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A NOVEL



K. SATO

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CHAPTER 1

Mia



Oh crap. I'm gonna cry. I did not foresee tears but then I drove here with 50 Cent poppin' off in da club of my SUV so I probably rolled up overconfident. Driving around with Beyoncé and Dolly Parton blasting is what gave me the courage to run for city council in the first place. Looks like 50 was a step too far. He is super gangster.

My eyes are brimming, about to be 2 little infinity pools overflowing the walls. People are clapping, "...deliberate misinformation" and there go the tears rolling down my cheeks. If I wipe them everyone will know, 2 of the other councilwomen already do. Rebecca's got a fiery look like she'd like to turn me into her cause and head out on the warpath together which I neither want nor need, but Melissa's genuinely empathizing with me, she knows what's right. Melissa Dietz is always appropriate and boundaried, I bet she had great parents who mirrored attachment and instilled self worth with their love. They probably treated her like a little adult and let her see harsh realities like death because they respected her young mind's right to see and they knew she could handle it with their loving support. God I envy her. She'd never be in this position, crying on the dais while people cheer. Her upbringing'd simply never allow it.

"A public official SHOULD NEVER mislead or spread lies..." more clapping and now whooping from the seats. I'm at that nothin-to-lose point in my city council career so I swung for the seats this evening. Agenda Item 17 was ugly no matter what lipstick I painted it with. Brett was furious when he saw it, ridiculous, all that taxpayer money for immigrants with legal issues, no way we'd support it. And our side needs to be heard, Brett reminds me. Yes, even though it'll get approved anyway, it's symbolic Mia, he harps, eternally

irritated by me or the circumstances, I don't know which anymore. And as District 9 Austin city council member, I signed up to be the symbol. He never says that but it's implicit in shoving me out here. And normally Brett's here in the audience so I can take it. I make eye contact with him and he bolsters me up with steely resolve, ramming backbone into me like when he baits the poor worm with his hook. I nod concurrence and flash that middle finger attitude at everyone around me like a projector. And normally it's budget disputes I'm losing 10-1 over that get no one's panties in that big 'a wad. Unlike tonight's Exhibit A: Gio Barra, who I've driven to the point of brain vein. It's like a lightning bolt down his forehead. Oh my god, he's looking right at me.

**Pssst* The urge to procreate is strong y'all. I think it rides shotgun over everything in life besides breathing. Deep down, we're all driven by the need to fuck. Because right now Gio's ripping me a brand new shiny asshole and I'm crying in a public forum as a result, but at this very moment when we lock eyes, mine being waterlogged and bereft of the desire to exist anymore and his being lion-disemboweling-a-gazelle-y, what do you think crosses my mind? Damn, he's scary? No. What a jerk? Nope. My addled brain murmurs "*he's merciless with that mouth*" and my damn vagina pangs in response! I'm so tired of the dry spell Brett and I are in. It's like half my body's resources are devoted to sexualizing everything.

Don't get me wrong, Gio's a beautiful man, no question. He's gotta be 6 feet tall and he has this gracefulness, like his ancestors were Spanish aristocrats or royalty. He's not old school Texas, cowboy hats and boots and giant trucks with the turn radii of a 747. He's superbly tailored skinny tie style, hybrid ride shares and folding bikes, city rugged, short groomed facial hair framing an erudite mouth, curled, slightly pursed lips poised to opine on the delicate notes of the air he breathes and tousled wavy hair you could fist handfuls of if you needed to which I won't, ever. He's urbane, educated and his cinnamon eyes see you, they appraise you and they'll flush you out of any hiding place you think you've found. You will not escape.

I blame Brett for this. If he were here, I wouldn't be in this

highly susceptible state, alone and emotionally bare. His indignant righteousness is a big enough tent to cover any and all the bullshit he spews. Without it, I don't have enough hands to cover my vulnerabilities.

Gio can take some blame too. Is it really necessary to orate at me for 10 minutes straight? I guess if we're rationing out blame though, I oughta take my share. What the hell was I thinking hawking Brett propaganda with Fiddy confidence? Sure, in the privacy of my home, I can rap along with him about rolling 20 deep on my birthday, wagging my finger around like I've actually ever done that, but a white woman should *never* attempt to operate dangerous machinery like a rapper's chutzpah in public. That's a straight shot to starring in somebody's Karen video.

"To rack up political points..." Ok, I've taken a Louvre length tour of the recesses of my mind and Gio's still ripping me that high end asshole I ordered. This thing's the Ferrari of assholes. I really thought he noticed my tears, his eyes narrowed and I had the briefest sense he felt, not bad per se but *something*, but I guess I misread. Sorry.

*FYI I'm an apologizer. Brett shoots first and asks questions later (we're armed to the teeth at our house btw so don't even think about breaking in - you'll die.) By contrast, I apologize first and ask questions later. Nothing wrong with niceties, it's like please and thank you, they cost me nothing and the world sorely lacks them these days. But according to my husband, I apologize *excessively and for no damn reason sometimes*. He doesn't quite get the concept of the apology as social grease. Sorry in advance if my apologizing bugs you.

I try to blow air up to my cheeks from my mouth to dry my face but I can't generate any real velocity because my stupid lip won't stop quivering. My wicked witch of the west meltdown is in final countdown. I put my hand up over my eyes, covering as much of my face as I can, lean down as I lose control of the sob and finally, *finally*, Gio stops.

It's silent now, except for me huffing air through my mouth because my nose's shutdown operations for the time being. My intern is kneeling at my side, shoving tissues into my

hand, “Mia, here.”

“Ok council member Barra, thank you for your input,” Mayor Neely’s using his soothing Mr. Rogers voice like we’re a bunch of warring kids he needs to wrangle. “I think we can go ahead and vote on Agenda Item 17 now,” and he’s asking for the ayes, all the other 10 council members, and then the nays, that’s me, party of 1, 9 months strong, holla! I sit up solemnly, raise my hand and stare blankly ahead, assuming as much dignity as a professional woman crying can, counted, and then duck back down. “Ok, so we have a 10-1 vote with the dissenting vote coming from council member Sinclair.” My mouth unleashes a final involuntary sob. I know Neely has to reiterate for the recorder but it feels like he’s kicking me when I’m already down. I cower in my box as the session is wrapped, wiping my face, my intern crouched beside me. Thank god in heaven that was the last item on the agenda.

“Somebody’s a damn dog on a bone!” Brit hisses provocatively in Gio’s direction as I crawl through the curtains behind the dais. “Do you need more tissue?”

“I’m good, thanks Brit,” I reply as I stand all the way up and book it to the hallway that leads to the offices. Once the end was in sight, my tears dried and flight became the focus.

“Let me check your mascara. You might look like a mascaracoona.”

I keep walking. “Everyone already saw me crying,” I assert hopelessly. Dignity sailed and sunk. Everybody died. “What difference does it make?”

“We still have to do the presser.” Oh hell no. “And if you show up lookin’ like Mia the Mascarycoon, the local reporters will jump on it way worse.” She grabs my arm and pulls me around to face her. “It’ll be red banner, *Breakin’ News! Gio Barra Makes Mia Sinclair Cry at City Council!*” Brit makes jazz hands and then leans in to examine my makeup. “No mascarycoon but you are a little smudgy.” I turn back around and head down the hall again, getting out my phone. “They’re so melodramatic,” she continues. “The other night when it hailed, KAUZ broke into Masked Singer 6 times with storm

updates! You'da thought it was the end of the world instead a rainin' Sonic ice. The meteorologist might as well've put on a big goofy costume and sung the weather warnin's." Brit has the flattest midwest accent. It's hideous. And I loved it from the first clogged up nasal passage vowel.

I check my phone. Should I be worried about Brett? He's missed the last few meetings but he watched them on the feed and texted me after. I could really use an "Are you ok?" or "What a bunch of assholes" supportive text right now. That nothin-to-lose point I'm at with my council career? Ditto for my marriage. I went all in tonight, quoting Brett word for word, concerns in the community about undocumented people committing crimes and being released from county jail. I gave voice to our side, I was a good soldier and I got reamed in public and on Karenesque video record for it. What do I get in return? Crickets. Did he have a car accident or something? Is there something wrong with my phone? I restart it just in case.

Someone's coming down the hall toward us. "Ugh. Ok," I give in, turning into the bathroom as we pass it. "Let me go check myself. I'll be down in a minute."

"Nah, I'll come with you," Brit pushes into the bathroom in front of me and straight into a stall. "I need to check the Netherlands. I swear sometimes in this heat it's like there's a homeless person livin' between my legs." I hear the toilet seat slam down and see only one foot under the door. Folks, brace yourselves: she's fanning herself down there.

Ah, my trusty intern. We had a group of them from UT at the brokerage, and each of us mock interviewed and hired one for the summer. Brit was lively and outspoken, very rough around the edges but perceptive and game for anything. At the end of the interview she'd blurted out, "I just have so much energy!" I hadn't even asked her anything. A little voice inside my head went "you need her" and even though "hiring" her was inconsequential, it felt momentous for some reason. She was supposed to intern at the brokerage, but when I mentioned city council, she jumped right in. "Cross internin'!" she'd baptized it triumphantly, finger pointing in the air like some kind of Wisconsin Napoleon.

My phone's back up. I text Brett 3 waving hands and "*You ok?*"

"I don't know how you withstood the heat of that man's ire. Better woman than me. Felt like the surface of the sun up there." I focus on myself in the mirror. Oh, I've got 2 giant armpit circles on my dress. Swell. Because nothing projects competence quite like copious pit sweat. No way I'm doing the press conference. The video always shows up on all the local news websites, if not the actual broadcast itself. And given my performance, city council will make the news tonight.

I ran for office 4 years ago when things were way less divisive. It was Brett's brain brat who I'm stuck raising alone lately. Austin's gone from the dusty little town I grew up in to endless suburban sprawl, mow down all the trees to make way for subdivisions y'all. Initially I liked having a say in the direction we went. Funding from tourism and festivals helped make parks and rec projects I cared about a reality, outdoor spaces to enjoy and central Texas nature preserved. Brett pushed me to focus on property taxes, not exactly a passion project but with the rapid growth, the system needed updating, everyone agreed. But then that growth ushered in heavier problems. Traffic, policing, affordability, homelessness moved in like dark clouds on the horizon. I don't have any expertise on those issues, and be honest, do perfect solutions for infinitely complex problems like those even exist? We can patch them but neither side is gonna have all the answers. That's my 2¢ worth but I've lost 10-1 for 9 months straight and I cried on the dais tonight so yeah. Ignore me.

"My underwear's soakin' wet!" Brit shares from behind the stall door. "I think it's just sweat though. Think bein' the optimal word there."

Anywho, no amount of driving around with Lizzo loud will ever prepare me to go up against Gioliath. My halting public speaking is littered with umms and ahhs and the occasional bout of circular logic because I lose my train of thought when nervous and have to double back, sometimes twice, a tricky Figure 8 of logic if you will. Nobody lands that thing

gracefully. Pretty sure Gio thinks I'm an imbecile. He's got presence, he commands attention and never hesitates. He's deeply invested in his community and they passionately back him, showing up like they did tonight whooping and hollering. My husband can't even bother to text me a goddamn hug.

Council used to have a Cheers vibe before Baldwin got voted out. Even Gio was friendly. Now I'm the lone conservative on the dais and my side expects me to stand up to the liberals no matter what. And every time I do, they sink their collective teeth into me like a bunch of sharks in a feeding frenzy. Being the constant 1 in 10-1 decisions has worn me down. I'm over it. I'm so far out of my comfort zone in public office I should be deported. At 24, I was the youngest person ever elected and lately all I can think is: it shows. Gio was 25 when he was elected, but city council's a stepping stone for him in what will be an illustrious political career. He quickly became a leader on the dais while I went the opposite direction and imploded. Re-election is right around the corner and my husband's talking higher office. I haven't exactly made my feelings clear with him yet. I'm working on it ok? Every time I bring it up, Brett's as confident as Gio and I end up hopelessly lost in a figure 8.

"Good news, the Netherlands don't smell like tulips but wait, do tulips smell?" the toilet flushes. "Anyway, the air down there isn't bad even though you could mop the floor with my undies. Who knew your booty could sweat so much? Not this Sconnie." Brit emerges from the stall and approaches the mirror, adjusting her shirt. "I swear, I've tried sprays, wipes, probiotics but sometimes a shower and fresh panties is the only thing for it." Ok, say what you will but I can be myself with Brit. She's one of those people who act like they've known you your whole life inside a minute of meeting you. Is there anything less pretentious than sharing intimate odor struggles? It's impossible to be nervous around her. "You think we could spin it and say you have allergies?" she asks, dabbing her face with a paper towel. "You weren't cryin', you've got cedar fever really bad?"

"It's the middle of summer Brit. Cedar fever is like December to March."

“Oh, gotcha. Wisconsin doesn’t have cedar fever.”

I’ve wetted a paper towel and cleaned my face as best I can without wiping half my makeup off. I’ve got a splitting headache from my contact lenses and there’s the pit stains. Presser - nay. “Let’s just leave. I can’t do questions or spin.”

Brit looks uncertain, “People might say you ran away,” she warns.

“What’s worse, running away or standing there with these?” I gesture at my pits.

“You look like you went to battle and fought hard,” she bites her lip, “inside a volcano.”

“No kidding,” and the one I fought for didn’t even notice. “I can’t do it, Brit. They’ll ask what happened and I’ll start crying again,” I’m about to right now.

“Ok, I understand,” she answers quickly. I haven’t known Brit long but she gets me. She saw me choke up and she’s sensitive enough to leave it alone. “What’s the game plan then? Where can we get outta here apart from the main exit?”

“The door to the dumpsters doesn’t have an alarm.” I volunteer. What? I’ve been out there a few times lately when I needed air, gulping garbage aroma like it was baking cookies or horses or pool chemicals (chlorine smells like summer y’all). “It’s a small area with a brick wall but the Four Seasons is on the other side.”

Brit pauses, looking like she wants to ask me what the hell I’ve been doing out by the dumpsters but then she shrugs it off, tempted by the adventure. You could call my evening lots of things but boring wouldn’t be one of ‘em. “Alright councilwoman. You ready?” she tugs her bra straps up and stands tall, purse over her shoulder.

One last glance in the mirror for me and it’s not pretty. “Yes. Let’s go,” I tell her grimly. Time to end this shitty eve.

CHAPTER 2

GIO

I stare down at an unremitting erection, so engorged with blood it's twitching with my pulse. I felt it throbbing on the dais but fortunately our cubbies cover everything but our torsos. I had to bolt at the end of session and hunker down in the accessible restroom.

There's knocking on the door. "Gio, 5 minutes," it's my assistant.

Ok, I don't have time for my normal problem solving which is unfortunate because it's kind of what I do best. Analyze an issue, gather information from reliable sources, convene a team, implement solutions. However, as my suddenly attentive assistant reminded me, presser in 5 and I can't very well stand there with a hard on looking like the sickest perv in town. Who gets an erection during city council? The only team to convene is my mind, dick and hand. Pronto.

Another knock. "4 minutes," of course my normally lazy and entitled assistant chooses this particular moment to become awesome at his job.

I grab myself because time's wasting. Kara. My girlfriend. Her taut nipples. *Stroke*. Dragging the slit of my dick over that nipple, glistening it with pre-cum, goose bumped and puckered tight, aching for me. Thrusting in between her breasts, screw that I'm in a hurry, her ass cheeks, that's better *pump* squirt lube into her crack, gleaming drops an erotic preview of what I'm gonna put in there. I use my dick to spread it where I'll need it, lean over her and circle my hips through a slow thrust, skin smacking through her cheeks, teasing myself with a few pumps before prodding at the hole I crave like a damn beast sometimes. Not all the time but say 20% of the time, 1 out of 5 fucks, is that unreasonable? It is? Ok listen, the lure would probably lessen if it wasn't so verboten. Buttfuck-free-for-all and I'd probably ask 1 outta 8, hell, I'd practice gratitude at 10%. Kara let me have anal once

in 12 years. At an average of 3x per week for the first couple years and 2x per week for the last 10, that's 1 out of 1352 sexual encounters. I'm being starved to death. 0.000739644970414, not even three quarters of a hundredth of one percent with helpful rounding up and yes I memorized a 15 digit decimal number after staring at it so many times on my phone calculator. It changes every year too and I recommit it to memory like a sad anniversary ritual. Because she hated it. *Why do I get off on something that hurts her?* she'd asked. I didn't have an answer besides *It turns me on. I'm a pig.* And I never asked again. So my rate is going down 0.005% each year because I calculated it, that's what I do, I'm a man, passionate about issues in my community and owning my girl's every orifice. Deal with it. Because from where I'm sitting, the only way to slow that 0.005% is to have sex less. Anal's become my negative sum game.

Knock knock. Who's there? "2 minutes." My assistant. I loathe him.

"I'm not feeling well at the moment," not a lie, an erection can be a symptom of illness like nausea or diarrhea. "Go, I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Okay," he sounds suspicious. If he stands outside the door, I'll strangle him against the wall as soon as I'm done choking off my cock in here.

Thankfully he walks away.

Ok, Kara isn't working. But my dick won't die despite anal deprivation mathematics. Time to masturbation channel surf... Actress? Meh. Model? Hmmm...Mia. **Yes.** Root of my cock **YES**, Mia Sinclair's the way, express train line to terminus Orgasm. I don't have time to examine the triple black diamond insanity of it, the clock's ticking and I need to let my mind run crazy free so I can come, tuck my dick back in and get in front of the reporters. Haughty bitch sinking to her knees for me *yeah, stroke.* Pulling the hair back from her face so I can see that defiant chin she thrusts out every session *your chin needs my come dripping down it.* Tears smearing the makeup she wears entirely too much of. I bet she smells like face powder which I would hate *shouldn't've said what you said. Made me*

go after you. Couldn't stop. Push her to the floor and straddle her neck now your mouth'll finish what it started. Take a few strokes inside before withdrawing from her mouth to thrust my stiffness against her cheek look what your vulnerability did. Push down on her chin so the hinge of her jaw opens, stick your tongue out baby. I need to come on it. I hate her grotesque lipstick but when she undulates her tongue trying to catch raindrops of my come? Yeah Mi, I'll feed it to you, my balls fire ejaculate, comb my fingers into her hair, tip her head back, fuck yes Mia, yes, YES.

Ok. A veritable shit ton of semen doesn't matter, what matters is that it's done. Sure, I've the overwhelming impulse to nuzzle her and kiss her clean, come licked lips but that's a normal post coital reflex I think. I feel it with Kara occasionally even though I can't ever kiss her because she's over at the sink spitting me out every single time. Dominating and degrading across the party line to a seismic orgasm isn't something to get worked up about I don't think. Whatever, I don't have time for this, I need to clean up and get to the damn presser without an uber relaxed, I-just-came stupid look of satisfaction on my face. Dick in, briefs, pants, zipper up, shirt tucked, belt done, sodden toilet paper flushed, hands washed, I'm ready.

I'm actually afraid, walking down the hall, of seeing Mia.

"Measure, not the member, that's what we're debating here." Oh good, I made it in time to be chastised by Neely quoting Robert's Rules. I look around at the other members, expecting to see the usual Papa-Neely's-parenting-us-again eye rolls. He's so old school and literally twice the age of almost everyone else on council. Face by face though (and by the way, star of the session Sinclair didn't even bother coming) I realize exasperation isn't what's staring back at me. No, what's there is a general look, fuck me straight through to Sunday, they're looking at me like I went too far! Councilwoman Harrington in particular looks like I punched Mia in the face although she's a bitch on a beautiful day. Melissa Dietz looks so grave you'd think someone died up on the dais. Why? Everyone used to love when I tore into Baldwin. Of course he was such a prick no one gave a shit about him except to be

scared that anyone would say what he said in public, but me ripping him to shreds was galvanizing, uniting us against a common enemy! Mia flung hateful misinformation around tonight same as Baldwin and I went at her the same as I used to him. So what's the difference? She's a woman, that's what. Shame on me for making her cry. À la carte, fair weather feminism, everything equal until the Titanic's sinking, then women and children first, you animal.

“Gio! What happened tonight?” a reporter interrupts my mental rant. My version of events is far meatier than listening to Neely preach. Step back into the past where you came from, Gramps. This my time. I step to the podium.

“Unfortunately Ms. Sinclair spread lies and misinformation during today's debate.” I hear my voice gathering strength, rising like an arrogant tidal wave but I can't stop, surrounded by all these traitors judging me. I'm pissed. “I will never let that kind of behavior go without a challenge, and when challenged, she literally crumbled.” Pissed at Mia for crying and hijacking my dick. “Productive civic discourse requires research, preparation and adherence to facts.” Pissed at her for going M.I.A. right now. Where is she and why isn't it here where I can look at her after she made me come like thunder? “If you think you can just show up looking good, you might go home crying.” I would've loved to skip the presser had I known it was an option. I too was “upset” by our interaction. But I went to the bathroom, abused myself with an ideological hate fuck fantasy and got my ass here. She couldn't dab her eyes and also attend?

The press room is exceptionally silent. I lock gazes with my assistant. His eyes are laughing at me. Rolling. Uh-oh.

“Gio, are you saying Mia Sinclair is good looking?” the reporter shouts.

I'm a leader on the dais. I did a ton of debate in school so I can get up in front of any number of people and clearly and passionately advocate for what I believe in. I don't falter, I don't misspeak. My mind and my mouth are my weapons and they've brought me far. But tonight they're misfiring and it's time to shut them down. “Nothing further, thank you,” I

answer curtly, backing away from the podium. I turn to see the gallery of surprised faces of my fellow council members, a couple of them registering shock. Rebecca looks ready to claw me. “Nothing more to say about Mia, Gio?” another reporter prods. Nope, nothing. I take a deep breath and walk away.

CHAPTER 3

Mia



Thought I was takin' the bougie route internin' at a realtor's office. Not once have we photographed or painted or even discussed ship lap," Brit looks down at me from atop the cinder block wall between city hall and the Four Seasons. "When will we be visitin' Chip to have a rustic outdoor table fabricated from reclaimed old growth lumber?"

I look up at her, wondering how to rein in her imagination and get her down. "Clint makes the furniture, Brit. Chip is the husband," probably not productive but I can't resist with this girl. She sucks me in like a vortex.

"Clint, Chip, Christ that's confusin' in one show. I guess that's Texas for ya. In Wisconsin, it's all Brads and Chads. White guys are already interchangeable, do they hafta throw rhymin' and alliteratin' names at us too?"

"Step down onto my leg," I spread my stance and pat my thigh. The wall turned out to be really tall when you tried to climb over it.

"I'm a dairy farm girl, Mi," Brit scoffs. "Raised on milk, cheese and the Packers. I'll snap your sweet little Texas stem. Listen, Fixer Upper isn't here?"

"No Brit, it's in Waco. Can you please focus on getting down before someone sees you?" I whisper urgently.

"Oh right, let me just - here," she tosses her shoes at me and shoves off the wall, landing on her feet but crouched down with her hands on the cobblestone. "I thought I was manifestin' Magnolia with you and Brett," she groans as she stands up and brushes her hands off on her skirt. "Although Chip's probably done dumpster parkour in one episode or another," she says in a hushed tone. "He's so zany."

"Sorry to disappoint," I respond, handing her her shoes. "We

can walk out to Cesar Chavez and go around the corner to the parking ramp.”

She grabs my shoulder for balance while wiggling on her shoes. “I’m pretty conflicted about all her barn doors anyway. The doors on our cow barn don’t glide Mi, you gotta put your foot up on the frame to move that thing in the snow. And all the cows moo when you open it in the mornin’ cuz they’re hungry. So whenever I see a barn door, I hear cows mooin’.” We set off on our way through the hotel garden. “Whoa! Fancy Nancy!” Brit takes in the manicured trees and bushes, fountain in the center with an adorable little cherub in the middle and the pathways twining this way and that, everything softly lit with string lights. It really is romantic. We stick to a side path that’s mostly dark since we’re trespassing and don’t need to be discovered fleeing the press conference. When we reach the end of the garden though, there’s a wrought iron fence with no gate. “Shit,” I tell her. We’ll have to backtrack and go in the hotel.

“Listen, let me scope the scene. No one knows who I am. I’ll figure our exit. There’s a bench over there in the semi dark,” Brit offers, pointing.

“Good idea, thanks Brit. I’m so glad you’re cross interning with me.”

“No worries councilwoman. Just don’t forget me when you’re a congresswoman,” she squeezes my hand and walks off.

I head to the bench and sit. If only she knew. Brett’s mentioned congress. The topic makes me think about disappearing myself. I lean back and rub my eyes, but the relief won’t come until the stupid lenses come out. I’d like to wear my glasses all the time but Brett says they cover my beautiful face. I should tell him contacts give that beautiful face a headache and bitchy expression. Newsflash! I haven’t.

“Oh my god Brett, you’re too much!” How funny, I think, same name as my husband. Which reminds me I should check my phone if he texted back. I reach for it but something about the couple meandering along the path catches my attention.

They're holding hands. She giggles and he leans in, nuzzling her neck. He walks like my husband. Wait - oh no no no no no no, goddamn it, he is my husband!

I squeeze my eyes shut, shrink down and turn toward the ivy covered wall behind my bench. Please don't let them see me! I'm holding my breath, hair curtaining my face but my outfit! He'll recognize my skirt, the top, my shoes. I hear him push her up against the wall maybe 10 feet down. He's not even looking in my direction, not looking around nervously at all. I hear the jangle of his belt being undone, is it her hands or his? What difference does it make? I can hear them kissing and fabric rustling like anxious hands are tugging at it, she's giggling again - how old is this woman? - and him mmming. Your husband moaning for another woman is an out of body experience y'all. The sounds you're used to, breathed in your ear or on your breasts while you grip him with your legs to rub your clit all over him, mine, you're mine and I'll mark you as such, the mmm's and low growls vowed in front of others to be kept only unto you-

"Steph," he groans, "You've got me on a goddamn leash with this tight little pussy."

Steph? His intern's tight little pussy...leash?!

And footsteps. My intern. FUBAR.

"Mi-oh shit," Brit sounds so grave. She doesn't even get to the second syllable of my name before an excruciating awkward pause.

"Brit! Hi..." more giggling.

"Excuse us," Brett's voice is as confident as ever, not even a hint of guilt, like somehow he's the one being put out by being interrupted. How does he flip everything like that? My first inclination is to wonder what I did wrong, hence the apologizing. Brett's inclination is to wonder what you did wrong and get self righteous.

My husband's belt clangs lightly again, hurried footsteps and Brit's in front of me. "Mia? Hey..." my irrepressible intern is speechless, mouth agape, and suddenly I'm furious at

my jerk of a husband for taking Brit's voice, that homely, folksy thing I love. And muted Brit's my gateway because all the things Brett's done loom like scary monsters. Council tonight. The public humiliation. Climbing the smelly dumpster. The contact lenses I hate. The headaches. The office I never wanted. 9 months of losing, ganged up on and alone lately. The sessions he's missed and the intern he met little over a month ago. The distance, the starvation of touch, the dick desert. And the lengths. The lengths I've gone y'all. I could puke.

Brit's sitting next to me, holding my hand and she squeezes it, yanking me up from my abyss. She looks directly into my eyes and takes a deep breath, "Councilwoman. I found an exit. And I know a great bar a few blocks up." And she drags me from the bench.

CHAPTER 4

Gio

Reaching my office, I sink into my chair. There's only one exit from the building and it's back the way I came, past the presser so I'm trapped. I escaped the reporters but there's no avoiding my colleagues once they finish. My door is the first down the hallway of offices and unofficial post presser meeting point. People stop in for opinions because I've got them tenfold. What can I say about tonight?

I will not apologize for making her cry. Words are powerful and they have consequences. If she can't handle a spirited debate, she shouldn't have run for office. This is not a playground.

What the hell happened in the bathroom and presser though? I've known Mia for 4 years and never been attracted to her. If anything, she borderline annoys me. For awhile she worked almost exclusively on property taxes, which needed an overhaul. Lately she's all fiscal responsibility, park improvements and historical preservation. Conservative rich white woman vanity projects. She organized a park clean up program that employs homeless people, which ok, that was a decent idea. But residents of my district are fighting dangerous working conditions, squalid living situations, labor and civil rights violations galore, family separations via deportation, discrimination...the list goes on and on. Can you see how I might judge her to be a hobbyist politician? Who, when the going got rough tonight because of her own inflammatory comments, cried on the dais. Is she for real?

But that crying. It did something to me. I didn't realize she was crying, I was railing against the ignorance she flung out there, my supporters cheering when I happened to look at her and she stared back at me.

People have such carefully constructed facades in daily life, whatever they've come up with over the years to cover their

soft underbelly. Mia Sinclair's normally involves way too much makeup, hairspray and that false superiority she projects like she knows better than all 10 of the rest of us even though she's spouting straight bull. Tonight I shattered that persona and underneath was something more fragile than I've ever seen. She was utterly defenseless. You'd be a monster to attack her in that state but I had no choice. She took my sense of self away.

I work for underrepresented communities and minorities, people being victimized by the system. I don't have time for the problems of a woman of means, position and big white SUV. Most of my constituents would kill to have her first world problems. She's an insult to real suffering. And in that moment she was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

Why was her vulnerability so attractive? Was it sympathy gone kinky? Dicks can be hardened by the strangest things. Pity fuck? Hero complex? I like helping people. I minored in psychology, I could've been a therapist but politics meant I could help on a much bigger scale. I bet it was that, she was suffering and it's my natural inclination to want to help. But I was the one causing her suffering, so that'd make it some kind of Munchausen by proxy fantasy, which is...sick.

People are coming down the hallway. My assistant saunters in first and sits in the the chair opposite my desk looking like the cat who swallowed the canary.

"Enjoying yourself?" I ask him.

"Most compelling session I've ever attended," Assistant of the Year responds, nodding. "Ready for this?" he asks, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"With zero help from you, yes, ready as I can be," I grumble.

"I was ready to assist before the presser. You were indisposed." His eye contact is blistering.

"Never mind."

"Feeling better?" he asks innocently.

"Fuck off."

“Well, you certainly seem back to yourself,” he comments.

Diego Cantu appears in the doorway. “Gio! Interesting presser!” he says as I groan inwardly. He saunters up to my desk. “Quick before the others come, were you hitting on her from the podium? She’s kinda cute with the fiery spunk and all but you know she’s married.”

“I’m aware,” I answer tightly. Diego’s a guy’s guy - every conversation with him’s locker talk. “And I was not hitting on her, for the record.” I blazed a half cup of come into a wad of toilet paper I fantasized was her outstretched tongue in the fluorescent flickering light of the dirty accessible restroom. I don’t hit on women via press conference statement. They’re called standards.

“Just checking. Her husband’s pretty intense. Might not like what you said and he’s always packin’ bro. Watch your back. You got his back?” he asks Diaz.

“No,” my assistant answers flatly. Cantu busts out laughing, clearly not that upset. Did I overreact thinking he was standing there judging me?

“What’s so funny?” Alex Martinez is standing in my doorway. He’s the only older guy on council besides Neely, citizen of his district for 65 years. He talks sports a lot and smiles all the time. The only time he’s not smiling is when he’s sleeping in council and he’s hard of hearing so he sleeps a lot.

“Gio’s presser statement,” Alex looks puzzled. “WHEN HE SAID MIA LOOKED GOOD,” Diego shouts as a reminder.

“What’s wrong with that? She does look good,” of course he doesn’t care about me complimenting Mia. Clueless old codger was born in 1955. He’d probably be fine if I pinched her behind.

“Right Martinez? If council was Gilligan’s Island, Mia’d be sweet MaryAnn all day long,” Cantu answers.

“Oh Gilligan’s Island. Now there was a great show,” Alex reminisces. Did I overreact thinking everyone was glaring at me? “I was always more of a Ginger fan though,” he muses.

“Retract what you said in the press conference, Gio,”

Rebecca Harrington and her assistant shove past Martinez into my office. She stabs up to my desk in her stilettos, pointing her finger down on it as she continues her demands. “Whistling at her looks like a construction worker while we all stood behind you like we supported it. I’ll make a statement tomorrow if you don’t take it back.”

Hate’s here! “Rebecca, I’ll retract as soon as you explain why you never minded me going after that bastard Baldwin for flinging around the same conservative talking points.”

“I’m talking about you bullying Mia at the presser Gio. She wasn’t even there to defend herself!” she yells at me.

“Defend herself - you mean by crying? She mighta gotten one over on you with that but it had zero effect on me.” Patently false but Rebecca didn’t bear witness to my purple erection so she’s none the wiser.

“I might not agree with Mia on policy stuff but she wouldn’t cry to manipulate us. What the hell is your problem with her tonight?” she shouts. If only I knew.

“Forget Mia’s husband bro. Watch out for Becky instead,” Cantu whispers.

“So help me god Diego,” Rebecca threatens, “I will annihilate you.”

“Becky please, I told you, certain talk is bedroom only. I’ll let you dominate but time and place.”

“Her name’s Rebecca, Diego and she and I have already filled out a formal complaint about you so keep on talking if you want a sexual harassment investigation,” comes Melissa Dietz’s voice from the doorway. “And Baldwin never relented Gio. Mia was crying. You should’ve stopped at that point.”

I turn to face my second opponent like a badass John Wick. “So cry and you’re off the hook for making dangerous statements, Melissa? You gotta admit what she said reeked of Baldwin.” Melissa doesn’t have an immediate answer, so you know me, I go at her again. “And are you really telling me that if he relented, you would’ve suddenly empathized with him?”

She sighs loudly and shoots me an annoyed look. “I didn’t

love what happened in session, Gio, but I agree, she shouldn't have said what she said. You were wrong in the presser though."

"I was," I'm a reasonable person. "I'll issue a retraction tonight." I'm also a man. I don't do well with demands.

"Hold on a second," Rebecca jumps in. "I think you need to do more."

Of course you do. "You just barged in here asking me to retract," I graciously remind her.

"And then you accused Mia of fake crying and me of falling for it. Now I'd like to hear from Mia herself that she forgives you." And I'd like to fuck my girlfriend in the ass Becky! We don't always get what we want! "Apologize personally. Take her out for muffins in the morning or something."

Muffins in the morning. This 78704 bitch. I bet she feeds organic, misshapen rescued produce to her backyard chickens and keeps their multicolored eggs "steeping" with a useless sprig of rosemary in a shabby chic wire basket on her mammoth kitchen island because they don't actually *need* to be refrigerated when they're fresh, you plebeian. "Care to give me her number so I can call her, Rebecca? I don't have it." That gives her pause. No woman is gonna give out another woman's number without asking her first. That ain't kosher. I smile sweetly at her. She sighs.

"I have her number," Cantu pipes up helpfully. He grabs his phone and forwards it to me, the moron.

"Awww, thanks Diego," Rebecca's voice drips saccharine.

"Anything for my fellow councilwoman," he answers gentlemanly.

"Oh knock it off. I think I like you harassing me better," she shoots back, turning to leave. "Enjoy your muffins Gio!" she taunts and her assistant runs out after her, the stilettos poking off down the hall. Melissa stifles a smile and leaves quietly.

Diego leans over my desk. "Bro, Becky's my Ginger. She could kill animals with those heels."

“You’re an idiot,” I tell him. Becky’s a bitch and Mia’s breathtaking. And there goes my mind again, running off like a misbehaving child, laughing at all the trouble he’s getting into with his wild new friend, my dick.

“Yeah I’m the idiot. Have fun groveling Gio,” he responds, laughing and leaving with Martinez, who immediately starts chatting about who the Spurs got in the draft. I’m alone with my assistant.

“Where’s everyone else?” This night still might not even be over.

“Ramos and Davis are women of color,” Diaz answers, i.e. a white woman crying barely registers. “And Knaus and Fitzgerald are middle aged white businessmen. I think they ran to their cars after that presser.” He studies me. “You wanna game plan for the muffins?”

“No,” I’ve got all night to prepare and jerk off. Several more times if necessary. No assistance needed.

CHAPTER 5

Mia



Holy heifer, Gio Barra's sexy," Brit's coming to our table with 2 beers.

"Gio? What makes you say that?" I answer tiredly because you know, my night. For the record, I wanted to go home. Let it be known, I tried. Hear ye hear ye, Brit wouldn't let me. And yes, I'm a pushover. Doormat, bootlicker, etc, we've established that. I prefer the term impressionable but nobody listens to me.

"He's so intense. When he was rantin' at you about how you shouldn't spread misinformation, a vein popped on his forehead. I thought he was gonna blow an aneurysm." I take a gulp of beer. I saw the vein all right. "Imagine if that intensity was slammin' you into a headboard Mi. Scissored underneath him, leg up over his shoulder, headboard bang bang bangin' against the wall," Brit thrusts her hips and her bar stool squeaks. "Vein pulsing while he looked down at you. You wouldn't be able to stop that animal."

"You wouldn't want to," I down a swig of beer. My husband's balling his intern so I'm no longer responsible for my behavior. Lemme take a sec to issue a blanket apology: things aren't looking good for me up ahead, so there may be crazy, weird, dramatic, cheesy, embarrassing behavior to follow. Sorry for all of it.

Brit nods emphatically. "No kiddin'. Crucify me to that headboard til I'm resurrected to the kingdom of orgasm," she laughs while the image of Gio's face looking down at me with that vein floats across my mind and my vagina does its corresponding clench. I'd reach out and touch the vein while he pounded me into the headboard. How satisfying would it be to soothe his intensity with my body? To be the female who tames it? Take him into me and watch him build, build, build, to have it be erotic instead of intimidating, wanting instead of

hating, feel it culminate and melt inside me. Jesus. My life is leveled but my libido could still fuck right out there in the rubble, and not just anyone but the guy who made me cry in public an hour ago! I told y'all, the drive to procreate could power the planet. I take another gulp of beer. "What do you think he sounds like comin'?"

"Can't imagine," that's a lie, I could and I bet it's so damn good. Gio's a gorgeous, stylish, smart guy. Sex is an art and I betcha he makes beauty. But I'm married. That thought path is Road Closed. And yes, I recall that my husband's gone a tad further than an adulterous thought, the *Fucker*. Also yes, I was just envisioning soothing Gio's brain vein with my vagina, but that's exactly the kind of erratic behavior I pre-issued the umbrella apology for so. Covered.

Brit sighs, oblivious to my lack of participation in the conversation. She's gazing off dreamily, chin resting on her hand, pinky finger playing in her mouth. "I love good come sounds. I had sex with this one guy at home - holy shit was he amazin'. I'd already done random Wisconsin white guys #1-4, but this guy was Italian and the dirty talk, Mi, it was in Italian, I didn't even understand it and I came so hard. It was all in the delivery, moany and passionate and losin' control. I just nodded along, bravo, Bellagio, Prego whatever, just keep on fuckin' me and talkin', you. And the sounds, oh my god, the sounds. I still masturbate to that man's come sound. It was my most valuable sex ever. Like really high quality product that lasts forever unlike all that made in China crap that breaks immediately. That shit was a legit Italian orgasm producin' tree, year after year it's borne delicious fruit and olives." She sighs. I think that story's done and I actually kinda followed it but a response... "Does he get on a tirade like that often?" Oh she's already regrouped, response not necessary.

"Who, oh Gio?" I straight forgot my whole evening there for a sec. "Uh, there was the time he didn't wanna adjourn even though the other council member needed to get home to her newborn. A bunch of his constituents came to testify and he wanted to keep the session going to accommodate them all. We had to overrule him. He wouldn't take no for an answer otherwise. He was pretty passionate."

“I bet. Y’all blue balled him,” Brit muses. “I wonder where he worked that frustration off,” she winks at me.

“He has a girlfriend. They’ve been together for years.” Lucky girl, that Kara.

“She’s not his wife? Or the mother of his children? Is she his beard? No, I take that back. He’s not gay. That kind of intensity wants to breed,” she nods knowingly.

I almost choke on a mouthful of beer. “How old are you again?”

“22. But I grew up around farm animals. What about you?”

“27,” I respond.

“Steph’s 19.” Oh Christ. I plunk my mug down and stare bleakly into it. Just when I thought my night couldn’t get worse, a teenager waltzes onto the scene with my husband on her tight little pussy leash. Brit grabs my hand. “Sorry Mia, I shouldn’t have said that. What can I do?”

I shake my head. “Nothing, you’ve done enough already. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.” I dig in my purse and leave a tip on the table. “I need to get home and I wanna be able to drive myself. I’ll be in touch, ok?”

“Sure, I’m right there in your phone. You gonna confront him tonight?”

“What else can I do?” I don’t look her in the eye because I’ll cry.

She nods, “I’d probably run away. You’re brave, Mia. Get your answers.”

“Oh I plan to.”

CHAPTER 6

I get zero answers because Brett never calls, texts or shows. I awaken to my phone ringing and grab it from the nightstand but it's not him. 9:02 a.m. The number's local and doesn't look spammy. Maybe Brett was in an accident. I know it's pathetic to give him the car accident out but hope is a stubborn thing. I mean the hope that he didn't contact me for a legitimate reason, not the hope that he's dead in a ditch by the side of the road.

"Hel...Hello," my voice is croaky because I just woke up, instead of smooth like the successful realtor and council member who's been up for hours already killing it. Or searching for her missing husband. You know, if he hadn't been trying to bonk a teenager against a brick wall.

"Hello Mia?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?" The voice is familiar.

"Yes but it's ok. Who is this please?"

"Oh sorry, Mia, this is Gio." Silence. "Gio Barra, from city council?"

"Uhhh..." long pause while I rack my brains for a reason Gio Barra would call me. "Oh my god is something wrong with the city?" because the only logical explanation is a terrorist attack on Austin, Texas.

"Wrong? No, nothing's wrong with the city that I know of. Do you have time this morning for me to buy you coffee or a breakfast muffin?"

Gio Barra, breakfast muffin. I'm not hungry, I can't eat, coffee is a must, but I'm not excited about muffins on a good day. "Gosh that's nice of you-"

"Listen Mia, I wanna talk to you about last night. I assume you saw the local news this morning, or maybe not since I woke you" eye roll "but I'd rather do it in person than over the phone. Meet me somewhere."

No I haven't seen the news, Gio, I've been a little busy. After you shredded me like coleslaw at council, I scaled a dumpster to skip the presser and ran into my husband not getting enough of a teenager up against a wall of The Four Seasons! After waiting the rest of the night for him to never come home, I chased Benadryl and Tylenol with wine, which granted, is my normal post council trifecta but last night I did it Superly! so *yes, I just woke up*. And cue successful realtor/confident councilwoman phone voice, "It's not the best time-"

"Mia. Meet with me. I need to apologize and I want to do it properly," he says tersely.

Uh-oh. He sounds brain veiny and thanks to Brit spraying her horniness all over my brain, I hear, "Mia. Meet with me. I need to *something something* and I want to do it properly." *Properly! Bar the door!* "Ok. Where?" I answer breathlessly.

"Do you know Bird Bird Biscuit on east 5th? It's walkup, picnic tables, no server."

"Uh I don't know the place, but I'll google it."

"I'll text you a link. How long will it take you to get there?"

"Like an hour and a half? I need to shower and take care of my dog and there'll be traffic," maybe it'll be too long and he'll cancel. Also, why did I tell Gio Barra I need to shower?

"See you at 10:30," he says and abruptly hangs up. In a gagillion years I never would've envisioned having breakfast muffins with Gio Barra this morning. Researching divorce lawyers, new brokerages to work at, places to live - all possibilities. I head to the shower, my mind racing. He needs to apologize? Sure, he attacked me in council but there's no way he feels bad. He's passionate about the people and causes he cares about, not my feelings. I'm midway through washing my hair when I remember he mentioned the morning news. Was there backlash to him berating me in council? Did my crying somehow manipulate things to make him look bad? That wasn't my intent, it was completely spontaneous. I wasn't trying to be a victim. But would it be good if he was chastened by the media anyway? I barely finish drying off before

grabbing my phone to check KAUZ.

Oh and my glasses. I threw my contacts away last night in what had to be the tiniest act of defiance ever. Outta my eyes and into the trash without a whisper of a sound. I don my glasses wondering if I could I be any more powerless. Or is it less powerful? Either way, not productive, let's see the news. Gio texted me a link, Bird Bird Biscuit, cute name, weird for muffins but sure. KAUZ...Red banner on top - **HEAT INDEX WARNING!** Brit's weather drama. Scrolling, *City Council Meeting*, ah yes there I am. *Barra and Sinclair Clash Over Funding for Immigrant Rights Group*, click. *City council drama* (pot → kettle, KAUZ) *personal fireworks* (whoa, imaginative) blah blah blah, *heated exchange*, blah blah blah, *Sinclair weeping*. Wait what?! Weeping? What an Elizabethan word. *Lady Sinclair did weep and swoon after Lord Barra tore her arse asunder*. Fuck's sake. Brit was right, stupid local reporters. *Measure passed*, blah blah blah, there's a link to *Barra's Controversial Press Conference Statement*, ok, let's see that please! Blah blah blah, *after Sinclair was seen weeping*, weeping again. Really KAUZ? Are they familiar with the more workaday "crying?" Have they heard of a thesaurus? I know they have computers, with their crazy high tech weather and traffic graphics. Ok, here we go. *When asked what happened during the exchange, Barra responded that "Ms. Sinclair spread lies and misinformation during today's debate. I will never let that kind of behavior go without a challenge*, blah blah blah, Gio's high and mighty babbling is gonna make me late for his breakfast muffin, blah blah, *"think you can just show up looking good, you might go home crying."*

Huh. Did he compliment my looks? Oh shit, what time is it? 9:39. I comb out my hair, rub in some moisturizer and go to the closet. My hair will mostly dry by the time I get there, it might be a little wavy but who cares. And I hate makeup. Brett likes me all done up. He says I look more polished and what a realtor and city council member "should" look like. I think he's actually describing what he feels the woman "on his arm" should look like and the truth is, I'm plain and in my glasses I'm downright dorky. Makeup amps me up, but I can't stand

foundation and powder and eye shadow and liner. I always forget I'm wearing it and rub my face (or cry!) and smear it all. Mia the Mascarycoon indeed.

I consider going yoga pants and tee casual but since I'm already naked faced, I better not push the envelope. There's a remote chance we'll be seen by a knowing citizen and I don't need to give screaming drama queen KAUZ the caption "*Homeless Woman Eats Muffins with Gio Barra!*" I choose a black and white body con summer dress because why not? If Gio complimented my looks, I'll serve looks. My face might be blah but I've got a cute body. Also I overheard my husband panting like a literal teenager's puppy last night and I'm a tad desperate to see my sexy on a man's face. It's been a rough 24 hours, I deserve a hit of the power you feel when a man appreciates your looks and I need every weapon in my arsenal going up against Gio.

I run to the kitchen and let Radar out the back door while I make her breakfast. She's an old dog, so she doesn't do much anymore besides eat, sleep and ignore all basic commands. I watch her progress like a mother hen to make sure she pees before I leave. I'm late but if I rush her, she'll get upset and accomplish zero pee. It's a loaded topic for her, don't even get me started. And finding the exact spot with the right smell to flip the pee switch in her little brain requires a chemical analysis of the entire yard. *Please pee.*

Rat terriers are stubborn and Radar's gotten worse as she's aged. Used to be her tenacity would kick in at the right time, like when the squirrel she caught wouldn't cooperate and die already, so she'd dig deep for that last bit of determination to shake him all the way out of his misery while I stood by wringing my hands, praying no one came along and witnessed the savagery I allowed in the middle of a city park. Thank god she can't get it up to chase squirrels anymore. Now she uses her stubbornness to thwart me at every pass, staring at me with that blank look like she either can't hear me or doesn't care what I'm saying. I can't tell which, the bitch. *Please just pee!*

I sigh. We have such a nice deep backyard with no neighbors behind, only Texas brush. The best part of our house

is the lot. It's also a great neighborhood with wonderful neighbors and close to Costco. Don't judge, but I might be sadder about losing my house than my husband. I LOVE my house. Although if I get divorced I'm gonna have to cancel my Costco membership anyway because that place is not single person portion friendly. Ditch dead Brett strikes again.

Praise Jesus Radar's peeing. I open the door and call her back, waving my arms in case her game is actual deafness instead of old age belligerence but my money's on stubborn turd all day long. I set her bowl down and rub behind her ears. I hope she didn't notice Daddy didn't come home last night. She was always my dog more than his, but she loved Brett back when she was aware enough to feel stuff. I guess it's good she's old and out of it? My eyes well up again but hey, at least if I cry today, I'm not wearing makeup to mess up. I grab my purse, strap on some gladiator sandals and head for the garage.

I get the directions on my phone and head out, turning up the music. Cardi B and her bloody shoes are perfection right now, repeat the whole way. I love driving with music, it's meditative with scenery passing by.

I wonder where Brett and Steph have sex. Do they go to his listings, ones that're staged with furniture? Is her pussy really that amazing? Should I be doing Kegels? I haven't birthed any babies so I don't see how I'd be that loose comparatively.

Oh great, we're down to 15 mph on I35. Ah, Austin traffic. I've no clue how to fix it and at 10-1 odds for the past 9 months, Gio and his set haven't worked any magic either.

Maybe Steph orgasms a lot. If so, good on her, I hope she gets hers. Brett took me to see The Who one time at the Long Center, Joan Jett opened. We got there middle of her set, and she was rocking out to barely an audience, a few die hards down near the stage - they might've been her roadies - the rest of the seats were mostly empty. Brett looked at his phone until she finished. I watched, feeling badly for her, although she played her heart out like the house was full and I Hate Myself for Loving You is a classic. Foreshadowing as it turns out.

Anyway, when The Who started playing, the seats filled and the arena came alive. But my orgasms are Joan Jett to Brett. He doesn't particularly care if I come, it doesn't turn him on, it's just something he has to wait out to get to his part, the headliner, Brett's The Who of everything. Over the years I stopped asking for orgasms much, my hand fills the void. I mean, if a tree falls in a forest and no one's around to hear it, the tree still falls y'all, loud and hard, maybe not quite as hard in a lonely forest, but you fell more trees to make up the difference. Meanwhile your husband forgets about making you come altogether. And that kids, is how a sex life dies.

Is Brett hoping to sub Steph in for me in our life? Cuz both our names are on that deed and I'm not leaving without my half the cash, even though it was all Brett's commissions that paid off the mortgage. I may be insecure about the integrity of my vaginal walls but I can still pull a bloody move, bitch.

It sure would be nice of Brett to show his hide. I'm literally stuck waiting for my cheating husband to finish his date so he can let me know if he wants to work on things. In the meantime, I let the person who drove me to tears last night bully me into meeting him for muffins. I basically pinball from one boss to the next, whacked around by those little metal flippers. A worker through and through. Cardi would snatch her album right outta my hands.

Oh no. Me an Fiddy is what started my problems last night. With Cardi on board, on repeat no less, I'll probably run Gio down with my car or commit some other felony before I even get the muffin I don't want. I quick switch to Lizzo and sing loud to make shiny and juicy but not bloody stick.

At least street parking is easy. I end up at the place only 5 minutes late. It's a dewheeled trailer with an awning over the order window. There's a patch of cement in front that was probably once a parking lot but's been overtaken by grass. Various mismatched tables and chairs are scattered around, haphazardly accidental-on-purpose stylish. Very east Austin, very Gio. And there he is, standing, no, modeling next to the trailer in dark fitted jeans, a blue checked button down with the sleeves rolled up and an Austin FC cap. Like he's some

sort of sexy city ambassador, which I guess he actually is, just leaning on this food trailer effortlessly gorgeous selling the shit outta east Austin hip. It must be hard being his girlfriend because imagine taking photos of him, travel selfies or everyday candid “hey babe, look at me real quick” shots and every single one of them is him slaying Calvin Klein man beauty. And then he looks up from his phone at me and whoa y’all, I don’t show my shape much because the way most men look at my body makes me feel cheap but when Gio looks, a man who intimidates the hell outta me, I feel like I have a tiny bit of traction staring up at a behemoth. I instinctively sashay my hips extra, reach up and adjust my glasses so my torso’s visible too - who’s the model now? And even though he made me cry last night something primal in those eyes commands *show me how you move when you fuck, sweet thing*. And I obey.

And then it’s gone, whatever thirsty look I thought I saw quickly shuttered behind liberal Gio’s infinite respect for women. I probably imagined it, horned up as I am from Brit and her Italian orgasm tree. I really need to stop thinking about trees.

“Gio, hey,” I greet him, thrusting my hand out uncertainly like a teenager shaking hands for the first time. I’ve never seen him socially so I don’t know what else to do. I don’t even know if he’ll shake after last night, but he invited me here after all. I have the sudden PTSD irrational fear that I’ve been lured into a trap. Is he out to get me?

“Mia,” his voice is heavy, like we’re a couple that’s been apart too long and he needs my body and I need to tell Brit to look into being one of those intimacy counselors because her horniness’s painted my entire world porn. “I barely recognized you. You look so different,” he grasps my hand firmly, not really shaking it, only holding it for a kinda socially unacceptable length of time. I should pull away. Pull away. He’s mesmerizing but wait, yes, now he’s frowning at me so we’re all good here. I pull my hand back. It’s my glasses and bare face, I know it, he barely recognized plain Jane compared with council glamzilla Mia. “What can I get you? Coffee, chicken biscuit?” he asks.

“Uh, coffee with cream please. I thought you said muffins.” Why, pray tell am I nitpicking? I’ve no idea, I wasn’t married to the muffin plan. I’m so scatterbrained right now, overtired, emotionally strung out and hyper sexualized with a man who can’t stand me. It’d be good to remember that but I probably won’t.

“Oh I did, didn’t I,” he laughs softly. “This place has great fried chicken biscuits. You want one?”

“Uh ok,” I’ve had that horrible clammy feeling all morning of my entire life being on a precipice but a fried chicken biscuit sounds really good actually.

“Do you like spicy?”

I nod. “For sure.”

“1 Firebird and coffee with cream. Grab us a table and I’ll order.” I head to a small bistro table at the edge of the grass and sit down. Gio joins me shortly with two cups of coffee. His long legs don’t fit underneath the table. I’m squinting because I’m facing the sun. “Switch places with me. This side is better and I have a hat,” he offers.

“Ok thank you. I don’t have prescription sunglasses, so either I see you clearly and squint or you’re a blur through my sunglasses.” Why am I sharing so much?

He waits for me to come to his side and holds the chair on the uneven ground as I sit. Then he moves to the other side and gets settled. “Why haven’t I’ve seen you in glasses before?”

“My husband doesn’t like them but I hate contacts. I feel them in my eyes and get a headache after awhile,” I respond as I cross my legs and sip my coffee.

“You wear something that gives you headaches because your husband doesn’t like your glasses?” he asks in disbelief.

**Sigh* As Gio has just helpfully illustrated, I’m an incorrigible people pleaser. As tiresome as my apologizing is, people pleasing is like the apologizing on steroids. It’s bad y’all, sorry. It’s not good to put others’ happiness before your own because somewhere along the way you realize you’ve

betrayed yourself and rage follows. I know. I do it all the time.

“Where’d you get my number?” That was a grinding gear shift but I’m too broke down to segue.

He looks taken aback from my abrupt change of subject. “Cantu.”

“Oh, Cantu.” Of course. We worked on the Q2 stadium bill together so we texted a bit. I deleted his number years ago but Diego’s the kind of guy who keeps your number forever and feels entitled to give it out to others. Figures.

Awkward silence follows. It was rude of me to demand where he got my number. I never should’ve agreed to this. I’m not prepared to socialize with Gio on a good day, let alone today. I sneak a quick glance to find him studying me. “So, no headache today then?” The gentleness of his tone blazes straight to the center of my broken heart. *That’s wrong Mia*, Brett wanting me to wear contacts when they make me feel unwell. And I didn’t even realize it until now. The most basic self worth and I don’t have it.

I have to look away from his eye contact but the only thing out there in the world for me today is frightening, desperate loneliness. “Not today,” I manage, biting my lip hard.

“Good,” he says hopefully.

I meet his gaze again. Something truly honest therein wicks emotion out of me, like a soft landing pad to leap off the ledge into. “Guess I gotta start somewhere, huh?” I ask tears welling. It seems this man can make me cry in more ways than one.

“27!”

Gio looks concerned but after a moment he gets up, “hold on, that’s our food.” I take the moment of privacy to dab my eyes and formulate some less fatalistic thoughts. He returns and plops a giant sandwich wrapped in paper on the table in front of me. We watch each other as he half unwraps his, silently yet handsomely modeling *this is how you eat this thing*.

“There’s no graceful way to eat it Mi...a. Grab it and dig in,” he says, taking a huge bite. Did he call me...Mi? “Leave

the paper on the end, there's a lot of sauce," he adds, his mouth full.

I'm so lost all I can do is follow basic instructions and open my biscuit, squish it flatter and dive in. "Mmm," damn, it's so good. Perfectly fried and juicy with a spicy sauce, crunchy fresh pickles and slaw on a buttery biscuit. "Wow. It's really good. Thanks Gio," I can't help but smile at him in appreciation. It's the little things today.

"You're welcome," he responds looking genuinely pleased. We drop the awkward conversation and enjoy the food while it's hot. I manage about half before feeling full, while Gio easily polishes his off.

He offers me napkins and a wet wipe. "You didn't finish."

I shake my head, "it's gigantic. I'm full."

"Give it here," he's got his hand out over the table, "I don't like to waste food, especially meat. Something died for that sandwich."

Brett hunts and preaches the same thing. *When you watch something die Mia, you don't waste any part of it.* Hence my familiarity with venison trotter stew, replete with hair. "Ok," I hand Gio my still wrapped end, and he unwraps it and finishes it in a couple bites. I watch him quietly from behind my coffee cup, cleaning my proverbial plate like a...partner. I don't know what's happening anymore.

"Do I have something on my face?"

"No, you're fine. It's a little weird, you finishing my food." Was it weird to tell him that? I can't tell, everything's weird.

"We never had enough when I was growing up. My parents struggled."

"Oh." Ugh. I'm entitled. Because he's right, I shouldn't waste food, especially meat, except that hairy stew, go ahead and label me first world but I just couldn't y'all. "Sorry." Awkward moment? Apologize!

"Don't be. Wasn't your fault," he balls up the wrapper and opens his wet wipe. "Anyway Mia, apart from enjoying your

company, I do have something I want to say.”

Oh he’s summing up now. Right. He doesn’t want to hang out with me and I’m honestly a little bummed. Ha! As if Gio Barra would ever wanna hang out with me. I’m so tired y’all.

He meets my gaze, “Did you see any coverage of the press conference? After I woke you?” and he says those last 4 words so gently, almost intimately, that my raunchy brain automatically tacks on, *with my needs*. I take a moment to mentally clear the top spot of my to-do list and scribble in *Masturbate!* because I’m way too horny for anybody’s good right now.

Gio’s still waiting on an answer. *Focus, Mia*. “Oh, um yeah, I read it on my phone.”

“Good, I don’t need to repeat my statement then,” he says smiling sheepishly before plunging ahead, “I’m embarrassed about it honestly. It was an uncharacteristic moment for me, I hope at least. I was angry about what happened in council and frustrated you weren’t at the press conference. I went in front of the reporters in that...heightened state and made an objectifying and dismissive comment. To treat you like that in the public space,” he’s shaking his head, “even worse. I’m sorry.”

Wow. So few men apologize well if at all. Most of the time they just stare at you dumbly while their error flaps like laundry on the line. Getting Brett to apologize is like pulling teeth. He always does it resentfully, like he doesn’t really believe whatever I’m upset about isn’t my fault. But Gio’s got apology skills. Sincere, explanatory without being defensive and really contrite. Like he’s being so hard on himself that I don’t need to be. Totally effective. “Ok. I can accept that.”

“You can?”

“It was a bad night,” understatement of the year. “We all misspeak sometimes, it happens.” Like for example, my husband referring to his teenage girlfriend’s tight little pussy as a mother fucking leash.

He looks at me, his brow creasing, “Thank you Mia. I

appreciate that.”

“No problem.” I could’ve at least asked why he made that “objectifying” comment before immediately accepting his apology though. See, this is why I’m not a good realtor. No amount of certified negotiator courses will help my constant need to come to terms.

“You sure you’re not gonna use this against me at reelection? It’s political ammunition,” he reminds me guardedly.

Jesus he’s paranoid. “I don’t need ammunition. I’m not running for reelection.”

“Are you putting it out there? This is the first I’ve heard,” he sounds skeptical.

“You’re the first person I’ve told.” Gio looks uncomfortable and I don’t blame him. I’ve shared my shower schedule, almost fell apart about starting over and now he’s the first person to know my plans for the future. He probably didn’t realize inviting me out for muffins meant marrying me for gods sake. I can’t help it. Somehow he’s morphed overnight from jerk-who-made-me-cry to sexy, sweet, super apologizing and feeding me yummy food dude. “Why’d you say I looked good?” Crap. In a hurried attempt to get things back on familiar adversarial footing, I confronted him. I couldn’t’ve at least use his sanitized liberal speak? *Made an objectifying comment’s* so lofty ya almost forget it means he turned me into an object he’d like to stick his dick in.

Gio’s still silent. I inhale a breath, readying to exhale another meaningless apology but his silence is almost menacing. I feel like I’m sitting across the table from a wild animal whose cage door is open. “What about during council then? Are you gonna apologize for making me cry?”

Gio shakes his head slowly. “I don’t apologize for things I’m not sorry for.” Ahhh. There’s our antagonism. Nasty, bitter and familiar.

“I see,” I say, tighter than my asshole.

“Mia, you made a misleading and dangerous statement. I

called you out. You started crying because you couldn't defend yourself. You were in over your head."

I laugh sarcastically, "God you're arrogant. Thank you for mansplaining my motive to me." Aha! The brain vein. My vagina ain't interested.

"Mia-

"You do realize what I said is something I hear on a daily basis from my neighbors and friends, right? You don't think I have a responsibility as their representative to voice it at council?"

"Is it TRUE Mia?" Gio's voice booms, "that the DA and sheriff are opening up cells and dumping dangerous immigrants out onto the street?"

"I don't know!" I shout defensively. Brilliant, I just admitted I don't know what the hell I'm saying in council so Gio can crucify me again and not deliciously into a headboard!

"Well I'm pretty sure it's in the job description of a public official to verify things before you go repeating them IN A PUBLIC FORUM!" he hollers back.

"Noble Gio Barra, grew up poor, practically starving I find out today! Called to public service like the fucking pope to clergy!" I yell, bolting up and bumping the table hard, knocking our cups over and spilling coffee everywhere. Stupid hipster vintage rickety table! "Always doing everything for the exact right reason. Except for last night when you inexplicably told the press I looked good. But you're in luck. My life's so fucked up I don't even care!" I'm screaming, crying and people are looking. Gio's shell shocked.

**Ahem* 'Member that rage I mentioned? Mount Mia's spewing in every direction. Go ahead and call the cops on this pity party because it's officially out of control. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "I'm so sorry. Thank you for the biscuit. It was delicious," I sound like a robot who just got manners programmed. "I need to go now." I grab my purse and scurry away from him before any more words come out of my mouth.

CHAPTER 7

Gio

Here's what I learned from Rebecca's muffin meetup: last night wasn't a one time fluke, errant hard on. Because Mia just scream accused me of being pure as the pope and I do try to be moral and ethical all the time and I'm genuinely worried about her life being fucked up but I can't stop eyeballing hands down the most mouth watering ass I've ever seen as she flees to her car, wondering if she wears a thong or nothing at all because she doesn't have an underwear line. If only she knew. If I was close to her I could tell her. If we were a couple I'd know what's under there because I could stick my face up her dress when we made up. So yeah. This thing's got gas to go.

She's in her car now, not even a parting look as she pulls away. I hope she makes it home safe. I should've walked her to her car or jogged alongside her to it but that would've been awkward given the state of my cock, not to mention everyone gawking after we screamed at each other. I'll text her later, that'll be appropriate, give her some time to calm down and then do a casual check-in. Right now I need to clean up the spilled coffee. Fortunately most of it dripped onto the grass. I sop up the rest with napkins, toss the trash and head to my car, hat brim firmly down.

Noble Gio Barra's been wrangling the wild Mustang of his dick all morning. I used the hour and a half she needed to get ready to masturbate twice more on her face, imagining her kneeling in my shower because she said she needed to shower and apparently I'm now a guy who can't even have a phone conversation with Mia Sinclair without getting aroused. I wore a long shirt and left it untucked over thick jeans on a Texas July day. I'm hot and sweaty and need to go back to my condo to shower and change, which is just as well because I need to go back there and kill my dick again anyway. I sat awkwardly to the side because I couldn't get my legs under the table while

keeping one crossed over my knee to hide my groin, and I looked directly into the sun, risking retinal damage and quelling my physical reaction to her with actual pain. All of this I did while apologizing for objectifying her, which I started doing again the moment she walked up.

I start my car and head for my condo. “*Why’d you say I looked good?*” she’d demanded. Oh I don’t know Mia, maybe it’s that fucking felony of dress, the one making you look like Venus de goddamn Milo. She never wears anything in council that hints at that killer body. When she was walking up and I was eye ravaging her, I didn’t realize it was Mia. She looked so natural, sandy brown hair loose and still a little wet from the damn shower I can’t escape, water dripping down the curves of that perfect hourglass shape. Her waist is just the right circumference for my hands to grip while pumping my seed into round hips I want cradling my offspring. When she went to sit down I got an eyeful of her profile and her plump ass sent me into a tailspin. I could barely order our coffee and get it to our table for the porn playing in my mind: withdrawing from her ass to spurt first come on it and then reinserting to coat her rectum with it, *all the rest on the inside baby*. Needless to say, her question went unanswered.

On a more flaccid note, Mia Sinclair has freckles, across the bridge of her nose and on her shoulders, peppery freckles that apparently she hides in the same spot as her extremely fuckable figure. She must plaster them in foundation (I’d plaster them in my come personally) because this is the first time I’ve seen them and that made me mad. Freckles that adorable should be out frolicking in the world and making it a happier place. Even her damn feet were beautiful in those strappy sandals with the leather wrapped around her ankles and toes, toes with no nail polish, I hate nail polish, it’s garish and ugly and of course Mia Sinclair has lickable little feet with no polish, of fucking course she does!

And her glasses. My fellow Americans, let us not forget the glasses. That her husband wants her to wear contact lenses that give her headaches when she’s the most fuckworthy nerd I’ve ever seen is nothing short of a crime. Brett Sinclair should be shot.

My phone rings as I pull into my parking spot in the garage. Kara. I called her last night and told her everything, minus my bathroom shenanigans of course, there was no choice, she'd see it in the news. She wasn't happy obviously. She preferred I didn't contact Mia, I reminded her I'm up for reelection in the fall and needed to salvage relationships with my fellow councilwomen and we ended the conversation on that fabulous stalemate.

"Hey," I answer while unfastening my seatbelt.

"Did you meet with her?"

"Yes." Silence.

"I think we should take a break." And she hangs up. I get out and walk to the elevator of my building. Kara and I've been together 12 years, since we were teenagers. We went to proms and homecomings together, applied to UT and moved from Houston, graduated together. She's an attorney but she's branched out into a bunch of advocacy work with underrepresented communities. She's the perfect partner in my burgeoning political career.

People used to admire us, together for so long, first loves. We moved in together after college but realized it was too soon and we've lived separate ever since. It was the first time I hesitated with Kara, right after our doomed anal encounter. Moving in meant engagement and marriage and I couldn't nail the door shut on anal. I've wrestled with that issue ever since, foolishly hoping she'd give it a second chance and finally coming to terms with my girlfriend's limitations. I've debated for years if it justified ending the relationship. Any sexual encounter is great when you're young but your appetite matures, it develops into specific needs you're driven to fulfill or slowly lose your mind.

Like my dirty talk. Kara can't take it seriously, it makes her laugh. Except when I called her a little slut once, that didn't make her laugh, it offended her even though I wasn't bullying some random woman with it, I was calling the woman I loved a slut for me because it turned me on, although it's not really accurate because there's plenty of things she won't do but long

story short, Kara didn't see the difference, I got educated on slut shaming and now I dirty talk to myself inside my head.

Once inside my condo I undress. My briefs are spotted with pre-cum and I'm on a break with my girlfriend which I think means still committed but probably not talking and definitely not fucking.

I get in the shower. What happened at council surprised me as much as anyone. I didn't intend to make Mia cry or compliment her looks and Rebecca Harrington is 100% to blame for the muffin mess. I can't control my physical reaction to Mia, it's not like I had a choice last night between:

- a) a normal, productive evening at city council working for my constituents, or
- b) an unexpected show of emotion during session that reverberated through my dick like a shockwave, the frantic realization that I wouldn't be able to do the presser without whacking off, an inexplicable, offensive comment to the reporters and a dressing down by my fellow council members

and I went "yeah, let's do b)" My damn dick ran away with the evening! Women have periods and childbearing but erections are no walk in the park. Blood on your clothes is embarrassing but never deviant. Erection in your pants is unelectable, creepy and possibly criminal.

I'm done showering. Moment of truth. If Kara and I weren't on this break, I'd stop jerking off to Mia or I'd break up with Kara. But the break is on, I'm on ice and I'm a man, not a monk. If she's gonna starve me, I'll cannibalize. I did nothing intentionally wrong. And I'm nowhere near done with the councilwoman. Freckle faced in glasses, made of paper thin glass and rock solid ass, losing her temper and then apologizing in tears, singeing my retinas the whole damn time...Mia Sinclair's sexy sweet slightly unstable is deeply appealing in ways I'm not handling that well at the moment.

So let's go with elastic strap thong, good choice Mi, and yes I actually called her that in an uncontrollable moment of intimacy and downright tenderness toward her but that's not

gonna get rid of the rod between my legs, so continuing on, thick thong riding high on those bulbous cheeks, relentlessly perky orbs that reduced me to caveman cognition: want, cover, own. I lean my arm against the shower wall and grab myself. This isn't gonna take long and I don't need to worry about aim or keeping quiet. I'm pissed at Kara, Mia, myself. I want that second little bitch on the tile floor of my shower, letting me work out my anger in her gorgeous fucking ass. She'd let me, Jesus, I know she'd acquiesce. Because I affect her. I made her cry last night and she still came out to meet me. Her life's fucked up and yet she showed up. She's got give. And I want to take it. Rip her pants down, slick myself on her hot wet pussy, take a few delicious strokes in it before telling her with my dick what I need today. *Here baby*, and the answer would come with the spread of her legs. *Use my body how you need*. Because her defiance isn't really fight, it's the role she plays to work me up into the animal she wants to take her. And I will baby, that thong's my harness and I'll use it to control you, look down on it strapped tight across your body, holding you in place while I draw from you my sweet relief. I grunt her name so loud, allowing myself the intimacy I crave while letting out all the pleasure I had to swallow last night because it feels so damn good. Christ these fantasies are base. I sound like that Robin Thicke song. I lean my head on my arm, shower spraying my skin. I don't have proper outlet for this sort of desire.

I dress and head for my office, chanting positivity. This infatuation has to die, it has no future, Mia's married and a conservative and I maybe have Kara. Whatever, that's a separate issue. The break'll be good, time enough for this physical attraction to run its course. I just need to be patient and learn to be happy with Kara or maybe I'll meet someone new but how and why is Mia's life so fucked up that she doesn't even care? What did *guess I gotta start somewhere* mean? Someone's honking their horn because the light's green and I'm stock still, that fragile moment emerging from the fog of lust. The stunning vulnerability again. I wanted to gentle her, kneel at her feet, encircle her hips with my arms and draw out her pain. Make her life better so there's no need to be so fragile. I was about to ask her if she wanted to talk but then

our number was called and the food was hot and it was strangely important to me that she enjoy it. Now I wish I could have that moment back.

I pull into my office parking garage and remember that I planned to text her. Panic blooms in my stomach - I need to check on her. I pull into the first spot I see, "*Hey Mia, just wanted to make sure you made it home ok.*" And then I remember I was supposed to leave the muffin meetup with her forgiveness to bring back and show Rebecca Harrington like completed homework. She accepted my apology before she flipped our table. Did that count? Is there any smooth way to combine a welfare check text with a check in about my apology? Are we good? Will you tell Rebecca you forgive me? Nope, not gonna work. In the end I send the first text because screw Becky, Mia's all I care about. That and "why is your life fucked up? What do you need? What can I do?" but I don't have any business sending those texts.

Diaz is working at his desk. "Issue a retraction to KAUZ for my statement last night," I bark at him on the way to my office.

He appears in my doorway moments later. "It didn't go well?"

"It went fine but let's cover all the bases," I lie. He stands there waiting for the details on the muffin meeting but I feel strangely protective of it. I can't protect Mia from whatever's going on but I'll protect her secret. Our time was private, mine and hers. I like the notion of privacy with her. What does she let a man do to her in private?

"Retraction issued," Diaz is back in my doorway just in time to yank me back from the edge of erection. "We need to talk about Austin Water. Neely's softened his stance on the oversight committee."

I sigh. "Damn Neely. I don't know whose side he's on sometimes. Ullrich is an archaic piece of crap that'll go offline again at some point."

"For sure. Ullraich'll have us back to boiling our water again soon if nothing changes," Diaz agrees. And I force Mia

to the back of my mind. I hope she's ok.

CHAPTER 8

Mia



As I turn onto our street, I see Brett's truck in the driveway. My stomach churns the Firebird. Might've been better to get the regular bird. I make a mental note to forego spicy food for now. My life's the Rocky Mountains at the moment and I don't need gastrointestinal upset added into the mix.

I steel myself as I park next to him. I want answers but a part of me doesn't want to go down this road. Life's current is dragging me downstream regardless. I head inside and hear Brett in the kitchen.

I round the corner and we meet eyes. The look that passes between us has a thousand heavy words in it that I wish never had to be said, but our marriage is in deep trouble and we have to see it out. I go sit at the kitchen table and he turns to face me, leaning against the counter, arms crossed. "I don't need a big argument, Brett. But let's talk honestly please. I deserve that don't I?"

"Ok Mia. What do you want to say?" As if I'm the one who needs to do some serious explaining. How does he flip everything like that? Now I'm on the defensive, like I have to justify being upset that he's screwing his intern. Arguing with Brett is always quick sand for me.

"I know we've been drifting and I've made mistakes but why didn't you talk to me? We could've worked on things."

"I don't want to work on things."

You know that feeling when you step off a step you didn't know was there? That jarring of your entire body because you expected the ground to be where it wasn't? That's how his words feel, except the step I missed is 10 feet tall. Ok, we're not working on things. Divorce it is. *Gulp*. Does he care about me at all? "People probably know at Capital so I'm ruined

professionally too. You couldn't have left me something?"

"You're not ruined Mia. No one knows."

"Except for your intern."

"Right," he responds quickly. "Except her."

Up until that little exchange a tiny part of me was still in denial, that unreasonable part of your mind that clings to things when it goes into shock. Brett couldn't do this, no way my marriage is over and I'll be *gasp!* divorced. I mistook him for someone else or she's only his intern and he wasn't nuzzling her neck while she giggled and undid his belt and he didn't say he couldn't get enough of her tight little pussy...ok yeah, that part's the nail in our coffin but still, hope's tenacious and the irrational kind is an especially stubborn infestation. And then my husband utters 2 tiny sentences: *No one knows* and *Except her* and goddammit that's it, he did, he fucked a teenager.

"Do you know for sure no one knows? Are you even sure your 19 year old girlfriend will be discreet?" Let me voice the phrase "19 year old girlfriend" aloud and knife myself in the gut with it.

Brett sighs. "She's not gonna say anything, Mia."

"What do you think she'll say to my intern?"

"They're not friends. And she called Tina this morning and said something personal came up and she won't be back. It's not a big deal. They're unpaid interns."

"You were with her this morning?" He doesn't answer. "So after you ran into my intern you continued on your date?" Still silent. "Did you fuck? Because you can't get enough of her? Did you get enough of her tight little pussy all night Brett?" Yeah I went there. I don't care.

"Stop it Mia," he warns, turning to leave the kitchen.

I jump up from my chair hot on his heels as he goes upstairs. "No I won't you pig. I sit here alone all night, waiting for you to do me the basic decency of coming home and dealing with your *wife* and you can't even be bothered to cut your date

short. Why are you here now? Did she have to go to class?”

“Enough!” he shouts, turning to face me at the top of the steps. “You’re so full of shit. ‘I don’t need a big argument,’” he says in a high voice, scrunching his face up in mimic.

“Do you think you love her?” He rolls his eyes and heads for our bedroom with me trailing behind like a gnat he can’t swat away. “A teenager is your future? Worth ruining everything we have? This house, a successful partnership at the brokerage, public office and you tossed it all because you needed a fresh fuck.”

Brett’s turns to me looking thunderous. “I tossed it all because I’m not happy anymore Mia! Sex has a lot to do with it, I’m not gonna lie, it’s kinda important! AND I DON’T WANNA FUCK YOU ANYMORE!” Ok, I really regret pushing him this far because when men yell, like when they’re *really* angry, their voices bellow and carry. The windows are closed but I wish he wasn’t shouting at the top of his lungs that he doesn’t wanna fuck me anymore. What will the neighbors think? Then again, they probably won’t be my neighbors much longer. Brett continues yelling as he stuffs clothes into a suitcase with a vengeance. “I’m not happy with us anymore. I’m not happy as your husband!” he shouts with finality.

Life sometimes. Isn’t it amazing? Elephants navigate their way hundreds of miles across Africa from memory alone. Birds migrate thousands of miles based on instinct. And I go along utterly clueless, la-di-dah, no sense of impending doom and in under 24 hours everything I had is wiped out. A tsunami came my way, and I had no idea it was coming. There were signs of trouble but I was oblivious. All the animals headed for the hills while I stood there like a dodo bird. And nothing in my life will be the same. I give. I sit on the edge of our bed. “Got it.”

Brett hears my defeated tone and looks at me sadly. “It’s not working anymore Mia. Are you happy as my wife?”

“I wasn’t unhappy. I know things haven’t been great, but I was still trying.”

“Yeah. You never would’ve stopped trying.” He’s right, I

wouldn't have. That's why he cheated, ruining things beyond repair was his only out. It's my fault. I shoulda known.

"It was worth working on or talking about at least. For me." And the tears start. Because I have nothing without Brett. I don't know what I'll do or who I am. I'm nothing.

Brett frowns and zips the suitcase. "Not for me." And that damn zipper sound punctuates his words like he just zipped up the body bag on the corpse of our marriage. "Sorry."

I nod, accepting that minuscule scrap of an apology because I live off scraps like a junkyard dog. Done it my whole life. My face crumbles and Brett looks at me briefly before turning and leaving, descending the stairs with the suitcase and a backpack. I hear his footsteps in the front hall, the door slam and his truck roar to life. And he's gone. I sit on the bed wiping my tears with my arm and then go to the bathroom and throw up, Firebird burning my digestive tract the whole way up. I tug off my stupid dress, leaving it in a pile on the floor, throw on an old t-shirt and crawl into bed for the next 3 days.

If it weren't for Radar, I wouldn't even leave the bed. But I have to get up and feed and let her out. I don't eat, shower or leave the house. Nothing is appealing. I move like a zombie through the hours, barely able to tolerate myself. Brit texts me but I don't answer, then she calls and I still don't answer. God knows why Gio texted but whatever. A couple people from Capital text too, wondering if I'm ok. I don't respond. I was exaggerating our successful partnership. It's Brett's team that I was on. The business and contacts are all his. He pushed clients my way and I did a decent job with the listings but I never woulda had them if it weren't for him. He can stay at Capital Realty. I don't even know if I'll continue as a realtor.

On the third day-

**Warning* My coping mechanisms aren't stellar, grade A healthy. I didn't have much role modeled growing up, so I scraped by with what I could come up with at the time, when my brain wasn't fully mature and I didn't know how to share or ask for help. No one was around anyway. I lost my mom when I was 11 and raised myself up from there. God I've

missed her.

On the third day I'm sitting on the toilet cutting myself, thin stinging lines that drip red into the toilet and bring strange relief. This should not shock. Mia the apologizing people pleaser with all the self flagellation, isn't self harm the logical next rung up? All that rage has to come out somewhere. I haven't done it in a long time but I haven't had to cross a canyon as deep and wide as husband-cheated-with-his-intern-and-walked-out in awhile. Cutting is the rope I leave out before the storm, when the blizzard of emotion becomes a whiteout of nothingness, that rope gets me home. I'm a person who needs to be with others. People pleaser's are no good at self regulating, we're cold blooded, we feel what the people around us feel and if no one's around, we get dangerously close to feeling nothing at all. And then I end up here, grasping at my rope.

Anyway I don't hurt anyone besides me and I consent to that hurt, it gets me through. I don't know what I would've done without it. I go on the insides of my thighs, that way if they bleed, it looks like I had a period mishap. I was actually proud of that self harm innovation. Sick, I know. But human beings strive to master anything they do. Serial killers always wanna be admired for their ability to hide their crimes, right?

Someone's knocking on the door but I ignore it and Radar can't hear. It grows into banging and yelling - Brit. "Mia, get your ass to the door and let me in!" I'm embarrassed at her yelling but the neighbors have probably already written me off as complete trash anyway. "MIA!!!" she roars, "My Uber's gone so I'm not goin' anywhere! I'll kick in the door or break a window!" She will. I abandon my project, dab the blood, stick on a couple bandaids and drag myself to the door. "Jesus, you look awful," she tells me barging in and striding down the front hall into the kitchen. "I've been textin' you. Worryin'. You couldn't even be bothered to let me know you're alive?" I pad behind her into the kitchen. She's walking around, running her finger along the countertops, looking inside the cabinets.

"Sorry."

"I'm on the struggle bus Mia. I need to provide you with 10

hours of indentured servitude this week and you're ghostin' me." She goes inside my pantry. "Steph quit the internship because she banged her boss and now she might need to bang the TA to pass the class." She comes out and looks out the back window into the yard. "Her parents are buyin' the kinkiest intro to business administration degree I've ever seen."

I have to smile. "You're right, I shoulda texted you back." Geez my mouth tastes bad now that I'm talking.

"Damn right you should've," and she barges by me into the living room, continuing to peruse, picking up decorative trinkets on my coffee table and examining them. "She's got a big body count Mi," she bounces down on an upholstered chair, putting her feet up on the ottoman and resting her head back on the cushion. "Have you been with him since we started internin'? You better get tested."

I sink onto the couch across from her, absorbing the body count blow. "We haven't had sex since you started interning," I admit. Which should be a relief if I wasn't feeling so glum about Steph having a tight little pussy and also a ton of partners. I was only ever with Brett. I thought it was romantic. Now I wonder if it wasn't staid.

"Good. I mean bad for your lady needs but good for your health. Unless there was anyone else before Steph?" Oh. Oh god. I hadn't even considered that possibility. Tears well up in my eyes. "Wait Mia, sorry. It doesn't matter anyway, it's over right?"

"You mean my marriage?"

"You're adorable right now. Greasy, smelly and there's food on your shirt. Yes your marriage, my pretty."

"It's not food, it's puke. And yes the marriage is over." It hurts to verbalize but I gotta put my stake in the ground and start over somewhere.

"Ok, let's move forward. As in straight into the shower. There's blood on your pants."

"Oh." Oh shit. "Sorry. Period."

“No worries, happens to us all.” I have a tiny burst of satisfaction. Come on, give me something. “Let’s get you clean,” she grabs my hand and drags me from the couch and upstairs. “This is a great house. What are we gonna list it for?”

Ugh. I hate thinking about selling my house. “It’s proly worth 550.”

“You owe a lot on it still?”

We reach the master. My dress is still on the floor and the bed is a mess. “It’s paid off.”

“Really? Wow, that’s great.” Tell me about it. One of the many things I love about this house. “Whew, it’s stuffy in here.”

“Radar threw up. I didn’t clean it,” I offer.

“Good to know. Let’s get you clean and then I’ll clean the puke,” and she starts to pull off my clothes.

“Ok ok, I’ll shower. I don’t need your help,” I grumble, swatting her hands away and going to my dresser to get fresh clothes.

“Good. I wasn’t excited to help you shower, I’m supposed to be learnin’ real estate stuff!” she yells as I close the bathroom door. I shower and wash my whole body twice. It does feel better to get clean. The cuts sting terribly but that’s the point. Like when I walk and they hurt with every step, every rub of my legs together I know, I exist, my body’s alive even if it doesn’t matter to anyone but me.

Today I matter to Brit though and I need some of her vast zest for life. I brush and floss, comb out my hair and bandage way better, using gauze and wrap. By the time I emerge from the bathroom, she’s cleaned Radar’s vomit and is standing in the doorway. “When was the last time you ate?” she asks, looking up from her phone.

“I had breakfast with Gio Barra morning after council,” which I tossed into the toilet but whatever, I just got presentable, accuracy is still up ahead somewhere.

“What? You didn’t tell me that!” Brit comes over and hits

me on the arm. “And that was 3 days ago Mia. You need to eat,” she says softly. She pushes me toward the door and down the stairs. “This is good, out of bed, dressed, the internship is back on track!”

I go to the coat closet and grab my purse and shoes. “I’m not staying at Capital. The internship’s over,” I tell her negatively as I open the front door.

“Well I’m not gonna bang the TA!” she yells as we step outside. Ken and Rosemary, my elderly neighbors, are unloading groceries from their car and look up. I give them a weak smile. “Steph mighta fucked her way into this problem and she’ll probably fuck her way out of it, but I’ve done nothin’ but honest, hard and weird work Mia! I almost had to shower you up there! I deserve a complete on this internship!”

Rosemary’s mouth is hanging open. Ken is thankfully hard of hearing. I close my eyes, desperately trying to squelch my smile, “Yes Brit you do. Sorry, we’ll figure something out. And thanks for everything.”

“You’re welcome,” she responds, calming down as we head to my car. She waves enthusiastically at my neighbors and clueless Ken waves back at the pretty young lady. “Now tell me about this date you had with GQ G.O!” she yells as she opens the door. Rosemary’s clamped her mouth shut in a hard line. I should grab the extra for sale sign we keep in the garage and put it up in the yard. At least she’ll feel better knowing I’m leaving.

CHAPTER 9

Gio

She's not coming?" I ask Diaz. Council starts in 10 minutes.

He shakes his head. "She's taking a personal leave. Nobody's saying anything more."

"How long will she be out?" Is Mia ok? is what I really want to ask.

"I couldn't get a read on it. Dietz and Harrington were hush hush."

Great. With those 2 patrolling her borders, all I can do is wait. I spend the first week obsessing about what's going on with her. Marital problems seem like a definite possibility given the glasses/contact lens/*guess I gotta start somewhere/my life's so fucked up I don't even care* cornucopia but I stop short of actually hoping for her marriage to fail because that'd be even lower than hogging the accessible restroom to masturbate.

By the second week I've online stalked Brett Sinclair to see if they might be having financial problems but he looks like a successful realtor. His page boasts impressive sales numbers. I end up staring at the airbrushed picture of him and his team in the bluebonnets. Mia's coiffed to the nines, her beauty suffocating underneath all that artifice, freckles concealed, curves covered, no adorable glasses. Did she have a headache that day? I wonder, stroking her cheek with my fingertip on my tablet screen. It doesn't look like it, she's smiling appropriately, in fact, Team Sinclair's a formidable front of picture perfect professional. There are no pictures of just Mia and her husband though, they're all Brett surrounded by the 3 women on his team, proud as a polygamist. If it were me, I'd have Mia front and center, glasses, freckles, curves, look at this woman, we'll do a great job selling your house because these glasses will work hard for you, those freckles don't lie

and the curves, well maybe I'd cover the curves because they're crazy distracting or maybe not because what the hell, look at this gorgeous creature, she's mine, see my arm around her? Anyway, there's options with the curves. But Mia isn't just a member of your team, she's your wife. She comes first.

Another week passes. Did she have a death in her family? I've a feeling the other councilwomen know what's going on so I ask Melissa but she gives me the company line, "she's on a personal leave Gio," with a touch of back off bitchy and I feel chastened like a child. Just because I made Mia cry twice doesn't mean I'm not concerned for her well being. Except it means exactly that. Damn it!

Being sidelined pisses me off. I'm a leader in city council, other members come to me for advice, influence, strategy, I'm in on everything except this. And I'm way less gossipy than Becky, who acts like she and Mia are besties now when she's no more in Mia's inner circle than I am. I could ask Diaz what he knows but the guy's really good at reading people. It's why I hired him. And it's inconvenient if you're hiding anything.

Weeks 4 and 5 I spend storming around pissed at her. It's completely irresponsible abandoning her constituents. She has an obligation to her community, hell, she has an obligation to me and her other fellow council members. She could at least send an update, an end date, an ETA, anything! Good thing she's not running for reelection.

6 weeks brings the foreboding sense that something you don't ask about is going on. It could be a serious illness. Maybe it's invasive but I break down and text her Labor Day weekend. I need to know if she's ok.

"You ok Mia? We miss you at council. It's me Gio Barra." I type as I get home from work. She sees it right away, I can tell from the pulsing three dot bubble but instead of a response, I get a text from Kara. *"Hey, what're your dinner plans for tonight?"* She finally contacted me a week ago. I texted and called a couple times with no response until one night she invited me to dinner with mutual friends and put her hand on my leg like I still belonged to her even though we haven't talked squat about our problems. I played like everything was

fine in front of people and went home alone afterward because we're not talking about things, remember? How am I supposed to know when the break is over? Anyway, I don't care. Her break's become my laycation with Mia Sinclair. When I'm not worrying about her I'm jerking off to her, in my offices, the gym, accessible restrooms across Austin have been rendered inaccessible because District 3's city council rep is a perv. And you know what? Fantasy anal with Mia is amazing compared to none at all. Imagining her swallowing my come beats the pants off Kara spitting into the sink. My sexual frustration's a symbol of our larger differences and her inability to bridge a single one. Are we gonna rebuild? Hell no. Are we over? Completely. Should I do something about it? Probably. Have I? Nope! I resent her punitive timeout, I'm taking some control back - I am a man after all - and she can be the one to wait with bated breath. I'll end things when I'm goddamn good and ready.

What the hell is taking Mia so long to respond when she saw my text? Meanwhile Kara's text stares expectantly at me, her three dot bubble bubbling away like she's typing something. I need to squash any hope before she reaches out further.

"I'm tired. Think I'll stay home."

"Ok" is all she responds. She's disappointed. Join the club.

I lay down on my bed and stare up at the ceiling before methodically sitting up and opening the nightstand drawer. Masturbation robot is what I've become. I grab the economy tube of lube I bought so excitedly before my life's singular anal experience, when I still had hopes and dreams. I'm getting my money's worth 6 years later. I looked it up, it doesn't go bad and my parents taught me not to waste, ok? I squirt out a dollop and rub it on my straining shaft, cursed thing that's got me servicing it round the clock. I feel like an addict, the fix after every episode fleeting, my roaring need only worsening. I'm ashamed to admit I've envisioned attacking Mia Sinclair when I finally see her. I come really hard to that particular fantasy.

And that's where I'm headed now, harsh and unforgiving strokes on my aching dick. She's driven me insane with worry,

staying away all these weeks. Don't you know how much I need you? Yours is the only pussy I fulfill myself in, the only mouth I want tending my cock and licking me clean after. Sweet female who lets me bite her like an animal when I'm close, holding her in the place she belongs, taking my fuck so good, butt cheeks jiggling. She's my personal padded fuck post, sorry baby, but I'm angry and it's gonna be straight need for a few fucks while I work it out on your body. *It's ok*, she says, *take what you need. God Mi* I groan in relief. I say her name so often when I come that I'm like Pavlov's dog. I'm gonna see her in public at some point and I really need to untrain myself of that.

I come on my stomach but also partially on my phone because it vibrated and I inadvertently turned toward it while still ejaculating. I can see the red text notification through my semen, it's Mia, she texted right when I came. A feeling of warmth shoots through me, like she was here in some ridiculous way. Jesus, next I'll be spooning the pillow, whispering her name to it, frantically tugging the pillowcase up like it's her dress and rutting into what's underneath...crap, I almost forgot real Mia texted me and real Mia is way more important than pillow Mia even though pillow Mia is single and in my bed every night without her underwear.

"whose we" slaps me out of my post coital stupor. Blunt, confrontational, not her normal manners at all. I'm overcome with dread. Could she be sick? *"Me, I miss you, where are you and what's going on?"* is what I want to respond but she's married and I've technically still got a girlfriend so, no. Instead I nervously type *"All of us, Mia."* through the come on my screen. I'm in no way the spokesperson for council but I'm already halfway down this rabbit hole and she called my bs, so let me double down like the pushy ass we all know I can be.

I'm wiping my phone when she responds, *"I'm ok Gio, thank you for asking. I'll be back soon."* Oh thank god, her sweet politeness. Reassuring and so damn feminine.

"Great Mia, I'm so glad to hear that." I send back. She's ok and she'll be back. It's been 6 weeks of torture waiting. Makes me think of my parents.

Guillermo Barra hitched rides and walked for 5 days to come to this country. His family was dirt poor and my mom's family was middle class and wouldn't accept him so he set out for America heartbroken, leaving her behind, telling her she was better off without him. *The journey was nothing compared to leaving your mom, Gio. That almost killed me.* He found back breaking construction work and threw himself into it, laying a foundation he dreamed was for her, he'd tell us as kids. Because he never forgot her.

She hadn't let him go either. She eventually went on a hunger strike in protest, literally forcing her family to contact him. By that time he had steady work in Houston and plans to start a construction business but it was still in the dream stage, he warned her. Sara Sandoval wouldn't be deterred. *They thought I was crazy, she'd laugh. I just needed your dad. Without him everything's wrong.* Kids came along immediately and steadily. I'm the oldest of 5, we lived in small spaces and trust me, knowing how much my parents loved each other was the first thing I remember in life. Their passion was the foundation our life grew from, the inescapable gravity in our world. They freaked me out at first and grossed me out by the time my father had the briefest sex talk in history with me. "You understand what happens between me and your mom, Gio?" he'd asked. I'd nodded, mortified. I understood all right, I was pretty busy discovering my own sexuality listening to them. "Don't ever be ashamed son. I let you hear because I want you to know what to look for. What you need as a man. As my son." And that was that. Unabashed candor. Fundamental truth. That's my dad.

And poor. He came from the dirt and worked like crazy, leaving my mom to raise us mostly alone. She's stubborn and strong, she had to be to leave the comfort of her life in Mexico, but sometimes she'd get overwhelmed with us driving her nuts or ends not meeting or living in a foreign country. *I need your papi, Gio, she'd cry. He makes everything right for me.* The confidence she had in him made me feel safe. We were under his protection. When he swooped in to rescue her, we regarded him with reverence. As the oldest she relied on me too sometimes, to translate for her when we went out

shopping and help her learn English. It manded me and gave me confidence.

Your mom makes me the best man I can be Dad told me when I went home a couple weeks ago. It was hard not to compare that with the picking and chiseling away at my confidence Kara engages in. If I overstep boundaries with her, she's quick to rap my knuckles and I've learned to watch myself around her. I don't like it. I police myself in public of sexist or dated thinking because all responsible adults should. In private I want ownership. I want to fulfill my needs without correction because they shouldn't be wrong. Sometimes I even feel like Kara uses my progressiveness like a cage in the bedroom, stifling my urges because they're base. Well guess what? I'm progressive and Mexican American. I need feminine, I like submissive, I need to lead, I want to man. And I believe I can be politically progressive and personally... conservative is a difficult word to associate with, so I'm going with traditional. But those things can coexist.

When Mia Sinclair cried in council, I was confronted with a part of myself I've been repressing. I attacked her like a brutish bully because I couldn't reconcile her irresponsible, offensive statement with the naked vulnerability that followed. That I wanted to possess. She was like a conquistador waving a red flag inciting my fury but behind the kerchief was the endless field of green I've been yearning for my whole life.

Mia's married. I remind myself on a daily basis: she's married. She can only be the template I move forward with. And once I shepherd her through these weeks with my worry and know she's ok, I'll move on. I have to. Because everything else I feel is just weeds sprouting up around me uncontrollably. Sexy, orgasmic, useless weeds.

CHAPTER 10

Mia



I spend a month and a half dismantling my life and starting a new one. I never set foot in the Capital Realty office again and leave the explaining to Brett. We agree to split everything down the middle, well the attorney lets him know he has to give me half and Brett gets real mad but after realtor and divorce attorney fees, it turns out banging your intern costs a quarter of a million. I could buy a lot of bloody shoes with that, although probably only one of Cardi's Birkin bags but I'm not a rich rapper, I'm an unsuccessful realtor and that money is my cushion while I grieve and figure out a new career. My house provides for me and I love it to the bitter end, driving past it in salute several times a week. My decorative garden bed still looks good, so many colors of xeriscape flowers and sculptural agaves that do well in the brutal Texas summers. I worked so hard designing that bed. I was really proud of it.

Brit helps me find a place. It's depressing to move backwards in life from a great house to apartment living. We find a condo complex with partially attached units, small fenced patios and yards good enough for Radar. The landlord doesn't want to rent to me because I'm unemployed, but when I offer to pay the entire year up front, he shuts up and signs.

I get in my car and drive, woman on a mission to stay away from the insides of my thighs, mellow music to process my grief, all over the hill country and small towns around Austin with their quaint old timey squares and cute retail. Although restaurants and ice cream parlors reinforce my aloneness and I shouldn't blow money on decorative home stuff since I rent. After awhile I take Radar with me, she's an excuse to avoid sadness inducing retail and she sleeps the whole time. I prefer driving with the music loud, I feel a little powerful again and my old dog's deaf as a stone.

Brit convinces her professor to switch her internship with me at Capital to one at city council since I'm technically still a member but on a leave he doesn't need to know about. I'm stepping down the minute I return, but I let the leave go on a couple extra weeks to accumulate the hours she needs. Instead of learning about boring civic service, we eat out, jog together and paddle board Lake Austin over Labor Day weekend.

Brit's a resident assistant, she shows freshmen around, holds sessions on safety and where to find services they need, places to eat and study. In exchange she lives rent free in the dorm. When I arrive to pick her up, she has 3 girls in tow. One of them's upset over a breakup. We pile in my car and head to the lake. The rental guy gives us boards, life jackets and a speech he's repeated 1000 times today judging from his tone. I decide to stick close to shore while Brit chases adventure with 2 of the girls. The third girl Ruby is very unsteady on her board and ends up with me.

"Where's your bikini." I guess it's a question but her tone doesn't modulate in the slightest. She also has a very low voice. In combination with her dead eyes and wan complexion, the effect is solid Wednesday Addams. Steph drained of giggles and embalmed.

"I don't like bikinis," I respond cautiously. She stares at me, then at my string top, eyes boring holes in my boobs. "Bottoms. I don't like bikini bottoms." Jesus Christ she makes me nervous.

"You have the perfect butt." You'd probably think that was a compliment from the words, but trust me, it wasn't.

"That's the biker shorts. They hold it in tight, otherwise it's a tub of cottage cheese." I laugh conspiratorially, know what I mean with the cellulite, girl? Wrong gal pal, she doesn't. She's like a bloodhound on scent of my cuts, which they're not bleeding, I haven't cut in a few weeks but this girl has me paranoid they could start like some guilt induced self harm stigmata.

"I know you." I look at her a little alarmed. "You're that conservative lady who wept."

Ah. KAUZ's weepy Lady Sinclair of Jacobean days of yore. "So you're from Austin?"

"Dove Springs." Of course she's from rough east Austin Dove Springs. I need to go buy a lottery ticket y'all because odds are on my side today, thousands of people at the lake and I end up with one of Gio's constituents. "Gio shredded you that night."

Correction: she's not only Gio's constituent, she's his fan and she enjoyed watching me publicly humiliated. One of the worst nights of my life made her happy. And like it's wont to do sometimes, rage rears its ugly head. "He sure did. I went way too far trying to please my husband cuz I'm a stupid people pleaser but it wasn't worth it because I ran into him trying to nail his intern to a wall an hour later. Oh, and I don't wear bikini bottoms cuz I get numb when I get depressed and cut myself on the insides of my thighs so I can feel things again." There ya go! Innocent bystander #2 covered in Brett rage, although the good thing about this girl's cadaverous personality is that she doesn't show shock either. Her blank stare reminds me of Radar. I grab my paddle. "I'm gonna go back." I actually feel a little bit better, as if releasing that was healthier than pretending to be ok.

"Wait. Take me with you." No fucking way Wednesday. "I can't swim," she admits.

"What!? Why'd you come out here? Aren't you scared?"

"Umm yeah," and the girl has the nerve to roll her eyes at me. Granted it was a stupid question.

"Uh ok," I sigh, considering the options since I can't very well abandon someone who can't swim in the middle of a lake. "It'll probably be easiest if I swim and tow you back," and I slide off my board into the water, grab the leash and hand it to Ruby. "Take my board," I tell her, laying my arm over the front of her board and scissor kicking. I'll get her to shore. That'll even me up for erupting and then I'm free to ditch her.

Ruby rides above, looking down at me with a smirk. "Mush," she says quietly.

“Excuse me, was that a sled dog command madam?” I yell at her and bring my kicking feet to the surface so I splash her.

“Hey! That’s cold!” she yells back indignantly.

“Oh you can feel that, good. You’re alive. I was starting to wonder.”

“I’m fine. You’re the one cutting yourself like a corpse.”

I stop swimming and turn around. She stares back at me with her roadkill personality while I fantasize about watching her sink to the bottom of the lake, byeee! “Sorry,” she offers quietly. I nod and turn back to swimming like a dumb retriever with a stick in its mouth. The same poor guy’s still loaning out boards. “We’re done, thanks,” I tell him as I drag Ruby to where she can walk in the water. I climb up the embankment and get my stuff, heading for my car.

“Where are you going?” she asks. To my car obviously except I’m a lowly people pleaser so instead of going there, I heave a martyr’s sigh and spread my towel out on the dock and share it with her, as well as the funny dog-in-a-bikini-and-sunglasses pic Brit texted me when “*You ok Mia? We miss you at council. It’s me Gio Barra.*” pops up in preview at the top of my phone.

“Gio Barra texts you?” Yep, we read that together and I’m as shocked as she is because hell no, he doesn’t text me, well except for once after the muffin meeting which I forgot about because my life slammed head on into that wall Brett was trying to nail Steph to. Ruby grabs my phone and taps on the text. “He misses you?” she asks in disbelief.

“He said we miss you, the other council members, he’s like a spokesperson for everyone but Gio doesn’t miss me, he can’t stand me,” I reassure her, don’t worry, I’m a pariah, all is still right with your world.

“How could he miss you?” she asks, looking crestfallen, like her hero died and you know I can’t let that happen!

“Maybe he misses me as an adversary,” I propose and Ruby scowls like that’s ludicrous. “Did you ever hear of Ayrton Senna?” and of course she hasn’t because I’m making a crazy

obscure reference to a 19 year old but Ayrton Senna was a hot as sin race car driver who come to think of it, oh my god Gio so looks like him, masculine and graceful and get-the-fuck-outta-here-dirty-sexy but that's not where I was heading trying to cheer up this morose teenager, "he was a race car driver whose main competitor was this guy Prost. They hated each other so much they'd crash into each other in races, but then Senna died in an accident on the track and Prost was devastated to lose his greatest rival."

"You're not Gio's greatest rival," she replies dourly and who would blame me if I left her in the middle of the lake to drown, huh? Except she's right, I wasn't a rival, I was an umming and ahing Brett parrot.

"You're right. I was more like the big fat turkey they carved every council session and now the table's got a big gaping hole in the middle," I'm also willing to plumb heretofore unknown depths in my mission to make a creepy girl I just met feel better. The world needs doormats y'all, you look down your nose at them and wipe your shoes on them but you sure miss them when they're not there and it's raining.

"That makes sense."

Oh goody, she feels better. And me as sacrificial lamb is what they miss. "Give me my phone please," I need to google next session date because I will be there and I will be resigning.

"Let's text him back first," she tells me. "Tell me what to say, I'll write it. I wanna see what he sends back." Her eyes widen with excitement - BOOM - stadium lights.

"How is this your business?"

"I voted for him. He's my council rep. He's texting with a council member who's an adversary to agenda items that help people in my district. It's my business."

Geez that was a good argument, she should run for city council. "Fine. Just say I'm ok, thanks for asking and I'll be back soon."

"Uch, boring, we're not sending that." She taps a couple

times, “and send.”

“What did you just send?” She holds my phone out so I can see but not grab it. “*whose we*” is what I responded. Alas y’all. My mom used to say, “you catch more flies with honey than vinegar” because she was a good southern girl. This girl’s utter disregard for spelling, politeness, punctuation: zero flies for her, and by extension me because she’s shanghai’d my phone. Although who wants to catch flies? They’re disgusting.

“*All of us, Mia.*” comes the response read in Ruby’s coroner monotone and I feel let down. I’m so starved for intimacy even a text saying “we miss you” had my silly heart foolishly hoping Gio missed me. As if. “Uch, he’s as boring as you,” she tosses my phone at me.

I catch it and immediately text back “*I’m ok Gio, thank you for asking. I’ll be back soon.*” to save face after Ruby’s “whose we” rude shove. My phone vibrates. “*Great Mia, I’m so glad to hear that.*” That was quick, eager almost. And relieved, like he really was worried. I feel strangely connected to him, like we’re both looking at the thread on our phones, thinking about each other, linked at that moment. I miss having a man in my life so much. I ache for that anchor, the partner you text grocery store lists to and random I love you’s in the middle of the day and where are you’s in the middle of Costco. Brett and I hadn’t been like that for years.

“Ruby, 3 guys gave Sasha their numbers so Dustin can go drown in the ocean!” one of the girls shouts from the water. Brit’s back, babysitting’s over, time to plan my council exit. I’ll write something to read aloud and be outta there, last vestige of Brett gone from my life. Then I’ll start thinking about online dating or a divorced people meetup because I’m so lonely I could cry.

CHAPTER 11

Gio

The following week, Mia's back on the dais, surrounded by the other members as I enter. I feast hungry eyes on her, inventorying what I see because it's been way too long: 1) She's smiling and her dress isn't hugging those dangerous curves, thank fuck. It's so good to see her. 2) She doesn't look like she has a life threatening illness. 3) She's wearing glasses - good for her, no headache, not dying and not slaying me with that killer bod. Win win win, everyone's alive, feeling good and nobody's inappropriately horny.

"To start off, Council Member Sinclair would like to make a statement," Melissa Dietz announces.

Great! We'll get an explanation and maybe she'll be extra helpful and say something obnoxiously conservative to help me disengage. Mia stands and looks down at a piece of paper. "Thank you for your time." She nervously tucks her hair behind her ear. *Christ she's sweet.* "I'd like to apologize for any issues caused by my absence." *Apology for excessive masturbation accepted.* "I followed your progress and was relieved to see the process flowing smoothly and seemingly uninhibited by my lack of vote. It's good to know I'm not needed here," *I need you.* A few members laugh and I grit my teeth at my dick to *Stay down damnit!* like an army sergeant trying to keep his troops alive, "and in light of that revelation, I'd like to announce my resignation from Austin city council." ??? "Since there are only a couple months left in my term, I'm confident this early exit won't have an effect on the city. I enjoyed my post and will miss you all and the connection I felt in my community," she chokes up for a moment. Her assistant hands her a tissue while I take the opportunity to entertain a fantasy about enveloping her in my body and whispering *tell me why you're sad so I can fix it baby* in her ear. Like my dad would my mom, stabilizing everyone in their orbit. "Thank you for the honor of serving." Mia folds her paper and sits,

looking down at her hands.

I don't understand why she'd resign now and I'm pissed I'm not privy to the information. I want her reasons to be our reasons, decisions we made together. I want to know her better than everybody else in the room. Instead she's come blazing back into my life for one session and's on her way out again like a sling shotting comet. I look to Diaz for a reaction. He knows something. Maybe now I can ask him what. The other council members seem surprised, probably more so than me because they didn't know she wasn't running for reelection. Although Rebecca looks smug. God I hate that bitch.

"Ok Mia, thanks for that," Mayor Neely bathes us in his fatherly tone, guiding us forward even though I don't want to budge. "With the election right around the corner, I doubt we need a special election for a temp to fill the seat, but we'll verify with the city charter. For now let's call the meeting to order and after we adjourn we can head over to Dumonts and toast the council member." My stewardship of Mia's over. She's back, she's fine. What I had with her existed entirely in my head. I let it flourish with the caveat that I'd let it go once I knew she was ok and she's ok. But she's also leaving. And I'm not ok with that.

Mia

"Mia! Why are you stepping down?" a reporter asks. The mayor's standing in front of the microphone, the rest of us surrounding him. He turns to me with a gentle look - do you want to respond? I'm not relishing this moment but I prepared for it. My constituents deserve an honest answer. It seemed gauche to go into during my resignation speech, but the press conference's as good a place as any to address it. I nod to the mayor and step up to the podium, "Honestly, I...I got divorced" and insta-tears. Again. I practiced this in the mirror and it went fine, but admitting my personal failure to others makes the pain surface instantly. I forge ahead before the crying overtakes my ability to talk, "I moved out of district 9, since I'm not a member of the community anymore it seemed

inappropriate to represent them, that's all I have, thank you." I rush off the platform, ripping off my glasses to wipe my tears and tripping as I exit the press room. I could scream in frustration at the utter joke I am. Fitting end to my council career I guess.

I book to my office, Brit behind me saying nothing. As I pass the bathroom I dart inside. She follows. I stop in front of the mirror, hands on the counter staring at myself, breathing heavy. That was utterly humiliating. She looks at me for a second and grabs me in a hug. I sob, no I weep in case KAUZ was wondering, onto Brit's shoulder for a few minutes until my composure returns. I pull back and look at myself in the mirror again. She's looking at me too.

"Never borin' you," she says, a smile on her face. "Brava. Love you lady."

A last sob escapes my lips at her affection. "Thanks," I croak. "What am I gonna do without you?" I set my glasses down and wet a paper towel to wipe my eyes. Fortunately without makeup the cleanup'll be easier.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not on council anymore. The internship's over."

"Oh right. Well, you won't be without me," she hops up onto the counter and sits facing me, "because we're friends. And you need a wingwoman. Want me to come to Dumonts?"

"Let's start the wingwomanship another night. I'm not prowling for men tonight," I tell her.

"Steer clear of Gio then. He was covetin' you in the session and I thought he might maul you in the presser."

I laugh out loud, "You're imagining things," I admonish, shaking my head at her overactive mind.

"You think because I grew up with a bunch of dumb cows I can't read people? I'm keyed into things on an animal level, Mi and that man wants you in a farm animal way."

Heat stirs low in my abdomen. "That's impossible," I insist.

Brit jumps down from the counter and grabs my hips and

turns me sideways to the mirror so we're both in profile. Then she fists a handful of my dress on my outside hip, pulling it tight across my butt. "You might've quit city council but this ass never quits. She's your best employee Mi, rock solid. She works hard 24 / 7 / 365."

I shrug. "I've got an ok body." Brit gives me an exasperated look, raising her hand like she's going to spank me. "Ok! I've got a hot body," I do. Always did, thank you very much. "But Gio doesn't care about that."

Brit grabs her phone and scrolls. "Look," she commands, shoving the phone in my face. It's the local feed they broadcast council meetings on. And there's meek little me, barely even looking up from my notes. The only positive thing I can say is that I didn't umm at all. Because I was straight reciting. "Stop criticizin' yourself and look at the panther in the corner devourin' you with his eyes."

I swallow hard because she's right, Gio looks like the Night Stalker while I'm resigning. "He can't stand me."

"He *can't* stand you," she affirms. "He wants to lay with you. Make Noah's Ark together."

I shake my head. "I'm so beneath him. Cheated on. Divorced. Unemployed."

"You know what I see instead all that negativity you just listed off? Faithful, loyal, devoted. Earnest, sweet, tenacious. Tryin' so hard all the time, just like your butt." She slips her arm around my waist. "Look in the mirror Mia." I meet her reflection's gaze. "Repeat after me. I'm Mia Sinclair."

"MacDonald," I reply. "I'm going back to my maiden name."

"Oh! Great! Ok repeat after me, I'm Mia MacDonald," she sounds excited.

I decide to humor her. She's trying so hard. "I'm Mia MacDonald."

"I am a hot divorcée."

I laugh. "I'm a hot divorcée."

“Life’s thrown me some curveballs but I’m wrestlin’ my ship around. And through my struggles shines my charm.” I stare at her in the mirror, smiling and tearing up again. “You’re gorgeous Mia, inside and out. Nod your agreement because I know you can’t say it.” I nod and she wraps her arms around me from behind for a moment, hugging me as we look in the mirror. “Mi MacDonald had a farm,” she intones softly. “G - I - G - I - O,” she laughs and pulls me tight enough against her to feel her boisterous laugh vibrating. It’s so comforting, touching another person, especially one who cares about you a little. “Just that Mi. Exactly that. And don’t forget it.” She looks serious for a second, grabs her bag and rushes off.

God I love Brit. She rejuvenated me. I’m ready for the bar now, natural smile on my face, feeling buoyant.

Gio

“That was refreshingly honest,” Diaz says as we head down the street to Dumonts. “I never would’ve characterized Mia Sinclair as courageous but she surprised me tonight.” No one ever surprises Diaz, he’s that smug, never let ‘em see you sweat asshole who refuses to be ruffled, except of course by sexy single Mia Sinclair.

I’m not in the mood for commentary. I’m still reeling from the evening’s events. Mia’s back finally thank god, she resigns, what? No! And mic drop - she’s divorced. Oh hell yes.

Everything screeched to a halt at that moment. *Kara, I need to talk to Kara*, went my brain and my dick, we all know what happened there. After yet another coup of the accessible restroom, I texted my girlfriend to meet me so I could make her my ex and now I’m heading down the street toward a toast to Mia with Kara by my side because my mind’s such a mess that I forgot about Neely’s Dumonts idea. So this’ll be fun I bet.

“She could’ve just said ‘I’m taking a step back’ instead of announcing her divorce on the 10:00 news. And crying again,” Kara says amused.

This is my karma for being a passive aggressive procrastinator. Didn't end things with her when I should've and now it's biting me in the ass! "Maybe she felt like her constituents deserved the truth." I could just let Kara have her snide little comment but we all know I won't.

"There's truth and there's too much information," Kara responds haughtily, "They didn't need to know she got divorced. That was just maudlin."

I'm not even her constituent but I sure as shit needed to know she got divorced and I don't know about maudlin but it's about to be life changing for me. "Regardless, no one's personal pain should be entertaining." Kara bristles, which of course me chastising her over Mia after saying Mia looked good in the presser won't go over great but I don't care anymore. I want what I want with the woman I'm with and turns out it's a dealbreaker if I can't have it. Took me 12 years to figure out but I'm done feeling bad. Kara never hesitated about shutting me down.

"She's very sympathetic," my assistant muses. "I was not a fan before but that honesty was winning. She'd be great on someone's arm."

Yeah. Mine, asshole!

"Do you hear yourself right now Diaz? You've reduced her to arm candy," Kara scolds.

"Political spouse isn't exactly a diminished position. They wield power."

"But her value lies in her wifely appeal," Kara points out flatly.

"If everyone stood in the spotlight there'd be none. Some people are sides and they're invaluable as such," he shrugs. "Not everyone can be the ground breaker you are darling," he says smoothly, linking his arm through Kara's and pulling her to him as a couple passes us on the sidewalk. I fall in step behind them, grateful for the bit of solitude.

"Bottom line is she won't be in council anymore," Kara warns loud enough for my ears. "She's been a thorn in Gio's

side for awhile.” *More than a thorn, Kara.* “Let her follow Baldwin out to pasture like all the loud mouth conservatives before her.” I take a deep breath and decide not to rise to the bait she’s dangling. I just don’t want to engage with her anymore. We’re over.

“Yes, out to pasture,” Diaz comments thoughtfully as we reach Dumonts. I pull the door open for them to enter. “Verdant pasture,” he says under his breath as he passes me.

Mia

Meeting at Dumonts to toast me’s become an extended session of council, the mayor and other members and their assistants gathered around the bar, discussing the never ending issue of property taxes. I’ve ended up standing at a small table close to the door, greeting people as they enter and thanking them for coming before they get poached away. I’m standing awkwardly alone thinking I can leave without anyone noticing when Gio, his assistant and Kara walk in.

“Gio, thanks for coming,” I extend my hand.

“Mia,” why does the way he says my name always sound strangely sexual, like he exhaled in relief when he said it? His assistant’s giving him a weird look and is he holding my hand too long again? Brit’s corrupted my mind with farm animals now. The girl could make garbage hot. “You remember Kara?” Right, his girlfriend. Duh.

“Kara, great to see you again,” we grasp hands. Despite my ups and downs with Gio, I’ve never had a problem with Kara. She’s serene, unflappable, a touch superior but I bet she’s a salve for his intensity. I wonder if it melts into her when they fuck. Online dating profile for me when I get home.

“So lots of changes for you, huh Mia?” Kara asks and I swear her voice has a nasty edge to it I never would’ve expected. What’s her problem?

“Um yeah, I’ve had a lot of changes,” I fess. No getting around my story so I might as well own it. “A lot of things I never saw coming, although leaving council wasn’t one of

them. You knew that,” I look at Gio pointedly and Kara stiffens. Uh-oh. He didn’t tell her I wasn’t running for reelection? Did he tell her about meeting me for muffins? Whoopsie. Awkward x 2. Welcome to Mia’s world Gio.

“What are your plans now?” he asks.

“Uh I have one more engagement tomorrow, a ribbon cutting at Dick Nichols for some trail improvements. Then bid farewell to the city I guess.”

“You’re moving?” he asks quickly, brow furrowing. Again his assistant gives him a look.

“Oh no, not again. I mean not for a year but not farewell like I’m moving even though yes I will have to move again in 10 months,” y’all I’m in figure 8 territory, Gio’s stare is burning me like a magnifying glass, his assistant’s glaring at him and Kara’s giving me a bless your heart pity look. *They don’t need your lease dates, Mia!* “I meant farewell as a public servant.”

“You still have your real estate business don’t you?” Kara asks.

Still? Like I’ve lost everything else, Kara? Maybe I do have a problem with this bitch because it feels like she’s poking me and you’d think she could lay off after my night but whatever. I’ve had enough of these pressure filled social situations where I feel so incredibly alone and there’s no obligation to stay anymore. Time to leave this part of my life behind. “I still have my license. Currently searching for another brokerage I guess. I’ve been taking a little time off. Reassessing.” Reassessment #1: this toast blows. “Anyway I’m gonna jet. No one will even notice, they’ve transitioned into session #2,” I say, gesturing toward the group. I meet Gio’s intense gaze and force a smile. “Thanks for stopping by.” I’ll never see him again, I mean maybe on the news but not in person and my heart absolutely aches. Of all the people to get sentimental about. *It was...never boring Gio* and the thought makes me wince, fighting back tears again. I shake my head at myself and turn to leave, grabbing my bag and heading for the door. Forward. Driving. Music, motion. Peace.

Gio

“Mia,” her name slips from my lips involuntarily in response to that bittersweet goodbye as she dashes out the door. The urge to grab her almost bowls me over but Kara’s standing next to me. Then I realize she’s walking to her car alone. “Someone should walk her to her car,” I tell Diaz. My voice sounds shaky. It’s late and downtown Austin isn’t always safe.

“Definitely,” he agrees raising his eyebrows, you or me?

“Kara, I’ll be right back.” I don’t bother waiting for her response. She’s already pissed and I don’t care anyway.

I get onto the street and see her a block up. I jog after her calling her name. She turns, looking confused. “Gio what are you doing?”

“Mia,” I say as I catch up to her. “Let me walk you to your car. It’s late.”

She frowns and shakes her head. “That’s not necessary. Go back to Kara and enjoy your evening.”

*I’m not going back to Kara, I mean I am for tonight because I need to break up with her but after that I’m coming to you and until then I’m walking you safely to your car. I can’t say any of that tonight, so instead I say, “Mia. No.” And voila, behold my erection downtown Austin side walkers. I’ve barely held back hardness like that kid wrestling with the Black Stallion, 30 minutes since I last ejaculated and he’s back with a vengeance. I’ve conditioned orgasm into my penis when I say *Mia* and it’s a hungry, salivating dog of a dick. She’s divorced and we’re alone and I wanna do things to her. And if I don’t stop thinking this way I’ll get back to Dumonts with pre-cum polka dots.*

Mia looks at me a moment before sighing a lovely little sigh. “I’m at the garage on Cesar Chavez,” and she wraps her arms around herself and continues trudging up the street. “Drop me at the elevator. I’ll be fine from there.”

“No,” I tell her again, falling in step beside her. I will not be dropping her at the elevator. Point of fact, I want to take her

inside the elevator and fuck the living daylights out of her but that's not happening tonight. It's frustrating all the things that can't happen tonight but one thing I am enjoying is telling this defiant woman no and watching her give, *yield* to me, I'd like to see her beautiful body yield to me as I rammed it into the elevator wall but no, let me guide my wayward mind back because if I thought my erection was bad a minute ago, that image is the hill my dick declares absolute war for.

"Please don't let me cry again," she mumbles, shaking her head. I'm not sure if she's talking to me but she sounds drained. I walk silently beside her, here, here, here with you every stride, longing to comfort her. A pedestrian comes toward us and Mia moves away, letting the person split us. I don't like it, I want her to be mine to hold onto. I steal a sideways glance and it takes a mountain of restraint not to yank her to me. She looks defeated. I imagine what her day's been like and tenderness time-lapse bursts into bloom all over my fertile lust. I'm drowning in desire for this woman.

"You need to get some rest," I boss because I need to control something and it's not gonna be my mind or body so Mia it is, dick declaration be damned. "What time's your ribbon cutting?" I demand like it's my business. It is, I'm going.

"10. It's close to where I live now." She sounds sad which of course, hurts because I want to affix her to an elevator wall with my cock *and* make her smile.

"Good." She's alone now. Who will be there for her when she gets home? I'd love to imagine it being me, but Kara. I have a Kara. Tomorrow I won't but right now I still do because I was being a stubborn ass. We walk the rest of the way in silence while I wage war with my own mind. I hold the glass door open for her and press the up button. The elevator is small and boy is that ride awkward. We get to her car and I watch her get in.

"Thanks Gio," she looks up at me and smiles. *So damn sweet. See you tomorrow baby.*

"Of course," I respond and she starts her car, smile disappearing from her face the moment she turns away. She's

sad but she forced a smile for me. Where Kara's hard and withholding, Mia's pliant and giving. Her softness feeds the man in me.

I have to leave her for tonight, I have to be single before I make a move, I have to do things right for our potential future. I head back to Dumonts but I don't walk fast because my throbbing erection. I force my thoughts to Kara. To kill my erection, Kara.

When I arrive back she's at the bar with Diaz, glass of wine in hand. "I'm sorry," I tell her.

"It's ok," she responds. It's not.

"Do you want another drink?"

"No Gio, I'm hungry," her tone implies I'm a complete clod. I nod submissively like a teenager in deep shit as she downs the rest of her wine and heads for the door.

Diaz grabs my arm, wrenching it backward as Kara exits, preventing me from following. "Make sure you show up at that park unattached tomorrow, understand?" he says in a low voice. "Mia's ex cheated. That's what precipitated the divorce."

Baby, I think to myself, my heart clenching, *tomorrow*. I nod to Diaz and he lets my arm go. Tomorrow, tomorrow is Mia. Tonight is Kara.

CHAPTER 12

Mia



Please join me as we enjoy all the wonderful improvements your hard work made possible. So much thought and planning went into these upgrades. This work was my favorite part of city council.” Uh-oh, tears. “From the bottom of my heart, thank you.”

There’s a smattering of applause. Someone who looks exactly like Gio’s clapping. Then the head of the neighborhood committee hands me a pair of scissors and I cut the ribbon hanging across the cement pathway. A few photos are taken and people head down the trail. I go to the nearby tree to untie Radar from where I left her and grab my purse and water bottle. Private citizen now, thank god. I unhook her from her leash so she can sniff at leisure - grass, garbage, mountains of shit, whatever. She’s an old brain and body being dragged around by the nose.

As I’m dumping her bowl, I see some shoes standing very close to me. I look up and see grey chinos tailor fit over long sculpted legs, floral button down and the bearded face of Gio gazing down at me. “What are you doing here?”

“Mia,” and like usual, he sounds relieved, staring and smiling.

“Gio,” I say loudly as I stand. “What are you doing here? Hello?” I wave my hands in front of him.

He finally snaps out of it. “I didn’t wanna miss your last engagement, council member Sinclair.”

“MacDonald.” He looks puzzled. “My maiden name. It’s Mia MacDonald now.”

“Nice to meet you,” he replies, holding his hand out for me to shake. I roll my eyes and extend my hand and we shake but he doesn’t let go. Instead he brings it to his mouth and kisses

it, slow and wet, like how I used to practice kissing my own hand when I was a clueless tween, nailing me with his gaze while I watch in horny wonder. What the hellfuck is wrong with me? I'm fresh off divorcing my intern screwing husband and here comes philanderer #2 prancing into my life like some ridiculous randy stallion. Gio was with Kara **last night**. Because what I need is another go round on the cheaters carousel, this time in the other woman seat. Even an incorrigible people pleaser has limits. Just no.

I pull back my molested hand and harness the fury building inside me. "Don't you have a girlfriend who I saw you with last night?"

"I don't have a girlfriend anymore Mia." What? "Mia?"

"You and Kara broke up?"

"Yes," he answers firmly.

"Last night?"

"Yes."

"And you're here this morning making out with my hand?"

"Baby, if you want me to wait a few months to call you, I will. But I need you to know my intentions. I've done nothing but worry about your well being and fantasize about covering you like an animal ever since that night in council. I should've ended things with Kara a long time ago. I was acting out resentments that'd built up between us for years. But I did not and would not cheat."

Call me weak or a horny hypocrite, I don't care. Gio Barra wants to cover me like an animal and maybe he'd call me baby while he did it. "You fantasize about me?"

Gio looks down at me with a sexy smile. "Yes beautiful girl," he responds softly. "I've been hard for you for weeks." He reaches down and runs his hand over my hip, clamping down on it possessively, staring at it on my body, eyes like a wolf. "Needing this as much as I have felt almost unhealthy." My feet move of their own accord, stepping inside his orbit. His other hand slips around my neck while his lips find my temple, trailing down to my jawline. I lean in closer, resting

my hands on his sides and tipping my head, opening my neck to him. He gives an “mmm” of approval as his lips run down my neck and back up to my ear, goosebumps chasing his path. “First I need to make up for making you cry though. My words, my mouth. They upset you,” he nibbles his way around my ear and then flicks the lobe with his tongue.

“Twice,” I point out breathlessly. “They hurt me twice,” and look who can negotiate after all! I guess closing costs and repair allowances just aren’t intrinsically motivating. Cuz I have a feeling cunnilingus is on the table and I’m gunning for it like a boss.

“Yes, twice I hurt you. What can I do with my mouth to make up for it?” Hungry kisses run down my neck. “2 times.” Yep, cunnilingus. And judging from the way he’s eating the meat off my clavicle, it’ll be worth my while. Twice.

“Ummm,” oh who am I kidding y’all? I absolved blue blooded Gio Barra of any and all his transgressions the moment he started using his fancy mouth for filth. I can’t even think straight what with the city councilman on my neck in a park full of families and children enjoying the amenities I cut the ribbon on. “Apologize?” Gah! Hot genie’s offering cunnifuckinglingus and I request an apology.

Gio pulls back and looks into my eyes, sexiness extinguished like a flame snuffed, council member Barra present, brain vein aye. “I went after you too aggressively in council that night. I could’ve made my point and stopped and it would’ve been more effective than haranguing you. I shouldn’t have made you cry, even if your vulnerability in that moment was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I’m sorry.”

Crying forgiven! “Thank you,” my voice squeaks.

“You’re welcome,” he leans down and kisses me gently, a first kiss that’s so right, familiar and tender, tilting his lips to mine and lingering, savoring our connection and then pulling back just slightly. I have to stop myself from leaning in for more. “What’s the second way you want my mouth, Mi?” And ooh...it dawns on me: he *did* call me Mi that morning, it

wasn't Brit tainting everything with Gio sexy. It was Gio. He wanted me, with the muffins, at Dumonts, he wanted me! "I wanna straddle your face and ride it."

Tragic overcompensation for the apology gaff. I told y'all, I'm impressionable. Twin flame to people pleasing, state of mind wherein the sufferer is highly susceptible to anyone nearby displaying strong emotion. The confidence of Brett, boundless energy of Brit or sexy innuendo of Gio- "Be careful how you talk to me in a public park baby. You'll make me lose my seat," he answers in my ear and I could really do with him calling me baby for the rest of time. "You started it," I volley back. "Intractable woman," he murmurs and who tucked my hands into his pants? Because there they are, 2 hands I don't even know holding onto his belt, and Gio's hands are tucked into my pants too. Just 2 public figures holding onto each other's hems here, yearning for underneath. He runs his finger inside, tickling my belly button, "you think I could fuck the defiance out of you Mi?" His finger dips a little deeper, sending tingles down my mound. His nose nudges my face up to look at him while his finger toys with the lining at the top of my undies. "Work your pussy into enough of a lather to break you of that habit?" I'm engulfed in bashfulness, "Gio-

"Your dog needs to be on a leash, lady!" someone yells and I turn away dazed, searching for Radar. She's wandered into the middle of the cement path completely unaware a group of people on bikes is riding around her. "Oh crap, Radar!" I run toward her. "I'm sorry, sorry," I repeat grabbing her. "She's old, she usually doesn't bother anyone."

Great, he's dismounted. "She's in the middle of the path. If I hit her and fall, I'll see you in court!"

"Hey man, calm down. Ride around her, she's barely moving," Gio says as he catches up, stepping in front of me and it feels good to be shielded because this guy's out for blood and I'll stand here apologizing til the cows come home otherwise.

"Whatever. Keep your dog on a leash," he grumbles as he mounts his bike and rides away.

I set Radar down. “It’s a shared trail you know!” I yell from behind Gio, instinctively putting my hands on his lean hard back, emboldened by his protection even though the biker’s too far away to hear. Then I realize I’m standing with my hands on Gio’s waist like he belongs to me and that’s a giant leap for mankind so I grab Radar’s leash and reattach it. She coughs a few times and goes back to shit sniffing. “I have to pay attention when she’s off leash, she shouldn’t be in the path,” I mumble, mortified at the scene I caused.

“That was my fault Mi. Are you ok?” Is he taking the blame for something that wasn’t his fault? Cuz that’s my thing. “Mia?”

“What?”

“Let’s sit on this bench.”

“It’s for sit ups,” I inform him, soothing myself with useless facts like fucking Rain Man.

“What?” Gio asks, gently taking Radar’s leash from my hand and wrapping it around the bench. He straddles it with his legs and pats the remaining length in front of him in invitation.

I sit gingerly. “The bench is for doing sit ups. There’re workout stations along the path. That’s what I cut the ribbon on today, that and the trail,” I babble. “You probably don’t think it’s a big deal but it meant something to me.” Oh we are here, the *Antagonize Gio spot on the map. Soothing familiar place. Join us, brain vein.

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, “I think it’s a great park and lots of people are enjoying the trail.”

“No one’s using the workout stations. They were a waste of money.” I was proud of this project but it’s fluff compared to what Gio works on and I’m nervous and listing off my failures is a topic of great confidence for me.

“Don’t say that Mia, you don’t know that yet. And it’s ok to make mistakes, that’s how you learn.”

“I made a huge mistake saying dangerous immigrants were being released from the jails when they weren’t,” I fess

unprompted. Gio's being so gentle and gentle, oral Gio has me building bridges. "I know it was propaganda. It wasn't even a good counter in the debate." I take a deep breath. "I'm impressionable ok?"

"There's nothing wrong with listening to others. Some might say I need to do it more," Gio offers with a smile.

"But I had a responsibility to verify what I said in a public forum," I further. "A public figure repeating falsehoods can become fear mongering. I was-" my breath hitches, "desperate that night," I force out, breaking eye contact because my eyes filled with tears. Not all apologies roll off my tongue like breath. That one cost.

"Thank you Mia. I really needed to hear that. It means a lot," he says softly, tipping my face back up to meet his gaze. "I've been going after you for awhile now in council, on fiscal stuff I didn't need to be nasty about."

I smile through the tears. "I started going outside to get away, but the only door without an alarm goes out to the dumpsters. The garbage air was better than the meeting."

"I'm sorry Mi," Gio's legs are bracketing my body. I know he wants to touch me and I'm dying for it but I wanna give him more of what he said he needed. It's who I am.

"I shouldn't use my responsibility to my district as an excuse either. A lot of my neighbors say gay people shouldn't be able to get married or women shouldn't be allowed abortions and I'd never support either of those opinions." I shake my head. "You were right you know, I was in over my head. Brett was looking for someone who thought the way he did on property taxes. We kept hearing our clients complain about it. When he couldn't find someone he said 'you should run.' I never expected to win. I was totally unqualified."

"So why'd you run?"

"To make him happy," I admit quietly and saying it out loud rams home how pitiful it was. I feel like a total loser. Gio looks shocked. Bet all his fantasies about me just went poof! I busy myself with retrieving my water bottle and Radar's

rubber bowl from my purse, making a production of pouring water for my thirsty loyal companion and setting it down in front of her. She ignores it. The dog is useless. “Go ahead, say it. I made a mockery of the system,” I sigh. “But you don’t understand what our relationship was like.”

“So tell me.”

“You really won’t let things go sometimes, you know that?”

“When it comes to you, no. I won’t let go. Get used to it.”

Ha! I drove a lot of circles around central Texas figuring out where I went wrong with Brett and it’s not pretty. But Gio deserves the truth. The last 15 minutes’ve been incredible but I’d never be a woman he wants. “In high school everyone had to run track. Brett was fast, he won all his races and was anchor on the best relay team. I was on the slowest team but we had to run even though we’d never win. It was a character building thing. I was embarrassed so I pretended I hurt my ankle and cheered Brett from the stands. He loved having me there adoring him and I felt like I won by being with him. My team didn’t run since they were short a runner and everyone knew I was full of shit. The teachers were so disappointed in me.” I stare out into the tall dry grass of the park field. Parents would’ve made me run. “We kept dating through college - Brett loved being the center of attention and I was his audience. We got married after graduation and he became a realtor and I joined his team. He passed me clients, maybe that bothered him, I don’t know, but at some point I wasn’t enough anymore. He started pushing me to wear contacts, makeup, dress the part more. I had to earn his love. Running for city council was just another task. He thought it’d boost our visibility and force me out of my shell. I won and made some progress on property taxes but it was never enough,” I look at him and shake my head. “It’s amazing how one small adolescent choice to sit out a race can shape the next 12 years of your life. I completely lost myself and didn’t even know it until everything I had was ruined.” What a humiliating story. But you know what? It doesn’t belong to Brett anymore. I’m the star of, granted a shitshow, but it’s my story is the point.

Gio

I'm floored by Mia's admission. It's so rare to hear someone lay out their mistakes unflinchingly, no attempt to make herself look better, just plain, painful truth. She's smart, humble and brave. And devoted. Everything she did in council was for her husband. None of her conservative positions are necessarily hers. The only thing I really know about her is she's devoted. "Sounds like you would've moved mountains for your ex," I think out loud.

"Yeah," she says shaking her head, like it was her fatal flaw. Only what I've been longing for from Kara for a decade.

"I spent years hoping my ex would do that for me." She looks up at me unbelieving and I hold her gaze, *Yes baby* I nod, *I still like you. I like you more every minute.* A hesitant smile emerges and I smile back at her, a bond seeded. Something about turning the moment from negative to positive for her makes me think of my dad, striding into our home and grabbing his wife. No matter what was going on before that moment, she'd giggle when he buried his face in her neck and the sun shone bright on us. I could have that with Mia, be the one to make her smile, the one she relies on and needs. And then she'd be in my bed every night letting me devour her, consummating our bond physically. "We're gonna be so good together," I tell her and she laughs, shaking her head, "You're so arrogant."

"I'm confident," I correct, grabbing her hips and dragging her into me, "about you and me."

"Ok," she acquiesces and her pliancy has the exact opposite effect on my dick. "Mi," I whisper, resting my forehead on hers. She closes her eyes and exhales shakily in the most docile surrender I've ever seen. *Ok* it says nervously, *take.* I kiss her, her hands coming to rest tentatively on my chest as the kiss deepens. My groin is clamoring to *take* absolutely everything. But I made a plan driving down to the park today not to overwhelm Mia with my lust. She wasn't thrilled about me coming right after breaking up with Kara. She explained

how her ex overwhelmed her. I need to hold back. I need to grow that seed.

Her hands have slipped inside my shirt, burning my abdomen with soft hesitant touch. She is so fucking feminine. “Mia,” I groan. “I don’t wanna take you in a park bathroom for our first time.”

“Noble Gio Barra,” she taunts in a whisper. “Wets me and then remembers he’s the pope.”

Damn her defiance. Fuck the plan. I grab her and kiss her again.

Mia

I’m wrapped up in Gio, his tongue pushing into my mouth. I answer with my tongue stroking his and my hands sliding up into his hair. Our mouths quickly find each other’s rhythm. He’s a damn good kisser, not too wet or frantic, confident, taking control of the pace and leading, tempting me along until I’m ravenous. He’s got one hand in my hair, tilting my head just right and the other gripping my body to him, my knee bent and his erection stiff against my shin. I feel the corresponding clench between my legs. I miss a man’s hands on me so much, that controlling grip to give myself over to. Brett never touched me with this need anymore. I wanna wrap my legs around him and grind my clit to a pulp.

And then Radar starts barking. I pull back, sense temporarily barked into me. No one’s around but she’s senile, ready to go guns a’blazing into the brush and she’ll end up in a coughing fit instead. I bend down to untie her leash from the bench and stand, picking her up and turning her so she’s facing me. “Radar stop. Radar,” I finally get her attention by patting her shoulder hard. She stops barking and starts coughing until something big floats across that nose and just like that, my little shit sommelier’s back on the job. I look down at Gio. He’s adorably rumped, polished Gio Barra tumbled by me. I can’t resist reaching out to straighten his collar, my index finger dipping inside to touch his skin. He catches my hand

and turns his face into it, kissing my wrist and biting the meat at the base of my thumb. Virility oozes out of this man and I wanna lick him clean. My aching vagina is ready to take this pony home and see what he can do in the privacy of a rented condo.

“The things I wanna do to you aren’t respectable on the first day,” he says low.

“Who cares?” I reason to no avail because Gio lets my hand go. “Maybe we should take a breather.”

“Maybe we should never see each other again.” I’m throwing a dick tantrum now but really Gio? Respectable? My underwear’s straight blown. It’s entirely possible I’m wet to the seat of my pants. And he’s curating. *Objectifying*. Sir, your dick. Now please!

Gio sighs and stands. “Let me walk you to your car.” You’d think my right to my own mind’d be respected, my body my choice and all but apparently you can’t ride a liberal’s mouth right out the gate without being judged. I grab Radar’s bowl, dump it and reattach it to my purse, cursing myself the whole time. I don’t know how to do respectable, ok? My mother didn’t gaze down lovingly at me in her arms like Melissa Dietz’s mom did so I don’t delay gratification, I chase it. Melissa’d never sleep with someone immediately. She’d make him take her out to eat and work for it and set the tone for the entire relationship. Shitty self esteem starts with having no one, then you act desperately to have anyone. I did it for 12 years.

I trudge toward the parking lot, Radar dragging behind me, tired and coughing and same, dog. You can’t make up for your mother looking down at you with regret during that crucial formative window. You got messed up at the factory level and there’s no fixing it. Gio built me up into a fantasy. I’m nobody’s fantasy, bird’s nest of freakish scars on my thighs.

Time’s coming to part ways again. I can give him a graceful out at least, people pleaser’s parting gift. *Let’s pretend you never came out here today* will work and god I really wish he hadn’t because saying goodbye to him last night was bad

enough. Now I need to do it again after kissing him and I really wonder what I did to deserve my life lately. Pity party's just getting into full swing when Gio reaches out and laces his fingers into mine. His grip is warm and strong and wrenches me back from self loathing. The tether of his hand feels like a rope of a different kind.

Gio

I have a hold of Mia's hand and make her look at me and tell her I'll call her later. She gives me a *sure you will* sad smile and squeezes into her car. I watch her drive away for the second time in < 24 hours and force myself into my car, passing and accelerating like I'm fucking the road with it. My rational mind says I should take the requisite amount of downtime between relationships but my dickbrain's rattling chains that I've been over Kara for months already because I felt absolutely nothing cutting her from my life last night like a surgeon excising a tumor. Scratch that, not nothing, I was literally Christmas Eve excited all night. As I exit downtown I think about how calm she was, like she knew better than me. It pissed me off. Everything's pissing me off. Like lost slow drivers in my way - I honk and swerve around them - and stupid downtown with its one way streets that make it impossible to approach my office from the west. Normally I'm coming from the east, when I've been at my condo instead of kissing Delicious MacDonald on a sit up bench.

I park in the garage and hustle upstairs. Diaz is working on his laptop at his desk. "You're here early," he comments as I blow by him, throwing my bag onto my desk. There's a dull ache in my balls, like there's a rubber band around them slowly cutting off blood flow like the poor goats my grandfather castrates on his farm in Mexico. I maybe should've stopped at my condo before coming to work.

Diaz appears in my doorway. "Mia rejected you?"

I slump into my chair. "No asshole, we made out on a sit up bench." So there.

He looks perplexed. “You took her to a gym?”

“No asshole, there’s a bunch of workout apparatuses along the trail she cut the ribbon on.”

“Oh!” he laughs. “Gotta love a rich person’s park.”

“The trail is nice. The apparatuses were getting less use,” I concede.

“You found a use for them,” he points out. “So how was it?”

“Glorious.”

“What’re you doing here then?” he asks, leaning on the door frame.

“I thought we should take things slow.” He doesn’t respond and I eventually look up at him. “I need to respect her, right?”

He raises an eyebrow, “who says?”

I pause before admitting, “Kara.”

“Wait, who were you at the park with?”

“Mia,” I answer through gritted teeth.

“So what’d she think of you treating her like Kara?”

“She said maybe we should never see each other again,” I answer and Diaz’s face stretches into a pained rictus. “I need to call her,” I give him a look that says *get out* while grabbing my phone and dialing. She doesn’t answer. I listen to her sweet voice message and hang up while my assistant parks his ass in the chair across from my desk.

“Go to her Gio,” he urges.

“I don’t know where she lives!” I yell in frustration. “Are there any public records we could get her address from? Legally?”

“No need to break the law, councilman. I have it.” He reaches for his phone in his pocket. I glare at him as he scrolls. “Stop looking all pissy and possessive. I got her address for you.” I feel a little grateful but don’t bother thanking him. “You’re welcome.”

“I thank you with your paycheck every week.”

He stops scrolling and eyes me from above his phone. “Her address must be worth more than my usual Friday thank you note.”

“You’re an asshole,” I answer.

“So you don’t want the address,” he starts to put his phone away.

“10k.”

He pauses, phone in hand. “You make boxcars. Your wife’s gonna be hurt one day when I tell her that her address was only worth 10k.”

“How do you know what I make?”

He scoffs like the question was ridiculous. “That’s the part of that sentence you take issue with?” He shakes his head and laughs softly. “You didn’t even blink at me calling her your wife.”

“15.”

“I’m your assistant and therapist.”

“You’re barely the first and hardly the latter. 20.”

“I had the foresight to obtain her address on your behalf,” he counters. We stare at each other. “Consider your testicular health. I know you’re planning to procreate with her.”

“25. Final.”

“Didn’t even bat an eyelash,” he smiles, shaking his head. “25,” he agrees and I jump up and head for the door. “*Think with your second head today asshole*” he texts me. When my phone vibrates again with Mia’s address, I’m already gone.

CHAPTER 13

I arrive back down south at a gated community in a street racing respectable 15 minutes. Fortunately someone exits and I drive in the open gate. There's a bunch of little streets and all the units have a driveway and their own garage. I drive to Mia's and park. I pound on the door and she opens it a minute later. "What are you doing here?" she asks angrily. "Thought I turned you off being unrespectable."

I step close and look down my nose at her. She stares defiantly up at me but there's hurt underneath. I grab her yoga pants at the waist and drop to my knees, yanking them down - Christmas! she's not wearing underwear - and attack her pussy like a starving man.

"Gio-I have neighbors!" she hisses, grabbing at her pants. "We're in my doorway!"

"I don't give a fuck about respectable Mi, I wanna eat you. And you need to learn when you provoke me, I'll go after you no matter where we are. Council, your doorway, I don't stop with you."

She's got her pants stretched up covering her front but I'm gripping those juicy butt cheeks with my hands and my face is still at pussy level. "Come inside! I rent here!"

"Tell me how much I want you." She stares back at me still defiant but backs down when I tug at her pants. "Ok! You want me," she says begrudgingly, her hand resting on mine, holding her pants in place. A smile is gonna break through those clouds.

"Giovanny Barra's crazy about me."

"You're crazy, that's for sure," she repeats. I bite her through her pants, "about me!" she gives in, wriggling in my grip and there's the smile.

"When I'm defiant, he wants to fuck me dirty. When I'm uncertain, he wants to fuck me sweet. He wants to fuck me all the time so I need to be careful when and where I push him because he's an elected official."

“You can’t possibly feel all that,” she looks achingly unbelieving.

“I feel more baby.” I get up and grab her, kicking the door shut behind us. Her arms and legs wrap around me. “I don’t know myself with you. You make me do things I never thought I would.” Her mouth smashes hungrily onto mine picking up where we left off on the bench. My hands slide to her ass, squeezing, “where’s the bedroom?” I ask urgently.

“Behind us,” she gestures, arm waving wildly behind her and her glasses smooshed crooked on her nose. She’s adorable. “Wait, Radar’s outside.”

I put her down briefly and go to the sliding glass door and let her dog inside. Then I pick her up, she wraps her legs around me again and I carry her to the bedroom, slamming the door behind us. I’m not gonna be interrupted by the damn dog again. I throw Mia down on the messy bed and crawl over her, gently removing her glasses and putting them on the nightstand. Then I yank her yoga pants back down, “I rip these off whenever I goddamn please.”

“Ok,” she agrees breathlessly.

I turn her to her side and duck underneath her top leg, kissing the back of her thigh to her cheek, licking and biting my way around the plump muscle that’s been the shining star of my fantasies.

“Where’re your panties, Mi? Did you soak them with your juicy pussy?” I ask between nibbles.

She lays back flat and stares at the ceiling. “You know I did.”

I settle between her legs and take in the view. She has a bunch of raised scar lines on her inner thighs, hatch marks over more hatch marks that my mind stumbles over briefly before the sight of her shiny pussy wipes my brain clean as a whiteboard. She doesn’t have a full head of pubic hair, but it’s not waxed either. Maybe she clips it or it’s growing out from being waxed - I’m fine with either maintenance plan Mi, just keep me in the loop. I open her labia up with my fingers. “Did

you wipe it? It's still so wet." Her pretty little clit's glistening like a sweet pink bud. I flick it with the pointed tip of my tongue and Mia sucks in her breath and arches her back. Excitement floods through me as her taste washes over my tongue for the first time.

"I was playing with myself when you knocked," she pants. "You got me primed at the park and left."

"Yes baby, I'm sorry about that," I tell her, all doctor-patient soothing. "I'm gonna take care of it now."

"Fuck Gio, please," she begs, undulating her hips and thrusting her pussy in my face and I suddenly remember her request from the park. I grab her hands and pull her up. "You wanted to ride my mouth," I remind her.

She covers her face with her hand. "I can't believe I said that," she admits shaking her head. "We don't have to do it."

I put my mouth to her ear, "I came in my briefs a little when you did," I whisper. She gives a shy smile and I kiss her long and slow before laying down on the bed and pulling her over me. As I watch her swing her leg over my head and grab the headboard, a lifetime of passion unfurls in front of me, long yellow brick road to explore with this woman, shameless and free. I latch onto her pussy the moment she lowers herself over my face, kneading her butt cheeks for a minute before moving my fingers to her vagina. She writhes above me, rising up to give me space to flick her clit and then fucking herself down on my fingers, grinding on my beard, lips and tongue. She rubs her wet all over my face and beard humping. I feel deeply content, the anxiety wound up in me over the last month and a half gone.

Mia

Gio's head is literally disembodied between my legs. I have to be careful not to smother him down there but he's strong enough to lift me off if I get too aggressive chasing orgasm. It's been nerve wracking ever since he ripped my pants off. Brett and doctors are the only people who ever saw my scars.

They're hideous, keloid and bumpy. Gio didn't say anything and I'm not bringing it up. Not when I'm aching to come, the tension's building and I'm galloping atop that mouth, *more, unh, more*. It's extremely erotic to ride the face of someone you feel inferior to. Professor, doctor, boss, fill in the blank and giddy up. All that superiority vanishes when you're gripping his head like a bike seat.

I run my hands through the councilman's hair, readying for an awesome come but then he pulls his fingers out. Mini spasms release the tension as full orgasm spins out of reach. "Your hole flexed like you came a little," he whispers, his breath tickling the inside of my leg. He licks my still shuddering vagina.

"I did," I gripe, resting my head on my arm and grasping for patience. Brett never noticed my signals. He was just present, with penis, awaiting his turn and not always patiently if I was taking too long. Sex had become turn taking and as the opener, I had a timeframe. If I went over (which I often did because I was razing forests like Paul Bunyan) Brett got annoyed. Performance anxiety is why I stopped asking.

Gio reaches for my hand and weaves his wet fingers into mine. "Relax Mi. There's no rush." I look down at his face sandwiched between my legs and can't help but lighten up. Never in my wildest dreams would I have pictured the councilman betwixt my thighs. I smile down at him and he squeezes my hand, "be patient baby. I'm learning to play you." His voice is gentle. "I'm sorry," I whisper anxiously, sitting back on his shoulders. "Am I degrading you in this position?" I fret. "I'm making up for hurting you," he reassures, fingers sliding back into my labia. "Making up's not necessary. You already apologized."

"Baby. Queen me. I'm gonna take all matter of liberties with you."

"Oh."

Good talk. I rise to my knees and vault back on my horse, grabbing the headboard as Gio's fingers drive back inside me. I'm knocking on orgasm's door in no time. I don't know what

he's talking about learning to play, the guy's a vaginal virtuoso. "You're tight again," he reports, thrusting hard, "so tight on my fingers."

"I know," I moan, swirling my hips, courting orgasm, come, *come* when he withdraws again. "No," I groan as the little spasms rob me of orgasmic tension. Is he teasing me? Orgasm with a partner's way too scarce a commodity in these parts to edge. If he won't finish me, I'll do it myself. I sit back and grab his wrist, horny kraken rising up and ready to roar. But getting what I need without demanding is my style. I dismount, rotate and remount facing his dick. "Tease all you want. I'll come from playing with your cock," and I lean down, rubbing my face along the huge wet spot on his underwear and licking it. "Your underwear look as wet as mine baby," I taunt, sitting up to tug my shirt off and rubbing my tits down his abdomen. He dives back into my pussy with a growl.

My mind tosses off everything but jockeying, leaning back to grind on his face and surging forward to play with my new toy. I take my time unwrapping it, rubbing it through his briefs, admiring the wet spot, imagining beads of pre-cum bubbling from the tip and fuck yeah, I'm gonna come, way before he does but this is the Run for My Forgiveness or Tour de Mia, pick your riding sports metaphor, this shit's for me. I peel his undies down to reveal a long meaty cock glistening with pre-cum and ruddy with need. *Yummy*.

"Taste me baby," Gio's voice urges, muffled by my pussy and I guess I said that out loud. No matter. My mouth waters and I bend down, clinging to the edge of a Niagara Falls orgasm. And for the first time with a partner, I don't rush over. I savor the delicious tension, delaying gratification because I want Gio to give it to me. I grab him, loving his girth in my hand, sniffing, inspecting as it stands tall before me, saluting soldier. I give it a hard pump, mesmerized by the fat bead I squeeze out, and yep, I'm gonna come. I lean in and lap up the milky drip and he groans "god yes, lick it. Please," and the neediness in his tone rockets me over the edge into the most erotic moment of my life: vaginal muscles seizing in an extra long climactic point while Gio's salty pre-cum permeates my mouth. I feel so utterly feminine. The apex drags on until

unhhh, I grunt hard and my vagina flexes on his fingers in satisfying waves, the relief deepened by his teasing. “Gioooo-unh,” I moan, riding the bucking pleasure to its delectable end, gripping his cock like a saddle horn. My legs are shaking so bad I flop to the side even though I wanna suck his dick dry. I stare up at the ceiling spent and weak. It’s never been like that and I needed it. The orgasm, the intimacy. This man.

This man. Because what was wrong with Brett, why our sex became turn taking instead of collaboration I realize, was compatibility. Regard the dirty masterpiece I just made with Gio. It belongs in a museum. And for the first time, I’m glad I got divorced. Up until now, I’ve been ashamed but I’m glad I didn’t live with subpar sexual compatibility because how sad. Brett was all about him and he was too damn conventional and quiet. Gio’s an articulate pig. He made me cry and he made me come, harder than I ever have.

He rotates around and leans up on one elbow, caressing my chest and tickling my breasts. “Do you have any idea how hot that was? I’m aching to fuck,” he whispers in my ear. “Do you have condoms?”

“No. Don’t you?”

“I should’ve stopped on my way here but I was rushing,” he admits. “Like 90 miles an hour,” he says with a shy smile before leaning down to kiss my breasts.

“What if you got pulled over, councilman? What would you say?”

“I left my girl’s gorgeous hot pussy unfulfilled and now she’s masturbating without me,” and my heart leaps at him calling me his girl. His hand squeezes mine while he licks and kisses down to my pubic bone. “I’ll go get some,” he says resolutely, kissing my pussy goodbye and getting up. I lay there momentarily, listening to him in my bathroom before getting up and following like a zombie, hungry for that beading cock. He’s at the sink washing his face so I get on my knees and push him back to make space for myself. He grabbed the towel and was drying his face before he realizes what I mean to do. I nuzzle my face into his groin, slip my

hands to his hard butt cheeks and inhale his private scent deep. “Mia,” he groans. I lower myself, licking all the way from his balls to the tip. He moans breathily and there’s a helpless tenor I pick up on that I absolutely love. “I’m in control now,” I tell him as he looks down at me with lust.

Gio’s not circumcised. He has the softest loose skin that helps my hand stroking up and down while I steal licks here and there. Near the crown there’s a cape of skin with delicate wrinkles that remind me of phyllo dough. The skin is marbled darker on his shaft, and he has a thick vein on the underside like the one on his forehead. I mouth the entire length of that sexy thing, all the crooks and crannies and pulsing contours. The tip is a deep shiny red, skin taut, all the blood vessels on point. I push the tip of my tongue into his slit, probing as far inside the little opening as it’ll go and Gio groans, grabbing my head with both hands.

“I could suck all the come out of you right now,” I say, looking up at him from under his cock, nudging it with my nose and then dragging my tongue up its length. “But you don’t deserve it after the way you teased me.”

He gets this seriously imperious look that makes me feel like I just screwed myself. “Defiant girl,” he shakes his head slowly, no, no, no and pushes me to the bath mat, “get on all fours and submit to me,” he growls and sure, I’m agreeable. Gio drops to his knees behind me and his hands caress my butt. “4 years you kept this thing covered. I want it out baby. I wanna watch you swing it around in public knowing my come’s dried under your clothes.”

Brit was right. My butt’s a hard worker. Employee of the month, that girl.

Gio tugs his stiff length low to thrust along my slit and slick himself. Slow, torturous drags of a width I’m dying to have inside me. Is he gonna fuck me raw? If I canted my hips slightly, he’d slide right in and I have to give myself a stern talking to not to. Would he be so bold as to try anal right off the bat? Gio’s confident but that move’s insane. Would I let him if he did? Yes. He pulls himself up and grips my ass, pushing it together to make a tight passageway that he starts

fucking, my wetness lubricating his thrusts. “Naughty slut orgasming on my name,” he pants. “You ruined it. They’ll say my name in council and I’ll think of you coming.”

“I’m gonna ruin a bunch of words for you.”

He laughs. “Go ahead baby, ruin the whole language. I want every one of those orgasms.”

I close my eyes to listen to him, imagining the dripping tip of his dick poking through my cheeks. His hands slide over my hips to my waist, no handing the ass cheek fuck and then gripping my shoulders, holding me in place while his pace increases and I cannot wait to hear this. Already it’s grunt, thwack, grunt, thwack. Then he groans *Mia* all breathy and my name’s ruined too. It’s the same relief he always says my name with lately but more intimate, the sound of a man’s pent up desire released and savored. I want it inside me. I turn around just in time to see the first excited spurt of warm ejaculate shoot onto my lower back, helpless moaning, then his pulsing cock throbs on my butt cheek, working thicker, extremely satisfying beads onto there judging from the breathy “god Mi” that accompanies them and finally it’s dribbling in my crack. “I gotta go shopping,” he mumbles rubbing his eyes, sleepy and spent. I wanna tend to him. His orgasm absolutely calls to me.

I crawl around on my hands and knees to lick the wick of come oozing from his half hard dick, looking up at him with it on my tongue before licking it around my lips provocatively, into my mouth and swallowing. “I’ll come with you. I’m hungry.”

“I love you with my come on your lips and ass,” he says and I straighten, putting my face in his neck. He makes me feel so sexy. I lick him and he groans, his head tipping back. I feel...I feel like I want to take care of this man’s needs forever. Like I’m meant to. I run my hands over his smooth skin, that graceful body and kiss his neck, his shoulder, his chest, Christ he’s gorgeous, I could worship his body for the rest of my time on earth but I’m getting carried away, post coital zombie wandering for Gio brain. I pull away abruptly and grab the hand towel off the floor, getting up to wipe myself off but he

snatches it out of my hands, “Leave it.” He’s still on his knees, face at my butt level and I watch as he smears his ejaculate around in a proprietary daze. Uh-oh.

I’m about to be real slutty y’all.

“Rub it around my asshole,” I tell him, leaning over the bathroom counter and pulling my cheek open. “And then we’re going out to eat.” I can’t help but laugh because I’m teasing him so good, it’s funny, it’s fun, I’m turned on and happy. I’m so happy right now.

“Mia,” he growls, pushing my leg up onto the counter and pulling my other cheek open, his tongue dipping into my crack. “Mine. This is my property,” he draws his come in slowly tighter circles around my anus until the tip of his finger slips inside.

“Gio. Hungry,” I warn.

“Mmmm. Food. Condoms. Then you,” he spanks my cheek, squeezes it and grabs his undies.

CHAPTER 14

We end up at a nearby Mexican restaurant. Gio sits next to me in the booth and we munch on chips and salsa side by side. “I like your place. Good that you have your own garage,” he tells me.

“It’s pricey. I can’t stay there past my year lease, but I needed a yard for Radar.” Gio nods his understanding, his knee touching mine. “I was afraid if I got an apartment it’d be depressing, going from a house with great neighbors and trails to a place full of young people, no one permanent, big concrete parking lot,” I swirl a chip around in the bowl of salsa. Divorce was bad, but having to downgrade my life was the blow I didn’t see coming. I was more attached to my life with Brett than I was to him. Isn’t that awful? “Where do you live?”

“I have a condo east of downtown. It’s small but the location is great, in my district and close to my offices.”

“You have more than one office?”

The server arrives with our plates. As we dig in Gio explains his numerous positions. The guy has like 5 jobs outside of council. He’s the policy director of an advocacy group, policy analyst of something else, executive vice chair of I stopped listening, board advisor of just nodding along. I hate careers I can’t even understand. I always wanna ask: so what do you *do* all day at your job? I’ll go first. I sell used houses for a living and I’m not even good at it. See how easy?

To top it off, he consults for people. Like he’s expert enough at whatever he does that people pay him to advise them how to do whatever it is. I feel so inferior, like I did in council when everyone was elbowing for position and making funny quips or hip references I didn’t get. My heart sinks. I have nothing to offer Gio besides the physical. No career, freshly cheated on and divorced. A boatload of inferior to all that fancy crap he listed off. “You’re so quiet,” he says, sliding his arm around my neck, tickling my collarbone with his fingers. *That’s because I have nothing to talk to you about.* He leans in close and brushes my cheek with his nose and I lean right back,

opening my neck again because I can't not. I'd frigging climb into his lap right now if my ego wasn't still smarting from his insane resume. I really need to throw up some warning flags before I tumble way too far into this thing.

"I'm only a realtor. I still have my license but I haven't found a new brokerage and don't know if I will," I babble nervous self negativity with Gio's mouth under my ear and my hands wandering his body.

His voice is soft. "You mentioned that last night." Oh right, when I was blathering away at poor Kara, shortly before Gio broke up with her. Her night was as bad as mine, which I can't help but feel is a little karmic seeing how she was being nasty to me. "Why don't you know if you're gonna find a new brokerage?" His hand squeezes mine, which unbeknownst to me is exploring his goddamn abdomen now. He picks his silverware back up with his other hand and starts eating again.

"I'm a terrible realtor," I'm tired of trying to be something I'm no good at. "I have no aptitude for it and I actually kinda hate it." There's literally nothing I'm scared of losing now. My house and social position are gone. I'm a divorcée with an old dog. Oh and a pile 'a money. Not gonna lose that.

"Your team's sales numbers were pretty impressive on the website."

"You looked at that?" Gio nods. "What were you looking for?"

"You."

"Oh." Warmth floods me. "Well those are all Brett's sales. He makes a ton of money. He's great at networking, great in a crowd, he was always popular and real estate was just a natural extension of that." Brett Brett Brett. I could sing his praises in my sleep. "He's fulfilling his genetic destiny."

"He's genetically destined to be a realtor?"

I'm voicing theories that're better left inside my head. Big fat sign blinking and flashing: **Not your equal here. Turn Back.** "I used to take Radar to this park off Menchac where the tree canopy is thick and there's tons of squirrels. She's a Rat

Terrier and she'd tree them for hours. She has a heart murmur and I made it worse running her like that - she coughs a lot now. But she was pure joy chasing squirrels, it's her genetic destiny as a rat hunting dog, what she was bred to do. Literally engineered for. Real estate is like that for Brett." I push my plate toward him. "I'm done. Are you gonna finish this?"

He picks up my silverware and starts eating automatically. "So what's your genetic destiny?"

I swallow hard. Illegitimate. Product of promiscuity. Fatherless. Disavowed granddaughter. Divorcée. Someone to no one.

Nothing.

Tears fill my eyes, "I told you at the park, I lost myself in Brett. And now," I shrug and bite my lip, "I don't know."

"I'd love to watch you find yourself," he wipes at the corner of my eye with his finger and then kisses me there.

"You'd probably die before I do." He saw my cuts. Apart from trying to kill myself, there's really not much lower a place to start from. But maybe he didn't know what they were.

"Have you ever heard of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona?" I shake my head no. "It's this amazing work of architecture dreamt up by Antoni Gaudi in the late 1800's. It was such a spectacular dream that it's still being worked on to this day and Gaudi's been dead for a century. The scope was enormous. Sometimes truly beautiful things take time."

"You've been there?"

"Yes," he hesitates, "Kara and I went a couple years ago. Gaudi's architecture is everywhere. It's an amazing city." He pushes my empty plate to the edge of the table.

"Sounds like it." New low. Jealous of a city.

He turns in the booth to face me, folding his leg up on the bench. "It's over with her Mia."

I nod quickly, embarrassed of my possessiveness. I had the best orgasm I've ever had but one orgasm doesn't come with ownership rights. Kara was with Gio for years, of course they

traveled. “Let’s get outta here.” I dig in my purse for some money. He insists on paying but I leave the tip.

We head to HEB. After perusing the condoms we choose Bare Skin Raw, truly hopeful marketing. I hate condoms, it’s like a plastic bag rubbing on my genitals. When we get back to his car, Gio asks if we can run to his place so he can get some stuff. “I’m unemployed. I’ve got nowhere to be,” I remind him. **Not your equal!** He smiles and kisses me. I don’t get it. I always thought he was so smart.

I look out the window at the view the whole way to his place, sorting through my emotions while the ride calms me. I should cancel this before I fall completely in love with him. But y’all. His Come Sound. I just need a few more fixes. Would recording it with my phone be super wrong?

Brit texts me as we ride the elevator up to his unit. *“How was last night at the bar? And this morning at the park? You’re not a public servant anymore-you’re FREEEEEE!!!!”*

I take a quick discreet picture of the back of Gio’s head as he’s unlocking his door and send it to her. She replies with a shocked face emoji and *“Omg who is that?!are you about to get laid? are you sending me the pic for safety? Quick, pin me your location in case you disappear inside that door!”* Thank god for my down to earth friend reaching out to me in the middle of this tumultuous day. I can hear her unpretentious accent slashin’ all g’s, homey and familiar in a foreign place.

Gio leaves me in the entryway of his unit and goes to his bedroom. I look around, small coat closet, folding bike hanging on the back of his door. I wander down the hallway to the living room and kitchen. It’s open concept with a small but upscale kitchen, modern cabinets and white quartz counters. Some of the cabinets have different knobs than the rest, irregular in shape. I pull open one slider to find the trash bin. Another opens the cutlery drawer. Two more above the counter house the plates, bowls and glasses. They’re very comfortable pulls, fitting my grip perfectly. I take a nosey turn around the living room, gazing at a few photos of Gio with what looks like a big family at his UT graduation. My phone vibrates, *“Omg are you getting laid or strangled? Or both???”*

“Both?” I text back as I wander into Gio’s bedroom. There’s a backpack sitting on his bed with clothes in it. He’s in the attached bathroom. I peek in and he looks up at me in the mirror while brushing his teeth. He smiles around his toothbrush and winks. When a man winks at me, it’s hard not to feel special for a moment. He’s gonna get laid for that in T minus 60 seconds. My phone vibrates again and I turn back to the bedroom.

“He could be into erotic asphyxiation and accidentally strangle you but we’d never know if he killed you intentionally or bc it was an accident!”

Gio slips his arms around my midsection from behind, bending his head down to my neck and nuzzling me. “Who are you texting?”

“My former intern,” I tell him as I pull away so I can text her back. *“I’m not into erotic strangling. If he kills me, it wasn’t an accident.”* I toss my phone onto his dresser. The top drawer has another of the funny drawer pulls on it, which I pull open to reveal his underwear. Briefs, boxers, mouth watering cotton that cups his cock and testicles on the daily and Lord Jesus help me I’m horny. Gio closes his hand over mine on the knob.

“I got these in Barcelona. Gaudi would squeeze balls of clay to make an impression of his grip and then the mold was cast in metal.”

“No wonder they’re so perfect in my hand,” I marvel, gripping the handle.

“It was made to be there,” his hand tickles a trail up my arm. I turn in his arms and slide my hands up around his neck, pulling him down to me. “Where are the condoms?”

“In the car,” he whispers in my ear, pushing his backpack to the floor and me back onto his bed. He crawls over me, yanking my pants down again. “I love the way you do that,” I tell him and set my glasses on his nightstand, cringing that I used the L word.

“Remind me to give you my credit card later,” he growls,

ripping my shirt and tugging my bra straps down. “I’m gonna destroy everything you own.” My body rises up to meet his mouth as he latches onto my nipples, circling them with his tongue and bringing them to hard tips. He moves down my navel and hips pinning me down, arms over my thighs and then he starts kissing my scars, tracing the lines with his tongue and mouthing them so gently that I know he knows. Tears stream down my cheeks. “I’m sorry it’s not waxed.”

Gio looks up at me. “What?” he asks gently.

“You probably prefer a waxed situation but my scars are so bad that it’s awkward to show anyone,” I babble nervously. “I shave but it doesn’t stay smooth long.” Pretty sure I’ve murdered the mood apologizing for stubbly pussy. “If I had any idea this was gonna happen today I woulda shaved.”

Gio crawls back up to my face and nuzzles me, licking my tears like a mate washing my face. “I’m gonna eat it every day from smooth to bushy.” Mood resurrected. I turn to kiss him, my fingers tangling in his hair. His mouth is salty with my tears and minty with toothpaste, a surprisingly good combination. Maybe they should put sea salt in toothpaste like they do all over chocolate nowadays but never you mind Colgate, I wanna fuck this sensitive hot mother fucker like nobody’s goddamn business. His mouth moves back down my body, kissing all the way until he’s between my legs again.

“Gio,” I pant with the need of a thousand fucks, “fuck me.”

“I gotta go to the car,” he answers, spreading my labia open with his fingers and staring. He dips a finger into my wetness and pulls it out. A drippy strand’s attached and he sticks his tongue out to catch it. I groan and let my head fall back to the bed. He zeroes in on my clit with his mouth, suckling hard and sliding his fingers inside me. I flex my Kegels on him in wordless pleading. “You need me baby?” he whispers.

“I need to come on you without a stupid condom between us.”

He looks up, startled. “Mia. You want that?”

“I was with one person for 12 years and got tested after he

cheated. I'm clean," probably way more than he wanted to know but I'm a goal oriented gal at the moment.

"Me too. I was with one person for 12 years."

"Then what are you waiting for?" I ask him. "Fuck me. Pretty please."

His smile is feral. "I love your manners. Especially when you're politely begging to be fucked." He crawls over me, bracing his elbows on either side of my shoulders and lowering his weight in between my legs. "I won't come in you," he whispers, kissing the tip of my nose. "I promise."

"Are you scared to?" I challenge him.

Gio's got the serial look again and I sincerely hope he fucks me to death. "If you want my come Mia, say so. I'll deposit it deep in you where it belongs."

Jesus H. Christ. "I want your come."

Gio

"Beautiful reckless girl," I tell her as I sit back and pull my shirt over my head and then stand to take my pants and briefs off. I see a flicker of hurt in her eyes and realize she took my comment critically. I need to fix that before we go any further, especially after she brought up her scars. She's fragile, from her divorce, being cheated on and whatever made her cut herself. I need to remember to be gentle amidst all my lust.

I crawl up the bed and lay beside her, bending my elbow to lean my head on my hand and sliding my other hand into her hair, kissing her slow, our naked bodies skin to skin. "I love your reckless Mia. It makes me wanna let go with you in every way. It has from the moment I saw you crying on the dais." She looks embarrassed. "And I want you to give me all that reckless so I can keep you safe."

Her face transforms from hurt to unbelieving to uncomfortable, like she wouldn't merit being looked after but she'll have to get used to it. She needs it and I want to. It's what my parents modeled for me. Mia MacDonald is the map

to understanding myself. When her walls come down, I feel close to home. Her revealing moments reveal my purpose.

I move over her, in between legs that open for me, wanting. I circle her opening with my cock and she reaches out and lays her hand on my chest. There's a moment of stillness, lust paused, the gravity of what we're doing like leaping off a ledge together. She's looking up at me sweetly solicitous *I hope I please you*, battered by life but softly tough, scarred from self harm and still hopeful, so goddamn alluring I can't wait to come my approval all over her ad infinitum. Everything's right inside me, the man in me roaring.

"Gio?" she's worrying I'm reconsidering. Not a chance. "Yes," I affirm, pushing into heaven on earth. She lets out a long moan, undulating her hips to draw me into her tight warmth and hooking her legs around mine, locking me into the cradle of her hips. "God you feel so good between my legs. I need you there."

I grab her hands and pin them aside her head, swirling my hips in a dirty grind, feeling her stretch as I hit new angles. "Has this perfect pussy been aching to be filled?" *Thrust* "Because I've been fucking my hand for weeks wanting to fill it." *Thrust*

"Gio," she pants. "Yes. Please. Fill me."

I torture us both a little pulling out to the tip and then tunneling back in slow, savoring every inch of tightness. "Your no condom idea was genius," I tell her, kissing the tip of her nose and nudging her with mine. "I don't use condoms inside a pussy molded to my dick and cast in flesh."

She exhales a laugh and her eyes flash with warm recognition. I can make dirty and sweet with this woman. I let go of her hands and grab one leg, shoving it up, bending her at the knee so I have something to grip while rutting. I palm her mound with my thumb where she needs it and lean on her bent leg, ending up over one side of her abdomen sideways fucking in my lust. *Thrust*. "You never leave my bed again Mi." *Thrust* "Where I lay, you lay." *Thrust* "I need between your legs and you will" *Thrust* "make it available to me."

“Jesus Gio, you’re gonna make me come.” Her soft hands are grasping for purchase on my bicep. “Hold onto me baby.” Her eyes close and I flick her clit fast and firm, watching her whole body culminate, my own climax racing up. “Say your man’s name and hold on while he fucks your body to ecstasy.”

“Gio...mmm...unh,” and she loses it, vagina contracting tight and grunting her feminine sound of completion, tendons in her neck straining. Her helpless whimpering and squeezing on my cock are the yin to my thrusting yang, tugging at my fragile restraint. I fuck her clenched muscle hard and barely hold off release, soaking up the image of her getting off on my dick, my dirty talk, me. There’s nothing on earth sexier.

“Get off good baby?” I ask when she opens her eyes. “Mmm,” she answers with a languid little sigh. I let go of her leg and straighten over her torso without withdrawing. She reaches up and runs her finger down my forehead and wraps her legs around me. “Your hungry little cunt almost milked the come right out of me.” I grab her tit and flick the nipple while I resume thrusting, plunging headlong into the best orgasm of my life. “I wanna breed you gorgeous girl,” I arch into my last thrusts feeling like a complete animal. I can’t wait to do her from behind, I know she’s gonna let me fuck her ass, all of it, I can’t wait. I’m in love with her. I thrust and hold, grunting as my dick throbs and spurts uncontrollably into her cervix, months of need released where it belongs, the extra warmth of my fluid blanketing the spasms into sweet relief.

I fall onto the bed and pull her to me, nuzzling her sweaty neck. “Mia,” I whisper kissing her chest where it meets her neck.

She drapes one leg over me. “Gio,” she whispers back, her fingers running through my hair. I reach down to her bottom, tickling her upper leg and butt cheek then down into her wet crack. I push my finger inside her still swollen flesh and she moans. Deeper inside I feel the thickness of my ejaculate and draw it out to her entrance, swirling it with her wetness and rubbing around her clit. “I’m a mess,” she murmurs.

“You wanted me without a condom baby. Now you say Gio everywhere,” I tell her as I paint my desire on her skin.

“You’re not worried about that?” she asks softly. “I feel nothing but satisfaction, Mi.” All my years with Kara were child’s play. Mia MacDonald is the only female I want from here on out. Her name’s spelled out in the DNA I just ejaculated into her.

“Ok,” she says hesitantly. “Do you mind if I clean up in your shower though?” she asks and my mind goes immediately to what I’m gonna need to do to her in there. “I gotta get home to Radar.”

“Go ahead. I’m gonna watch you,” I tell her and she smiles shyly. “I’m bringing stuff for the night Mia,” I tell her instead of asking, and my body instinctively braces for conflict. Because that sort of presumption with Kara would be grounds for battle, no question.

“Where you lay, I lay,” she answers softly and I pull her to me, holding her tight, peacefulness washing over me.

Mia

Gio leaves me in his bathroom after watching me shower for several minutes. I dry off with his towel and go to the bed to get my clothes. “I’ll buy you whatever you want to replace it,” he says as he holds out an Austin FC tee.

“It’s ok,” I put it on and he comes close, tipping my face up to his and kissing me.

“I love you in my shirt,” he says, stroking my cheek. I grab my purse and phone and Gio gets his backpack and we head to the elevator where he pins me to the wall and kisses me all the way down. I have to nudge him to get out at the garage. He pulls back dazed, touching his nose to mine, breathing hard, hand cupping my cheek, groin pressing into mine.

“Radar,” I remind us both. “Mmm,” he exhales and stares into my eyes, kissing me a last time before grabbing my hand and pulling me to the car. I love being tugged behind this graceful, purposeful man.

I check my phone after we get in. There are a bunch of texts

from Brit.

4:34 p.m. *Smart mi. Now I've got it in writing.gotcha girl. I continue reading as Gio drives.*

4:38 p.m. *I can hear it in that Dateline guy's low dramatic voice...Dying for the killer come...But I've got your text, I'll never let them say you died kinkily.*

4:54 p.m. *I've spent the last 15min zooming on the back of that head pic you sent and I'm pretty sure you're fucking Gio Barra, which would be AWESOME because I bet he slays in the sheets and not in a shallow grave way*

5:05 p.m. *those 3 freshman we paddle boarded with just came to my room. One of em's never had an orgasm, not even masturbating.i'm a farmer Mi, I grow plants, take care of animals, I've even grown people-that's what I told them at the RA interview. I could grow an orgasm but should I?*

5:09 p.m. *ok, I improvised and suggested gay porn.have you ever watched that shit? With the lord Jesus as my witness, there's no straighter female activity than watching a man fuck another man. Good god it's hot. First time I saw it I had a look mom, no hands orgasm*

5:22 p.m. *We used the dorm wifi to sample gay porn and then I had to make them leave so's I could touch myself. Do you think I shoulda let no gaz girl stay and learn how to masturbate? I'm in some tall corn here Mi, otherwise known as fucking Iowa. Are you done laying the sexpot councilman yet?*

We're halfway to my place when I text her back. *I'm done for now and Do NOT demonstrate masturbation and snap a picture of Gio driving. He looks over at me and smiles right before I take the picture, all sexy flirty eyes.*

Squeeeeeee!!!!!!!!!! is her response. My phone vibrates again. *"He's so damn hot. And so into you. Look at the look on his face!!!!"*

"He's into my body. The rest I srsly doubt but the force of my butt is strong."

"Your butt could cause traffic pileups. Omg, is the sex

hotballs amazing???? ☐☐☐!?!?"

I laugh and Gio turns to look at me. "My intern, well, she's my friend now. She wants to know how the sex is," I tell him.

We've gotten off Mopac and are stopped at a red light. He turns to me, sliding his hand into my hair and pulling me close. "You can tell her it was amazing for me. I can't wait for more," he whispers, kissing me. The light turns green and he turns back to driving. I can't help it, he gives me the warmest feeling.

"Gio says sex was amazing and he can't wait for more. Agree. 😊" We're in the driveway of my complex now and I need to enter the code into the gate keypad. I jump out and check my phone one more time when I get back in.

"Get it girl."

CHAPTER 15

I don't get it that night. Instead we spoon on my couch and watch public television. Gio likes this cooking show called Pati's Mexican Table and there's a marathon on. I'm glad he likes public tv because I can't afford anything but an antenna. Pati's this sweet mom who cooks authentic Mexican dishes for her loving husband and 3 adorable sons, who grow visibly through the parade of episodes. Her biggest problem in life is that she can't pronounce Worcestershire. I mean.

After a few episodes I get sleepy and turn toward Gio. He smells so good and he was already sleeping so I feel less self conscious about burying my face in his neck. His arms tighten around me with an "mmm" and his leg drapes over my hip, his breathing slow and steady. Jesus Christ he's as good with the cuddling as he is with the Calvin Klein modeling, city counseling, policy directing, chairing, consulting, apologizing, fingering, tonguing and sexing. Can he be bad at something please?

A new episode's started and Pati's telling us about the beeyooootiful peppers she's charring on her comal. Her oldest son's getting ready to leave for college and they're cooking together one last time. It's bittersweet for the devoted wife and mother. Brett's mom was similarly verklempt, watching her baby move out and go to college in the same damn city she lives in.

Gio'll have a wife like Pati one day soon. He'll be a congressman or senator and she'll be confident and loving and a wonderful mom, making delicious homemade food for their kids. Gio's wife won't be a divorcée. Powerful politicians don't marry women whose exes slept with teenagers. Senators' wives don't have tally marks scarred on the insides of their thighs. Congressmen don't marry women who raised themselves from age 11 like a wild banshee because their mom died and their country bumpkin Baptist grandparents disowned her and their father was Unknown on the birth certificate. You can't know how deeply shameful that one word is on your foundation document y'all. Or how negating it is to have your remaining kin refuse to acknowledge you. I've been

apologizing since the moment I understood what “disowned” meant. My mom struggled so much because of me. And then my stepdad got saddled with me when she died. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Apologizing’s my genetic destiny.

I had the best sex of my life today but my damn brain didn’t orgasm and I need it to keep track of facts. My sexual chemistry with Gio is off the charts Ah-mazing because things are brand new. Time will catch up with us, it does everyone, even perfect Pati. Until then it’s on me to limit the damage with birth control. Because I hate condoms, I’m not worried about STDs with Gio and I’ve got a pack of pills in the bathroom left over from Brett that I knew I could come home and start when I taunted him to come in me in a moment of reckless horn. The ball doesn’t go on forever Cinderella, she needs to get home and take her pill. Or scrub the stairs because she didn’t fuck the prince raw, she only danced with him and lost her weird glass house shoe. My ball was way better.

I manage to extract myself from Gio’s heavenly neck and turn halfway around but he’s got a pretty good hold on me with all his limbs still. And good lord, Pati’s house is huge and she has every imaginable color of hydrangea because she’s Mexico’s Martha Stewart apparently. Her patio is perfect for summertime cookouts with all her friends who love her creative cocktails. Do you know what happens to a woman who loses herself in her husband, personally, socially and professionally when she gets a divorce? She has no fabulous patio to host cookouts because it sold with her home and no friends to invite anyway (save one horny intern) to now Aaron and Hannah’s patio because all her contacts were her ex’s.

Aaron and Hannah Sullivan, hunky firefighter and his lovely wife, proud new residents of my house, capable stewards of my garden bed, parents of an autistic son and a toddler. Despite their son plugging his ears and humming loudly while tiptoeing through the house, Hannah’s sweet politeness never wavered, baby propped on her hip and husband touching her affectionately while guiding their son gently along the tour. Hannah will host lovely cookouts on my patio and Pati’d bring food made of pure love while hot Aaron valiantly put out the dumpster fire that was my life. Or something. I need to get the

hell up out of Gio's arms and take my stupid pill.

"Gio," I whisper, "I gotta pee."

"Mmm," he mumbles back and good lord is he cute when sleeping y'all. And I need to get up right now because I did not just imagine waking his adorable mini me son up from a nap and having him wrap his arms around my neck and call me mommy, I did NOT!

"Gio," I stop with the whispering and get with the normal voice.

"Sorry Mi," he says, lifting his limbs off me. "I don't like letting go of you," he murmurs and squeezes my hand before letting go. He tucks his hand under the side of his face, looks at me sleepily smiling and closes his eyes again.

I'm finally free. Good lord I love when he one-syllables my name. And oh my god he doesn't like letting go of me. I head to the bathroom to take my pill and get a goddamn grip on myself.

I grab the pack of pills at the back of the bathroom drawer and cup my hands under the faucet to get a swallow of water because I'm Classy.

It probably won't even take Gio the entire pill pack to get over his fantasy of me, I think glumly as I toss it to the back of the drawer again. He's smart, I give it one row of pills til the novelty wears off and he goes back to Kara or someone else on his intellectual level. A stronger woman would see this silly fantasy for what it is and sidestep it altogether but I'm not that lady. I'm the woman whose low self esteem sends her rushing headlong into things, chasing happily ever after like an addict. The pills will have to be my daily dose of reality, tick tock pop your pill Cinderella. I can't even get anymore because I'm uninsured. COBRA after my divorce was way too expensive. My life is so embarrassing.

I brush my teeth and use the toilet and then stand in the doorway of my bathroom, contemplating the beautiful man sleeping on my couch. Last night I came home and cried on that couch and tonight Gio's asleep on it. In between I had the

best sex of my life. I didn't know it could be like that with the dirty talk, Gio opened his mouth and it was like that deaf baby who hears for the first time after surgery...Laaaaaaa! Except it wasn't an innocent baby hearing his mother's voice for the first time, it was a desperately horny adult woman coming hard and fast to the filthy fucking symphony of Gio's words. And I can dirty talk him back and then we're nudging each other toward climax and if there's anything hotter than that, I don't know it. Gay porn according to Brit. I need to check that out when I arrive at the wasteland that'll be my sex life after Gio.

I go and sit on the sliver of couch next to him, touching his face, stroking the line of his eyebrows. He wakes up and smiles at me, stretching. "Let's sleep yeah Mi?" I nod and get up to let Radar out to potty. Gio stands with me watching her from the sliding door and we head to my bedroom. He takes off his shirt and pants, getting into bed in his briefs and watches me as I undress to my shirt and undies. I get in and he pulls me close, kissing me and whispering goodnight. I get to have sex with this gorgeous man for the next 7-27 days, 7 if he's all novelty, 27 if not. Oh but there's the stupid sugar pills that = period. Damn! But my period doesn't last 7 days. So 23ish days if he's squeamish and 27ish if not. In the shower it's totally feasible and something inside me helps the achy period pain but some men have no tolerance for blood. Brett acted like I was Chernobyl every 4th week of my life.

Anyway, this is good, I think as I drift off to sleep, plan B, not the abortion pill, Mia's plan B. Forget warning signs, Gio's not paying attention and blowing right by them. Plan B isn't dependent upon his participation, I'll just enjoy the hell out of the next 10-27ish days and when the pills are gone, the hot councilman goes back to his upward trajectory and I go back to crying on my couch.

CHAPTER 16

Gio's erection poking my butt crack wakes me up. Happiness surges through me at his big male body in my bed, breathing steadily and radiating heat. The memories of yesterday flood my mind, his body, his hands, that mouth. I push my butt against him to wake him. He moans and stretches. "Good morning," I reach around to take his hand and guide it between my legs, sliding those skilled fingers inside my wet underwear.

"Mmm," Gio whispers, kissing the back of my neck and rubbing his hard length against my backside. "Good morning to you beautiful Mi. Did you sleep well?" His finger circles my clit, swirling in my moisture.

"I slept great until I woke up with your morning wood stabbing my butt," I whine.

His finger slides inside and he bites my shoulder. "Beg."

I fuck back on his finger. "Baby, can I please have another finger? I came so hard on you yesterday but your dick is so much thicker."

"Sweet girl can have whatever she wants when she asks so nice," he answers, rewarding me with a second finger. "You gonna be more responsible today Mi? Make me wear a condom inside this hot little cunt? Put restrictions on me?" In, out, in, out.

"Hadn't planned on it," I breathe. "You said you'd keep me safe."

"I will baby, I promise." He rams 3 fingers in, "I need a morning come Mia."

"Take it from my body, councilman," I pant.

Gio gets up and yanks my hips up and back. "Get this fucking underwear off. I want nothing in my way, just your dripping pussy standing for me to breed." I rock back and forth on my knees, pulling my undies down in a slow wag of my ass. "Dangling this ripe fruit in my face like a little bitch in heat," his rock hard shaft brushes against my butt and he

spanks me hard once before prying down between my legs and frantically ramming home. “Sweet girl turns slut for me,” he pumps like a machine, ruthless and primal and I can only surrender my body to him, his hands, fingers, mouth and cock. “Anything, I’d do anything for you,” I pledge and he increases the punishing drives, “you’re gonna do everything for me baby.” When he presses my clit hard “now let me finger this come button,” giving me the counterpoint I need, my vaginal walls clench and let go, melting away the tension in delicious waves. “Gio yes,” I yell as relief surges through my veins like electricity generated from the friction of his dick drilling into my satisfied flex. I hope the neighbors are at work because there’s no doubt what’s going on chez Mia, but he’s got a handful of my ass gripped like a plump handle and he won’t let go for anything. I turn to look at him, his brain vein is huge, pure male animal rutting into the hole he just made so sensitive. “Mine,” I chant, lick-biting my shoulder like a porn star, “you’re *my* man,” and I see him give in to his climax panting “god yes Mi,” submissive, surrendered, I own him at this moment as he grunts in relief, his cock spasming inside me.

“Jesus,” he falls back to the bed pulling me with him and encircling me from behind. He bites my shoulder and holds on, grunting softly as his cock clenches inside me. “Mia,” he pants when he finally slips out and lets go with his teeth. I roll over and run my hands into his hair. We caress each other and touch noses and look into each other’s eyes for a long time.

Is it too soon to take another birth control pill? Because my plan was to keep my head on straight and here I am not 12 hours out from taking the first one head spinning and chanting he’s mine like possessed Ragen. I swear, I turned around and felt it SO strong but brilliant Gio Barra isn’t mine. He’s stratospherically above me and his gravity’s so powerful it’s gonna obliterate me. There won’t be anything left but the shadow burned into the ground from my incineration. I need to stop dreaming about what would happen if I hadn’t taken my pill but I truly wonder what he’s thinking, risking that with me.

Gio

I don't make it to any office that day. Mia and I eventually got up and showered together. She washed me gently, spending a lot of time stroking up and down my soapy hard cock. I took my turn soaping her delectable body, kissing the cut scars that make me want to take care of her, washing her bottom and then getting on my knees to lick it. Put her hands up on the tile wall, bent her over at the waist, pressed my face into her cheeks and licked that puckered tight little o, manipulating her clit and inserting my thumb and middle finger in both her holes until she came. After that it was too slippery in the shower for how hard I needed to fuck, so we got out and made it 2 feet to the bathroom counter. I shoved one of her legs up onto it, pushed her torso down, grabbed that ass that was presenting to me so obscenely, pulled open the cheeks with my thumbs and rimmed that wet puckered hole with my licked fingers while I fucked the front hole. My mouth was watering at the view. And then she kicked me off, yanked open the vanity drawer in front of her and threw a tube of lube on the counter, hitching her leg back up and laying back down on it. I stood there dumbfounded, gawping at her in the mirror like a fish out of water. "It's yours Gio. Take it," and my brain almost exploded. I've calculated anal percentages to the quadrillionth place but I hesitated, it seemed like a lot for the second day together and I didn't want to rush her despite all the deliciousness of letting go so far. "I know you want my ass. So fuck. My ass." And she licked the mirror. Great FUCK. "Start with your finger cuz it's tight in there and I'd rather you don't hurt me."

"I never wanna hurt you baby, you're precious to me," I told her. "We don't have to do this right away, we've got forever." I mean it.

"Gio. Put some lube on your finger. I don't mind anal when you go slow at first. And talk dirty."

This woman. If she had a license in that vanity drawer I would've married her then and there too. Instead I got on my knees on her bath mat, ate her asshole for way too long but I

couldn't stop and then lubed up my finger and slipped inside that beautiful tight ring, savoring every wrinkle as it stretched open, listening carefully to her breathing so I wouldn't hurt her, letting her tell me what to do so I knew she was ok. One finger became two and her hole opened beautifully and she said, "I'm ready, Gio. Fuck me there. Fuck my ass and tell me about it." And thank you very much, I did.

Ok, I didn't last 3 thrusts. Mia has the most beautiful butt known to man, round and full and exquisitely tight. I could come from the view alone but in combination with the sensation, well it was spectacular and way too short to tell her anything besides *I'm gonna come like a mother fucking cannon in your ass*. She took it in stride and made fun of me saying, "we're gonna have to work on your stamina" which I took to mean we're gonna practice anal, yes please but I also verified "does that mean I can do it again?" because it's important to the quadrillionth place for me. And she said yes and I took her back to bed and ate that delicious pussy for breakfast and then I was hard again and it turns out she let me do it again *the same goddamn morning* and the second time, oh that miraculous second time. I lasted and lasted and wrung myself dry in her anus, lying on our sides from behind, my arm over her waist, fingers stroking her clit, then leaning back and grabbing handfuls of her gorgeous bottom, mesmerized by my cock penetrating and withdrawing, her sphincter sinking in and pulling out, owning that hole slow and sweet for awhile and then a little frenzied because I was certifiably insane near the end-

Mi baby, am I hurting you?

(Breaths) *No, it's stretched.*

Do you need more lube? It's raw I've been reaming you so long, fuck it feels so good.

(Breathing) *Lube it with your come...*

I did baby. I'm fucking your ass with my come from the first time.

(Moaning) *Yes Gio.*

(Skin slapping) *I wanna look at it after I nut in you. Will you let me?*

(Soft laugh) *Yes...*

Are you laughing at me? It'd turn you on too, my come dripping out of your sweet back hole.

Gio...(breaths, shifting) yes, my clit. My pussy, please...

Need to come dirty girl? Begging me to give your greedy little cunt relief? (Urgent female grunt) Fuck, you just got so tight (Moaning) I'm gonna pump come into this hot ass-(shifting, hard thumps and my deep exhaled groan).

I am now conditioned to Mia saying my name to turn immediately rock hard and ready to fuck. Her, forever only her, but you've been warned city of Austin. *Yes* or *please* may get me arrested.

After I come I don't look at it dripping out of her. Instead I turn her around, pull her close and tell her, "I love you. Already." Because I do and she went all in with her body to please me, twice no less, so I'm holding nothing back in return. We have our whole lives to do dirty things to each other and as the trust between us grows, the sex'll get even better, if that's even possible, but I need to sow the seeds of that trust. I'm devouring her like a starved animal and I don't want her feeling used, not when it's so simple. I love her and it's time to start telling her. "It might seem fast but I love you and I want you to know." And Mia looks at me with this spooked nervousness like a cute little wild bunny and says, "I'm scared." I pull her closer and ask, "why baby?"

Mia

So I gave Gio anal. Because he's made no secret of his desire for my butt and I'm flinging everything but the kitchen sink at him sexually because I'm a glutton y'all, apologizing, people pleasing, sex, more is always better in my book and I'm on a limited timeline to boot. And when I people please Gio, the hot son of a bitch gives me every orgasm under the sun: Oral, missionary, doggie style, orgasm orgasm orgasm, 7 7 7 Cha

Ching and Super Deluxe Bonus in the anal round. I was feeling downright jaunty when he said I love you.

He already said it twice the day before, *I love you with my come on your lips and ass* (my personal fave) and *I love you in my shirt* - you mighta thought I missed it, I sure as shit didn't but those were watered down, situational I love yous. I love you when you wear my semen and shirt, not I, Gio Barra, love you Mia MacDonald constantly, 24 / 7 / 365 / ∞. But now it's I love you straight, no chaser, nose to nose, holding my naked body with his in anal afterglow, his come dripping out of my butt onto the sheets. My thoughts race *I love you too but I don't trust me, I'm easily swayed by whoever's confident and nearby and right now that's you saying you love me and I love you too but I don't trust - oh fuck, I'm in a figure 8.*

"I'm scared," is the extent of my verbosity. *Why baby?* Gio asks. Because we're each other's brand new shiny toys and the novelty is supposed to wear off, not turn into love. Plan B is a 28 day plan with no contingency for day 29. Don't get me wrong, I'm as big a fan of love stories as anybody. A life with gorgeous, smart, sexy Gio Barra would rival Hannah and her hot firefighter, hell, it'd give PBS Pati a run for her pesos. But it feels absolutely impossible for me.

"I'm having a great time with you," I hedge, "but can we take things slower?"

"Sure," he agrees casually. "Or maybe we should never see each other again."

Shit. Shitshit. "I'm sorry for saying that, I was horny and frustrated, I didn't mean it." Please don't take your dick away!

Gio laughs and kisses me. "It's ok baby. How do you wanna go slower? You want me to get up and go to work?"

"No," I figured we'd have one more day of bliss together before he had to go back to work.

"You want to have less sex?"

"NO." Hard one. As hard as his delicious dick. Jesus he makes me horny.

"You want me to not say those 3 words?"

I think about that. Because I loved hearing them. Loved loved loved it. Needed it, more than he knows. I shake my head no.

He kisses my nose. “So what do you wanna change beautiful girl?”

“Nothing. Is it ok if I don’t say it back though? For now?”

He looks perplexed and then nods, “Yes Mi. It’s ok,” sounding surprised that I asked.

“Thanks,” and I feel a little better. But then I feel bad because I do love him already and I don’t want to hurt him. “It’s not that I don’t feel it, I do. I’m just having a hard time trusting it so soon.”

“I understand. Thank you for telling me. Take your time, we’ve got forever.” Y’all. I mean. I love him. “Let’s go get some breakfast, ok?”

“Kay.”

CHAPTER 17

Gio

As we drive to Kerbey Lane Cafe for breakfast - brunch at this point because we've been fucking all morning - I can't wipe the smile off my face thinking about Mia asking if it's ok if she doesn't say she loves me yet and then telling me she does anyway. Polar opposite of Kara. Kara never asked if anything she did was ok because I could fuck the hell off if I didn't like something. She loved Beyoncé's Lemonade album, especially the Hold Up track and video. I like the video (I've seen it enough times) and I thought the way she dealt with Jay-Z apparently cheating on her was creative genius. But I never cheated on Kara, so I found her embrace of that smash-your-windows attitude a little alienating. Nor did I ever need her to take a backseat to my career. I treated her like a queen, supported everything she did and cheered her on, went out of my way to please her, shut my mouth during sex, buried my desire for anal, stifled the urges she labeled primitive or passé while she acted like it was all a given, my penis penance for hundreds of years of shitty men and Jay-Z. Well fuck that. I'm a modern man ready to support the woman I love doing whatever makes her happy while also owning every last inch of her.

Mia worried not returning my I love you would upset me. She knew I'm crazy about her beautiful butt and gave it to me without reservation or limits. Her desire to please me beckons like a siren. I can hear Kara now, admonishing me for being reductionist or exoticist or essentialist...I needed a PhD in women's studies to understand half of what she accused me of sometimes but it's time to evict her from my head. Mia cares about my needs and I want to take care of hers in return. She weaves us together.

I slide into the booth next to her and the server arrives to take our order. I can tell by the way she's looking at me that she recognizes me. I order an omelet and Mia asks for

pancakes. The server pauses before leaving. “You’re Gio Barra from city council right?”

“Yes,” I respond, “and you’re...”

“Greta,” she answers. “I wish you were my council member. I live with my parents still so I’m stuck with the conservative crybaby.”

Mia goes utterly still beside me and then slowly turns her face down and to the window. I clear my throat, “Actually Greta,” I begin but Mia’s hand’s like a lightning bolt onto my thigh, *don’t*. “Would you mind getting us coffee please? Bad caffeine headache,” she asks pleadingly, rubbing her forehead with a shaking hand. I can see the tears through her fingers and the distortion of her glasses.

“Oh sure, sorry,” Greta turns and leaves.

Mia drops her hand and looks absently out the window. “This is why I’m scared,” she says, her tone resigned like she knew this would happen. “We’re too different. Once you get to know me, you’ll regret saying-” she swallows hard, “too much,” she chokes out, tears streaming down her face.

I look at her for a moment and then grab her, “come here” hauling her onto my lap, her legs dangling onto the booth seat. “Gio what are you doing?” she asks as my arms slip around her waist and lock at her side. “Getting you where I want you,” I tell her. She’s stiff but slowly relaxes into me, pulling off her glasses and resting her head on my shoulder, face in my neck. “I love you more every minute Mia. I’ll never regret saying it. Let me stand up for you.”

“No one does that for me,” she whispers back, tears rolling down my chest inside my shirt.

“Well get used to it then,” I tell her more vehemently than I mean to. What the hell was wrong with her ex-husband?

“Ok,” she sounds hesitant, “but let me calm down first please.” I nod. My needs, her needs, feeding back on each other over and over again in an infinite loop, binding us together ever tighter.

Greta’s back with our coffee. She gives me a strange look

because Mia's on my lap but I'm too pissed to care. I thank her and press my lips to Mia's hair, holding my girl close and stroking her body. Her breathing slowly steadies. Councilwoman Sinclair was a wolf in sheep's clothing, Brett Sinclair using his wife as a megaphone and dangling his love in front of her like a carrot. She said she started having to earn it. The offensive point she made was his. She has cut scars all over her thighs. And I attacked her while she cried on the dais and my supporters cheered. Not the man I want to be anymore.

"Food's coming Mi," I whisper and she immediately starts to move. Instead of letting her slide back to where she was sitting though, I slip out from under her toward the window, so she's in between me and the server. She turns to me panicky and grimacing, "my face" so I use my napkin to dry it. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, you know that?" I whisper, leaning in to kiss her as the plates are set down, "never wear makeup again. Or the contacts. Please." She puts her glasses back on with a shy, flattered smile and I feel a burst of pride. Bonding with Mia feeds a deep need in me. "Anything else I can get you?" Greta asks.

"No, we're good thank you," I answer, my eyes intent on Mia. "I don't want the food to go cold," I tell her. She nods and we eat in silence, side by side, legs touching. Greta checks in on us and I tell her we'll take the check. When she returns, I get out my wallet and while she waits for me to give her my card I tell her, "Actually Greta, I regret the way I went after council member Sinclair. I wish I would've made my point and moved on," I pass her my card and slide my arm around Mia's shoulders. She leans into me, hand on my leg.

"Why?" she responds, inserting my card into her reader. "It was awesome when you tore her to shreds." I take Mia's hand and stroke her palm.

"No it wasn't. I don't want to be cheered for ripping anybody to shreds," I tell her.

"You didn't seem to mind when it was Baldwin," she hands me the card reader and I let go of Mia briefly to tip and sign, "you're right, I didn't. That was wrong I guess, but Baldwin was also different."

“Why? Because he’s a man?” she takes the card reader back.

“No, because he never felt bad about what he said. He never relented.”

“How do you know Mia Sinclair felt bad? Maybe she was just manipulating everyone,” Greta asks, handing me back my card.

“I wasn’t manipulating,” Mia’s voice is quiet but firm. She takes a deep breath and turns.

“Oh my god, you’re her?” Greta asks in disbelief. I fold my leg up in the booth and put my hands on her hips so she can feel me behind her.

“Yes,” she answers softly. “I’m sorry this is really awkward but please know I didn’t cry on purpose. Gio’s so articulate and to have him go after you for 10 minutes straight while people cheered, I didn’t wanna cry but it was impossible,” she explains. “Mi,” I say, bending to her ear. “It’s ok, you already apologized,” she tells me, turning back to Greta. “I was out of line with my comment that evening, it wasn’t true and I shouldn’t have put it out there. I ran for city council for the wrong reasons and never should’ve been up there in the first place. I owe you an apology, you were my constituent and you deserved a better representative.”

“Okay,” Greta answers hesitantly.

“I’m Mia MacDonald now. I’m starting over. I hope you can forgive me but I understand if you can’t.”

I can’t stop myself from slipping my arms around her from behind and gathering her against my chest. “I love you,” I whisper kissing her cheek. I love saying it, it feels right, sounds right, it is right. Screw going slow, I want a life with Mia *now*. She smiles into my cuddling, I see her soaking up my affection like a thirsty plant and I wanna drench her with it like she did her pancakes with syrup. Greta and the restaurant fade away. Nothing matters but Mia. She turns into my nuzzling, “I think I said that ok,” she murmurs.

“You said it perfect,” I tell her, nudging her with my nose and kissing her again. “Perfect.”

Mia

Conservative crybaby, I think to myself, taking a deep breath once we're in the car. Bolstered up by Gio in the booth, his solidity at my back, I handled the situation ok. Cuddled in his arms after I felt cherished. But now I'm replaying the ugliness of the exchange, worry mounting. Gio's risking everything for a relationship that might not last a birth control pack. Ok yeah, he said he loved me and I love him back so Plan B's torched, but how will he feel if he loses his seat for me? I've been someone's cost before. I'm not worth it.

"Are you ok, Mi?" Gio's voice breaks into my thoughts as he pulls the car over to the side of the road. "Let's talk." He shifts into park and turns to me. "I know that was hard. What can I do?"

I look out the window and shrug. "It is what it is. Your supporters hate me. My former constituents don't exactly love you."

He reaches across the center console to take my hand. "So what are we gonna do about it? Since I love you and you feel it too even though you wanna wait to say it?"

I turn to him and rest my head on the seat. "Maybe also wait to let others know?"

Gio fiddles with my fingers, rubbing each one. "For how long?"

"Long enough to know if it's worth risking your career."

He stops on my ring finger, stroking the knuckle and then just holding that one finger, gripping it with his fingers. "I already know it's worth it Mi."

"But we could've just let that go and not said anything. She didn't recognize me."

"I understand you being scared and wanting to slow things down. Can you understand me loving you and not wanting to let someone talk about you like that?"

I don't answer right away but eventually concede "yes."

He loosens his grip on my ring finger and continues playing with my hand, tickling my skin with his soft touch. I watch him, his long fingers and masculine hand twined around my smaller feminine one. "Good. I thought it went well with Greta. We found a way forward. Together," he's watching me and ventures cautiously, "You know I'll get asked about it at the presser."

Oh lord. Back to council like Katniss Everdeen going back to the arena which ok, that's some dystopian level drama on my part. I wouldn't be at the presser, only the subject of it with Gio being forced to answer questions about us, which me dragging him down by association is in no way better. Before I only embarrassed myself, Brett was too busy screwing a teenager to care but this is precisely how it could happen, gossipy reporters digging for salacious details which I've got aplenty and then gleefully shouting them from the rooftops for Gio to be unseated. "I don't feel good," I say, grabbing the door handle and jumping out. I might puke pancakes.

Gio gets out of the car, "Mi what are you doing?"

Walking by the side of the road because there's no sidewalk - it's not really a road people walk on but Gio's car just became a vise. I woke up this morning to the best sex of my life and by the time we're done with brunch loving me's gonna cost him his career and then he'll grow to hate me like Brett and things'll be right back where we started so Plan C! We can avoid all the heartbreak and professional ruin and go our separate ways on this hot road of misery because even though it's mid September, it still feels like 1000 degrees on the asphalt in the Texas sun but it's not that far to my condo. I'll walk home, Gio'll go to work and forget about me and I'll jerk off to my cache of hot sex memories and love him forever. And yes the plans are getting lamer as I move through the alphabet but this thing's a barreling train I'm frankly running out of good options to get off of.

"Mia, stop." And his voice is so authoritative that I do. "Look at me." I turn around and look at him. "Talk to me." Heaven help me, I word vomit.

"Gio, I'm not worth this for you, I have no career, I was a

terrible realtor, terrible councilwoman, terrible wife, Brett cheated on me with a teen-" my breath hitches on that word it's so humiliating "teenager if you wanna announce that in the presser, you've seen my scars if you wanna explain self harm to the reporters. Also I have no family, my mom was promiscuous, that'll be newsworthy for the gossips at KAUZ, she didn't even know who my dad was and my grandparents disowned us, they'll have a field day with that and then she died of cervical cancer because she was a whore according to them-" and oh, I'll just set in the dead weeds by the side of the road for a spell, Plan C *updated, worst one yet but I can walk home whenever, no one's waiting for me besides a deaf old dog because when I called my grandparents to tell them my mom died, I was hoping they'd take me in but her mom's vicious sniping took all my breath away, led to my first cutting and it still has the power to cut me down to this day. Side of the road it is.

"Jesus Christ," Gio comes and sits perpendicular to me, straddling and wrapping his arms and legs around me and the tears become sobs but he holds on tight, breathing steady, his lips on my temple, rocking us gently. As I calm down, he pulls me even closer, tucking my head under his chin. "Mi."

"Mmph," gravel's digging into my butt which may be leaking come onto my undies, dry grass is poking my arms, I'm sweaty, face sticky with tears and I cannot breathe one iota of air through my nose but amazingly, I actually do feel a little better.

"Every time you tell me stuff you think will turn me off or scare me away, it does the exact opposite."

"How is that possible?"

"You're my genetic destiny." I sigh out a laugh. "Be brave with me Mia."

"I could ruin your political career."

"How? None of those awful things that happened were your fault."

"Your constituents won't vote for you if you're with me."

“Good thing I have 5 other jobs then.”

“We could wait until the election’s over and you win your seat.”

“If we need to go slower because you’re scared, we’ll go slower. We’re not hiding. Ever.”

I press my face into his neck, giving in for now because Gio keeps knocking my objections out of the park and he smells deliciously sweaty. “I love you. So much already. It’s terrifying,” and so much for not saying it back, despite all my reservations, I can’t resist this man. So that’s it, time to stop pretending I can avoid wherever this relationship’s headed because I’m not gonna stop it from going there and my attempts to do so have been embarrassingly feeble. People pleaser’s give their fate over to others, here ya go, please do right by me although nothing’ll happen to you if you don’t, so you know, do whatever you want.

“I love you too baby, so much. But I’m not scared, I’m excited,” he tips my face up to look into my eyes. “Let’s go home ok?”

And just like the virtuoso snuggling and ace apologizing, Gio serves me a big, reassuring, committing word, Home, like we live together. My heart sings hope into the darkness like that first indomitable bird in the morning. “I’m excited too,” I admit. Because maybe, just maybe, he’s a safe person to give my fate over to?

His eyes light up. “Good Mi. Great,” and he kisses me, snot and sweat and tears all over my face and he kisses me like I’m gorgeous.

Gio

I can’t believe what Mia told me. 11 years old and her only family gone, her awful grandparents assailing her mom in death, her stepdad leaving her in a house he maintained but moved out of, stocked the pantry with ramen and canned food like no one was ever coming back for her, paid people to mow the lawn and clean. One of the cleaning ladies brought her

cooked food and held her while she cried the first couple of years. He sold that house when she left for college but she still drives past it to this day. “When no one’s around, you attach to inanimate things,” she explained as we sat talking on her couch and my brain went *Not anymore. I’ll be around forever.* Family and ex-husband failed my sweet girl miserably but I will be husband and family 2.0. Mia will get every last bit of constancy, attachment and reassurance she needs from me. She will bask in it.

“I’ll be home tonight,” I tell her the next morning as I leave for work. I need to stop at my condo and grab more things, so I take my empty backpack with me but I leave everything I brought with me in her place, clothes on the bed, toothbrush and razor in the bathroom because I know she’s gonna feel the lack of me when I leave. She’s been looking forlorn all morning. I’m gonna miss her like crazy too. We’ve been together the last 48 intimate hours, touching, learning each other, talking, making love. Now I need to lead us into everyday life. Mia’s not weak - she’s probably stronger than me - but she is uncertain. I am not.

I kiss her one more time and press my forehead to hers, my hands encircling her lower back. “I’ll text or call during the day and when I’m leaving work.” *Soon you’ll be confidently waving goodbye to me from a home that’s ours* I try to transmit from my forehead to hers. I’m walking a tight rope of wanting to tell her everything I’m ready for but also trying to stick to a slower pace that doesn’t freak her out. “I love you. I’m gonna miss you.”

She nods, her eyes wet. “Maybe I’ll make some dinner. Try a Pati recipe,” she offers.

“That sounds great Mi. I can help.”

“Ok,” she agrees, looking more confident. I pull her close again and bury my face in her neck, inhaling her smell. “See you tonight,” I whisper into her ear.

“I love you,” she says gripping me with a suddenness that feels like panic and a wistful tone that signals dread loud and clear. I press her to the entryway wall and kiss her deep. “I’m

coming back every night Mia,” because right now she needs a big nugget of reassurance.

“Please Gio,” she whispers into my mouth and now I’m 30 minutes late because *please Gio* made me yank our pants down and nail her to the wall.

Diaz looks up expectantly from his desk as I stride past him into my office. “You look great,” he comments when he comes to stand in the doorway.

“I am,” I affirm. And I need to not think about it too much or I’ll drive back home to the source. “What’d I miss?”

“I’ve been prepping a bunch of reelection stuff. Ready to get going on it?”

“Yes,” he turns to go back to his desk. “But people aren’t gonna like me being with her. I could lose the seat,” I warn the empty doorway.

He returns to stand in it. “Trying to get out of that raise?”

I shake my head no. “I can give it to you as severance. If you’re gonna jump ship, now’s the time.”

He comes to my chair, leans down and cups my face. “I’m not going anywhere Gio.” He nods purposefully once and heads for his desk. “Let’s get to work.” What a strangely intimate moment between me and another man. I exist only for Mia in that way so it’s not weird. I actually kinda like it.

CHAPTER 18

Mia



Over the next 3 weeks of my pill pack, I give up any pretense of trying to keep Gio at bay or my feelings in check - he moves in and I fall head over heels in love with him. There are strong, smart women like Pati whose lives are so full of friends and family and hydrangeas the size of your head that they're able to take things slow, they don't spend every waking minute with their man and kudos to them for having strong principles because I have none. No family or friends except Brit and zero career motivation, so what else do I have to do besides play Florence Fucking Henderson?

I grocery shop every day, getting fresh ingredients for a new Pati recipe each night which is the epitome of unemployed nesting bubble. Gio even gives me his credit card for the full housewife immersive experience. And every evening he stops at his condo and gets his mail and fresh clothes, laptop and tablet, pairs of shoes, hats, books, bed pillow, arriving every night arms full, saying nothing. It's a delivery of commitment every time I open the door and very quickly his things are reassuringly everywhere, like the drape of his arm over my shoulder when he's gone. After the fourth day I do our laundry together and fold his clothes into piles on the bed. When he gets "home" that night he asks if he can have some drawer and closet space and I destroy my neat piles attacking him on top of them and spend the next day blissfully marrying our clothes together in my closet and dresser like they're Ken and Barbie.

Another public confrontation isn't that likely but we stay home all the time anyway. Gio's way more popular than I ever was and he seems to sense that I'm not up for another run in with a constituent. I feel him being so careful with me, allowing us time to nurture our bond in private. We don't talk about all the ramifications of him moving in, he just does it little by little every night, easing me into it like slowly turning the heat up on a frog in a pot which what the hell is wrong

with me that him moving in feels like being slowly boiled alive? Anyway the point is: he wants to live with me which is both thrilling and freaking me out. Brit Ubers unannounced to my love nest one day and pins me with a knowing gaze from the couch covered in the button down, t-shirt and pants some rabid woman ripped off Gio the night before. I hope his undies are buried in the cushion crack because it's not like I left them on him.

“Do you love him Mia?”

I hesitate for only a moment because here's the beauty of my gay porn loving intern with the intimate odor issues: I can tell her anything and she'll never judge, never scorn me for loving above my pay grade. “I do. I adore him.”

“And he loves you?”

“He says he does. All the time.” All day, everyday via text, flowers, phone calls, post it notes, in my ear after he wakes me in the middle of the night with his needs, so intimate and private in the dark of my room, listening to him work his come into me. It's incredibly healing after the pummeling of my divorce and I think I deserve it.

“That's awesome. He's gorgeous, oh my god, you're gonna marry that hot politician!” she squeals in delight. “And oh my god, your babies! Stop right now with this happiest ever after ever!” Suffice it to say, Brit's on board.

We cook together every night but even with all the fancy fresh ingredients, Pati's recipes are a letdown considering how orgasmic she makes them seem on her show and I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say I think she fakes it a little. We followed those recipes to a T and Gio's actually got a lot of experience cooking Mexican food with his mom but alas, no food climaxes. There were orgasms on the kitchen counter where I chopped stuff up and screwed the shit out of Gio but that had nothing to do with PBS Pati and everything to do with XXX Mia around Gio.

CHAPTER 19

My happy little bubble is about to pop. It's council tradition for everyone to head to Dumonts before the end of the term to toast the year's accomplishments before the election ushers some people out and new ones in and Gio wants me to join him and you know your trusty people pleaser agreed. From the wonderful cocoon of my condo where I have him all to myself to the witty banter and social maneuvering of council where he'll be in his element and I'll be in the audience, right back where I was with Brett. Nonexistent. Sure, I'm projecting Brett behavior onto Gio, I'm even a little preemptively mad at him for forgetting about me at Dumonts which hasn't even happened yet and is thus truly illogical but I'm nervous, ok? When I'm nervous I go negative, usually self afflicted but Brett's been a constant target for negativity ever since fucking a teenager and coming tonight was Gio's idea, so what the hay, he's catching some blame too. We're also ripping the bandaid off with a surprise unveiling of our coupledness, as if I didn't have enough to worry imagine going wrong already.

So here I am, parking at a nearby garage and taking the elevator down to street level in a sexy black bandage dress because as we know, I'm not above using my looks as a crutch in a challenging social situation and Gio likes to see my shape. Because even in a torrential downpour of negative, your resident people pleaser's still got her nose to the grindstone y'all. The hungry look on his face when I emerge from the elevator is worth it. He opens the glass door to the vestibule and draws me into his arms. "I know you weren't excited to come but are you trying to get me to leave right now? Because I will," he says, sliding his hands down my back to my butt. His lips are on my neck and yes, I'll leave right this second with you- "God you're beautiful Mi. I'm gonna be so proud to be there with you" nope, never mind, not getting out of this.

"Thanks," I tell him, turning for my kiss. It's long and passionate, my hands running through his hair, his roaming all over me. I eventually pull back, looking into Gio's glossed over eyes from behind my fogged up glasses. "We're outside a

parking vestibule,” and I’m breathless from that kiss.

“Do you wanna be fucked in the elevator before or after?” he asks, his forehead on mine and voice heavy with need. But then a group of people walking by turn and go inside the vestibule.

Gio grabs my hand and bites it, “after” and tugs me in the direction of the bar. I ask how council went to get our heads back in the game. When he reaches for Dumonts big iron door handle though, I balk, tugging on his hand to wait. He turns to look at me and I back further onto the sidewalk, pulling him with me. “You sure you wanna do this?” Because there won’t be any going back from letting this many people know about us.

He gazes down at me tenderly, “Yes Mi. I’m sure.”

“Is it ok if I leave if I get uncomfortable?”

His arms wrap around me, pulling me close. “If you’re uncomfortable, we’ll both leave.”

“You should stay if you’re enjoying yourself.” Brett loved social situations, he was always the center of attention, crowing away and ignoring my misery because he never wanted me to leave, not when I was a member of his flock. And yes, I’m anticipating Brett behavior with Gio again. Shoot me. I’m shitting myself with nerves right now.

Gio looks at me quizzically, hand cupping my cheek. “I promise I won’t be enjoying myself if you’re uncomfortable. Can you trust a little?”

I search his eyes for that trust, brown, steady and calm. “It’s just that we’ve been alone so much and I like that, just you and me because I don’t have to share you.”

“You never share me baby, alone or in a crowd, I belong entirely to you,” he reassures. “Come inside. You’ll see.”

I love this man’s words, the dirty words, the mollifying ones, the committing ones, all the words that cross his lips. Well maybe not the ones that made me cry in council, *deliberate misinformation, mislead or spread lies* those ones were more loathsome than lovable but I deserved them. “Ok.”

“Thank you,” he whispers, bending to kiss beneath my earlobe, “for coming and for trusting.” He turns and opens the door and leads me inside. Several people glance at us as we enter and the surprised looks on their faces effectively erase Gio’s sidewalk pep talk. I don’t miss this environment one bit. I take a deep breath, girding myself for the hour or so I have to stay. “Mia look at me,” Gio pulls me to him and tips my face up. His concerned face eclipses everything, “you have all my attention. Whenever you need.”

I put my hand on the side of his body, right above his belt, a touch that’s normal for us alone but screams possession in front of others and Gio was right, I feel it again like I did when I sex chanted he was mine. In this public space amongst all these people, I can touch him however I want because he belongs to me. “Thanks.”

His hand slips to my nape, pulling me in for a slow and sweet kiss, a light touch at first and “no thanks necessary,” then a little more pressure, his lips gently sucking on mine, holding my face so gently. *I love you* he tells me so often in these moments he doesn’t even have to say it anymore, it just rings in my head, a nose nudge says *I cherish you* wordlessly too. If we weren’t in front of a bunch of colleagues, my legs’d be around him in a hot second consummating that love. Instead Gio simultaneously calms me and owns us in front of everyone, so go ahead and add multitasking to the list of things he’s awesome at. If there were any questions, there aren’t now, the record’s been set: we’re together, we’re in love, witness the perfect fit that is my body pressed up against his.

He ends the kiss and gazes into my eyes for a moment before turning to the bar and pulling me with him, leaning in to motion to the bartender. “What do you want to drink?” he asks, enveloping me in his stance.

“I’ll have a light beer please.”

“2 light beers please,” he tells the bartender, handing her his credit card. He turns back to me, strokes my cheek and runs his finger down my neck to the edge of my dress, tickling my skin along the neckline, staring at me intently. He leans down and murmurs in my ear, “tell me about your underwear.”

“Nothing to tell.”

His eyes go molten. “Are you wet?”

“I’m in the same room as you, so yes,” I whisper back.

A slow smile spreads over his face as the bartender delivers our drinks. Gio hands me one, his fingers lingering on mine on the glass. “Is that all it takes?”

I nod. “It’s pretty constant but usually we’re at home. So you need to tell me if you see a wet spot on my dress.”

He takes a sip of his beer, eyes pinning me. “I won’t be telling you baby, I’ll be fucking you in the nearest dark corner.” I stifle an abashed smile and sip my beer. Mayor Neely approaches. Gio’s thumb strokes the back of my neck reassuringly as I turn to greet the mayor. “Mia, what a wonderful surprise. It’s great to see you,” he says in that fatherly tone I used to find patronizing but in this fragile moment, it’s more kind silver fox acknowledging me with Gio and affirming it. I ask about his reelection campaign while Gio stands close behind, playing with my hair, nodding, laughing where appropriate, asking a question if I falter but mostly just paying attention while I interact with the mayor. Not taking over. Not forcing me to audience. Not expecting me to achieve his agenda. Nothing but partnering. For the first time in my life, I’m not awkward because I’m not alone. Instead of left out, I’m wonderfully included. Lovingly centerpieced.

“Hey beautiful girl,” his voice invites me into a private moment when there’s a lull in the conversation with Neely, “let’s go sit, yeah?” “Ok,” I agree and we bid the mayor farewell and head over to his assistant who’s reserved the middle booth in the bar. I feel eyes following us the whole way but Gio’s hand is firmly on the back of my neck, guiding and keeping me close. Diaz stands and squeezes my upper arm, “Mia, lovely to see you again,” he kisses my cheek while Gio slides into the booth first, pulling me into him and sliding his arm around my waist. I feel guarded, handed briefly from Gio to his assistant and back and that might sound like I’m a possession but being Gio’s possession feels damn good. Diaz sits across from us. “What was that?” Gio asks him.

“What was what?” Diaz asks innocently.

“Your mouth. On Mia,” he clarifies, sounding like an annoyed older brother.

“You told me to get a booth and you wanted to sit at the back of it. I was distracting her so you could get in,” he explains.

“I could’ve accomplished that without you putting your lips on her,” Gio grumbles.

“I know but she’s beautiful and I wanted to kiss her,” he says matter of factly, winking at me and I have to hide my smile.

Gio literally growls in response and I turn to look at him, “you wanted to sit at the back?”

“I like you in between me and everyone else. That way you’re right in the middle of things.”

“Nobody puts Baby in the corner,” Diaz says and I laugh. Gio sighs loudly. I slip my arms around him, “you planned that?”

“There was a seating chart, Mi,” Diaz teases.

“There was not. And you’re not allowed to call her that, she’s Mia to you,” Gio warns but the tone is more grouching than angry.

Diaz looks to me for permission, eyebrows raised, “Mi? Or Mia?”

“Mia please,” I tell him, kissing Gio on the cheek. If he doesn’t want to share my single syllable name with another man, I’ll honor that. I love it. “You’re so sweet worrying about where we sit,” I whisper to him.

“I don’t want anyone leaving you out. If they talk to me, they talk to you.”

“I love you,” I whisper, nuzzling in his neck, “I’m having fun.”

He looks down at me, “Thank you baby. That’s so important to me,” and he leans in to kiss me.

“Incoming,” Diaz says under his breath.

“Gio! Great to see you!” Cantu’s voice booms.

Gio pulls back from kissing me but doesn’t look away. “Yes Diego, it’s been a whole half hour,” he responds dryly as he kisses the tip of my nose.

I turn to face Diego. “And Mia! What a surprise!” he says sliding into the booth next to Diaz. “Isn’t this exciting, Mommy and Daddy getting married instead of divorced!” He pauses a second, knowing that made no sense. “Listen, we’re all scarred from the fighting but one look at you kids in love makes it worthwhile,” Gio’s hand is rubbing slow circles on my lower back. “Oh shit, here comes Becky,” his voice lowers, “check out her stilettos. I bet she brained a snake with that heel and then skinned it to finish the shoe.”

“They’re Manolo Blahniks Diego,” she responds flatly, sliding into the booth next to me.

“And you’re slaying them Rebecca,” he says flirtatiously, “Rawr.”

She huffs out a sigh, rolls her eyes and turns to me, “Mia, lovely to see you. We miss you.”

“You too, Rebecca,” I answer. Gio’s arm tightens around me.

“Gio.”

“Rebecca.”

“Enjoy those muffins?” she asks saucily.

“I fell in love with them,” Gio answers earnestly.

Rebecca purses her lips. Diego pounces. “You so wanna ‘awww’ right now!” Diego teases. She rolls her eyes. “What do you want Becks, credit? Your love muffins spawned Mio, ok? Happy?”

“My happiness is not your concern Diego,” she says as she gets up from the booth.

“Let it be my concern and we’ll be even hotter than Gia. Your heels make me wanna play Single White Female,” he

says, getting up to follow her.

“I’ll happily bury one in your eye orbit D,” she answers.

“You kill me with your dirty talk Becky. I’m dead,” he swoons. She shakes her head in exasperation and walks away.

I turn to Gio. “What was that about?”

He looks sheepish. “She made me call you that morning for muffins. She wanted me to apologize to you in person.”

“Really?” We’ve always been cordial but I can’t believe she stood up for me like that. I suddenly feel like I should’ve been nicer to her all this time. “Mia?” I look up to see Melissa Dietz and her husband Wes standing at our booth. “Melissa, it’s great to see you,” I get up to hug her, running directly into a hard bump. I look at her questioningly and she smiles back at me, “yeah.”

“How exciting, congratulations! Wes, you too,” I gush. “Please, sit with us.” Wes settles in next to Diaz and I scoot back into Gio’s warmth so Melissa fits next to me. “How far along are you?” He tucks his hand under my bottom and gives it a squeeze as he chats with the guys.

“5 months now and finally feeling better. I was pretty sick the first trimester.”

“Are you still running in your district?”

She nods, “we’re gonna take on a couple realtors so I can step back. Wes is ready for more of an ownership position too.” Her husband turns and smiles at us when he hears his name. “I’ll probably take some time off in the beginning. I hope it’ll work with council. It wasn’t planned,” she tells me softly, toying with the straw in her glass. “We knew what we were doing, but we weren’t consciously trying you know?”

Do I know. I do not. Gio might be consciously trying - he dirty talks about me needing his come deep and fucking his seed into me where it belongs all the time while I’m pretty much consciously completely *not* trying, popping my pill in secret every night- “Mia? You ok?” And I never answered Melissa, just left her hanging because the guilty dialogue inside my head suddenly became way more important than this

conversation. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. You’re in a great position owning the brokerage, so much flexibility,” that sounded good right? Knowledgeable and buzz wordy. It’s the best I could do, I need the brain space to obsess over why I haven’t told Gio about the birth control already.

“It’s been so much work these first few years. Hopefully it’ll start paying off now.”

“It will,” I reassure, as if a crappy realtor would even know. Plus Melissa does rental, I did sales. Really just talking out of my ass here.

“We’ll see. If you’ll excuse me, I need to go to the ladies room,” she says as she gets up from the booth. Wes gets up too and takes her hand. Gio’s hand under my butt pulls me into him. “Still having fun?” he whispers, his mouth on my earlobe. “Yeah. I’ve always liked Melissa. You didn’t tell me she was pregnant,” as if I’m in a position to accuse him of keeping things from me.

“Sorry, guess I didn’t think of it,” he’s nibbling me now. “You think that could be us soon?”

“Us?” I ask as his mouth tickles down my neck and I, like always, lean into that mouth and make my neck ever so available to it. Guilty and insatiable. I should wear a scarlet letter around my secret keeping neck.

“You know. Pregnant.”

“Ummm, I don’t know,” I answer, laughing nervously. Yes I do. With 99% certainty. Oh my god, I should wear a scarlet number. 99%!

“I’d love it if it was,” he whispers, pulling me closer, hands circled around my waist.

“You think about that?” Don’t get me wrong, I love his breedy talk, I just didn’t know we were saying that stuff seriously. Because I’m not. Because 99% effectiveness.

He rests his forehead on mine, kissing me gently, his hand cupping my nape. “Of course Mi. I mean every dirty word I say to you.”

Ok I really need to come clean but this isn't the ideal setting for a contraception discussion so I'll be putting it off til the very next possible good talking time because here we are nuzzling and foreplaying in the corner of a booth with all of city council around like we're the only 2 people here and Gio'd love if we got pregnant and I'd love to have babies with him right back. I'd give my left fucking kidney to be *consciously trying*, how sexy would his dirty talk be if we were honestly, openly trying to make that adorable mini him who clung to my neck and called me mommy? The thought sends my hormones roaring and hands exploring my man's body, Gio kisses me again, lips insistent, whispering "baby" in my mouth, if we don't stop soon, we won't stop. He's rubbing my ring finger again, I think about marrying him all the time and omg where can we get alone in this bar because public's been fun but I'm ready for private time-

"You have got to be kidding me," a harsh voice from above the table pierces our hot foreplay bubble. Gio and I turn and Diaz looks up from his phone. Kara. "Gio, seriously?" she sounds heartbroken.

"Kara," he responds warningly.

"No way. No fucking way," she pleads. "Have you lost your mind?" she yells and people turn to look at the spectacle. Diaz scoots out from his side of the booth and attempts to take her elbow, "Kara, come with me and let's talk."

"No! I wanna talk to Gio. Alone," she insists, glaring down at me.

And oh no she didn't just. "Baby, do you wanna let me out?" he asks gently. "No," I tell him stubbornly. Bitch just clanked into bedrock. I might have a measly 23 days to her 12 years and I'll cop to being threatened by that but Gio's *mine*, I don't share, he said I never have to and the shoulder lick-biting slut might could be scrappy in a fight. "You can talk to Gio here," I grant conditionally. His hands slide to my hips in reinforcement thank god. I planted my butt on this booth bench like a sword in the ground but I'm shaking like a leaf. Kara's super intimidating.

Her eyes narrow into menacing slits. “Ok Mia, sure,” her voice dripping venom onto the table, “are you aware Gio’s about to lose his council seat?”

And that sends me reeling because I never ask about his reelection campaign, I’ve been on mute about it like the birth control because I’m a total coward!

“It’s a tight race Kara. No one’s won or lost anything yet,” Gio fills in for me.

“It is, isn’t it Gio? Within a few points either way I hear. Close enough that losing your endorsements to Salinas will pretty much seal the deal for him, wouldn’t you say?”

Super bitch also somehow controls endorsements? “If that’s what you need to do Kara, go ahead,” Gio responds.

“If this is who you’re with then you’re not the same candidate you used to be and voters have a right to know,” she justifies, making her sound a titch desperate if you ask me.

“Like I said,” he annunciates plumb outta patience “do what you need to do.”

“Oh I will, Gio, trust me. Enjoy obscurity,” she shoots back, turning to leave. Diaz follows her. She may not have outright won but obscurity’s got teeth. I turn to Gio and blurt out, “I’m taking the pill. I have been since we had sex the first time at your condo,” because I changed my mind, end of term Dumonts bar toast is a fine setting for a contraception discussion. Perfect in fact. He’s risking everything for me and I haven’t even bothered being honest. The scales are way out of balance.

“Ok,” Gio says slowly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrug, feeling ashamed of myself, “I didn’t think this would last. I thought it was all physical and I’d never burden either of us with an unplanned pregnancy. When things kept going...I didn’t know how to tell you anymore.”

Gio doesn’t respond right away but then, “I knew from the first time we made love at my condo that I wanted you and only you. Forever Mi.” Ugh y’all, I’ve disappointed him. “Gio,” I whisper mournfully. “I need to tell you something

too,” he continues hastily, “Rebecca made me call you for muffins because I pissed her off suggesting you were manipulating everyone by crying in council. She wanted me to apologize to you in person.”

Oh. “Do you really think I was manipulating? Like that girl Greta?” My voice sounds panicky.

“Mia, no. People were in my office, I’d made that idiotic statement at the presser and I said something else stupid. It was a bad night for me. I know you didn’t cry intentionally. I’m sorry.”

“Ok,” Gio’s so good at apologizing, leaving no room for lingering doubt or resentment, just wholehearted I messed up, I’m human, please forgive. “What about the birth control? Are you mad?”

“I’d never be mad about that but I wanna talk about those things. I don’t want any secrets between us Mi.” He caresses my cheek.

“So tell me about the election.”

CHAPTER 20

Diaz



I've already reached out to Salinas and he's excited to work together and thinks my endorsements will give him some real traction," Kara says determinedly as she strides toward the parking ramp.

"I like that move, Kara. Go for it," I encourage. She stops to look at me, taken aback, expecting another response I'm sure but my ambition's bigger than the fishbowl of Austin city council.

She's eyeing me. "You don't care?"

"Gio's constituents should know who they're voting for," because he's too mainstream for that district anymore.

"Are you moving on from him?" she asks hopefully.

"I haven't decided," I lie. The first time I met Gio all I could think was *Potential*. He's flush with it. And Mia brings out the alpha in him. He's always been charismatic but he radiates leader with her. I'm not going anywhere.

"You should. He's completely out of his mind dating her," Kara advises, turning to walk again.

"He's out of his mind all right," *in love with her*. I love her too, she's the perfect wife on the big stage. Kara's ideals make her a change driver but big change moves at a glacial pace. So many people in this state view her as a threat. Mia's a social liberal with an eye on the budget. Totally palatable.

"That's why I'm pulling my support. I can't endorse him with her and no one else we know will either," she predicts.

"You're probably right," I agree, but for all the hard left voters Gio loses, he'll gain twice as many moderates. Mia's barely right of center in Austin, making her solid middle and middle's the furthest left you can go if you wanna win

statewide in Texas.

“What the hell do you think he’s doing with her Diaz?”

“I think they spend a lot of time screwing each other,” and Kara visibly winces. Low blow, I know. But it’s full contact sport now - she’s out to ruin my guy. “Sorry, I’m frustrated,” *with you specifically* but let me go back to playing nice. We’ve reached the garage. I push the elevator button.

“I am moving on you know. I still love him but it’s like he doesn’t exist anymore, the Gio I knew,” she says wistfully.

“That’s a good way of looking at it, Kara. He has changed,” and I mean it. Now that Gio’s experienced the passion he has with Mia, he’ll never settle for less. He won’t settle for anyone but her.

“I thought we needed time away from each other,” she says, getting in the elevator. “But then he moved on so fast.”

“You were together a long time, it was a shock.” Not to me. Once it dawned on me that raging attraction flowed like lava under Gio’s mountain of antagonism toward Mia, I was all for it. I love someone who follows their gut. That’s what makes a visionary. Taking risks can pay off big.

“I know, right?” Kara’s shaking her head in disbelief as we exit the elevator. “She was a total headache for everyone on council and then she made that obscene remark and cried! She looked like an idiot.”

“It was a spectacle,” but in a good way, like a destructive wildfire that burns the old forest down and leads to an explosion of new life. Mia’s messy at times but she’s no idiot. She’s like the competitor that fools everyone into thinking she’s weak and slays everyone in the end. Covert. I’m not sure she even consciously knows she’s doing it. She’s all instinct.

“How can he be into her?” Kara asks impulsively once we’ve reached her car.

Gio’s way more than “into” her - he’s gonna marry her. “He’s serious about her Kara,” I tell her gently.

She dabs at her eyes with her sleeve while I stand there,

supportive but detached. I'm not her shoulder to cry on. "Jesus, look at me. I really am fine."

I nod encouragingly. "I know. You deserve the best and I hope you find it."

"You too. I hope you find someone to work for who'll take you far and whose vision you respect." I smile at her because I'm already still working for that person. She opens her car door and gets in. "If you're looking to move on, I can refer you. Let me know," she says helpfully.

"I will," *not be taking you up on that, but thanks*. She starts her car and I wave goodbye, to her and council. Gio's seat is gloriously gone. This destruction is gonna lead to something great, I can feel it.

Mia

"Let's get outta here," Gio pushes me to the edge of the booth. We leave quietly, joined at the hip, people watching us limp out like 2 wounded animals after a fight. This could be the end of Gio's council career and I can't believe how wrong that is. He cares so much, invests so much of himself. I wanna jump up and down and scream, this isn't right! I search people's faces as we walk out, some of them bidding us goodnight, looking for anyone to say something. No one does. Cowards, the lot of them. Just like me.

As we walk to the parking garage, Gio takes my hand and explains how Kara does legal advocacy work for underrepresented communities and sits on the board of several lobbying organizations, a bunch of fancy worded gobbledy guck that means she got him endorsements and can very well take them away. And how his opponent Antonio Salinas is close enough in polling that those endorsements will give him a boost and raise questions about Gio losing them. Whether or not it could sink his campaign, Gio shrugs. "Anything's possible Mi," he concedes and what a difference a couple hours can make. We made out hot and heavy outside this parking garage and now. "There's not much time left but

public opinion can swing on a dime.”

It can. Anything can happen. Someone as inexperienced as me can win and someone as competent as Gio can lose. And even though Kara left the bar semi defeated, she’s gonna prevail in the end. I will be the reason Gio loses his council seat.

A part of me erupts in sheer panic at the prospect of being someone’s cost, the hypersensitivity to their displeasure, the devastation of letting them down, the overriding need to sell yourself completely to the task of being worth it. I think my mom loved me but she was always so busy making up for me that love was a distant second. Being a burden was my entire childhood, it’s what my marriage became and the harsh voice in my head is screaming that I’m setting it up to happen again.

“I love you,” Gio squeezes my hand as we wait for the elevator, “more than anything.”

And then Gio comes along and interrupts that awful voice with loving words. And a half feathered fledgling inside the nest we made wants to see if I could fly on the buoyant winds of his words.

Gio

It’s time. If I’d pushed Mia too fast in the beginning, she would’ve gotten spooked. So I planted little seeds of trust and nursed them along in the protective nursery of her condo. She needed that time. It’s a safe harbor, I’m a safe harbor for her. Tonight I pushed her to come out in public and as always, she yielded and things were going great until Kara strutted onto the scene, Beyoncé autographed baseball bat in hand. I was furious and resigned and generally engaged with her in a way I simply don’t want to be anymore. Because I love Mia, she supports me, our love builds us up. I stood by her side chatting with Neely, held her close in the booth and made sure she knew I’m here for you in public and private and she paid me right back, invested it in us by refusing to back down to Kara. That move set me alight for her.

I know she's frightened about me losing the election. I probably am going to lose now. But part of my mind splintered off into so what? territory when Kara leveled her threat, excited at the prospect of change. Austin's great but I'm from Houston which is way bigger. I'll always love it here, it's where I got my political start and met Mia but maybe it's time to move on. I don't know exactly but losing my seat didn't scare me. I can work at my other positions, run for higher office, Mia and I could move to Houston. One dead end is a course correction, not The End. But there are no options for me other than Mia. And it's time to make that clear. The ride could get bumpy and I need to cinch her in tight for it, safe against me. I'm gonna take this attempt to ruin me and flip it into my greatest joy.

"I love you," I squeeze her hand as we wait for the elevator, "more than anything," I quantify, because I know she needs it.

Mia

When Gio reassures me, he doesn't stop short of serving full commitment on a platter. When he apologizes he gives me everything I need to forgive him and move on. Even when publicly castigating me, he went after me to the point of crying which was god awful but the point is, he commits to everything he does. If he were packing your lunch, all the food groups would be covered. "I'm sorry for keeping the birth control from you and not asking about your campaign," I respond as we board the elevator. "I was avoiding stuff that scares me."

Gio punches the emergency stop button and pins me against the side wall, threading his fingers into mine on the elevator rail. "There's nothing to be scared of Mia. I'm all in with you," he breathes into my neck. It used to be so hard to get out of bed in the morning when no one was there to greet me or make sure I brushed my teeth or even know I was awake. I didn't matter to anyone but me. Gio's words flood my low places with foundational hope. "I'm learning how to believe that."

"Believe it baby. You were so hot defending your territory,"

his mouth hovers over mine, voice dark with frustration I think he needs to take out on the elevator wall via my vagina. “All naked and pussy crying wet for me under your dress.” He thrusts his hips into me, dry humping me to the wall, my hands still locked in his. “I wanted to drag you to the bathroom and fuck your ownership loud and clear for everyone to hear.”

“My pill pack is out, I’m waiting for my period but just to be totally honest, I’m not actively taking the pill because I don’t wanna keep anything from you.”

He presses his forehead onto mine. “I haven’t cared about birth control from the first time I came inside you. It’s up to you,” and he finally lets go of my hands to yank my dress up my thighs and grab my ass cheeks. I frantically undo his belt and pants button, shoving them down and wrapping my legs around his waist. He nudges inside my labia, wetting himself as I arch toward him but he doesn’t thrust. I’m dying for a thrust. “I wanna marry you beautiful girl. Say you will.”

Y’all, what could a lifetime of this man’s love do for me? Because I’ve always felt stunted by my circumstances, so busy just getting by that I never had time to thrive. I stare into his intense eyes, place that became safe, portal to a world where I’m moored, reassured, aloneness doesn’t exist and only desire, aching desire to please my man thrives. “Yes,” I whisper and he thrusts my reward, deep and satisfying. I moan and he grabs my hands and pins them to the wall, “before the election.”

And he withholds another thrust until I acquiesce even though it’s 2 weeks away but he’s already raised my baseline, the elevator doesn’t go as far down as it used to and I want to know, I want to see what I could be with his love at my back all the time. “Mmm-hmm.”

Thrust. Mmm. “This weekend.” Sneaky politician’s moved the date even closer, teasing me with dick. I nod. *Thrust.* “You’ll marry me.”

“Yes,” he drops my hands and grips my hips, “I can’t wait, Mi,” my arms wrap around his neck, butt perched on that thin rail as he holds my body in place and ruts into it slow and

hard, “can’t wait to fuck my wife.” *Wife*. A damn benediction from Gio, his best word yet. Hot, brilliant, sexy sweet Gio Barra for my husband, how could I be so lucky? And we’d be consciously trying to make mini him because birth control’d be up to me. Up to me and we’re consciously trying right the fuck now! I mean I’m about to get my period and never even ovulated in the first place but whatever, it’s the thought that counts and right now my thought is “fuck your come deep, Gio. Seed me,” whispered in his ear as he pumps his hips and groans, losing control at my words, the exquisite sound of his climax hot in my ear, cock throbbing load into me in time with his panted breaths, the inescapable vortex of our lovemaking sucks me into orgasm, my whole body gripping him in hungry, aching contractions.

Gio

I get Mia to her car and send her home, promising to follow after I talk with Diaz, who’s waiting at my car a level down in the parking garage. In spite of everything, I feel loose and relaxed. Mia gives me so much personal satisfaction that everything else is a dim second. To my wife, Mia will be my wife so damn soon and I can put a baby inside her, for real. She made me come so hard whispering that in my ear, little minx.

“Kara threaten me with anything else?” I ask casually, like a big lazy cat.

Diaz shrugs noncommittally, “no. She’s already reached out to Salinas though. He’s a decent guy and I doubt he’d go after you personally, but no one turns down free endorsements.” I nod and turn, folding my arms and leaning up against my car next to him. “Also, I egged her on. And allowed her to believe I might move on from your employ.”

“You want me to start making calls for you?”

“What? No,” he scoffs. “I had to let Kara think that, she was reeling from seeing you with Mia.” I’ve nothing to say, I’m so far removed from the relationship. “Council’s a stepping stone

Gio, logical springboard to something bigger but screw logic. You're dynamic so why be boring?"

I turn to look at him, "Agree."

A sly smile spreads across his face. "Good. Is Mia ok?"

"Yes. I need you to arrange for me to marry her this weekend."

"Congrats," he nods his approval. "You want anything specific?"

"Jacob's Well. Precinct judge, woman. Ellis. Or Sanchez."

He nods. "Guests?"

"You're it for me."

"It'll be my honor Gio," he hugs me warmly and I hug him back for a long time, feeling potential gathering under us like an unstoppable force, powerful engine propelling us forward.

CHAPTER 21

Mia



Radar's coughing nonstop when I get home. Her tongue is blue and there's clear puddles all over my condo. I grab her and go outside while I dig for my phone and search for the emergency vet. I work my way through the phone maze while Radar wretches on the patio, stumbling from the force of her body practically turning itself inside out. Yes, bring her in, they tell me when I explain the situation. I grab her and head for the car. I drive as fast as I can, letting her brace against me as her incessant hacking thrusts her backwards.

The vet comes in almost immediately, which is ominous. I fill her in on what's going on, talking loudly above Radar's ragged cough. She calls in a tech to hold Radar while she examines her, attempting to listen to her heart. "I'll have to give her a sedative so I can hear her heart," she says loudly. I nod and they leave with my dog.

I sit on the bench in the room to wait but have the sudden sensation of either Gio's semen or my period leaking because only a truly responsible dog mother goes sans underwear with her period imminent and then gets fuckengaged in an elevator to boot. Real good Mia. I sneak out to the restroom and put a tampon, wiping my dress of bloody come as best I can. Thank goodness it's black. I rush back to the room and wait more. Finally the vet reenters. "Mia, I'm sorry to tell you this but Radar's in final stage congestive heart failure. Her heart is pumping so inefficiently that she's not getting enough oxygen. The valve in her heart constantly leaks blood back into the lower chamber and the water in the blood separates and seeps into the lungs. It causes the cough and at this stage, gagging and vomiting."

I steel myself in the face of all that bad news. "So it's time?"

"We could give her some diuretics to drain the fluid off her

lungs but it'd only be palliative. At this stage, she's pretty uncomfortable. She's ok now because I sedated her," she reassures me. My phone rings. It's Gio.

"Can you give me a few minutes? I need to contact my ex."

"Of course. We'll check back in a bit."

"Thank you," the vet leaves. "Hey," I answer my phone.

"Mia where are you?"

"At the emergency vet. Radar was coughing like crazy and she threw up everywhere-" I break down crying.

"What vet? I'm coming," he asks. "Behind Central Market," I answer through my tears. "On my way," and he hangs up. I stare at my phone. I need to contact Brett in case he wants to be here. If he does that could be super awkward but it's too late now, Gio's coming. My call goes straight to voicemail. I leave him a tearful message and also text "*Radars at the end. Do you want to be here?*"

A tech comes back with Radar in a fluffy donut bed and sets her gently on the table. She's out, breathing heavy but unaware. I stroke her fur and tell her lies that it'll be ok. My phone pings, Gio's here. I peek my head out of the room and he comes to me, engulfing me in his arms. I cry into his shirt until I calm down and look up at him, "Hey," he says, tucking my hair behind my ear and stroking my face. "Not good?"

"No," I answer. "She's at the end. They gave her a sedative to stop the coughing. I-" hesitate, my natural inclination to avoid a difficult topic kicking in but I push forward, "I'm waiting to hear back from Brett." Gio stiffens. Is he angry? I start explaining, "He was her dad. She knows you a little but she's been so out of it lately. She used to love him and he loved her. I don't want to see him but I have to give him the chance to be here. She knows...his scent. His voice. It'd be a comfort maybe..." I trail off.

"Ok Mi. I understand. Did you talk to him?"

"I left him a voicemail and texted. He hasn't responded."

The vet knocks gently and enters. "Have you decided what

you'd like to do?"

"I'm gonna put her to sleep. I left my ex a voicemail in case he wants to be here. Let me try him again-"

"Ok, take your time. We have some paperwork for you to fill out. The tech will be back in," she tells me but I'm already dialing again. Brett still doesn't answer. I'm angry and abandoned on behalf of our dog child but the worst thing is and I feel bad about myself for even feeling this but I'm ashamed. If I weren't with Gio, I'd be here alone, muddling through this on my own like everything else, resorting to whatever I had to to get through with no one to see or judge. I held my mom's hand for her last week of life, made her ramen because I only knew how to use the microwave and she ate it. My 11 year old mind thought I'd saved her with my ramen until she stopped eating that too and my stepdad dragged me away from those last 37 hours, saying it was inappropriate when I *needed* to see and know her body couldn't go on. I needed the finality. Because I cut the shit out of myself for years before I matured enough to understand it wasn't my fault. So I'm damn sure gonna accompany my dog daughter to the gates but I so wish there wasn't anyone here to witness. I've lost everyone. My mom, the cleaning lady who comforted me because I started skipping school to see her and got her fired, my house, my husband, my house again and now my dog. No one sticks with me. And yes, houses aren't people but they shelter you and stand sentry to your existence when no one else does. Time passes in them, people die and leave and you grow and change while they remain steadfast. For years a house was my only constant. I get attached to them.

I turn my back to Gio and dial again. Voicemail again. Again. Finally Brett answers. "Yes Mia?" he sounds annoyed. I haven't heard his voice since the last morning at our house. Irritated, tired of the burden of me, painfully familiar tone. I know Gio can hear it in this small quiet room.

"Radar's at the end. Do you want to come?"

"No," he answers firmly.

"Really? You used to love her," I plead, cringing at the

desperation in my voice, but I have to advocate for her. Yes she's a dog, unconscious and so senile she hasn't cared about anything but the vast world of shit smells for the last year. She still deserves to have both her parents present when she dies.

"I know. That's why I don't want to come," he admits.

Oh. Right, Mr. Popular, Mr. Good Time can't handle being here. Brett was never on the rock bottom relay team. He didn't get attacked relentlessly in city council, in public and personal while fighting for pennies on his property tax. He won all the races, closed all the deals, fucked all the interns. "Got it," I say and hang up. The only good I thing I did in my marriage was not have kids with that selfish weakling. I take a deep breath and turn to face Gio.

"He doesn't wanna come," as if I needed to tell him, he just heard the whole pitiful exchange.

"Ok," he responds softly. "I'm here." Yes he is. And I so wish he wasn't. Someone knocks on the door.

Gio

The tech enters with some paperwork. She gently discusses what Mia wants to do with the body afterward, cremation, group cremation or disposal. Mia chooses cremation, an urn and gives the receptionist her credit card. She leaves again, saying they'll be in shortly.

I reach out and squeeze Mia's hand. She doesn't respond. She's despondent in a way I've never seen and definitely don't like. The interaction with Brett was harsh and I want to comfort her but she erected a wall with that phone call.

The vet enters with a technician and verifies Mia's ready. When Mia nods, she explains that she needs to place the IV. I watch Mia as they hover over her dog. She's watching them make the preparations, detached and grim. I don't like it but stay where I am against the wall, awkward witness to the end of this life.

The vet asks if Mia wants to hold Radar. She agrees to sit on

the floor and hold the dog bed in her lap. They get everything arranged, tell us to knock when we're ready and leave. I guess this is for saying goodbye? I've never done this before. Mia leans down to her dog and gently caresses her face, gulping down a sob, "Radar, Mumma's here. Daddy couldn't come, he loves you so much that he couldn't handle being here. But Mumma's here," tears are pouring out, bloodlessness gone, replaced by searing vulnerability and gritty determination. She belongs in a spotlight...righteous, honor bound, visual definition of love. "Thank you for being my dog. I had so much fun with you and I wouldn't have made it without you when Daddy left. Mumma loves you forever, my super squirrel killer, beautiful huntress. Go up to heaven and chase the squirrelies all day long. I'll see you again someday. Wait for me there. My girl. Mumma's girl." She looks up at me, face registering a bittersweet smile, like she's being kind, polite in this moment. She's killing me right alongside the dog.

"Could you knock on the door please?" she asks sweetly and I want to crush her in my arms, this incredibly strong and graceful girl who does absolutely everything for the ones she loves no matter what it costs her. I fight back tears and knock on the door. The vet enters and attaches a fat syringe of something pink to the IV. She injects the solution. Mia keeps stroking Radar's face and whispers "Mumma loves you" a final time. Radar's been quiet the whole time and there's only one small twitch of her tail. The vet leans down and presses a stethoscope to her chest and listens. "She's gone," she tells Mia, putting a hand on her shoulder. Mia nods, tears dripping onto Radar's fur. The vet tells us to take as much time as we need and leave everything, they'll take care of it. She leaves. Mia takes a big breath, gently picks up the dog bed and puts it on the exam table. She removes Radar's collar, puts it in her purse, strokes her dog's face one last time whispering "bye" and turns to me, taking a fortifying breath. "Ready." Her face's gone blank again.

"Mi, talk to me," I urge her.

"Let's go to my car," she answers. "They'll need the room for another patient," and I follow her to the parking lot. She turns to me at the driver's door of her car. "I'm so sorry you

had to see that with Brett. He did love Radar at one point. Not anymore obviously,” she laughs sadly and shakes her head. “It was my mistake, calling my ex husband about his ex dog. Of course he doesn’t care anymore that she-” she chokes up, “died.”

“Mia,” I say, reaching for her and lacing my fingers into hers. “Why are you sorry I saw your ex being a selfish prick?”

She looks down. “Cuz it’s so embarrassing,” and she shakes her head.

“My love, what could you possibly have to be embarrassed about?”

“My aloneness. My sucky fucking existence before you!” she yells and untangles her fingers from mine, unlocking her car and crumbling into the driver’s seat. I quickly put myself in the way of her closing the door, “Gio, let me go! Look at me, I have absolutely nothing! Never even had the courage to kill myself so I just limp along maiming instead. Goddamn bottom feeder is what I am. Everything I do is demented. My life is grotesque, bunch of pathetic attempts to make good outta garbage.”

I lean inside the car to get at eye level with her. “Your life is not grotesque Mia. There’s a bunch of reckless coming out of you but it’s ok. Give it to me.”

“I don’t wanna give it to you! You deserve someone who’ll be a great wife and partner and mother to your kids. Not a fucking psyche patient!” Her anger melts into heartbreaking pleas. “Just leave me be, please Gio. It’s so humiliating for you to see.” I grab her arms, pulling her body to mine because I know I need to pour reassurance into her raw wound but first I need to get her close to me. She’s limp against me for the first time ever, a lifeless doll. This is the bottom. The place she cuts. She feels dead in my arms. I pull her tighter, willing her back to me.

“Gio,” her voice is robotic, reminding me of when she apologized and fled the muffin meeting. “I need to go.”

“You’re not going anywhere without me,” if she thinks I’ll

let her slip away without shaking the life back into her, she's wrong. "I'm following you in my car and Mia. You're gonna drive so I can follow you or I'll run red lights, cause an accident, whatever it takes. You know I don't stop with you baby. Cops will come, we'll have damage to pay for, it'll get out that council member Barra drives recklessly. Do you hear me?"

Give in, I think to myself. Yield me an inch goddamnit. I hear her breathing. I can almost feel her thinking, working through someone *staying* for the first time in her life, reworking that circuit in her brain that trips into numbness when she's left alone. "It's been a terrible night but I'm here and I'm not leaving you." She doesn't know what to do with that, I can tell because her body perks up in response and maybe it's anger that I refuse to let her do what she wants, but at least it's something, anything other than that awful numbness.

CHAPTER 22

Mia



Rio rides my ass like some jerk face driver the whole way. I watch him in my rearview mirror, irate as a teenager being helicoptered over. I never had overbearing parents. I had no parents.

I used to envy my high school friends who'd get grounded for staying out too late. It never mattered what time I came home. No one was waiting for me. And my stepdad had warned me that if it got out that I was basically living in his house alone, social services would be called and I'd end up in foster care. So I behaved better than most kids, self policed by overwhelming fear. I never had friends over and lied that I had an early curfew, going home to no one to seem like I had a family and ending up even more isolated by hiding. Even Brett didn't know the truth until college. When I finally told him he had little reaction. I was relieved, still living in too much fear to be bothered by him not caring. My secret didn't matter to Brett. He was the star of the show and the fact that I had a reason to remain in his shadow, all the better.

I park my car and Gio pulls in next to me. "I made it here fine. Go home," I tell him coldly.

"Are you coming with me?" I shake my head no. "Then I'm not going. Where I lay, you lay," he responds undeterred. Not even annoyed by my childish rudeness.

There's nothing for me to do besides head inside with him following. Radar's vomit puddles are little wet landmines everywhere. I try to be a martyr who cleans alone but Gio insists on helping. When everything's wiped up, I go to the bathroom and change into my pajamas, and he goes to the bedroom where I hear him undressing. I go pee and sit on the toilet lost. He's interrupted the normal sequence of events that ends with me cutting. I'm not alone and frankly a little lost. He clears his throat and I look up to him watching me.

“I’m just going pee,” I gripe. “You can’t watch me 24 / 7.”

“I don’t need to. I’ll just go over your gorgeous body with a fine tooth comb every night and if I find fresh cuts, I’ll cut myself in the same place.”

“Gio-” I sputter, “you can’t do that!”

He leans on the doorway and crosses his arms. “Why not?”

“It’s sick!”

“Sick to harm me but ok to harm you?”

“No! I mean, I don’t know,” I shake my head in frustration. “You’re being so high handed.”

“I’ll do whatever I need to protect you.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Finish that sentence, Mi,” he replies. I stare at him stubbornly. “Finish it, defiant girl.”

Gio

“About me,” she grumbles. I go and kneel in front of her on the toilet, my arms on her thighs. “I would never harm you,” she whispers.

“I know baby. You love me more than you love yourself. You loved your dog and your ex more too. You do anything for the ones you love. And I’m gonna use that to keep you safe while we work on your self love.”

She digests that for a minute. “Work on it how?”

“With my constant presence. With you attaching to me and healing your wounds from being left alone. With a therapist if you want.” I stand and pull her up off the toilet, pulling her undies up. “Look at me pulling your underwear up for once. Makes me excited to potty train our daughters.” Mia stares at me dumbstruck. “What?” I flush the toilet and take her hand, pulling her to the bedroom.

“You think about daughters?”

“Of course, Mi. I want at least 2 little yous.” I set her butt down on the bed, lift her legs up on the mattress and get in beside her.

“What else do you think about?” she asks, laying down.

I stretch out next to her. “I think I need to sell my condo so we can shop for our home. I think we need to look for something with a big master bedroom and closet to store the fuck bench I wanna tie you to and impregnate you on.” The look on my beloved’s face is priceless. Her eyes register shock and then her lips quirk ever so slightly as shock smelts into arousal. “Would you let me do that to you?”

“Yes,” she exhales breathily, smiling shyly. I roll on top of her and her legs automatically open. “I got my period at the vet’s,” she warns, a cloud passing over her eyes.

I kiss her face. “We don’t have to make love. It’s been a terrible night. I just wanna lay between your legs for a bit.”

Her eyes close and squeeze out tears. “I have low...lows.”

“Losing Radar was awful,” more tears, which I lick. “Your ex couldn’t even handle coming. But you walked through fire. Every time I see you so vulnerable, I stand in awe Mia.”

She opens her eyes and meets my gaze. “I’m frightened I’m not worth losing your seat for,” she admits.

“Mi, council’s a step in my journey,” I kiss her gently and her lips automatically accept and reciprocate, the familiar pulse of chemistry between us surging back to life. “If District 3 can’t handle me being with you, I’m not the right rep for them.”

“Would you run in another district?” she sounds cautiously hopeful, soft hands tickling my sides.

“I’d like to think I’d aim higher but I don’t know yet,” I nudge her cheek and nuzzle into her neck. “We’ll have to decide that together if I lose. Everything I do going forward requires your input.”

“But I’m not political wife material,” she worries even as she arches her head back to let me kiss her neck.

“I love you. Your electability doesn’t matter. And you’re wrong, you’re my dream political partner.” I kiss my way around her neck and nibble on her ears. “You’re a fighter and a survivor. You don’t need to be ashamed of things that weren’t your fault.”

She swallows hard and stares at the ceiling. “What about my statement the night I cried in council then? It could come back to haunt you.”

I pull back and rest my forehead on hers. “You’re not the only one who regrets their actions that night Mia. We both messed up. But we can accept responsibility and move on.”

“How?”

“By shifting the focus to more important issues,” and what she said on the side of the road pops into my head *you saw my scars if you wanna explain self harm to the reporters*. My mind flashes images of her stunning sensitivity, the first night in council, the muffin morning, when she bade me goodbye at Dumonts, tonight with Radar. *You can explain it Mia. And help people*. I roll off her and lay by her side. “You have a bunch of things you could do really valuable work on, issues you have personal experience with,” oh I’ve got her attention now. “Social safety nets for kids who fall through the cracks. Cervical cancer. Do you know Texas has a crappy HPV vaccination rate?” Mia goes utterly still and her eyes glaze over. “Depression. Self harm,” I finish softly.

“You’d want me to share the cutting?” she asks disbelieving.

“If you wanted to, absolutely.”

“You wouldn’t be embarrassed?”

“Your cuts are inspiring Mia. They’re a marker of how deep you go. The low you touched and lived.”

Her eyes are shimmering with tears. “You’re good at spin.”

“I’m mirroring my love at you baby. I know you grew up without that but it’s not too late for me to give it to you. For the rest of our lives.”

She stares at me, flame of hope relit in her eyes. By me. I

touch noses. Our denouement's beginning and so many joyous scenes await: marrying her, getting her pregnant, holding our babies together, holding onto Mia my entire life. "Is Jacob's Well ok for our ceremony?" I ask because I know I've got her strapped tight into marrying me.

"I love Jacob's Well," soft wonder in her voice.

"Do you need a different proposal? I can redo it, ring, romantic setting, surprise. Tell me what you need if the elevator didn't feel right."

She looks at me serenely, cemented in our love. "I loved the elevator. All I need is you." I could be elected POTUS and it'd never be as sweet as this moment.

CHAPTER 23

Mia



I awaken thinking I need to get up and let Radar outside. My sniffing wakes Gio. “Hey,” he says turning to me, hand slipping into my hair, “you ok?”

“Yeah. Just adjusting to life without her.” He nods. “I can stay home today.”

“No,” I tell him firmly. “I’ll be ok.”

He gauges me. “I’ll check in during the day. Promise to call if you need me. I don’t want you upset and alone, Mi.”

“I promise.”

Uncertainty creeps in about a second after Gio’s car turns out of sight. He’s so confident about our future that it’s easy to parasite off him. But the truth is, this driven man will drag me to new, *higher* heights where I can only hope I don’t disappoint. I don’t feel like cutting so I don’t call him but I do feel panicky, so I jump in my car to drive and end up at the park I used to take Radar for squirreling. I wander under the canopy, crying to let the trees and squirrels know she’s gone, the little tricolor terror won’t be back, which the squirrels are probably cheering considering she killed like 5 of their brethren. She wasn’t the biggest dog either so the killing wasn’t instantaneous and yes that’s horrible, *how could I let her do that?* you’re thinking. It was the closest thing I could find to rat hunting for an animal with a high prey drive who I loved like a child. I was people pleasing even her. And you know, some people view squirrels as vermin, squirrel haters exist. I’m not one of them, I personally apologized to each little body after she thrashed it to death because squirrel corpses are as eligible for an apology as anybody, and I drove the little killer there so she could hunt for sheer enjoyment. I asked Brett if he had any use for the carcasses but park squirrel stew was a step too far for his Hair Eating Highness.

I feel guilty for not checking my garden bed at Hannah and Aaron's in awhile so a house drive by is next on the route. I'm dismayed to find everything shriveled and thirsty, providing less privacy from the street than I intended. I park out front and seriously consider tiptoeing across her driveway to grab the hose and water it quick but this is Texas. If someone did that while Brett lived here, they'd been shot dead amongst my flowers. And then the curtains part. Someone's looking at my car because Hannah killed my garden bed so she can see me clear as day. I start my car when a child streaks down the driveway and right into my front seat.

"Ryan!" I hear Hannah yell as I look at him. "Hey Ryan," I address him. There's something tan brownish all over his hands which I quickly realize is shit because he stinks to high heaven. "Oh my god, Mia, I am so sorry," Hannah says as she reaches the door, baby on her hip, "Ryan honey please get out of Mia's car," but Ryan's plugging his ears and humming now. She touches his shoulder and he flinches away like she burned him, plugging his ears tighter and swaying back and forth. She takes a deep breath, "Mia please do not judge me for getting in your backseat with my baby and poop everywhere and singing Wheels on the Bus." And she jumps in the back seat.

"The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round," she sings while her baby gurgles, wet hand knuckled in his mouth, shit on his forehead. "The wheels on the bus go round and round, all over town." Ryan's humming is softer. "The wipers on the bus go swish swish swish, swish swish swish, swish swish swish," Ryan's taken his fingers out of his ears to make tiny wiper blade motions. "The wipers on the bus go swish swish swish, all over town."

"The horn on the bus goes beep beep beep, beep beep beep, beep beep beep..." Hannah and Ryan make a horn pressing motion with their hands and her baby giggles. The shit smell in the car is becoming hot boxed in the Texas sun, but I'll be damned if I won't get in on this catchy tune. "The blinkers on the bus goes blink blink blink, blink blink blink, blink blink blink," we make finger flicks and Ryan's completely engaged now. "Ry, let's go inside. We're missing Sesame Street," and just as quick as he came, he darts out of my car and up the

driveway. “Come to the door, I’ll give you some wipes,” Hannah hustles after him, giggling baby bouncing on her hip.

“I am so sorry,” Hannah tells me at the door moments later, handing me a canister of cleaning wipes. “Please, if you need to get your seats shampooed we’ll pay for it.”

“It’s fine Hannah,” I tell her, taking the wipes. “I’ll be outta your hair in a minute.” I head back to my car and wipe the handles, arm rests and seat fabric. The shit smell is strong so I start the car and open the windows. I’m just tiptoeing away from leaving the canister at the front door when she appears in the doorway again.

“Did you need anything Mia?” she calls out, bottomless nurturer juggling a baby, autistic child and shit shit shit, still offering aid. I swear, some women are walking saints. I can’t shake the feeling that if I just skedaddle, I’ll miss an opportunity. She’s got shit in her hair, she can handle my truth. “My dog died last night-”

“Oh my gosh I’m so sorry,” and the empathy in her eyes is so rich and true it draws the pain out of me like a toxin, “it’s ok, she was old and it was her time but my ex wouldn’t even come be by her side because he’s a selfish weakling who cheated on me with a teenager,” and whoa Bill, that horse got away from me.

“You’re not married to Brett anymore?” she asks bluntly.

I shake my head emphatically no. “We got divorced. I’m not sure I could’ve gotten over the cheating, but the truth is he didn’t even want to work on things.”

“I killed your beautiful flower bed,” Hannah offers back. “And I really wish that was the worst thing we’ve done to Rosemary.”

“Did you do Wheels on the Bus for her? That shit’s catchy. I’m gonna be singing it all day.”

She smiles. “I gotta get back inside before Ry burns the house down. Do you wanna come in? And more importantly, can you handle more shit?”

“Did something go wrong with the house?” Any way this

could be my fault? “I swear, there was nothing to disclose about the plumbing.”

“Oh god Mia, no. The house is perfect. Ryan dug in his brother’s diaper when I was on the toilet. Wait’ll you see what we’ve done with the master bedroom.”

I run to my car and turn it off and grab my purse, excited to see my old house and hang out with Hannah. They’ve kept things light and bright and their furniture is organized the same as I had ours - I’m flattered by that. Ryan’s glued to the TV in the living room and the baby’s in a crib babbling sweetly to some toys. Hannah grabs my hand and leads me upstairs. She opens the door to the room I shared with my husband and she shares with hers, “I loved the paint color you chose so much I didn’t change it. And now look,” she gestures at one of the walls. Tan brown smears, all along the bottom half of the very long wall. And yep, it’s on the carpet too. And good lord does it stink like rank shit. Somewhere in dog heaven Radar’s head is exploding.

“Ryan’s one-to-one aide called in sick this morning. If she’s not on the bus with him, he can’t ride. I was getting ready to drop him at school when he went diaper diving. Since then all I’ve done is call Aaron and have a nervous breakdown and stress him out at work. The damn walls have texture, Mia. How am I gonna detail clean texture? I’ve got a baby on my tit and a kid who finger paints with shit.”

“Get Ryan to school,” I instruct her. “I’ll clean.”

She stares at me. “I should argue with you but I’m desperate today and you’re like an angel showing up on my curb. There’s a bucket and rags and gloves and enzymatic cleaners under the kitchen sink. I’ll help when I get back,” she shouts to my back as I head downstairs. I grab the stuff and climb the stairs. I didn’t have breakfast and I’ve got a bucket. I got this. I can hear Hannah in the second bathroom washing Ryan, “the driver on the bus says sit right down, sit right down, sit right down...”

I open the windows, turn on the ceiling fan and find a candle in the bathroom to light, setting it on the dresser. I’m working

on the wall when Hannah peeks in. “It hasn’t dried much so it washes off,” I tell her encouragingly, “although you’re gonna have to repaint. I’m scrubbing some of the paint off.”

“No problem,” she answers. “Your phone’s ringing,” she says, tossing it to me. “I’ll be back in 15 minutes.” I peel off my gloves and answer Gio, “hey.”

“Is everything ok? I’ve called a couple times,” he’s worried and I love that for me.

“I’m fine. I’m sorry I missed your calls. I’m at my old house. The couple who bought it have an autistic son and he ummm...smearred baby poop all over. I’m helping Hannah clean.”

“Mia...what?” There’s a lot of noise in the background.

“I freaked a little when you left so I went out and ended up here...”

“Hold on-” I hear him tell someone. “You promised you’d call me,” I can hear him walking.

“I didn’t wanna take you away from the campaign. And it turned out ok. I might’ve made a friend.”

“I’m glad to hear that Mia but I need you to know your well being is more important than my campaign.” I hear a door close and the background noise is gone.

“I know. And I’m ok, I swear. You can check my body when you get home.”

His voice lowers, “I’ll check every square inch,” I can hear him breathing. “I ordered...a rack to start. It’s smaller than a bench. It’ll be delivered Monday.”

“A rack?” I ask nervously.

“It’s a breeding rack baby. It has...straps to hold your legs open for me. And bindings for your torso and hands,” his needy voiced description has me wanting to put him on speaker so I can google. “Tell me what you’re thinking. I can cancel it.” And for the first time ever, Giovanny Barra sounds unsure. City council leader. Man who accepts every scarred piece of me so lovingly. Man who’d cut himself for me. I want

to accept all of him back and explore his fantasies alongside him cuz I'm pretty sure it'll be a land of endless orgasm. I wanna *play* with him. "I'm thinking I should track my ovulation so you can tie me to it when I'm in heat."

A pause. "Fuck baby," his heavy exhale sounds like when he comes. "We're gonna use it all the time for awhile but yes, track your ovulation please." Would it be super wrong to go into Hannah's bathroom and have phone sex with my fiancé? I masturbated in there a million times already. What does having my name on the deed matter? "I need you, Mi. Body and soul."

"Me too but I'm cleaning shit at a potential new friend's house."

He breathes a laugh into the phone. "If you'd called me, I'd be suckling your clit right now."

I grit my teeth. "I gotta go before I combust. I love you," I hang up and don my gloves, forcing my mind to baby shit. Like the baby Gio wants to fuck into me. On a rack. Shit. Baby shit. Wheels on the bus baby shit baby shit-never mind, it's not helping. I go to the bathroom to wipe my wetness and narrowly escape masturbating when I hear Hannah pulling up outside.

I grab my shit water bucket and head down to dump it in the garden bed. "We're watering and fertilizing the bed!" I tell her cheerfully as she watches mortified as Ken and Rosemary emerge from their house. I wave to them because why not. Rosemary looks confused why I'm here but they both give a quick wave back. As they back out of the driveway, I see the Texas Exes sticker on the car. UT Alumnae, like Brett and I were before we became crappy divorced exes. Ken and Rosemary used to be so much friendlier when I was faking happiness next door.

Hannah coos at her baby on her hip as we head back inside. She's got a shit smeared master bedroom and Pati's food isn't orgasmic. Instead of feeling inferior, I may have made a friend and Gio's higher seems a little more doable. Life sometimes.

CHAPTER 24

Gio

Gio!” shouts the local reporter. “Why do you think you lost?”

“Antonio Salinas is a strong candidate. He got great momentum at the end and it took him over the top on election day. I want to congratulate him and his supporters on their victory. I know District 3 is in great hands and I look forward to what Tony will accomplish.”

“Why’d you lose the endorsements near the end?” someone else asks.

“Sometimes you run into differences with the groups you work with that can’t be resolved.”

“Differences like Mia Sinclair?” the same voice presses. There were rumors surrounding the endorsements but even the local reporters mostly sidestepped delving into the personal story behind them.

I lock eyes with Mia standing next to Diaz at the back of the press room. “First of all, her name is Mia MacDonald. Second, the former councilwoman-”

“Barra,” comes Mia’s voice. “My name’s Mia Barra,” she asserts.

She made no mention of changing her name until now. “Mia Barra,” I repeat and the public ownership of it rockets to my dick. *Mine*. “Come here Mrs. Barra,” I beckon. She looks uncertain but Diaz takes her elbow and escorts her to the podium. “The former councilwoman did me the honor of becoming my wife recently,” I reach out and take her hand, pulling her to me and covering the mic with my other hand. I give her a good tongue kiss because, well, I want to and then whisper in her ear, “I got hard saying your married name so stand in front of me please,” and she breathes out a laugh. I go back to the mic. “So forgive me if I’m not interested in

dissecting what happened. I lost the seat. Tony will be great. And I have all I need to be happy.”

“Can we get a statement from the former councilwoman?”

Mia takes a moment to compose herself while I move behind her. “Obviously I think my husband (my heart almost explodes when she calls me that) is the best candidate but congratulations to Antonio. Council members come and go but their commitment to Austin never changes.” She turns back to me and we stare at each other mesmerized like we did holding hands in front of the judge. I love our private world. I’m my full, complete self there, nothing held back or edited, everything accepted. She squeezes my hand - let’s go.

I hustle her out of the presser to my office to collect my things, locking the door purposefully behind us.

She hears the click of the door and stops still in front of me, facing away. “Here?” she asks innocently, turning slowly, secretive smile on her face.

“On the desk,” I lift her gently and push her legs open with my knee. “It’s technically not my office anymore so be quiet,” I warn as I tug her undies down from beneath her skirt, licking my fingers and then stroking her clit. She undoes my pants and pushes them down. Her legs hook around my waist, pulling me into her as she lays back on the desk, arching her back and thrusting her wet opening at me. As I ease into her slow and deep, feeling every inch of her stretch, she takes my hand and puts it over her mouth. My balls clench. Our sexual playlist is expanding and it’s thrilling. “Are you tracking your ovulation Mrs. Barra?” Her eyes sparkle as she nods, body bouncing with my thrusts. “Do you need to be tied to the rack tonight and bred?” Her brow creases in ecstasy as her vagina tightens on me and she whimpers helplessly, coming almost silently under my palm, orgasm pulsing through her body like she’s hooked up to those electric shock paddles instead of my dick. The image is the perfect bookend to my council career. I ached for her in this office and stroked myself to completion fantasizing about her. Now time is propelling me out, forward, with Mia by my side. I’ll never be without her again. I pull her up so I can bury my face in her neck as I pump everything I

have into her fisted vagina. “Mi,” I exhale as I thrust that last sweet time. “My wife.”

The next morning, photos of us kissing at the press conference are all over the local papers and news websites, even Dallas and Houston publications. We’re sitting at our kitchen table, scrolling through them when my phone vibrates.

“Seen the press conference coverage?” Diaz texts me.

“Looking now. So weird.”

“I prefer to think of it as advantageous,” and he attaches a link to a poll done overnight, asking people about likely candidates for a U.S. senate seat held by Kip Conley, who announced his upcoming retirement yesterday. My name’s at the top. *“Ready for a run at the senate?”*

I stare at my phone, laughing in disbelief. Mia looks up and I forward the link to her. She reads it on her tablet, my beautiful wife’s face lighting up with surprise and anticipation. She looks up at me, eyes hopeful. I put my phone down, stand and lean over the table, eyeing her like a hungry predator. She takes off her glasses and tilts her face up, eager for my kiss.

EPILOGUE

Mia



He looks so happy Mi,” Gio says as I sit frozen in the passenger seat of the car, staring out the windshield at my father and his wife, his arm around her in front of their garage, hopeful and excited. Tears are streaming down his face. Mine too. I never thought I’d stare my genes in the face, at least until I had my own children and then when I got divorced I thought I’d moved further away from it than ever. But here they are, microscopic links to the man standing in front of us. This must’ve been how Radar felt when she stared down a squirrel. Gene deep. I’m a little sick honestly.

I hear my husband exit the car, see him striding up to my father and shaking his hand and then coming to my side and opening the door, holding his hand out with a smile. I guess he gets me out of the car and walks me up the drive - it’s a blur but all of sudden I’m standing within arms reach of my father. “May I hug you?” he asks gently and I nod and he reaches out and grabs me into a tight hug, “Mia,” he says softly, “it’s wonderful to meet you. If I knew...I’m so sorry. I would’ve come for you had I known,” and I break down sobbing in his arms, grieving for what could’ve been, a loving family, but what ultimately was, years spent alone, clawing my way, desperately resorting to the basest measures to survive like an animal gnawing off a stuck limb. I did what I had to and I made it but goddamn it’s bittersweet. Gio’s behind me and suddenly I crave his arms. I pull back from my father and turn to my husband, falling into his familiar hold and smell. “Take me away from here please,” I beg and he pulls back to look into my eyes, taking my hand and walking to the back bumper of the car.

“Need to talk?” he asks gently, wiping my eyes with his shirt sleeve. “It’s so painful, what might’ve been. I’m happy to have found him but angry I didn’t have him. My mom could’ve tried to find him when she got sick but how can I be

mad at her?”

Gio doesn't answer right away, just pulls me into his arms. “It's awful you didn't have him when he wanted to raise you. But if you grew up in Houston, we might not've met and then you wouldn't be my wife, we wouldn't have Memo growing inside you, wouldn't have all the happiness and hope we have.” And just like that, he turns things around for me, yes, this is ugly but check out this side, it's beautiful. “Finding him can be 2 things at once Mi, painful yet joyous. Wrong but ok. I think your dad would agree.”

I turn to look at my father who's leaning up against the pillar of his garage, hand over his eyes crying while his wife attempts to comfort him, rubbing his back and talking softly to him, “it's not your fault Gare, you didn't know.”

I turn back into my husband's arms. “Thank you for helping me do this.” He gave me the ancestry kit for Christmas and called my father when I got the results in case his reaction was unwelcoming. He turned my life around with his secure attaching. His voice, as always, is comforting in my ear, “It's an honor to see you find your family Mi,” and I siphon strength from him and turn to my father. His wife addresses me as I come back up the driveway, “we've been following Gio's campaign and we saw the causes you work on and your dad,” she hesitates but continues, “Gary's been so worried about what you went through.”

“It's ok,” I tell him, “I'm ok.”

“It's not ok but I'm glad you are. That gives me some relief. I can't change the past but I hope I can make up for it a little going forward.” The front door opens. “Can we meet her yet?” a woman probably 8 years my junior peeks out asking. Her eyes look kinda like what I see in the mirror everyday. She steps out in front of a seeming unending line of people who emerge to greet me. I stand with Gio in a stupefied receiving line as they introduce themselves, my younger half sister and brother, 2 aunts and an uncle, their spouses, 8 cousins and my grandmother. She cupped my face and told me, “you look just like I did at your age,” and I bawled again, I bawled all day but every time I did, someone family embraced me. Guillermo

kicked inside me all day long. My whole body was sparking with connection. I filled my contacts with Durands and now I have so many birthdays and life events to keep track of. Plus we have a whole other family to see when we're here visiting Gio's family. I'm someone to so many people I barely recognize me.

At the center of it all is Gio, the man whose path crossed mine on Austin city council, whose political star was rising whilst mine flamed out. The intersection of our lives that fateful evening in session braided us together forever. His words demolished the shell of my life and as I sat in the tatters, his hand reached out and pulled me up. He rebuilt me, wrote me anew with reassuring, attaching, dirty sexy words. I'm not ashamed to say he made my life, he did. I'd survived before him and I would've survived without him. I'd cut myself, felt like nothing but I hadn't killed myself. I am strong. But to find my purpose, I needed him.

We're here on the last leg of his senatorial campaign. We rented a bus and drove all over Texas, driving, my favorite thing, made all the more perfect by cuddling up to my husband while staring out the window at the scenery.

I took Gio's suggestion and started talking to a therapist once a week. I want to be the best Mia I can for me, him and our kids. Gio took my suggestion and we do couples therapy too. I want to prevent any of the mistakes I made with Brett and he doesn't want us to go down the path he did with Kara either. Not that there's any trouble now - we're bliss. That constancy he wooed me with? The man covers his promises y'all, vote for him. He was everywhere for me on the campaign trail. At big events, he never let go of my hand, making sure I stood next to the podium when he spoke. The first speech I was overwhelmed by the crowds. He saw the frozen look on my face, stepped away and pulled me to him, tipping my face up. "Baby, I'm right here," one of the mics caught him saying, and he stood there stroking my face until I calmed down. And then he kissed me, really kissed me, crowding out my nerves with hormones, reaching out to grab my hand and kiss it sweetly one more time before he continued. The crowd ate it up and his popularity soared.

Younger voters went mad for him, the loving and attentive husband, women especially. I'd get jealous if I had the time. He reassures me every other, second, with words, touch, a look or slow lick of his lips.

At political dinners he'd pull my chair close, including me in conversations, asking my opinion and always touching me, my neck, face, hair, kissing and nuzzling me. He's my husband first and candidate second, he says. When I'm tired, we leave. I told him to stay out later and mingle with donors but he doesn't want to without me. I don't mind because we go back home or to our hotel and fuck so sweet and sleep so deep.

Someone on his growing campaign staff was looking for him the other day and I heard another staffer tell them, "Find Mia, he's wherever she is," and I had to smile. He literally dragged me into every political discussion, meet and greet, handshake, campaign strategy meeting, press conference. I feel held and attached all the time. Cherished. I soak it up. Women look at me enviously. He's hot and brilliant and devoted. To me. I can't get enough of him.

Gio

"Fuck Mi," I pull out of her ass, gripping my dick hard "can I come on it? Is it healed?" "Yes Senator," she pants, her own orgasm still subsiding. "Baby," I groan, stroking myself to completion. "God I love it, I love you," I pant as my ejaculate spurts all over *Barra* tattooed right where her incredible butt cheek meets her back. In my handwriting. "I needed to give you something in case you lost," Mia told me when she unveiled it. I stared at it for 2 seconds before attacking her.

Normally I reinsert. I love to do that, see my come squirting out and then reenter to ejaculate the rest inside. It's such an erotic visual that I've recorded it all the ways, vaginal, anal, oral. Mia masturbates to the videos while I watch or when we have phone sex. Things haven't exactly cooled since we got married and pregnant. We got a house with a big walk in closet that stores a fuck bench, board, spreader bar...we explore online and play in bed. I still tie her to the breeding rack with

her big baby belly. We're obscene.

But on the night of my senate victory, and let's be honest, the next week at least, I'm coming on her butt cheek. Owned, stamped, heavy with our baby and coated in my desire, Mia Barra, **Mine**. Caveman, she calls me. I don't care, I tell her, and she teases me for being defiant. I don't. Corralling my feelings for Mia has never worked. They're meant to exist as they are.

I had to be careful on the campaign trail. There was a swell of news coverage and social media about our love story, the liberal and the conservative, which certainly didn't hurt my candidacy. We didn't play into it intentionally - I just can't keep my hands off my wife and cameras caught me lusting after her everywhere, which wasn't ideal when it came to my ever present erection. Fortunately having Mia in between me and whoever I'm talking to killed 2 birds with one boner. She's never left out and my hard on's concealed. Worked out perfectly.

Initially people focused on our infamous evening at city council. We were forced to watch the recording of it incessantly. Mia apologized for her statements so much that we finally added a full retraction to my campaign website. And then we did our best to shift focus and move forward. Mia was a natural. People who tried to make her look bad ended up looking bad themselves because she'd apologize wholeheartedly and then bring up her passion, connecting with and helping people. She visited low cost clinics across the state, using her personal story to highlight the need for better vaccine education and funding. She met with foster kids and connected with other children who'd lost a parent. She sat in on self help groups and candidly shared her struggles with depression and self harm. She was spellbinding. When Mia Barra's vulnerable, you can't look away. You root for her no matter your political affiliation. Articles have been written about her watering down my progressive edge, how we hit a sweet spot of appeal for a broad swath of Texas voters. Hard left voters bailed on me but in their wake came 3 times the moderates. Mia softened my image. She softened me. I wouldn't have won without her.

Flooding rains hit the hill country right before the election. The Colorado river was full of silt and Ullrich water treatment plant went offline again. Austin had to boil water for a week. Neely took a well deserved bath in that dirty water, while all my harping for oversight on the water department finally paid off. My popularity swelled even further. My campaign was like a train gathering steam, unstoppable at the end. In a race with no incumbent, all that momentum took me over the top. Diaz gunned for the senate seat from the get go. It was a bold move to go from Austin city council to U.S. Senate but he saw an opportunity and he was right.

“I love you calling me Senator,” I tell Mia as I smear ejaculate back and forth across my name with the tip of my dick. “Can we play intern?”

She bursts out laughing, “Oh my god, yes. Yes we can.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Endless thanks to my husband for his unconditional support, for taking on extra chores so I could fulfill my passion and giving me the space to read and write while you resolved crimes with the dog by your side. My life isn't possible without you.

For my brother Tom. I love you gene deep.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K. Sato has been obsessed with love stories her whole life. Like taped HEA's of soap operas, TV and movie couples - she would watch over and over - completely obsessed. Fast forward decades later to when she picked up her first contemporary romance novel and realized she could craft her own stories AND make them as dirty as she wanted! That's her HEA! When she's not playing with her couples like naked Ken and Barbie, she's reading some of her fave authors or hanging with her husband or working at Costco. 'Cuz she might as well get paid for being there so much.

Keep reading for an exciting look at K. Sato's hot, hilarious
new novel...

Lilac

LOVE HEALS SERIES BOOK 2.

CHAPTER 1

Brit



It's frozen boogers cold. Mom's on her way and I came outside to wait because I'm excited to be home after 3 and a half years but Texas may have turned me wimpy. I head back in the sliding doors, texting Mom to call me when she pulls up. When I look up from my phone I see a familiar figure lumbering across the airport. "Holly!"

She looks up from her phone, same curly brown farm mullet, same towering body hunching over. Holly grew up on her grandparents' dairy farm after her parents were killed by a drunk driver and their farm neighbored ours. Not like we could see their house or our yards butted up against each other or anything. We were farm neighbors. Our back pastures butted.

"Brit, hey, it's been awhile," she says distractedly.

She looks stressed. "Are you ok?" I ask gingerly.

"Grandpa had a stroke. I'm headin' ta Phoenix now - that's where they live. We sold the farm after the fire. I don't have any family left here."

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?" Mom told me about the terrible barn fire, cows wailing and the smell of them burning. I wonder why she's still in Green Bay. Holly didn't have a ton of friends growing up. She's a large girl who frequently came to school in slurry coated muck boots. Not surprisingly, eau de manure didn't win her homecoming queen.

Her eyes squint as she appraises me. I smile sympathetically

back. “How long are ya home for?”

“2 weeks. I’m on Christmas break. Why?”

“Ya remember Lorenzo Franchini?”

Do I remember. See, Holly and I were 4-H and Future Farmers of America friends. We talked bovine conformation, show points and end of year circuit championship potlucks, not 18 year long obsessions that call to mind a duck imprinting, culminating with a down on the ground fuck so hot and dirty it’s still flowering daily orgasms 4 years later. Holly’s kind of a dorky girl, not that I was head cheerleader or anything but she’s intact hymen dorky. “Lorenzo? Sure, I remember him,” you know casually, the name rings a bell, I don’t mainline it to orgasm every single day at all.

She checks her watch. “He’s the CEO of Latticini now and he pays me super good to be his personal assistant-”

“You’re his personal assistant?” my voice achieves a new octave and I’m extra bummed she’s leaving town because Grandpa of course, really hope he’s ok but wow, she coulda brought me round the wellspring of all orgasm.

“Well not anymore actually,” she huffs out a laugh. “He just fired me.”

“What? With your grandpa sick?” That’s frozen boogers cold.

She shrugs. “I been wantin’ to move on anyways, I got my nursin’ degree and I do almost nothin’ for him,” she shakes her head and then bites her lip. “And he’s havin’ a hard time right now. We came back from Italy early.”

“You were in *Italy*?” Like it’s the moon. I kinda can’t handle Holly right now.

“Flight 672 to Chicago O’Hare now pre-boarding, gate 11,” a woman announces over the loudspeaker. Grabbing a lanyard from her pocket, Holly shoves it into my hand. “Use this at that door over there,” she points behind the luggage revolver. “He’s in the private jet,” my eyes bug out. “Be his partner Brit - nothin’ weird. If it turns weird, walk away for sure.” Wait, what? “But will ya stay by his side? For a few days at least?”

At least?! How about forever? “I gotta go. 4-H handshake?” she tucks the handle of her rolling carryon under her elbow, pushing it as she backs away from me, extending her hands crossed out in front of her.

“Yeah, 4-H handshake,” I nod in a daze, air shaking her hands with mine crossed too. Stay by the side of my GOAT sex? Be his partner? Oh I will partner the shit outta him. I’ve been kinda down lately and this is exactly what I’ve been needing. “I won’t walk away,” I assure her.

“Thanks Brit. You’re the best,” she turns and heads up the ramp toward the gates.

No Holly, you’re the best. I look down at my golden ticket, the lanyard with its red, white and green flag waving over a red Wisconsin barn and silo. *Latticini. Il Modo Italiano.*

My phone rings. “Hey honey, I just pulled up!” Mom’s voice chirps cheerfully into my ear. “Coming,” I respond absentmindedly.

Mom jumps out of the ancient relic Ford Taurus and pulls me into a tight hug. “Brit,” she breathes into my chest because I’m way taller than her. “It’s so good ta see ya honey,” she leans back to take me in with tears in her eyes. “So womanly now,” she comments, intrigue laced into her tone.

“Mom stop. I haven’t gotten laid in Texas,” I placate her.

“Britney Lynne! I was not askin’ ya that!” She smacks my arm halfheartedly, grabs my suitcase and rolls it to the trunk.

“Yeah you were,” I respond as she opens the trunk. I go help her lift my suitcase inside.

“Ok yah,” she laughs. “But don’t do that foul mouthin’ in fronta your dad,” she slams the trunk shut and goes to the driver’s side. “Get in, eh? It’s freezin’ and ya don’t even have a coat. Tha heck were ya thinkin’ Brit?” and she ducks into the car.

I take a deep breath, open the passenger side door and lean down inside. “I’m not gonna come home right now Mom. I just ran into Holly VanDenLangenberg. Her grandpa had a stroke in Phoenix.”

“Oh my gosh, does she need a ride or somewheres to stay?”

“No, she was heading to a plane but she works for Lorenzo Franchini and she asked me to help him...while she’s gone.” Forever. Because he might be Ebenezer Scrooge.

“The Italian stallion?” And yes, I told my mom about fucking Lorenzo Franchini - it was my GOAT and she’s got a perverse enjoyment of talking about sex. She relished giving me the talk. The talk’s never ended. She turned the talk into a volunteer gig as a middle school sex educator. “Oh yah, that’s right, she’s been workin’ for him.”

I nod. “She was-is his assistant,” I stumble “so maybe I just need to shop for him or cook dinner. We didn’t have time to get into details.”

She hesitates, not happy about any of what I’m telling her. “Well, me and your dad didn’t have fancy plans but we were excited ta have ya home for Christmas. Been almost 4 years.”

Brenda Van Dervyn’s highly skilled in the art of Midwestern shame tactics. “You’re gonna see plenty of me,” I reassure her. *Be his partner Brit.* “I’ll be callin’ ya in a few hours to pick me up.” If I stick to the letter of Holly’s request, this is almost certainly a lie, but what’s a couple little lies to infinite orgasms?

“Well ok then. Dad’s waitin’ at home. He wanted ta finish the milkin’ so’s we could catch up all evenin’ but there’s no sense kickin’ up a fuss if it’s just a few hours.”

She’s making me double down now, the manipulative cow. She more than anyone should know that when challenged, her only child digs deeper. She instilled it in me. “No,” I answer resolutely. “No sense.”

She puts the car in drive and turns back to me. “Holly lives out at his place ya know,” she mentions casually but the absolute suggestion is that I’m headed into a den of sin.

I smile defiantly back at her, irritated that she caught me off guard because Holly neglected to mention she *lives with* my hottest fuck. But it only strengthens my resolve. “Well that sure increases my chances for dick now doesn’t it, Mom?”

“Britney Lynne Van Dervyn!” she shrieks. My vulgarity’s a thrill ride for my mom. “That is not how I raised ya!” I always go way raunchier than she could ever imagine and she secretly loves it.

“It’s exactly how you raised me,” I assert. “Now quit huffin’ and puffin’. I won’t ignore you and dad, I promise. Let me see what he needs real quick, ok? I told Holly I’d help.”

She grumbles “yah ok,” and I slam the door. I don’t need my mother’s Wisconshame right now. I go back inside the terminal and march past the luggage carousel, following the sign to the *Private Hangars*. The door’s locked but there’s some kind of scanner on it which I hold the lanyard up to and it buzzes and clicks unlocked. I push it open and head back out into the cold Wisconsin winter.

CHAPTER 2

Enzo

Enzo, I'm sorry but ya know I gotta go.
I have to be in Italy right now Holly, but I'm not.
My grandpa had a stroke Enzo! You wanna lay with a buncha women!

What I do in Italy isn't biblical Holly. I go there to fuck.

So? You're rich! Go back!

The pilots need rest. The plane needs fuel. And no matter how much money I have, I don't jet around the planet to fulfill my bodily functions. Do you see me flying to China to eat and the south fucking pole to shit?

Please stop cursin'. (Sigh.) So don't pay me while I'm gone. Make up for every last penny through my pay.

That's sweet. And I pay you incredibly well but that won't even begin to cover a round trip flight to Italy on the jet. Leave now and you're fired.

Mussolini she mumbled on her way down the aisle. My Wisconsin nickname and an uncharacteristic low blow from Holly. An ex once scrawled it in lipstick across a public restroom mirror and it stuck no matter how good a boss I try to be. Holly's been an outcast like me her whole life and she's never used it before so it stings coming from her. Harsh, rigid, cruel. Tit for exactly tat. That's me off antidepressants. As a kid I tapped on walls, stepped on carpets a certain way, flicked light switches on and off incessantly and generally drove my father up the wall with embarrassing rituals until he got me on a lazy susan of meds, and I abandoned checking and magical thinking in favor of lists, schedules and the absolute maximization of time and resources. No amount of turning the lights on and off was gonna bring my mother back from Italy once she left or provide my little sister with the sense of security she desperately needed. So I gave Tina stability by

organizing everything: homework, extracurricular activities, tutoring, meals, clothing, giving her the structure she could rely on. Once I got our lives steadied, I turned my new hobby into running our home and staff, which my father was only too happy to let me do in the absence of his wife. Shopping, cleaning, maintenance, yard work all fell under my purveyance. Once I got a look at the budget, I attacked the business side of running the household efficiently too, negotiating contracts, paying bills and monitoring performance. The staff *loved* me.

SSRI's smooth over my rough edges enough to not be a giant thorn in everyone's side and Holly was an additional reinforcing buffer. I'm allowed to be driven and uncompromising as long as Latticini's pumping out profits. People may not love me but they're impressed and intimidated by me. Anyway, I've no need for friends but I do need to fuck. And I can't. It's a decimating tradeoff, one I swear the pharmaceutical companies deliberately engineered to cull the population of people like me.

Medication holidays worked for a couple years but their appeal's waning. I was just satisfying base male need when Holly stumbled onto me with my mouth latched onto a nameless contadina's cunt like a police dog on an offender's arm. I'm nothing more than an animal in Italy, since I restrict my prowling to the far off homeland of my parents. No need to make things more Mussolini for myself in Wisconsin with a bunch of meaningless sex. Case in point: Holly. She could barely even bring herself to make eye contact with me after seeing me in action. I caught her watching me eat dinner on the plane home with something akin to horror on her face. I stared back at her, forkful of puttanesca poised in front of my pussy eating lips *Yes, I still consume food with this mouth. I hunger for a lot of things, innocent girl.* Holly's a big fan of Little House on the Prairie reruns if that tells you anything about her sexual experience level. She was thoroughly appalled but give her some time for the image of me being Italian manimal to rise above the righteousness. At some point it'll pop into her subconscious or she'll dream about it and wake up with her hand pressed into her panties. I was shocked

the first time I caught my father mounting the secretary bent over his desk. Angry, hurt, confused but deeply and eventually, aroused. It's like the curds separating from the whey. The animal act runs a deep gorge through all of us.

Even on my meds when the physical need is deadened, the intellectual urge doesn't go away. I'll notice a woman's curves, fixate on how they'd cushion the force of my thrusts as I covered her and bore my need deep and I know it's time to prep for an Italian sojourn. The first couple times felt illicit but at this point it's utterly rote:

- Tell people I'm going to visit to my imaginary fiancée
- Lay off the meds 10 days prior
- Pay my father a visit on the coattails of the meds
- Report on Latticini's continued astronomical growth since I took over. Whereas dad ran it like a lackadaisical cheese Da Vinci, I diversified and then OCD'ed the fuck out of every branch I've ventured into. Wisconsin is consistently losing the farms we need to make our delicious cheeses, so I started investing in them, buying farmers out when they went under and then asking them to stay on and specialize under Latticini's stewardship. We now create the kind of microcreamery craft cheeses Dad always wanted from grass fed, humanely raised cows. And once I vertically integrated into dairy farms, I had built in co-ops to raise capital. We installed biodigesters that allow farmers to monetize their manure, a complex process of infrastructure and partnership an individual could never afford. Now our farms reap the benefits of government subsidies, energy profits, liquid fertilizer and solid bedding. Next I'm moving into meat. Modern day farmers have to utilize every possible revenue stream and my talent's milking every last cent from their product. I'm taking Latticini from an aging cheese company to an agricultural powerhouse, and I enjoy presenting my successes to my father more every time, although

that enjoyment's tempered by dad's responding progeny pressure. *You need a wife!* (This from the man whose wife can't stand him.) *You're a virile Italian man and rich to boot!* Federico Franchini can give you a 30 minute lecture on how to properly taste cheese but trying to fathom the negative aspects of my OCD never did anything but frustrate him. Why can't I just *stop with the obsessions already*, as if it were that simple and I'm a moron who hasn't thought of that solution. *Plenty of Italian women would bear you children in spite of the personality difetti*, Lorenzo he assures me. Gee thanks dad. Sure, I'll marry an Italian woman, drag her to America's dairyland and subject her to the same misery that made my mother abandon us, olive complexioned and heavily accented in a place as white and homogenous as the milk.

- Restart the meds and depart the Franchini villa, fucking my way back to Rome for the next 12-14 days until my dick dies.

Except this time I brought Holly. I sense her getting restless lately, wanting to go swaddle newborn babies all day and actually use her neonatal nursing degree instead of being my live-in personal assistant. I hoped an all expense paid trip to Italy'd make her feel good about her job again, even going so far as to hire a handsome translator to squire her around so I could fulfill my needs with zero guilt. But that backfired spectacularly. Instead of enjoying personally guided tours complete with flirtatious attention I requested and funded, she stuck to me like a stage 5 clinger, stalking me as I courted a local farm woman and following us from town to the scene of what was shaping up to be a delightful rustic fuck. After behaving as if she'd caught me screwing a goat on the Italian mountainside, she demanded we leave and shamed me with pious attitude the rest of the way back to Rome. I didn't have a single Italian orgasm and I'm on day 3 of the 14 day SSRI lag, basically unmedicated. I'm a horny anachronism. Holly was right about one thing. I need to go back to Italy.

I grab my phone and dial my pilot. "Bob! Don't bother

unpacking. We're going back to Rome."

"Enzo? Just a sec...it's Enzo," I hear him tell his wife. There's a muffled sound and then he must press mute because it goes totally silent for a minute until he returns. "Enzo, hey, what's that again?" He sounds guarded, like he received instructions during that muted minute.

"I need to go back to Italy. Tonight." Shocked silence. "Just kidding, I know you have to sleep. Tomorrow'll be fine."

"Uh...listen. Donna was real excited to have me back when ya cut the trip short. Our grandkids are comin' for Christmas dinner."

"So fly me there and come back. I don't care."

"I'm not a young man anymore, Enzo. I can't do the short turnarounds with the long distances and the lag. I need downtime in between. I was meanin' to talk to ya in the new year about stickin' to Wisconsin."

"I'll need an extra goddamn pilot on the payroll if you cherry pick, Bob."

"95% of your work's here. There's plenty of young guys you can contract cheap just for the Italy legs."

"I pay you for premium service. Not piecemeal."

He pauses. "What's goin' on anyway? Cuttin' the trip 11 days short and now ya wanna go right back?"

Oh ok Bob, let me explain. Holy Holly caught me cunnilingussing and dragged my horny ass back to the monastery of Wisconsin and now I'll spend the next 11 days walking around with a dick so hard I fear it could shatter like dry ice. "I know you like to think of yourself as a father figure to me but it's none of your goddamn business. I pay you to fly and I need to fly to Italy tomorrow. Do it or I'll put Simpson in the pilot seat and find a new co."

There's a shocked silence followed by him chuckling softly. Sarcastically. "I flew a lotta miles for your dad, he's a decent man. And yeah, I watched ya grow up along the way. Too bad you're nothin' like him. You're just a young hotshot who

thinks he can throw money around and act like a dictator,” that’s a veiled Mussolini reference! “Find somebody young and hungry enough to put up with ya,” and he hangs up.

I dial Simpson angrily and it goes straight to voicemail. I redial him 3 more times and finally leave a voicemail. “I need to go back to Italy tomorrow. You’re the Franchini pilot now. Find a copilot and make it happen.” I’m in the middle of texting him the same message when I hear someone’s boots crunching across salt and snow. The plane techs who power down the plane and secure it in the hangar. “Do you need me to come up and help with your bags?” A woman, her voice oddly familiar. “Hello?”

“Just a minute!” I snap. “And I don’t need your help!”

“Ok.”

The metal of the plane steps creaks. “I said not to come up here!”

“I’m not. I just sat on the bottom step. But oh shit, do you think I’m too heavy? I cannot break your plane. I don’t have the money for even one step and I bet this whole staircase is one continuous and monstrously expensive piece. How much did this plane cost anyway?”

Plane techs are usually male and while they might ask how the flight was or if the plane needs any attention, they certainly don’t inquire as to the cost of the thing. But I’m in luck. I’ve been blessed with a chatty tech. The metal is vibrating like a tuning fork now. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Oh sorry, I’m shivering. I just got here from Texas and dammit, Mom left with my suitcase!” I can hear her sigh from way up here and my dick perks like a dumb dog. *Sigh again sweetie*. “She probably did that on purpose to get me to come home. She’s so passive aggressive,” she grumbles and sighs again and my dick stiffens and tingles as *obedient* drifts across my mind like a waft of smoke. “Anyway, I’ve been in Austin for 3 and a half years at UT and I guess I’m kinda wimpy now about the cold.”

Do you know how many words were actually necessary to

answer the question I asked? Exactly 2. 2 words, *I'm shivering* would've sufficed, and the sexy sighs that mean I now need 5 minutes of alone time were totally excessive but screw it, I own the plane, I can jerk off in the bathroom. "Go back inside the terminal. I'll be out in a few minutes and then you can move the plane to the hangar."

"What?" she sounds panicked. "You want me to drive your plane? I gotta be honest, that's probably a bad idea, like wings crashing through the windows of the airport bad. Does Holly drive the plane?"

"Who are you?" I demand.

"Brit," she says as if it's obvious from her voice alone. It's not. "Britney Lynne Van Dervyn. We slept together 4 years ago, remember? I mean I guess I shouldn't say slept together because it was outside on the ground and zero sleeping happened but you remember right?" She sounds hopeful and hell yes I remember the girl with her legs splayed so wide for me I've never looked at spatchcocked chicken the same again. "Ok, I guess you forgot that night at our farm which is too bad because I revisit it at least once daily," she giggles and once daily, Jesus she's horny. I restrict myself to older women in Italy, widows or spinsters, emotionally unavailable for attachment or giggling of any kind. I shift in my seat, praying she doesn't go into masturbatory detail, which actually seems like a distinct possibility on the roller coaster that is her conversation. "Well anyways, I'm a friend and neighbor of Holly's. I ran into her in the terminal and she asked me to help you since you fired her."

Really Holly? You didn't think your boss with the slight control issues might wanna have a say in who you sub in for your duties at the last second? The last 36 hours've gone so unbelievably wrong that at this point, I might as well sit Brit's ass in the pilot seat and let her plow my jet's wings through the airport windows. Hell, why not just make her my new pilot and have her crash me over to Italy while she's at it?

"You really don't remember me?" Her voice is plaintive.

"No!" I snap. I have nothing to offer this girl right now.

Everything is wrong. Flares always start with a sense of uneasiness, like when you go to the grocery store and can't remember what you need or you go into a room in your house to grab something but you forgot along the way what it was. Except instead of being able to let that vague uncertainty go, it's a lit fuse that crackles to anxiety and burns away at your sense of well being like acid. I feel spacey and rudderless and wrong, wrong, wrong.

"Bummer," she laughs softly. "I had the time of my life with you," she says wistfully and her cloying sweetness knifes me in the gut. A gust of bitterly cold wind blows inside the plane. "It's snowing a little," she offers as a tidbit of information I might be interested in. "So pretty. I missed the snow," she says almost to herself as the rattling reverberates up the metal staircase. I don't want to care about this random once a fuck shivering at the bottom of my jet steps and bright siding me with the pretty snowflakes landing on her frostbitten skin. I need to go inside my plane bathroom, relieve my aching balls into a tissue and go home to bed, call my new pilot repeatedly in the morning until he gets his ass to the airport and flies me back to Italy where I can get my life back on track even if the track sucks and I hate it. The actual track doesn't matter, being *on* it is what relieves the anxiety.

But no, Holly sicked a girl who's acutely horny for me on me on her way out the door. I get up from my seat, yank my carry on from underneath it, grab my coat from the hook and fold it carefully over my arm so it's concealing my groin because public erection's the semen icing on my shit cake of a day. I stride purposefully to the hatch, standing atop the steps looking down at this interloper, ready to unleash my frustration on her. Her back's to me, huddled on the last step, arms wrapped tightly around her legs in nothing more than a t-shirt for christ's sake. *Lampone*. I clear my throat like a dictator. She jumps up and turns to me, "oh great, are you ready? Holy shit you're even more gorgeous than I remember," she breathes out, blown away look on her face, exactly the way she looked when I nudded all over her tits and stomach. And she loved it. My dick aches. I'm gonna have to jerk off in the car. It's parked on the top of the garage. Should

be the only one up there.

I focus on keeping a straight face even though her girlish fawning makes me want to laugh, invite her inside my jet and defile her on every surface but I descend the steps as dignified as possible with an erection throbbing between your thighs, brushing past her at the bottom and heading for the terminal. She doesn't immediately follow. I can feel her watching me walk away. Is she checking me out?

When I reach the door I realize I don't have the stupid card with the chip in it to open it. And then I realize who must have a card to be out here with me. The card assigned to Holly by airport security after a full background check. That she so blithely passed on to someone else. My blood boils.

I whirl around, ready to bark at Holly's horny imposter to stop eye fucking me like a piece of meat and get over here but she's disappeared. I tip my head up to the sky, closing my eyes and praying for patience. Leaving my suitcase, I stalk back across the tarmac, bound up the steps and inside. Britney's standing in the middle of the aisle, motionless. "I assume you have the key card to open the door to the terminal?" She jumps, startled and turns to face me, her cheeks and nose and ears reddened from the cold.

"Oh my gosh, you scared me. I've never seen a private jet before so I had to peek," she pushes by me and stomps down the steps. "Jesus, it's like a rap video in there."

"Did you see everything you wanted to?" I ask, following her down. The jet's nice and I don't mind showing it off.

She jumps off the last step to the ground landing on both feet like a kid. "I'm good. Fancy stuff like that makes me super uncomfortable," and she heads toward the terminal door.

I'm a dickholder so I don't appreciate her rejection of my jet. "I assure you, it's very comfortable. I have to fly often and it really makes a difference," I tell her, trailing behind her, *like my jet please*.

We arrive at the door to the terminal. "Does Holly fly with you all the time?" She holds the lanyard up and the door

buzzes. She grabs the handle and holds it open while I push my bag through the door.

“Yes. She enjoys it thoroughly.” Lie, she thinks it’s an unnecessary, un-Jesus like indulgence although I noticed Hollier Than Thou slept like a baby in her sleeper seat after enjoying a double of the chef’s lasagna on the way to Italy. We head down the narrow hallway that opens to the baggage claim.

“Wow. Who woulda thought the girl who came to school in muck boots’d be jetting all over in a private plane like a Packer player or the governor?”

“She met the governor last month.”

“Really? You’re like Sconnie royalty now, eh? Do you have Lambeau season tickets?”

We’ve reached the baggage claim area. “Ok Britney-”

“Brit.”

“Brit. Here’s where we part ways. You can leave the key card with me since you won’t be driving the plane anywhere.”

“Ha. Yeah ok,” she hands me the lanyard, our hands briefly touching, her warmth despite standing out in the freezing cold for way too long jolting me like electricity. “But I promised Holly I’d stay with you while I’m home. Do you have some important business merger coming up that you need a date to keep things human like Pretty Woman?”

I stare back at her, agog at her naïveté. “It’s not your problem Britney.” I push past her, heading for the parking garage.