike her, he’d never had anything to fear in this house.

Despite the tightness in her throat, she still smiled a little when she walked into the kitchen and saw the sprinkle jar out with the butter. Nicholas was hovering over the toaster, in slate-grey slacks and a black shirt he hadn’t bothered to do up. She saw him stretch, almost like he was posing for her, and her mouth went dry as she watched his abdominal muscles flex.

“Nicholas.”

He looked at her, and both of them startled a little when the toast popped. He recovered quickly, giving her a slow, sexy smile as he picked up the bread and dropped it on a plate.

“You’re up early. You must have slept well.”

“No. I had a nightmare.”

Her voice broke into a sob on the third syllable. Shit—she turned away from him but not fast enough. He set the plate down to reach for her, and Jay surged forward, burying her face against the solid wall of his chest, and letting the crisp dark hair scrape against her cheek. The smell of him was so familiar. She’d never been able to eat or even look at a piece of grapefruit in the nine years she’d been away, but now, the sweet bitterness was like a tranquilizer in her blood.

“Daddy,” she said raggedly. “Hold me. Please.”

Above her head, she heard his sudden intake of breath. Then his arms

folded his arms around her, squeezing so tightly that it nearly hurt.

He's bad at hugging, was her distant thought, which made her sad, for him and for herself. With a small sound, she pressed harder against him, locking her hands over the small of his back, and pressing her mouth to the base of his throat, until his arms loosened reflexively and she felt his deep sigh as his palm smoothed down her spine.

“You’re safe now,” he murmured, and a small corner of her whispered, yes.

“Your bread is getting cold.”

“I don’t care.” He petted her hair. “I can always make more.”

Jay pressed her hand against his chest once, lingeringly, before reaching down to do up his shirt as she took a single step back. The emotion welling in her throat was so thick she couldn’t speak around it, and her fingers were trembling so badly that she almost couldn’t fasten his buttons.

(I want you to feel safe with me)

He kept one arm around her. She could sense his concern as his fingers continued lightly stroking her spine. “Are you all right?”

No. I’ve fallen in love with you.

“Blue jay?”

She had flinched, startled by the blistering salience of that thought. So this was how he would do it. This was how he would cage her. Not with violence, but by her own betrayal of herself.

“Jay, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

Tears had filled her eyes, as if he had summoned them there, and she pulled away so he wouldn’t feel her shaking. “I’m so afraid,” she gasped. “I’m so afraid . . . that you’ll become your dad.” *I’m so afraid that you’ll hurt me if I let myself love you.*

He flinched. “What?”

“I dreamed I was my mom—” She swallowed hard. “M-marrying your dad. But he had your voice when he—” She broke off. “When he said—”

(Good girl)

Jay turned bleak eyes on Nicholas. “I couldn’t stop him.”

I can’t stop you.

He took her hands from his shirt, holding her at length, and the strength in his hands and the look in his eyes left her unsure as to whether she wanted to melt into him or run. “It’s not real.”

She stared up at him bleakly, letting her shoulders sink beneath the unrelenting weight of his gaze. Her mouth still burned where she had kissed him, and she could still feel the imprint of his heart against her cheek. “You don’t get it,” she said. “That’s okay.”

His frown deepened. “Jay—”

“No. It’s okay. Like you said, it isn’t real. It was a stupid thing to get upset about.”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that,” he said harshly. “I don’t think it’s stupid. I just don’t understand what it is you’re trying to tell me. I’m *not* my father, Jay.”

“I know.” She folded her arms. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“Fine.” Nicholas turned back to the counter and scraped butter over his now-cold toast, before propping a hip against the counter to eat it. Crumbs and sprinkles fell in a shower as he tore into it with a viciousness that went beyond hunger. He was angry.

Jay steeped herself a mug of tea and tried not to let her misery show on her face.

He didn’t say much to her after that. But that was no surprise. He insisted she was perfect like a man who wanted his device to be top of the line.

But everything falls apart.

Jay looked out the window, studying the downtown area, and the buds on the leaves. The hand on her thigh startled her and so did the look on his face when he hit the brakes at the red light.

“I want you to come to me.”

To his bed, she thought he meant, and sharp words of denial were already forming on her tongue that he could be so callous when she was so fragile. “You—”

“When you have nightmares,” he clarified. “Come to my room and wake me. I sleep with my door unlocked—” She winced at that. “Any problem you have, Jay, I can make it better.”

Fiddling with the clasp of her purse, she said, “But what if you can’t?”

“I make it worse.” He tweaked her nose. “And then you forget about it.”

He smiled at her and she found herself helplessly returning it, despite telling herself that she wouldn’t fall prey to his charm.

You arrogant, frustrating, beautiful man. How dare you make me fall in love with you.

She was doomed. He had trapped her, swinging the cage door shut the moment her guard was down, just like she’d been afraid he would. And when her heart inevitably broke like the clasp of her sad, worn-out purse, she really would be ruined. There would be no walking away from this.

She craved him like she had craved nothing else.

“I’ll come to you,” she said, and the light changed, so all he said was, “Good.”

But he put his hand back on her leg, and as his thumb traced the border between silk and skin, she could feel her resolve crumbling faster and faster, like cheap concrete breaking under pressure.

She had thought work would be a distraction but there was a tension in the office that she could feel immediately. People seemed agitated, and there were more whispers than usual. That perpetual knot of anxiety in her chest expanded painfully, tightening. Nobody was looking at her, so possibly it wasn’t about her, and as she returned the usual litany of smiles and greetings in the kitchen, she didn’t detect anything different in the way people were speaking to her, either.

Granola bar in hand, Jay sat down in front of her computer and let out a controlled breath, aware of Annica beside her. Nothing new from that department, either.

She watched her emails scroll in as she took her phone out of her purse to sign in through the 2Factor system. Then she sat up, as one of the subject lines caught her eye.

The open VP position had been formally announced at last.

That’s what this was. She nearly cried in relief. It had nothing to do with her at all, people were just excited about the role that she had known about for days, thanks to Nicholas. He had been so casual in his delivery

that she was surprised to find that it was such a big deal.

All day, she heard speculations about who would get it, versus who deserved it. Some people were blatantly careless about their opinions and how loudly they spoke them. Jay noticed that, despite the many names put forth as possible candidates, hers was one that never came up at all.

And why would it? that voice in her head whispered. *You're nobody. You're your stepbrother's little whore. If they talk about you at all, that's what they're going to talk about.*

Another email popped up on her screen. Arthur and Nicholas would be interviewing any candidates who expressed an interest in the VP role within the coming weeks. If someone wanted to apply, they would need to talk to their manager before emailing either of them to move forward.

Do I need to email you to apply? she asked Arthur.

His response was immediate.

No, Jay. :-)

She glanced up at Nicholas, who was staring intently at his computer screen. Obviously busy, or he'd be off in a meeting somewhere or bothering her. Maybe he was bothering Annica. Her seatmate had been typing away at her keyboard all morning. At one point, she'd even stepped away from her desk to take a phone call, which was a surprise.

Jay decided to get herself a coffee. The caffeine wouldn't help her anxiety but it was balmy outside and the walk across the palm-lined street might clear her head. Better than sitting idle at her desk and pining after Nicholas like a foolish schoolgirl.

The relentless sun almost made it too hot for sweater weather but the back of her blouse was revealing enough that Jay didn't want to take it off, fearing catcalls. She had forgotten how warm it got down here. Temperatures really didn't fluctuate that much, this close to the water. In high school, she and her friends had spent most Friday nights having bonfires on the beach, toasting marshmallows and drinking alcohol that someone's older sister or brother had procured.

As the sun melted on the horizon, they'd loudly declare their summer plans and sometimes even their adult ones. Most of them wanted to leave when they graduated, at least for a little while, because even a gilded

paradise like Hollybrook could still be a cage. They talked about the houses they planned to own, the future spouses they'd marry: all of it had boiled down to a restless desire for more, to create their own little empire, to be just like their parents.

Jay straightened her blouse, making sure it was still tucked into the waistband of her skirt. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirrored wall of a building—*cute little secretary*—and flinched.

Stop that.

She steeled herself and walked into the same indie café from before, studying the patrons in a quick sweep. Except for a few well-dressed businessmen who had come here to work, the café was mostly empty. The only guy who didn't quite fit the demo was a younger man, and he was sitting by the door with his face turned away. Her eyes lingered on him for a beat before she headed up to the register. All that mattered was, none of the clientele today were Tweed Creep.

"Oh hey," the barista said. "You were the sprinkle chick, weren't you? How was it?"

"Oh! Yes, I was but it wasn't for me. It was for, a, uh, friend. He really liked it." *Liked it so much he thanked you for it on his knees when you got home and called you a dirty little tease.* Jay swallowed hard, eyes skittering over the menu. "I'll just have an oat milk latte today. For Jay."

In her periphery, she saw the young guy shift in his seat. Jay turned her back on him, arms folded as she waited for her coffee. She was so on edge that she didn't even notice the vibration of her phone, and when she saw it was her mother, she groaned and swiped "decline."

Jay didn't want to hear her mother's self-serving apologies. They always turned into recriminations, anyway. God, if she had tried to bargain with *Nick*, he was going to kill her.

She could still remember the anger on his face when he'd come to her apartment.

That was not the face of a man who wanted to bargain.

"Oat milk latte for Jay!"

"Thanks." She took the coffee cup and turned to the door, only to find that the youngish guy was now getting to his feet.

“Justine?”

She stiffened, looking at him cautiously. He was less young than she thought; the gelled hair made him look younger in profile but he was actually closer to Nicholas’s age, though not nearly so well-preserved. She stared at him longer than was probably polite, trying to understand why the pinched planes of his face looked so familiar.

And then it hit her. “... Jake?”

“You remember me.” He sounded so pleased that she immediately wished that she hadn’t. Nicholas’s weaselly little friend, the one who had squatted at their house all the time and stared at her whenever she was in the room. He’d been the first one to throw the rock at the cat that day, too. Probably, she thought uncharitably, because he had thought it would impress Nick.

Jake’s smarmy smile faded when she didn’t smile back, and a darker, almost defiant expression gleamed in his eyes when her gaze dipped to her throat.

“So the rumors are true. You really did come back.”

“Yes,” she said stiffly. “I got a new job.”

“Well, lucky you, having a swank family home to return to. Not to mention a booming family business.” He paused to scratch his nose. “I suppose that means Nick’s forgiven you.”

He must have seen the newspaper, too. “It’s been nine years.”

“So? Nobody can hold a grudge like Nick. Hell, he’ll fuck with you for fun, just to show you he can. Just like his dad used to do with his investors. He learned that from his old man.”

This was a little too close to the truth and it made Jay’s jaw clench. “He’s different now.”

“Not that different. You ruined his father’s name, turned it into dirt. He should hate you.” *Like I do* hovered unspoken in the air, and Jay realized with a chill that of course, Jake would hate her if he thought she was the reason that he’d lost his ‘in’ with Nick. “Instead, he’s opening his house to you and inviting you out to fucking black-tie parties? What the fuck?”

Jay drew herself up taller, and noticed that Jake was actually an inch or two shorter than she was. She saw the exact moment when he noticed this,

too. “Did you ever think that maybe Nick didn’t approve of the scandal? He testified against his father. Provided *evidence*.”

And he hadn’t even told her about the rest—that he’d defended her name, her reputation. Quentin had been the one to bring that up, and Nicholas was not the sort of person to suffer a good deed in silence, but he had never tried to leverage any of that with her.

Never, she realized. Even when it could have helped him.

“Oh, that’s right, I remember. They made out like he was some kind of saint for doing the bare minimum. That he was so brave.” Jake’s lip curled. “But you and I both know that he never really gave a shit about anyone. Except for you.”

Scalding pain burst like hot fireworks on the backs of her knuckles. She’d squeezed her cup so hard that the coffee had spurted out of the lid, burning her hands. “Shit,” she hissed.

Jake watched her shrug out of her sweater, watched her set her cup down on the counter and grope for napkins. He made no move to help as she got to her knees to mop up the floor, and when she looked up, she didn’t like the look on his face when she realized he was staring at her back.

“I guess it does make sense, in a way. You two were always close.”

An ominous sense of dread dripped down her spine.

“Anyway, it was good seeing you. I’m sure I’ll be seeing a lot *more* of you soon now that you’re back in town.” *Fat chance of that, creep.* “Tell Nick I said hello.”

With a final smile, he swaggered to the door like he thought he’d won.

A bell signaled his departure.

Jay waited until he was out of sight before grabbing her ruined sweater and what remained of her drink and hurrying out of the café. Her skin was crawling. A man shouted something at her from out the window of his car, but she barely noticed. *Damon used to look at me like that*, she thought, her skin going clammy. *Right before he—*

No. No, she wouldn’t think about that.

But this was just a taste of what awaited her if she did accept Nicholas’s proposal. Beyond the exquisite agony they brought out in one another, there was the judgement of the town to consider. The contempt and

disgust would be bad enough but the sly, leering glances from men like Jake would be worse, because she would know what they were thinking. She would know and she—

Jay gripped the doorhandle to Beaucroft Assets and yanked it, letting herself into the building.

For a man who had grown up with so little physical affection in the home, Nicholas was very handsy. When he stood behind her while she was cooking, he would sometimes lay a hand on her waist as he asked about the ingredients or pestered her for a taste. If he passed her in the hall or she was getting in or out of his car, it wasn't uncommon for him to catch her by the chin and pull her in for a kiss that left her feeling dizzy.

Too many times, she had stumbled into her bedroom after one of his kisses and finished herself off until she was squeezing her eyelids so tightly shut that she saw the burst of phosphenes, wondering what cruel god had forced them together only to watch them repel with the violence of two opposing poles.

Jay dropped into her seat like a lead weight, exhausted by the exchange. Her cooling coffee sat beside her like a stark reminder.

Her phone buzzed. *That's your third coffee break. I believe the employee manual says that you can have two.*

Jay pursed her lips. After their charged interaction in the kitchen that morning, she wondered if this was his attempt to bring things back to normal.

Finished torturing your clients already? It's not even 3.

He sent her three devil emojis. I'd rather torture you.

I'm sure you can think of something else to do at your desk, Nicholas.

That was a mistake. Her phone began vibrating incessantly as the screen filled with bird, eggplant, and sweat droplet emojis. She glared up at the mezzanine, where Nicholas appeared to be propping his fist against his mouth in an attempt not to burst into laughter.

You are such a child.

Come teach me a lesson then.

By the way, I ran into one of your old friends in the coffee shop.

In the corner of her eye, she saw him sit up. *Which one Jake. He said to tell you hello.*

Van Hoff?

Yes.

Three dots appeared. Then disappeared.

He didn't write back again and the remaining hours of the day spun themselves around her in a slow web as she tried to focus on her work.

Arthur said goodbye to her at five and the lights went off at six with an audible hum. Jay could hear the cleaners vacuuming the conference rooms on the opposite side of the building. Almost everyone was gone now, except for them, her, and Nicholas.

The sound of his brogues on the stairs made her hair stand on end. She wasn't expecting the hand on her back and made a sound as she whirled around in her desk chair.

He didn't smile the way he usually did. "What did he say to you?"

"Jake? Um." Jay glanced warily around the office.

"There's no one else here." There was a bite of steel in his voice. "Tell me. Did he say something to you? Threaten you?"

"N-no, nothing like that. He just said a lot of really strange things about your father's trial before implying that there were rumors about us." She checked his face and forced herself to go on. "Did you really punch him in the throat?"

"He told you that?"

"No." Jay hesitated. "Someone else did. I don't remember who."

"I did." At her stricken expression, he chuckled grimly. "Some rumors are true, Jay."

"I can't believe you did that!"

"Yeah. I had to spend a night in jail for it. Dad posted bail. I was supposed to apologize but I never did and my father didn't make me." He flashed her a tight smile. "Can't have the heir wasting away behind bars."

"He said that?"

"Something like it, before calling me an embarrassment."

That bastard. “You shouldn’t have punched him, but I don’t think you’re an embarrassment. Far from it, in fact.” She locked her computer and grabbed her purse, and so she did not see the way his face softened. “But this is exactly what I was talking about. All of this happened so long ago and people still talk about it. It’s going to be even worse if I say yes.”

“You’re going to say yes?”

His eagerness was like a knife in her heart. “I don’t know,” she lied, lowering her eyes and keeping her hands at her sides so she wouldn’t touch the ring burning like a drop of cold fire beneath her clothes. “Why did you punch Jake?”

“Because of what he was saying about you. I won’t repeat what he said, but suffice it to say that after that incident, nobody else did, either. Not in my hearing, anyway.”

“You must have still been angry with me,” she said hesitantly.

“I didn’t hate you.” Nicholas’s eyes cut away. “I never hated you. Everyone just thought I did. People would tell me what they thought I wanted to hear about you, trying to fucking ingratiate themselves with me, using *you*, and it made me want to kill them.”

“Figuratively,” Jay prompted worriedly.

He glanced at her. His gaze was cold and terrible. “Not necessarily.”

They walked out of the building side by side, close enough that the wool of his suit rubbed against her arm with every swing of his broad shoulders. The violence that ran through him was close to the skin. Sometimes she imagined that she felt the teeth of it. *A wolf in sheep’s clothing.*

“What are you thinking, Nicholas?” she asked, shaking that disturbing thought off. “You have the most terrifying look on your face.”

“I’m wondering if this is going to be a problem.”

“The Jake thing?”

“Yes, the ‘Jake thing.’ I ran into him myself not too long ago. I wonder if he’s following us.”

“He’s a creep,” Jay said. “But there are a lot of creeps, and we come from a wealthy family. That’s always going to attract the gossips and the bottom-feeders.”

“Bottom-feeder. Yeah, that’s exactly what he is.” Nicholas unlocked his car with a dark laugh, holding the door open for her. “But you’re more vulnerable than I am. Nobody would ever say anything to you with my name attached to yours.”

“It’s not the name I’m worried about. I don’t want to see the love slowly drain out of another person’s eyes when they look at me. That’s worse than being alone. It’s like being broken, slowly. I couldn’t stand it—”
Not from you.

He closed the door and stormed around to the other side before buckling himself into the driver’s seat furiously. “I’m not my father. I don’t care about keeping up appearances. I thought I made it very clear when I punched that fucker who I was choosing when it came to you.”

“You did.” She spoke quietly.

He turned his key in the ignition. “I meant what I said earlier. I want you to come to me. For anything. Any time.”

Come to me. How many times had he summoned her exactly that way, expecting her to obey him? Somehow, hearing it as a request made it even harder to bear.

Chapter Thirteen

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Nicholas watched Jay stare meditatively into the darkness, her face reflected in the dark glass window. Every time some specter from their past popped up like a fucking jack-in-the-box, he was afraid it was going to be the reason that she left him again.

She was like water running through his fingers. If he closed his hands over her too forcefully, there was a distinct possibility that she might slip past him out of reach forever.

Not wanting to broach the subject of Jake further, he said, “Where do you want to go for dinner?”

“I don’t. I’ll cook something. We have all that food we brought back from my apartment. I don’t want it to go bad.”

He didn’t want her cooking. Not when she seemed to think that he wanted her as his live-in possession. “I think I can afford to lose a few tomatoes. They’re, what, twenty cents each? Let me take you out. The guy who owns that Afghan place wants to give you his baklava.”

“It’s not generosity if you give me more than what I want.”

“Well, I don’t cook,” he said gruffly. “I don’t expect you to do the same for me.”

“I don’t do it because I want something in return,” said Jay. “I cook because I like cooking. You really don’t cook? At all?”

“Not unless you count the microwave.”

“What did you do in college?”

“Ate in the dining commons like a normal person.”

“You are not a normal person, Nicholas. Normal people don’t try to buy people apology paintings—” he couldn’t help it, he laughed “—and have casual prix fixe dinners on a whim because they don’t know how to use their ovens.”

“I know how to use my oven. I use it to make pizza sometimes.”

“Oh my god,” said Jay. “Stop trying to rationalize your insane amount of privilege.”

Nicholas hid a smile at her playful scolding as he pulled into the driveway, knowing that she wasn't really angry. When she was yelling at him in earnest, her face got all flushed, and she got these three little lines between her eyebrows. Now she just looked sexy and cross.

"I don't like that look on your face, either," Jay said.

"You'd like what's in my head even less then," he said absently as his eyes swept across his property. The satisfaction of owning it was tinged with the darker knowledge of what it had cost him, and how it had almost lost him the woman sitting in the car beside him.

His mother's flowers glowed whitely in the moonlight, filling the air with a fragrance he could detect as soon as he had opened the car door. For years, his father had talked about ripping out the jasmine, lilies, and roses, and he had been forced to pretend at indifference to the matter, knowing that if he revealed just how much that would have devastated him, his father would have done it that much sooner.

He always destroyed what he couldn't have, he thought, glancing sidelong at Jay. *Especially if it was beautiful.*

The cross expression had left her face as she hopped up the raised levels of the walkway with the same little skip in her step that she'd had when she was fourteen. She had smiled more over the last couple days than he had seen her smile at home in years.

Because she was unhappy.

Maybe he was more like his father than he thought.

Impulsively, he bent down and plucked a sprig of jasmine free. White sap leaked out, staining his fingers. He reached over and tucked the flower in the dark curls of Jay's loose hair. It stuck, and she reached up to touch it with a startled sound.

"Hey! What are you doing? What is that?"

"Jasmine. It comes alive in the dark—just like you."

The smile on her face faded and she looked at him with solemn eyes.

"What?" he asked, defensive.

"You're so surprising." She said it quietly, as if she hadn't meant to say it aloud at all.

“In a good way?”

(Stop begging for her approval like the fucking dog)

Jay lowered her hand, leaving the flower in her hair. The white petals were striking against her dark curls. He didn’t dare breathe, afraid that the wrong response would send her running.

“In an I-forgot-how-charming-you-can-be-way.” She touched his cheek, thumbing the corner of his mouth, before ducking her head in apparent embarrassment. As she stepped aside to let him unlock the front door, he noticed her cheeks were flushed. “I’ll go start dinner.”

Nicholas felt almost short of breath as he headed up the stairs to his room, his face still tingling where she had touched it. Ignoring the doubts in his head, he changed into a pair of worn gray sweatpants and a white wifebeater, hoping he hadn’t imagined the longing in her eyes.

Jay was standing over the stove when he came back downstairs, frowning into the pot as she added a powdery yellow spice from a jar. She was still wearing her work clothes, though she had kicked off her shoes. The open back of her blouse revealed a generous expanse of bare skin. He’d put his tongue to that dark beauty mark on her left shoulder blade more than once while taking her from behind. It always made her shiver. Sometimes, it made her moan.

He wanted to spend the rest of his life taking his time with her, finding out what other things could wrest little shivers and pleasure-sounds from her.

He wanted her to say yes.

“Can I help?”

Jay jumped, her fingers tightening on the ladle in her hand. She looked at him, and then away, where she gestured to a pile of carrots on the cutting board.

“You can chop those carrots for the curry.”

He grabbed one of his good Japanese knives.

She winced, watching him hack the top off the biggest one with a flourish. “It’s not an execution. Here—” She left the ladle in the steaming concoction to take the knife from him, rocking the blade back and forth to

slice off several neat and even pieces. “Make them nice and thin, like this. It’s a gentle back and forth motion.”

“I know how to cut vegetables, Jay.”

“You’re just holding it awfully close to your f—”

“Jay. Stop.” He took the knife back from her reluctant hand. “I know how to—*motherfucker*.”

“Fingers,” she finished helplessly. “Is what I was about to say. You’re supposed to cut away from yourself, Nick. Not towards.”

He swore again in response as drops of blood scattered on the wooden cutting board. Jay sighed and took the knife away, giving it a rinse with soap and hot water before setting it back on the cutting board, nudging the carrots away from his blood.

Tearing off a piece of paper towel, she said, “Let me see what you did to yourself.”

He gave her his hand, letting out a hiss when she gripped him by the wrist, one thumb pressing just above his pulse point, with her other fingers bracing against the backs of his.

“It’s not that deep,” she pronounced, bowing her head over his palm. When a few locks of her hair slid against his bare shoulder, his groin tightened with need. Oblivious, she the paper towel and squeezed while looking up at him with one of her gentle half-smiles. “One time in college, I accidentally cut myself down to the bone while slicing an avocado. Avocado hand.”

“That’s not a thing,” he ground out, staring at their entwined hands.

“It is. Look it up.” She gave his finger a final squeeze before taking the paper towel away. “You’ll be fine. Make sure you bandage that later, though. And put some antibiotic on it.”

She picked up the knife.

“Are you ousting me from my own kitchen?”

Jay began to chop. Small, neat slices. *It’s a gentle back and forth motion.* “It’s your house. You can do whatever you want as long as it doesn’t involve knives.”

His cock throbbed. “I’m making the drinks then.”

“Not too strong.”

“If we’re having an evening in, I want to have some fun.”

“I’m fun without alcohol.”

“Yeah.” He splashed a generous amount of gin into two cut-crystal tumblers. “Reading and rock collecting. You’re quite the party girl. Pass me a lemon.”

She took one out of his crisper and began grating it.

“Seriously? You don’t trust me with the fucking grater, either?”

“No.” She dropped the zest in his hand. “You’d find a way to cut off your finger with it.”

“Well, aren’t you bratty.” He scattered the zest into the gin before topping it off with some elderflower tonic water he’d brought back from France, watching the cocktail bubble. “Here, try this for me. If it makes you fall over, it’ll be just about right for me.”

Jay pointed the knife at him. “Take your devil water and get out.”

Rolling his eyes, Nicholas set down the gin bottle. He could feel her eyes following him as he carried the drinks out into the den and set them on the end table. The look was not disapproving.

Humming to himself, he got to his knees and began fiddling with the cables in the entertainment console, rearranging things in the HDMI ports until the screen flickered to life, revealing polygonal 64-bit graphics that looked only a little faded on the big plasma screen.

He was surprised by the wave of nostalgia it brought.

“Is that your old Nintendo?” Jay’s voice sounded from behind him. “I can’t believe it still works.”

“It is and it does. Now sit down, blue jay. You’re going to loosen up and have some fun with me.”

She looked down skeptically before getting to her knees one leg at a time. While lowering herself from that awkward kneel, she handed him one of the bowls. She had pureed the carrots into the soup and now the liquid was a beautiful, rich orange color with a glistening sheen.

“This looks good.”

“I think it will be.” She accepted her drink from him and gave it a wary sniff before taking a very small sip. “This tastes like you put the whole distillery in it.”

“Good.” He picked up his controller. “That’s how it should be.”

“I feel like we’re about to get in trouble,” Jay said, laughing self-consciously. “Eating and drinking on the white carpet. Remember how Yelena was always so particular about the carpet? She seemed to think your dad would skin her alive if it ever got stained.”

Nicholas glanced at her, and then casually let some of his curry tip out onto the rug.

“Nick! Oh my god! I put turmeric in that! It’s going to stain!”

She jumped up, and he reached out to catch at her hand, giving it a little tug. “Sit down, blue jay. It’s just a rug.”

“A stained rug.” She looked at him for a long moment before sinking back down beside him. She looked so sweet with her skirt riding over her knees. Now that she’d brought it up, this really did remind him of when they were both in school, whiling away the hours until their parents came home to ignore them in person. “Why did you do that?”

“Because it’s my rug.”

Jay shook her head. “Unbelievable.”

“Cheers,” he said, lifting up his cocktail. “To the carpet.”

She wrinkled her nose as they clinked glasses. “To getting ants.”

He clicked his tongue at her before shooting her ship out of the sky.

“Nick! I wasn’t ready.”

“Your toast was shit.”

“God, you’re so annoying.”

“You love it.”

“And manipulative.” She gave him a challenging look. “Arrogant. *Pretentious.*”

“Well, that last one is more habit.” He waited for her ship to respawn while he took a thoughtful drink. “You go to all the right schools, meet all the people, and you don’t need to be taught good taste because good taste is all you’re ever exposed to.”

“Nobody made you do any of that.”

“My father did,” he said quietly.

Her face shifted, undergoing several changes in sequence. When she spoke, she sounded subdued. “You’re still haunted by him, too?”

He thought of the dark whispers in his mind whenever he’d reached another low, or found himself pushing up against another dark wall. “You could say that. In any case, I’m glad he’s dead. I often find myself thinking that if he wasn’t, I might just have killed him myself.”

“You’d be in prison, Nicholas.”

Her ship exploded into a cloud of pixelated fire. “When I think about what he did to you—what he would have done that night if I hadn’t stopped him—”

“Nicholas.” She grabbed his arm as her ship smoldered on the screen. Her face was worried. “Nick,” she said, softening her words. “I don’t want you to hurt people for me.”

“I feel like I’m losing my fucking grip, Jay. First my father. Then your mother. Now Jake—”

“I know. Believe me, I know.” She ran her hand over his bicep before taking her hand away. “After that fight with my mother, I drank a whole half bottle of wine. It made me sick as a dog.” She gave him a sympathetic glance. “What is Jake doing now? Is he the sheriff, like his dad?”

Nicholas breathed out a laugh. “Him? No. Even his father thinks he’s an embarrassment. He works for his uncle, who runs some sleazy detective agency. The kind that photographs cheating wives for their cuck husbands, like they’re not getting off on watching strangers fuck.”

“Wow,” Jay said. “That’s a little ironic, coming from you.”

The remark stung and he grimaced as he raised his glass, causing the ice to clink against the side. “It’s easy to get used to seeing people through a lens.”

“Spying on them.”

“I mostly just spied on you.”

“Reading my diary.” Jay shook her head. “Filming me. Sneaking into my room.”

“You were so fucking beautiful. Everything came to you so easily.” He set his glass down, the florals of the gin thickly coating his tongue. “I just wanted a piece of you for myself.”

“You wanted me on my knees.” She gave him a harsh look that crackled through him like static. “Everything I had, I had to work three times as hard for—and you wanted to take that all away. And nobody stopped you from doing it to me. Nobody stopped your father, either.”

“Poor blue jay.”

“That’s what’s wrong with this town,” Jay said. “The people here will tell you that it’s a privilege to be able to breathe, and then they’ll sit back and watch you be suffocated.”

“I told you that.”

“I didn’t want to believe you.” Her eyes blinked away. “But then you made me do things I didn’t want to do, and I did.”

He picked up the controller again. “I’ve made you bitter.”

“I’m not bitter.”

“And a liar, too.”

Jay grabbed his controller, sending his ship flying wide. His eyes widened in surprise, and then a smirk tugged at his mouth as he flipped his wrist, so her hand was trapped beneath his when he swung to his knees, using his weight to roll her onto her back while their ships both crashed.

Her drink tipped over right along with her and the scent of bitters and lemon rose up from the carpet as he pinned her down by his hips, stretching to cover her body with his.

“Daddy’s bitter little bird.” Smiling darkly, he drew his fingers possessively down the side of her cheek while his eyes searched her face. “You don’t want anyone to save you from me now, do you? You like being at my mercy when I fuck you.”

“Nicholas—” She shivered. “Please . . .”

“I asked you a question.”

She wet her lips. “N-no. I . . . like it.”

He reached past her for the remote, turning the TV off. Under the black eye of the screen, they fumbled. Her hands moved over his back and

shoulders, and he was forced to get down on one arm so she could pull the wifebeater over his head.

“You want this.” It was not a question, but she closed her eyes and nodded.

“Good. Because I never wanted it with anyone else.” The buttons on her blouse were on the back, and with a grunt of frustration, he yanked at her sleeves, until her breasts were spilling over the neck of her top in that sheer, lacy bra. “Never.” He leaned down and kissed her through it, breathing out heavily against the stiff bud of her nipple. “That’s why I kept your old bed. I couldn’t get rid of the first place I ever had you.”

“Fuck,” she choked out. “That’s—so messed up.”

“I know.” He slid his hand beneath her skirt as he trailed kisses over her ribs. “But the thing is, Jay—” he rolled her skirt up to her belly and tugged aside her underwear, exposing her dark, glistening sex “—you’ve always had a way of getting under my skin.”

He bent his head and fucked her with his mouth right there on the carpet, tonguing her clit until she was bracing against the floor, her thighs squeezing his face until his jaw ached. When he looked up at her, one of her hands was on her breast. The other was tightly gripping her skirt, keeping it rolled up and out of his way. “Daddy,” her hips lifted. “Daddy, *please*—”

The desire burning through him was violent enough to blow him apart. As she trembled beneath his lips, he knew he’d never get her out of his blood. It was Jay or nothing. All he had ever wanted was this. Even if it ended up scoring him raw, he wanted *this*.

With a harsh exhalation, he pulled away and fumbled with a condom before plunging inside her trembling cunt, letting his arms hit the floor on either side of her pretty face. The first thrust made her jolt, but then he felt her legs wrap around his hips and pull him deeper.

“You slutty girl.”

“Yes,” she panted.

“Marking me up like your property.” Her fingers bit into his back and he groaned again. “You think clawing Daddy up is going to keep you from getting fucked?”

“Sorry,” she gasped, and he laughed against her throat.

“Don’t apologize. Fuck me harder.”

Make me yours.

She let her head fall back into the spilled drink as she lifted her hips at his command. He thrust deeply in response, crushing her breasts against his bare chest as he filled her until he met resistance. “Harder,” he said, breathless himself now. “Make me work for it.”

She kept trying to arch into him but couldn’t maintain the pace, gripping his shoulders to brace herself as her thighs began to tremble with the strain.

“Daddy, I can’t—” Jay collapsed on the next thrust, making her head fall back towards the ceiling as she struggled to catch her breath. “We ruined . . . the carpet.”

“I don’t give a fuck.” Nicholas entered her again, pinning her pelvis to the floor with his cock, and came with a shudder, as he settled into the lush cradle of her hips with a final, shallow rock. “Help me christen the next one.” He traced the rise of her left breast. “Marry me.”

Jay shook her head.

“Marry me,” he repeated. Still inside her, he reached down to unfasten the chain at her throat, pulling the little ring free from her cleavage even as she tried to grasp it from him. Unable to resist teasing her, he dangled it over her face, letting the ring bounce off the edge of her nose.

“Do you love me?”

Her chest hitched. “Yes, but—”

“But what?”

“I’m scared.” Tears sparkled in her eyes. “Everyone leaves me because I’m not good enough.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” he snarled. “I’ve always loved you.”

“Yes. Everyone says that . . . right before they go away.”

“I’m not going to leave you, Jay.” His chest fell heavily against hers, and she stared up at him, her eyes wide. “I would never leave you. You’re mine. You have always been mine. But you have to trust me long enough to prove it to you.”

Jay let out a stuttering breath, more tears sliding down her wet face. “But I’m so scared.”

“But can you do that? Can you trust me?” he demanded, thumbing the tears from one of her sharp cheekbones. When her eyes skated to the side, he let his hand drift to her shoulder, tugging the dangling straps of her bra back into place. “Tell me things aren’t that broken between us.”

“I’m tired of fighting you, Nick,” she said wearily. “I can’t resist you anymore.”

He looked down at the beautiful woman beneath him, bent in surrender, and his conscience twisted. Gently, he cupped her face. “Are you always going to call me Nick?”

“I can’t help it.” He felt the movement inside and out when she freed up an arm to stroke his jaw. “You’ll always be my Nick.”

My Nick. It felt like his chest was caught in a vise.

“I can be your Nick.” He took her hand from his face and slipped the ring on her finger. It fit perfectly. “Say yes,” he urged, folding his fingers over hers. “And I will be.”

Jay closed her eyes and he felt his heart clench.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Yes.”

■■■■■

When Jay was younger, she had thought about her wedding like any other girl, but every template for marriage she’d ever seen had either been disastrous, like her mother’s, or had a hard, sterile stop after the “I do,” like one of those children’s fairytales.

Nobody had ever told her what *should* come next after the happily-ever-after. She only knew what failure looked like, and had felt the brutal sting of its loveless lash as her parents’ marriage disintegrated. Relegated to the role of spectator, she had watched the matches play out as cold silences and shouted arguments, punctuated by broken plates and late-night rendezvous. Both her mother and Damon were far too proud and cruel to ever let the other leave unscathed, even if it meant that their own children would end up as the casualties. Which they had. Over and over.

What would happen when she and Nicholas inevitably fought? Because they would. They were like oil and water—if the oil was ablaze and the water was frozen. Would he mock her, trap her in a cage of her own words? Or would he follow his father's teachings and allow himself to become poisoned by the hate he claimed to deny as she inevitably failed to meet his expectations and fled from his taunting?

For years, her resistance had become a steel bar that she could support herself against when everything else was crumbling down. If she didn't need anyone, it wouldn't matter if she ended up alone. If she didn't let herself love anyone, it wouldn't hurt when they left. But now that bar had been yanked away and Jay could feel herself falling into the cold dark void it had left behind, and for the first time in her life, she had to trust that somebody would catch her.

(You need someone to take care of you)

God, it terrified her. It had been so long since she had been in a relationship with anyone, and none of those had ever made her feel the tide of overwhelming sensations that threatened to take over whenever they were together. It left her feeling desperate—to run, hide, both, either. She wasn't sure. She had tried both and been run to ground by his tireless, maddening pursuit of her.

The lines that were beginning to form on his face suggested that he was as exhausted by it all as she was. Far from being the carefree playboy she'd imagined he had become in her absence by living large on his father's money, Nicholas ran his company with the defiant stoicism of a captain manning a sinking ship.

Not that he was saint—he had his father's cold patrician arrogance and could be so hot-tempered that he was nearly bratty. But in the years that she had been away, Nicholas had become an adult in a way that she had not.

And she was so fucking lonely.

Nicholas wanted to celebrate their upcoming nuptials by taking her out to dinner. He didn't call it a celebration but she knew it was one because this time they didn't go to Accia; they went to the Bayview, which had a very expensive wine bar with a view of the ocean.

Hitting up all the old haunts, she thought, wondering if Nicholas knew that despite its quiet elegance, the Bayview was notorious for being the

place where men brought their mistresses.

At least I fit the dress code, she thought, pulling down her strappy black dress. She felt ridiculous in it—her mother would say she looked like a “size fourteen sausage in a size ten casing”—but when Nicholas saw her wearing it, he had nearly walked into the wall.

“My fucking god,” he said, fisting his keys. “Come here. Now.”

(“*Tell me I’m yours*”)

A maître d’ walked them to a booth by the plush bar of Quentin’s father’s hotel. Or maybe it was *his* hotel now. She caught a glimpse of Quentin himself, dressed in a tailored suit and giving orders to a handful of staff as he no-doubt instructed them on how to handle the pre-dinner rush.

Jay looked away before their eyes could meet but thought she saw him do a double-take in her periphery. He was pushy enough that he would take a single look as invitation to come over, so she kept her eyes on her water glass. But when a complimentary bottle of wine arrived at their table that Nicholas denied ordering, Jay knew who it was really from.

It angered her. Did everyone think she was so cheap to buy?

“One More Night” by Saleka was playing from some hidden speaker, the low, sultry music adding to the seductive atmosphere. Anxiety heightened her senses, making her aware of everything from the smells of cooking spices to the slight current of displaced air against all the skin exposed by her “punishment dress” every time someone passed by their table.

Nicholas took his napkin and covered the cork, twisting until the bottle opened with a muffled pop. “Was Quentin the one who told you about Jake?”

Jay looked at him so sharply that her earrings shivered. “He was.” Taking the bottle from him, she poured them each a frothing glass, as a waiter raced over in a panic, trying to help her pour. “We’re fine, thank you,” she said, and then felt her mouth harden when his eyes flicked involuntarily to the low neck of her dress. “He mentioned you invested money in this hotel.”

“Very opportunistic of him.” Nicholas leaned back in his seat as he watched the flow of pale liquid, his eyes a deep slate in the low lights of the

bar. “I wonder if he’s kissing up to me or you.”

“You, probably.” She handed him his glass and a spark shot up her wrist when their fingers brushed. “He made it very clear where his priorities lay when we last spoke.”

“He took you for granted then. Just like all your other friends.” He raised the glass to his lips, causing his dinner jacket to fold open. He was the only man in the establishment who wasn’t wearing a tie and he outshone them all with his dark elegance. “It’s pathetic how quickly they’ve all come crawling back, isn’t it?”

“If you dislike it that much,” Jay said, filling her own glass, “why are you here?”

“I never said I disliked it. But you do. Is that why you pushed him away? I always wondered. He looked at you like he wanted to add you to his collection of expensive, pretty things. In another life, it could have been you up there. The charming brochure-ready hotelier’s wife.”

Jay grimaced. “I don’t want to talk about Quentin anymore.”

“Then let’s talk about you.”

“What about me?”

“Well, we could talk about our engagement.” He studied her in the low lights. “Or we could discuss how beautiful you look in your slutty new dress—and how distracting it is, when you fidget like that.”

Jay realized, when she saw his eyes go pointedly to her shoulder, that she was unconsciously fingering one of the straps. It was the one he’d shown her on his phone before he took her out to lunch at Accia, and was every bit as low-cut as he’d threatened. The structured fit made it look like she was about to spill out of her dress.

Expensive, pretty things.

Jay lowered both hands to her lap, resisting the urge to cover herself. “I’m not used to dressing up.”

“You mean, you’re not used to people looking at you when you let yourself look beautiful.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t analyze me, the way you do everything else. It makes me feel like one of your stock portfolios.”

“I just think it’s a shame. I bet those polite little cuckolds you dated thought so, too. When you walk into a room, you outshine everyone in it. But you always tried to dim your own light by hiding yourself away.”

Jay took a generous swallow of champagne. The bubbles stung her nose and she wrinkled it, feeling an unexpected flare of defiance that flickered through her like a candle. “Sometimes I don’t want to be looked at,” she said heatedly. “I didn’t ask to look like this.”

“Like an angel of sin?” Nicholas leaned back against the booth and the buttons on his shirt strained with the movement. “That’s what you always looked like to me.”

“At least I don’t make people cry on purpose,” she said childishly.

“No, you just choose not to see how you affect people. I’d call it cruel if I thought you had it in you. But it honestly seems like you just really don’t want to see it.”

“You did call me cruel,” she reminded him. “And if I am, I learned it from you.”

“Then you learned from the master.” He picked his wine up again, thoughtful. “I’ll tell you a secret, though. Sometimes, I don’t mean to be cruel. I just don’t care enough not to be.”

“You could pretend. It might even start to feel real if you do.”

“It doesn’t seem worth the effort—my caring. At work, I get paid either way, regardless of whose feelings I end up hurting. In these circles, a bit of emotional bloodbath is a self-fueling spectacle. Entertainment.” He scoffed. “Before you came back here, I figured I’d end up alone.”

“Oh, Nicholas.” She hated it when he was like this. She could never tell if he was trying to play on her sympathies or expressing genuine despair. His mobile face offered her no clues and she didn’t want to be caught staring, so she turned to study the opulent wallpaper with its bold peacock print, even as it felt like her heart might shatter to pieces. “You really didn’t think someone else would have fallen for you? With all that you have to offer?”

“You mean I should have gotten myself a trophy wife, like my father.”

“You know that’s not what I meant. You have your charms.” She turned to face him, breathing a sigh of relief when she saw that some of the

intensity had left his face. *Even if he is pretending.* “I think you like it better when people are afraid of you.”

He toyed with his fork. “Are you afraid of me?”

“No,” she said, surprised to realize it was true. “I watched you grow up in your father’s shadow. I saw the hold he had on you—and how you tried to escape it. You aren’t the boy you were. I wouldn’t have had dinner with that boy. But I *am* here with the man you became.”

“You don’t think I’m—” He looked up impatiently as their waiter approached.

One glance at Nicholas’s drawn eyebrows and hard mouth made the younger man flustered. “Shrimp tartlets for the gentleman,” he said, grievously breaking protocol and serving Nicholas first in his eagerness to soothe, “and baba ghanoush for the lady?”

“Yes, that’s fine, thank you,” Nicholas said, in a tone that very clearly meant *fuck off*.

“Thank you,” Jay echoed after him before he could completely flee. It was strange, she thought, giving Nciholas a chastising look. She didn’t need to imagine what it would be like to sit across from this man at a kitchen table for the rest of her life. Because she had already done so for years. Unlike the other men in her life, there was no mystery.

With Nicholas, she knew exactly what she was getting.

“I don’t think you’re what?” she prompted, finding his eyes on her.

Something flickered in his face. “Cruel. Heartless. Selfish.”

“Oh. Well.” She rubbed at the back of her neck. “I think we can all be those things.”

“Enough so that you regret saying yes to me?”

“No.” Jay leaned forward and saw a muscle in his jaw tighten. “I would have said no if I didn’t want this. I know you love me. But you also understand that sometimes—” her face flushed as she looked around. “Sometimes it feels good to be disrespected in the dark.”

Nicholas half-smiled. “Your faceless stranger.”

Jay winced. “You can stop bringing that up any time.”

“What kind of wedding do you want? Not one for the society pages, I’m assuming, since you don’t like being looked at. Did you want to get married in a church?”

Jay poked at a chickpea, making it roll across the plate. “I don’t really want a wedding at all.”

“That won’t be a problem,” he said, so easily that she looked up suspiciously. “We can get a license. It will be faster. The sooner you’re mine, the better.”

Her throat tightened. “Can we wait until the interviews are over?”

Nicholas paused with the fork raised to his mouth. “Why?”

“It wouldn’t look good for us. People would accuse me of sleeping my way to the top.” And they wouldn’t be wrong, would they? He had only offered her the position as a sort of sexual bargaining chip, even if it was with the best of intentions. “They already kind of do.”

“Give me names.” His tone was grim.

“No. Please, Nick. It’s very important to me. I want people to take me seriously. Nobody ever has, not until about three years ago. I don’t want to lose all of that. If we’re going to enter this partnership—” she emphasized the word “—I need to be self-sufficient.”

His eyes fell to her hand, where she was worrying the ring with her thumb. A line in his jaw relaxed. “Whatever you need to do,” he said carelessly. “But I’m used to a certain standard of living, and I reserve the right to step in if your self-sufficiency isn’t up to par.”

“Step in to do what?” she asked suspiciously.

“Mostly throw money at all of your problems until they go away.” He gave her a sideways smile. “I may have bought you a new wardrobe that reflects your elevated role at the company. I don’t want to see my new Vice President walking around the office with a broken handbag.”

“I suppose you already bought a scandalous wedding dress, too,” said Jay.

“I actually thought you could wear my mother’s.” He glanced at her. “If you want to.”

“Your father kept it?” Jay asked incredulously. “I didn’t think he was that sentimental.”

“He wasn’t. I think he forgot about it. Otherwise he would have had it destroyed.”

The cowed waiter came back and asked if they wanted dessert while Jay reeled from that bombshell. Nicholas sent him away impatiently. “Just the check.”

“He was a terrible man,” Jay said, recognizing the pain in his face. “You’re not him.”

His eyes went to her, hopeful and uncertain. As he pulled out his black Amex, he said, carefully, “Most people say I’m his spitting image.”

“Your coloring, maybe, but the shape of your face is different,” Jay insisted, though she had believed the same once, when the cruelty on his face had been more apparent. “I always imagined that you must look an awful lot like your mother. She must have been beautiful.”

“She was.” He folded the leather case closed over his card. “I’ll show you a picture.”

“I would love to see it.” She put her hand over his. “And I’d love to wear her dress.”

“Good, because I—”

“Jay-Jay. Nick.” Nicholas went stiff, the expression on his face chilling visibly as Quentin hovered over them, putting his hand on the back of Jay’s side of the booth while the waiter cleared away what remained of their dishes. “How are you both doing tonight? Was everything to your liking? Don’t tell anyone but I sent over a bottle of our best champagne.”

“We noticed.” Nicholas was wearing a knife-sharp smile that was a pale shadow of its former glory. “How’s your sister, Ho?” he asked casually, handing the folder to the waiter.

As Jay watched Quentin react to Nicholas’s obvious contempt, she had a vivid memory of taking Nicholas to the store as a child. They had been doing their holiday shopping and she had wanted to go alone, but Nick, being his usual bratty self, had appeared out of nowhere just as she was halfway out the door. “Yelena’s not here and my dad says that you’re supposed to watch me.”

She had recognized for the lie it was immediately. Damon had never really told her to *do* anything. All of his orders had been filtered down

through the untrustworthy mouthpiece of her mother, who was about as interested in watching them as she was in anything else.

But Jay had also known that dealing with Nick now would be easier than dealing with Nick later, when he would be bearing a grudge after her return alone.

“All right,” she’d sighed. “Come on, toad.”

They had gone to a thrift store downtown called Hidden Marvels because Jay wasn’t used to having an allowance and was terrified that it would be taken away if she overspent. “Why aren’t we going to the mall?” Nick whined. “They have an arcade. This is where old ladies shop.”

“We’re shopping here,” Jay had said, already annoyed. “Don’t touch anything. If you break it, you have to buy it,” she added, noticing a sign.

“I’m not going to break anything.”

Jay, recognizing the bratty tone, had not been convinced. And when he did break something less than five minutes later, she was not at all surprised. It had been an old glass ornament—blown antique glass. Very expensive-looking and quite possibly irreplaceable.

Before Jay could get in an “I told you so” or reluctantly reach for her wallet, the bratty little twelve-year-old that was her stepbrother had reached for a tiny leather wallet she didn’t even know he had, and handed the startled clerk three twenties. “A little extra for your trouble,” he said, in what was clearly a stiff approximation of his father, and Jay remembered staring at him with a stunned sort of awe, thinking, *Just who the hell does this kid think he is?*

Even dressed in deliberately casual disarray while surrounded by all of Hollybrook’s finest social climbers, it was clear who held the power here. Quentin’s suit might have cost the same on the rock, but the fact that Nicholas wore his so carelessly suggested a level of comfort that added to, rather than detracted from, his arrogance.

The difference between the Nick sitting across from her and the Nick from sixteen years ago was that this one knew *exactly* who he thought he was—and now, she did, too.

“Courtney’s great,” Quentin said, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he’d already lost this game of social calculus before it had even begun.

“She’s a doctor now. Married.”

“Are you married?”

Quentin’s face became unreadable. “No.” Turning to Jay, his smile gained some fresh wattage. “Jay-Jay, how are you? I meant to reach out after we talked at Just Avocados but you must have changed your number. I was hoping we could catch up. Shoot the shit, spill the tea—just like we did during the good old days.”

Did you, Jay thought humorlessly, aware of Nicholas’s gaze. Picking up her champagne glass, she studied the legs of the wine, the fine spray of bubbles. It had obviously been very expensive.

“I didn’t think we had much left to discuss,” she said. “You made yourself very clear.”

Nicholas smiled.

The corners of Quentin’s mouth turned down even as he somehow maintained his professional smile. “It’s been years, Jay. Can’t we forgive and forget? You never used to stay mad at me.”

“I’m sorry, Quentin. I’m not the girl I was in high school.”

“Did you want something, Ho? Or are we done here?”

Resigned, Quentin faced Nicholas without much enthusiasm. “Michael wanted me to pass on his thanks if I saw you. He wanted you to know that the development is going well. Everything is signed off and ready to build.”

“I’m more interested in him holding up his side of our bargain than I am in platitudes.” He smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Thanks for the wine.”

Quentin’s smile was now visibly forced. “With my compliments. Thanks for patronizing the Bayview.”

“I thought you liked him,” Nicholas murmured, as Quentin walked away.

“I used to. What was that about? What bargain do you have with Michael?”

“Just a little business deal. Nothing for you to worry about. Our fathers used to do business together and he wanted it to be just like old times.” He

arched his brows at her continued silence, not even bothering to hide his obvious glee. “Wasn’t he one of your simps?”

“Quentin? Or Michael?” Jay drained her champagne, the decadence of the waste thrilling her a little in the wake of her sudden adrenaline rush. “I’m not the pushover everyone thinks I am, you know. He can’t buy my forgiveness with a drink.”

“And to think you used to care so much about what they thought of you.” His eyes were hotly admiring as he studied her over the delicate glass that looked like it might snap in his fingers. Nearly twenty years later, Jay thought, and he was still the small boy who gloried in the delights his own destruction wrought. “I could ruin him, you know. With a single phone call.”

Jay’s eyes snapped to his. “What do you mean, ruin him?”

“I mean, I can make all this—” he snapped his fingers. “Gone.”

Jay backed up against the booth. “Y-you can do that?”

He leaned forward, his dress jacket creaking as he braced one hand near her thigh. “Why don’t you ask me and find out for yourself?”

Her throat tightened as she thought of herself nine years ago, terrified and desperate, and Quentin’s dismissive “sorry, babe” while lying through his teeth.

Do it, a voice whispered.

A chill slithered down her spine at the look of seductive menace on his handsome face and she set down her glass with more force than necessary. “N-no,” she said uneasily. “Just take me home . . . please.”

Nicholas nodded, like he’d expected nothing less, tucking the tip beneath his plate. They walked past the still-hovering Quentin and out into the cold night.

Jay could hear the roar of the ocean in the distance and it reminded her of her youth with the stinging salience of salt in a wound. No matter how hard she railed against it, this place belonged to her as much as her own weary bones did, and she could not unknow the taste of those dark waters any more than she could the bitterness of citrus on a man’s clean skin.

She wondered if Quentin knew how close he had come to ruin.

“Would you really have destroyed this hotel if I’d said yes?”

His lips curled into a small, private smile. “I guess you’ll never find out with that soft heart of yours.”

As they headed down the path that would take them back to the car, Jay impulsively tugged on Nicholas’s sleeve, nudging him down a side path. He followed her gamely towards the beach as she stumbled a little over the rocky shore. There was no one else there. It was off-season for bonfires and all the hotel guests would have been safely ensconced in the warm cells of their lamplit rooms, but as they got closer to the shoreline Jay could see the charred remains of old bonfires from last season, made out of circles of driftwood and cold pockets of ash.

“What are you doing?” Nicholas asked in a bemused tone, as she shivered in her thin, low-cut dress, holding the hem down with one hand as she felt her way across the sand in the dark. “I thought you wanted to go home.”

He didn’t sound at all annoyed but she still felt compelled to explain. “I just needed to get out of there. Look at that—” She pointed to the moon’s reflection, scattered over the swells like glinting pieces of broken mirror. “That’s a million-dollar view.”

Following her finger, he said, “That’s waterfront, blue jay. It’s closer to ten million.”

“Oh, who cares what it costs? It doesn’t always have to be about the money.” Jay hopped over a log, nearly losing her shoe when it got sucked into the wet sand. “We used to come out here back in high school. To this exact beach. We’d just bum around the sand all day, and then someone would get food and drinks and we’d sit around the fire and talk about all the things we wanted to be when we grew up. As if we had a choice,” she said, some of the bitterness seeping out.

Nicholas nudged a charred piece of wood with the tip of his brogue. Something in the detritus seemed to catch his attention because he stooped down to pick up what appeared to be a small white stone. He rolled it in his fingers, testing its shape. “What did you say?”

“Nothing, usually.” She folded her arms tighter as she watched his hand. “They all said they wanted to leave here. I did, too. But talking about it like that made me realize that when everything was over, I’d be all alone. And then I was the only one who did leave and I *was* alone.”

She took a few unsteady steps to the side as the wind whipped her dress around her legs.

“Isn’t that sad, Nick? I was surrounded by people but I was always alone. I didn’t know how to be with people because I pushed everyone away. I was afraid they’d leave me as soon as I stopped being *enough*. And they let me do it. They let me push them away and they never asked if that was what I really wanted. Except for you. But there was always a cost with you.”

“Welcome to the world of business, darling.” The words were mocking but his tone was achingly gentle. He kicked sand over the ashes. “I tried to tell you it was a fuck or get-fucked world.”

“Were you even happy? You were trapped in that house, too.”

“You’re the one who left,” he pointed out.

“And you’re the one who stayed. You got everything you wanted.”

“We both know that that’s not true.”

He moved closer and she stopped breathing as the static tension between them heightened until it was like a touch she could feel against her skin.

“You were like a dreamer living in a fairytale. You thought there was goodness in restraint. But there isn’t.” He straightened, the fabric of his jacket rippling. “When you feed your dreams to the bonfire, you just end up with a pile of cold dead ashes and a whole lot of nothing.”

Jay laughed humorlessly. “Says the boy who thinks he can buy his way out of trouble with a fistful of twenties.”

“Oh, blue jay. Don’t tell me you dragged me out here just to be sad.” She shivered again and he shrugged out of his dinner jacket. It was the one he’d promised her he would look good in—truthfully, as it turned out. The fabric was still warm from his body when he draped it around her shoulders. “You should tell me your dreams instead. If you do it nicely enough,” he pressed his wind-chilled lips to her cheek, “I might even make them all come true.”

“You never answered my question,” said Jay. “Were you happy, Nick?”

“No.” Heedless of the fine weave of his trousers, he dropped down on one of the half-rotted logs facing the water. It was low enough that his legs

bowed comically, nearly level with his chest. “I wasn’t happy.”

Mindful of the fabric riding high on her thighs, Jay sat down beside him. He immediately put his arm around her waist, stretching his legs out closer to the silent fire as he stared out at the silvery sea. Jay extended her leg, and knocked the tip of her heel against his leather brogue.

“I wasn’t, either.”

His hand rubbed up and down her back.

“I know.”

As they sat, breathing in the silence, she felt his hand cover hers. The dim lights of the Bayview blurred in the distance as she felt his fingers pry open her palm. The light graze of his nails sent a pulse of heat to her fingertips as he pressed something smooth and warm into her hand.

“You were looking for one of these, I think.”

The white object Nicholas picked up hadn’t been a stone at all. It was a sand dollar.

She looked up at him in surprise. He was staring at her.

“I’m only happy when I’m with you,” he told her solemnly.

Jay ran a hand through his thick hair, curving her fingers to cradle his scalp. “I had a similar thought recently.” She pulled him closer. “Right before you cockblocked me on your sofa.”

“Sounds like something I would do.”

“Dick,” said Jay.

And with the wind tangling in their hair, and the faint scent of the dead fires mixing with the salt of the sea spray, she closed the distance and kissed him beneath that brilliant moon.

The sand dollar went on her desk, next to her favorite mug and a chipped geode that was too broken to be part of her main collection but she also couldn’t bear to throw away because the thought of all those crystals glinting dully in a landfill made her want to cry.

She rattled the sand dollar unthinkingly sometimes while reading her emails, until she caught Annica giving her a dirty look. Then she shut it away in her drawer.

As she put together spreadsheets and pulled data, she found herself thinking of Nick.

Nick and his hands. Nick and his faint aura of menace. Nick and his devastating words.

(I'm only happy when I'm with you)

Another email had gone out that morning that Nicholas would not be interviewing candidates for the VP position, after all. Arthur would be carrying out the interviews alone.

"I'm trying to minimize the potential for conflict of interest," he had told her privately in the car that morning. "When you get the role, I don't want anyone saying we didn't do this properly."

"If I get the role," she corrected him gently.

"Right." He winked and tweaked her nose.

Some people were disappointed. They had been hoping for a chance to hobnob with the CEO. But according to the chatter, this wasn't unusual. Nicholas often cancelled redundant meetings and he didn't manage people as closely as Arthur did. Numbers and fine details were his domain, and when it came to facts, he was like a fine-tuned machine.

Jay got up for her interview stiffly, feeling very self-conscious. She had dressed in eyelet lace and her favorite A-line skirt, not wanting to be too obvious. Someone had asked, "Is Jay applying for the role?" while not entirely out of earshot and the other person had responded, "No, that's just Mr. Hartwell's secretary. She's just here to take notes."

It was only with supreme effort that she was able to walk through the room with her shoulders relaxed and her steps unfaltering. She was an administrative assistant, not a secretary. She had gotten a certification for her work and she did her work *well*.

No more tossing my dreams into the flames, she told herself.

As she passed Nicholas's desk, he looked up from his computer and winked.

Her face was warm when she opened the door to the office where Arthur was waiting. He'd gotten a new desk chair, one of the ergonomic ones that looked like it belonged behind the console of a spaceship. "Hello, Jay." He leaned back comfortably. "I hear congratulations are in order."

Her mind blanked out. “For what?”

His tawny eyebrows lifted and for a moment she thought—perversely—that all of this interviewing had just been a farce. That despite her repeated insistence that she wanted to do this her way, Nicholas had found a means of just giving her the position.

But Arthur was nodding at her hand.

Her left hand.

The *ring*.

Oh my god. Heat suffused her face as all of the shock and anger abruptly swirled out of her like colors down a drain. “I—yes. Nick and I . . . we—”

“I only meant to congratulate you,” Arthur said quickly. “Not put you on the spot.”

Jay blushed. His tone was one of someone assuring another person that their mistake wasn’t really *that* bad. “We’re only stepsiblings. And we didn’t really grow up together—”

“You don’t have to explain. Nicholas told me earlier.” Arthur looked as uncomfortable as she felt. “It’s why he isn’t interviewing. He didn’t think it would be seemly under the current circumstances.”

Current circumstances. Seemly. A hysterical laugh threatened to burst from her lips at the thought of Nicholas using such uptight language.

“It’s all right. You can say it. It’s distasteful. People are going to talk.”

His face softened immediately and he moved towards her as if he wanted to touch her before visibly changing his mind. His hand hovered a moment before falling to his side. “I wouldn’t say that,” he said gently. “It’s very obvious how much he cares about you.”

Was it? Jay gave him a timorous smile. “You’d be one of the rare few, then.”

Arthur gazed thoughtfully out the window. “He never struck me as a particularly happy man. I don’t think I even really saw him laugh until you arrived. But now he does.” His eyes flicked to her. “I assume, because of you.”

(*when I’m with you*)

“Yeah,” Jay said faintly. “He did say something like that.”

The silence stretched and Jay shuffled her feet, wondering why her skin felt too tight on her bones. “Anyway,” Arthur said, so loudly that both of them winced. “Let’s get on with things, shall we? You have an interview with me today, Ms. Varens. So why don’t you go ahead and take your seat, and we can start by having you tell me some of your strengths and weaknesses . . .”

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Chapter Fourteen

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In twenty-seven years, only three things had ever managed to score him beneath his armor: crying in the mall over his dead mother's perfume, Jay's rejection the first time he told her he was in love with her, and his father fucking laughing in his face when he'd announced his intention to propose to her.

The two former humiliations had faded to a faint sting over time, but in the face of his now very real and upcoming marriage, the latter loomed as large as a ghost. His father's voice, so close to his own in terms of pitch and timbre, now echoed abrasively in his ears.

(How did you get her to do it?)

His hand tightened around his mug of coffee.

"Stacey is our strongest candidate so far," Arthur was saying. "Apart from Jun in marketing."

Nicholas nodded, but he did not want to think about Stacey and Jun.

(I know you've been doing a little backyard breeding under my roof. What do you have on your sister, Nicholas? Receipts? Photographs? Or perhaps a tape?)

"Not Stacey," he said, shifting restlessly. "Any power you give her, she'll run with."

"Because she's a senior level employee. You have to give people some room to grow, Nicholas. Otherwise, it's hard to retain talent. It's grow or go, in this industry. You know that."

An image popped into his head, sharp and salient, of a teary-eyed Jay lying in a bed of cast-off silk, begging him to let her go. He made a harsh noise in the back of his throat.

"No."

Arthur pushed his computer aside, rubbing at his graying temples. He'd been interviewing candidates for several hours and it must have been exhausting but he didn't care. Everyone had a reason for why they deserved better, but only one person here had been forced to suffer for it.

“What about Jun then? His managing style is a little less abrasive. And he has a coordinator role, so he’d be ideal at running those meetings.”

(Is that it? Did you film yourself fucking her? Did you make her cry? Do you really think she’ll love you now?)

“No,” Nicholas said again. He stood up and began to pace. “Not Jun.”

Arthur let out a rough breath. “We have to agree on *somebody*.”

“How did Jay’s interview go?” he asked abruptly.

The lines on Arthur’s face seemed to sag; it was as if invisible strings holding his face in that usual good-natured state had all been cut. *He’s been waiting for this*, Nicholas thought, watching him through narrowed eyes. *He knew I’d ask and he doesn’t like it.*

“She’s a very bright and talented young woman who doesn’t have much experience. And if we were to give her the role, it would be hard to create a story that doesn’t smack of nepotism.”

(Give me the evidence and I’ll clean up your mistakes)

Nicholas shook his head. “I can’t. But you can. It’s your job to create the stories, Hartwell. I’ve wiped my hands clean of it.”

“Have you?” Arthur asked mildly. “Then why are we even having this conversation?”

Nicholas turned towards the tinted glass windows that looked out at the people buzzing like ants below the mezzanine. All of them were under his employe, which ostensibly meant that they had to do what he ordered them to. But he had been letting the system run on its own momentum for so long that he had never really put that to the test.

Five years ago, they had called him a wunderkind. He’d found the idea of that a little insulting, even though the attention had brought in cash flow and fresh talent, and youth had allowed him to cruelly surprise some would-be opportunists. Little games of loyalty had been more his father’s domain, because unlike his father, he didn’t need their fear or admiration.

As Nicholas looked down at those unsuspecting white-collar hipsters, with their Uniqlo button-downs and Lodis bags, he felt a wave of scorn. *They look entirely too comfortable.*

It made him understand for the first time why his father might have indulged in the games he had. Nobody was calling him anything except for favors, and now here he was, being told *no*.

“I’ve never seen anyone work as hard as she does, and get so little back for it.” He folded his arms behind his back as he spun away from the window. “I don’t want that to happen to her here.”

“Jay is an incredible woman,” Arthur agreed. “But she *does* lack experience.”

“Pick whoever you think best then.” He gave a sardonic, insincere smile. “I know you’ll make the right call. That’s why I promoted you.”

It sounded like a threat even to his own ears. Perhaps it was.

Served Hartwell right.

His CFO’s disapproval followed him all the way back to his desk. What did he expect, though? When he’d casually announced his engagement to Jay the other day, the first thing that man said after he’d recollected himself was, “Congratulations. You’re a lucky man. Have you notified HR?”

Always by the book, he thought. Which was what Jay wanted.

But no matter how properly they conducted themselves, some people would insist that this went beyond decorum. They hadn’t lived those nine empty, soulless years—but he had. Every day, for over three thousand days, he had endured the chafe of his own sharp edges until he felt like he might bleed out from the continual abrasion of his own wicked soul.

It wasn’t just that Jay made him happy when he was around her. She made him feel at home in his own skin.

On the ride home she kept glancing over at him worriedly. She had her legs crossed in that fitted black skirt, making it ride up high enough to make it clear that she was wearing tights instead of stockings, and the flashes of skin beneath her white eyelet blouse were giving him ideas.

“Are you okay?” she asked hesitantly, raising her voice to be heard over the music.

“I’m fine,” he said gruffly, and then paused. “I’m not angry with you.”

“Do you want to hear about my interview?”

He lowered the volume dial. “I thought that was a conflict of interest.”

“Well.” She gave him a wry look. “You’ll just ask Arthur, anyway, right?”

Her tone was light but thinking about Arthur made his mood darken further. But when her smile dimmed, he managed, with effort, to shove some of that irritation away.

“Tell me about your interview, blue jay.”

Nicholas let his mind drift as she described the questions she’d been asked and how she’d responded. He already knew all of that anyway, since he and Arthur had been discussing candidates, but the sound of her voice soothed him, and her cautious optimism was endearing.

Fuck Hartwell, he thought, looking at the hopeful smile on her face.

Soon Jay would be his wife. After the interviews, which he needed to go well. Then she would be his. He watched her so intently at dinner trying to see her through that lens that he could tell it made her nervous from the way she began to falter.

“Nick?”

“Your glass is almost empty.” He picked up the bottle. “Do you want more wine?”

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” she scolded, half-seriously.

“No.” He only filled her glass halfway, mentally calculating how long it would take her to sober up. “I just like seeing you enjoy yourself.”

“You do have very good taste in wine.” She took a slow sip.

She fucks like that, too, he thought, watching her close her eyes to savor a bite of pasta after the swallow of vintage, and he’d had to drown that thought in wine before it could grow teeth and bite.

It was so laughably fucking civil the way they played house between bites of vegan carbonara and tofu pancetta. Passing dishes like he’d never put that same hand around her throat. It was a civility you could crack like ice and fall into, unless you skated around the tension with wine and soft words. They both hid their true faces in public, just like they’d been taught.

Sex was the most honest thing they had between them.

Jay went to her room after dinner but he went to his office, now located in his childhood bedroom, and tried to work. His mind refused to cooperate,

however; his thoughts remained firmly upstairs, no matter how many times he tried to refocus them.

He got up from his desk and shut his laptop decisively. There were still emails to respond to, but he was done. *And she's had several hours to get that wine out of her system.* Using his phone as a flashlight, he made his way through the darkened halls, up the righthand staircase. But instead of taking a hard left, he went right and down the hall.

A path he'd taken dozens of times before, always cloaked in shadow.

The door creaked as he pushed it open, holding it just wide enough to let himself inside before snicking it shut behind him. Jay had her hoodie pulled over her face and her cat was sleeping on her stomach. When it saw him, its ears pricked and it scampered under the bed.

Nicholas got on top of her, savoring the way the softness of her body yielded so easily to his weight, and shifted the phone to his free hand as he pushed the hood back from her sleeping face.

“My god, you’re pretty.” He brushed a few curly locks from her forehead, drawing his fingers down her cheek, her parted lips. *And she’s all mine.* With a rough sigh, he yanked the zipper of her sweatshirt down and kissed her breast through the thin camisole. “Come to Daddy, sweet bird.”

A harsh breath escaped her as he ran his hand over her torso, tracing every dip and swell.

“Open your eyes.” He plucked at the thin strap of her top. “I want to make you feel good.”

She stirred, her eyes fluttering open—and then she let out a startled scream, flinching back against the bed as she clawed at him in a panic.

Fuck. “No, no, no,” he crooned, reaching for her now-flailing wrists. “Relax, blue jay. It’s just me. Don’t be afraid. It’s me. It’s Nick. Just Nick.”

(You didn’t think she’d be having nightmares, did you, boy?)

I bet she dreams of you)

Her body went limp beneath his—surrender, but not the kind he wanted. “N-Nick?” The whites of her eyes were overly large in the dark, even as her heaving breaths began to slow. She twisted experimentally in his grip and he relaxed his fingers. “You scared me.”

“I’m sorry.” He bent to kiss her and felt her mouth soften beneath his. So soft, like crushing velvet. Groaning, he slid his hand into her sleep-tangled hair. “Kiss me back.”

Jay turned her head to the side, much to his frustration. “You’ve been acting strange all day. First, you wouldn’t stop staring at me at dinner. And now—” She realized her sweatshirt was open and covered herself, even though she was wearing a camisole beneath it. “What is *wrong* with you?”

“I don’t want to fight right now.” The words brushed against her mouth. “Just fuck me.”

Jay growled at him and pushed at his chest, which made him pin her wrists down again. “I’m being serious,” she hissed. “I can’t deal with you when you’re like this.”

“Well, if you’re *serious*,” he whispered hotly, “turn the light fucking light on and I’ll stop.” He freed her right hand, leaning back to look at her face. “You have long arms. I know you can reach the lamp, if you really want to.” He laced his fingers through the ones on her trapped hand. “But I think you just want to be fucked.”

She shoved at him again, deliberately, and he pushed down with his hips, grinding her into the mattress. Jay made a noise that made him laugh and knot his fingers through her hair.

“Oh, so you want it like that from Daddy?”

Arousal pounded through him like a second heartbeat as she tried to wait him out. But her breathing betrayed her—it always did—and he could feel her heart pounding against his chest even as she tried unsuccessfully to break his hold on her wrists.

“I asked you a question, Jay. Do you want to be a good girl for me? Or do you want to fight me while I take what I want?”

The silence stretched. She tried to squirm again. The hard tips of her breasts dragged across his chest, which almost broke his control.

“Jay,” he said, once, warningly.

He heard her throat click when she swallowed. “I—I don’t want to be good.”

“That’s what I thought.” He rolled off her hips reluctantly. “Get out of bed.”

“W-what?”

“Out. Of. Bed. Now.”

“What are you going to do?”

“You,” he said with emphasis, “are going to run.”

“Run where?” She sounded so horrified, he would have been amused if he weren’t so fucking hard. “Outside?”

“Wherever you think you can get to in ten seconds before I drag you to the ground and have my way with you.”

“What?” Her voice sounded thin. “Are you serious?”

“Nine seconds. And if you make me fuck you in this bed, Daddy is going to be extra mean.”

Jay jerked, swaying as if hypnotized, and then scrambled to her feet, stumbling a little in her haste. Her pajama bottoms were just a little too long, and it occurred to Nicholas, as he watched her hitch them up to her waist, that they might have been his.

She slammed the door behind her. He could hear her stumbling down the stairs, loud enough to wake the dog, who howled unhappily from the master bedroom. A door downstairs opened—not the front door, but the one that branched off from the sitting room that led out to the pool.

You want me to fuck you outside, Jay? He pushed off from the bed. *You really are a bad girl.*

After carefully shutting her door behind him, he headed down the stairs, taking them two at a time. He didn’t bother being quiet—he wanted her to hear him. In her haste to escape out the door, she had closed it but hadn’t bothered to latch it, and he shoved it all the way open, letting it slam against the side of the house with a loud bang, before swinging it violently closed.

There was no way she hadn’t heard that, no matter how hard her heart was pounding.

(It comes alive in the dark just like you)

He breathed in lungfuls of jasmine-scented air as he scanned the garden for Jay. He figured she would play hard-to-get, forcing him to drag her out

of the shadows, and was surprised to see her in the pool when he stepped out on the deck, still fully clothed.

Out in plain sight. Just waiting to be snatched up.

With a dark smile, he kicked off his pants and grabbed a small stone from one of the garden beds, casually lobbing it into the water at the deep end of the pool.

Jay yelped, and covered her own mouth, swinging her whole head in that direction while he hoisted himself into the shallows with the quietest splash.

“N-Nick?” she said, drifting towards the ladder—closer to him. She sounded puzzled, and a little worried. “Nick, was that you? Are you oka—aah!”

“Got you.”

She bucked in response, clawing at the arm that he’d looped around her waist. Her camisole rode up as he fought to maintain his grip, pushing aside the damp ropes of her hair and letting her feel the press of his teeth against her skin. “I thought I said no clothes in the pool.”

“You tricked me,” she seethed.

“I always trick you. You let it happen so often, I have to figure it’s on purpose.”

Jay elbowed him in the ribs and he swung her up in his arms. Water poured off her body in sheets as he walked through the shallow end and up the tiled steps, heading not for the house but one of the plastic loungers where his stepmother had used to drink and ogle the pool boy.

He set Jay down on one, ass-first, throwing out a hand to cushion her skull when her neck snapped back. “Put your hands over your head. I want both your wrists.”

“It’s cold,” Jay chattered, as if the water hadn’t rendered her top completely sheer and he couldn’t see this for himself. “C-can’t we go inside if we’re going to f-fuck?”

“You should have thought of that before you jumped into my pool with your clothes on.”

The lounger creaked dangerously as he joined her on it. This was far more precarious than fucking on the love seat in her living room and he

found himself wondering if the plastic and rubber might snap beneath their combined weight.

Jay gripped the sides of the chair, head tilting back to watch him with wide eyes as he tugged at a lock of her wet hair, twisting the curl around his finger until her face was tugged towards his.

“You’re not afraid to take Daddy’s punishment, are you?”



Here in the darkness, cloaked in their own private world of darkness, it was almost possible to forget everything but him and the electric impulses flashing beneath her skin as he touched her like a man possessed. God, he was terrifying—like a pagan god, wild as wine.

She envied the girl she had been. The girl who had been able to resist him.

Now she could not imagine him from her life any more than she could imagine herself dead.

Punish me, she thought, leaning into that rough, claiming kiss. I deserve it.

She must have spoken the words aloud because his fingers bit into her skin. Then he was yanking her pants off. It was difficult—the fabric was clingy and wet, and he had to roll them off her legs slowly once he got past the backs of her knees, which he did.

It made her nervous, him being on his knees so close to her thighs, but he was still holding her pants, pulling them taut with a wet snap that made her flinch before rolling them out longwise. *Restraints*, she realized, when he hauled her hands over her head and tied her loosely to the chair. Wet pants were not nearly as effective as his leather handcuffs and she could have easily wriggled away if she’d wanted to, but she didn’t. She let him tie her to the chair.

She watched the flex of muscle in his arms as he worked, the efficiency of the act making her wonder, for the first time, how many other women he had tied up. She could feel him breathing, warm puffs of air against her chilled throat, and was surprised by the sharp stab of jealousy that she felt. Her fingers spasmed when he bent to kiss her palm, the impulse traveling

down her veins like liquid gold burning up her blood, and she thought: *I want him.*

“W-what would you have d-done to me if I d-didn’t r-run?”

“Exactly what I’m going to do to you now.”

The cold rushed in as her breath rushed out. She leaned towards him, but he pushed her back down with a shake of his head. Filled with something far too fluttery to be dread, Jay watched him stride to his discarded pants at the other end of the pool and pick something up. The patio lights bathed him in milky light, throwing skin and muscle into bas-relief. Water matted the hair on his chest and trailed over the grooves of his belly in quicksilver streaks, before dripping lower.

Jay nearly choked on the dryness of her own throat.

Nicholas tore open the condom and sheathed himself before swinging himself over her prone body. He didn’t enter her right away, though. He ran a hand over her body, in a single possessive stroke, before gripping her hips, just over the hard girdle of bone. She thought his hands might be shaking. “Look at you,” he rasped, almost involuntarily.

And then he fucked into her on a sharp, shallow thrust that made her cry out in surprise as he slid along her inner walls. The stretch of it almost hurt, especially with the cold making her body so stiff, but his skin was hot and the ache was familiar; it went all the way down to her heart.

As he sank deeper, he braced his hand on her ribs, keeping her flat. The other slid between her legs, shockingly warm. “How long were you in the pool?”

“I—” He watched her face as he touched her clit. The porch lights didn’t reach this far and half of him was in shadow. As soon as her breathing picked up, he took his hand away despite her protest. “W-wait! I’m sorry—I d-don’t know! I’m sorry.”

“Only good girls get to come, little bird. Sorry girls lie there and take it.” The chair creaked dangerously as he lifted her up by the backs of her thighs, forcing her to wrap her legs around his slim hips for purchase as he drove into her at a steeper angle. The pressure was exquisite now; she could feel the gouge of his pelvis with each stroke, the impact jolting her back against the slats as the metal shrieked under their combined weight. “And slutty girls just get fucked until Daddy’s had enough.”

“Aaah.” He was being forceful enough that she could feel her ass sinking through the gaps in the slats. They were really testing the limits of the chair now, Jay thought. His knees were nearly touching the ground and one of his hands was actually braced against the rough concrete.

He didn’t seem to care, though. It was like he had something to prove. From the very moment that she had woken up to find him in her room, she had sensed his frenetic energy. Something wild had driven him to her, and now he was releasing his passions the only way he knew how.

Maybe I have something to prove, too, she thought, tilting her hips to meet him, even as she struggled to hold onto the slippery metal rails that were slick from pool water.

“Fucking me back isn’t going to change my mind.”

“I don’t care,” she gasped.

The wind blew an errant lock of hair into her face. At this angle, she had a full view of his vast backyard, though most of it was upside-down. She loved the sweeping rows of his mother’s roses, which were cast in thick bars of darkness from the wall of cypress that blocked the scaled-off side of the property from the eyes of the street below. Jay had always thought that its mock Greek Revival façade had the appearance of a palace fortress.

She gasped out on another sobbing exhale as his hand slid up to her face. “Nick—”

He brushed the lock of hair out of her eyes, dragging his knuckles tenderly down her jaw before collaring her throat with his hand and tightening his fingers just enough that she felt exquisitely lightheaded. Her muscles spasmed and he gave her a particularly rough thrust that had her gasping.

“Don’t you dare fucking come.”

“Please—”

So many small humiliations lay scattered between them, spangled like a constellation of hurts in a black velvet sky where she was caught in his orbit, unable to escape.

He punished her for making him want her, and she punished *him* for making her need him.

For making her crave this.

"Please," she repeated.

"You're mine," he said, his voice a textured snarl in her ear, and she shivered so violently that the chill seemed to ripple through every cell in her body, turning her very nerves to ice.

When he came, she felt the harsh echo of her own denied pleasure in each of those last staggered thrusts. His still-damp hair was drying with a slight curl to it, throwing his eyes into shadow as he stared down searchingly into her face the same way he had at dinner.

What is he looking for?

She shivered again. That icy feeling of pins and needles was edging into pain. "Nick. I'm c-cold."

He swung off her body, heading for his pants. Jay looked away from the sight of his buttocks and tugged free of her restraints with a few hard pulls, trying to force back the bitter feeling building in the back of her throat like hot acid. As she looked around desperately, wondering where her sweatshirt had disappeared to, a hand clasped her shoulder.

Nicholas was holding up a towel.

She peeled off her damp top and let him blot her dry, the briskness of the gestures making her suck in. "Does that hurt?"

"N-no," she said shakily. "Just sensitive."

Apparently deeming her dry enough, he handed her the towel, watching her wrap herself in it.

"What?" she asked cautiously. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm imagining what it will be like when you're here."

Jay blinked, a startled laugh escaping her. "What are you talking about? I am here."

"When you're my wife." He gave her that same intense look from before. "When you're mine and you finally let yourself *belong* here."

All the moisture fled her mouth.

"I can't remember what my life was like before you came here. You're studded into my soul like little pieces of glass. I can feel you all over this house, and when you're not here, it's like being lost in that fucking mall all over again, chasing the scent of my mother's perfume."

He broke off, as if he hadn't meant to say that much all at once.

(it's such good sex)

"I said yes," she reminded him, but he didn't seem to hear her.

"You can't fuck me like this and then leave me again. You can't make me feel—" He reached out suddenly, grabbing her by the hips and pulling her close. She could feel his strong fingers biting in, even through the thick terrycloth. "Don't leave me again."

It felt like he'd reached into her chest and squeezed. "Oh my god, Nicholas, what's gotten into you? I'm not going anywhere."

"You always run," he said. "And I can't fucking exist without you. I don't know how."

The devastation she saw on his face caught her raw. "I'm not going anywhere," she repeated, very alarmed now. She leaned into him until he opened his arms and gave her one of those awkward embraces that broke her heart every time. "Except m-maybe inside," she said in a muffled voice.

"Yeah, you're freezing." He sighed against her temple, his hand running over her arm. "Let's get you in the house."

The warmth of the house hit her like a wall. Nicholas picked up a red Stanford sweater from one of the backs of those sunroom chairs and pulled it over her head. She let the towel drop to the floor as the fleecy fabric swung down to her lower thighs, curiously indulgent against her bare skin.

"Red looks good on you."

"So you've said," she replied warily.

"It's still true." He headed for the bar, reaching up to grab two glasses. "Do you want a drink before we go to bed? It might warm you up."

"No," she said. "And I don't think you should, either."

Nicholas smirked at her before pouring himself a shot of rum. "Always taking care of me." Still holding his glass, he strode closer, tucking her hair behind her ear. "And all I want to do," he finished, letting his hand trail down those white letters, "is take care of you."

"I love you," she said quietly, the admission ripping something violently away from her. "But I'm a grown woman, Nicholas. I've been

taking care of myself for thirty-one years. That won't change when I'm your wife. You can't bully me into letting you control me."

Careful, Jay. You know what happens when you want it too much.

"No," he agreed. "But sometimes—you could hand the reins over to me."

Jay thought of all the times she'd dragged herself to his room, burning with humiliation and the expectation of being destroyed. Even as his touch woke parts of her that she'd never been able to reach, she had always been braced for a level of suffering and revenge that never came.

"The reins?" she repeated faintly.

"Just for a while." He tilted her chin up gently. "You must be exhausted. You could be my little bird out of bed, too. Let Daddy make some of the decisions. Let me dress you up and show you off and spoil you—I don't think you realize what that would do for me. Or how much that would turn me on."

Panic was bubbling through her in earnest now. She was scared of how much she wanted what he was offering—safety, security, and the knowledge that she would never be alone again. All her life, she had been so scared that she would be left if she didn't leave first.

"Jay, you're shaking. Why does it scare you to rely on me?"

"I'm afraid my freedom will be taken away," she blurted.

"I won't do that to you." He stroked her and the touch was so gentle that she flinched as if struck. "You let me tie you up, blue jay. Don't you trust me to take care of you properly?"

Jay looked at his hand on hers. She felt as if she were standing on the edge of a diving board and her feet were bolted to its surface. "Yes," she said falteringly.

"But?"

"You could hurt me," she whispered.

Nicholas said nothing, but she saw a line form on his forehead.

She swallowed, wondering if she should say what she was about to say given his irascible temper. "My last relationship was very comfortable. He

—he never really asked anything of me. Even though we were a couple, we were still separate people.”

“You dated someone who bored you so you wouldn’t be invested in the relationship.”

Jay looked at him sharply. “No, we just didn’t really discuss things like this. He didn’t care what I wore. He didn’t want control. We just went about our lives and um, did couple stuff.”

“Boring and bad in bed,” he said, in a deadpan tone. “What a catch.”

“Stop it,” she said, but there was no fire in it, and she could see that this pleased him. “You just told me you couldn’t exist without me. You don’t get to criticize anyone.”

“I’m tired,” he said wearily. “And I know exactly what I need.” He hugged her to him and she sucked in a breath, inhaling the chlorine scent still clinging to his bare skin, and beneath that, night-blooming flowers and citrus and *him*. “From the very first day we met, you never had any trouble telling me exactly what you think. I don’t want that to change.”

“No, you just want to run the house and order me around like a big man because that’s what turns you on.”

“It does—but only when you let me.” Jay was taken slightly aback by the power in his arms when he crushed her bodily to him. “Come to my room.” He bussed her cheek. “Spend the night with me. I won’t even touch you if you don’t want me to. I just want you with me.”

Jay, face buried in the crook of his shoulder, hesitated. And then she took the shot of rum and drank half of it herself before responding, “Yes, Daddy.”

Chapter Fifteen

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The rumpled sheets smelled like him, she thought, as she got into his bed. He dwarfed her old twin with his massive frame, but even in this large queen-sized bed, gravity kept her flush against him when the two of them were on the memory foam together.

He tugged at her sweatshirt. “Keeping this on?”

“Yes,” she mumbled.

He just made a mild editorial grunt, squeezing her body a little tighter through the cotton.

Jay looked at his sitting area with the two brocaded chairs and loveseat as his arm settled around her waist, keeping her back pressed against his chest. One of his legs was pressed between hers, and though he had his hips tilted away from her, she could feel the heat of body against her bare thighs.

She covered his hand, smoothing her fingers over his knuckles. “Will you tell me what’s wrong now?” she asked quietly. “If I’m supposed to trust you, you have to trust me.”

Nicholas sighed. But then, in the moderated tones of a man who treated his feelings like unpleasant business, he began to talk.

He told her how hollow he felt at work and how bitterly he resented everyone in town for their complicity in his father’s dealings. He was furious over how people were treating her, in particular, and after he again demanded the names of the people who she had heard spreading rumors, he confessed that he was afraid she wouldn’t marry him if she didn’t get the job.

Jay felt a wave of pity. Nobody had ever taught him that love wasn’t something you could bargain for or buy. *No wonder he was so unhappy*, she thought. *Nick, you foolish boy*.

“It’s not about the job. It’s about you treating me like an equal, and not using your money as a tool of control.” She touched his arm gently. “It sounds like work is stressing you out.”

“No,” he said, and she felt him shake his head. “It just doesn’t do what it used to for me.”

“Well, that sounds like you’re depressed.” She ran her fingers over his forearm, flattening the springy hairs and watching them bounce back up. “It happens to me sometimes.”

“Men like me don’t get depressed.”

“Men like you *do* if they feel like they don’t have a purpose in life. What’s yours?” She tilted her head back to look at him. “Have you ever thought about starting a charity?”

“So help me, Jay, if you whip out a bible—”

Jay smacked his arm. “You funnel money into the town with all your big investments, but you’re mostly just helping your rich friends. You have the power to change someone’s life if you wanted to. I mean, look at me. I went to a great school but had to use your father’s money to do it, and if it weren’t for the optics of having a dropout as a stepchild, he would have cut me off. I was completely dependent on him—”

She paused, struggling to stay composed.

“You could send kids to school.”

“You want me to use my money on a bunch of brats?” He tugged at her sweatshirt sleeve, baring part of her shoulder. He nipped at her gently. “I’d rather use it on you.”

“It could be a wedding present,” said Jay.

Nicholas paused, his breath stirring the fine hairs at her nape. She felt him turn to study her, and when he did, his cock nudged against her backside. “I was going to take you to Singapore.” He sounded surprisingly hesitant. “That’s what you want?”

“I think it would be very sweet of you.” She leaned back against him. “I think it would make you feel good, too.”

“I forgot what an idealist you are.”

“It’s not a bad thing, wanting the best out of people.”

“I didn’t say it was a bad thing.” She felt him playing with her hair. She hadn’t dried it properly and now the frizzy little strands were unwinding from themselves like small pinwheels. “It just says so much about you.”

“Like?” she prompted.

“Why you keep giving second chances to people who don’t deserve it.”

Jay rolled around to face him. He was lying on his side propping up his head with one hand. The other, which had been resting over her stomach, was now on the bed.

He arched an eyebrow, running his fingers through his mussed hair.
“Yes?”

“I love you.” She leaned forward to kiss his nose and saw his eyes flare open wide. “I won’t co-sign all of your decisions, and sometimes you get on my nerves, but I do love you, and I want to see you grow. And as long as you try to do that—as long as you’re kind to me—I’ll forgive you.” Resting her head on the pillow beside him, she whispered, “It’s really that simple.”

His mouth tilted. This close, she could see all the little individual dots of his stubble, and all the lines and angles that comprised his beautiful, infuriating face. “You’re such a goody two-shoes.”

“And you’re a demon prince,” she said, not unkindly.

He reached up and flicked her nose.

“As long as that means you’re my princess.”

▪▪▪▪▪

Jay woke up to the smell of coffee. It sliced through her dreams like an arrow, and she startled, staring at the unfamiliar ceiling and wondering why the room didn’t look like hers. Then a weight lifted from her feet and she heard a bark, punctuated by a series of whimpers and a closed door.

A more pervasive pressure took its place, followed by the brush of a man’s stubbled mouth against her cheek. Nicholas’s blurry face snapped into sharp focus and her eyes darted from his eyes to his T-shirt, to his mesh shorts. “Hey,” she said shyly. “You’re all dressed.”

“I tried waking you up but you whined something about being sore. And then the puppy came in.”

Jay sat up, letting the sheets fall to her waist. “Where are you going?”

“Just for a run. I came to kiss you goodbye first.”

“Okay. But I didn’t brush my teeth.”

“I didn’t mean on the mouth.”

Just in case his meaning wasn't clear, he yanked the sheets back. Jay yelped, tugging his sweatshirt down over her thighs. He pushed her hands away, pinning her wrists to the bed.

"Lie down, and keep your hands up there. I don't want you trying to drive."

"Nick." She was shocked by his crudeness.

"I know. You're sore."

Nicholas smoothed his hands over her skin before pushing her legs apart and kissing her so deeply that her breath caught. She was still sensitive and swollen from the previous night and the extra stimulation was paved with little bursts of discomfort.

"Nick—" she gasped.

He had mapped out her body in dark rooms with an enthusiasm that now felt like it might be her undoing as he sucked on her aching clit hard enough that it almost hurt when she came, and she squeezed his shoulders with her knees, nearly unable to bear it.

"I've never kissed anyone else like this, you know," he said. "Just you."

"Oh my god," she cried out hoarsely, when he guided one of her legs over his shoulder, spreading her wide on his sheets. But she didn't resist, drawing in a deep breath as she slid one of her hands beneath her sweatshirt to cup one of her breasts.

"Did you like hearing that? I thought you would."

"Fuck." Jay closed her eyes. "Please don't stop."

"Tell Daddy how much you love being the only girl who gets to fuck his face."

"I love it," she sobbed. "All of it, god, anything, please—" He switched to his tongue and her low cries became hoarse screams of pleasure that had hot streaks of white flaring in her periphery as her body lifted off the bed. "Nicholas. Oh my god."

"You love this." He ran his fingers down the backs of her thighs as he kissed her again, deep and lingering—the way he kissed her on the mouth. Her legs trembled. "You love me."

“Yes,” she cried. “I do. Oh—Daddy—fuck—”

“I love seeing you like this.” His breath tickled her tingling skin and when he kissed her just below her mons, another throb pulsed through her aching flesh. “I used to be amazed that I could do this to you. Watching you come would get me worked up for hours.”

“But not anymore?” she asked, breathless.

“Don’t provoke me when you’re sore,” he said. But when he leaned over to pick a steaming mug off the nightstand, she caught a brief glimpse of tented mesh between his legs before he sat down at the foot of the bed. “Are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”

Jay accepted the drink, collapsing back against his bed. All the blood rushing back into her brain was making her heady. “I think . . . I already did.”

“Jay.” He laughed, his smile approving and a little wicked. “You bad girl.”

“Only with you.” She took a long sip of coffee. He’d made it perfectly, creamed with oat milk and only lightly sweetened. “I’m still impressed that you figured out the machine.”

“I just read the French instructions, Jay—or are we talking about your pussy?”

Jay made a face and kicked out at him. “I was talking about your *coffee machine*.”

“C'est ça. Je n'ai qu'une seule douce machine.” He caught her by the ankle and gave her foot a squeeze. Running his thumb over the arch, his eyes held hers, and Jay felt another dull throb between her legs.

“Did you just call me a douche machine in French?”

“You’ll never know.” His smile widened, dimples popping out on either side of his mouth. “What do you want to do when I get back from my run?”

“Um.” Flustered, she leaned over to set the mug on his nightstand, drawing her legs away. “Well, I was going to wash these sheets, but we could do something together afterwards.”

“Here? Or in town?”

“Whatever you want.”

A flicker went through his eyes, disappearing before she could identify it. “Think about it. But if you have some extra time on your hands—”

He paused, turning away.

“You could bring down my mother’s dress from the attic. I’d like to see it on you.”

“I think that’s bad luck.” Jay tried to keep her voice light so he wouldn’t hear the swell of emotion in it. “I’m pretty sure it’s supposed to be a surprise.”

“I make my own luck. And I’ll never get tired of seeing you in a pretty dress.”

Nicholas reached over and flicked her nose before rising to leave, making her wonder if she had imagined the shadow that had briefly darkened his features. “By the way, I fed the dog and the cat, so take your time getting up,” he tossed over his shoulder, before closing the door behind him.

Wow, okay.

Still buzzing pleasantly from her orgasm, Jay finished her coffee as she watched the shadows shift on the other side of the curtains from the mulberry tree outside. Light reflecting off his pool made ripples on the voile as the breeze stirred the fabric. He’d left the window open and she could smell roses. She sighed and stretched leisurely.

If this is what he meant by spoiling me, I could get used to this.

She finished the last drop and took the empty mug with her down to the kitchen, where she was immediately greeted by Maynard. “Hello, baby,” she said, leaning down to ruffle the dog’s ears. The sound of claws skittering on hardwood followed her all the way to the sink, which was empty for once. He’d even taken the time to wipe the counters down.

Jay washed her mug and took a long shower, and then changed into loose jogging pants and an old off-the-shoulder top she’d brought back with her from San Francisco. After popping the sheets in the wash, she decided to call herself an Uber and pick up some pastries for Nicholas as a surprise. He didn’t eat before his runs and the thought of his eyes lighting up at some surprise sugary treats made her smile.

It was too early for the brunch rush and she was on main street within ten minutes, walking into a boutique bakery called 24 Karat Cakes. *What a ridiculous name*, Jay thought, as she walked in through the doors. Everything within those four pink walls was covered in rhinestones, and there was a custom neon sign on the wall that said *BYOC (bling your own cake)*.

“Hi there! Can I get you something? We have samples of our bake of the day.”

Jay glanced at the tray of purple frosted somethings and shook her head. “I’ll take some of the guava jam rolls, a maple bar, and one of those donuts if they’re vegan.”

“I’ll check for you,” the girl said agreeably before disappearing into the back.

Jay arranged her pick-up Uber as she waited. Another customer walked in just as she was slipping her phone back into her purse, talking into his phone. She recognized the voice and looked up sharply, just as Michael glanced over.

“They’re vegan,” the cashier said cheerfully. “Do you want one?”

“Um, yes, please.”

A look of panic flashed over Michael’s face, which was odd. But the anger that followed it was even stranger. He stormed over, throwing a nervous glance at the street.

“What are you doing here?”

“Getting pastries,” she said, accepting the box from the now-puzzled cashier. “What are you doing here?”

“My wife owns this place,” he said coldly.

That explains the rhinestone theme.

Michael was still looking around cagily. “Is Nicholas with you?”

“No,” Jay said. “He’s at home, and I’m headed there, too. So if you have business with him, I’d recommend calling him up on the phone. It was nice to see you.”

To her consternation, he followed her out onto the sidewalk. “Tell me it isn’t true.”

“What?”

“Quentin said you were at his hotel. He said the two of you were—” He broke off, but his eyes went to her throat and she clapped her hand over herself. Michael’s face creased in disgust. “Tell me you aren’t sleeping with your own stepbrother.”

“Wow, all right then, I won’t.” Jay scanned the street desperately. “Screw you.”

“My god.” His voice rose, causing a few people to glance over curiously. “Did it start after graduation or were you already fucking him when you started seeing me?”

Jay whipped around. “First of all, you’re being absolutely disgusting. Second of all, you don’t know anything about me. You never did, because you never asked. Our relationship was always about *you* and what *you* wanted. And now you’re married to someone else, so it’s really none of your business who I sleep with, and even if it was, I wouldn’t discuss it on the street.”

“But it is business, right?” he said flatly. “After all, he owns half this town and you’re—you.” His eyes drifted to her bare shoulder, and she fought the urge to tuck away her bra strap. “I used to think you were a nice girl. It actually used to make me feel guilty a little, because I felt like I was corrupting you every time I made a move. But I guess I just wasn’t paying enough.”

Jay shifted the box to her other arm and slapped him—hard.

“Ow, fuck.” Michael pressed a hand to his face. “Very classy, Jay.”

“Fuck you,” she said, fighting back the angry tears forming in her eyes. “Seriously. Fuck you and fuck Quentin, too. The whole sorry lot of you can just get fucked.”

“He tried to pay me off to get me to stay away from you. Did you know that?”

Jay turned away.

“Quentin was paying back interest on that predatory loan for years. And Nick even put one of his own friends in the hospital with a bruised trachea. He couldn’t swallow solid food for two weeks. Two weeks, Jay. Nick only had to spend one night in jail for it.” Michael let his hand fall to

his side, revealing his reddened cheek. “That’s the kind of man you’re sharing a roof with.”

“Leave me alone,” Jay said in a low, furious voice. “Or I’m calling the police.”

“I thought you were a feminist. You think he won’t do the same thing to you?”

“Leave.”

“Wow.” He shook his head. “Well, that makes my decision easy. You made your bed. Have fun lying in it. But don’t expect anyone to help you when he runs your heart through the thresher.”

With that, he turned and headed back inside 24 Karat Cakes.

When the Uber arrived two minutes too late, she was still shaking. The young male driver kept shooting her these little worried glances, and when he let her out by the trash cans, he wasted no time peeling off back down the hill in a thick cloud of dust.

Nicholas wasn’t back yet so she set the pastry box on the counter, one hand pressed flat on the granite as she stared at the oak cabinets and eggshell white walls.

She thought of Michael saying “I guess I just wasn’t paying enough.”

She thought of Nicholas saying “You could be my little bird out of bed, too.”

Her hand clenched into a fist and she turned away from the wall with bright eyes. With the dog nipping at her heels, she stormed down the empty hallway and yanked hard on the chain that unfolded the set of wooden stairs leading up to his attic.

Fuck you, Michael, she thought, seething with every step. I’m going to marry that man so hard that he forgets his own name.

As children, both she and Nicholas had been expressly forbidden from going up here, even though it wasn’t a true attic like the ones in old Victorian houses. This was more of a crawl space, where insulation poked out of the walls in yellow tufts that would itch and burn if you touched them, which Nick had, because telling him not to do something was the best way to get him to do it. Shaking her head at the memory of instructing him on how to wash the little particles of glass off his arms and legs through a

closed bathroom door, she eyed the dust-covered mess of things that had been stored up here to be forgotten, wondering where to start.

There was a box of her things, marked ‘JAY’ in Nicholas’s handwriting. It looked like it had been opened and sifted through multiple times. Curious, she pulled back a flap and saw old clothes and schoolwork and several notebooks and diaries, her old school uniform.

Shoving that aside, with an odd lump in her throat, she moved one marked ‘XMAS’ and another marked ‘MOTHER’ (whose mother? she wondered. Damon’s?) before coming across one that simply said ‘EMMA.’

This one had been taped shut but the tape had yellowed over the years and was already starting to peel back. She opened it carefully, revealing stacks of Japanese notebooks and packs of fancy-looking pencils. There were books, too. Piles of them. Jay found a leatherbound copy of Jane Austen’s collected works, clearly well-loved, and her heart sank a little at the thought of a woman who had yearned for that kind of romance, only to find herself married to a man like Damon.

In a silver frame, she found a picture of the woman whose ghost she had glimpsed in the features of her son. Emma Beaufort was more striking than pretty, with sharp cheekbones and brows that looked like brushstrokes. Her hair was cut fashionably short but quite wavy, and Jay, with a tight chest, recognized that same curl pattern from Nicholas, when his hair was wet.

She set the photograph carefully aside and, beneath some sketchbooks, found what must have been her wedding dress stuffed carelessly in a plastic trash bag that had been tied off. The material hadn’t yellowed too much despite being poorly stored, and when she shook it out, she saw that it had a deep sweetheart neckline with lace-screened sleeves. On his mother’s athletic build, it wouldn’t have been very risqué, but this was going to be quite revealing on her.

Jay folded the dress over her arm and took the book and the photo frame back downstairs with her. In the master bedroom, she peeled off her shirt and pants and tried the dress on, half-expecting it not to fit. The waist was very snug, and her ass and bust stretched the fabric to its limit, but it fit, and she knew Nicholas would like the low decolletage.

She thought of that nightmare when she'd been wearing her mother's Vegas wedding dress. *This* was the class her mother had always tried to emulate. Jay smoothed her hands over her own hips before looking away from her own reflection.

Stepping into this dress, and into this life, made it feel an awful lot like she was taking her mother's place, along with his name.

I'll be the third Mrs. Beaucroft to live in this house.

Jay set the photo and the book on the coffee table of Nicholas's screened porch, thinking he might enjoy seeing them. There was also something that felt very right about putting her so close to the roses she'd loved, although Jay was careful to face the picture away from the direct sunlight so it wouldn't fade. The dress, she laid over the settee in his master bedroom to air out.

Even after her awful confrontation with Michael, Jay felt almost happy. The birds were singing and she could hear the piercing cry of a blue jay, and the rumble engine of the mail truck. She decided to get the mail, too, walking back down his spacious drive, glancing at the mulberry tree whose shadows she had watched while drinking her coffee in bed.

When Nicholas had first brought her back here, she had been surprised to see it standing. Just as Nicholas's father had carved the women who betrayed him out from his life, Jay had expected to be similarly excised by his son. That her presence had not only been left untouched, but also carefully preserved, seemed emblematic of the differences between the two men.

Nicholas, in his own strange, twisted way, was capable of love.

The mailbox was all the way down the path, past the wall of cypress trees that screened the pool from the street. She opened it with the key and took out a number of envelopes, mostly bills. She sifted through them on the granite countertop, chucking away a few obvious ads, pausing only when she came to a thick unmarked envelope that had no postage stamps.

Nick & Jay was written on the outside in ugly black sharpie.

She felt a twinge in her belly. Before she could second guess herself, Jay tore open the envelope and shook the contents out onto the counter, causing them to scatter in a colorful cascade of shadow and flesh tones. At

first, she wasn't sure what she was seeing—not because she didn't understand but because her brain didn't want to.

Photographs.

She was looking at glossy, full-color photographs.

Photographs of her and Nick.

The first must have been taken in the parking lot of BA because Nicholas was leaning on her open car door with his arms folded, talking to her with one of those half-smiles as she got out.

The others were less innocent. There were several taken on that hiking trail, when he had pinned her against that tree and kissed her like he was planning on taking her there.

And then there were—her breath caught—several taken out by the pool.

These were farther away, but it was obvious what they were doing. And it was just as obvious that she was wearing no clothes at all.

The picture fell from her fingers and landed on the floor with a slap.

That was when she heard the sound of the front door opening. Nicholas, still existing in a world where these pictures did not exist, was humming along to one of his metal songs, the low bass of his voice echoing through the wall.

She tried to call out his name, but all that came out was a sob.

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Chapter Sixteen

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Nicholas slid the lazily-drawn contract back across the desk as he studied the man who was old enough to be his father. He wasn't really seeing *him*; it was Jay and her crying face floating before his eyes. He had come home from his run in a relatively good mood, only to find the relaxed and happy woman he'd left reduced to a shattered version of herself.

And then she'd held up the pictures.

"What the fuck is this," he began, in a cold tone that came out sharp enough that the man across from him flinched. That was no good. He was too emotional, too distracted to really bargain properly, but for the moment at least, shock had given him the edge. "This is an insult."

The man stammered some excuse. Nicholas barely listened. He'd heard them all before.

They marched in here as if they had come from an assembly line of white, balding executives in bespoke suits and Countess Mara ties and they fucked with him because they wanted to *be* him, thinking his youth made him a fool, thinking that age made them smarter.

If it were Jay in here taking notes, she would have been staring at him with a hint of subtle reprimand. But instead he had Annica, who was still bristly from their "growth" conversation, who would only glance up occasionally to see if he had finished speaking before taking notes.

This man, as irritating as he was, was just a proxy for who he really wanted to destroy.

"One-point-five-percent, minimum," Nicholas said at last. "I'm not going to bargain."

Sweat was beading at the man's temples. It was the sweat of a man who could already feel the heat of the grill and had braced himself to endure the flames.

He agreed so quickly that it was embarrassing for both of them. There were rings of dampness beneath the arms of his charcoal Armani suit and he left without shaking Nicholas's hand, which was just as well because he couldn't seem to relax his out of a fist.

Silently, he followed the other man out, holding the door open for his secretary as a courtesy she coldly ignored, preceding him out of the conference room with only the harshest of thanks before taking her seat next to Jay. He didn't miss the dirty look she shot her, either.

Jay looked especially pretty today, with just a clip holding back her hair and all those curls tumbling down her shoulders in a glorious fall of umber shot through with silver. Normally, she kept it up and she was getting second glances from men passing by in the halls.

People said all kinds of things behind his back. He'd heard whispers at work, seen it in the papers, even had some of it said to his face. It came with the territory of owning a company that brokered international deals with the morally flexible and having a skirt-chaser as a father.

Jay had left before their family legacy had all gone up in flames. When she returned, only the ashes were smoldering; he had been there for the inferno, and seen all of his father's so-called friends melt away while everyone else kept their distance, waiting to see how it played out.

Seeing the devastation on her face had made his chest tighten, reminding him of a time not so long ago when he had been the one to elicit that look.

He had savored it then. Now, it made it hard to breathe.

At least some of the photographs had been taken on his property. He hadn't wanted to examine them too closely in front of her, but he recognized the view and perspective on the one taken of them in the pool. The photographer would have had to have been standing in the shadows of those cypress trees that his father had put in to capture that angle.

He had checked the security camera that looked out over the drive, and the side of the house, and after spending a few hours going through the footage, he'd caught a glimpse of a stealthy figure making its way up the walkway. They hesitated for only a moment before heading not towards the front door, but to the immediate left. Right for the pool.

Like they knew exactly where to go.

Jay, the poor little bird, thought this was going to ruin their lives. Thinking, no doubt, of the men like his father who would only be too happy to imagine her in flagrante delicto.

“It’s not like we’re actually brother and sister,” Nicholas had pointed out, which hadn’t been the comfort he thought it would be. She had just looked away and sobbed.

He had switched to a different, more familiar tack. “If whoever sent this really wanted to ruin our lives, these would be posted somewhere already. Which means that they probably plan on bargaining with them. I am very, very good at bargaining, Jay, and when I found out who did this, I will listen to their terms and then I will fuck them so hard, they’ll wish they’d never been born.”

She had laughed miserably but he’d gotten a small, wavering smile. “You sound so scary.”

“That’s because I am.”

His first thought was that it was Jay’s own mother, who had been ruthlessly pressing her for cash for weeks. When the calls stopped, he’d been suspicious rather than relieved, though he hadn’t voiced his suspicions to Jay. She also wasn’t very technologically inclined—he had a distinct memory of ignoring her when she’d shouted up to him to help her program the DVD player—and she had all the stealth of an airhorn. There was no way she had taken these photos herself.

But that didn’t mean she hadn’t outsourced the work to someone on Craigslist.

Then Jay, still in tears, had told him about her confrontation with Michael outside his wife’s bakery-slash-restaurant, and the subsequent slap—he would have paid good money to see *that*.

Right after he ran the two-timing double-fuck over in a fatal hit-and-run.

Anyone who knew them could have done it, though. It wasn’t a secret where he lived, and plenty of people wanted to see them fall. As he’d told Jay once, perfection was really fucking annoying. So was success.

But the VP role hadn’t been announced yet, and he’d never gotten close enough to any woman in Hollybrook for Jay to be seen as romantic competition. His address also wasn’t listed in the company directory and he had never given it to any of his “dates.” He had been discreet. He had always been discreet, even with Jay.

Michael had figured it out and his stepmother certainly had, so he supposed others harbored their suspicions. But they were *only* suspicions. Conjecture didn't hold up in a court of law.

Even he knew better than to say "maybe it was your mother" when Jay looked so fragile, though. Besides, the photos had clearly been taken with a tele-photo lens and those weren't cheap. Even if Danielle *had* outsourced, a good photographer was likely more than she could afford.

So he had moved on to the next best solution, grabbing her on their way out the door.

"Bring your dress to work. I'm marrying you today."

"W-what?" She eyed him incredulously. "I thought we agreed that we would wait until after all of the interviews were over so there wouldn't be a conflict of interest."

"That was all you. Now, the situation has changed. You're worried about your reputation—and the public perception is very different for a mistress versus a wife."

"But that's a terrible reason to get married!"

"There are no terrible reasons. Not where you're concerned. Besides, you've always known that I can be a little bit mercenary. I'm just staying true to form."

Jay hadn't denied his words. She knew what he was like. And he knew what *she* was like. Watching her fret, he was filled with the suspicion that if he allowed Jay to her own devices, she'd be on the first bus out of town, and he had no intention of letting that happen. She *would* be walking down that aisle with him, even if the "I dos" had to come with their last dying breaths.

By the time he got back to his desk, he had a whole page of emails waiting for him. He jotted off a few quick replies to the ones that seemed most important before redelegating the rest. Then he pulled out his phone.

Did you try the dress on?

Yes, she responded. And it fits. I didn't think it would.

He had. As soon as he'd seen the dress draped over the back of the embroidered chair in his bedroom, he'd known. She wouldn't have arranged the drape of the skirt so carefully if she hadn't fallen in love with it.

I removed the outer skirt, she wrote. It's one of those day-to-night dresses. For dancing, I think. Did your mom get married in the 80s?

She did. She told me once that she wanted to look like the princess in Swan Lake.

There was a pause. *Do I need to sign anything for your lawyers? Like a prenup?*

You tore up a check for ten million dollars. If this is some kind of long-con, you're playing it so well that even I can't see the angle. And any lawyer I hired to verify the contract would probably cost more than you've ever allowed me to spend on you. So no, Jay. You sign nothing.

That's surprisingly idealistic for a cynic like you, she responded.

I'm a romantic. Also, if you ever try to fuck me, I'm just going to fuck you back.

I know. She sent an eye roll emoji. Nicholas Beaucroft fucks everyone twice as hard as everyone else who tries to fuck him.

Say that to my fucking face tonight without stammering over the fucks. I want to hear it.

She sent him a middle finger. He sent her a diamond, an eggplant, and a bird.

I'm going to make you say it. 'Daddy fucks me twice as hard as any man who's ever tried to fuck me, including my ex who couldn't make me come.'

I'm going to unmarry you.

Then I'll just have to marry you again with an even bigger ring and think of some even filthier things for you to say to me on our next honeymoon.

I don't recommend that. The diamonds fell out of my stupid rich person nails. You're already coming into this marriage at a \$20,000 net loss. :(

A snort escaped him.

He heard her laugh echo through the office, though she quickly tried to stifle it, looking around self-consciously as she covered her mouth in a gesture he recognized all too well because he had seen it every time her mother dressed her down for being herself.

I'm going to kill her mother.

Reluctant to end the conversation, he put his phone away and headed to the conference room for his next meeting, where he was intercepted by the VP of Marketing, who looked anxious as he wielded a slim folder like a shield.

“Mr. Beaucroft? These are the quarterly profits you asked for.”

“I’m on my way to a meeting. Didn’t I ask for those two weeks ago?”

“Yes, you did. But one of the files got corrupted. We had to have IT retrieve the data.” He cleared his throat. “Should I put it on your desk?”

“No. Those numbers are confidential. Shred the folder and send the data to me in a spreadsheet. I’ll review it later.”

The man nodded, looking crestfallen, and hurried towards the copy room. Nicholas looked over at Arthur’s office, but he was in a meeting with a woman from Acquisitions and the two of them were talking animatedly. As he passed, Arthur lifted his hand in a congenial wave.

Nicholas nodded back, before shutting himself into the main conference room. The meeting was tedious and he really did need to speak to Arthur, but when the presenter finally wrapped up their presentation on their current roster of prospective, high value clients, Arthur was still in his meeting, much to his annoyance.

Not wanting to hang around the door like a student at office hours, Nicholas went back to his own office. At his desk, he opened one of the bottom drawers and took out a burner phone.

Danielle hadn’t answered when he’d tried to call from the house, so he hadn’t bothered with his cell or office phone, figuring she was screening her calls. Smart enough to block his number but not smart enough to realize that her proactive silence was an admission of guilt.

Not smart enough to realize that he could buy as many phones as she could block.

She picked up on the second ring. “Hello?”

His hand flexed involuntarily. “It’s Nicholas. I understand that you’ve been trying to get in contact with Jay about my finances. That’s unacceptable to me. If you want to do business with me, you do it with me—not her”

“Got her locked up in the attic?”

“It’s about seventeen years too late for you to still be pretending that *Jane Eyre* is your favorite book. Or haven’t you already cannibalized enough of her life?”

“What do you want?”

“The negatives of the photographs I know you sent.”

There was a brief pause. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

It was almost admirable, how well she lied. But he had watched her con his father for years and knew her for the careerist bullshit artist that she was: the kind who would sell her own firstborn child to save her own skin.

Someone waved at him through the glass wall of his office, trying to get his attention. Nicholas spun around in his chair, making an impatient brushing-off motion.

“Unlike you, I’m not a fucking adulteress trying to skate around an infidelity clause. It’s nobody’s business what I do in my own house, and if you think you and your two-bit Craigslist photographer can wring money out of me with an outdated Nikon, I’m going to come after you so hard that you’ll be pissing litigation.”

“So you’re threatening me,” she said, a little too loudly.

Was she recording him? How amusing. “It’s not a threat. It’s a promise. Just like the promise you made to my father before violating it on top of a freezer with a pool cleaner young enough to be your son. But that’s not my problem. You can fuck every moron from here to Kokomo as long as it means that I never have to hear from you again.

“What is my problem is you calling here, upsetting Jay, and making her cry as you try to fuck up her life for what I have to figure is the thousandth time. These photographs—which, I know, you’ve never seen before, it must be nice to outsource your dirty work—are the last straw. Do not test me. If you have the negatives, I suggest you give them to me. And if you don’t have the negatives, you had better find them and still give them to me, or I will make you very sorry.”

“You have a lot of nerve accusing me of anything when you were perfectly happy to buy her from me yourself.”

The truth of that statement hit him like a wall. Because it had been exactly like that, hadn't it? Knowing he couldn't lure Jay to himself willingly, he had employed the same underhanded tactics to reel her in, like a fly caught in a spider's web. "What did you do with the money I paid you for that?"

"I have expenses."

He laughed harshly. "I just bet you do."

"You never had to work. Not like I did."

God, the fucking irony. He leaned back in his chair, looking down at Jay at her desk. *I had to work three times as hard.* "Do you even have a job?"

"Screw you."

So that's a no, he thought, pleased that he'd gotten to her. The more unsettled she was, the more likely it would be that she'd screw up later. "I'm having a hard time hearing you over this line. Perhaps we should get together and discuss this in person."

"I'm not having you over to my house."

"Well, I'm not exactly dying to go to the Aging Barbie Dreamhouse but you started this. And don't even think about bypassing me to harass Jay, who will be coming along with me when I come to see you, by the way. She'll tell me if you try to contact her."

"Jay wouldn't do that. She doesn't like the way you talk to me. I'm still her mother."

Nicholas laughed. "You *were* her mother. But I'm taking care of her now."

"Yes, your father told me all about your sick little games before he died. But she didn't want you—then or now. What makes you think she wouldn't leave you the way everyone else did?"

And there it is, he thought.

"Because we're getting married," Nicholas said. "So either you set up an appointment with my secretary or I'll be coming to see you on my own time—with my wife."

He hung up on her outraged squawk, pleased. Now all he had to do was sit back and wait to see how she'd react. However she was earning her money now, he doubted it was legal. He could imagine her being in debt to dangerous men who were twisting her arm for cash.

But he could—and would—twist a whole lot harder.

Arthur had finally finished his meeting and whoever had foolishly tried to get his attention was nowhere in sight, so he seized the moment to head to his CFO's office.

As he walked, he glanced down at the little administrative hub below the mezzanine where Jay was working busily. He felt a wave of jealousy. He missed her gentle touch. Ever since she'd been swapped over to Arthur, he'd started noticing the bumps in his schedule. Despite what Annica thought, his days had never felt as seamless as they had been when they'd been managed by Jay, and every time he'd had a meeting with her, the scent of her shampoo had left him feeling drunk.

He swung Arthur's door closed behind him, the sound making the older man look up. His eyebrows bunched together briefly and then he smiled and pushed his laptop back.

“Nicholas. What can I do you for?”

“I came to ask you for a favor.”

Arthur’s smile faltered. “What kind of favor?”

“I want you to be a witness at my wedding.”

“At your—oh, yes, that’s right. You and Jay.” Arthur blinked at his laptop, as if surprised to find it closed. “Of course. I’d be happy to.”

Nicholas watched the other man straighten out his starched-looking cuffs and wondered if his wife did his shirts. He wondered if Jay would do his. The image of her leaning in as she knotted his tie popped into his head, bringing with it the phantom sensation of her fingers grazing his throat, and though he was not aware of it, his cheeks flushed.

“When is the wedding?” Arthur asked.

“Today.”

Arthur laughed. When Nicholas didn’t respond in kind, his smile dimmed again. “Today? That’s rather last-minute notice for a wedding.”

“It’s not exactly a wedding. It’s a civil ceremony. I’ve been in love with Jay since I was a kid.” Nicholas folded his arms behind his back. “She was too good for me then. She’s probably too good for me now. But I lost her once because I didn’t do right by her when I should have and I’m not making that mistake again. We’re getting married this afternoon.”

Arthur toyed with one of his expensive fountain pens. He’d been around at the company long enough that he’d still been working here when his father had been alive. Sometimes, like now, Nicholas found himself wondering how Arthur thought the two of them compared.

“She’s very worried about you,” Arthur said at length.

“I know.” He set his teeth. “I need to do this. Please.”

Arthur set down the pen. “I don’t see how I can refuse.”

“Thank you.” Nicholas headed for the door, darting another look at Jay. “I mean that.”

Weddings were supposed to be the happiest day of your life.

Or at the very least, Jay thought, they weren’t supposed to fill you with panic and doubt.

It had been an awful day, too. Ominously so. After getting hung up on by one of Nicholas’s would-be investees and spending her morning correcting spreadsheet errors and bad formulas, Jay was ready to hide in the bathroom and never come out.

Soon, all eyes will be on you. No one will think you’re good enough.

She couldn’t shake off the terrified little voice whispering that this was part of Nicholas’s revenge. That he had coaxed her into falling in love with him just so he could shatter her heart.

“Jay?” An executive from one of the other departments was looking down at her impatiently. “Can you photocopy these documents for me?”

“I was actually just getting ready to leave, but sure, I guess. Just leave them on the edge of my desk and I’ll take care of them tomorrow morning.”

Annica huffed very quietly, and Jay turned to look at her.

“These are confidential figures,” the man said. “I can’t just leave them sitting around. I need them done today.”

“Well, I can’t do them today.”

His face darkened. “Then what are we paying you for?”

“She’s not your assistant, Harold.” The deep voice came from behind them both, with a hard edge that made a diamond drill seem soft by comparison. “Or do we need to discuss the reason you’re unable to get your own work done on company time without outsourcing it to the C-suite assistants?”

Harold blinked and stammered out an excuse, clutching his precious papers to his chest as he scurried away. Jay cringed, very aware of Annica’s notice when Nicholas turned his attention back on her. “Are you ready to go?”

“Uh, yeah. Let me just—um. Get my stuff. For my appointment.”

She could feel Annica’s stare as she tugged the bag out from under her desk. She walked to the restroom at a clip. *Why did I think this would work?*

Surely, Nicholas wasn’t so cruel that he would get her all dressed up in his mother’s white dress, only to abandon her at the altar, or wherever it was you abandoned someone when it was just a civil marriage ceremony.

(You let me tie you up, blue jay. Don’t you trust me to take care of you properly?)

She really didn’t care what he did to her body. She was more afraid of what he would do to her heart. That the whisper of vintage silk against her skin was just the first link in a chain that would bind her to him forever: a man who could hate as fiercely as he loved, who did not believe in uncertainties. Her polar opposite, some would say. Not the sort of man anyone would ever imagine her with. Not the sort of man that she had ever imagined for herself—

Until he made her.

The bathroom was empty and silent, except for a dripping tap. Sighing in relief, she went into one of the stalls to change. Even without the outer skirt, the dress had a lot of fabric. When Jay looked at herself in the mirror, the low sweetheart neckline made her blush and throw on her coat.

Good thing we’re not going to a church, she thought.

The office blurred around her as she stepped back out into the hall, holding the coat closed with the arm holding her purse as her eyes restlessly scanned for Nicholas's rangy silhouette.

He wasn't there.

Jay braced herself against the wall, sucking in a sharp breath as she tried not to cry. People glanced at her curiously and she turned her face away, hoping no one would ask her if she was all right. *No. He wouldn't do that to me*, she thought desperately. *He told me he loved me.*

He promised he would never leave me.

A man's hand gripped her upper arm and she looked up wildly, causing one of the tears in her eyes to slide down her cheek as she found herself looking into Nicholas's cinereous gaze. She swiped at her face but she must have looked awful because his softened.

"I was parking the car out front."

"Okay," she said in a small voice.

"I'm here now."

Nodding, she let him lead her away. Most people were in meetings or getting their late afternoon coffee, but in a company this big there were always a few people *somewhere*, and the sight of their CEO with a crying woman in a coat was bound to draw stares.

Stupid, Jay thought, that desperate feeling rising in her chest until it felt as if she were about to burst. *What the hell were you thinking?*

"Deep breaths, Jay."

She stumbled to his car like a sleepwalker, stepping back to let him open the door for her. As she started to get in, she paused, blinking at the sight of the champagne glasses in the cupholders and what was clearly a makeshift bouquet on the front seat. White lilies, white jasmine, white roses —had these come from their own backyard? She cradled them, stunned.

"Like it?" he prompted.

"Oh . . . yes." Her voice sounded faint even to her own ears. She set the flowers on her lap with a rustle, as the AC blew their sweet fragrance in her face, and picked up the champagne flute uncertainly. "Is this alcohol? I don't think that's legal."

“Don’t make me drink alone on my wedding day, blue jay.” He held his glass aloft as he got behind the wheel, heedless of anyone who could see him waving his drink around like a madman. She clinked with him just to make him stop and he knocked back the glittering gold liquid in a single ravenous gulp. “Live a little.”

Jay sipped her own champagne, ducking every time they passed a car. “I think you live too much,” she muttered, and he gave a playful pinch.

“That’s because you’re a little rule follower.”

“I used to be.” She set her empty glass back in the cupholder and picked up the flowers, gripping the blooms so tightly that the petals were shedding faster than she could breathe. “I think we’ve both fallen from grace now.”

He put his hand—the same one he’d pinched her with—on her thigh. *As if he’s checking to see if I’m really here.* “Show me the dress.”

“You’re driving.”

“The light’s turning. I’ve been picturing it all day. Lose the coat.”

A fresh wave of heat poured down her throat, which was already far too warm, before radiating outwards in a wave of prickling numbness. As she peeled coat off, she could *feel* his gaze as if it were melted candle wax dripping over her skin, making her nipples bud against the silk.

“Fuck,” he said reverently. “You look like an angel.”

The car behind them honked, startling them both.

Jay tossed the coat in the back and Nicholas swore, hitting the gas hard enough to propel them both forward. She couldn’t get that look out of her head.

If only we didn’t have all this cruelty between us, she thought desperately. If only he had never listened to his father—if he had been kind—and honest from the start—

Her eyes went to the window, to the world beyond that now felt strangely muted, and her eyes widened to see a familiar silhouette with graying brown hair. “That looks like Arthur.”

She sat up, tugging at her skirt.

“I think it *is* Arthur. Nicholas, what is Arthur Hartwell doing here?”

“I invited him. He’s our witness.”

She glanced over and saw his eyes flick away; he’d been staring. “Our witness?”

“You can’t get married without a witness.”

“When were you going to tell me that you asked my boss to be a witness at our wedding?”

“I just did.”

She gave him a frustrated look that he pretended not to see.

Hollybrook’s city hall was a beautiful Victorian with a mansard roof and white stucco walls. Once it had been a mansion belonging to a long-dead member of Hollybrook’s distinguished elite, but they hadn’t had any heirs, and the property had reverted back to the state. Jay vaguely remembered her mother harping about it back when she ran with the historical society. They had come here as a family for some kind of fundraiser, though she couldn’t remember the details now.

Arthur smiled at them as they walked up from Nicholas’s car. This was a far cry from the white wedding she had envisioned—she had imagined something big, and white, and floral, with an audience packed with nebulous friends. Dreams filtered down through her mother, who had conflated pomp with affection and had often left her own daughter starved at that glittering buffet.

The handpicked flowers and plastic champagne glasses were so oppositional to his grandiose tastes, that Jay knew he had selected both especially for her. Maybe that was part of being in love: finding someone who made you feel brave enough to be the person you couldn’t be alone, and who forgave you for what you did when you were.

“You still should have told me,” she said aloud, giving Nicholas a stern frown.

“I should have told you.” Nicholas took her hand, turning it over in his larger one before raising it to his lips. “But it’s not easy to think about anything else when you look like that.”

Jay felt a traitorous blush rise up her throat. “That’s not going to work on me.”

He nipped gently at her fingertips, letting his eyes drop to where her breasts swelled rather indecently over the low neck of the dress. “It’s not?”

She yanked her hand back, folding it into her skirts as he tugged her towards the city hall building with a grin as her face overheated beneath the spring sunshine.

“Congratulations,” Arthur said, as they approached. “Jay, you look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she said, adjusting her grip on the flowers. She wondered what he was thinking, how much of their interactions he had seen. This had to be strange for him.

“She always does.” Nicholas gave her hand a squeeze.

Standing between these two men, with Nicholas holding tightly onto her hand, made her feel very shy and very young. Which was ridiculous. She was almost thirty-two. She wasn’t all that much younger than Arthur.

“Thank you, Nick.”

Nicholas tilted his head towards the doors. “Shall we?”

“Yes, let’s.” Arthur gestured in front of him. “You two go ahead. I’ll get the door for you.”

Jay shifted her grip to Nicholas’s arm, which was firm and solid beneath the wool suit. She could feel his heart pounding against her forearm which surprised her. He didn’t appear outwardly nervous.

She was pretty sure she did.

He glanced down and looped his other arm around her waist. When she felt him casually stroke her hip through the thin, rustling silk, she felt so lightheaded that the officiant’s words seemed to come at her through a tunnel when he stepped forward to greet them. She had already forgotten his name, and he had to tell her three times where to sign her own.

“Just put your name here,” he said, a little exasperatedly. “Right on the X.”

She gripped the pen extra hard to steady her shaking hand. Nicholas’s signature was right above hers and it surprised her how messy his handwriting was, given how precise he was about everything else. Hers was the stiff cursive she’d been forced to learn all the way back in grade school, when they were still being fed the lie that it would be used in college.

Nicholas, who was four years younger, had never been taught cursive in school.

“Good afternoon,” the officiant said. “We are gathered here today to join Nicholas Beaucroft and Justine Varens in the institution of marriage. Do you, Nicholas, take Justine to be your lawful wedded wife?”

“I do.” His pale eyes burned like gas flames, lit up by the high beveled windows. She remembered him telling her that he was hard to read but his solemn expression still surprised her. He didn’t look like a man who was on the verge of getting everything he wanted.

“And do you, Justine,” the officiant said, turning towards her, “take Nicholas to be your lawful wedded husband?”

“Yes,” she choked, widening her eyes so the tears forming there wouldn’t spill over. “I do.”

“And do you, Arthur Hartwell, give your consent that these two be married on this day?”

“I do,” Arthur said.

“Then by the authority given to me by the State of California, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Nicholas, you may kiss your bride.”

That was all the prompting he needed to lean in and give her the sort of kiss that would have raised eyebrows in a church, nearly forcing her backwards in his eagerness. Jay fell into it, until she remembered where they were, and that her boss was standing *right fucking there*.

“Oh,” she said, pulling away, and covering her chafed and reddened lips with her hand.

“Sir,” the officiant said, stumbling a little over his words as he turned to direct his speech to Arthur, who had politely averted his gaze to a placard announcing the date of the building’s construction, “it is now my privilege to introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Beaucroft.”

“Nice to meet you, Jay,” he said, and the cheesy joke diffused the tension, making her laugh with weak relief after the jarring erasure of her maiden name.

After some final paperwork and a clumsy shaking of hands all around, they were free to leave. She was married. *I’m his*. She looked down at the

strangled flowers in her hands: her trembling grip had reduced them to wilted stems. She couldn't believe that the fight was over so quickly.

Or that it had been so bloodless.

"That was faster than I thought it would be." Arthur caught up to them at the door, echoing her thoughts. "Since I already told my wife I would be late, I would love to take you two out to dinner—although I'd understand completely if you would prefer to celebrate alone tonight."

Jay's face flushed. *Is he implying—*

"No, thank you," Nicholas said, which made her face burn hotter. "But we'll take a raincheck."

"My wife's been dying to meet the man who makes me late for dinner every night. I spend so much time at the office, she calls you the son I never had." His cheeks reddened a bit beneath the whiskers, like he hadn't meant to say so much. "Thank you for asking me to be part of your day."

"You did me a favor." Nicholas ran his fingers over Jay's arm. "I should be thanking you."

Watching him leave, Jay said, "I can't believe your father hired him."

"He was only a manager when I took over," Nicholas said. "He was one of the first people I promoted."

"No wonder he's so loyal to you." Jay put her hands on Nicholas's—her *husband's*—shoulders and stretched to brush a kiss over his mouth. On the sidewalk across the street, someone on a bicycle slowed to stare but Jay made herself ignore them, straightening his lapel. "You chose well."

"You're blushing."

"Yes, because your CFO implied that you might be too busy deflowering me to get dinner."

"He didn't mean it that way. He's just being nice." Nicholas ran his thumbs over the outer edges of her neckline. "And I've already deflowered you." His fingers ran down her sides, making her suck in. "Your heart's pounding. I can feel it through your dress."

Jay gave him a defiant look. "Yes, well, to be fair, so is yours."

A hint of color appeared on his cheekbones—*is he embarrassed?* Jay wondered. "I don't get married every day." Turning from her, much to her

bemusement, he opened the door, waiting until she'd gathered the skirts of her dress to her body. "Have some more champagne. It'll just go flat."

Jay let him refill her glass with far too much wine, too flustered to worry about whether anyone could see. Her ring finger still throbbed where he'd twisted the ring off, just to replace it on her finger after they had said her vows. She fiddled with it, turning the little bird back and forth.

"What a day," she sighed.

"Mm. Did you look at your ring?"

"Yes, it's very nice." She hoped he wasn't about to tell her how much it cost.

"I meant the inside. I had it engraved."

"With what?"

"Take a look."

As Nicholas peeled out of the lot, Jay twisted the ring off again, wincing at the gouge of the tiny diamond-studded wing. When she held the silver band to her face, she could see faint words etched inside. She squinted, bracing her elbows on her knees to steady her hands.

"I am no bird, and no net ensnares me. I am a free human being with an independent will."

"I thought if you still didn't believe my intentions," Nicholas said, staring fixedly at the road, "you might believe them coming from your favorite book."

"I can't believe you remembered that."

"*It is* your favorite," he said, almost as a question.

God, she felt like she was about to cry again. "Yes, but that was ages ago. When did you do this? I don't recall this being here before."

"The day after we watched the documentary about the planets. That was when I realized that I couldn't let you go. Not until you fell in love with me. Not unless you agreed to be my wife." At her stunned silence, he said, "I told you you weren't forgettable. I've been thinking about you every day of my life since you first walked into it."

He parked the car in the drive while her mind reeled with that revelation, loping around the side to open the door for her the way he

always did. They didn't go through the front door. To her surprise, he led her around the side, past the same lilies, jasmines, and roses that had made up her bouquet, and into the sunroom where she had arranged his mother's picture on the wicker table.

Nicholas already had his jacket off and had tossed it on one of the chairs as they passed, the way he had so often done with his school jacket as a child. Jay narrowed her eyes at him and he grinned unrepentantly, already loosening his shirt collar. The sight of his tanned skin made her stomach flip, and so did the smile he leveled in her direction.

She could almost imagine the words he'd engraved in her ring burning into her skin.

"Are you going to come upstairs with me, Mrs. Beaucroft?"

The smile widened when she blushed.

"You're taking the whole white wedding thing rather literally, blue jay. I hope you aren't going to make me chase you around the bed."

"Nick."

Laughing, he gave her hand a playful tug, drawing her up the stairs with him. He was almost giddy. She had never seen him like this. Even as a child, he had always seemed subdued, as if he thought any hint of joy would cause the moment to be stolen from him. Now, happiness lit up his eyes and gave his face a softness she hadn't seen in years.

I could fall in love with this man, she thought. I could fall and fall and never stop.

Without being any less dazed, a flicker of terror crashed through her stupor like lightning.

The master bedroom had been cleaned—by him, she assumed, unless he'd hired someone. A melting bucket of champagne sat on the nightstand. She recognized the brand, and turned to look at him in shock. "How did you set all of this up so quickly?"

"I drove over here on my lunch break." Making work of the rest of his shirt buttons, his dress shirt fluttered around him as he walked to his expensive stereo and pressed "play." Jay braced herself for hard rock and was therefore surprised when one of the old songs she used to dance to

began to play instead. “Dance with me.” He held out his hand. “This time, no one’s watching.”

Every doubt and fear she’d ever had slammed against her all at once as his fingers closed over hers and he spun her towards him with an ease that made her feel nearly weightless in his arms—as if she were some precious, fleeting thing that might disappear without his grip to tether her to this realm any longer. It was a covetous embrace he held her in, with the rarest amount of restraint, and when she leaned into him and braced her hand against his bare chest, his fingers tightened over hers as if that restraint was as fragile as her will to resist.

All those nights that she had cried herself to sleep, she had longed for a love like this—a love so big that it consumed her entire world. But love like that was terrifying, and when it had finally fallen into her lap she had fought, and fought, and fought, because being consumed meant losing parts of yourself that were no longer yours to keep, and reconciling with the emptiness left behind.

But now there was only Nick—*her* Nick—swelling to fill up those empty spaces in her aching soul, and she was so fucking tired of fighting.

So she told herself she wouldn’t.

Jay kissed him, cradling his jaw as her fingers spread to lightly trace his ear. The passion between them had always been charged with violence, and this gentleness crackled against her skin like static as the kiss became less sweet, more demanding.

Her hand dropped to his shoulder, thumbing his collarbones, and the hard planes of his chest, before slipping into his waistband to cup him beneath his dress pants.

“Fuck.” He gripped her wrist. “I can’t last if you do that.”

But Jay noticed he didn’t pull her hand out. Pressing against him, she said, “I need you, Daddy.”

With a snarl, he lifted her up and dropped her onto the bed, stepping back to shrug out of his shirt before working the placket of his pants with fingers made clumsy by his haste.

“If you’d said that to me back then,” he said, stepping out of his pants and walking towards her nude, “I would have been your slave.”

Jay scooted back on his bed, heedless of how it made her skirt ride up. "I wouldn't have wanted that. Love shouldn't make people into prisoners."

"Always the proverbial good girl." Getting on his hands and knees, he slowly prowled up her body until he was straddling her thighs. "I hope you don't plan on fucking me like one."

"I'm only as good as you make me."

"I see." He smoothed his callused palms over her thighs before shoving them apart. "Then don't be." Hooking his fingers in her underwear, he yanked hard enough that she felt the fabric catch and weaken before they ripped. "I like you begging and slutty."

The current of air between her legs made her gasp.

And then, so did his tongue.

She was forced to grip the headboard as he gave her the sort of kiss that wouldn't have been suitable for any sort of ceremony at all.

"Tell Daddy your new name," he whispered between her legs, as she trembled over that precipice of mindless, breathtaking desire. "I want to hear it again."

"Justine Beaucroft."

With a low, satisfied rumble, he swung onto her hips and entered her on a hard stroke. He seemed to take the recoil of her body as a fight, because he pinned her hands down beside her face on the next thrust and held them there. The dying light coming in through the window sparked off her wedding ring in a flash of red as her fingers spread open beneath his.

"You're mine," he said, looking down at her.

Jay looked up at his handsome face and faltered, her staggered breathing a match for the pace he was setting with each rock of his hips. "And you're mine," she said, as a slight question.

He bent to kiss her; she could taste herself on his tongue as he took her mouth the way he had taken everything else: in a single violent sweep. His fingers laced more tightly with hers, and his heart was beating against his chest like it wanted to crawl right into her own.

"I always have been."

Chapter Seventeen

•••••

“You know you can’t force me to love you.”

Jay was wearing one of her old band tees from high school and these little terry cloth shorts, both worn and a little ratty. He knew she was doing it to show him how little all of this mattered to her, and he told himself he didn’t care. If she wanted to dress herself in rags like some sort of LA Cinderella, she could. All her clothes came off anyway when it was time to fuck.

He folded his arms behind his head and affected what he hoped was a look of careless disdain. “What are you talking about, Jay?”

“You might be able to blackmail me into having sex with you—but you can’t make me love you.” She slid off his bed, one long leg at a time, looking around his room with a dismissiveness that cut far more effectively than his own because she was so achingly lovely. “Maybe one day, when you’re on your third wife, you’ll understand why.”

Nicholas didn’t miss how she stumbled back from him when he stood up. *Third wife*. Was that what she fucking thought of him? Could she be that clueless? “I don’t plan on getting married,” he lied. “And if I wanted forgiveness, I’d be in a church. But I’m not in a church, am I, Jay? And you know there’s only one place in this house where I like to kneel.”

She bristled so obviously in distaste that his anger spiked.

“What’s the matter, little bird? Your pussy’s too good for me now? You were happy enough to let me play with it when I was tongue-fucking you so hard you couldn’t breathe.”

“I hate you.”

“Show me.” He took a step closer and when she jumped away again, he told himself again that he didn’t care. Fear was better than love—his father said so. Being feared didn’t make you weak. But the way she was looking at him now scored him so deeply that he found himself thinking very briefly that if this was strength, he didn’t want to be strong. “Get on your knees and show me.”

The unhappy noise that she made was like a knife in his chest. She reached for the hem of her shirt and he felt the belated pang of conscience.

“No, I don’t need that. Just your mouth.”

“You’re disgusting,” she said quietly.

He felt disgusting, in that moment. And for the first few seconds, as she knelt down and began to do what he was forcing her to do, he hated himself more than he had ever allowed himself to hate his father. But the hatred made it easier to let this go on, too. Because the more Jay ripped at his heart, the more he could tell himself that *this* was what he wanted all along.

(*you’re disgusting*)

His eyes snapped open and he breathed in sharply, his heart keeping pace with the throbbing pulse in his neck. The dreams were receding, leaving behind a heaviness that had become as familiar as a lover. During those nine years that she’d been away, he had woken up hollow and gasping, holding nothing but empty air; and then the memories of what he’d done to drive her away burrowed like flechettes beneath his skin as the coolness of the sheets beside him salted the wounds of her loss.

What if there’s nothing? He thought wildly, his body already bracing itself for that familiar rejection and emptiness. *What if she’s gone?*

He rolled over and brushed something firm and warm.

It felt as if a pressurized catch inside his body had just been released. *Oh, thank god.*

Nicholas traced her lips, which parted under his thumb, before touching her cheeks, her nose, her throat—whatever he could reach, working his way down her body like a blind man struggling to remember. Then he gripped her hand until he thought her ring might draw blood.

“Nick? What are you doing?”

“Looking at you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re here.”

“Wow. Okay.” She laughed, drawing the covers up to her breasts as she rolled over to face him. There were lines around her bright eyes and slight brackets around the corners of her full, upturned mouth. They gave her beautiful face a comfortable, worn-in air that made looking at her feel like coming home. She looked at him warily. “Good morning to you, too.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I lived to excess and have regrets.” She looked at the empty champagne bottle, pressing her fingers to her temple. “You’re like the devil.”

“If am, it’s only because you were begging so sweetly for my corruption.”

“We’re going to be late for work,” she said, when he rolled her onto her back.

“I could be persuaded to let you work from home.” The sheets rustled as they were crushed by their bodies. He grinned down at her wickedly. “As long as you wear a slutty uniform.”

Jay glared up at him. “Get off me, creep.”

“Stockings.” He smoothed his hand over her hip as she struggled and failed to maintain her composure as he traced feather-light circles on her inner-thigh. “A sheer blouse. No underwear.”

“Absolutely *not*.”

He thrust his fingers inside her, all the way to the second joint, and she groaned.

“*Fuck.*”

“I love that little buzz.” He ground his thumb over her clit. “It’s so fucking cute.”

Jay writhed beneath him and he tightened his grip, resting his chin on her shoulder as she made those little sounds that drove him wild. She was still the girl who slept beneath a canopy of sunflowers while dreaming of men with cruel hands.

But now she belonged to him.

“Come for me,” he growled. “Come for your husband.”

Her body tautened beneath his before going limp, her chest heaving beneath the thin layer of sheet. With her hair falling richly around her flushed face as her head fell back, she looked so decadent that it took his breath away.

“You’re going to kill me,” she said, still breathing hard. Her face was all flushed. “God, what time is it? Oh my god.” She stared at the phone

screen in disbelief, wriggling free from his body. “We really will be late now. It’s almost nine.”

“At the company I own.” He reached for his own phone, scrolling through the emails as he gave his cock a few tentative strokes. His fingers were still wet from her arousal and that dampness slicked his skin, blending with his own. “Take your time.”

“Easy for you to say,” she grumbled, turning her back on him. “You’re not angling for a new position.”

He half-smiled, looking up appreciatively at her retreating form, but his teasing retort remained unspoken as he noticed that his private investigator had finally gotten back to him.

Spotted a man leaving her apartment at 3am.

Did you get an ID on him?

No, got the license on his car. Having a buddy of mine at the DMV run the plates. Shouldn’t take too long. He owes me a favor and I told him it was for an extortion case.

Good. Put the bitch through the wringer. Make it hurt.

Nicholas collapsed back against the sheets as Jay appeared in the doorway, wearing a prim little button-down blouse and high-waisted trousers.

“You’re still in bed?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Jay flung his pants at him. “I thought you were an early riser.”

“I am,” he said deliberately, his smile widening with wolfish delight at the way her cheeks reddened when she looked away from his waning erection.

She threw a shirt at him. It sideswiped his face.

As he got dressed, he was aware of the little glances she shot his way, pelting like hail against his skin. He grabbed a silk tie from his drawer and purposely fumbled it, and just as he’d hoped, Jay stomped over and reached up to fasten it properly around his throat.

“You’re hopeless,” she told him, giving the knot a final cinching tug.

“Hopelessly in love with my beautiful wife.”

She faltered, staring at him.

“This is the part where you return the sentiment, Jay.”

“I’m in love with my beautiful wife,” she echoed, and he spanked her, making her jolt forward.

“Bad girl.”

Jay ducked her head but not before he saw the brief smile breaking through her serious appearance like a crack. And he thought: *Got you.*

They held hands on the way to the car. When he adjusted the rearview mirror before backing down the drive, he noticed her looking out the window and followed her eyes past the garden, to the bare, denuded earth. His father hadn’t seen much point in gussying the yard up for the deliverymen, and now the path was choked by weeds and native scrub. It had been like that for so long that he’d forgotten how it might look to an outsider.

“It’s not much to look at, is it?”

“No . . .” She looked from him to the window and back. “It’s pretty barren. It was like that even back then, wasn’t it? I remember it flooding whenever it rained.”

“You can do the yard however you want,” he told her. “The interiors, as well. I can give you the names of the people who did the furniture and the décor when I last remodeled, and we can sell any of the art you don’t like.”

“What? Oh no,” she said. “Nick, I was just teasing you about the jellyfish in the museum.”

“No,” he said firmly. “This is your house now. It should look the way you want it to.”

“I really don’t mind it the way it is.” She fidgeted with her broken purse. “I’d be happy to see to the landscaping, but you don’t need to gut your house for me to want to live in it.”

He wondered if he ought to reiterate that taking his money wouldn’t come at the cost of her independence. But then he remembered her words—*you don’t have to give me things to make me like you*—and hesitated.

At various office parties, he’d heard the society wives talk as he circulated the room. They turned their homes into passion projects, invested in their appearance the way their husbands did in mutual funds, and spent

their husbands' money just because they were bored. He was not entirely sure how to deal with a woman who didn't want to spend any of his.

"You're going to need a car," he said eventually.

Jay glanced at him. "Yeah. I suppose I will."

"Another Honda?"

She looked surprised. "I'd love that. Thank you."

"You mentioned your license expired. We can get it renewed this weekend. Depending on how long it's been, they might make you take the test again."

"I guess that's a good thing. I'll need one with my new name, anyway." She leaned back against her seat. "I should email HR today. Meghana is going to *love* that."

"You're a Beaucroft, Jay."

"Your name can't protect me from everything."

"Then I will. You don't need to worry, seriously." Nicholas threw the car in park. "I'm going to take care of you. Say it."

"You'll take care of me," she breathed.

He leaned over the console to kiss her and felt her lips part beneath his. *Yes, kiss me, kiss me like you can't get enough of me, undo me thread by thread until I just come fucking loose.*

"You like that?" he whispered, and she nodded, looking a little drunk.

He ran his knuckles up her shirtfront before stroking her throat. He'd gotten so used to the necklace, it was strange to see her with her throat bare. *I should get her a necklace.* She gripped the back of his neck as she leaned away, her eyes unfocused. *Collar her. Make her mine.*

No one is ever going to fucking hurt her again.

"How's my lipstick?"

Nicholas tweaked her lower lip. "All gone."

"Shit." She took a tube of lipstick out of her purse and begin filling in her full mouth with a dark plum. "You don't have to wait in the car for me anymore," she added. "People seem to suspect we're together, anyway. I heard some people from Acquisitions gossiping about how you're probably sleeping with me a few weeks ago."

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because I knew you’d be angry.”

“I’m not angry,” he lied, feeling a surge of warmth when she leaned into him just a little as he stroked her warm cheek. *At you*, he added silently. “We can discuss how we’ll conduct ourselves in public later. Just do whatever feels most comfortable for now.”

“Okay.” She tugged her blouse down and centered her waistband as she stepped out of the car. “I hope you can maintain that mindset going forward because they’re going to talk about us a whole lot more now. Marriages are part of the public record.”

“I could always issue some Q4 layoffs,” he muttered.

“Please don’t do that. If you fire anyone who looks at me funny, people really will talk.”

They shouldn’t be looking at you at all, he thought, though he smiled and nodded for her sake.

Let her think she’d won. She wasn’t ever going to see any of that paperwork.

Jay turned and headed into the building at a brisk clip that she must have adopted in the city. A man held the door open for her and Nicholas rolled his eyes as he wiped her lipstick from his mouth. Her little fan club would be very disappointed when they found out she was off the market.

He took the same path as Jay—*my wife*, he thought, which raised goosebumps on his arms—stepping aside to dodge an intern who was padlocking her bike. The usual clutch of kiss-asses from sales and marketing were hovering by the door, comparing numbers, though they swarmed him like lemmings when he came in through the door, eager to schmooze.

Nicholas maintained a bland look and nodded until he didn’t feel like nodding anymore, and then he made an excuse and left. Stacey was on her way to get her morning coffee and shot him a wary look before hurrying down the hall with her mug, her face slightly pinched.

He watched her with a lifted brow and then grimaced when he saw something worse coming down the hall—Harold, his least favorite executive.

“Mr. Beaucroft, hey—how was your weekend?”

“It was fine,” he said, with a note of irony only Jay would have understood.

“I spent the weekend in Malibu. But I’m sure yours was much more eventful.”

Was it supposed to hurt that he wasn’t burning the midnight oil in overpriced surfer hell like a burner frat boy with a trust fund? “The weekends just fly by.” His smile thinned. “Was there something you wanted? I have a meeting in twenty minutes.”

“I just wanted to check in. If I need something, I’ll ask your secretary.”

“That’s what she’s there for,” Nicholas said, adding silently, *for now*.

He headed for the stairs, and on his way to the office he saw the man swagger over to Jay and Annica’s station. He leaned over to talk to Jay, and whatever he said didn’t appear to please her, because her shoulders tensed and the smile vanished from her face as she responded.

Nicholas sat down at his desk and drew in a breath as he looked around his domain. The room still smelled like the lemon carpet cleaner the janitors were so fond of. Usually, he was able to ignore it, but now it stung his sinuses like a brand.

His eyes went to his computer. He frowned. A newspaper was tented over the keyboard, arranged so that even the mouse was covered. It was *The Hollybrook Herald*. That was even stranger. It was a puff-piece pamphlet paid for with city dollars by people who thought that local change was terrifying. He never read it if he didn’t have to. Why the hell was it on his desk?

Maybe one of the janitors was reading it, he thought doubtfully.

Then his eye caught on the title of one of the articles.

LOCAL CEO CAUGHT IN TABOO SCANDAL

Hollybrook, CA—Early last week, an anonymous source revealed that Nicholas Beaucroft, local philanthropist and CEO of Beaucroft Assets, has allegedly been involved in a clandestine relationship with his older stepsister, Justine Varens, for the last nine years.

This revelation sent shockwaves through the community, particularly in light of his father's sexual misconduct, for which he stood trial for several months following multiple allegations from his employees. The anonymous source, claiming to be a part of the young CEO's inner-circle, hinted that the affair began with the family's tacit knowledge, albeit against their approval.

Since Varens is an employee at her stepbrother's firm, the nature of this relationship has sparked concerns on the morality of Beaucroft's actions and the implications of his perceived nepotism with regard to how it might potentially affect the running of his corporation. This is not the first time that this concern has been raised. In 2015, an ex-employee of BA wrote an open letter to the CEO, alleging that BA was a hostile work environment with little to no amenities.

One employee, who did not wish to be named, said of the incident: "When she [Varens] first came here, nobody knew who she was or how she'd gotten the job. She started as [Beaucroft's] secretary, but then they swapped her out to the CFO. Now, she's vice-president. A jump up the corporate ladder like that doesn't just happen. Other people's careers have been toppled just so she could glide ahead. But I guess some people don't care who they stop on as long as it means they're climbing to the top."

A shareholder, who also wished to remain anonymous out of fear of retaliation, said: "As someone with a stake in the company, who has relied on his investments in the past, this news is incredibly distressing. CEOs are supposed to be the figureheads of the companies they lead. They're the face that everyone sees. If Nicholas chooses to conduct his personal life with such a flagrant disregard for his own reputation and conduct, that, to me, raises serious red flags about his ability to steward his own corporation. But then, he's always been a little too comfortable strongarming people into handshake deals."

The news has caused other shareholders to wonder if Mr. Beaucroft ought to step down. The anonymous shareholder continued: "We have an expectation that company executives are always operating in good faith. If a CEO's behavior compromises that public face in any way, even during their so-called private lives, the shareholders have a right to know these details because the effects can be so public. When an executive's personal life impacts corporate governance and throws his moral and ethical values

into question, he's saying he doesn't care about the rules or the people he's dealing with."

Beaucroft Assets became a multinational corporation earlier this year, but the anonymous employee hinted that there are whispers of clients who have already begun pulling out due to the allegations of their CEO's conduct. When we attempted to reach out to BA for a statement, we received an email from their HR department claiming that they would be "looking into these allegations." Nicholas Beaucroft and Justine Varens could not be reached for comment.

Hi Meghana,

Nicholas and I got married this week and I didn't see a name change form on the company's internal Wiki page. What is the procedure for getting my last name updated in the system?

Also, do I need to notify someone else besides you? We want this to be above board.

At least, *she* did, thought Jay, as she signed her name to the bottom of the email and sent it off before she could second guess herself. It would have to do for now. If she had made a mistake, she was sure Meghana would correct her.

She twisted the ring on her finger. Nicholas must have had it resized since he had attempted to present it to her nine years ago. At thirty-one, her fingers were no longer as slim as they had been when she had been a young girl fresh out of college. That should have disturbed her and it did a little, but it wasn't that much more invasive than anything else he'd done.

Keeping her childhood bed because he'd fucked her in it, hiring a PI to stalk and photograph her, blackmailing her into being his mistress by filming her getting off—even when he was a boy, he had lacked both boundaries and restraint.

That morning, he had been holding her like he thought she might be taken from him. Touching her with such aching tenderness that she had feigned sleep so that he might do it longer. She couldn't remember the last time someone had touched her like that, with so much longing.

Like she was their whole world.

“Do you think you can make these copies for me?”

Jay looked up. It was that marketing executive that Nicholas had chased away. Memory of his authority had apparently faded in his absence. “I’ll see what I can do.” She didn’t bother to mask the sharpness in her tone. “It might be faster to do it yourself. I have a full morning with Mr. Hartwell.”

“And you don’t do what you do for your bosses for other people?”

The wording of his question gave her pause. “I’m Mr. Hartwell’s assistant. Not the office secretary. I’m happy to show you how to use the copier later but if I do, it’s going to be a courtesy and not because that’s my job description.”

“That’s funny,” the man—Harold, she remembered his name was—said. “From what I hear, you do plenty of things outside of your job description for your stepbrother.”

Jay stiffened, shooting a sidelong look at Annica. Did she *hear* this? But she kept her face angled pointedly towards her own screen, in a way that suggested bomb blasts could be going off and she wouldn’t notice. Either she had the best-noise cancelling headphones in the world, or she wasn’t going to lift a damn finger to help.

“I’m not sure what that’s supposed to mean,” Jay said at last, opting for a cold, no-nonsense tone. “I don’t work for Nicholas.”

“Just under him,” she thought she heard Annica say, but when Jay whipped around to look at her in shocked anger, the woman still had her eyes on her screen.

“Look, I don’t have time for this,” Harold say, with a nasty smile that suggested he’d heard what Annica said, too. “Just make the copies.”

Just do this, do that, I thought you were a good girl.

People were always telling her how to behave and what to do, and expecting her to just roll over like a beaten dog. Anger flared through her, hot and dangerous.

She picked up the sheaves of paper, allowing the man one beat of smug satisfaction, before ripping them right down the center with a neat twist of her hands.

“What the *fuck*.” Harold dove to his knees to salvage his precious documents while Jay turned to her desk, her hands shaking as she put them in her lap. *I can’t believe I just did that.*

Harold stood, his posture menacing—familiar. She stared at the screen until the bluish light wavered, remembering a time not so long ago when her stepfather had put his fist through the wall.

(if you want to keep that pretty face)

“You’re as crazy as your whole fucking family.”

Jay jumped when her computer chimed. God, shit. She plugged in the jack, silencing her computer as Harold walked away with a shake of his head. Her heart was still beating a mile a minute and there was a high-pitched ringing sound in her ears.

HR had sent her an email. *Wow, that was fast.* Jay was vaguely surprised that Meghana was responding to a request for a name change personally, when she had an entire staff at her disposal.

Please come see me in my office at your earliest convenience.

Dread sank into her gut like a falling stone. Had Harold run to HR? And—what? she mocked herself inwardly. Complained that she’d ripped up the documents after he’d made vaguely suggestive comments about Nicholas and her family?

It’s probably about Nicholas. She darted a look at Annica as she rose up on shaky legs. *It’s always about Nicholas.* The trek to the office felt longer than normal as her brain spiraled with worst-case scenarios and doubts. Who was the sadist who had designed this building so that you had to parade yourself across the entire floorplan just to get called on the carpet?

And then she realized she knew the answer. It would be Nick’s father, of course.

He was already there, standing over Meghana’s desk. Looming, the way he always did. She wished he wasn’t doing it now. Even if the HR director seemed immune to his tactics, any threatening behavior would make whatever was about to happen worse.

This definitely isn’t about the name change form.

“Oh good.” Meghana spoke in a tone of decisive calm as Jay shut the door behind herself. “Since you’re here, we can all begin.”

“Begin what?” Taking a cue from Nicholas, Jay didn’t sit down, either, remembering how helpless she had felt last time when she had been forced to remain seated while castigated like a child in front of all that yarn. She held onto the back of the chair as if it would buoy her. “What’s going on?”

Meghana held up a newspaper. Jay recognized it. *The Hollybrook Herald*—the one she’d been on the cover of just a few weeks before, not that she went out of her way to read it. Damon had thought it was gossipy trash and her mother didn’t read anything that wasn’t in *Vogue*, and Nicholas seemed to get all of his news from his phone—

“What,” she began, confused, until her eyes focused on the first page.

There was a picture of her and Nicholas there, printed in black and white. Not a recent one—not one of *those* pictures. Not even the one of her in that silvery dress that she’d hated.

No, it had been taken on the night of her stepfather’s holiday party.

The night she had run away and never come back.

LOCAL CEO CAUGHT IN TABOO SCANDAL

“Oh,” Jay heard herself say, her voice cracking.

“This was on my desk this morning. I don’t know who put it there and to be honest, it doesn’t really matter.” Meghana set the paper down beside her colorful yarn decorations. “Someone took the liberty of circulating copies around the office. At this point, I think it’s a safe bet to say that everyone has either seen it or heard about it.”

Jay stared at that photo of herself in the rose gold-colored gown that she’d hated. *The look in his eyes*. She hadn’t imagined it—Nicholas as a young man who didn’t know how to mask his obsession. It was there on his face, plain to anyone who cared to see it.

She supposed that there were plenty of people who would.

“The copier needs credentials to work,” Nicholas said. “Did you check the log?”

“Yes. Someone used the interns’ code from the supply office.”

Jay made a sound. Nicholas started to go to her and the sight of him visibly checking the impulse—for her sake, she assumed—had her sinking into that stupid chair, after all.

“Given our last conversation on this subject and your litany of legal issues, I had hoped that we had seen the matter of corporate malfeasance reach a close. But it seems Jay’s new role in the company has now raised concerns about favoritism in the workplace.”

“Spare me the pearl-clutching,” Nicholas said. “We’re all adults here.”

Jay started to glare at him and then did a double-take. “Wait—my—my new role?”

“We were going to announce your promotion today. Mr. Hartwell made a very strong case for your lack of experience in light of your other considerable achievements. But now that this is out, we’re considering either deferring the announcement and your promotion to the next payment cycle, or until the blowback from this situation dies down. Or—” She hesitated. “Going with another candidate. There were contenders.”

They don’t want you, that nasty voice in her head whispered. They never wanted you.

“Don’t punish her for what I did.” Nicholas had moved. Now he was standing right behind her, gripping the back of her chair. She could feel the warmth of his fingers through her blouse. “There’s no need to denigrate her contributions. It’s all above board.”

“Nobody is denigrating anyone,” Meghana said. “But we have the company to think of. And I apologize for sounding harsh, but when you fail to disclose a relationship that impacts the work environment, the situation is very much *not* above board, Mr. Beaucroft.”

“It doesn’t matter. Jay isn’t going to be taking the fall for this.” She felt him lean forward, both hands bracing on the back of her chair now. She imagined he looked like an angry-eyed panther, ready to spring. “I raised this company from the ashes. If you go through with this decision, I won’t just step down. I’ll gut it. That could mean pro bono consulting with every single one of our competitors, or it could mean a lawsuit for retaliation. I got this position by being creative, and I plan on getting even more creative if you force me to leave it before I’m ready.”

A look of panic flashed over Meghana’s face, as if she were considering the damage an angry and inspired Nicholas could wreak. “Let’s not be rash.”

“I’m not being rash. How did news of her new role get out in the first place? We hadn’t even announced it to *her* yet.”

Oh my god. Jay’s hands fisted in her lap. *He’s right.*

“Arthur and I were the only ones who knew the names of the applicants. And I only know because he discussed it with me briefly, in passing. This suggests that there was a breach—or someone was given access to Arthur’s office or files that shouldn’t have.”

His tone said very clearly who he blamed for that.

Meghana nodded stiffly, accepting the strike. “We’ve already considered that possibility and have our security team looking into the situation.”

“Are you? That’s interesting. Because I should have been informed of this slanderous hit piece *before* you gave yourself the go-ahead to deliver a canned response to the press.” His voice turned cold. “When I find out who violated their NDA to go crawling to a reporter, they’re going to be fired—and sued—regardless of their position with the company.”

“Security is reviewing the footage from Mr. Hartwell’s office and the legal department has already signed off on dealing with this as a violation of the company’s NDA. As soon as we have this vetted through the proper channels, you’ll be consulted on every step of the outcome.”

“Let me make one thing perfectly clear.” The chair creaked as Nicholas leaned forward again. “As long as I’m doing my job and the numbers look good on paper, the perception of the slack-jawed public doesn’t really matter to me. We’re not brokering auto shops and church bake sales here. I could not give less of a flying fuck what John Q. Public thinks about how I conduct myself *with my wife* when I’m making the company billions. They don’t hand out your paychecks. We do. I suggest,” he finished, with a slight growl, “you remember that.”

For the first time since Jay had met the woman, Meghana looked surprised. “I’m sorry, did you say—wife?”

Nicholas reached down and grabbed Jay’s left hand, holding it up like a trophy. Meghana’s brown eyes drifted from Jay’s hand to Jay herself and then over her shoulder, to Nicholas. Jay cringed at the thought of what his expression must look like right now.

But a small part of her thrilled at his fierceness.

“We got married this week. Clearly, the informant didn’t know that. They got Jay’s name wrong.”

“I sent you an email.” Nicholas was still holding her hand and she made no attempt to free herself, although she did shoot an uneasy glance at Meghana. “This morning.”

“I didn’t see it,” Meghana said. “It’s been a busy morning.”

“Too busy to check your emails. That is concerning.” He stroked the inside of Jay’s palm with his thumb. “Especially if you have the time to schedule superfluous meetings that could have been proactively handled by reading them.”

That was enough. Jay spread her fingers, gently breaking Nicholas’s grip, aware even as she folded her hands in her lap that she was free only because he had allowed her to be. “I told you in my email that we wanted this to be above board—and we do,” she added, hearing his quiet scoff. “We were hoping to keep this quiet for at least a little while but now it’s affecting the work environment, you’re right. But a lot of that is because of the paper being circulated. Someone made a suggestive comment to me before I’d even settled down at my desk.”

“I’m sorry,” Meghana said, after a pause. “That’s unacceptable.”

“Yes, it is. Listen to your VP. She knows what she’s doing. And unlike me, she’s going to be a lot more understanding about you reading the gossip rags instead of doing your job.”

He let go of the chair and pivoted towards the door. “I expect to have an email before the end of the day telling me how you plan to deal with this in detail. Assuming we’re both still here.”

Way to drop that bombshell without diffusing it, Jay thought, her frustration blending with concern and—yes, a little schadenfreude, too. Nobody had ever defended her like that, not so viciously. She thought she might like it. Too much.

“I’m sorry,” she said, as much as for Meghana’s sake as herself, before hurrying after Nick. “Nicholas, wait,” she called out, and his steps slowed, allowing her to catch up to him in the hall outside the HR office. Employees

from the Acquisitions department were beginning to trickle in and they were getting a few sidelong looks. “I need to talk to you.”

“In my office.”

His office? Jay eyed the people who were making a very poor attempt at disguising their interest. If she went into a room alone with him, there would be talk. But on the other hand, there already was.

She had a flash of following him in there before, terrified that he would use her as his little office whore but bound to follow anyway. He pressed a button on his desk and the windows automatically became opaque. Jay startled.

“I didn’t know they could do that.”

“Well, they can.” He leaned back against his desk, hands braced on the surface. “What do you want, blue jay?”

The affectionate nickname softened the impatience in his voice. “You can’t give up your job for me.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s your *job*. You’re good at it. You enjoy it. I’ve seen your face at those all-hands meetings, Nicholas. It lights you up.”

One of his eyebrows had lifted challengingly, but as she spoke, she recognized the stubborn set to his jaw as he pushed off from the desk. “It’s not my job that ‘lights me up.’ It’s you. You’ve given up so much for me. What if I want to be the martyr for once?”

“Because you can’t fix the past by . . . by martyring yourself on it.” Jay shook her head desperately. “Is this about what you said by the pool? Your idea of a big sacrifice? I don’t want that.”

“Do you want the job?”

“Not at the expense of your career!”

“No, I’m asking you, Jay. Do you *want* the job?”

She glared up at him heatedly. “Stop trying to make me punish you. I told you I wasn’t going to co-sign your stupid decisions!”

“This isn’t punishment. They’re not going to let me go without cutting me some kind of deal. We’re a multinational corporation and I’m me. Do you think those shiny new deals I brokered are going to last if the CEO

suddenly disappears? Meghana's probably on the phone with Legal right now, trying to conjure up some golden handcuffs to bind me to them right now.”

“My god,” Jay gasped. “You’re *evil*.”

“It’s a fuck or get-fucked world out there, Jay. I didn’t get where I am today by letting people bend me over a table. You, on the other hand, insist on seeing the best in everyone, even when your ass is in the air.”

“Nicholas!”

“It’s a very cute ass.” He flicked her nose, his smile widening into a grin when she smacked his hand away. “I’ve seen people here fall over themselves trying to please you. I think they’ll try even harder when they come crawling to you for comfort after dealing with me.”

Jay wasn’t sure whether she wanted to laugh or scream. “Please tell me you didn’t threaten Arthur into giving me this job.”

“Of course not. Just a strongly worded suggestion.”

“Oh my god.”

“You deserve it. You’ve always worked harder than everyone else. Three times as hard—isn’t that what you told me?” His eyes flicked over her. “I can believe it.”

“I didn’t ask you to do this.” She shook her head. “I didn’t want you to do this.”

“Look, I told you that hard work didn’t matter, but that was before. Back when my father was buying me off like some kind of insurance policy. Bailing out this company like a sinking ship changed my thinking. I don’t want some corporate pencil-pusher managing my operations division like it’s just another rung on the corporate ladder. I want someone who will fight.”

“What if you lose your job?”

Nicholas shrugged. “Then I sell the house and buy you a vegan bakery or something.”

“You can’t do that.” She felt as if she were speaking through a mouthful of Novocain. “You can’t just sell your house and leave, just like that.”

"I don't think you understand how much money I actually have, Jay."

Oh god, Jay thought. He's right.

"You know," Nicholas said, lowering his voice confidently, "half of it is yours. Or do you still not realize that?"

"I realize that," she snapped.

"Because you're acting like you think you still need to budget for a tiny little apartment with bars on the windows."

He's so arrogant. That entitlement was like something out of another age, when men could own land stretching beyond what the eye could see.

And then Jay thought of how he had defended her, and his unshakable faith in her. She wasn't sure it was warranted but it still made her feel good, because nobody had ever told her that it was okay to yearn for things that seemed beyond her reach.

Before she was quite aware of doing so, Jay closed the distance and wrapped her arms around his slender waist. The muscles of his back stiffened beneath his suit.

"What are you doing?" he asked, in a careful voice.

"Hugging you, idiot," Jay mumbled, hugging him harder, burying her face in his throat the way he did, whenever he inhaled against her hair. "Even though your plans are stupid and I think you might be insane, the way you defended me today made me want to kiss you."

"Of course I defended you." His arms folded awkwardly around her body, in stark contrast to the smooth elegance of his usual gestures. "Anyone with eyes can see how hard you work."

She managed a brave smile. "Part of the reason I worked as hard as I did was because sometimes it felt like that was the only thing keeping me afloat. I was so afraid . . . that no one would step in to save me if I stopped flailing." She paused. "But you would."

"Every time." His lips brushed her brow. "Until my heart stops."

Jay nearly shuddered when he pushed her gently back.

"I thought—when she showed us the paper, I thought it would be the photographs."

The gentleness vanished from his face like evaporating mist. “Yeah, I think we’re going to have to talk to your mother about that. I had a PI looking into her. The same one I used for you. He’s thorough, and he told me she’s seeing someone.”

The same one he’d used for her. He said it so casually, so shamelessly.

“Who is she seeing?”

“I don’t know. But she’s not smart enough to come up with anything this elaborate on her own, which probably means that whoever she’s with lit a fire under her ass.”

“You want to confront her,” Jay said, reading his expression.

“Do you not want me to?”

“No.” Jay realized that could be taken for denial and shook her head. “She made her choice a long time ago. The weekend she let me think she was dead so she could hook up with your dad—that was the day she made it clear that she would never choose me. If she is behind this—” Jay steeled her shoulders “—if she sent me those pictures, I will *never* forgive her.”

“Don’t worry. She knows she won’t get her money if we think we have nothing left to lose.”

“Was that why you did it?” Her voice was quiet. “When you blackmailed me?”

Nicholas studied his tinted office windows with his wintry eyes, folding his arms. “I thought you didn’t love me anymore. And I wanted you . . . so badly. I didn’t want you to leave.”

“I never understood what made you want to hurt me.”

“I thought if I made you stay, I could force you to love me back. But the more I took from you, the emptier I felt—and the more you shoved me away.” He laughed bitterly, shaking his head at the blinds. “I really was a waste.”

“You were a cruel and vicious boy who got everything he wanted. Someone was going to have to say no to you eventually.” She leaned back on the edge of his desk, crossing one foot over the other. “I hate that you made it be me.”

“I’m not a nice man, Jay. But I love you. And I want to do for you what neither of our parents did for us. Protect you, take care of you.” He stalked

closer, making her suck in her breath. “And now that I know that you love me back, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

“I know,” she said, a little anxiously. “You’ve told me. I believe you.”

“No.” He bent slightly, so they were face to face. “Not just in the office. Anyone who has ever kept you up at night, I can destroy.” She gripped the desk tighter as something too dark to be arousal blazed through her veins. “Do you want to get back at your mother? Your friends? You’ve only seen me at the very best of my very worst. I can show you what I’m capable of when I’m not holding back—and I will win.”

Jay had a piercing realization of what the serpent must have sounded like while cajoling Eve into tasting the apple; it must have tasted like the sweet violence he was promising her now.

She turned her face away, conscious of the closed door and the buzzing silence and the slight kiss of arousal on her inner thighs. Even in this steel and drywall bubble, they were not beyond judgement.

“I don’t want to hurt her,” she said uncertainly, still turned away.

“You don’t need to hurt her to make her hurt.”

She thought of all the times her mother had made her feel worthless. She might not have raised a hand to her, but her words had been like the slow death of a thousand cuts. And she had swallowed down all those insults like bitter medicine, thinking that her mother had surely known best.

And then she left me alone. She hurt me on purpose because it made her feel bigger when I was small. She treated me like I was nothing. And then she sold me—like I was nothing.

She looked up at the man her mother had sold her to. He looked back at her, and she saw that radiant chill in his eyes thaw by just a few degrees, like a teasing glimpse of sun in a storm.

Then he bent to her ear and whispered, “Let Daddy take care of it.”

“Okay,” Jay said, sounding only a little shaky.

Chapter Eighteen

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When she was young, she used to have the same recurring dream. She was looking for her father and he was singing to her, and she knew with the logic of dreams that he would only come back to her if she could remember the lyrics. She *had* to remember the lyrics.

But she could never remember how the song went, and he never came back, and Jay would wake up with tears in her eyes and a stinging sense of failure that she could never put a name to. Lying in the warm bed, with one of Nicholas's heavy forearms draped around her waist, she felt the fleeting vestiges of those feelings even now.

They whispered, *You're not good enough to be loved.*

Looking at Nicholas put an ache in her throat. Being with him made her feel for the first time in her life that she could be enough—and not just for him. For herself, too.

That was terrifying.

She ran trembling fingers along his jaw, rasping over the sawtooth blades of stubble. The shape of his face was as familiar as her own, with those vaulted cheekbones that were sharp enough to gouge and a prominent nose that he spent far too much time looking down at others with. *And that mouth*, she thought. It was a wicked, sullen mouth that did terrible things to her heart.

“Please don’t hurt me again, Nick.” She touched his nose, thinking about the way that he was always flicking hers with such irreverence. “Can you do that? Can you just—love me?”

His fingers flexed at her hip, but otherwise, he didn’t stir. He would soon, though. The rise and fall of his chest was steady and his breathing was too shallow for deep sleep.

“Thank you.”

Impulsively, she pressed a kiss to his nose before sliding out of his arms and quietly creeping to her own room. She didn’t look back, so she didn’t see his eyes open, following her as she left while his fingers ghosted the path hers had taken.

Jay fed her anxiously pacing cat and patted his butt the way he liked before sliding her arms into a floral blouse and doing up the buttons. As she clasped on a statement necklace that she refused to believe was out of fashion, she studied herself in the mirror.

It wasn't the loss of Danielle she grieved so much as the loss of a mother who had never really existed at all. She had made excuses for that mother, but every time she stayed out late at night, it wasn't because she had been trying to provide. She had been looking for a way out—with or without Jay. And when she had needed her mother most, her mother had chosen *without*.

Maynard was scampering around the kitchen and kicking up his heels, so Jay fed him, too. He was an excitable dog, and was beginning to get quite large. Sometimes Nicholas had to walk him three times a day, and Jay would quietly go to the front door to watch their shapes disappear around the curve of the hill, her stomach flipping when he would bend to ruffle the dog's ears.

The only thing the dog liked more than them was the cat, who stayed locked in Jay's room. He would claw at the door like a creature possessed, while her cat's little shadow floated back and forth beneath the gap in the door, hissing audibly.

I bet he's lonely, she thought, as the puppy sniffed her hand with interest, detecting hints of the cat he could smell but never see. She smiled when he licked her and scratched behind his ear, watching him kick out his left leg in a rhythm of pure blissful joy.

"I get lonely, too," she told the dog. "But maybe none of us has to be lonely anymore. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Jay." She jumped guiltily, falling back on her ass as Nicholas placed his briefcase on the kitchen table. The puppy gleefully took advantage of her discomfiture by jumping into her lap. "You ran away again."

She set the puppy to the side and got to her feet, straightening her shirt. "The cat was hungry."

He looked at her, with an expression that clearly said, *I might be, too*. When he slid a hand into his pocket and strolled over to her, her body thrummed in anticipation.

“This is pretty.” He fingered her statement necklace, lifting one of the pink rhinestones.

“It’s just a necklace,” Jay said, looking down at his hand. “I brought it back with me from the city.”

“Would you wear something like that for me?”

“A necklace?”

“No. Something that will go with the lace you wear for me at night. Delicate and sweet—until it’s not.” He gave a tug on the rhinestone. “Something that tightens when I pull on it.”

“O-oh,” Jay heard herself say faintly, as his fingers drifted harmlessly down her blouse.

“I like that reaction.” He pulled away with a grin, which faded when he realized how stiff she was. “What is it? What’s wrong? You don’t want the necklace?”

“N-no, that’s fine—” she flushed. “They’re announcing my role today and I’m just really nervous.”

And now her head was full of explicit images, thanks to him. She shook her head side to side, trying to dispel them.

“I’m worried about how people will take it after that article.”

“It doesn’t matter how they take it. You’ll be the smartest person in that room.”

The praise made her smile unwillingly, even as she searched his face for deceit. Absently, she reached up to fasten his crooked shirt collar, before taking the silk tails of his unfastened tie and knotting them beneath his throat. He smiled at her. The smile was not reassuring.

“You’re not going to scare them into respecting me,” she said, partially as a warning.

“It isn’t my fault most people listen to me when I tell them to do something.” His hand smoothed down her back, which would have been sweet, until he squeezed her ass. “You happen to be the lone exception to that rule, *little bird*.”

She pushed his hand away from her butt. “I listen to you when you’re being reasonable. I just also call you out on your toxic bullshit.”

“It’s a simple, *reasonable* equation, Jay. If they’re afraid of me, and you’re not afraid of me, why are you afraid of *them*? ”

It was a good point and she was mildly annoyed that he had made it. “Just don’t meddle.”

“Trust me. I told you I’d take care of everything. All you have to do is pass the probationary period.” He scrolled through his phone. “I’ll send you a picture of the necklace I’m having made for you later. I think you’ll like it.”

“You found one *already*? ”

“You shouldn’t leave me alone in bed in the mornings. I get very distracted when I’m horny.” He gave her ass another grope. “Come on.”

She tried not to fret over what he might do on the car ride over, while she kept absently nudging his wandering hand off her thigh. Nicholas’s method of taking care of things tended to be oppositional to hers and sometimes it got people hurt.

But when Annica gave her the cold shoulder, refusing to even look at her, it was clear that she had not only read the article but believed every word. She was still stinging from the looks she had gotten from some of the other female employees in the bathroom that morning, and the mocking laughter that had followed in the wake of her departure.

Maybe Nicholas is right, and there is something to being feared.

“Jay,” Arthur said, “does that clarify what the transition plan should look like?”

“Yes,” she lied, too cowed to admit that she hadn’t been paying attention.

“Good. I’ll forward you the 30-60-90 plan Nicholas had drafted up for our last executive hire. But as a very quick debrief, the plan is to have you in your new office within the week.”

“So quickly?”

He nodded. “Annica can take over your duties while we interview candidates to fill your role. By the two-month mark, you should be making most of your decisions independently, and in about three months, the training wheels will be off, and you’ll be a full-fledged executive with all of

the responsibilities that entails. Which reminds me, did you sign your new NDA?”

Jay nodded, thinking, *Provided that I pass the probationary period.*

Nicholas had explained in the car that this was the only way the board would go for it, given her lack of experience. No matter how prettily they spun the narrative, she was a risk. If she failed, they would replace her with someone more capable and Nicholas would lose his job, or so she assumed. He hadn’t actually said *that*, but the fortunes of many powerful men were riding on his shoulders.

She swallowed hard and forced her smile around her unease.

“On the third Wednesday of every month, we circle up and discuss various pain points within the company. Sometimes people will share team updates or brainstorm ideas. The meetings are always very loose and fluid, following a freeform structure. I thought it would benefit you to attend the one that we’re having today.”

“Yeah, sure. That makes sense.”

“Do you have any questions about what we expect for you?”

“No, um, you’ve been very clear.”

“Then I think we had better head over now.”

They walked side by side to the massive conference room that Nicholas had used to take her into whenever they went through prospective clients together. A little shiver passed through her when she saw that he was already there, his head bowed as he talked to the head of security.

“Odd,” Arthur murmured. “I wonder what James is doing here. He never attends these meetings.”

Nicholas caught her staring while he was nodding along to whatever the other man was saying, but his mouth crooked up at one corner. Then James took his leave and Nicholas took his seat, causing the chatter to drop by several decibels. A couple of people looked at her curiously.

Arthur put his hand on her shoulder gently propelling her forward. “Everyone, this is Jay, our new VP of Operations. Some of you may have met her before,” he added, acknowledging her change in status. “Jay, perhaps you’d like to say a few words before we kick off this meeting?”

Fuck, they hadn't prepared her for *this*. She glanced around the table in alarm, her eyes bouncing over everyone except Nicholas, who gave her another one of those subtle not-quite-a-smiles. Nobody was being outwardly hostile—especially not with *him* in the room—but some of the executives stared a beat too long and she knew from the way their eyes narrowed what they were thinking and why.

"H-hi," she said. "I'm Justine Va—ah, Beaucroft," she corrected herself. "I'm a Cal alum and I've been with BA for the better part of a year now." She fought the urge to duck her shoulders and make herself small, the way she always had whenever people looked at her too long. "Before I came to this company, I worked at a small luxury home goods manufacturer in the Financial District of San Francisco. My role there was largely administrative, too—at least in the beginning. But I worked my way up, and that was where I got my experience managing to the operations and financial health of a business."

Her eyes darted to Nicholas again. She had his full attention. She had everyone's attention but it was his that made her cheeks warm as she set her shoulders and kept going. "You already know my husband—" her voice cracked, and a few people looked away—"I've heard the rumors circulating and I'm willing to acknowledge that our relationship probably makes my presence here seem questionable to some of you, but I plan on working very hard to prove to everyone that I deserve to be here. I promise that I won't let any of you down."

A long, frozen silence followed her words. A bead of sweat rolled down her spine. Arthur saved it, by saying, "Well said, Jay," and clapping, and slowly others joined him. It was the most tepid accolade she had ever received but at least they weren't booing or sewing a scarlet letter to her chest.

After her cringing introduction, the talk shifted to the promised department updates. Jay listened to the various executives give perfunctory reports of their metrics before launching into their lists of grievances with far more gusto. Jay struggled to look competent and interested, even as she wondered how many of these "operations" would actually fall into her court.

When she dared to look over again, Nicholas was on his phone.

She felt drained and useless dragging herself back to the desk that would only be hers for another week before she got an office of her own. Annica wasn't at her seat and her desk appeared to have been cleaned—ruthlessly so. All of her various knickknacks and photos were gone.

Her eyes swung to Nicholas's office. He wasn't in there.

Back-to-back meeting? It wasn't uncommon for his day to be stacked—she knew that from managing his schedule—but a bad feeling nipped at her like a biting fly. He'd seemed so distracted in that previous meeting. And what was that about with Security?

Is everything okay? she asked him.

Don't worry about me. Tell me what you think of this. It's a mock-up.

He sent her a picture of a silver chain necklace that had a bunch of little charms dangling from it: a big sphere of citrine surrounded by smaller spheres of onyx, heliotrope, kyanite, and what appeared to be pallasite, with small chunks of olivine crystal,

Is it space-themed? she asked, looking at the meteorite.

They're the planets from your documentary.

Jay stared, her breath leaving her in a rush as she belatedly recognized them all: the irradiated desert planet; the one that was half-lava seas and frozen volcanic rock; the hurricane planet with diamond rain; and a real chunk of space, meant to sit frozen against her skin.

(Can I watch the world burn with you?).

.....

Nicholas sat with his laptop out in front of him, tucking his phone away. There was a document open on the screen but it was mostly there for reference: he had been preparing for this meeting for weeks now, with an attention to detail that would impress even Jay.

And he was *so* looking forward to it.

James entered the room, standing against the far wall. One of his subordinates had already been to Annica's desk, cleaning it out and revoking her credentials—after copying her hard drive. If she did somehow make it back to her desk before she was escorted out of the building, she

wouldn't be able to access her computer. It only took one spiteful employee with a magnet and a grudge to learn that lesson.

He watched her adjust her headphones, taking her time making sure everything was arranged just so before walking down the hall. A fastidious little control freak, he thought. There was a notepad under her arm and her face was expressionless as usual, although he didn't think he was imagining the new undercurrent of distaste whenever she looked at him.

The feeling was mutual, though she'd be finding that out for herself soon enough. His smile hardened as she walked in. Her eyes flicked uncertainly to James as she sat down, opening her legal pad to a fresh page. When the seconds ticked by and he didn't kick off the meeting or introduce his "guest," she began to squirm, dog-earing the page and working it back and forth.

"Do you know why you're here?" Nicholas asked, after several minutes had passed.

"No. You didn't send me a calendar invite for this meeting. Was there supposed to be a brief attached to it?"

Nicholas leaned forward, pushing his laptop to the side so that there would be no obstructions between them. "This isn't a meeting. Let me enlighten you on why you're here today. We have security footage of you making unauthorized use of Arthur Hartwell's computers after hours to access confidential documents."

"What?" The shock in her eyes could have been convincing if not for the panic.

"We also have footage of you going to the photocopier *before* hours, using credentials that weren't yours—seemingly to circulate copies of *The Hollybrook Herald*'s front page amongst staff. I don't think I really need to specify which issue."

The color faded from her face. He relished it; he'd been planning his revenge since the day she'd demanded a promotion, figuring he could get her slapped with a performance improvement plan after catching her in enough mistakes. But corporate malfeasance?

That was so much better.

“Additionally,” he began, drumming his fingers on the table, “I’ve managed to obtain a transcript of a conversation you had with a reporter from said newspaper. Not only were you foolish enough to have that conversation during work hours, you fed him information that violated your NDA *and* slandered me.” He raised an eyebrow. “That looks a lot like retaliation.”

“I get a lot of phone calls. Any one of them could have been a reporter.”

“Don’t give me that shit. I have proof. He was eager enough to sell you out after I called his boss and threatened to pull my funding if he wasn’t fired. Several of that paper’s biggest advertisers are clients of this firm. But I suppose you knew that already, being so good at your job.”

Her shoulders sagged and she threw a look at the door. “Whatever you think I did, I can explain.”

“I’m not interested in explanations. The consequences of your actions speak loudly enough. I already know you met with Michael Valdez, that he fed you information that you then leaked to the reporter. I have photographs of him slipping you cash before you both left the Bayview. And since I happen to know for a fact that you aren’t his type, I’m guessing he was paying for a different kind of fuck.”

That made her lurch back in her seat. “You can’t let him talk to me like that,” she said, appealing to James, as if expecting agreement. “That’s harassment.”

Nicholas could see James’s subordinate boxing up her things, including those meticulously placed headphones. Jay wasn’t there to see it, of course. She was in another development meeting with Arthur—he’d planned that out, too. Everything was shaping out perfectly.

“Harassment,” he repeated. “That’s an interesting choice of words, coming from you.”

“W-well, what about *you*?” Too angry to maintain the illusion of ignorance any longer, she rose to her full height. In the corner of his eye, Nicholas saw James tense. “Everyone knows that you’ve been playing favorites with Jay. Your own stepsister—who you’re obviously sleeping with!” Her voice, which had been rising steadily, became shrill. “You wouldn’t even consider my promotion, but you’ll pour company resources

into paying off your office mistress, even though I'm way more qualified than that *wh*—”

“Don't.” Nicholas pressed his hands flat to the desk as he stood. “You were not more qualified. You were complacent and vindictive. And rather than address your own shortcomings, you denigrated another employee. You didn't get the job because your performance wasn't up to par.”

“Or maybe it wasn't the kind of performance you were looking for.”

He smiled. She flinched.

“James will escort you out. Don't bother stopping by your desk for your things. They've been boxed up already and will be mailed to the address you provided on the day of your hiring.”

“You're—” Annica flicked a wild look at James. “You're *firing* me?”

“I already have. For violating your NDA and sabotaging the company.” He allowed himself the privilege of a sneer. “Good luck with your future employment.”

James shepherded her towards the door, and Nicholas followed, watching the man march his ex-secretary out. His third secretary to leave in as many months. He had flashbacks of Crystal's voluble departure—when she'd called him heartless, screaming it for everyone in the office to hear.

The other employees were watching with interest, sensing blood in the water. Jay was back at her desk and looked up when the shadows of James and Annica fell over her desk. The other woman seemed to find that provocative. Nicholas took several steps forward but Annica had already lunged, aiming not for Jay herself but her cup of coffee, sending it flying with a single, well-placed swipe before James grabbed her by both hands.

Jay jumped to her feet with a yelp as hot coffee dripped down her pants and blouse.

“Enjoy the victory,” Annica snarled over her shoulder. “Little Miss Slutshine.”

The whispers in the room got louder. A few people exchanged half-smothered grins that quickly disappeared when his harsh gaze swept over the open floor plan. Eyes dipped and they got back to work, or pretended to.

Jay stared after Annica. His anger spiked at the look on her face—lost and devastated, but also so unsurprised—and he had to suppress his sudden

desire for violence.

Not now, he told himself. Everything's going exactly to plan. Security will deal with her.

Nicholas put his hand on her shoulder, rubbing her arm through her blouse. “Let’s get out of here,” he suggested. “I think this calls for an early day.”

Still looking stunned, Jay folded her arms over her soaked and stained blouse. *Is she off the property?* he texted James.

The response was prompt: *Yes, Mr. Beaucroft, she's gone. I sent her out in a taxi.*

He needed to get Jay out of the building before the shock broke. He’d seen that brightness in her eyes too many times not to know when she was about to cry. With his mouth in a firm line, he herded her out the door.

By the time he had gotten Jay into the passenger seat, tears were rolling down her face. He turned off the radio while backing out of his parking space one-handed, swearing when someone walked in front of his car.

“Call my accountant,” he barked at his phone, which obliged him by dialing. “Go to speaker.”

The man picked up after two rings. “Hello?”

“Cancel my installments on the Valdez project.”

“Really? Are you sure? They’re in the middle of development.”

“I don’t care. Cancel it. Tell them there was a breach of contract. If they don’t like it, he can get a lawyer. End call,” he snapped at his phone, and it went silent.

Jay sniffed. “Wasn’t that the project you were telling me about in the restaurant?”

“It was.”

She rubbed at her eye. “What happened?”

He sped up to beat a yellow light. “Did you know Annica was the leak to the paper?”

“N-no, what?”

“Yeah, she came to me asking for a promotion. But she tried to throw you under the bus. Then she went to the newspaper when I didn’t give it to

her, complaining about our hiring practices, feeding them all that bullshit about our homelife.”

The petty little cunt.

Jay rubbed at her hands. “How would she know about our homelife? She told me she grew up in Ridgeview.”

“Because, like your mother, she wasn’t working alone.” Nicholas turned down a familiar street and Jay sat up when she realized that they’d missed their turn off.

With a crunch of gravel, he pulled up in front of a big house with a marble bird path and a row of agaves leading up to the wraparound porch.

“This is Michael’s house,” Jay said.

He hated that she remembered that.

A look of sudden comprehension dawned over her face. “Nicholas, did he—”

Not wanting to hear her finish whatever that sentence was—because the answer was almost certainly yes—he got out of the car and headed for the driveway.

With a curse, Jay scrambled to unfasten her seatbelt. “I don’t like that look on your face. Whatever you’re thinking of doing—please, don’t be hasty—”

“It’s just business,” Nicholas said grimly. “Just like our fathers used to do.”

He rang the bell. Jay hovered conspicuously at his side. When the door opened, he half-expected some uniformed member of the help to answer it, so it was a surprise to see Michael himself appear in the doorway. He must have been hurting. His wife seemed like the type of woman who would think it was gauche to answer her own front door.

“Nicholas?” His eyes bounced from him to Jay. He looked scared—but not scared enough. “What are you doing here? I just got a call saying you cancelled our fund—”

Nicholas clocked him in the face.

“Nick.” Jay tried to grab for him but he sidestepped her, grabbing Michael by the front of his green Lacoste shirt and using his body to shove

the door the rest of the way open before throwing him against his tasteful mahogany credenza. Several equally tasteful pieces of pottery shattered and fell to the tiled floor, causing a fluffy Pomeranian to appear out of nowhere and start barking.

Nicholas nudged the dog away, swinging one leg over Michael's torso to straddle his chest. He was heavy enough that the other man began to wheeze. "I warned you."

His next punch caught Michael in the mouth and he felt the bite of teeth in his knuckles, busting them up. There was pain, too, though he barely felt that—he was too angry. "I told you not to fuck with her. And what did you do? Pay off my employees to talk shit, just to—" his words splintered into a snarl and he slammed the man's head against the tile. "You little *fuck*."

"That's *enough*." Jay gripped him from behind, hauling him backwards beneath his arms. Michael took advantage of his distraction to lash back, hitting him on the nose. It was a glancing blow, really, but something cracked and Nicholas swore, lunging forward in a way that had Jay falling against him. "Nicholas, stop—"

"I never touched her." Michael's voice was clotted.

"I know," Nicholas said coldly. "That's why I'm hitting you and not cutting your dick off."

"Nicholas." Jay shrieked when he lunged again. "I said *stop*."

She wasn't strong enough to hold him back and she knew it. They both knew it. But her shaking arms reminded him of that terrible night that she'd left him for good.

Because she wasn't strong enough to stop you then, either.

He sagged, giving Michael one last half-hearted swipe before allowing Jay to pull him away.

"Jesus," Michael said, in a choked and miserable voice. "Fuck."

"We're through. The whole project's through. I've got you for breach of contract. Nobody in this town will touch you with a nine-foot-pole when they find out that you tried to season your development plan with a little bit of extortion."

From the depths of a house, a baby began to cry.

Jay went white. “You didn’t,” she whispered, seeming to register the gist of the conversation at last. But this time it was Michael she spoke to, Michael who couldn’t meet her eyes. “*Why?*”

“Mikey?” Angie’s voice echoed down the hall. “Mikey, I heard a noise. What are you—oh my god. Oh my god. What happened to you? Do I need to call the police?”

Nicholas gingerly touched his nose. “Hello Angie.”

“Did you do this?” Angie whirled on him. “Get out. Get out of my house, Nicholas, or I’m calling the police.”

“Ask him about the pictures.”

Angie looked rattled and stared at Michael with the trace of insecurity that he remembered so well from high school.

No matter how many extensions she purchased, or antique porcelain she put in her pretty house, she would always be that jealous, petty girl from high school, crying by the pool to her friends because her ex liked someone better.

“What *pictures*? Pictures of *her*? ”

“No! I didn’t take any pictures.” Michael blotted his nose with his shirt collar, giving Nicholas a baleful, watery glare. “I paid your employee off with money and information so she could go to the papers but she was going to do that anyway. I never did anything else.”

“You say that like you’re capable of doing your own dirty work.” Nicholas put his arm around Jay’s waist, pulling her towards him. “Did you *pay off* anyone else?”

“No, I told you, I don’t know anything about any pictures.”

“If my husband said he didn’t, he didn’t,” Angie snapped.

“Why?” Jay repeated, her hazel eyes glittering with their own internal fire. “Why would you go against my back like that?”

“Because he wants you,” Nicholas said bluntly, when Michael didn’t respond. “And since he can’t do anything about that now, all he *can* do is punish you for not being the pristine little angel he never got to fuck.”

Jay jerked away from him. “*Nicholas.*”

Angie cracked him across the face, breathing hard. She looked at Jay, who flinched expectantly, but it was Michael she went for next, leaving gouges that must have stung.

“What the fu—”

“I’m taking our child to a hotel,” she spoke over him. “I can’t deal with any of this shit right now. I have to meet with our investors tomorrow. *Someone* has to bring in a paycheck.”

“It’s not my fault,” Michael protested. “Angie—*baby*—” She shook him off and disappeared deeper into the house, towards the direction of the crying child. His whole body sagged as he watched her leave. “Shit. Fuck.”

“You should have denied it,” Nicholas said. “But maybe you wanted to punish your wife for not being what you wanted, too.”

Michael turned hot eyes on him. “You’ve fucking ruined my life, Beaucroft.”

“No,” Nicholas said, reaching out and grabbing Jay’s left hand. “You’ve ruined your own.”

He saw the other man’s eyes go to Jay’s ring, and the matching platinum one that he wore on his own left hand. Horror and disbelief filled his eyes. “You—”

“Me,” he agreed coldly. “And her. Goodbye.”

With a final backwards sneer, Nicholas let the door close behind him with a slam.

Chapter Nineteen

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Jay was silent on the drive home, her face gradually shifting from anger to something that he wasn't sure how to identify. "There's blood on your shirt," she said at last.

Nicholas made an impatient noise and undid a few of the buttons before yanking his shirt over his head and wadding it up into the backseat. The car swerved.

"Jesus," Jay said. "Don't do that while you're driving!"

"Well, I'm not really sure what you want from me Jay. I had it all under control."

"Not beating Michael up would have been a start."

"He made you cry." A few drivers gave him second glances as they passed in their vehicles. People in Hollybrook weren't generally in the habit of driving around half-dressed, busted up like they'd been bare-knuckle boxing in some underground bar. "On the street. In front of everyone."

He gripped the wheel harder, wishing he'd broken Valdez's nose.

"And he had a baby in the home. God, Nick, I never would have told you if I'd known that this is what you were going to do. You're lucky Angie didn't call the police. You could have killed him, hitting him like that."

"Probably because she's planning on killing him herself," he said darkly.

Jay pressed her lips together and he felt an unwilling flicker of fear. The last time she'd looked at him like that, she had left him for nine years.

"It was because of the paper," he said, and he saw her head turn back towards him. "That's why I did it. When Meghana showed you that newspaper, you were looking at her the same way you looked at me."

When I forced you.

Her mouth trembled before she bit her lip and turned away like she'd heard the unspoken words.

When they arrived at the house, she slipped past him as soon as he'd gotten the door unlocked. Nicholas had to resist the urge to follow, to forbid

her from leaving him again. He made the turn into the master bedroom instead, gripping the marble sink of his bathroom and leaning in to study the damage that Michael had done to his face in the big, full-wall mirror.

Touching his nose tentatively, he hissed through his teeth. Blood trickled out of one nostril accompanied by a hot flash of pain. It didn't feel broken but he looked like a fucking mess.

At least Valdez looks worse.

"Did he break your nose?" Jay appeared in the mirror behind him, framed by the gilt edges his father had chosen. She had changed out of her work clothes and was now wearing sleep shorts and a faded tank top that left very little to his suddenly very overactive imagination.

"No." He lowered his hand to the sink. "Just busted it pretty badly. I'll be fine."

"Sit down," she said, pointing to the bench outside of the shower.

He moved to obey, glancing up at her beneath his dark brows. "I thought you'd left."

"Why would I leave?" she asked crossly. "We're kind of stuck with each other at this point, aren't we?"

Nicholas did not care for that phrasing at all, but when he opened his mouth to say as much a snarl of pain escaped his lips instead as she dabbed at one of his cuts with a Q-tip that felt like it had been doused in battery acid.

"Fuck, that hurts."

"It's your own fault if it does." She picked up his hand in her cool one, studying his split and oozing knuckles, and he had a vision of himself coming to her for some bleeding scrape at ten, when her hands were still bigger than his and her gentleness was all he'd craved. Nicholas inhaled and —god, he could smell her fucking hair. "You're lucky this isn't deep. When human bites get infected, you can get sepsis all the way down to the bone."

"You're such a little nerd," he breathed, shifting uncomfortably as she got a new Q-tip and began dabbing more of that liquid fire torture all over the back of his hand.

"As opposed to, what, a fratty jock with anger issues?" Her golden eyes narrowed beneath their heavy fringe of lashes. "I know what you thought

you were trying to do, but beating up my ex-boyfriend isn't going to unprint what that stupid newspaper said about us."

"Are you sure it didn't turn your crank at least a little, seeing me mop the floor with that waste?" Another harsh breath escaped him as she wound the bandage around his hand. He flexed his knuckles. "I thought you liked it when Daddy got mean."

"Cut it out," she said, in a missish voice that had him stirring. "You could have gone to jail. Or worse. Don't shake your head at me," she snapped, furious again, seeing the smirk tugging at his lips. "Even you're not above the law, despite what you seem to think. Did you really think he took those pictures? Hand to heart."

No," he admitted. "But whoever did it knew their way around our house so it could have been him, and to be honest, after you told me what he said to you, I wanted to put a little fear of god into him, anyway." He let his hands fall to his sides, tilting his head obediently when she leaned in to study the scratches from Angie's nails. "He's still in love with you. I can tell. Thinking about you with me doesn't fit with his image of Jay the Angel. Seeing photographic confirmation would make his head explode."

"Was I part of your bargain, too?" Her fingers gripped his chin a little too forcefully. "The one that you cancelled in the car? Did you really pay him off to stay him away from me?"

"I told you what I was willing to do to make you mine."

Jay applied the Q-tip from hell to his face far more viciously than he felt the situation required. "Have you ever read *Faust*, Nicholas?"

"Why? Is it hot?"

"Stop smiling. This isn't funny."

Oh, Jay, you're having far too much fun topping Daddy from the bottom in his own home.

He wound his arm around her waist and tugged her bodily onto his lap. Startled, she fumbled with the bottle of rubbing alcohol and nearly dropped it on the floor when he splayed his hand on her thigh to steady her. "I think Jake is the one who took the photographs."

"Jake Van Hoff? Your friend from school?"

"We're not friends," he reminded her. "But yes. Him."

“Why?”

“Because he’s your mother’s little boy toy.”

She let out a disbelieving laugh as she twisted to toss the bloodied Q-tip in her hand in the trash. “He’s not exactly her type.”

“He’s got a cock and a pulse. Of course he’s her type. He also has something she wants; he works for his uncle.” He took the bottle of alcohol from her loosened grip, screwing the cap on tightly and setting it on the counter beside him.

“The PI guy? You think he’s working for my mother? You think she’s paid him to take pictures of me?”

“I know he is. I had my guy trace his car—it was parked in front of her apartment. And guess what? It’s registered to a Frank Van Hoff. He’s driving his uncle’s car. I saw it in San Francisco, too. Same model.” *Right outside your apartment.* “It’s not fully paid off, either. He must be desperate.”

“You really think my own mother hired a cheap PI who’s in debt to follow me around and—” she couldn’t finish. Tears began to form in her eyes. “No. She’s awful, but you can’t believe she’d do *that*.”

“I do think that. I think there’s a lot of money at stake and she’s been whoring herself out to Jake to get a discount on services rendered.” His mouth flattened. “She might have even gotten the idea from my father, if he really did tell her about what had been doing on between us.”

Jay shook her head desperately. “Oh god. I don’t want her having that kind of hold on me, Nicholas. She knows I gave up the money for you.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you.”

“It already has! For years, I searched my name, waiting for the ticking bomb that would blow up my entire life. It might be the past for you, but it wasn’t for me. Until a few months ago, *that* was my present. I don’t want it to be my future as well. I *can’t* go through that again.”

Looking at her face, he felt his desire evaporate, leaving behind something hard and cold. Carefully, he stood, bringing her up with him as he got to his feet. “I know, sweet bird. I’m sorry.”

“I just want to be happy,” she said, brokenly slumping against his chest. “I just want to feel good without someone always trying to make it

hurt. That's all I've ever wanted. I didn't think it was too much to ask."

"I know," he said again. He walked to the bath and turned the tap, watching the water steam. When his eyes flicked to the mirror, he saw his smile turn sardonic. "Get in the bath. I'll make you a nice, stiff drink, and then you can talk to me about anything you want while I wash your hair."

"A bath." She glanced at the tub uncertainly with a bitter twist to her mouth. "You know, the night I left, I scrubbed myself raw when I got to my motel—as if that could wash the whole evening away."

Nicholas stared at her as she peeled off her clothes, seeing not her nakedness but the regret on her face. "You told me I didn't scare you anymore."

Jay got into the water and put her arms on the edge of the tub as she looked up at him. "You don't."

Nicholas felt his heart thump against his chest. With a terse nod, he turned and walked into the bedroom, pouring two glasses of the honey whiskey from the small bar area. *So she really was thinking about leaving jostled with but she didn't—she stayed.* She had turned around when he came back, though he saw the muscles in her back ripple as he padded back into the room.

"Tell me what to do." He set her glass where she could reach it as he swept down to his knees. When she didn't reply right away, he gathered all her wayward locks of hair into a loose ponytail, and put his hands on her bare shoulders, smoothing them over her back the way he'd done when he was younger and a soft touch was the only tenderness with her that he could fathom. "Tell me how to take care of you." *Tell me how to fix this.*

She reached up for his jaw, bringing his face down to hers.

And then, in a quiet but steady whisper, she told him.

"So we have plenty of money in the bank, which puts us in a strong position for Q3." Jay clicked to the next slide of the Powerpoint that she had spent the last two days putting together even as it felt as if her whole world was threatening to come apart at the seams. "New growth has slowed

since Q1, but we're still projected to make fifteen percent profit year over year."

As she spoke, it was like she was hovering outside of her own body, watching herself. Public speaking had never been her forte, but practicing with Nicholas made her realize very quickly that she needed to memorize all her speeches because of how badly her notecards shook in her trembling hands. She gripped the clicker a little tighter, trying to hide the shaking.

A man from Marketing raised his hand. "If we're doing so well, why is it just sitting in the accounts like deadweight?"

"Because it's not deadweight." Jay folded her arms behind her back. "It's a buffer. Part of that deadweight ensures that your salary gets paid after all."

She hadn't been trying to be funny, but several people laughed—not at her, thank god—and she was able to get through the rest of the presentation before handing the remote off to Arthur and retreating to her seat as he gave the introduction for the next speaker.

Nicholas was sitting several seats down and looked very intimidating in his dark suit, which he undoubtedly intended, since he had worn the same one to intimidate *her* when he had come to San Francisco that first time and literally dressed her down in that little vegan diner.

She smoothed out an imaginary crease in her trousers, remembering her mother's ability to zero in on her appearance and immediately point out all her flaws. She had donned her work clothes as if she were putting on armor, but as she was getting dressed, she found herself ticking off all the flaws out of habit, from the worn-out heels of her shoes to the fashion tape she used to keep her blouses from gaping open when the buttons were spaced too wide.

The thought of confronting her mother, in person, was terrifying.

Her fidgeting drew Nicholas's eye. He gave her a brief, but pleased nod.

"Great talk, Justine," someone said to her, and Jay looked over in surprise at a clutch of female employees, whose names she didn't know.

"Yeah, you nailed it."

“Um, thank you?” She smiled uncertainly, wondering if she were being mocked. After Annica was let go, she had left a schism in her wake. Most people supported Nicholas publicly, but privately, Jay knew there were people who felt that Annica had been punished for speaking the truth. They wouldn’t meet her eyes and left every room that she walked into.

She had two other meetings, neither of which she had to present in, before spending the rest of her day at her desk, reviewing metrics from some of her new direct reports and responding to emails. Her mind kept getting pulled towards her mother.

Nicholas no longer bothered to wait until after the building closed to collect her, which made her wonder, with a little lurch, if all of those late nights had been because of her.

As he strolled up, Jay fumbled to lock her computer, while stuffing her things in her bag. “You did nail that presentation,” he said, as she stumbled to her feet. “By the way.”

“You heard that?”

“You’ll get used to the office sycophants. They’re irritating but harmless.” He rested one hand on the small of her back as he dug into his pocket for his keys. “Are you ready to go?”

“I guess.”

“You’re ready. Just remember—your mother’s desperate.”

And desperate people are dangerous. They don’t have anything to lose.

Her mother was staying in Ridgeview, in what the people in the Granite County area referred to as “the bad part of town” because what they actually meant was that it was “affordable,” and therefore undesirable because it wouldn’t be inhabited by the rich elite worthy of their time.

Jay remembered Annica’s glaring once-over as she said, dismissively, “You look like you grew up here.” As Nicholas drove his car through this genteel version of “poverty,” she found herself recalling all the times she had gone to bed hungry or used watered-down dish soap as hand soap, and wondered if her coworker would have liked her any better if she’d known that she had grown up even poorer than her.

Probably not. Jay looked at the peeling paint of what she assumed was her mother’s apartment complex, noting the proximity to the railroad tracks

and the empty, yet-to-be-developed-lot next to a convenience store with a burnt-out sign. The cars parked on the street were old, but all of their windows were intact and none of them were perched precariously on wooden blocks.

“She told me she was on the verge of living on the streets,” Jay said.

“And you believed that old liar?” He parallel parked across the street, almost hitting the Volvo in front of them. “That’s the car I had tracked, right in front of her house. It’s the newest one on the street. Looks like they’re spending the night in. How cozy.”

He headed across the street without any sort of preamble and Jay jogged a little to catch up to his long stride, wondering if their formal office attire was drawing stares through those shuttered windows. She would have liked more time to prepare herself but Nicholas seemed nearly eager.

“Danielle!” He rapped on her door so sharply that he opened up the scrapes he’d gotten from whaling on Michael, leaving little streaks of blood on the paint. “Open the fucking door.”

“Maybe she’s not ho—” Jay began, only for the door to swing wide open. “Oh.”

She hadn’t seen her mother in years. She was still petite, and her spare, lean build suggested that she still worked out. Her long blonde hair was scraped back into a ballerina bun and her cheekbones were dusted with some kind of glittery bronzer. The only nod to her true age were a handful of sunspots and a few fresh wrinkles.

Her mother gave her a once-over. Critical and unfriendly, it made Jay feel like she was being measured and found wanting even as she was being condemned for both.

“Oh,” she said. “It’s *you*.” Her eyes shifted to Nicholas. “I guess you don’t make idle threats.”

Jay turned to Nicholas, who was looking at her mother the way someone might look at a buzzing fly in a restaurant. *When did he talk to my mother?* she wondered, disturbed by the glacial rage in his eyes.

“Are you going to invite us inside or do you want me to have my lawyer dial in through your Ring app?”

The mention of litigation seemed to get to her mother. She quickly stepped aside and Jay, walking into the foyer, found herself in a space that looked like the back room of a Victoria's Secret, with everything done in shades of varying pink or white. There was a sugar cookie smell that made her feel vaguely sick, reminiscent of the strip club and too many mall trips that she hadn't enjoyed. Fake vanilla and humiliation.

Jay's mother drifted to her fridge and opened the door. The shelves were mostly empty but then, her mother had never cooked. She pulled out a frosted bottle of peach-colored wine from the top shelf. "I suppose you'll want a drink."

Nicholas eyed her. "Do I look like one of your girlfriends?"

Jay saw her mother's mouth open, ready to deliver a cutting remark. Then she appeared to think better of it. "Your father never said no."

Nicholas just looked at her. She swallowed, and then covered her unease with a shrug.

"Justine, wine?" It sounded like a command.

"Fine." She didn't want it, either, but it would give her something to do with her hands, which were shaking quite badly. Nicholas raised a disapproving eyebrow at her as she accepted the glass with shaky hands and took a few desperate sips of the sickeningly sweet rosé.

"I suppose you let him bully you into coming here." Her mother watched her hands, not looking away when Jay accidentally splashed some of the wine on herself. "He said he would."

Nicholas gave her hip a squeeze, which did not go unnoticed by her mother.

"I didn't realize your brother had turned you into such a pushover."

The barb had been intended to sting but it didn't hurt as much as it would have before, when her self-worth had hinged on how well she had pleased the people around her.

She realized, with a kind of numb fascination that was heightened by the wine, that she no longer really cared what her mother thought of her at all.

"This is a nice place." Nicholas gave her a little tap with his fingers before letting his hand drop from her back. Her mother grew tense as he

circled the kitchen, like a panther pacing a cage. “Is it a rental? I imagine it must be, given the dire state of your financial woes.”

“You put me in this position,” her mother seethed.

“Did I?” Nicholas opened one of her cabinets, peering inside, before turning over his shoulder to give her a cold look. “I don’t remember telling you to get on your back.”

Jay’s mother looked at her. “Are you going to let him speak to me that way?”

Such a pushover. The wineglass trembled in her grip. “If you don’t like it, tell him yourself.” She set her glass clumsily onto the ugly Formica counter. “You’ve already sold me out once. And for what? An apartment on the train tracks? Screw you.”

Nicholas snorted, and headed back down her narrow hallway.

“You are living in *my* house, Justine. I suggest you remember that before accusing *me* of selling out.” Her mother turned on her roundly, deciding she was the easier target, even as she kept one wary eye on Nicholas. “Last I checked, you got there the same way I did.”

“Last I checked,” Jay said, “it’s not your name on the deed.”

“Why’s this door locked if you’re here alone?” Nicholas asked casually, rattling the doorknob on one of the three doors in the foyer. “Where’s it go?”

“My bedroom,” her mother snapped, looking away from Jay. “Stay out of there.”

“Nicholas, stop,” Jay said, when he tried the handle again.

“He always did take your marching orders.” Her mother’s tone was sour as Nicholas leaned back against the wall, his arms folded. She turned a look on Jay that would have made her wilt when she was fourteen. “I suppose I know why.”

“You do know why. You drove me into his arms.” Jay squared her shoulders. “It must have been very disappointing when he didn’t squeeze.”

“Doesn’t he?” her mother said.

Jay closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. “What’s your price? I’ve been told everyone has theirs. What do you want to make this stop?”

“Seven million dollars.”

Nicholas laughed from his post by the door.

“Seven million dollars in exchange for my *silence*. I saw that article—I know people are already talking. You’re the biggest scandal this town’s had since your father’s trial.”

“People always talk,” Nicholas said indifferently.

“I’m sure they’d talk a lot more if they know what you were up to when you were younger. Damon told me some things before he died.” A disgusted laugh left her lips. “I didn’t believe it at first, a little prude like you, but you didn’t waste much time trying to steal my husband from me, either, so why wouldn’t you sleep with your barely-legal stepbrother, too?”

Jay’s mouth fell open. “What?”

“He told me you came onto him that night at the resort when you were eighteen while you were hanging around the bar dressed like a little tart.”

She sounded as if being eighteen were a crime, Jay thought. Perhaps, to a woman like her mother, it was. The sour tang of bile rose in her throat. “That’s a fucking lie. He tried to—”

But she couldn’t finish. All she could taste was that cheap acidic wine.

He wanted to own me.

“You see? You can’t even deny it. Just like this thing you have with your brother—” Her mother jabbed a pointed fingernail at her. “When did this start? Because Damon told me that you’ve been fucking him since he was only fourteen.”

Jay’s vicious cry of denial was lost to a deafening thud, followed by the sound of splintering wood. Nicholas ignored both of their startled shouts and rammed his shoulder into the locked door again, causing it to jump off its broken hinges.

“How *dare* you,” Jay’s mother shouted, but she sounded terrified. As if she hadn’t realized how strong Nicholas really was, and how easily he could turn on her.

Or that he might want to if she pushed him far enough.

Nicholas walked into the room, and Jay heard a shout, followed by what appeared to be a loud scuffle and then a curse. She saw her mother’s

eyes dart to her phone on the kitchen table, but Jay beat her to it, dropping the battered old iPhone with the cracked screen into her purse.

“Give that back,” her mother snapped. “Now, Justine!”

“I will, when we leave. Nicholas isn’t finished with his marching orders yet.”

“I am your *mother*,” she seethed. “You listen to me right now and *give me my phone*.”

“If you’re my mother,” Jay said, still riding that wave of eerie calm, “you should act like it.”

Pain lit up the side of her face and Jay blinked in shock at her mother’s uplifted hand.

“You have a lot of nerve—you vindictive, *twisted* little—”

Her mother jumped back from Jay as Nicholas reemerged from the bedroom, holding a struggling Jake by his shirt collar. In his other hand was a camera.

“He was listening at the door.” With a display of strength that made Jay jump and her mother scream, he flung the camera onto the floor so roughly that it shattered, denting the linoleum. “He was recording, too. Which is illegal, in case you were wondering.”

“You ruined my floors!”

“My floors, actually,” Nicholas said, but her mother, who was working herself up to one of her tantrums, didn’t appear to hear. Jay did, and looked at him; he gave her a smile that she knew well, because she had been on both sides of it.

The fuck-or-get-fucked smile. And clearly, her mother was on the wrong side of the table.

Then he did a double-take and his eyes went to her reddened cheek, before swinging sharply to her mother and narrowing.

“That’s destruction of private property and assault,” Jake snarled, oblivious to the murderous expression on the other man’s face. “You want to talk about *illegal*. If you think you can keep me from pressing charges, you’re so fucking wrong. I won’t be bought off.”

“Isn’t it an election year?” Nicholas’s fury was no longer visible but Jay, who was far more familiar with his moods, could see it in every rigid outline of his body. “I think it is.”

“The view from your ivory tower must be pretty rosy if you think you’re that above the law.”

“Do you? I have your license plates and photographic evidence of you being places you’re not supposed to be. I know your dad isn’t going to go for that. He’d sacrifice you in a heartbeat.”

Jake scoffed. “You don’t know shit. Now, let go of me.”

Nicholas tilted his head to look at Jay’s seething mother. “You said I was like my father. But we both know what kind of man he was—that what he couldn’t acquire fairly, he destroyed. If you really believe that, I’m not sure why you would invite me over here and then try to fuck me.”

Jay’s mother turned away. “He betrayed me. Why shouldn’t I get my dues?”

“Do you really think you’re the wronged party here? He proposed to your own daughter, you stupid fucking bitch. If she were as grasping as you think she is, you would have been out on your ass the day of her graduation and she would have been his new wife. But she told him no. My father didn’t like no. He once arranged for the devaluation of a property when the owner wouldn’t sell. He tried to do the same thing to Jay’s reputation.”

“Everyone knew she was with Quentin and Michael,” Jake broke in.

“And my father did business with both of theirs.” He gave Jake a little shove, sending him stumbling back into a rack full of mismatched wineglasses that tumbled out and shattered. “How do you think he managed to control the narrative? He paid for the stories he thought were fit to circulate, until his influence dead-ended and control finally eluded him.

“I saw the way he watched her. I know you did, too. You saw him alienating her from her friends, cutting off her paths to escape one by one. But I think you convinced yourself to let the chips fall wherever they may because deep down, you wanted to teach her a lesson. If something *did* happen, with all your carefully laid criticism, she’d only blame herself.”

The kitchen seemed to go gray. Jay leaned back against the counter, breathing harder.

No, she thought. Oh god.

“I used to think you were just some dumb bimbo,” Nicholas was saying, “but you and my father really did deserve each other. Neither of you ever cared about anything but yourselves.”

“Jake,” Jay’s mother said, appealing to the other man, but he didn’t move. He looked at the glass, and then at Nicholas.

“You want to get involved in how I conduct my business, Van Hoff?” Nicholas gave him a chilling smile that was all teeth. “Someone in this room is getting fucked tonight but only one of you is going to like it.”

“Is that another threat?”

“No. You’re going to give me the negatives and then you’re going to pack up and leave before I call the cops and have you arrested for trespassing.”

Jay’s mother laughed angrily. “In my own apartment?”

“No, in mine. I did some digging and found out what you’ve been doing to float your rent, in addition to letting this pathetic little fuck live with you rent-free. Both of those things violate your rental agreement. Your landlord was very interested in hearing about that.”

“Well, he didn’t tell *me*. He’s supposed to give me thirty days.”

“I’m telling you. Get the hell out of my building.”

“I don’t believe you. You won’t fool me with your nasty tricks.”

“It’s not a trick. One of my recent business deals fell through so I had some extra money to burn. This *is* my apartment, whether you believe me or not, and if you don’t get the fuck out of it by five o’ clock this evening—that’s one hour from now—I’m forwarding everything I have on you to the police before I have them throw your ass out to the curb with the rest of the trash.”

“You can’t do that!” Jay’s mother looked at Jay. “Tell him he can’t do that.”

Jay shrugged.

“I also picked up most of your collective debts, so your car,” he added, tilting his head to look at Jake, “or, rather, *my* car, also belongs to me. So

you'll be hightailing it out of here on foot. Make the appropriate arrangements. Or don't. I don't really give a shit."

"I'm your *mother*," her mother said again to Jay.

"Get on your knees," said Nicholas.

"I—excuse me?"

"Get on your knees," he repeated, "and beg her forgiveness. You said you were her mother—a real mother would do it. If the apology's good enough, I'll write you a check for ten grand."

"You're crazy," her mother said.

Nicholas gave her a grim look. "It's the best offer you'll get."

Jay was aware of a numbness in her fingertips as she turned her head to look at him. She could sense the desire for violence radiating from him as if it were a physical thing, rubbing against her skin like a furred and vicious creature that would eat her alive from sheer hunger alone.

It left her breathless.

Slowly, Jay's mother got down to the linoleum floor. She winced a little and there was a popping sound as her kneecaps rolled against the hard surface.

"I'm sorry, baby." She spoke grudgingly.

"For what?" Nicholas prompted. "Be specific."

"I'm sorry I failed you as a mother. You were such a difficult child and I—" Nicholas gave her a sharp look and she broke off. "I wasn't a good mom to you. It was wrong of me to buy into your brother's twisted schemes to get my house and my money back."

"Stop calling him my brother," said Jay. "He's my husband and the house belongs to us."

That gave her mother pause—Jay could read every thought flashing across her face: fear, disgust, and something that looked a lot like jealousy. "You scheming little *bitch*."

Jake muttered, "Shit."

"God. You're both such *freaks*."

"And you're a bad person!" She fought off the familiar prickling of shame spreading its fingers along her spine. "You spent so much time trying

to make me feel as if I would never be good enough that I actually started to believe it.”

“Justine, spare me your persecution complex for once in your miserable little life. I know it’s all the rage now to hate your mother, but you’re not exactly an innocent here.”

“Bullshit,” Nicholas said.

“I tried to make you independent. I *tried* to make you grow up into a young woman. But you weren’t like *me*. You couldn’t take things on the chin. Everything hurt your feelings, like the child you are. *Everything* made you cry.” She drew herself up from the floor dramatically. “I’m sorry I hurt you by trying to toughen you up, but it seems like you landed on your feet anyway.”

“That’s your apology?” Her voice sounded a little too high. She didn’t care. “Saying that it was all my fault, and adding a *mea culpa*? You have been holding the bar over my head my whole life and criticizing me for not being able to reach it. But I don’t think you ever really wanted me to. I think it made you feel a whole lot better when I couldn’t. That’s why you threw me to the wolves! You wanted to see me get torn apart!”

“That’s not true!”

“Then why wouldn’t you let me feel pretty? Why wouldn’t you let me feel *good*?” Jay shook her head wildly. “Why wouldn’t you believe me over your husband when he would sit there and talk about my how beautiful my fucking wrists were at the dinner table like it was his right to comment on my body? Why did you throw me at *Nick*?”

“I just can’t believe you can say things like that to me with a straight face after marrying your own brother—I’m sorry, *stepbrother*—and sending him here to intimidate me like a little mob boss. You never came to *me* about your stepfather, Jay, and I remember how you dressed. You can force me to apologize all you want but it doesn’t change the fact that you *liked* the attention.”

Jay said nothing but a gasping breath left her lungs.

“It seems like you still do.” Her mother looked at her for a long moment, apparently satisfied. Turning to Nicholas, she said, “Just give me the ten thousand so we can drop this ugliness. I’m tired of this.”

Nicholas looked over her head at Jay. Even now, choking on all of her past trauma as if it were a bone stuck in her throat, she recognized the look—stern and expectant. The look he gave her whenever she defied him, like he was waiting to see if she would push him harder.

(you want it like that from Daddy?)

“Justine,” her mother said, snapping her fingers.

Still looking at Nick, Jay said, “No.”

“Excuse me?” her mother said.

“I said no.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I don’t think my wife liked your apology.” Nicholas sounded like he was trying not to laugh. Enjoying himself, actually—but for once she didn’t fault him for it. Not when hearing him say *my wife* felt like being stroked by a staticky brush. “Get out of my apartment and take your boy-toy with you.”

“You promised me money!”

“Yeah, but your apology was shit.” Nicholas tilted his head and gave her the empty stare her mother had mentioned on the phone. “You have three options now. You can leave on foot, in a cop car, or on a stretcher.”

Jake tried to slink past Nicholas, to the safety of the bedroom, but he reached out and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. The fabric bunched beneath his Adam’s apple, making him gasp and choke.

“Where is she keeping the negatives?”

“M-my uncle has them.” Jake swallowed hard. “Please don’t hurt me, man.”

“People in my line of work don’t typically operate on good faith.” Nicholas studied him for a long time, letting the other man squirm before releasing him with a hard shove. “Put your keys on the counter and make sure she leaves.”

Jake tossed them clumsily on the Formica before darting into the bedroom. Nicholas pushed off from the wall to join Jay in the kitchen while Jay’s mother swore in her bedroom, grabbing jewelry and various other things and shoving them into a pink laundry basket.

He picked up what was left of the rosé wine and took a leisurely drink, his throat bobbing. He swallowed and held it out, offering it to her like a fallen angel offering to lead her down into hell. But Jay knew what hell was like. She'd grown up surrounded by its gilt trappings like a bird in a cage, and had almost been blinded by their deceitful dazzle.

Nicholas had burst into her life and dragged her back just when she finally thought she'd have a chance to escape, stalking and blackmailing her into submission, only to get down on his knees and offer to tear it all apart, bar by golden bar, if it meant that she would be his—and, more than that: if she would allow him to be *hers*.

To a girl who had never felt wanted, being coveted—fought over—fought *for*—was frightening. She had never wanted to be another man's conquest. She had attended far too many feminist lectures to see herself as a *thing*.

But being the treasure he protected, the thing that made him turn vicious at her request—

Jay took the bottle and watched his eyes flare as she drank from where he'd put his mouth.

She thought she might like that.

Chapter Twenty

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Nicholas threw his car into park in front of V.H. Investigations. The fake Spanish revival tiling really set the stage. If you were going to hire a guy to catch your second wife cheating—or entrap your daughter who desperate to escape from your poisonous influence—why not hire someone who paid rent to work in a strip mall?

Jay had been very quiet on the drive over. She was always quiet, but usually her silences held a certain charge—judgmental, disapproving, wounded. But she hadn’t said a word since she’d taken the wine bottle from him and gulped it down with those dark siren eyes.

When they were young, she had always been the voice of reason. The conscience he’d never had. Hollybrook’s little angel, he had called her. Rule-abiding to a fault.

But as her eyes lifted from that bottle, she looked like every bad thought he’d ever had. He wasn’t sure what to make of her silence or that look, but he liked it, just as he’d liked seeing her finally stand up to her evil bitch of a mother.

“You think I was too harsh,” he said at last.

“What?” Jay blinked like she was coming out of a terrible dream. “No. She’s been awful my whole life but I just didn’t want to see it. To think that she would go through all that effort to hurt me . . . after all that I’ve been through—”

“It was cruel.”

“Yes, it was cruel.” She looked as remote as she had in those conference rooms, whenever he’d given someone a talking down. “For so long, she was the only family I ever had . . . and she made me feel so *awful*. She’s never looked at me the way that she looked at me today. Like she was afraid of me.”

“That’s called power,” he said. “Enjoy it.”

“I feel like I shouldn’t.”

“Why? Because it might make you a bad person?” He tilted her face towards his. “Be a bad person, then. Take a little pleasure in thwarting that

s spiteful bitch.” *Who fucking hit you.*

“Do you really think she’ll leave town?”

“God, I hope so.” He leaned back from her, reaching down to unbuckle his seatbelt. “I’ve always liked it better when the trash takes itself out.”

Jay slid out of the car, rubbing at the cheek her mother had slapped. Her face was solemn but there was a restless energy in her movements; it was as if she had been a wilting blossom that had just been placed in a new glass of water and finally allowed to bloom now that she’d shaken off her mother’s poison.

I see you now, he thought. *This is the you that you don’t give anyone else.*

Strong and even a little vicious beneath all the sweet.

The woman who fucked him with her nails buried in her back.

Frank Van Hoff was at his desk, sifting through his papers. He didn’t look up when the door opened. “I don’t take walk-ins. If you want to arrange a consultation, do it through my website.”

“I think you’ll want to see me.”

At the sound of his voice, Frank’s head whipped up just as Nicholas reached behind him to lock the door and flip the sign from OPEN to CLOSED.

“What do you want?” Frank demanded.

“My stepmother is a client of yours.”

“I don’t discuss clients with non-clients.”

“I just came back from talking with her,” Nicholas continued. “She informed me that she had been using your services, which she wouldn’t be needing anymore because she plans to leave town very, very soon—along with your nephew.”

The other man’s mouth tightened. Nicholas suspected Jake had already called to warn him, and maybe give his own colorful version of what had happened. Even when they were kids, he’d been a spineless weasel. First to throw the rock, first to deny the blame.

“You can call her yourself, if you don’t believe me.”

“What do you want?” he repeated.

Nicholas saw him tense as he put his hands on the man's pretty polished desk and bent down, staring him right in the red-rimmed watery eyes that made him suspect that there was a bottle of whiskey locked in one of those many drawers.

"I want the negatives you have of us."

"I don't keep photographs in the office."

"I think that's a lie. You seem like a man who enjoys keeping his vices close. Give me the negatives and you can continue slithering under the radar to conduct your shady little business without any further interference from me. I doubt you'll get a better deal elsewhere."

"I only answer to the police."

"I have a stake in almost every big property in town. Even your brother—the sheriff—looks to me during election time, which is coming up soon. Do you really think, knowing him as well as you do, that he would ever side with you over me? He didn't even choose his own son."

Frank studied him for a long moment, with the cold stare of a seasoned gambler. "Danielle owed me money. It doesn't sound like she'll be paying up now."

"I'll cut you a check."

"Ten thousand. Plus expenses."

"How affordable." Nicholas reached for his checkbook. "She got what she paid for then."

Frank barked out a humorless laugh. "She said you were a stone-cold motherfucker but I figured you were just another prissy little rich boy with a fire lit under his ass."

"The negatives," Nicholas said, without looking up. "Now."

Frank reached into one of his drawers and slapped down an envelope. The edge of something glossy slid out of it. "It's all in here. Call it a fucking wedding present. I don't give a fuck."

"I don't want to see you anywhere near our home or offices again."

"I doubt that will be a problem," Frank said, lighting up a cigarette. Nicholas noted, with disgust, that the ashtray on his desk was overflowing.

“You and I don’t exactly run in the same circles. I only knew your father because we played cards.”

“Lucky me.” Nicholas toyed with a dagger-shaped letter opener he’d plucked up from the desk. “I never gamble unless it’s a sure thing.”

“Be careful with that! That’s real sterling silver. I got it in Scotland.” He reached for the letter opener and Nicholas jerked it back, out of reach.

Frank turned irately to Jay. “Do you talk?”

Jay eyed him with distaste. Nicholas had been on the receiving end of that look before: it was just as scalding as he remembered and appeared to make Frank angry. As he reached down for the envelope and opened it with Frank’s fancy sterling silver letter opener, the other man said viciously, “I guess with a body like that, she doesn’t need to talk.”

Nicholas looked up, letting the blade slide noisily through the paper.

That gave Frank pause, but mean-spiritedness won out over caution.

“I remember your dad used to talk a lot about you when we played poker. He always talked about what a good girl you were. Figured you’d marry well, shore up the family business.” He smiled unpleasantly. “I suppose one of those things turned out to be true.”

“He was disgusting,” said Jay, “and so are you.”

“You married the fruit of his loins, honey,” he said, with a hoarse smoker’s laugh. “So how disgusting could he really be? I’ve seen the pictures. God, I thought your mom was a fox, but you do shit she wouldn’t do for free. What’s that old saying—lady in the streets, whore in the sheets? Maybe in ten years, you’ll thank my nephew for photographing your wedding n—*motherfucker*.”

A meaty thud pierced through his scream.

Nicholas pushed down harder on the handle, driving the sharp point of the letter opener into the web of flesh between the man’s thumb and forefinger, pinning his hand to the desk.

Blood began leaking out, soaking into some of the nearby papers.

“If you go to the police,” Nicholas said casually, “I’ll find you and do the same thing to your dick. Even if they do put me away, I’ll get out and then I’ll come after you again. And then I’ll be angrier. You will suffer worse than you have ever suffered in your life. Do you understand?”

Moaning, Frank managed to bob his head.

“You don’t fuck with her.”

“Sorry,” he croaked.

“Not to me. To my wife.”

Swallowing back a whimper, Frank lolled his head towards Jay.
“Sorry.”

“Oh my god, Nicholas,” Jay said. “Stop it. We need to go. Now.”

Nicholas slapped Frank in the face with the envelope. “Make sure you pass my message along to your nephew. Just in case he thinks he got off easily.”

Jay was stumbling, and the warm tones of her skin had taken on a slight grayish cast. As the doors swung back behind them, she looked around the half-full parking lot and said, in a low, terrified voice, “Nicholas, what the fuck? I mean, seriously, what the fuck?”

“You expected me to stand there and let him talk to you like that?”

“You stabbed him in the *hand*. After threatening his nephew. My god, Nicholas, he could go to the police. They could both go to the police. Don’t you understand?” Her voice became higher, desperate. “They could arrest you and lock you away.”

“Jay.” He felt an unfamiliar heat in his face and throat.

“I don’t want to be alone. I can’t go back to—I can’t go back to before.” She reached for the doorhandle blindly and he caught her by the wrist, holding it against his chest. “Nick, I can’t—”

“Nothing is going to happen to me.” He folded his hands over hers. “But we’re not getting into this car until you promise me that I won’t wake up to an empty house.”

“No,” said Jay. “I wouldn’t leave. But we have to go—”

“You did leave me. Twice.”

“I know. I *know*. But I wouldn’t do it again.”

“Why did you leave that night? Why not the first one or the next? Why did you leave on the night I bared my fucking soul to you and chose you over my father?”

“Because what I saw in your eyes *scared* me. It wasn’t love—it was obsession. I saw a man who would burn down his entire world to make a place for me in its ashes, who didn’t care how many pieces he broke me into as long as he owned them all.”

“And now?” he asked, his voice hollow.

She plucked her hand from his face and held it in her own.

“And now I’d rather watch the world burn with you just as I am. So *please*, let’s go. Now.”

Jay woke up to the smell of smoke.

She shot out of bed, panicked to find herself alone, the sheets next to her cold. But then she went to the window and looked through the glass, her breath fogging the clear surface.

Nicholas had the fire pit lit. The orange glow of the flames softened his profile, throwing the shadows of his bare torso into relief. He was feeding something into the fire—she thought, from the way their glossy surface reflected in the light, that they might be photographs.

There was something so very gothic about that: a man destroying relics of the past with fire. She twisted her wedding ring as she watched him, not sure what to make of his behavior. If he was the tortured, brooding master of the house, what did that make her? Not the wife in the attic, but the one he’d slash his way through hell and back to save.

Her face softened, fascinated by the way he carried himself when he thought he was alone. No airs or attempts at intimidation, just a man who moved confidently in his own skin.

A man who was desperately in love with her.

On her way out the door, she stopped by Nicholas’s nightstand and reached inside the drawer, tucking the small foil-wrapped packet she’d retrieved inside the bodice of her nightgown.

Walking down the steps in the dark, she noticed the ghostly spaces where photographs of Nicholas had once hung on the wall. He must have removed them—or his father had. There had never been any there of her.

Only the spider sculpture and the blue jellyfish sculpture and windows that looked out onto a property that was slowly beginning to fall to ruin.

She remembered Nicholas's offer to let her redecorate the way she wished. She really didn't want to touch the house, but the bare grounds and the driveway could use some love. A pop of color amidst all that white.

Jay walked from the righthand staircase out to the sunroom. In the light of the moon, she thought the wicker furniture looked a lot like bone. She could *smell* the fire now, not just the smoke, and she thought it smelled rather awful. All those chemicals—breathing in god-knew-what just to make a point.

Nicholas looked up as her shadow stretched over the tile, and his eyes widened briefly before he turned back to the fire. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I smelled the smoke."

"Pull up a seat then." He tossed in another photo.

"I'm almost positive those fumes are toxic." She pressed against him with one arm looped loosely around his waist from behind. She felt his body tense as she stretched to rest her chin on his shoulder. "Don't you have a paper shredder?"

"I thought you'd appreciate the theatrics of it."

"While I was asleep?"

He shrugged. "In absentia then."

"I told you how I feel about bonfires."

"Yeah, you did." He watched the edges of one of the photos blacken and curl. "Want to tell me your dreams?"

"I don't remember my dreams anymore and I have everything I want."

She saw his cheek lift. He tossed in the final photograph and then the folder, for good measure. Gently, he extricated himself from her hold, turning to look at her with the reflection of the fire gleaming in his pale eyes. "If that's the case, what do you want from me?"

"Come over here." She tugged at his hand and he followed her to the planter—the same one where he had gotten down on his knees and begged

her not to leave him before trying to pay her ten million dollars just so she could do exactly that.

You beautifully twisted man, she thought. *Oh, how I love you.*

“I can’t leave the fire,” he said, sounding amused, though the looks he was giving her in her thin lace dress made her feel as if she were curling up at the edges just like those blackened photos.

“Sit,” she said, and he did, his mocking half-smile becoming considerably more satisfied as she straddled his lap. The scent of jasmine suffused them both as they kissed, and even with her knees bruising on the tiled edge of the planter, she was as conscious as she always was of just how brutal a man he was beneath the streamlined tailoring of his expensive clothes.

She covered his hands with hers, pressing to keep them pinned against the ceramic. They both had long fingers, but his were broader, and stronger. She could feel the flex of the tendons as he looked at her with those hooded eyes. “You’re not going to be able to hold me down.” He tugged on her lip with his teeth. “I’ll fight back.”

Jay’s breath came a little shorter when kissed her again, sitting up a little as he did. She grabbed onto one of his shoulders to restabilize, and put her other hand over his chest.

“Fuck—” He arched into her touch when she rocked against his hips, a low, satisfied sound emanating from his throat as she slid her palm over his pectorals, and over the ridges of his abdomen. “What do you think you—” A shudder rippled through him as she thumbed his waistband, his belly hitching as she teased the dark line of hair that thickened beneath his navel. “Jay.”

There was power in this. Making him want. Making him wait. All his life, he’d been given everything he ever wanted. Everything but her. And she had been on the outskirts of his orbit all along, oblivious, until she tried to leave, and he collided into her world with a violence that set her entire horizon ablaze.

Can I watch the world burn with you? he had asked, when he was the one holding the match.

But now she wore the world at her throat.

“Yes, Daddy?”

Nicholas pried her hands away and looked at her for just long enough to make her heart begin to pound in earnest before flipping her over one of his shoulders.

“Nick! The fire!”

“I don’t care,” he said, striding towards the house. “I think need to deal with you.”

“No.” Jay slapped at his back, kicking her legs ineffectively. “Put me down.”

“Why?” But he set her roughly on the ground, standing in a way that let her know that she wouldn’t get far if she tried to run. “Do you want me to fuck you in the pool?”

“No.” She reached into her bodice for the condom she’d plucked from his bedside drawer. “I want you to do it here. Under the flowers.”

He stared at his hand when she put the wrapper in it.

“Fuck me,” she said to him. “Please.”

This time, when he lunged, she let out a little scream as he half-pushed, half-tackled her to one of the loungers beneath the patchy shade of the flowers. She did fight him, and he fought back like he promised, kissing her into submission until all she could taste was smoke.

They fell asleep out there beneath the balmy skies, with the sweat of their exertion chilling on their skin. Flower petals had blown over them in a light shower, carried by the wind.

Jay opened her eyes. The fire had died to a few faintly glowing embers and Nicholas was tracing a sprig of jasmine around her breast, the feather-light touch raising goosebumps.

“That tickles,” she said.

“I keep thinking you’ll vanish.” He ran the flower up her throat. “I’ve had too many dreams that you were in my arms, only to wake up and realize it wasn’t real.”

“I’m real,” she said.

Nicholas tucked the flower into her hair and leaned over her again. “Show me.”



Jay had already received three compliments on her “necklace” and after the first two, she had even managed not to blush. It really was exquisitely crafted. The semi-precious stones on the stainless-steel chain looked so demure, threading through the handcrafted leather band. Nobody looking at it could have guessed that Nicholas sometimes fucked her with that citrine bead in his fist, with six inches of its extended chain wrapped around his knuckles.

Don’t think about that now. She could feel the threat of a blush warming her cheeks and recentered the necklace absently, making the little stone spheres clatter against the citrine.

“The number of international clients in our portfolio is up 4.3% from last quarter,” Jay said. “And our retention is good. Customer Success sent out a survey: seventy-percent of our clients would be willing to work with us again.”

Everyone clapped politely and despite the nerves fluttering her gut, and an upcoming audit that she was very nervous about, she felt a flicker of pride. She had worked so hard for this, living and breathing this data. It wasn’t all that different from the work she had been doing for Arthur and Nicholas behind the scenes, but now it was her face up front, her name on the dotted line.

Justine Beaucroft, VP of Operations.

“All in all, it’s been a very successful quarter,” she finished, handing the remote over to Arthur, adding into the mic, “And things are looking even brighter for Q4.”

“Thank you very much, Jay,” he said. “Now I’m going to talk to you all about your favorite subject, OKRs.”

Jay glanced subtly at her phone screen as she took her seat up front, hiding her smile when she saw that she had a text from Nick. *How was your speech?*

It went well, I think. Thank you for practicing with me.

I saw it on the live-feed. It did go well.

After her promotion, Nicholas had stepped back into a consulting role. His choice—which surprised everyone, considering his ire when the option

had been given at HR's suggestion. "I think it's time the company took a new direction," was all he said. "I want to step back from managing and focus on maintaining a decent work-life balance."

On paper, Nicholas was still the owner of the company, but he had hired a new CEO to take his place: a no-nonsense woman named Katie Chang, who had moved down from Silicon Valley to take on the new role.

Now, he ran his own schedule and came into the office on an as-needed basis, which seemed to please him. Jay wasn't surprised—he seemed to relish the control. What did surprise her was the way he seemed to throw himself into managing the house. In the absence of a maid, it was not uncommon to come home to find him cleaning or staring down into a pot of boiling soup while adding ingredients with the contemplation of an alchemist at work.

Damon would have been rolling in his grave if he could see his son now.

I'm so flattered that the high-flying millionaire house husband tuned in to see me.

Of course. Did you remember to eat lunch?

Not yet. Jay glanced at Arthur, clapping in the appropriate spot. I'll grab something after the All Hands meeting, I promise.

I know you, Jay. You forget when you're nervous.

I won't forget.

She watched Katie take the microphone from Arthur, clicking to a slide that showed a bunch of metrics for various departments and their performance. She thought wistfully of the first time she had listened to Nicholas speak at one of these meetings and how impressed she had been, seeing his depth of knowledge and casual competency.

Their marriage had raised some eyebrows, and she still heard the occasional whispers of disapproval, but it seemed like Nicholas's jaded assessment of the town had been correct: money talked even louder than rumor. His sense for business outweighed his transgressions, and when he came into the office to discuss big clients or expansions, people still looked at him with respect.

Still, sometimes she found herself looking at that empty office on the mezzanine and thinking of how he used to make faces at her when he pestered her over text.

When he wasn't here, she missed him.

After a full day of back-to-back meetings, she was ready to go home. With her new car and new license, she could play all the 90s strip mall music she wanted. Whenever she drove, Nicholas groaned aloud every time Letters to Cleo came on, but he never touched her radio. And sometimes, she thought she'd caught him humming the hook to her songs in that deep, resonant voice.

The house was warm and after hanging up her purse and coat, she found Nicholas standing over what appeared to be a passable imitation of her curried carrot soup, along with a plate of vegan aquafaba merengues. "Surprise," he said, watching her face with obvious delight.

"You baked," she said, unable to keep the shock out of her voice.

His brows slanted down and he folded his arms over the front of his raglan shirt. "You don't have to sound so shocked."

"I'm sorry, you're so progressive, I should have realized you were a feminist king."

Nicholas rolled his eyes and smacked her sharply on the ass. "Get two wine glasses and tell me how your speech went. Did you remember to eat?" he asked casually.

Jay froze in front of the cupboard just as her stomach let out an incriminating growl. She glanced at him over one shoulder and saw his mouth twitch into that familiar dark smile.

"So, no."

"I had meetings all day," she protested.

"So get something delivered."

"I can't do that, that's so embarrassing. I feel bad."

"So tip them." He caught her by the chin and kissed her hard, taking the glasses out of her hands and setting them on the counter. Her heart gave a little skip of anticipation when he flicked the citrine stone against her throat before gripping it in his fingers. "You bad girl. Now I have to think up a punishment for you."

“Why?”

“You need to eat,” he said, and when he tugged on the chain, she shivered. “It’s the third time this week you’ve forgotten. I can’t have my beautiful little bird wasting away to nothing while she flutters up the corporate ladder.”

“Daddy,” she said. “No. Please.”

“The more you beg, the worse it’s going to be.”

Jay heard herself make a rather shameless sound that did not sound particularly concerned with consequences, worse or otherwise.

He laughed darkly. “Is the thought of a little punishment turning you on? I’ll make it extra fun for you then. You can choose how and when.”

The scent of the baked merengue filled her lungs when she breathed in, and she thought dizzily how strange it was, to taste such lingering sweetness while listening to his threats. “H-how?”

“Option one—you go out to dinner at Accia with me in that slutty little dress you hate, with nothing on underneath.”

“Oh my god,” Jay choked, scandalized—but not as much as she wanted to be.

“Option two—you let me buy you a proper gift, *no* spending limit. And charity doesn’t count.”

She glared at him.

“Option three,” he continued, with a glint in his eyes. “You let me fuck you in the ass.”

“Nicholas!” Her jaw dropped. “Oh my god.”

“I wasn’t planning on going in dry,” he said, which made heat flood her face as she made another incredulous sound. “But if you don’t want an assful of cock, you can always let me dress you like a slutty princess.”

“I thought you said you weren’t a sadist.”

“Bratty Jay brings out the worst in me.” He kissed her nose, grinning when she wrinkled it. “Stop stalling and tell me how you want to be punished.”

“The third thing,” she said defiantly.

“Are you sure you aren’t frightened of Daddy’s big cock? You went pale.”

He looked so smug and pleased with himself that a little flicker of rebellion made her say, “Shut up, Nick.”

His face got that forbidding look then—the one that she secretly loved, though wild horses couldn’t have dragged that from her, even though she suspected that part of him knew and reveled in it—and when he tugged on her necklace, the sound that came out of her was high and needy.

He pushed his fingers against her lips and she parted them, closing her eyes as he dragged them over her tongue.

“Eyes open.”

Jay cracked open her eyes just in time to see him grip her by her blouse and haul her partially over the counter. She yelped, her fingers sliding for purchase against the slippery surface as he yanked her skirt up, baring her ass to the air.

“Nick!” she cried out, but it broke into a soft moan when his fingers spread her open.

Nicholas ran his hand over her backside before delivering a stinging crack that had her bucking. He pressed down on her clit, which sweetened the sharp pressure and discomfort of him thrusting the finger of his other hand inside her ass, causing her to clench up in surprise.

“I see why you chose this,” he said, his tone almost conversational as she began to pant. With every thrust, the slackening release, paired with the smooth glide of his thumb over her clit, made her knees feel watery and weak. “I can picture it now—you, bent over and struggling to take every inch of my cock in your disrespectful little ass just to fucking spite me.”

“Nicholas,” she gasped, clawing at the counter. “Please. I can’t hold on.”

“Don’t worry. Daddy’s going to take good care of his pretty slut. You might even be able to still sit down when I’m finished playing with you.”

Jay came hard, falling against the counter with the granite at her cheek, and felt a throbbing ache of relief as he slid his finger out of her and unzipped his jeans. There was a crinkling sound, a hoarse vocalization, and

then he was inside of her aching cunt, pushing so deeply that the intensity of it made her cry out a little.

Pinned against the counter the way she was, the stove was in her periphery. She could see steam coming off of it, and a smell that suggested that some of the spices and vegetables on the bottom were starting to get burnt.

“I think . . . you should stir that.”

“Oh, fuck.” His breath puffed against her neck. “Dinner.”

“Sounds like you should get punished,” Jay said effortfully.

“If you think you can manage to hold me down long enough, you’re welcome to try.” His hand stilled over her hip, holding her in place as he finished, his breathing becoming unstable. “But Daddy always wins.”

Jay groaned. “Why should I get punished for your mistake?”

“Because I didn’t make you forget your lunch.” With a final shudder, he straightened, giving her ass another possessive slap before tossing the condom in the trash and washing his hands. As he walked to the stove, he shook out his arms, and gave his shoulders a little flex. “Come here, my starving bird. I used your recipe so it should be at least as good as yours.”

“Well, aren’t you confident for someone who never started cooking until this year,” she said, still a little short of breath.

“Why don’t you taste it first, before you light into me.”

Jay rolled her skirt down and limped over, defiantly picking up the bowl he handed her. As she breathed in the warm aroma of the spices, she felt an unexpected but thrilling wave of affection at the thought of him measuring out all the herbs, stirring until the consistency was exactly right.

A little more eager now, she tasted a spoonful. “Did you add sugar to this?”

“And cinnamon. I thought it would be better, if it was sweeter.”

“I am not going to stand here and listen to my perfectly fine soup get slandered by a sugar fiend who eats marshmallow fluff out of the jar.”

Nicholas flicked her nose. “But it’s good, isn’t it? You *like* it.”

“I do like it. And I love you,” she said impulsively, looking up at him.

His mouth curled into a smile and he reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I love you, too, blue jay.”

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Epilogue

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Apart from the usual slew of expensive presents and performative celebrations, birthdays hadn't carried much significance in the Beaucroft household. There were no favorite meals or homemade cakes, at least none that Nicholas could remember. He had written lists of the things he wanted and his father made the housekeeper buy them for him.

Nicholas wanted to do something special for his wife's thirty-second. It felt like an important way of delineating their new life from the old, creating a new tradition and clearing away the strangling vines of the past.

Putting the completed forms for the scholarship he'd created in both their names beside the plate of vegan omelet he'd laboriously crafted out of chickpea flour and nutritional yeast (after ruining a pan) had been a good start. She had looked at the table and cried before kissing him, running her hands over his face with that tenderness he craved.

But that wasn't enough.

"Why do I need this blindfold?" Jay asked, from the passenger seat. She was wearing a Kelly green dress and her hair was tied off with that little avocado ribbon. He'd watched her put it up with the satisfaction of knowing that he would be the one to take it down later.

"So you don't spoil the surprise."

He stopped the car. Jay was frowning when he opened her door. He helped her out, liking the way she gripped his arm for support. "I feel ridiculous," she grumbled, tilting her head like she was braced for laughter she couldn't hear. "This had better be worth it."

"Oh, I think you're going to find it very satisfying."

She bit her lip. "Are we in a public place?"

"Yes." He didn't bother to keep the amusement out of his voice. "Very public."

Smiling wider at the uneasy expression on her face, he led his pretty victim up to the door of her surprise destination, ignoring the stares and the whispers. "That's so weird," she said suspiciously. "I know this smell. Nicholas, where did you take me?"

"Guess."

“Niiiiick,” she whined. “You’re making me nervous. It’s not somewhere *weird*, is it?”

Feeling like he’d tortured her enough, Nicholas tugged off her blindfold, making a note to ask her what sorts of *weird* public places she thought he might take her later. “Surprise.”

Her eyes widened. “You brought me to a bookstore.”

“I knew you’d love it. Happy birthday, you little nerd.”

Jay slapped at his arm, though she looked delighted.

Then wary.

Then suspicious.

“You didn’t buy the store, did you?”

“No. Having one business is enough. You’re going to have to work for it this time, though. I’m only giving you three minutes to buy as many books as you can carry.” He reached into his pocket for his cell phone and hit a timer. “Starting now.”

“What?” she squawked. But she was already pivoting, causing the green hem of her dress to flare out appealingly as she sprinted off for the fantasy aisle, disappearing behind a shelf.

They had been married for almost two months now and he found that it suited him the way it had never quite seemed to suit his father. He enjoyed the way that Jay made every space feel warmer just by being in it, and it made him feel good to anticipate her needs and give her things she never even knew she wanted. Nobody had ever really depended on him before or trusted him to satisfy their needs in a way that went beyond the financial.

Despite his natural inclination toward reticence, Jay’s inherent sweetness made it far too easy to confess things to her that he would never tell anyone else. His father had taught him that fear and compliance were all that he needed from a woman. But Jay’s love and acceptance of him, even after seeing him at his ugliest, made him feel more like himself and less like his father’s shadow. And he was so grateful for that, every day.

Because, despite what his father believed, love hadn’t made him soft. It had given him a reason to better himself, to be the person that she thought he could be.

Jay herself had become more like the girl he remembered and had fallen in love with that first day by the tree: the self-righteous Valkyrie who wasn't afraid to take up space or chastise a small group of boys for doing wrong. At his company, she was a compassionate leader with a firm adherence to the rules, who could manage people as well as she could data.

And then at night, she would become his little bird, sitting on his lap in those prim little office clothes and calling him Daddy until he took her to bed and made her scream it.

While he waited for Jay to finish, he ordered a small coffee from the small kiosk they had in the front. "Do you want sugar?" she asked, and he glanced at his watch.

Two minutes to go. "Yeah, two pumps of caramel, please."

He was the only one in line, so his drink came out quickly, and he sipped it as he headed down the path Jay had taken, only to find her struggling to carry a stack of at least fifteen books.

"Here." Nicholas shifted his coffee to one hand. "Let me help."

"No," Jay said stoutly. "You said I had to carry them. I'm not going to be disqualified from your little game because I didn't follow your rules."

"It's not a game," he said. "It's a gift. And if you would just let me—"

"Noooooo." She dodged past him, moving faster than he would have believed possible. A book went flying from the top of her pile.

Nicholas bent to pick it up and glanced at the title before setting it back on the shelf.

Rules were rules.

He turned to see an older man staring at him. "Your girlfriend always make you clean up after her like that?"

"What?"

"Women these days are so entitled. The pretty ones are the worst." He gave him a commiserating look. "Be careful. She'll take you for everything you have—just like my ex."

"She's my wife," Nicholas said coldly. "And it's her birthday. So why don't you fuck off?"

The man looked at him uneasily before shaking his head. “Whatever, asshole. Don’t say I didn’t warn you when you end up in divorce court.”

Divorce court, Nicholas thought grimly. *Yeah, right.*

He found Jay by the register, studying a rack of bookmarks. There was one in front of her shaped like the backside of a cat. She looked up as he approached, already smiling hesitantly, though the smile got bigger when she saw it was him. “There you are. I thought you got lost.”

“Why? You’re the one who ran off.” He held out his arms and Jay begrudgingly handed the stack over, apparently unwilling to be separated from her haul even for a second.

He watched the young cashier ring up the titles, studying the various covers without recognition. It seemed to be the same colorful medley of dragons, unicorns, and girls with swords that she’d idolized since she was young. The only one he knew was a hardbound classic edition of *Jane Eyre*, which made him smile, satisfied.

“Oh wow,” said Jay, when the cashier read out the total.

“It adds up,” the girl said, nodding sympathetically. “How will you be paying?”

“With this.” Nicholas slid his card across the counter, and leaned over to grab the bookmark that Jay had been admiring. “We’ll get this, too.”

“Nick, you don’t have to,” Jay protested. “It’s already so much.”

“I know I don’t have to.” Remembering that bitter old man in the aisles, a line formed between his eyebrows. “I want to.”

“Are you two married?”

“Yes,” Nicholas said. “Two months. But I’ve known her for eighteen years.”

Jay elbowed him beneath the counter.

“Wow, that’s so romantic,” the cashier said. “Congratulations.”

“You’re so evil,” Jay whispered, the moment they were out of earshot.

“What?” he asked innocently. “I have known you for eighteen years, Jay.”

“I just think it’s a little twisted how you keep telling people that without context. You *know* they’re thinking it’s something like *The*

Notebook."

"It's still the truth."

"Oh my god." But she was swinging the bags as they walked out, with that little skip in her step that seemed to be an unconscious expression of her joy. He was afraid to remark upon it, suspecting that if he ever did, she might stop.

Impulsively, he pulled her face towards his and kissed her right there in the middle of the parking lot. After a brief exclamation of surprise, she kissed him back.

The parting of her lips beneath the sudden pressure of his mouth felt as natural as breathing.

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After her promotion, her childhood bedroom had been converted into an office-slash-guest bedroom. She'd replaced her old desk with a sleek, cherrywood model that had lots of pretty pull-out doors with brass handles, and looked exactly the way she'd imagined her ideal grown-up desk to look.

The new books Nicholas had bought her for her birthday were carefully arranged along the back of it, sandwiched between two geode bookends that Lily had mailed her as a gift. She had only managed to read one so far. The pay bump and professional respect were amazing, but sometimes, like today, it felt like there weren't enough hours in the day to get everything done.

Jay leaned forward on her desk, pushing her reading glasses up to her hairline as she scrubbed her hands over her face. The numbers the marketing VP had provided for the last quarter didn't match with the data they had, and she was working with Arthur, going over the latest sales figures and trying to understand if it was a bookkeeping error or something more sinister.

"How far back do these sales records *go?*" Jay muttered, briefly closing her eyes, praying that her first big assignment from the company wasn't going to be an embezzlement case.

“As fun as it is watching you toil away after working hours, I can think of something better you could be doing with your time.”

She groaned when she felt the hands on her shirt buttons, leaning back to find Nicholas looming over her in the chair. “This is for *your* company.”

“Fuck my company. It’s almost ten and my wife is still working, instead of in bed with me.” He nipped at the shell of her ear as he slid a hand into her shirt and massaged her breast. “Leave the glasses on when you come to bed. They’re hot.”

Jay pushed his face away, adjusting said glasses self-consciously. “I’ll be there soon. I’m halfway done going over this spreadsheet.”

She felt him sigh and rest his chin on her head. “What is this?”

“It’s the audit for marketing. It’s been in the pipeline for weeks and we’re behind. I’m sure Arthur’s told you about it.”

“Is it due tomorrow?”

“We’re already behind,” Jay said. “It should have been done weeks ago.”

“So what I’m hearing is that it’s already fucked and can probably stand to be a little more fucked. How many hours have you spent on it already?”

“Three, but—”

“Jay.” He tugged at her shirt from the inside. “To bed. Now.”

Jay pushed his hands away and opened up another email, ignoring him. But she didn’t read it, and when she heard him exhale slowly, with a bit of vocalization, goosebumps rippled down her arms.

She knew what that sound meant.

Suddenly, the chair was no longer beneath her. Jay yelped when she found herself draped over Nicholas’s bare shoulder, suspended very precariously over the now-moving floor.

“Put me *down!*”

“No.”

Jay kicked fruitlessly, feeling rather embarrassed as he walked down the hallway to his bedroom as if she were a wriggling sack of flour. She smacked his back and he retaliated with a hard spank that made her screech, “I am the vice-president of your fucking company.”

“Yes, you are.” He dropped her on his bed. “And I own your C-suite little ass.”

“You don’t get to punish me for working.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, little bird. If you were really that desperate to be bent over at your desk all night, you should have come to me.” He was wearing silk boxers and they hugged the outline of his hips so snugly that she had no trouble assessing her effect on him when he leaned over her menacingly. “Strip.”

“What’s stopping me from walking past you and going back to my office?”

His mouth tilted up at one corner. “Try it and find out.”

Jay swallowed hard, scooting nervously on the bed. His posture shifted to match hers—*like he’ll chase me if I run*, she thought, and a hitch entered her breathing. Pretending to be more annoyed than she actually was, Jay huffed and pulled her work blouse off, lifting her hips to slide down the comfortable sleep shorts she’d changed into.

Nicholas knelt down between her thighs as she struggled out of her bra and kissed her, tilting his head at a sharp angle to avoid the blue light-blocking reading glasses she was still wearing. One of his hands tangled in her hair, cradling her head. “You look like a slutty librarian.”

Jay ran her hands down his bare back and felt the muscles flex as he pressed his lips to her chest, just above her pounding heart. *Show-off.* “I didn’t think librarians did it for you.”

“They do when they look like you.”

She let her hand wander around to his front, and felt him suck in a little as she trailed light fingers over the contracted lines of muscle, before sliding her hand into his pants. With a ragged sigh, he let her cup him, stroking the velvety, wrinkled skin of his testicles before curling her palm around his shaft as she slid upwards from the base.

He made an encouraging sound and Jay stroked him harder, the way she knew he liked, smiling when he moaned against her mouth. But just when she started to feel like she’d gotten away with escaping punishment, his fingers closed firmly around her wrist.

“Nice try.”

With another hard kiss, he dragged her up from the bed, dislodging her hand in the process. She stumbled, breathless, as he walked her to one of the brocade sitting chairs. But instead of pushing her into it, he swung it around one-handed and pointed.

“Bend over it.”

“Excuse me?”

She took a step back and he stalked closer.

“I said, bend over it. Ass in the air.”

The strangled sound that escaped her made him smile. The fluttery feeling inside her body was closer to anticipation than fear but her heart still gave a panicky jump when one of his hands rested on the back of the chair he wanted to her to bend over, caging her in.

If she drew in a large enough breath, her chest would graze his.

“Don’t look at Daddy like that.” He caught her chin, thumbing her kiss-swollen lips. “It’s just going to make what’s going to happen that much harder for you.”

Slowly, repressing a shiver, Jay turned her back on him. He put his hands on her hips, just above her waistband, as he moved her into the desired position. She grunted when he hefted her higher, nudging her upwards until she was nearly on tiptoe.

Then he stepped closer, putting his hands just behind hers on the armrest. “Remember how tense you used to get before I fucked you?” he murmured, just level with her ear. “You knew it was coming, but couldn’t admit how badly you wanted it. That’s how you look right now.”

Jay swayed in place, feeling a flicker of dread when his body heat vanished.

His footsteps padded across the carpeted floor, and she knew, from the deliberate heaviness of his tread, that he wanted her to hear him. Even while listening for his approach, she nearly crawled up the chair when she felt his breath tickling her back. With a low sound of amusement, he dropped a kiss on her bare shoulder. “You look so worried.” More kisses trailed down her spine. “It’s not an execution.”

Recognizing her own words being thrown back at her, her eyes narrowed at the wall. “Just a punishment.”

“A punishment you chose.” He kissed her other shoulder, pressing his tongue to her skin as he reached beneath her arms to cup her breasts. Jay stood taller as he rolled her nipples in hard circles that had her squirming indecently against the chair. “I was rooting for the slutty dress.”

“So you could humiliate me in public?” Her voice came out unsteady. Now that she knew what he was going to do to her, a rush of adrenaline kicked through her blood.

Nicholas breathed out a soft laugh and the fabric of the chair blurred. “I told you I’m not an exhibitionist.” He let a hand fall, and she sucked in when he grazed her abdomen with his fingertips. “I was only going to play with you a little under the dinner table before I fucked you in my car on the way home.”

He tugged down her underwear and slid his fingers between her legs before she could react, making her arch against him at the first confident stroke. He pushed back with his body, and she realized that he was naked. And *hard*.

“Now I’m going to make you beg.”

Her fingers dug into the brocaded fabric as he pumped his fingers faster, adding pressure. He was very good at making her come. He’d adjusted his stance so he wasn’t pressing against her, and the only hint of his arousal was his breathing, which grew heavier as she got closer and she struggled to remain upright even as her knees turned to water.

“Please,” she said. An electric shiver arced down her spine when he bit the nape of her neck, giving her breast a hard squeeze. “Oh god . . .”

“Open your legs.”

She whimpered when she felt the slick, lube-covered head of his cock nudge her ass.

He kissed her ear. “Open. Your. Legs.”

“Nick,” she said, and his hand smoothed down her hip, gentling her even as he slid two fingers of his other hand back inside her cunt. After a few shallow thrusts, he rubbed her clit, working that slick nub of flesh beneath his rough fingertips until all she could feel was pressure, and pleasure, and—she gasped, arching back involuntarily—a hot spark of pain, like being pulled apart.

“That’s it. Arch your back just like that.”

Jay gripped the chair tighter and felt his groan reverberate throughout her body. “God, yes.” He kissed her hair and that was when she realized that he was inside her. “You feel—so fucking good.”

She felt overfull and on the verge of collapse. When he abandoned her clit to fuck her with his fingers, Jay’s hands convulsed on the slippery fabric. “I don’t know if I can—”

“You’re doing so well.” His lips opened against her bent spine. “Say, ‘My Daddy fucks me twice as hard as anyone else and I love it when he fills my ass with come.’”

“Oh my god, Nicholas. No.”

He fingered her more aggressively, until she cried out again. She felt a puff of warm air as he worked himself deeper that could have been laughter or a silent moan. “Say it.”

“My Daddy—Nicholas, *please*—he fucks me twice as anyone and I . . . aah . . .”

Surging forward, and making her gasp, he reached around her torso for the citrine dangling from her necklace as the fingers of his other hand curved to stroke her inner walls.

“Finish that sentence.”

“I—” His hand fisted and the chain attached to her collar pulled taut around her throat. “*Fuck*,” Jay choked, even as her shoulder blades began to prickle and a tingling lightness overtook her thoughts, shrouding everything in a heady white mantle of pleasure that felt as if it might leave her blind. “Yes, oh god, I love it—”

“And?” She felt the sharp dig of his hipbone as he bottomed out with a low groan. He let go of her collar, letting his hands fall just behind hers on the armrests, his hard stomach flush with her spine. “The rest.”

“I want him . . . to fill my ass with c-come.”

He pulled out with a labored grunt and entered her again, bowing her over the chair until she could feel his chest bearing down on her. Giving up on bracing herself, Jay let herself be flattened, hugging the back of the chair and burying her face in the padding to stifle her moan.

“My god, Jay. You’re such a filthy little whore.”

Jay heard herself make a sound; the desperation of it embarrassed her. “Please.” She flexed her hips, arching into him, and with a low, approving growl, he stroked between her legs, nudging her into the rhythm of his thrusts with his bent fingers. “Oh my god—I can’t—*please*—”

“You even sound slutty when you beg.” He sank his teeth into her bare shoulder, before dragging his lip over the bite. “Who makes you scream when you beg for it?”

“My Daddy.”

“Good girl.” And that low growl of approval made her let go, loosing a scream that seemed to shatter his control and drive him wild.

He began fucking her in earnest—slow, heavy strokes that had her hips rocking against the chair, causing the brocade to chafe her sensitized nipples with every torturous graze as she struggled to maintain her now-sweaty grip on the slippery armrests. The tight, full-to-bursting pressure, and the slackening relief cut short by the next deep thrust were punctuated by little blazing sparks of pleasure wrought by his fingers and his mouth.

Her glasses were all fogged up and the pleasure was beginning to feel raw, but she didn’t care, because she was thoroughly lost in the sensations of him now—high on endorphins and adrenaline and something that seemed to be just him.

Just Nick, she thought, and cried out softly.

“God.” His voice was hoarse. “Fuck.”

Jay rolled forward as she felt him pulse on that final staggered thrust, followed by the searing brand of his release. The unfamiliar sensation shocked her a little, and she sank forward against his arm until he took pity on her and lifted her up from the chair in a tight, constricting embrace.

“That was so, so good.” He kissed her hair, her cheek, nuzzling her face, even as his cock softened inside her. “You take me so well.” When he pulled out, she winced at the feel of his warm come dripping down her thighs. “Are you sore?”

She nodded, sagging a little in his arms.

“Poor little bird. Daddy’s going to take good care of you.”

When he swung her up in his arms, she didn’t struggle. It was a much gentler carry—less potato sack, she thought wearily, and more princess. He

took her to the master bath, past the bench where she had dressed his wounds, and sat her gingerly on the seat of the deep tub while it filled with warm water. There was a big mirror built into the wall, which reflected most of the room, including the shower, the tiled bench where he had sat, and the bathtub itself.

Nicholas left to shower himself off before disappearing back into the bedroom. Jay shifted a little at the sting of the warm water when it reached the level of her hips. Then she closed her eyes, soothed by the steam. There was a splash beside her, followed by the clink of glass on tile, and then his hand was nudging her gently.

“Don’t fall asleep.”

“I wasn’t.” She lifted her head to let him unfasten her necklace. “You just wore me out.”

“Well, I hate to compete with a spreadsheet.” She cracked open an eye and saw him pouring what looked like port into the two glasses he’d apparently gone to retrieve. Watching the garnet liquid made Jay remember other alcohol-steeped nights, with kisses that burned like liquor. He pushed the glass firmly into her hand. “You work too hard.”

She blinked confusedly at his blurry face before belatedly remembering the glasses. With a sigh, she removed them and set them on the edge of the tub. “I still feel like I have to prove myself.”

“You don’t.” He took a sip from his glass, dangling an arm over the edge of the tiled lip. “Why break your back bending over for someone who just wants to fuck you?”

“Says the man who just gave new meaning to the recovery of back pay for unpaid overtime.”

His mouth curved sinfully. “You can work off the clock all you want if you want to earn your wages that way.”

Jay swatted at him, and he shifted his drink to the other hand, using her buoyancy in the water to reel her onto his lap. The tub was nearly full now and Jay stretched to turn the faucet off with his arms still wrapped around her waist while Nicholas tilted his head back with a satisfied sound.

The water lapped at his broad chest, puckering his nipples and making his body hair shift in the current. She trailed a finger down his sternum and

felt his low rumble of contentment.

“I hope they appreciate you.”

“They do.” She let her hand fall away where his skin met the water, thinking about how that body had felt against hers mere moments ago. “I’m still sorry you had to step down for it.”

“I didn’t have to. I chose to. I’m being very well compensated.”

“You should know, it wasn’t the title I admired—it was how capable you were standing up there in the middle of the room. Seeing you being under that much pressure for work was awful and it wasn’t making you a nicer person.”

“Is that going to be your new project?” He didn’t open his eyes but his posture was relaxed and there was a faint smile on his mouth. “Being the angel on my shoulder, whispering in my ear?”

“I sense there would be some resistance on that front.”

“My accountants keep assuring me that I’m very generous. Saintly, even. Apparently, all these donations I’m handing out are making me quite the levied martyr.”

“Only because I made you.” Jay put her hand on his thigh and saw him smirk as her fingers teased the base of his cock. “You told me that you enjoyed fucking with people. Getting inside their heads. Seeing what makes them tick. You said it got you off.”

“That’s not the only thing.” He watched her through half-closed eyes as she stroked him beneath the water. “Keep that up and you’ll have a sore pussy *and* a sore ass.”

Jay gave him one more stroke before taking her hand away, much to his obvious displeasure. “I mean it, though. You need to stop mining people for weaknesses that you can exploit later when they piss you off. I *know* when you’re doing it. You get this evil glint in your eye.”

“That’s going to be a hard habit to break, oh conscience mine.” He grimaced as he took another drink of port. “As I get older, I see more of my father in me, hear more of his voice in my head. You’re fortunate. You look—and act—nothing like your mother. God, I used to fucking look at you and wonder how you could have possibly come out of her.”

She trailed her fingers down his jaw. “That was a choice. Reinforced by a series of choices, some of them tough ones.”

“Living here didn’t help with that, I’m sure,” he said darkly.

“No, it didn’t.”

“I know I added to that. When you ran away and I realized you were running from me as much as you were my father—that was tough to reconcile.”

“You’re not your father, Nick. Your father never apologized for anything he did, and he didn’t suffer pangs of conscience. And he could never—” she leaned in “—ever be as sweet as you can be to me.”

She felt him smile against her mouth when she kissed his cheek. “How are you feeling, by the way? Are you going to be able to sit down at your desk tomorrow? Or are you going to have to call in sick and tell them you’re feeling about nine inches under the weather?”

“I take it back,” Jay said. “I think I hate you.”

“You always say that after I play with your ass. And then a few days later, you’re begging for it again. You love my dick almost as much as you love me.”

“I’m divorcing you.”

“You’re going to leave me and take half my money because I played too rough?” Nicholas laughed against her throat, running the back of his hand over her belly. “What a little coward.”

“It’s called a division of assets,” Jay said stiffly.

“Mmm. Try to get away from me now and see what I do to your *assets*. I’ll hold you up in court for years, fucking you harder than any lawyer ever could.” He nipped her waist with a playful pinch before bundling her more firmly against him. “Want to hear something funny?”

“Can you behave?”

“No.” He gave her a naughty grin as his hand settled comfortably in the dip above her hips. “Look at that wall. This is the only room in the house that my father designed that I never destroyed or altered—mostly because of the mirror.” He bumped his knee beneath her, making her turn to look at their slightly steam-clouded reflections, where they were wrapped in each other’s arms.

She didn't think she imagined her cheeks getting a little ruddier. "Was it valuable?" she asked, looking away from her own face to take in the gilt edges with a puzzled frown.

"It's actually quite the gauche moneysink unless you're into whorehouse chic like my father. But I told myself that one day, when this house was mine, I'd be looking into that tasteless mirror he put in here so he could watch himself fuck, and I'd see you sitting right here with me."

"Wow." Jay was startled by the sudden heat in his eyes and realized she'd been absently running her fingers over his arm. "I don't know whether to be flattered or creeped out that you've been planning on asking me to be your mirror mistress."

"Not a mistress," he corrected. "You were the only girl I ever wanted to marry." He picked up her left hand, bringing it to his mouth in that one courtly gesture that always unstitched her heart at the seams. "That woman in the mirror is my sine qua non."

"What's a sine qua non?"

"A condition that's necessary for something else to be possible. That's what you are for me, little bird. Everything that makes up the best of me exists because of my love for you."

"Oh Nicholas," Jay said. "I love you, too. Sometimes more than I can bear."

He gave her hand a squeeze. "Then let me bear it for both of us."

The end

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VEGAN MERENGUES

You will need:

- 6 tablespoons of aquafaba* liquid from a can of unsalted chickpeas
 - $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of cream of tartar
 - $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of granulated sugar (100g)
 - $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of lemon extract
1. Preheat oven to 250 degrees
 2. Whip the cream of tartar and aquafaba until glossy stiff peaks form
 3. Add the sugar slowly while still whipping and whip in the lemon extract
 4. Repeat the first step until you get the glossy stiff peaks again
 5. Drop or pipe meringues onto a baking tray lined with parchment paper
 6. Bake for 45 minutes and then turn off oven—**DO NOT OPEN DOOR**
 7. Let them sit in the cooling oven for 60 minutes
 8. Store in air-tight container

*Aquafaba is the chickpea “water” in the can

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A C K (!) K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

I started this book as a purely self-indulgent series of vignettes because I couldn't quite get over these characters. Then I looked at some of the critical reviews for *Quid Pro Quo* (which, I KNOW, I KNOW, you're not supposed to do) and realized that I wanted to write a better ending for Nick and Jay as a couple where they actually deep-dive into their issues with each other and figure out how they can actually work together. I have written a lot of dark romances, but I've never written one where the couple is endgame but still figuring themselves out.

My father got diagnosed with brain cancer and died while I was working on this book. He actually designed this cover for me because he told me he wanted to be more involved in my career as a writer to support me in my successes. I'm lucky I had so much support from family and friends after his passing, including a wonderful group of writer and reader friends who designed stickers with quotes from my books and donated the profits to the Musella Foundation.

But at some the very worst moments, these characters felt like my friends, too. They "listened" to me and were there when I wanted to be alone but not alone. I am so grateful that one of my dad's last gifts to me is memorialized in something that means so much me and helped me cope with his loss.

Like *Raise the Blood*, *Sine Qua Non* was originally serialized on Kindle Vella. I was delighted by how many readers tuned in for the first draft (even more than *Raise the Blood*, I think!). It was fun to see people's live reactions while I wrote it, especially since some of the scenes in the first draft didn't make it into the final copy (I thought Nicholas might be into mask kink—no, no he is not). One of the things I struggle with is not having my writing read as "perfect" from the get-go, so serializing is kind of freeing, because I get to tell my stories faster and just have fun with it. To everyone who was interested in seeing me pants my way through the story, thank you very much!

Also, huge thank you to my beta readers, Julia and Allison, who were kind enough to donate their time to reading and providing feedback on this story, and helping shape it into what it is now. I can't tell you how much I looked forward to your emails, and having our little chats.

Lastly but certainly not leastly, thanks to *you*, the reader, for buying this book or reading it on Kindle Unlimited. It's truly an honor to write stories for people to read and hopefully enjoy. Out of the millions and millions of books out there, thank you for taking a chance on little old me.

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A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Nenia Campbell 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. You can find her on Goodreads and Facebook, on TikTok and Reddit under @neniacampbell, or on Instagram at @alwaysbeebooked.

She loves to hear from readers. :)

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