



ARROGANT
Single Dad

GRUMPY BILLIONAIRES
LAUREN WOOD

ARROGANT SINGLE DAD

GRUMPY BILLIONAIRES SERIES

LAUREN WOOD

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ROBERT

As I navigate the congested streets of the Upper West Side, my eyes are drawn to the high end boutique stores that line the sidewalk. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee that normally drifts on the morning air is fading to the scent of garlic and butter as restaurants switch to dinner service.

My destination is a towering building where, at its apex, my penthouse apartment resides. I check my watch again to confirm I'll still make it home just in time for a quick dinner with Millie before heading off to meet the guys at Suave for Thursday night poker.

My thoughts turn to one guy in particular - the key connection in closing an important deal that I've been working on for months. If I can successfully close this thing, it will give me space to take extra time off this summer to take Millie away to the beach.

The doorman greets me, ushers me into the private elevator and hits the button for the fifty-first floor. I love making it home before the sun goes down, when my whole place is bathed in natural light that bursts through the floor to ceiling windows scaling ten feet up.

I toss my keys into the tray on the end table and stand there for a minute, listening for Millie and her nanny - Estelle.

I note that nothing appears to be cooking in the kitchen, the sink is full of dirty dishes, and Millie's unfinished homework is sitting out on the counter. I stop for a moment, gritting my teeth and clenching my fists with a frustrated sigh. Estelle has only been with us for a couple of months, and she's already treading on thin ice.

"Millie!?" I call out, heading up the stairs for the playroom.

As I reach the top of the stairs and round the corner, my heart sinks in disappointment. Millie is giggling from the fort she's built in the corner.

I walk over to pull back the sheets. "Sweetheart, what are you doing in here?"

"Daddy!" she lights up, ignoring my questions, and springs forward to throw her arms around my neck. As she hugs me, the comic book she was just reading falls down beside her.

"Where's Estelle?"

Millie shrugs.

"Okay. You stay here. I'll go find her."

I'm fuming as I head further down the hall to find this woman. I pay my nannies better than any one else in the city, all in hopes of getting the very best care for my daughter. And yet - not a single damn one of them seems capable of keeping up with the basics.

Finally, I spot Estelle in her room - laughing and eating popcorn as she watches TV and lazily folds some laundry.

I clear my throat, causing Estelle to jump up in surprise. She quickly shuts off the TV and stands before me, her head bowed.

"Mr. Pierce, I was just -"

"Slacking off," I bark. "I found Millie reading comic books again. We've talked about this. I made it very clear I expect you to follow the schedule."

"She was having trouble with her homework," Estelle snips. "So I let her take a little break. No big deal."

"No big deal?" I scoff. "Homework should be done immediately when she gets home so she has time to practice her violin. Plus, I didn't see anything cooking in the kitchen. Now dinner will be late, which means she'll be late to bed. What did you have planned for dinner anyway? I guess you thought you'd just serve up frozen food again, huh?"

I have to stop myself from going off on her as bad as I want to, as much as she deserves it. I can't just let this kind of stuff slide, when I've made my expectations very clear. But I also know it's not good for Millie if we keep cycling through new nannies every few weeks or months. No one seems to be able to stick around long. I'm forced to choose between lowering my standards, or never having a stable person that's here for my daughter when I can't be.

The way I see it - she only really needs *me*, so I can't fathom lowering my

standards for the paid help. I would never do that for the men that work for me. Why the hell should I do it for someone with a job as important as looking after my precious daughter - the only person who really matters to me?

"Do we need to go over the schedule again?" I ask, holding back the full force of my anger.

"No," she says firmly, obviously holding back something of her own. "We don't need to go over the schedule again. We've been over the schedule a million times, Mr. Pierce. Millie is just a little girl. She's not a robot. You can't schedule and plan every second of her day. It's not good for her!"

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my cool. This is not the first time I've heard this argument. "It's not about scheduling every second. It's about making sure she's on track with her development, and that she's being given opportunities to explore her interests."

Estelle rolls her eyes. "Right. By forcing her to practice her violin all the time, and not letting her take a break when she needs it."

"It's called discipline," I say, my voice rising. "It's what made me successful, and it's what will make her successful."

Estelle shakes her head. "You don't get it, do you? You can't control everything. She's her own person, with her own interests and talents. You need to let her be that person."

That's it. I can't stand here and listen to this anymore.

"I pay you to do a very important job," I seethe. "Not to stand here and try to tell me what's good for my own daughter. You've only been here a couple of months. You don't know anything about her, and you certainly have no right to try and tell me how she should be raised."

"Well, while we're on the topic, *I'm* not a robot either!" Estelle snaps, flicking the TV off in anger. "I have been caring for children my whole life, Mr. Pierce! How many have you cared for besides your own!? I know what's good for children! And the way you shelter and control Millie isn't good for her!"

I stare at her in disbelief as she continues to rant, my anger and frustration intensifying. How dare she speak to me like this? I've worked hard to provide the best life for my daughter, sacrificing my own desires and interests to ensure she has the best opportunities. And yet, here this woman is, telling me that I'm doing it all wrong.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," I growl, stepping forward.

"You're just a nanny. You're replaceable."

Estelle doesn't back down as I approach her. "Maybe I am replaceable," she huffs with a bitter smirk. "You can hire as many nannies as you want, but nothing is ever going to change if you don't. No one can live under all of your rules. Especially not Millie! She's just a little girl! She wants to play, relax, have fun."

I stare at Estelle, trying to process the anger and frustration that is bubbling up inside me. I can't let her think that she can talk to me like this.

"If I want your advice, I'll ask for it," I say coldly, my voice barely above a whisper. "Right now, all I need you to do is clean up this mess and go make dinner."

Estelle crosses her arms and stares back at me in defiance. "I told Millie she could have a break for thirty more minutes. Then I will help her finish her homework while I cook dinner. Until then, I'm going to finish folding the laundry."

I shake my head. "No, you know what? Get out. You're fired."

Estelle stares at me, her mouth agape. "What?"

"You're fired," I repeat, my voice growing more steely. "You're no longer employed here. I'll have security escort you out."

I turn on my heel, ready to storm out of the room, but Estelle's voice stops me.

"You can't fire me! Because I quit!"

She starts yelling in Spanish as she storms to the closet and pulls out her suitcase. She slams it onto the bed and starts collecting all of her things and throwing them inside.

I check my watch again as I try to keep my calm and walk down the hall, headed back for Millie's playroom. Now I'm on my own to sort out dinner, and worse than that - I'm stuck without a sitter. Every day this deal goes by unclosed, the more I risk someone snatching it up from under me. I can't let that happen. Especially not because of all the nannies in New York are apparently incompetent.

"Dad?" Millie asks when she sees me reappear in the doorway. "What's all the yelling for?"

"Estelle's excited," I lie. "She just won the lottery. So she's taking off to travel the world. Isn't that great?"

My sweet baby girl smiles for a brief second, but it quickly fades into skepticism. "Dad! Are you making that up?"

"No, not at all."

"Then let me go say goodbye," she commands, crossing her arms in anger.

"I would, but we don't want to make her late. She'll miss her flight."

She spikes a brow, and I try not to notice how much it makes her look like her mother. "You fired her, didn't you?"

"No, actually," I answer honestly - sort of. On a technicality. "She quit."

Millie stares at me for a moment before shaking her head. "I don't understand why you keep firing all of my nannies, Dad. They all seem nice to me."

"It's not about whether they're nice or not, Millie," I say, my tone clipped. "It's about whether they can do their job properly. Of course you're going to think they're nice when they're letting you slack off on your homework and other activities."

"But you're always so mean to them," Millie says quietly. "Maybe that's why they keep leaving."

I feel a pang of guilt at her words, but push it aside. "I'm not mean, Millie. I just have high standards."

"Okay," Millie says, but I can tell she's not convinced.

I take a deep breath, trying to figure out what to do now. I can't afford to lose this deal, but I also can't leave Millie alone.

"Okay, Millie. We'll figure something out," I assure her, ushering towards the stairs. "I'm going to order us something for dinner. You go grab your homework and take it to your desk to finish it up."

"Why can't I just finish it in the kitchen?" she groans.

"I designed your study area to keep you sharp and focused. Do me a favor and put it to good use."

When Millie's mom left, and I was forced to figure out this whole kid thing all on my own - I quickly took to reading and researching everything I could on parenting and what kids need. I've probably studied enough to earn a doctorate in parenting and child psychology by now. Which is why it's so laughable that someone like Estelle thinks she can tell me what's best for my daughter.

Of course what the books don't tell you is how hard it will be to get everything to work out the way it does on paper. When we're not dealing with the newest nanny disaster - Millie is fighting me every step of the way. She's stubborn, just like her dad.

But this time, she does as I say and collects her homework, then settles into her study area to finish it up while I slip into my home office to close the door and try to figure out this whole nanny fiasco... yet again.

First, I have to sort dinner. The healthiest options around for delivery are vegan food or Thai. I hate vegan food, but I also feel like I need to do something to counter all the frozen fish sticks and chicken nuggets Estelle's been feeding to Millie these past couple of months. So soy burgers it is.

After ordering our food, I have no choice but to call the agency and ask them to send over a new sitter for the night - someone temporary. I'll have to save my intensive interview process for later and just trust that they can at least send someone who's been through a thorough screening and background check. That will be good enough for me to step out for a while to blow off some steam with the guys, but more importantly - to make some headway on this deal.

By the time Millie finishes her homework, our food arrives. We eat together and talk about our days, then she takes a bath and gets ready for bed. Just as I'm tucking her in and kissing her goodnight, the doorbell rings.

It's the new nanny, or at least, I hope so. I make my way down the stairs, not looking forward to the awkward small talk and introduction phase. I've been through this too many times before. If I have to review my rules and give a tour of the place one more time, I'm going to break something.

But as soon as I open the door, I'm surprised that I recognize the woman staring back at me.

ROBERT

"It's you," I blurt, trying like crazy to keep my eyes from drifting up and down her body. For a moment, they win out - feasting on the way her white t-shirt cinches her waist and cups her breasts.

"Excuse me?" she puzzles, laughing a little with her big plump lips.

It's then I realize I can't even remember her name, only her face. And she probably doesn't even remember me at all so I must look and sound like a creep.

"The woman the agency sent over for the night?" I offer quickly, trying to correct myself.

"Yes, that's me," she nods, reaching her hand out for mine. "Jessica Easton. Nice to meet you."

As our hands touch, my eyes get sucked into hers - a vivid crystal blue ocean. Jessica. How could I forget? The bombshell redhead shop assistant we met while shopping for Edward's suit for his wedding. I couldn't keep my eyes off of her the whole time we were there.

I don't want to freak her out by admitting that I remember that brief meeting that seems like it happened forever ago, but if I'm going to be trusting her with my daughter for a few hours, I need to know what her deal is.

"Forgive my staring," I tell her. "It's just that I swear I've met you before. We were shopping for my friend's suit for his wedding and..."

"Ah, yes," she smiles. "I thought you looked familiar. I work at Rothmans part time in addition to picking up these nanny shifts when I can. I'm hoping to eventually switch to nannying full time, when there's an opening with a

family who's a good fit."

I'm not so sure how I feel about a woman who does this part-time being left alone with Millie - even if it's only for a few hours. But if I don't get going soon, my contact at Suave will be gone and there won't be a point to any of this.

"Well, come on in," I say, trying to keep my tone light as I step aside to let her in. "I'm Robert Pierce, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Robert," she says, stepping into the foyer and glancing around curiously. "It's so quiet in here. Where's your daughter?"

"I just put her to bed," I say, following her into the living room. "She should be asleep by now, but if she wakes up, just go up and sit with her until she falls back asleep. It's the last door on the left. She'll try to sweettalk her way into staying up with you, but don't let her. She's on a pretty strict schedule and has school early tomorrow."

"Got it," she nods, spinning around to face me as she casually glances around the house. "Any other special instructions?"

"Not for tonight. I'll only be gone a few hours. When the agency has sent people before, they've usually brought their references and resume?"

"Yes, of course." She opens her black leather bag and hands me a few sheets of paper.

I look them over, wishing it wasn't so late. None of these people would answer the phone at this hour most likely - not that I really have time to be so picky. I'm sure this woman is qualified enough, or the agency wouldn't have sent her. Then again, they were responsible for all of the other nanny flops, so I'm starting to think I've put too much trust and faith into them.

"I hope you don't mind if I hold onto these?"

"Not at all."

"Normally I'd have more of an official interview, but I'm kind of in a rush tonight, and since it's just for a few hours..."

"I assure you, you have nothing to worry about, Mr. Pierce. I'm the oldest of five children and our house was the hangout spot for all the kids in our neighborhood growing up. So I started babysitting when I was young enough to still need a sitter myself. This is just your one little precious daughter, and she's already sleeping soundly. It'll be a piece of cake."

She flashes a wink, which I know is supposed to make me feel better - along with everything else she's said. But something about it doesn't sit right with me.

"And where was that exactly? The neighborhood where you grew up?"

"Just outside of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania," she says with a smile. "A small town, but a great place to grow up."

I nod, feeling a little more at ease. But there's still something about her that seems off, but I can't quite put my finger on it. Maybe it's just my overprotective dad instincts kicking in.

"Well, I really should get going," I say, checking my watch. "I have an important meeting, and I don't want to keep them waiting too long."

"Of course," she says. "Good luck with your meeting, Mr. Pierce. I've got everything under control here."

I nod, not entirely convinced. But I don't have much of a choice at this point. I grab my jacket and head for the door, mentally noting that I'll get this over with as quick as possible. The sooner I get back, the less I have to worry about. I'll go into work late tomorrow, and resume the search for a permanent nanny after I drop Millie off at school.

Christopher, Scott, and Aiden are already well into their first game of poker by the time I arrive at Suave.

Aiden shoots me a wink as I approach the table. He knows Christopher Black is the man I'm here to see, and if I can close this deal on his tech company's central location, Aiden will be the next man in line to work with him.

I take a seat at the table, greeting the guys with a nod and a small smile. My mind is still on Millie and the sitter. I hope I made the right decision in leaving her alone with Jessica. I take a deep breath, trying to push the thoughts aside as Christopher Black deals me in.

"So, Robert, you ready to lose a few hands in poker?" Christopher asks, a sly smirk spreading across his lips.

I nod, my focus shifting to the game in front of me. I need to concentrate on this, not on Millie and the nanny. It may just look like a fun game of poker, but it's moments like these that could win or lose Christopher's trust and decide if he likes me enough to entrust this contract with me.

The game is intense, the stakes high. We all play hard, but in the end, I come out on top. I collect my winnings as Christopher leans back in his chair, grinning.

"You're a damn good player, Robert," he says. "You didn't hold back. I like that."

Aiden comes up behind me and smacks me on the shoulder. "This man is

as cutthroat as it gets," he grins.

Christopher studies me carefully, then reaches out to shake my hand. "What do you say we continue our chat about my company's new location tomorrow over lunch?"

Mission accomplished. Now I can finally go home and get the hot redhead who's a stranger to me and my daughter of my house.

Jessica

After Robert leaves, I'm left reeling over the turn of events this night has taken. I planned on having a quiet night at home as usual - cozied up with some knitting, Chinese takeout, and a nature documentary. But of course when the agency called with a last-minute shift and the opportunity to make some money, I couldn't refuse.

Story of my life. When no one else is available because they have other things going on - like family, dating, or a social life of any kind, I'm the pathetic one with nothing better going on.

Oh well. More money in my pocket I suppose, and there's always the hope that one day - one of these families will decide I'm worth keeping around so I can pay my bills doing something I actually enjoy, like looking after kids.

It's not my life-long dream, but I do love kids and I'm good with them. And I'm great at all the other housekeeping things. It sure beats selling luxury suits to ass hole men who are constantly ogling me, thinking they can flash a smile and their hefty wallets and it will somehow get me into bed with them or at least make it so I won't mind if they grope my ass as I cater to their every whim in the shop. They're always wrong, and it's all starting to weigh on me. I don't know how much longer I can take it.

My real passion is designing clothes, and the job at Rothmans seemed like a step in the right direction. I had no idea I'd feel more like a cocktail waitress than a respectable hand in the fashion industry - albeit way down on the ladder.

The real benefit of working at Rothmans is that it's taught me how to act around the wealthy elite of the big city - who are unlike the good people of my small town in every way. I can only hope that will one day put to good use in my fashion career. A girl can dream, right? But for now - it's at least made me more comfortable stepping into the lavish homes of the families I work for when I'm not pulling long hours in the shop.

Robert's penthouse is a shining example of the glittering world I had only

seen in movies and magazines before starting in this line of work - nannying for the richest of the rich.

His building is guarded by massive iron gates, and the back courtyard is lined with the kind of tall trees you wouldn't expect to see in the middle of the city. A grand fountain graces the center of it, which I can admire a plain view of from one of the windows in his enormous living room.

I still can't believe fate would bring me here of all places tonight... to *his* home.

A few months ago when Robert and his well-known billionaire friends came into Rothmans, I felt a spark between us. His intense gaze was impossible to ignore, but he never made a move. Now I can see why. Why would a man who lives in a place like *this* ever ask out a shopgirl? No matter how well she knows high-end Italian fashion.

I roam the halls of the suite, taking in the expensive art work and mix of modern and antique furniture - all very cold and masculine. It's hard to imagine a little girl living here. It's laughable now to think he'd ever approach me for anything other than a little innocent flirting. What could a billionaire like him ever see in a small-town girl like me?

As I explore the house, wandering upstairs every so often to lay eyes on Millie and make sure she's still sleeping sound, I find myself in what appears to be his home office. I need to stay awake and alert just incase anything comes up, so surely he won't mind if I use his computer for a bit?

And while I'm at it, I find myself unable to resist trying to learn a little more about Robert. I sit behind his large desk in the dimly lit room and open up a new window to browse incognito. The screen illuminates her face, casting shadows on the walls lined with leather-bound books.

"Robert Pierce," I mutter under her breath as I type his name into the search engine. Images flood the screen – Robert at lavish parties, on yachts, and with countless beautiful women draped over him. My heart sinks.

"Of course," I whisper, feeling a foolish but unstoppable sting of jealousy. "He's one of those guys."

I scroll through articles highlighting his wealth, his investments, and his glamorous lifestyle. With each click, I feel further removed from the man I felt an undeniable connection with in the shop months ago, and again earlier this evening.

"Who are you?"

The sudden sound of Millie's voice startles me, causing me to almost

knock the mouse and keyboard right off the desk. I look up to see the little girl standing in the doorway, rubbing her eyes.

"Hey there, Millie. I'm Jessica."

"Are you the new nanny?"

"Just for tonight. I'm staying with you for a few hours while your dad is out, but don't worry - he'll be home before too long."

"I had a bad dream," Millie murmurs, her voice quivering slightly.

I slide the leather rolling chair out from the desk and stand up, crossing the room towards her.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Do you want me to come sit with you?" I ask softly, pushing aside my thoughts of Robert and the glamorous world he inhabits even outside of his luxurious home.

"Yes, please," Millie replies, taking my hand in hers. We walk down the hallway together, the soft patter of our footsteps echoing against the polished floor.

I'm struck by her politeness, but also at how trusting she is. It has to be confusing and jarring to wake up in the middle of the night and find out you're alone with a strange woman you've never met before. But she seems to understand the deal, and has no problem adopting me as her nanny for the night.

As we enter her bedroom, I notice how cozy it feels even though it's grand in size. I help Millie crawl back under the covers and settle onto the edge of her bed.

"Do you want to talk about your dream?" I ask gently.

"No," Millie mumbles, snuggling closer to me. "Can you just stay with me until I fall asleep?"

"Of course," I whisper, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face. As I sit there, doing my best to comfort her, I can't help but wonder how such a tender-hearted child has been raised by a man who seems so detached from the world around him. Maybe there's more to Robert Pierce than his expensive penthouse and google search results let on.

I shake my head and turn my attention away from Millie's enigmatic father back to calming her nerves. I sing soothing lullabies to her in a whisper until her breathing steadies, her small chest rising and falling in a peaceful rhythm.

Even after she appears to be asleep, I stay by her side in the dark room, cast in a silvery glow from the light of the moon outside the tall ceiling-to-

floor window in her room - just like the ones in the rest of the house.

My tiny apartment is a dark box, and apparently this is where the city has been hoarding all of the natural light.

"Jessica?" Millie murmurs, her eyes fluttering open for a moment.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"My old nanny... she wasn't very nice," Millie whispers, her voice barely audible. "She always yelled at me when I had nightmares."

A knot of concern tightens in my stomach. I squeeze her hand, reassuring her. "I'm sorry. But I promise...I'm not like that, Millie. I'm here for you, okay?"

"Okay." The relief in her voice is palpable as she drifts back to sleep.

I can't shake the comment as I sit there with her while she sleeps, sticking true to my word. What kind of woman would treat a child so harshly? And why would someone like Robert, who clearly adored his daughter, hire someone like that? My mind races in the dark room.

I can't shake the feeling that there's something hidden beneath the surface of this seemingly perfect household. There always is. We all have skeletons in our closet and the scars we'd rather the rest of the world not know about. Money doesn't change that. If anything, in my experience - the more money a person has, the more secrets they have to keep.

What are Robert Pierce's secrets?

ROBERT

The front door slams shut behind me as I return home, the silence within swallowing me whole. My eyes dart around the living room, taking in the ordinary scene of scattered toys and Millie's art projects from school. But something feels off. A nagging feeling tells me something's not right.

I slowly make my way up the stairs. The only sound is the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hallway. I make my way to her bedroom, my heart pounding in my chest like a jackhammer as I throw open the door - only to find an empty bed. Panic grips me, icy tendrils spreading throughout my body as I imagine all the terrible things that could have happened to her. I can't breathe, can't think straight, the very thought of losing my daughter crushing me from the inside out.

I knew I never should have left her with this woman on such short notice. I had no time to learn much of anything about her or to check her references. I should have known better than to put so much faith in the agency.

Now this woman may have very well taken off with Millie in the middle of the night.

"Millie? Where are you?" I shout, my voice sounding louder and more frantic with every step I take. The panic gnaws at me, pushing me forward as I race through the house, checking every room, every closet, every possible hiding spot a scared child might crawl into. - if she's still here somewhere.

"Jessica!" I call out. But there's no response, only the maddening silence that seems to stretch on forever. My heart hammers in my chest, each beat like a drumroll of impending doom.

"Damn it," I whisper under my breath as I continue searching for Millie. My hands tremble, my mind racing through all the horrible scenarios that could be unfolding while I'm left here helpless - tearing through my own home which I'm now thinking is way too big for just Millie and me.

"Please be okay," I pray, though I've never been one to believe in a higher power. But now, faced with the possibility of losing my little girl, I'd do anything, *believe* in anything, if it meant keeping her safe.

Finally, as I enter the guest room, I find them. Millie is snuggled up against Jessica, both of them sound asleep, their chests rising and falling in sync.

"Millie," I breathe, relief flooding through me, momentarily washing away the fear that had threatened to consume me.

My mind starts racing, searching for an explanation. *What the hell are they doing in here?* It's not like my daughter to leave her bed unless there's a good reason. I clench my fists, anger and protectiveness surging through me like a tidal wave.

"Jessica," I hiss, shaking her shoulder to wake her up. "What the hell is going on here?"

Her eyes flutter open, confusion clouding them for a moment before she registers my presence and sits up. She wiggles out from the weight of Millie's small body, gently rolling her over in the bed. She gets out of bed and walks out into the hallway, nodding her head for me to follow. I let out a frustrated sigh and go along with her. Once we're both in the hall, she lightly closes the door to the guest bedroom.

"She kept having nightmares, so after she woke up the second time, I offered to let her come into the guest bedroom with me. She was scared."

"Scared?" I echo, my brow furrowing as a cold sweat breaks out on the back of my neck. "Why would she be scared? What happened?"

"Nothing happened, Robert," Jessica insists, her arms crossing over her chest defensively. "She woke up from a nightmare and told me how her last nanny used to ignore her or yell at her when she cried at night. You said her sleep schedule was strict and that she had to be up early for school, so I did whatever it took to get her back to sleep."

As she speaks, her blue eyes blaze with conviction, and I can't help but notice the way she holds herself, straight-backed and unyielding, as if daring me to challenge her further. Despite my initial suspicions, something about her confidence makes me hesitate.

"Look, I was just doing my job," Jessica says, her voice firm but no longer as defensive. I watch her carefully as she continues, noting the way she stands tall and proud despite my challenging gaze. "Millie told me that her old nanny would leave her alone when she cried at night, or tell her to 'get over it.' So when she came to me, scared and upset, I did what any good caregiver should do: I listened to her, held her, and reassured her until she felt safe enough to fall back asleep."

A part of me wants to believe her, to accept that perhaps she is simply better at this than Estelle. But there's still something nagging at the back of my mind, making me question both her motives and her story.

"Millie has never mentioned any problems with her previous nannies," I point out, crossing my arms over my chest. My skepticism is clear in both my tone and my posture, but Jessica doesn't seem fazed by it. As much as I want to trust her, I've been burned before by people who seemed genuine on the surface, only to reveal their true colors when it suited them.

"Maybe she didn't want to worry you," Jessica suggests, her blue eyes meeting mine with unwavering sincerity. "Or maybe things were too busy for her to bring it up."

"What are you implying, Miss Easton? That I'm too busy for my daughter?"

"Of course not," Jessica replies coolly, her gaze never wavering from mine. If she's frightened or intimidated by my threat, she doesn't show it. "We're all busy. That's all I meant. In my experience, kids would rather laugh and play when they have time with you. They don't want to spoil a good time. Besides, didn't you say you just let the other nanny go earlier today? Maybe she didn't want to say anything in front of her, so she never had a good time to tell you."

As we stand there, locked in a tense standoff, I can't help but feel a flicker of respect for this fiery redhead who refuses to back down from me.

"I don't like coming home to surprises. Especially when my daughter is involved." I don't mean for my tone to still sound so accusatory, but it does. I can't just switch off the rush of intense emotions so quickly.

"I'll carry her back to her room," she offers, turning for the doorknob.

"No. No, you've done quite enough here tonight," I snap sarcastically.

She glares back at me, obviously offended and angered. "Fine. Suit yourself," she snips before marching off down the hallway.

"Jessica," I call out after her. But she doesn't respond, leaving me

standing there with my words hanging in the air.

I carry Millie back to her bed and tuck her in, then head down the hall to watch Jessica's car leave out the window. It's only then that I realize she stormed off before I could pay her. Maybe she didn't think she was still getting paid after I was so cross with her.

I check on Millie again, then close the door - leaning against it as I try to process the altercation that just took place. My heart races, and I can feel the heat rising in my face as a mix of anger and confusion swirls within me.

The image of Jessica's unyielding gaze is burned into my mind, making it impossible to dismiss her words entirely. I knew Estelle wasn't doing a great job, but was she really being so cold to Millie this whole time?

My jaw clenches as I think back to Millie's sweet, sleeping face, curled up next to Jessica. The thought of the paid help being so intimate with her makes me uneasy. From the moment Millie's mom walked out on us, I've been determined to prove I'm all she needs - even if my work is so demanding. The nannies who look after her have one job - to keep her safe and follow the schedule until I can be with her again. I don't need another woman growing close to her only to let her down and break our hearts.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, running a hand down my face.

I still have to find a new nanny for the long-term, which is only going to be a hundred times more nerve-racking in light of everything Jessica claims Millie told her, and the panic I felt when I walked into the sight of her empty bed.



THE NEXT MORNING, as I walk down the grand staircase, I can't help but feel the weight of everything that happened last night and everything I know I need to do today.

"Good morning, Mr. Pierce," Martha, our housekeeper, greets me from the kitchen doorway, her voice subdued.

"Morning," I reply, forcing a smile.

"Millie is already having breakfast in the dining room," she says, stepping aside for me to pass. "She asked about a woman named Jessica?"

"Thank you, Martha," I say, trying to hide my unease. "I'll talk to her."

As I approach the dining room, I hear Millie humming quietly to herself.

"Morning, Daddy," Millie says cheerfully, looking up from her cereal. "Where's Jessica?"

"Jess...Miss Easton was just sitting with you last night," I explain, doing my best to mask my concern. "But you'll have a new nanny soon."

"Another one?" Millie asks, her big brown eyes searching mine.

"Listen, Millie...I want to ask you about something Jess...Miss Easton told me last night." I pull out the chair next to hers and sit down. "About Estelle. She said you told her Estelle used to yell at you when you woke up in the middle of the night?"

Millie nods, breaking my heart. "She said you'd yell at her or fire her if I woke up in the middle of the night, and she wasn't going to lose her job because I couldn't be a big girl and get over my nightmares."

My heart pounds as I listen to Millie's words, feeling a surge of anger towards Estelle for treating my daughter so poorly. I can't believe I let her stay as long as I did, blinded by my own trust in her supposed expertise.

But now, thanks to Jessica, I know better. And how did I thank her for enlightening me? I yelled at her too.

"Mills, I'm so sorry," I say, reaching across the table to take her hand. "You should never have had to go through that. Daddy wants to make sure you always feel safe and loved, even when I'm not here."

Millie smiles up at me, her eyes shining with a mix of gratitude and relief. "It's okay, Daddy. I know you will."

Together, we finish our breakfast, discussing Millie's upcoming ballet recital and the new nanny search. Despite everything that's happened, I can feel a sense of hope blooming within me. Until Millie starts offering up her own opinions on things.

"Why can't Jessica be my new nanny? Like for longer than just one night? I liked her. She's my favorite one yet."

"She only sat with you for one night," I smirk in disbelief.

She shrugs. "I know what I like."

I can't help but laugh. "You're just like me, you know that? Look, Miss Easton can't be your permanent nanny because... well, she has another job. But we'll find someone you like just as much," I assure her, feeling a twist of guilt tighten around my heart - hoping that I can actually follow through on that promise. "Now, eat up. You have school today."

"Okay, Daddy."

ROBERT

After dropping Millie off at school, I call my assistant and let her know I'll be out for the morning. Then I dial the agency's number with an exasperated sigh. I've never been one to put up with incompetence, and so far every nanny they've sent me has proven to be nothing but. Millie deserves better, and I intend on providing that for her.

My intolerance only grows as I'm put on hold for what feels like forever, just to get connected with whoever is in charge of my account. I'm starting to see why everyone they send is so underwhelming. Even the admin staff at this place seems to struggle with the basics. I'd say the solution is to find a new agency, but they're supposed to be the best in the city.

"Good morning, Mr. Pierce," the woman over our account finally answers, her tone far too cheerful for my liking. "How can I help you today?"

"Good morning," I reply, keeping my voice steady despite my irritation. "I need a replacement for Estelle immediately."

"Mr. Pierce," she hesitates, "I'm sorry, but we just don't have anyone else available who can suit your... specific demands. You've gone through quite a number of our nannies already."

"Are you serious?" I snap, clenching my free hand into a fist. I've paid them an ungodly amount of money, and they can't even provide me a decent nanny for my daughter?

"Unfortunately, yes," she replies, still maintaining that infuriating cheerfulness. "I apologize for the inconvenience, but there's nothing more we can do."

"My daughters tells me the last nanny you sent to us was scolding her for

waking up with nightmares. So yes, I guess I do have specific demands. Like that the person not traumatize my child and that they'll actually meet her needs while I'm gone."

"I see," she says slowly. "Mr. Pierce, we'll look into your complaint, I assure you. But for now... there's no one else available to send in her place."

I'm quiet for a moment, weighing my options. Is it really the best use of my time to keep going off on this woman?

My mind drifts to what Millie said at breakfast this morning. I don't see why she needs to like a woman who's only responsibilities should be keeping her safe and following the schedule, but so far - no one's been able to do that. And after everything that happened with Estelle on top of a long line of women who weren't up to the job - Millie deserves to be around someone she actually like, someone who makes her feel safe.

"What about the woman you sent here last night? Miss Easton?" I finally force myself to ask.

"One moment," the woman replies just before that annoying hold music comes back over the line. "Mr. Pierce? Yes sir, I so apologize, but Miss Easton's availability is limited to nights and weekends. She's on call for temporary fill-ins, but I'm afraid she can't work with your scheduling needs."

"Fine," I grit out, hanging up the phone. I throw it onto the couch, utterly disappointed in their inability to fulfill their promises.

As I pace around the room, my eyes catch on the envelope sitting on the end table. The one with Jessica's check inside, which she stormed off without ever claiming.

At the very least, I owe the woman a thank you and maybe an apology. She deserves to be paid for her time, and for enlightening me to what was really going on with the last failure of a nanny.

I grab my car keys and make my way to Rothmans. The drive is short, but it gives me enough time to clear my thoughts. I don't like admitting I'm wrong, and I sure as hell don't apologize for things. In my line of work, that's a sign of weakness. But this isn't work. I try to soften myself up to the idea that maybe just this once, an apology is in order.

I stride into the store and instantly spot her, which sends a strange sense of relief washing over me. Unfortunately, I spot something else too, which quickly turns that relief to concern. There's a half-dressed man, being fitted for his new suit, standing uncomfortably close to Jessica - leering at her with a predatory gaze. I can tell by the look on her face and her stiff body

language that she doesn't appreciate it.

Something inside me snaps. *What is it with everyone lately?* Taking advantage of people every chance they get - like with small children you're supposed to be taking care of, and shopkeepers who are stuck trying to tolerate your bull shit.

"Good morning, Mr. Pierce. Welcome back," Jessica calls out to me with a nervous laugh, trying to maintain her composure despite the obvious discomfort she feels from the creepy man invading her personal space.

"Good morning, Jessica," I reply, narrowing my eyes at the man. "Is everything all right?"

"Of course," she stammers, shooting a nervous glance at the man. "Everything's fine."

"Good," I say, not taking my eyes off of the man. "Because if it isn't, I'd like to know."

"Actually," Jessica hesitates, biting her lip. "This gentleman seems to be having trouble minding his manners."

"Is he now?" My protective nature flares up, and I feel my blood boil. "Listen, buddy," I growl, my voice low and menacing as I step closer to the man. "You need to leave her alone and get the hell out of this store."

The man's eyes widen in surprise, flickering between me and Jessica. He seems to think that he can just stand there and keep harassing her without any consequences.

"Who do you think you are?" he snarls back, clearly trying to save face.

"Someone who doesn't tolerate creeps like you," I shoot back, my dark eyes locked onto his, not giving him an inch. "Now, I suggest you walk away before I make your face match your new blue suit."

"I'm contacting the manager about this place," he spits, taking a step back and glaring at me one last time before turning on his heel and storming back into the fitting room.

I stand there and keep a careful watch on everything as the man quickly changes, then bolts from the store.

As he disappears from sight, I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to regain control of the anger coursing through me. I turn to Jessica, who's watching me with a mixture of gratitude and surprise.

"Are you okay?" I ask, concern etched into every word.

"Y-yes," she stammers, her eyes wide and cheeks flushed. "You didn't have to do that. I mean, I'm glad you did, but..."

"Don't mention it," I say gruffly, feeling a strange warmth spread through my chest at her words. It's been a long time since I've felt like someone besides Millie genuinely needed me. "You don't deserve to be treated that way."

"I know that, but some of the men who come in here... They seem to think otherwise. Thank goodness you were here this time." Her eyes float back up to mine. "What... *are* you doing here anyway?"

Just as she asks it, the shop door dings again with a new customer walking in.

I lean in closer to her. "Is there somewhere private we can go to talk for a moment?"

"Sure," Jessica nods, leading me toward a small corner of the shop, tucked away behind a display of colorful ties. We sit down on a plush bench near a row of fitting rooms.

"Thank you again," Jessica sighs, running a hand through her fiery red hair. "Unfortunately, it's nothing new. Creeps come in all the time, thinking they can get away with being inappropriate. It's just part of working in retail with this type of clientele, I guess."

"What type of clientele is that exactly?"

"Men," she scoffs in a bitter tone. "*Rich* men, to be more exact... who aren't used to be told no. Who think they can buy anything. Even people."

I hang my head for a moment. "Is that what you thought of me the first time I was in here?"

"Oh! No!" she laughs, her eyes widening. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean..."

"It's fine," I smirk, waving it off. "I apologize if I gave the wrong idea that day."

Although whatever idea I gave may not have been entirely inaccurate. I felt drawn to her from the moment I first saw her, but I know better than to get involved with women who seem sweet and genuine like her. I can't handle a real relationship right now between work and Millie. I keep my sights set on women I know hold zero risk of expecting anything from me beyond a one night stand.

"Does your boss do anything about these men?" I ask, anger beginning to simmer beneath the surface again.

She shakes her head, a bitter smile curving her lips. "Not really. He says as long as they're buying something, it's not worth the trouble."

"Unbelievable," I mutter, clenching my fists. "You shouldn't have to put

up with that."

"Believe me, if I had another option, I'd take it in a heartbeat," she replies, staring wistfully across the shopfloor. "But right now, this job pays the bills."

"Speaking of which..." I reach into my pocket and pull out the check I brought with me. "You took off so fast last night, you forgot this."

"Oh, right. Of course. Wow, thanks so much for bringing this all the way here," she says, taking the envelope from my hand. "Most people wouldn't have bothered taking the time."

"Well, I also owe you another apology. Millie trusted you enough to divulge information she hadn't even shared with me yet. It's obvious you made an impression on her. She talked about you all morning."

She looks at me, a smirk playing on her lips. "We didn't get much time together, but it doesn't take long to see what a sweet girl Millie is."

I nod, thinking to myself Jessica sure seems like a sweet woman to match, then force the next question off my lips. "Jessica, how much does this shop pay you?"

"Wow, that's... awfully personal," she teases, raising an eyebrow. "And, no offense, but... none of your business."

"Fair enough," I concede, though I can't help but feel frustrated by her evasiveness. My curiosity isn't just for my own benefit.

"Look," I say, leaning in closer, trying to convey the sincerity in my words. "I understand it's not my place to pry, but I can't help but worry about you here. The way that guy was treating you... I don't want you to have to go through that all the time."

"Thanks for your concern, Robert," she says softly, touched by my words. "But I can take care of myself. I've been doing it for years."

"Of course," I reply, nodding. "But you're obviously great with kids, and we're in a bind. Maybe there is another option."

Jessica turns to look at me, her green eyes wide and curious. "What do you mean?" she asks cautiously.

"Come work for me," I blurt out, feeling my cheeks heat up at my own audacity. "As Millie's nanny. Full-time. I'll pay you double whatever this place does."

"Are you serious?" She looks completely taken aback, and I can't blame her.

"Completely," I reply, my resolve growing stronger by the second. "You'd be doing me a huge favor, actually."

"Wow," she breathes, clearly mulling it over.

"Take your time to think about it," I say, trying to give her space even though my heart is pounding in my ears. "We can discuss the details later, but just know that I wouldn't make this offer if I didn't believe you were the right person for the job."

"Thank you, Robert," she whispers, her eyes shining with gratitude and something else – something that makes me feel like I'm standing on the edge of a precipice, ready to take a leap into the unknown.

As I walk back out to my car, I have to shake the lingering images of her from my mind. The ones that are focused in all the wrong places - like her plump kissable lips, the curve of her luscious breasts that command attention even when she's dressed in the most modest of outfits. Her intense eyes that are vulnerable and prying all at once.

I've been hard for that woman from the moment I first saw her, but if this is going to work... All of that has to come to a stop. From now on, I can't see her as anything more than the hired help. That's the end of it.

JESSICA

Robert hands me his business card and leaves me to tend to the busy shop. I watch him leave the store in a daze, half-wishing I could walk out right then and there with him. But I don't know if my desire to follow along his offer is because I genuinely want the job, or if it's just because I'm burning with a need to be around him more.

I knew from early in my teens that I didn't want the same kind of life I grew up with. I was crammed into a small chaotic home in a small town where nothing exciting ever happened.

Robert strolling into the shop this morning is the exact reason I always wanted to live in a big city like this - in a place where it felt like anything could happen, and that on any given day - something unexpected could come along and change everything. Something could save you from the same old boring monotony that I grew up with.

Chaos starts to seem dull when it's the same kind of chaos every single day. Besides, it's not the chaos I'm after. It's the adventure. I want something that feels magical, not something that feels like a trap.

I have to admit, I feel a glimmer of that magic I've always dreamed of when I look in Robert's eyes. But if I'm going to work for him? That has to stop.

For the rest of the morning, my fingers itch to call him, to ask more about the job and what his expectations would be. Just the thought of his *expectations* make my heart pound at an uncontrollable rate in my chest.

I have always felt a draw to powerful men. A man who can take control of the chaos and bend it all to his will. Robert has that air about him, and god,

the more I'm around him - the more I wish he'd bend me to his will.

For years, I've dreamed of a man captivating and commanding me in a way that forces me to let my walls down. I have no doubt Robert would be up to the task - if he actually saw me that way. I thought he did before, the first time he came into the shop. But now? I'm not so sure. After seeing all of those pictures online of the kind of women he normally spends his time with, I'm certain he doesn't think of me as anything more than an innocent flirtation. And now that's been downgraded even further... to nanny, employee.

I don't know if I ever stood a chance with him or not. But even if I did, taking this job will put a nail in that coffin. Nothing can ever happen between us then.

Then again, for years I've also been dreaming of a ticket out of working at Rothmans. And this could be it. I'd be crazy not to take it, especially at double what I'm making now.

A man in an Armani suit leans in, his cologne invading my space. "Will this tie complement the suit, darling?"

I force a smile. "It's a lovely choice."

Another wealthy man who thinks his money and looks entitle him to my attention. They're all the same.

All except Robert.

There's something different about him, a hardness that both frightens and intrigues me. I picture his granite expression as he laid down the law with that guy earlier. The way his gaze seemed to pierce through me, sensing my desperation.

Sensing my longing for something more.

Does he know my secret? Can he somehow tell? A man like him knows how to read people, but to what extent? I wonder if he can see into my mind and know that I've never let a man touch me. I kissed a boy once in highschool and felt disappointed, and I haven't opened myself up to that kind of let down since. Mostly because the men I desire - the men like him - usually tend to be jerks. It's a horrible paradox that has brought me here... just a couple years shy of my thirtieth birthday, and I'm still a virgin.

The permanent dry spell has taken its toll. Some days I'm so desperate to experience all the things I've never known before that I'm half-tempted to give into one of the perverts who hit on me at the shop. But I always stop myself, clinging to the dream that maybe one day a guy like that will hit on

me who seems like he's more than just a jerk. Someone who's arrogant on the outside, but feels more than that on the inside.

Someone like *Robert*.

A flush creeps up my neck as I recall the charge in the air when he stood close, my body straining toward his. The thought of working and living under the same roof as him, being subject to those penetrating eyes, his commands—it's madness.

And yet.

How many times have I dreamed of escape from this place? Dreamed of adventure, change, a path uncharted?

Robert is both the embodiment of my fantasies, but working for him means those would all be off-limits. The devil offering salvation at a price.

Do I dare pay it?

The man in front of me clears his throat, dragging me from my reverie. I finish ringing up his purchase on autopilot, my mind still lost in a maze of questions.

At the end of the day, I lock up the shop and start the long trek home to my apartment on the other side of town, lost in thought. That business card burns a hole in my pocket, a reminder of the offer I haven't yet accepted or refused.

Part of me thrills at the prospect of an escape from this life, a chance at something new. The money would be life-changing. But every time I think of Robert and his cold arrogance, warning bells clang in my head.

Still, I can't stop wondering...what's the harm in finding out more?

I heat up a TV dinner and sit down on the couch with my knitting supplies, but nothing holds my interest. My gaze keeps drifting to the business card on the coffee table.

Restless, I get up and pace, chewing on my thumbnail. The pros and cons chase each other in endless circles.

With a sigh, I pick up the phone. It's late, but - before I can talk myself out of it, I dial the number.

He answers on the first ring.

"Mr. Pierce," I spit out, trying not to let my nerves show through in the shakiness of my voice. "This is Jessica Easton."

"Jessica." My name is both question and command.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself. "I was just thinking about your offer, and... well, I have some questions about the position."

"Of course." His tone is clipped, impatient. "What do you want to know?"
Here goes nothing.

I wet my lips, hesitating. "The salary you mentioned...it's very generous. But I want to be clear on what the job entails before I make a decision."

"You would be Millie's nanny and governess," he says. "Manage her schedule, ensure she eats properly, help with homework, activities, whatever she requires." A pause. "I won't lie. I expect nothing short of perfection. That's how I oversee the people who work for me in every other aspect of my life. I'm sure you can understand why I'd be all the more strict about someone who's in charge of my daughter while I'm gone."

"Right. Of course," I exhale.

Nothing short of perfection. No big deal, right? My chest tenses with unease and creeping insecurities. The same ones I felt googling Robert in his expensive penthouse last night. The truth is... I'm not so sure I am good enough to meet his demands. But there's a stubbornness in my heart that wants to try anyway.

"If you deliver results and meet my standards, the compensation and benefits will reflect that. If not..." He leaves the threat hanging. "My daughter's well-being and development are my top priorities," he says, a new edge to his voice. "I expect her schedule to be strictly followed. Healthy, organic meals. Limited screen time and exposure to undesirable influences. Her education and activities must be properly stimulating for a child of her talents. She—"

"Her talents?" I interrupt.

"Millie is gifted," he says bluntly. "She requires an advanced curriculum and attention to her intellectual and creative needs. If you do not feel capable of meeting the demands of her development, we have nothing further to discuss."

Indignation flares, but I tamp it down. "I'm confident in my ability to nurture any child's development appropriately."

A rustle of papers in the background. "The role also requires managing the household. You would answer directly to me regarding Millie's care and ensure all runs smoothly so I can focus on my work. If at any point I feel you are not performing adequately, your employment will be terminated immediately."

The threat is clear. Meet his demands, follow his rules, deliver perfection, or I'm out. Every instinct screams that working for this man would be a

disaster.

Yet taking the job could be my chance to finally get the hell away from Rothmans and step into a life of more freedom. And, deep down, it's a chance to prove something to myself. If I could meet the expectations of a man with such impossibly high standards, I could do anything. Maybe I could finally stop doubting myself and go after some of my other dreams. I could rid myself of the heavy weight my disappointing life in the city has placed on my ego the past few years.

"Okay," I say, hopes and misgivings warring within me. "I accept the position. If you'll still have me."

I swallow hard, regretting my choice of words. Moving forward with this means he can never have me. Not in the way I'm still, even now, secretly fantasizing about.

"Excellent. I will have a contract drawn up and sent over within the next few days. You may begin as soon as it's signed."

"Understood." I end the call before I can change my mind, conflicted emotions tumbling through me. It seems I'm about to enter a whole new world—one with as many thorns as roses. But a fresh start will make it worth it... I hope.

The next day, I give notice at Rothmans and begin packing up my tiny apartment. It's bittersweet, saying goodbye to the only home I've known for the past few years and the familiarity of my job. But the prospect of change thrills me too, my heart racing at what the future may hold.

When the contract arrives, I read through it carefully. The terms are more than generous, as Robert promised—yet the list of responsibilities is daunting. I'm to oversee all aspects of running his household and caring for Millie. There are strict rules about her schedule, diet, activities and education. While the salary and benefits are motivating, taking on such a huge job is intimidating.

With a deep breath, I sign the contract and mail it back to Robert. My new life is about to begin.

The next week passes in a blur of goodbyes, packing and moving. At last, everything I own is crammed into my little car, and I'm heading north into a world of wealth and privilege I've only glimpsed before.

My heart pounds as the gates of Robert's building come into view.

This is it. No turning back now. I park in the private lot he gave me instructions to enter and get out, squaring my shoulders as I get onto the

private elevator.

Millie answers the door, her eyes lighting up. "You came! I knew Daddy would hire you." She throws her arms around me in an enthusiastic hug.

Despite my nerves, I can't help smiling. "Here I am," I say, hugging her close. "Ready to start our adventure."

Robert emerges from the foyer behind Millie, impeccably dressed as always in a dark suit and tie. His gaze rakes over me in a way that makes my cheeks burn, though his expression remains inscrutable.

"Miss Easton," he says coolly. "I'm glad you decided to join us."

I'm *Miss Easton* to him now. I suppose that's for the best - even if his formality rubs me the wrong way. That's a good thing. I need him to give me every excuse in the world to not be so attracted to him. Anything and everything I can cling on to keep from wanting him to rub me in all of the *right* ways.

I paste on a polite smile. "Please, call me Jessica. I'm looking forward to getting started."

"I'll send someone down to bring up your things, and then you can get unpacked before acquainting yourself with the schedule. I send a new one every morning." He checks his watch, a gleaming Rolex that probably costs more than I make in a year. "I have a meeting this afternoon, so I'll leave Millie in your capable hands. Make yourself at home."

With that, he sweeps out the front door and is gone in a flash. I stare after the door, nonplussed. *Some welcome.*

Millie tugs my hand, drawing my attention. "Don't mind Daddy," she says confidentially. "He's always in a hurry. But he hired you! So that means he likes you!"

"We'll be just fine," I assure her.

I can only hope he likes me... enough not to fire me right away. I no longer have an apartment or other job to go back to. That fact hangs heavier on me now as I stand there in the wide open entryway that is supposed to be my new home.

Millie follows me around, asking a million questions, as I get partially unpacked and check my inbox for the schedule Robert said he would provide.

Even though it's a Saturday, Millie has a long list of obligations including everything from extra studying to piano and violin practice and horseback riding lessons. I'm exhausted by the end of it all so I can only imagine how she feels.

After dinner, we end up baking chocolate chip cookies, giggling over the mess we make. By the time Robert returns home, the kitchen is spotless again but the house is filled with the aroma of fresh-baked cookies.

He strides into the kitchen, loosening his tie. Then he stops short at the sight of the cookies. For a moment, his hard expression softens. But when his gaze flickers to me, the shutters slam down again.

"Something smells good," he says grudgingly.

"Jessica and I made cookies!" Millie dances over and tugs at his sleeve. "Have one, Daddy, they're delicious."

"Maybe later." He checks his watch. "Time for your bath now. Jessica, a word?"

He jerks his head toward the study, already walking away. Suppressing a sigh, I follow him. This ought to be good.

"In the future, I'd appreciate if you stuck to the schedule we discussed," he begins without preamble.

I fold my arms. "It was a special treat. Millie had a hard time with her violin practice today. She needed cheering up."

"While I appreciate your concern for Millie's feelings, that does not give you license to disrupt our routine." His tone is clipped, hard as granite. "There are reasons why I have the schedules and rules in place. See that you respect them."

"Of course," I say coolly. I'm outraged that he'd be so uptight about something as small as cookies, but it's my first day. I don't want to push my luck. Besides, it's not like he didn't warn me. I knew it'd be like this. "Anything else?"

He studies me for a long moment, as if searching for any hint of insolence. Finding none, he gives a curt nod.

The next day, I'm up promptly at 7:30am just to make certain I can stay on top of everything. Robert is already dressed in one of his impeccably tailored suits, scanning through emails on his phone.

"Morning," I say briskly. "Working on a Sunday?"

He looks up, eyes traveling over me in a quick assessment. I'm dressed professionally as always in a modest blouse and pencil skirt. But still, his gaze makes me want to squirm. I force myself to remain still, meeting his stare head-on.

After a beat, he replies, "I just sent you today's schedule. Millie has lunch with a friend at noon. Pick her up by 2:30 since she has an art lesson at 3. I

should be back around dinnertime, so have something ready."

I make a note of the schedule on my phone. "Understood."

We regard each other silently. The air between us is heavy with things unsaid. His flinty eyes seem to cut right through me, seeing too much.

Get a grip, I scold myself. He's just your boss. An arrogant, infuriating, controlling boss who happens to be unfairly attractive. But that's all.

I clear my throat. "If that's everything, I'll go say good morning to Millie."

He gives a curt nod and looks back to his phone, effectively dismissing me. I turn on my heel and stride down the hall to Millie's room, irritation and another unnameable feeling churning in my stomach.

This is going to be another long day. I have to remember I'm here for the paycheck and for Millie. Not for the man who employs me, no matter what unwanted effect he has on me.

No matter how much he infuriates me. Or intrigues me. Or makes me feel...

I cut off that dangerous train of thought and knock on Millie's door. Today is going to be focused on my job, and my job alone. Nothing more.

Millie is playing with her dolls on the floor, her dark curls tumbling around her face. She looks up at me with a sunny smile. "Hi Jess! Do you want to play princesses with me?"

I grin and sit down next to her. "I'd love to, sweetheart."

Millie enthusiastically launches into an elaborate tale involving three princesses, a spooky forest, and a fire-breathing dragon. I listen and make admiring noises in all the right places, but part of my mind is still back in the other room with Robert.

Why does he affect me this way? I've never reacted to a man like this before, and it's inconvenient and unwelcome. I don't have time for inconvenient attractions.

"The dragon is defeated!" Millie cheers, bringing me back to the present. I clap enthusiastically. "Hooray! The kingdom is saved thanks to the brave princesses."

Millie beams, then glances at the clock. "Is it time for my lunch playdate yet?"

I laugh. This girl knows her schedule better than I do, which is saying something for such a dense itinerary that changes on the daily. "Not quite. How about we pick up your room a bit before lunch?"

Millie makes a face but obediently starts putting her toys in the basket. I help her fold some clothes and put them away, keeping up a stream of light chatter. The normalcy of the scene soothes my frazzled nerves. This is what I'm here for, what's important. Not brooding over her infuriating father and whatever is happening between us. There is nothing happening, I remind myself firmly. And there never will be.

"All done!" Millie announces, looking around at her tidy room with satisfaction. "Shall I go get dressed?"

"Perfect," I say, forcing a smile even though I hate how formal Millie sounds sometimes. Not like a little girl with her playful spirit at all - but more like her stuffy dad. Then again, I guess she has to force a certain degree of self-discipline to tolerate her endlessly packed schedule and the formal life she leads with her father.

JESSICA

I spend the rest of my first week getting to know Millie and trying to steal away any fun and pretend play I can for her. The more I do, it seems like her energy and curiosity are endless. We explore the massive courtyard together, discovering secret hideouts and imaginary worlds. I find myself chasing after her as she runs from one adventure to the next, laughing all the way.

"Jessica, look at this bug!" Millie squeals, crouching down to examine a particularly large beetle. Her eyes widen in wonder as it crawls across her hand.

"Wow, that's amazing," I say, trying to match her enthusiasm, even though bugs aren't exactly my favorite thing. But seeing her excitement makes me forget my reservations.

"Did you know the rhinoceros beetle can lift 850 times their own body weight?" Millie asks, clearly eager to share her knowledge. "Do you think this is a rhinoceros beetle?"

"Uh, no sweetie. I don't think we have those around here," I tell, praying I'm right. Whatever kind of beetle that is, I don't want it anywhere near me.

Later that night, after dinner, Millie insists on showing Robert and me her latest drawing: an elaborate scene of horses and castles and a prince saving a princess from an evil dragon.

I admire the drawing, secretly wishing I could be a little girl again - still believing some prince would arrive one day and sweep me off my feet.

"Very impressive, sweetheart. You're quite the artist," Robert says, his voice softening as he gazes at his daughter's masterpiece.

I can't help but think that there's more to this grumpy billionaire single dad than meets the eye. If only I could find a way to peel back those layers, to see the man underneath. But I know I must remain focused on my job – taking care of Millie and doing what I can to help make her busy schedule a little more bearable.

The next day is another busy one full of music lessons, studies, and playdates with other little girls who have schedules just as packed as hers. By the time we make it home, I have to check the schedule again to make sure there's nothing else we've missed. Robert sends me a new one every day. The demands seem to constantly change, so I'm constantly on my toes. When I tried to gently ask Robert about why new things always seemed to be added, he told me Millie was gifted so she needed new things to keep her stimulated.

In between chores and making dinner, she's supposed to have enrichment time. Robert keeps a tablet with special programs for that, but Millie hates those things. She says they're incredibly boring.

I tap my finger on my cheek, wondering if there's anything else I can come up with that qualifies as enrichment - without being such a bore. I go into her playroom and scan the shelves in search of ideas.

"Millie, I think it's time to put this puzzle together," I announce, pulling out the giant floor puzzle that catches my eye.

"Yay! Let's do it!" Millie exclaims, her face lighting up with excitement as she jumps into action.

We take the puzzle downstairs so I can get started on dinner in between helping her. I feel like I've done a good job of satisfying Robert's demands for healthy meals so far, so I decide it's a good chance to bend the plans just a little and serve up one of my specialties. Chicken casserole, rolls, and green beans.

"Mmmm, that smells good," Millie calls out from the rug in the hallway as she searches for the right spot for the puzzle piece in her hand.

"Thanks! This was one of my favorites when I was your age. Well, all except the green beans," I wink in her direction.

She frowns with a sigh. "Daddy says I have to eat something green with every dinner, fruit with every breakfast, and a fruit *and* vegetable with lunches and snacks."

"Your dad cares very much about you," I assure her. "He just wants you to be healthy, and I have to agree with him there."

"Look, Jessica, I found the edge piece!" Millie shouts proudly, holding up

the missing link triumphantly.

"Great job!" I say, grinning at her accomplishment. "Now find out where it fits."

When dinner is nearly finished and we're about to place the final piece of the puzzle, the front door swings open, and Robert walks in, briefcase in hand. He looks surprised, his eyes widening as they take in the scene before him - his daughter and nanny sprawled on the floor in the hallway, surrounded by puzzle pieces.

"Hey, Daddy!" Millie greets, waving the final piece in the air. "You're home early. Look what we did!"

"Hello, sweetheart," Robert replies, his voice softer than usual. "That's quite an impressive puzzle you two have been working on. Even if you are working on it in a rather unusual spot."

"Jessica helped me," Millie beams, clearly proud of our teamwork, ignoring his ability to always find at least one negative with everything.

"Thank you, Jessica," he says, offering me a small nod of appreciation. Every time he shows me the slightest sign of warmth or gratitude, it catches me off guard.

"Of course. We've had a great day together," I respond, maintaining my professional demeanor despite the twist of excitement in my stomach.

"Millie, why don't you go wash up for dinner?" Robert suggests, his gaze never leaving mine.

"Okay, Daddy!" Millie skips off, her footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Once she's out of earshot, Robert peaks into the kitchen, studying the stove top, then turns to me, his expression serious. "What's all this?"

"It's chicken casserole. We used to eat it all the time at my house. It's healthy, and I have vegetables for the sides, so... It meets all of your criteria for the meal plan, I believe."

It's hard not to get lost in his piercing dark eyes and sharp jawline. His big strong arms cross over his chest, accentuating his muscular physique.

"Jessica," he begins, his voice firm but gentle. "It's important that Millie sticks to a certain level of consistency."

"Absolutely," I agree, nodding my understanding. "Today we followed the schedule exactly."

"Except for the enrichment activities on the tablet," he argues, glaring down at me and the puzzle pieces on the floor.

I nod in understanding, choosing my words carefully. "Right. So sorry,

Robert. I thought the puzzle would be a great replacement. Something to switch it up since you did say she needed a variety of new things to stay stimulated."

Robert considers my words carefully, his eyes burning too deep into mine as he does it. The longer he stares, I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks and the pounding of my heart.

"Is everything okay?" I force myself to ask. If trading a tablet game for a puzzle and baking a casserole is somehow what's going to get me fired, I wish he'd just get it over with. The longer I'm subjected to his unforgiving glaring eyes, the more my mind begins to wander to all the places it shouldn't logically go...

...Like how part of me wishes he would be angrier about these small little things he doesn't approve of. I wish he'd scold me so I could yell at him and tell him how ridiculous he's being. And it could all erupt into him needing to punish me, to teach me a lesson. We'd go crashing into his office and...

"Jessica?" Robert suddenly asks, smirking.

I realize he's already offered some kind of response, and in reply - I've just been staring at him, my mind running rampant with so many embarrassing dirty things that I'd just die if he ever knew.

I quickly avert my eyes. "Sorry," I mumble, feeling the heat of embarrassment rush to my cheeks. "How about I start making a meal plan and list of proposed enrichment activities in advance? I could send you a new one each week and get your approval. Would that be helpful? I know you don't like surprises. Especially when it comes to Millie."

He nods in agreement, looking impressed - no matter how hard he's trying not to show it. He studies my face for a moment before turning to leave the room. "I'll be in my office until dinner is ready."

"Thank you," I call after him, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Oh, and Jessica?" He calls out, spinning on his heels.

"Yeah?" I jump, desperate for the relief of him being gone from the room. I need to be alone to cool off and collect myself.

"I'm looking forward to trying your casserole."

I swallow hard and retreat into the kitchen. I brace myself against the counter and close my eyes, rolling my head back. The scent of his cologne is still haunting me, suspending me in his commanding presence even though he's long gone.

It makes absolutely zero sense. He's so rude and impossible uptight. I feel

bad for Millie most of the time, even though she loves her dad and seems to be a pretty happy and well-adjusted child - despite all the pressure and demands he puts on her... and *me*.

While dinner is finishing up, I start to tidy up the house - desperate for a distraction. But I find myself stealing glances at his office door. The pull towards him is magnetic, and with each passing moment, it grows stronger. Despite the fluttering in my stomach and the irrational desire to knock on his door, I remind myself that he obviously doesn't feel the same illogical attraction to me. And even if he did, we could never act on it.

I check the timer on the stove, wishing like hell that I had enough time to escape into my bedroom for a little bit. I'm on duty and should be focused on Millie, housework, and dinner. But Robert has ignited such an intense need in me, I feel like I'm about to burst.

I imagine bursting into his office, throwing myself at him, letting him take me right then and there on his desk. I want to know what his expectations are in the bedroom, and I want him to teach me how to meet them.

"Focus, Jessica," I whisper to myself, taking a deep breath - despite the fact that my fingers are twitching with a need to touch myself.

I turn my attention back to my responsibilities, doing my best to keep my thoughts and feelings in check. But deep down, I know that the spark between Robert and me isn't going away anytime soon - and that scares me more than anything else.

Things only get worse over dinner. All I need to do is make it through until later tonight when I can be alone in my room, lost in my fantasies about him with my vibrator in hand. Then I can hopefully get this all out of my system well enough to survive another day in this house. But Robert seems deadset on making this as hard as possible for me, like he really does somehow know my secret and all the dirty things that are dancing behind my eyes.

His demeanor is different towards me as we eat. He softens a bit, resembling more of the man I saw that first day we met in the shop when he flirted with me. It was one of the rare occasions I actually didn't mind the attention from one of our customers.

No matter how hard I try to focus on Millie and our small talk about her day, our stolen glances and shared smirks betray the simmering tension between us. We're walking a tightrope, testing the boundaries of

professionalism, and it's getting harder to deny what's happening.

"Jessica, I've got bedtime tonight. I'll tuck Millie in myself." Robert announces when we're finished eating. His voice is smooth, deep, and impossibly alluring.

"You really don't have to do that," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady. I can hear him enter the kitchen, the sound of his footsteps resonating within me.

"It's okay. I want to," he says as he strides past me. The scent of his cologne lingers in the air, making my pulse race. It's maddening that even the smallest interaction with him leaves me breathless. "After you're finished cleaning up, you can be done for the day."

"Thank you," I murmur, watching him leave the room. His tall frame and broad shoulders consume my thoughts, and I wonder if he's feeling this same unrelenting pull towards me.

I allow myself one last glance at Robert as he walks out. My body squirms with desire for him, but I push it down, determined to outlast the temptation. I'm in the home stretch. I just have to finish these dishes and clean up the kitchen, and then I can finally escape to get some relief.

When all of my chores are done, I go to hide away in my room. I change into my silk tank and matching pajama bottoms and rub some lavender lotion into my skin to calm my nerves. But it only pushes my body off further into the deep end, because I can't help but wish it was Robert's strong hands kneading into every inch of my skin.

I double check to make sure my door is locked, then climb into bed and reach for the drawer of my nightstand. I knew living here with Robert would be a challenge. Admittedly, I didn't know it'd be this bad - but I at least had the foresight to buy a new vibrator before coming here.

I pull it out and breathe a sigh of relief, letting every last one of my wicked thoughts about him run wild and untamed in my mind at last. But when I flip the switch on my new toy - nothing happens.

I jerk up in bed to study it and figure out what's wrong. I shake it, realizing it's lighter than it probably should be. Unscrewing one end of it, I find an empty opening where the batteries should be.

"Of course, Jessica. God. How could you forget the batteries?"

Beyond exhausted with frustration, I force myself out of bed to peak out my door. The house appears to be quiet and dark. I think I know where some batteries are in the utility closet near the kitchen pantry. I can go out and grab

some along with a glass of water.

Checking again to make sure the coast is clear, I tip toe down the hallway, quietly feeling my way around in the dark until I reach the end of it. The kitchen is in sight. *Almost there.*

"Jessica?" Robert's voice jolts my body and my heart to a hard stop. I spin around to see him sitting there in the living room, sipping a glass of wine. "I thought you were in bed already."

I was. Just not for sleep.

JESSICA

This building tension between Robert and I feels like it's threatening everything... especially my sanity. All I needed was a little relief, but now this infuriating, impossible man is preventing me from even getting that.

There's no way I can get the batteries now, and risk him suspecting what I'm up to.

I reside myself to giving up for now, and step closer to where he sits by the fireplace. With each step, I realize I'm only in my thin silk pajamas, but I don't care. Let him look. I hope it tortures him half as much as he's been torturing me.

"Couldn't sleep," I shrug, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

He nods thoughtfully. "I'm feeling a little wound up myself. I was thinking of opening a bottle of wine to help me decompress."

"You should," I smile. "Relax. Enjoy your evening. I'll go to my room... Give you some peace and quiet. I just wanted to grab a glass of water." I turn for the kitchen, eager to escape his burning eyes. "Goodnight."

Just as I reach the hallway, Robert stops me.

"Actually, I'd love some company. Care to join me?"

"Oh!" I sound more surprised and eager than I mean to. "Really?"

Robert's been so strict about the line between personal and professional. He's made it clear he doesn't even want me getting too cozy with Millie and forming an attachment that could be unhealthy incase he ever has to fire me. I certainly never expected him to invite me to have a drink with him. And tonight, I'm in the worst possible state for this kind of thing.

"Be right back. Make yourself comfortable," he commands.

My heart is racing as I settle onto the couch and watch Robert walk towards the kitchen with his usual quiet confidence. I wish I could be as cool and collected as he is all the time. The only occasions when he loses that are when he's angry, which just makes him more intimidating- and is its own form of confidence.

It all makes me that much more nervous about what I can expect from this surprise encounter. This is by far the most personal invitation he's ever offered to me. Things between us started out with blatant flirtation, but that all stopped the moment he hired me full-time. All sparks since then have been unspoken things simmering beneath the surface, and for all I know - it could all be in my head.

Robert returns with two glasses of wine, and I have no idea if I'm about to share this drink with the cool, casual man that strolled into Rothmans that day when we first met - or if I'm about to be stuck with my demanding boss.

"Here you go," he says, handing me a glass of wine. He clinks his own against mine as he settles down on the sofa next to me, his arm accidentally brushing against my shoulder ever so slightly. I try to ignore the shiver that runs down my spine at the contact.

"Thanks." I take a tentative sip, savoring the rich taste of the red wine as it washes over my tongue. It's clearly expensive, but then again, everything about Robert is.

"So Jessica," he begins, his voice low and smooth like velvet. The sound of my name falling from his lips sends another shiver down my spine. "How are you finding life here? I know it must be quite different from what you're used to."

I work hard to push down the surge of bursting desire inside and try to act professional. Another sip of wine relaxes me, but probably not in a way that's helping matters any. "It's definitely a change, but I'm enjoying it. I love taking care of Millie, and she's such a sweet girl. I'm grateful for this opportunity."

He nods, his eyes lingering on me a moment longer than necessary before he takes a drink from his glass. "I know I can be difficult sometimes. But... you've surprised me at every turn with your ability to meet the challenge."

"Oh," I blurt in surprise. Up until now it's been impossible to tell how he's felt about the job I'm doing. "Thank you, Robert. That means a lot to me."

I can feel the warmth of his gaze on my face, and I know that we're

treading unfamiliar territory. The air between us feels charged, electric.

"Do you mind if I ask... where is Millie's mom?"

"Why?" he barks defensively. "Did she ask about her?"

"No," I assure him. "She's never mentioned her. It's what made me so curious, and I just thought... well, incase she ever did, as her nanny... it'd be in her best interest if I knew what to say."

He tenses up, obviously unsure if he wants to answer. We both take another sip of wine, and he gives in. "She left when Millie was just a baby. Millie knows nothing about her, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"Okay," I answer slowly, unsure of how that really helps me if Millie should ever start asking questions. I'm also unsatisfied in my attempt to learn more about him, but I know I shouldn't be too focused on that part if I know what's good for me.

"What about you?" he asks. "No boyfriend or other family commitments? I notice you didn't need much time before moving in."

I shake my head. "Single as can be. My family and I talk over the phone and I go to see them for holidays, but otherwise... well, it's kind of lonely to be honest. Ever since I moved here to the city."

I recoil, wishing I hadn't confessed to being lonely. It does nothing to relax the tension between us, and I feel even more on edge than I did before.

He studies me intently for a moment, then leans forward, perching his elbows on his knees. His unwavering gaze is glued to me, making me squirm.

"Are you alright? You seem a little... tense."

Tense is putting it lightly.

I throw back the rest of my glass, emptying it, then reach for the bottle to refill it without asking for permission.

"You could say that," I blurt. "Look, to be honest, Robert... Can I be honest with you?"

He leans back, his brows furrowed in curiosity. "I appreciate honesty, and while usually I'd be hesitant... given our working relationship... We're here sharing a bottle of wine. If there was ever a time to be more open and honest, it'd be now."

"Yeah," I nod, swallowing hard. My heart pounds in disbelief over the words that are about to spill from my lips.

It's time like these when I'm fully willing to admit that clinging to my virginity this long has driven me to the brink of insanity. Being around Robert on top of it all? Has pushed me over the edge and made it unbearable.

"You see, the thing is... when we first met, it was under completely different circumstances. You were just a man in the shop, who... if I'm not completely mistaken, was flirting with me. And if I'm being honest, then I have to admit I liked it. When I thought you were flirting with me. I knew when I took this job that it meant cutting those feelings off completely, but for personal reasons... that's been harder to do than I thought it would be."

As I let out the string of word vomit, all the things I know I shouldn't be saying - I'm all too aware of the line that exists between us – a line that, once crossed, cannot be uncrossed. It's a dangerous game we're playing, but in this moment, with the fire casting flickering shadows across Robert's handsome face, it's a game I'm willing to play.

I can't help but notice the way Robert's eyes linger on me as I take a sip from my glass. The subtle shift in his gaze sends a current through my body, and I find myself caught up in the intensity of the moment.

"Where do I begin?" He smirks, his dark eyes twinkling with mischief. "Obviously I have to admit it's impossible not to feel the same about you. You're intelligent, passionate, and you have this incredible ability to light up a room just by being in it." He reaches across the table, his fingers brushing against mine as he takes the glass from my grasp. "You're... captivating."

My heart races at his words, and I find myself leaning in closer, drawn in by his magnetic charm. "Well, I could say the same about you, Robert. You're not exactly what I expected when I first started working for you."

"Oh?" His eyebrows arch in surprise. "How so?"

"Well," I hesitate, biting my lip in thought. "You're not the cold, unapproachable man I initially thought you were. You keep it well-hidden, but I see it. There's a warmth to you, an undeniable kindness that I didn't expect."

Robert smiles, something tender and genuine spreading across his face. "You have a way of bringing out the best in people, Jessica. Even someone like me."

Our eyes meet, and I feel as though we're teetering on the edge of something profound, something life-altering. The tension between us is palpable, and I know that neither of us can deny it any longer.

"Robert..." I whisper, my breath hitching as his hand finds mine on the table.

"But you were right," he murmurs, his voice thick with emotion. "All of that has to be cut off completely now."

I nod in understanding. "Then you should probably stop touching my hand. Please, you've already tortured me enough tonight."

"Tortured you?" he laughs lightly in disbelief in shock.

"Don't pretend like you can't see it," I plead. "You have to know the effect your presence has on me. Every time you're in the room... my mind goes to all sorts of places it shouldn't. Tonight all I wanted to do was be alone and... think of you."

He spikes his brows. "Think of me?"

I lock my eyes onto his as they flicker over the silk of my pajamas, sticking to very specific places - like the sight of my nipples poking against the fabric.

"I wanted to think of you and... touch myself. I know I shouldn't. I know it's bad, but... part of me wants that too. For you to tell me how bad it is, and to..."

He holds up a firm hand. "You have to stop."

"I know I do, but..."

All at once he closes the gap between us on the couch and pulls me into him. The firmness of his touch sets my body on fire, and I half think I still am locked away in my room - dreaming all of this. Our lips crash together, and I can't help but lean into it further - no matter how dizzy it makes me.

This is *nothing* like that first sad excuse for a kiss I had as a teen.

When we finally pull apart, breathless and flushed, I know that things have changed irrevocably between us. This can't be undone, and as much as I fear the consequences, I can't bring myself to regret it. Not when the taste of him still lingers on my lips, and the memory of his touch burns like fire in my veins.

"Robert," I breathe, my heart pounding in my chest. "I want you."

He pulls back slightly, surprise flickering in his eyes. I can see the desire there too, but it's tempered by something else - caution, perhaps.

"Trust me," I say, my cheeks burning with embarrassment at my own boldness. "I know what I want, and right now, that's you. I don't expect anything more than this, nothing beyond tonight."

His gaze searches mine, as if looking for any hint of doubt or uncertainty. But I'm resolute, even if it scares me. The longing I feel for him is undeniable, and I refuse to let this opportunity pass me by.

"God, Jessica," he murmurs, his own need evident in the tremble of his voice. "You have no idea how much I want this too."

Suddenly, he stops and pulls back.

His hand rests gently on my arm, his touch firm but not unkind. "Jessica," he says, his tone steady, "you don't want to get mixed up with a man like me. I'm good at my job and I do the best I can with Millie, but... I can't do relationships. It wouldn't be fair to you. Not to mention all the other complications with you working here..."

I look into his dark eyes, searching for any hint of uncertainty in them. But all I see is a quiet resolve that both touches and frustrates me.

"Robert," I say, my voice shaking a little. "I'm not asking for a relationship. I'm asking you to do me a favor." I swallow hard and brace myself for the confession I'm about to make; a vulnerability that leaves me feeling exposed and raw. I swallow hard, knowing that I need to be honest with him – and myself. "I'm... I'm a virgin, and... I don't want to be anymore."

The air between us seems to thicken, charged with tension and unsaid words. Robert's fingers tighten around my arm, as if trying to reassure me even as he struggles with his own emotions.

The admission seems to momentarily stun him, as if he hadn't expected such a revelation from me. But then again, how could he? To him, I must appear confident, self-assured; someone who knows her worth and isn't afraid to express her desires.

"Jessica..." He trails off, his stormy dark eyes searching mine for any trace of doubt or regret. "How is that possible?"

"Good question."

As he gazes into my eyes, I can see the wheels turning in his head. For the first time tonight, the weight of our actions seems to settle on him, and it's clear that he's grappling with conflicting emotions. On one hand, he yearns to fulfill my request, to give me the experience I crave. But on the other, he's aware of the potential consequences – not just for us, but for Millie as well.

"We can't do this," he finally replies, his voice low and measured. "Once we cross this line, there's no going back."

"I know," I admit, my heart pounding in my chest. "But I want it to be you, Robert. I want this – more than anything."

He sighs, running his fingers through his black hair in frustration. I can sense the turmoil brewing within him, and part of me wonders if I've made a mistake in voicing my desire. But deep down, I know that this is something I need to explore – even if it means risking everything.

"Jessica, you have to understand," he says, pulling away from me and

sitting up on the edge of the couch. "I don't want to hurt you, or jeopardize your relationship with Millie. You're the best nanny she's ever had, and I can't risk messing that up."

"Robert," I whisper. "That means a lot to me, and I don't want to mess anything up either. But I'm not asking you to change who you are. I just... I want to experience this with you. I've been waiting for someone who felt right. And for whatever reason, I just know that's you."

"Jess," he says, his voice strained but gentle. "I understand what you're asking, and I can't tell you how much it means to me that you trust me enough to ask. But I can't be the one to give you that. I'm not the right man for this."

His words sting, but deep down, I know he's right. And yet, there's still a part of me that wants – needs – to hear him say it. To know that it's not just some whim or fantasy, but something real and important.

He turns back to look at me, and for a moment, I see a flicker of vulnerability in his eyes – a hint of the man beneath the gruff exterior.

"Your first time should be special, Jessica," he murmurs, his voice softening. "Not some meaningless fling that's so complicated."

I can feel my cheeks burning as embarrassment creeps in, and I suddenly become very aware of how small and insignificant I must seem to him in this moment. He's so worldly and experienced, and here I am, bumbling through a conversation about something as intimate as my virginity.

"Right, of course," I stammer, avoiding his gaze. "I... I don't know what I was thinking."

Robert reaches out, gently placing a hand on my shoulder. His touch is warm and comforting, but it also sends a shiver down my spine. "Hey, it's okay," he reassures me. "We all have moments of weakness. Just promise me that you'll wait for the right person, alright? Someone who will cherish you like you deserve."

I shake my head, wishing I could erase the last few minutes. But since I've come this far, then it's only fair that I get to be heard.

"I don't want to be cherished like that," I insist. "I don't even want something that's special. I just want... someone who knows what they're doing. Someone who can take control and...and just make it good for me."

As the words slip from my mouth, I grow red with embarrassment. But I can see the color rising on his cheeks as well, indicating that he understands what I'm saying. There's no denying the attraction between us, and as he

gazes at me with interest, I can sense our mutual desire burning hotter.

"Oh, Jessica," he breathes, holding his hands up in careful restraint. "You don't know how badly I want to take you right now. How badly I want to give you what you're asking."

"Then do it," I reply, feeling my body flush with heat and anticipation.

I see the possibilities dancing in his eyes, but just as I think he's about to give me what I want, he jumps to his feet.

"I can't do this," he groans in frustration. "This was a mistake. I have to... I'm going to bed. And you should too."

Faster than I can even process what's happening, he leaves me alone there in the dark living room. I don't even know when the fireplace shut off, but its absence makes everything feel ten times emptier than it did a moment ago.

I don't know what I was thinking... confessing everything to him like that.

But now I know he wants me too, for whatever that's worth. Which may not be a whole hell of a lot if he fires me over this. The sad part is, I know that's what he should do.

I've waited my whole adult life, not giving myself over to anyone. And I had to pick now of all times - with my job and a place to live hanging over my head - to try and force it, likely ruining everything in the process.

ROBERT

I'm working hard to forget the night before even happened when I wake up the next morning and go into the kitchen. There they are: Jessica and Millie, a picture of domesticity that both warms and unnerves me. Millie is perched on a stool, eating her breakfast with her usual gusto, while Jessica stands at the counter, slicing fruit. Their laughter fills the room, but it's the memory of our kiss and everything she said last night that makes my heart race.

"Good morning," Jessica says sweetly, looking up from her task. She doesn't seem to show any signs of discomfort from what transpired between us. Was it really only last night when she bared her soul, confessing her virginity and begging me to be her first?

"Morning," I manage, trying not to let my gaze linger on her too long. The air is thick with unspoken tension, and I can't help but feel incredibly awkward.

"Ready for work, Daddy?" Millie asks, her innocent face oblivious to everything that has happened. I force a smile, nodding as I reach for my briefcase.

"Sure am, sweetheart. You have a good day at school." I plant a kiss on her forehead, avoiding Jessica's eyes as best as I can.

"Bye, Daddy!" Millie beams, but my focus shifts to the woman standing next to her. Her red hair glows in the morning light, drawing attention to her full, pink lips – still tender from our kiss, no doubt. How could I let it go so far, knowing how vulnerable she is?

"Jessica," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Have a good day. As

always, if you need anything, just call."

"Sure thing, Mr. Pierce," she replies, her tone polite but distant. It's clear she's putting up a front, but I can't help but wonder if she regrets what happened as much as I do. I give her a curt nod before turning to leave, my thoughts already racing with how I'll survive this day.

As I walk away, I can't help but think of the night before. The raw desire in her eyes, the way she trembled in my arms with need. The strength it took to say no, to protect her from myself. She's too sweet, too good for someone like me. And yet, as I close the front door behind me, I know that nothing can erase the image of Jessica Easton from my mind.

The drive to work is a haze, my thoughts consumed by last night's events. I clench the steering wheel, chastising myself for letting things go so far. Pulling into the parking lot, I know that it won't be easy to concentrate today.

Throughout the day, it feels like I'm wading through quicksand. Every document I read and every meeting I attend, my mind drifts back to Jessica – her soft lips pressed against mine, her confession, her vulnerability.

"Mr. Pierce, are you sure you're okay?" my assistant asks me during lunch, genuine concern etched on her face.

"Fine." My tone is curt, dismissive. "Just a lot on my mind."

"Alright then," she replies hesitantly. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

As the workday finally comes to an end, I dread returning home. I don't know how I'll face Jessica after what transpired. But Millie needs me - and she needs a solid nanny for when I'm not around. I can't let her down.

I unlock the front door, steeling myself for whatever awaits me inside. The sound of splashing water reaches my ears, and I follow it to the hallway outside the bathroom. There, I find Jessica – her shirt soaked and clinging to her body, leaving little to the imagination.

"Hey, Robert," she says sweetly, brushing damp strands of hair away from her face. "Millie's having her bath."

"Is she?" I try to keep my gaze focused on her eyes, but it's impossible not to notice the way her wet clothes accentuate every detail of her perfect breasts.

"Uh-huh," she responds, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Her movements seem deliberate, drawing my attention to her hips.

"Good," I manage to say, my voice strained. "That's...good."

"How was work?" she asks, leaning against the doorframe and lowering

her gaze at me.

"It was..." I can't even finish my sentence, the heat of frustration building inside me. It's like she's taunting me, pushing me towards the edge. I want to say it was unbearable because she was all I could think about, but that's better left unsaid. "Fine. It was fine."

"Good." She smirks, turning back towards the bathroom. "That's good."

As she disappears into the room - after mocking the awkwardness between us, leaving me standing in the hallway, I'm at a loss for words. The only thing I can do now is try to avoid her – until this unbearable desire subsides.

The moment Jessica closes the bathroom door behind her, I head straight for my home gym. The weight of my growing desire for her is suffocating, and I need to alleviate it somehow. I change into my workout gear, crank up the music, and begin a punishing exercise routine.

As I move from one machine to another, I try to focus on anything other than the way Jessica's shirt clung to her body, but it's no use. Even lifting heavier weights than usual can't quell the visions of her that continue to infiltrate my mind.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath as I finish a set of reps with a grunt, wiping the sweat from my brow. My frustration only grows with each passing minute, and I can't shake the feeling that I'm trapped in an endless cycle of longing and denial.

Later that night, after giving Millie a kiss goodnight, I quickly head to my bedroom - eager to avoid any more run ins with Jessica.

This is all my fault. I never should have let things get so relaxed between us by inviting her to join me for that glass of wine. I won't be making that mistake again. All the more reason to hide away in my room, and take a long cold shower to rinse away the sweat from my workout - and hopefully to wash away the rest of these dirty things I need to rid my body and mind of.

I walk into my room and let out a heavy sigh, crossing the room to my bed. I sink down onto the edge of the mattress and it's only then that I hear the sound of water running in the bathroom. I check the time, noting that Martha wouldn't still be in here cleaning at this hour.

"Millie? Is that you?" I call out.

When I open the bathroom door, the sight that greets me leaves me momentarily breathless. Through the steamy air, I catch a glimpse of Jessica's naked form, her body glistening with droplets of water under the stream of

the showerhead.

My heart races, and I'm instantly hard. I try to look away, to give her privacy, but I find myself unable to tear my gaze from her. Her curves are perfectly accentuated by the water cascading down her skin.

I know I should turn away, give her privacy, but my feet seem rooted to the spot. All I can do is stare in awe at the curves of her body, at the way her hair clings to her damp skin. It's like she's a siren, calling me towards her with a magnetic pull that I can't resist.

My eyes trace the curves of her body, the way her long legs seem to go on forever, and the perfect roundness of her breasts. My body reacts, the heat spreading from my core, and I have to fight the urge to join her in the shower.

"Robert!" she gasps, covering herself quickly with her hands.

"Sorry...I thought..." I stammer, trying to tear my gaze away from her but failing miserably. She's everything I'd imagined and more – a living, breathing temptation I can't seem to resist. "What the hell are you doing in here?"

"Can't a girl get some privacy around here?" she teases, smirking at me despite her obvious embarrassment. "Or do you like what you see?"

"Jessica, this isn't funny," I snap, forcing myself to look anywhere but at her. "You know we can't...I can't."

"Relax, Robert," she responds, her voice dripping with mischief. "It was an accident. I was only trying to joke to lighten the mood. I'm the one standing here naked."

"Please just...hurry up and get dressed," I say, my frustration reaching a boiling point. As I close the door, leaving her to finish her shower, I can't help but wonder how much longer I'll be able to resist her advances.

After the door closes, I lean against the hallway wall and try to regain my composure. *What the hell was that? How did she end up in there?*

Heat rushes through me as I remember her wet skin and teasing smile. I shouldn't have seen that. My jaw clenches, and I force myself to walk away, trying to clear the image from my mind.

"Sorry about that," Jessica says as she steps out of the bathroom, towel wrapped around her body, her hair damp and tangled. She's still beautiful, even like this, and it only serves to frustrate me further.

"Jessica, what were you doing in there? In *my* bathroom," I demand, glaring at her. "You're not supposed to use that one."

She looks at me, her eyes widening. "I'm really sorry, Robert. There's

something wrong with the plumbing in my own bathroom. The water pressure is gone, and the shower won't turn on."

"Then why didn't you tell me?" I snap, feeling a mix of anger and desire. She's standing so close, and I can smell her shampoo mingling with the steam from the shower.

"Because... I didn't want to bother you," she admits, biting her lip nervously.

God I want to be the one biting into that plump bottom lip of hers.

"There's a plumber coming tomorrow to check it out, so I thought I could just use this one for now. I didn't think you'd be home so early."

"Fine," I say, trying to dismiss the issue and ignore the way my heart races at the sight of her. "Just don't let it happen again."

"Okay, I promise," she replies softly, her eyes downcast.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. It's getting harder and harder to resist her, especially when she keeps pushing boundaries. But I have to maintain control for Millie's sake – and my own.

I nod and turn away from her, heading toward my home office to distract myself with work. I can't go anywhere near that shower for a while. But as I walk away, I can't help but think of how beautiful she looked with droplets of water clinging to her skin – and how much I want her.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, knowing that this is far from over.

After an hour or so of working, there's a light tap on the doorframe. Jessica appears there, fully dry and clothed again. Not that it helps one bit. Not now that I know exactly what her body looks like under those clothes. It will be impossible not to picture her naked every time I see her now, and I don't know how I'm going to function around this house plagued by an image that makes me hard every single time it comes to mind.

"What?" I bark, growing impatient.

"I just wanted to apologize for earlier," she offers. "I swear it was an accident."

"I should hope so. I made my position on all of this clear. I thought... I thought we were on the same page."

"We are," she assures me. "But... you should know, even though I agree with everything you said... well, it doesn't change anything. I can't help it. I just wanted to let you know that my offer still stands."

My heart races, and I try to keep my cool, remembering Millie and the promise I made myself. "Jessica, we've been through this already. I won't – I

can't take you up on your offer." My voice is strained, betraying my desire.

"Are you sure?" she teases, raising an eyebrow. "Because from the way you're looking at me, it seems like you could use some...relief."

"Damn it, Jessica!" I snap, clenching my fists. "Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to resist you? To know that what I want is right there, but I can't have it because of my daughter?"

"Maybe you should stop resisting then," she whispers, closing the distance between us. Her breath is warm on my neck, causing goosebumps to rise along my skin.

"Stop it, please." The words barely come out as a desperate plea. "I need you to stop teasing me. I'm trying to do what's best for Millie – and for both of us."

She sighs and takes a step back, the playfulness in her eyes fading. "I understand, Robert. I'll try to make it easier for you, I promise."

"Thank you," I manage to say before quickly turning away, heading back toward my home gym. I need to work off this frustration and clear my head before I lose control completely. This ordeal is going to make me more fit than ever.

The moment I shut the door behind me, I begin to furiously work out, pushing my body to its limits. With every bead of sweat that rolls down my face, I try to forget the way Jessica makes me feel – the fire she ignites inside of me.

But no matter how hard I train, her seductive offer echoes in my mind, and I know deep down that this battle is far from over.

ROBERT

The dim lighting of Suave casts a warm glow over the dark wooden tables and leather booths. I lean back in my chair at the high-top table near the bar, swirling a glass of scotch in my hand as I survey the room. The atmosphere is electric, just like any other Friday night in the city.

"Robert," Edward drawls, a devilish grin on his face. "How's that new nanny of yours? Jessica, isn't it?"

Ethan chuckles along with him. I roll my eyes at the two of them, trying to feign disinterest. "She's fine. Doing a good job taking care of Millie."

"Come on, Robert," Ethan says, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table. "Don't be coy about it. We know you've got a thing for her."

"Her long legs and that cute little smile of hers," Edward adds with a smirk. "Don't think we didn't notice that look you get in your eyes every time you talk about her."

"Please," I scoff, taking a sip of my drink. "You two are delusional."

But deep down, I can't deny the truth in their words. There's something about Jessica that catches my attention, even though it shouldn't. With her gentle demeanor and quiet beauty, she's not the type of woman I usually go for.

"Alright, Robert," says Ethan, leaning back in his chair. "We'll drop it. But you can't fool us." He shares a knowing look with Edward before they both burst into laughter.

I shake my head and force a smile, trying to keep my thoughts about Jessica at bay. My friends may be teasing me now, but there's no way they could understand the conflict I feel. She's just my daughter's nanny, and that's

all she'll ever be.

I can't help but feel on edge as Ethan and Edward continue to tease me about Jessica. Their words echo in my mind, stirring up feelings that I've been trying to suppress. My attraction to her is undeniable, but this can't happen.

"Enough about Jessica," I say firmly, trying to change the subject. "Let's talk business."

"Ah, yes. Speaking of which, how's that deal with Christopher Black and Whitestone Industries coming along?" Edward asks, his voice taking on a serious tone.

"Actually," I say, reaching into my jacket pocket and pulling out my phone, "I just got the contract finalized." I can't help but feel a surge of satisfaction at the thought.

"Nice work, Robert!" Ethan exclaims, raising his glass in celebration. "To another successful deal."

"Cheers," I say, clinking my glass against his and Edward's before taking a sip. The taste of victory is sweet, but the lingering thoughts of Jessica dampen my mood slightly.

As we continue to chat about the latest business ventures, my mind keeps drifting back to the redhead who has captured my interest. Despite my friends' teasing, I know that pursuing anything with Jessica would be a mistake.

"Alright, guys, I should head home," I tell them, checking the time on my phone. "Millie will be waiting."

"Say hi to your hot nanny for us," Ethan chuckles, nudging Edward with a grin.

"Very funny," I reply, rolling my eyes as I stand up from the table. "Goodnight, gentlemen."

"Night, Robert," they call after me as I make my way toward the exit, my thoughts consumed by the woman I can't seem to escape.

As I step out of Suave and into the crisp night air, a smile spreads across my face. My chest swells with pride as I think about the deal I just closed. The cool breeze carries the faint scent of the city - a mix of exhaust fumes and street food vendors.

"Your ride is here, sir," the driver says, opening the door to a sleek black sedan. I nod my appreciation and slide into the luxurious leather interior.

"Home, please," I say, buckling my seatbelt and leaning back against the

plush headrest. The driver nods and we're off, smoothly merging into the sea of yellow taxis and honking horns.

As we navigate the busy streets, I can't help but think about Jessica and the way she makes me feel – a dangerous mixture of desire and vulnerability. I know getting involved with her would be a colossal mistake, but I can't shake the feeling that she could be different from all the others.

I've never had an easy time trusting women, and Millie's mom certainly didn't help in that department. But to know that Jessica has saved herself all this time, I can't imagine the amount of restraint that must have took. And that she's chosen me of all people to be her first... It's hard not to give her what she wants as a reward for doing what most people can't, for having high enough standards to make it this far.

The car pulls up in front of my building, and I exit with a quiet word of thanks to the driver. The doorman greets me with a nod as he opens the entrance for me. Stepping into the marble-floored lobby, I make my way to the private elevator that will take me straight to my penthouse.

"Evening, Mr. Pierce," the security guard says as he swipes his keycard, granting me access to the elevator.

"Good evening," I reply, stepping inside and pressing the button for the top floor. The doors close, and I'm whisked away to my floor.

As the elevator doors slide open onto my penthouse, I pause to take in the breathtaking view of the city below. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer an unobstructed panorama of the twinkling lights and towering skyscrapers. It's a sight that never gets old, even after all these years.

"Welcome back, sir," Martha greets me from the hallway. "I'm just finishing up for the night. Jessica and Millie are in her bedroom."

"Thank you, Martha," I say, my heart quickening at the mention of Jessica's name. As Martha gathers up her things, I slip off my jacket and loosen my tie before heading into the kitchen.

I need to blow off some steam, and now that I have an excuse to celebrate - I decide to pull out the bottle of Dom Perignon champagne that I've been saving in the wine cooler. It's a brand I reserve for special occasions like this – the closing of a multimillion-dollar deal with Whitestone Industries that had my chest swelling with pride earlier tonight.

There's a satisfying pop as the cork is freed, followed by a faint rush of bubbles escaping their glass prison. The rich aroma of the champagne fills the room, and my body relaxes a little.

My eyes drift towards the elegant crystal flutes resting on the polished countertop, the dim light from the city outside casting shimmering patterns on their delicately etched surfaces. Picking one up, I carefully pour the champagne, the golden liquid fizzing and bubbling as it makes contact with the glass. The sound is almost musical, a symphony of effervescence that mirrors the excitement coursing through my veins.

"Cheers," I whisper to myself, raising the flute to my lips and taking a small sip. The taste is exquisite – crisp, delicate, and alive with possibility. It's a flavor that embodies everything I've fought so hard to achieve, and in this moment, I feel utterly invincible.

As I savor the champagne, thoughts of Jessica begin to intrude upon my consciousness, much like they have been doing ever since she entered my life. My friends' teasing remarks about her from earlier tonight still echo in my head, sparking a mixture of annoyance and, if I'm being honest with myself, a twinge of desire. She is the one mystery I have yet to solve, an enigma that both frustrates and intrigues me.

I chide myself, shaking off the unwelcome thoughts. Tonight is about celebrating my achievements, not dwelling on the confusing emotions brought on by a certain small-town nanny.

I take another sip of champagne, letting its effervescence dance on my tongue as I stubbornly shove any thoughts of Jessica to the back of my mind. For now, at least, this night belongs to me.

Just as I'm about to take another sip of my champagne, the floor creaks and Jessica walks in, her fiery red hair cascading over her shoulders like a waterfall of flames. She looks breathtakingly beautiful, dressed in a long simple yet elegant navy blue dress that hugs her curves in all the right places.

"Robert," she says, a hint of surprise in her voice. "I didn't know you were in here. Sorry to interrupt you."

"No, it's alright," I reply, my gaze lingering on her for a moment longer than necessary before I snap out of it and gesture toward the bottle of Dom Perignon on the counter. "Care to join me for a drink? It's not every day I close a multi-million-dollar deal."

"Really?" Her green eyes widen as she glances at the bottle, then back at me. "Well... are you sure? I mean, I don't want to..."

"Look, truthfully, I know it's probably a horrible idea," I admit. "But I'm exhausted. Too tired to fight right now. And, for once, I don't want to celebrate this alone. We're here in the kitchen. Not too close for comfort on

the couch. We can control ourselves, right?"

She dips her head with a sincere smile that drives me mad. "Yeah. I think so."

"Fantastic." I make my way to the cabinet and retrieve another champagne flute, the crystal catching the light as I hand it to her. "Only the best for such an occasion."

"Wow, fancy," she says with a smile, accepting the glass. I can't help but notice how her slender fingers wrap around the stem.

I raise my glass and clinking it against hers. The melodic chime of our flutes resonates through the room, and for a fleeting moment, I allow myself to savor the rare pleasure of sharing this triumph with someone else.

"Cheers," Jessica murmurs, taking a delicate sip of the champagne. I watch as her eyes flutter closed, her lips curving into a smile that makes my heart skip a beat.

The dim lighting casts a warm glow over the room as we sip our champagne, the soft notes of jazz music filling the air with an almost palpable energy. Jessica's eyes dart around the apartment, taking in the luxurious furnishings and appreciating the tasteful decor.

"Tell me something about yourself that I don't know, Jessica," I say, leaning in closer to her. My dark eyes lock onto her green ones, searching for a glimpse into the woman she truly is.

"Something about me?" She hesitates for a moment, biting her lower lip in thought. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything. The way I see it, it's easy for us to be so wound up over each other when everything's still a mystery. Maybe the more we know about each other, the more human we'll be. The easier it will be to control ourselves and make this thing work."

There's something about the way she looks at me – vulnerable yet hopeful – that makes me want to protect her and show her the world.

As the night goes on, our conversation flows effortlessly, our laughter mingling with the sultry jazz tunes. For once, I'm not thinking about business deals or dollar signs; I'm simply enjoying the company of this beautiful, enigmatic woman who's somehow found her way into my life- for better or for worse.

JESSICA

The bubbles from the champagne tingle on my tongue, a sensation that seems to dance in time with the soft music playing in the background of Robert's luxurious home. I can't help but let out a small giggle as I take another sip, feeling the warmth spread through me like wildfire.

"Something funny?" Robert asks, his voice carrying a hint of amusement.

"Nothing," I reply, trying to suppress my laughter. "It's just... this champagne is incredible." My cheeks flush at the sound of my own words, and I find myself unable to meet his gaze.

"Indeed, it is," he agrees, smirking as he takes a swig from his own glass. "You know, I'm glad we're doing this - having a drink together and getting to know each other better."

"Absolutely," I say, feeling the alcohol slowly chipping away at my inhibitions. The air between us is charged, and I can't help but remember our previous conversations. He refused me once, but I know it's been eating at him, driving him insane. Could tonight be the night he finally takes me up on my offer?

"Do you think it's helping in the way you hoped?" I venture to ask.

A smile spreads across his lips. "I think my experiment would be more effective if..." He stops himself.

"If what?" I press, dying for him to finish his sentence.

"If you didn't look so fucking good tonight," he says, his voice a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine.

"Thank you, Robert," I reply, feeling my cheeks flush with warmth. It's hard not to be affected by his presence, even though I know I should resist.

As we talk, I notice how our touches linger – my hand resting on his forearm, his fingers brushing against mine. Each innocent touch sends a jolt of electricity through me, making my heart race.

"Robert," I begin, biting my lip nervously. He follows my every movement, his dark eyes darkening with desire. "Did you give any thought to...what I said before?"

His smirk tells me everything I need to know. The tension between us has been building for weeks, ever since I put the idea into his head. I can tell it's driving him crazy, just as it is for me. We both dance around the subject, neither wanting to be the first to break.

"Jessica," Robert murmurs, leaning in closer. Our faces are mere inches apart now, and I can feel the heat radiating off his body. "I've thought about it more than I'd like to admit."

My breath hitches in my throat as I muster the courage to make my move. "Maybe...maybe now's the time to stop thinking and start acting," I suggest with a shaky smile.

His eyes flicker down to my lips, and in that moment, I know there's no turning back. We're both lost in the haze of champagne and desire, and nothing will ever be the same again. His resolve crumbles, and our mouths crash together in a passionate kiss. He takes the lead, his tongue exploring my mouth with practiced skill.

"God, what am I doing?" he mutters against my lips, almost too quiet for me to hear. Yet, he doesn't pull away, his eyes still locked on mine as they dance with conflict.

"Please, Robert. I've been dying for this to happen. I still think about you and..."

"What kinds of things do you think?" he questions, his eyes flickering between my eyes and my lips.

"Well... in my mind, we've done it just about everywhere in this house by now," I confess.

"Jessica..." His voice is barely audible, laced with so much emotion that it makes my heart ache. "If I give this to you, it can't be anything more than a fantasy. A one time thing, just to get it out of our systems. So, tell me what that fantasy is. What do you want me to do to you?"

I close my eyes to escape his demanding eyes, pretending I'm alone in my room - thinking of him and touching myself the way I do nearly every night now. Only this time, I force myself to describe it to him out loud.

"Right now, if this was my fantasy... you'd kiss me... and pin my hands behind my back, running your hands all over my body." I swallow, realizing how dry my mouth is.

"Then what?" Robert prompts, his voice low and raspy.

"And then you'd push me down onto the carpet, ripping off my clothes as you go. You'd be rough with me, making me scream your name as you take me," I continue, my voice barely above a whisper. "You'd make me yours, Robert. Show me what it's like to be with a man like you."

Robert's eyes darken with desire, and he wastes no time in fulfilling my fantasy. He lifts me up effortlessly, my legs wrapping around his waist as he pushes me back against the stool. He lets my weight settle there and wraps his hands around my wrists, pinning them to the counter behind my back.

"Like this?" he growls against my ear, his hot breath sending goosebumps up and down my neck.

I nod, unable to speak. He grinds between my legs, allowing me to feel the full length of his hardness - maybe as a warning. My one last chance to say this is too much for me. But it has the opposite effect. It only makes me want him more. I've always been determined to prove to him I'm up for the challenge.

"You feel that?" he asks. "Is that what you want?"

I force myself to open my eyes and stare back at him with certainty.

"Yes," I answer in a breathless whisper. "That's what I want."

He lifts my dress up around my waist so there is nothing but the thin lace fabric of my panties left between my most sensitive places and the hardness bulging against his expensive suit pants. He presses it harder against my folds, making me gasp and squirm.

"And no one's ever touched you there before?"

I gulp and shake my head no. "I want you to."

His smirk is almost cocky as he shoves my panties aside and slides a finger along my dripping wet slit.

"Good," he replies with a smirk, as he slides the finger between my folds and sinks it deep inside me.

I groan, bucking my hips against him. Each thrust of his finger makes me wetter - wilder - until I can't take it anymore. "Please, Robert. I need it... I need you..."

"Not yet," he insists, keeping a steady rhythm against me. "You're not going to come until I give you permission to."

He growls and pushes himself even closer, layering kisses on my neck and collarbone. He presses his hand against my clit, and I moan at the sensation.

"You've been a good girl for so long, Jessica. Not letting anyone have you in this way. Now you're going to keep being a good girl for me, aren't you?"

"Yes," I breathe.

He repeats the motion, this time with his fingers. A wave of pleasure crashes over me, and I close my eyes, focusing on the sensation of his hand working against my clit.

"Oh, God," I moan, feeling the tension building in my hips.

He slips a finger under my panties, running it over my most sensitive spot. With expert skill, he coaxes out a moan loud enough to fill the whole room.

"I'm going to make you come for me, Jessica. I'm going to make you scream my name," he purrs. "Just like you asked me to. I'm going to give you what you want."

I can feel the rush of an orgasm building inside me, so close that I can almost taste it. My hips begin to buck wildly, matching the rhythm of his hand as he slides a finger deep inside me again. My whole body shudders as he shuts off my brain and lets my body take over.

"Oh, fuck," I moan, not even realizing what I'm saying. "Oh, Robert, please."

With that, he slips one more finger inside me, joining his other finger in a rhythmic thrusting motion. I arch my back and scream as I come, my knees buckling as pleasure explodes from my core. Wave after wave of ecstasy pulsates through me, leaving me breathless and weak. He holds me up, still moving his fingers until I'm completely spent, my body relaxing into his.

"Thank you," I breathe.

He looks down at me, his lips curving into the tiniest of grins. "Is that everything you wanted?"

"No," I pant. "More. I need you inside of me."

He wraps his hands around my wrists again and pins them behind me, pressing his hardness into the dripping wet pool he's left between my legs. He breathes hot and heavy against my ear.

"You like it when I take control. When I take command of your body, don't you?"

"Yes," I whimper.

"What more would you like from me?"

"I want you to... take me. Make me yours," I breathe. "I want you inside of me."

"I can do that," he replies, his voice steady, but his words bringing a rush of chills to my body. "I'm going to slide you down onto the floor, spread your legs wide, and lift your skirt up around your waist. And then I'm going to slide my cock into your pussy, and I'm not going to stop until I'm balls deep inside of you."

"Yes," I murmur, barely able to form a sentence.

"Now tell me how you want me to do that."

"Oh, Robert..." I whimper as he teases my bare flesh with his fingers. "Please. Take me hard. Fuck me."

He bites his lip, looking me up and down. "Is that what you used to think about when you were in your room thinking about me, touching yourself like this?"

He slips his fingers back inside of me, making me hiss from the overwhelming sensation.

"Yes," I whimper. "Fuck, please. Please, Robert."

He lifts me up and pins me down to the floor, studying every inch of me as he takes off his shirt and undoes the zipper of his pants. They drop to the floor with his boxers. He kicks them off to the side and strokes himself as I admire the length of him. I swallow hard in anticipation of feeling him inside of me, even if I'm unsure I can take all of him. I still want this more than anything.

He kneels down and pulls my dress down from my shoulders, taking one of my breasts into his hands and squeezing it until it's free from the cup of my bra. He sucks it into his mouth, making me whine and squirm with need.

He's quick to respond by undoing the clasp and tossing it aside. He takes both of my breasts into his big strong hands now that they're free, and flickers his tongue over each of my hardening nipples. He kisses and sucks them until I don't think I can take it anymore. All the while he presses his hot, hard, throbbing cock against me, making me shake in anticipation.

He takes me by the hips and lifts me up onto him so I can feel his velvety head pushing against my entrance.

He smirks and shakes his head as I groan. "It's going to hurt a little at first. But I'll take it slow."

"Yes, please. Please, Robert."

He pushes himself inside of me, inch by inch, until I feel his entire length pulsing deep inside of me. He holds himself like that for a moment, before pulling completely out. The sudden emptiness makes me whimper, but I quickly lose it when he pushes back inside me, sliding all the way inside until I feel his balls pressing against my swollen sex.

"Oh, yes..." I moan. "That's what I need."

He begins rocking his hips against me, easing himself in and out of my opening. I grip onto his muscular arms, digging my nails into them with abandon. With each thrust my need grows more and more urgent.

He reaches down between my legs again and teases my clit. He strokes himself faster and faster as I writhe my hips against his hand. I can feel him getting close to his own release, but he stops just short of letting himself go.

"Oh, Robert," I moan.

He thrusts his cock inside of me then, silencing my pleas. He fills me up in one motion, pushing all the way inside in one practiced thrust. It makes me cry out from the sheer overwhelming pleasure of it.

I unravel all over again, feeling the second orgasm crash over me even stronger than the first one did. As I sink into the intensity of it, I feel Robert letting himself go. It fills me up, and every thrust of his hips makes me tremble from the sensation. I can feel every bit of him throbbing inside of me, the sensation of his cock pulsing along with his climax. When he's finished, he pulls out gently.

He leans over me, still panting. "Was that everything you wanted?"

"Yes," I whisper.

He brushes a strand of hair out of my face, still panting as he studies my face. "You were amazing."

He kisses me, and I melt into the sensation of it - wishing we could just stay suspended here. I don't want to know what kinds of feelings tomorrow morning will bring. I only know what I promised him: that this would be enough.

JESSICA

The sun creeps through the curtains of my room, stirring me awake. I look at the clock and am unsure if I overslept by accident, or if I had permission to. In my post-sex champagne daze, I seem to remember Robert telling me to take the morning off - but I can't remember much of anything outside of what we did and how amazing it felt.

The scent of coffee wafts up from downstairs, and the sound of birds chirping outside makes it feel like any other morning. Except it isn't.

Everything's different now. I'm no longer a virgin, and no matter how hard I try not to think of it this way - Robert's not just my boss. He will forever be my first.

The weight of it feels heavy, and I understand now more than ever why this was a dangerous line to cross. But he gave into me in the best possible way.

I don't know if he fulfilled my fantasy exactly how I wanted because it's what I asked for, or if maybe it's the only thing he's capable of giving. But I know if it had been any other way - if it had been sweet and tender, I would be in over my head.

I slide out of bed and go to the bathroom to take a shower, still in disbelief over how well he conquered my body the night before. Everything seems surreal as I get dressed and make my way downstairs, bracing myself for whatever awkwardness I'll find when I get there.

Millie and Robert are in the dining room, eating breakfast. It looks like an ordinary morning, so I try to convince myself it still can be. At least on the surface.

"Jessica! Come eat with us," Millie beams.

"No, sweetie. Jessica has the morning off," Robert argues, taking careful glances at me - making sure not to linger too long. "You're welcome to join if you want to, of course. But don't feel obligated to."

"No, it's okay. I am hungry," I tell them as I go over to sit down.

I figure the sooner I force myself to be around him again, the sooner I'll figure out how to act normal despite everything.

As we eat, the tension between us remains palpable, but we manage to keep the conversation light, discussing Millie's latest school project and our plans for the day ahead. Despite my efforts to make things comfortable, there's an unspoken understanding that we need to address the elephant in the room.

Things feel heavy with expectation when Millie gets up from the table to clean her plate and wash up, leaving me and Robert alone.

"Is there anything you'd like to do today? Maybe we could take Millie to the park?" he suggests, his tone hopeful yet cautious.

Maybe he's desperate to prove things can go back to normal too, even if his tone is much softer than it ever would have been before. Robert isn't one to ask what I think we should do. He usually tells me what's going to happen. The only exception being last night - when he asked me to share all of my dirtiest thoughts, and then gladly fulfilled each and every one of my requests.

And now again - he asks what I want. I don't know if this is the new normal, or if he just feels a guilt he really doesn't need to feel.

The only thing I regret is how much I want more, even though I know that can't happen.

"Actually, that sounds lovely," I admit, smiling at the thought of spending a carefree day with Robert and Millie. "I think some fresh air would do us all some good."

"Great," he says, returning my smile. "Let's get Millie ready and head out then. It's going to be a beautiful day."

As we prepare for our outing, the simple acts of kindness Robert extends to me - helping me with my coat, holding doors open as we leave the house - only serve to deepen my appreciation for him. In these small gestures, I find reassurance that, despite our complicated feelings, he genuinely cares for me and is willing to treat me with the respect I deserve.

The sun shines brightly on our faces as we step outside, its warm embrace a balm for the complications circling my mind. And as the day unfolds, filled

with laughter and small moments with Millie, I'm able to convince myself that everything can still be okay.

"Millie, why don't you go play on the swings?" Robert suggests, watching as his daughter's face lights up with excitement and she dashes off towards the playground.

It's quiet for a moment. *Too* quiet. Robert is the first one to break the silence.

"Jessica," he begins, turning to me. "We need to talk about...last night."

MY EYES MEET HIS, filled with a mix of uncertainty and nerves. "I know," I whisper, biting my lower lip nervously.

"I can't pretend it didn't happen or that I didn't enjoy every second of it, because I did," he admits, making my heart race at the memory. "But...I also know that it's not fair to you. You deserve someone who can give you everything. I just don't want you to feel trapped here, settling for less, because you've committed to this job. I know last night may change things for you. I want you to stay, of course. For Millie's sake. But I also know if you do - what we did last night can't happen again. So, my question is... Can you handle that?"

His words sting, but deep down I know he's right. As much as I want to be with him again, the reality of our situation is impossible to ignore. "I understand," I say softly, my voice barely audible above the sound of children's laughter in the background.

"Please don't think that I don't care about you, Jessica," Robert says, his dark eyes filled with anguish. "If things were different..."

"But they're not," I interrupt, trying to hold back the tears threatening to spill over.

He nods. "It's why I didn't make a move on you that first day in the shop. I'm not the kind of man who can... I can't give you..." He stops, looking frustrated, and shakes his head. "It's not just because I'm your boss."

"I know that, Robert. It's okay."

"Right," he acknowledges, nodding slowly. "We'll figure out how to make this work – for Millie's sake. We're both adults, after all."

"Agreed," I reply, forcing a smile. "For Millie."

As we watch Millie playing happily on the swings, the weight of our decision settles heavily upon my shoulders. Despite the impossibility of our

sexual relationship continuing, I can't help but feel a pang of regret for what might have been.

ROBERT

I sip my coffee, staring out the window at the construction site below. It's been a month since that night with Jessica, and life has moved on. She and Millie have grown inseparable, and I can't help but feel a pang of jealousy at their bond.

In the meantime, I've closed the big deal with Christopher Black, ensuring that my company stays on top in the construction and contracting world. Now, all that's left is to finish the project and whisk Millie away for our summer vacation.

"Morning, Daddy!" Millie chirps as she enters the kitchen, her schoolbag slung over her shoulder.

"Morning, sweetheart," I reply, turning to face her. "Are you getting excited about our summer vacation?"

Her eyes light up at the mention of the trip. "Oh, yes! I can't wait, Daddy!" she exclaims. "Jessica will love it too, right?"

"Jessica?" I ask, hesitating for a moment. I hadn't planned on inviting her, but the thought of leaving her behind feels strange now. "Well, we'll see, okay?"

"Okay," Millie agrees sleepily. "She told me she's never seen the beach before. I think she'd really like it."

"Go get your homework together."

As I lean against the door and watch her take off down the hall, I can't help but consider Millie's words. If Jessica and I are pretending everything is fine between us, why wouldn't I invite her on the trip? It's not uncommon for nannies to join families on vacation, especially considering how close she

and Millie have become. But the truth is, I'm scared. Scared of losing control again, of crossing that line between us.

I shake my head, trying to force the thoughts away. No, I need to maintain this professional distance. It's for the best, isn't it?

"Robert?" Jessica's voice startles me from my thoughts. I turn to find her standing in the hallway, an uncertain look on her face. "Is everything okay?"

"Uh, yeah," I stammer, struggling to regain my composure. "Everything's fine. I was just...thinking."

As she turns to leave, I watch her walk away, my heart heavy with indecision. The thought of spending the summer without her gnaws at me, but inviting her along risks exposing the unresolved feelings between us. And as much as I want to believe we can keep up appearances, deep down, I know I can't resist her forever.

I walk into the kitchen and see her standing there, her slender hands submerged in soapy water as she scrubs dishes. Her red hair is pulled back into a loose ponytail, revealing the graceful curve of her neck.

"Hey, Jessica," I say, trying to sound casual. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Of course," she replies, turning off the faucet and wiping her hands on a towel.

I take a deep breath, ready to ask her about the trip, but before I can get the words out, she speaks first. "Actually, I have something to ask you too."

"Sure, go ahead," I say, gesturing for her to continue.

"Would it be okay if I took tomorrow night off?" she says hesitantly, her cheeks turning a soft shade of pink.

"Yeah, of course," I force out, doing my best to keep my voice even. "You deserve a night off."

"Thank you," she says, relief evident in her expression. "I didn't want to impose or anything."

"No, it's fine," I insist, though every part of me wants to demand more details about this date of hers. Instead, I focus on the original reason I came downstairs. "What do you have planned?"

"Oh, just... well, I have a date," she states plainly.

She goes back to washing dishes, I can't help but feel a mixture of relief and dread. The thought of her going on a date tomorrow night gnaws at me, making it difficult to focus on anything else. I just hope I can keep my jealousy in check and maintain the professional distance we've worked so hard to establish.

"Going on a date?" The words stick in my throat, and I struggle to keep my tone casual. "I didn't realize you were seeing anyone."

Jessica shrugs, her cheeks flushing pink. "It's just one date, Robert. And no, I haven't been seeing anyone. A friend is setting me up."

I clench my fists behind my back, trying to quell the jealousy that's clawing its way up my chest. Why should it bother me so much? Jessica is free to date whomever she likes; it's not like we're together.

"Jessica, I don't mind you taking a night off, but... dating? Don't you think it's a bit unprofessional?" I snap before I can stop myself.

"Unprofessional?" She raises an eyebrow at me, clearly taken aback by my outburst. "Robert, I'm asking for one night off. It's not like I'm abandoning my job or neglecting Millie. I'm allowed to have a personal life outside of my work here."

"Still, you live and work here full time. Have you even thought about how a relationship would work? How it might affect your responsibilities? I know I certainly don't want a strange man hanging around my daughter under any circumstances." My jealousy is making me lash out, trying to find any reason to paint her as being in the wrong.

"Excuse me?" Jessica narrows her eyes, obviously insulted. "It's not a relationship, Robert. It's a date. And as my boss, this conversation seems highly inappropriate." She stops and checks to make sure Millie and the housekeeper are no where around. "As for whoever you have been in my life aside from my boss, if you must know... I figured since I'm no longer... Well, now that I've..." She blushes and shakes her head. "Things are different now than they were before. It's time for me to start doing normal things, like dating. You know as well as I do that I work hard and take excellent care of Millie. Having one night off for a date doesn't change that. Besides, you've gone on dates while I've been here, so what's the issue?"

"Those were business dinners," I retort, but even I can hear how weak my argument sounds.

"Regardless, I have a right to a personal life outside of this house, Robert." She crosses her arms, defiance written all over her face. "And if you're going to try and make me feel guilty for wanting a date, then maybe we need to have a serious conversation about boundaries."

"Fine." I grind out the word, my jaw clenched tight. "Go on your date. But don't let it interfere with your responsibilities here."

"Of course not," she replies, her tone icy. As I turn to leave the kitchen, I

can feel her gaze like a pair of daggers in my back.

Goddamn it, why does this bother me so much? I shouldn't care who Jessica goes on dates with; it's none of my business. But the thought of another man touching her, kissing her... it makes me want to punch a hole in the wall.

I need to get a grip on my jealousy before it ruins everything.

"Jessica, I just don't understand why you'd want to date someone else when--" I cut myself off, realizing that I'm about to reveal how much I want her. "Dating. Is that what you really want?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. I can feel my heart being ripped apart at the thought of her being with someone else.

"Yes," she replies without hesitation. "I'm a grown up, Robert. Perfectly capable of knowing what I want. You should know that better than anyone."

"Fine," I growl, anger coursing through my veins.

In a desperate attempt to regain control of the situation, I nearly resort to an old tactic. In the past, any time a nanny gave me the faintest bit of resistance - I'd fire them on the spot. But those nannies were allowed to have a personal life outside of this job. I can't very well get by with that this time... not without revealing exactly why it bothers me so much in this instance.

"Just remember that this is a job, and you need to keep your personal life from affecting your work here," I fire back, trying to save face.

"Of course," she replies coolly, and I can tell she's still angry.

My jealousy bubbles under the surface, threatening to boil over, but I swallow it down, knowing that I have no right to dictate her personal life.

As I watch her go back to the dishes, all I can think about is Jessica with another man. The thought consumes me, making it impossible to focus on anything else. I know that I need to let her live her life, but the idea of her being touched by someone else feels like a punch to the gut.

I have to find a way to cope with this jealousy before it destroys every sense of normalcy we've worked so hard to rebuild over the past month. Deep down, I know Jessica is right – this has nothing to do with her job performance and everything to do with my own selfishness.

"You're right, this isn't about your job," I try to explain. "It's just...hard for me."

"Hard for you?" Jessica crosses her arms, her green eyes narrowed as she studies me. "We both agreed that night was a mistake, Robert. I'm trying to

move on and live my life like any normal person would. You should too."

"Alright, alright," I concede, raising my hands in surrender. "But let's discuss something else - the summer vacation. I could use your help there with Millie. And I'm just thinking if you get involved with someone... Well, how will that affect your ability to be away with us on trips like that?"

Her eyes widen in surprise, clearly not expecting the invitation. She hesitates for a moment before responding. "You want me to go on the summer vacation with you? Are you sure that's a good idea? After everything?"

"It's what the job requires," I lie, knowing full well I could handle Millie on my own and had every intention to when I planned the trip. "So, yes. I think it's a good idea."

"Okay then," Jessica says, her tone softening. "I'd love to join you and Millie at the beach. I assure you nothing in my personal life will affect my availability for the summer."

"Great. I'll hold you to that." I force a smile, but inside, my jealousy continues to gnaw at me. I know that I need to find a way to deal with these emotions, but right now, all I can focus on is the thought of Jessica out on a date with another man.

As I leave the room, I can't help but feel both relieved and unsettled. I'm glad that Jessica will be joining us for the summer vacation, but the thought of her dating still lingers in my mind like a dark cloud that continues to haunt me for the next twenty-four hours.

I'm no better shape by the next evening when it's time for me to relieve Jessica so she can go on her damn date.

I stand by the window, hidden behind the curtains, watching Jessica as she steps out of the house. She's wearing a tight red dress that hugs her curves, highlighting her toned legs and leaving little to the imagination. With every step she takes, my heart clenches tighter in my chest, consumed with jealousy at the thought of another man seeing her like this, touching her.

"Dammit," I mutter, unable to tear my eyes away from her, even as she gets into the waiting car and disappears from view. The empty feeling in my chest threatens to swallow me whole, and for a brief moment, I feel the cold grip of panic closing in on me.

I shake it off quickly, though, forcing myself to move away from the window and focus on anything else. I pace the length of the living room, my mind racing with thoughts of what might be happening on her date. Is he

making her laugh? Holding her hand? Kissing her?

The jealousy burns like acid in my veins, and I can't help but wonder how I let things get so out of control. Why didn't I just fire her so I wouldn't have to be dealing with this kind of distraction? But deep down, I already know the answer: I'm terrified of letting her go, of admitting that maybe – just maybe – she means more to me than I ever meant for her to.

As the night drags on, sleep eludes me entirely. My restless pacing continues, punctuated only by glances at the clock, counting down the minutes until she comes home. When the front door finally opens, well past midnight, my heart leaps into my throat, and I force myself to remain in the living room, feigning nonchalance as if I hadn't been waiting up for her.

"Robert?" Jessica's voice echoes down the hallway, surprise evident in her tone. "What are you still doing up?"

My mouth goes dry, and I struggle to find the words to respond. The truth is too raw, too real for me to admit, so instead, I force a smile onto my face and try to play it cool.

"Couldn't sleep," I say with a shrug, praying that she doesn't see through my façade. "How was your night?"

JESSICA

As I open the front door and step into the entryway, there's Robert, sitting in the living room, looking like he's been waiting for me all night. His normally composed face is a mixture of concern and irritation.

"Robert? What are you still doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep," he shrugs. "How was your night?"

"Uh, it was...fine, I guess." I fiddle with my purse strap, avoiding his piercing dark eyes.

"Fine?" Robert echoes, raising an eyebrow. "Just fine?"

I sigh, knowing that he's fishing for more information. Part of me wants to tell him everything, but I've been trying so hard to keep our personal and professional lives separate. My dating life shouldn't be any of his concern. But as I look into his eyes, searching for something – anything – I know that I can't help but share my feelings with him.

"Okay, not just fine," I admit. "Honestly, it was pretty awful."

"Awful?" He leans forward, suddenly interested. "How so?"

"Look, Robert" – I pause, searching for the right words – "It's really none of your business. And you shouldn't have stayed up worrying about me."

"Who says I was worried?" he retorts, trying to sound nonchalant. But I can see the tension in his jaw and the way his fists clench at his sides.

"Your face says it all," I point out gently. "I know you don't have any right to feel this way, but it seems like you can't help it."

He looks away, unable to deny it. We stand there in silence for a moment, the weight of our unspoken feelings pressing down on us.

"Robert," I begin hesitantly, "I don't want things to be weird between us. You're Millie's dad, and I'm her nanny – that's it."

"Right," he mutters, finally meeting my gaze. "I just...I couldn't sleep, knowing you were on that date. I don't know why, but it bothered me."

His admission sends a flurry of butterflies through my stomach, but I squash them down. We can't go there. We just can't. For the sake of Millie and our working relationship, we have to keep things strictly professional.

But... I haven't had the best night. And truthfully it feels good to know someone was waiting up for me, wondering if I was okay or not. I could use the company, so I decide to take a risk.

"Hey," I say, trying to lighten the mood, "I know it's late, but do you want to have a drink with me?" My heart races as I wait for his response.

"Sure," he agrees after a moment of hesitation. "Let's go to the kitchen."

We walk side by side, the tension between us lessening slightly. Robert moves around the kitchen with practiced ease, pulling out glasses and ingredients to make cocktails. I watch him, the muscles in his arms flexing subtly as he pours and stirs, creating our nightcaps - doing my best to not focus on the vivid memories of what we did right here in this kitchen.

"Here you go," he says, handing me a glass filled with a beautifully mixed drink. I take a small sip, allowing the delicious flavors to dance on my tongue.

"Thanks," I murmur appreciatively, feeling the warmth spread through my chest as the alcohol takes effect.

"Millie," I begin, as if just remembering why we're here. "How did she do tonight while I was gone?"

Robert leans against the counter and takes a sip of his own drink before responding. "She was fine, don't worry. She missed you, though."

I feel a pang of guilt at his words. I hate the thought of her missing me when I'm not there.

"None of our past nannies have ever cared about Millie the way you do," Robert admits, his voice softening. "They treated it like a job and nothing else, but you genuinely care about her. And I guess I never realized how important that was, how much we needed that, until you came along."

"Of course I do," I reply, surprised by the intensity of my own emotions. "Millie is an amazing kid, and I love being a part of her life."

Robert gazes at me intently, his eyes searching mine as if trying to find some hidden truth. We stand there in silence, the weight of our unspoken

feelings pressing down on us once more.

"Thank you, Jessica," he finally says, his voice low and sincere. "You've been one of the best things to ever happen to us." He quickly clears his throat. "As our nanny, I mean."

I can't help but blush at his words, feeling both flattered and incredibly aware of how close we're standing to each other. The air between us seems charged with an electric current, the sparks threatening to ignite at any moment.

We take another drink, the warmth of the alcohol soothing away some of the tension between us. For now, we can pretend that everything is normal, even though our hearts know the truth.

He clears his throat and looks away for a moment, taking a deep breath before continuing. "I guess that's what makes it even harder sometimes, to keep the lines straight between personal and professional."

"Robert, I--" I begin, but he cuts me off with a wave of his hand.

"No, let me finish," he says, finally meeting my eyes again. "I know it's my fault for not being able to separate my feelings, but you make it difficult because you're so... incredible."

I feel my cheeks flush at his words, and I avert my gaze to the floor, biting my lip in an attempt to control my racing heart. "You don't have to say that," I whisper, knowing full well that he's only trying to ease the tension between us.

"No, I do," he insists, stepping closer to me. "And I need you to know that I've been insanely jealous over the whole date. I'm sorry for feeling this way, but I just couldn't help it."

I look up at him, our eyes locking as I drink in the raw vulnerability etched across his face. It's both endearing and terrifying, making my chest ache with a mixture of sympathy and longing.

"Robert," I say softly, reaching out to touch his arm. "You didn't have anything to worry about. The date was awful."

"Really?" he perks up, his eyes wide with curiosity. "What happened?"

"Ugh, it was just one thing after another," I say, rolling my eyes as I think back to the disastrous evening. "First of all, the restaurant he chose was so pretentious. They served these tiny portions that left me starving by the end of the night."

"Ah, the old 'fancy but unsatisfying dining' experience," he chuckles, shaking his head in amusement.

"Exactly! And on top of that, he kept making these awful jokes that weren't even remotely funny. At one point, I caught him staring at the waitress's ass."

"Sounds like quite the catch," Robert smirks, clearly enjoying my tale of woe.

"Believe me, it wasn't just him either. The entire night felt like a disaster," I confess, feeling more relaxed as we share this moment of levity. "We even had some obnoxious guy at the next table who was being so loud the whole time it gave me a headache."

"Wow," he laughs, running a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry you had such a terrible time, but if I'm being honest, I can't help but feel a little relieved."

"Me too," I admit, smiling at the way he seems genuinely concerned for my well-being.

As our laughter dies down, Robert's expression grows serious once more. "Well, that settles it," he says decisively. "I'll just have to take you on a date to show you how it's done."

"Wait, what?" I stammer, my heart racing as I try to process his words. Is he joking? No, there's a glimmer of sincerity in his eyes that tells me he's serious about this.

"Robert, are you sure that's a good idea?" I ask, biting my lip. "I mean, after everything we've agreed on... nothing else can ever happen between us."

"Jessica," he replies, leaning back against the kitchen counter and crossing his arms. "This isn't about romance or crossing any lines. You said you wanted to have a normal dating life, right?"

I nod hesitantly.

"Exactly. So consider this a favor from a friend," he continues, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. "I just want to set the bar high for you so you know what standard to hold other men to. You deserve the best, even if it can't be with me."

The room feels warmer now, the air thick with tension and unspoken emotions. My mind races through possible outcomes, weighing the risks against the excitement that surges through my veins at the thought of going on a date with Robert.

"Okay," I finally say, trying to keep my voice steady. "But it's just a friendly outing, right? Nothing more."

"Nothing more," he agrees, holding up his hands defensively. "Scout's

honor."

"Alright, then." I take a deep breath, attempting to push aside my lingering doubts and fears. "Let's do it."

"Great," he says, his smile broadening. "You won't regret it, Jessica."

As he turns to rinse out our glasses, I can't help but wonder if I've made the right decision. But there's no turning back now.

"Wait," I suddenly say, the reality of the situation hitting me. "Who will watch Millie?"

"Ah, good point," he says thoughtfully, drying his hands on a nearby towel. "I'll ask my sister to come over and look after her."

"Your sister?" I ask.

"Yup, she adores Millie and doesn't get to see her as often as she'd like. Plus, she's great with kids," Robert reassures me.

"Okay, as long as you're sure about this." I can't shake the feeling that we're playing with fire here, but maybe it will be good for both of us to have a little fun, even if it's just as friends.

"Trust me, Jessica" he says, the corners of his mouth lifting into a mischievous grin. "It's going to be amazing."

"Alright," I acquiesce with a sigh, trying to ignore the butterflies that have taken up residence in my stomach. "Tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow," he confirms, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

As I head up to bed, my thoughts are a whirlwind of anticipation and unease. The idea of going on a date with Robert is both thrilling and terrifying; I know it could potentially lead to disaster, but there's something so irresistible about him that I can't help but want to take the plunge.

In my room, I sit on the edge of my bed, my hands shaking slightly as I take off my shoes. My mind is already racing with thoughts of what I should wear, how I should do my hair, and whether or not I can muster up the courage to make it through an entire evening like that with him.

I finally crawl into bed, pulling the covers up to my chin as I curl into a ball, desperately trying to convince myself that everything will be fine. As sleep slowly begins to claim me, I can't shake the nagging feeling that we're about to cross another line we shouldn't be crossing.

JESSICA

I'm a bundle of nerves and questions as I touch up my lipstick and give myself a pep talk in the mirror, fully aware that this is probably the worst possible idea.

Having sex with Robert was a dangerous enough line to cross. But going on a date with him? No matter the pretense - it's still a game I shouldn't be playing. It's like I'm begging to be hurt and to snip the final thread this delicate situation is hanging by.

But when a man like Robert Pierce begs someone like me to go on a date with him, how am I supposed to say no? Even though deep down I know that would have been the smart thing to do, I couldn't bring myself to put up enough of a fight to stop this train wreck from happening.

So now here I am decked out in my favorite little black dress, reminding myself over and over again that this isn't a real date and that I, under no circumstances, am allowed to let myself believe otherwise tonight.

It's not a date. It's... an example date. As if that's any less confusing. I feel a tinge of anger at Robert for insisting on doing this and making everything more complicated than it needs to be. But as arrogant and infuriating as he can be, he knows how to lay on the charm. And when he does that - I'm apparently powerless to resist.

I suck in a deep breath, grab my purse, and make my way out into the foyer just as Robert is showing his sister in.

"Aunt Laura!" Millie cries, barreling forward to give the woman a hug.

"Hey, sweetie! How's my favorite niece doing!?"

"Good," Millie replies with a sweet smile and giggle.

Laura straightens and sees me standing there. She raises an eyebrow at me, her eyes scanning my outfit – a simple black dress that hugs my curves just right.

"So, what's the plan for tonight?" she asks, clearly curious about why her brother and his nanny are going out together.

"Nothing special. Just grabbing dinner," I say, trying to sound casual, but my heart races at the thought of spending time alone with Robert outside of our usual work setting.

"Uh-huh," Laura says, her tone skeptical. "You two have fun," she adds, flashing a look of suspicion over Robert.

"Thanks," I mumble, feeling my cheeks flush.

As we get ready to leave, I can't help but notice the way Robert looks at me. His dark eyes roam over my body appreciatively, and I suddenly feel more exposed than I'd like to admit. There's a strange undercurrent between us, an attraction I've been trying so hard to ignore. But it's getting harder to deny, especially when he's so close to me.

"Are you ready?" he asks, his voice low and smooth.

"Y-yes," I stammer, cursing myself inwardly for letting him affect me this way.

"Good," he says, flashing me a grin that makes my stomach flutter. "I hope you don't mind, but I've made a reservation at one of the city's finest restaurants. It's not every day I get to enjoy dinner with such an enchanting woman."

"Are you going to lay it on this thick all night?" I laugh.

He stops and looks into my eyes. "I'm going to treat you the way I would expect any other man taking you out to treat you. But that doesn't mean I have to lie about anything. You *are* enchanting, and that's just my point. Any man who's lucky enough to take you out should know that and have no problem letting you know as much."

"Thank you," I murmur, blushing furiously at his compliment. The fact that he's treating me this way is both thrilling and terrifying.

As we make our way to the restaurant, I try to focus on anything but the chemistry between us – the cool evening air, the sound of our footsteps on the pavement, the way the streetlights cast shadows on the ground. But it's impossible to ignore the heat simmering beneath the surface, threatening to consume us both if we let it.

And for one crazy moment, I wonder if maybe, just maybe, letting go

again wouldn't be such a terrible thing.

"Your sister seems...concerned about us spending time together," I say, attempting to sound casual.

"Ah, well," he chuckles, "she's always been a bit overprotective, especially when it comes to Millie. She doesn't want history to repeat itself."

As we walk down the street, I find myself leaning on him slightly, the warmth of his body comforting in the chilly evening air. The city lights cast a soft glow on his face, highlighting his strong jawline and the intensity of his eyes. I can't help but think about how handsome he is – and how utterly out of my league I am.

I can hardly believe my eyes as we pull up to the luxurious oceanfront restaurant. The whole building practically sparkles under the moonlight, its floor-to-ceiling windows offering a breathtaking view of the waves crashing against the shore. Robert smiles knowingly at my reaction, and I struggle to maintain my composure.

"Robert, this place is incredible," I gush, feeling somewhat out of my depth in such opulent surroundings. "You really didn't have to go to all this trouble just for me."

"Jessica," he says, his voice softening as he takes my hand and helps me out of the car. "I told you I wanted to show you what you deserve, remember?"

As we enter the restaurant, I can't help but feel my attraction toward him intensifying. Every small touch and lingering glance sends shivers down my spine, and I find myself struggling to focus on anything other than the way his strong hand feels in mine.

"Your table is right this way, Mr. Pierce," the hostess says, leading us to a secluded corner by the window. The flickering candlelight and gentle sound of the waves make it feel like we're in our own romantic world, miles away from the bustling city outside.

"Wow," I breathe, taking in the stunning view as we sit down. "I've never been anywhere like this before."

"Then I'm glad I could be the one to bring you here," Robert replies, his gaze never leaving mine.

Throughout dinner, our conversation flows effortlessly, punctuated by moments of intense eye contact that leave my heart racing. It's hard not to notice the way Robert's fingers brush against mine as he passes me the breadbasket or how his leg presses against mine under the table – small,

innocuous touches that seem to set my skin alight with desire.

"So, what exactly do you do with yourself when you're not working?" Robert asks with a curious spark in his eyes as he pours us both another glass of wine.

"Nothing exciting," I reply with a bashful laugh. "Sometimes I read or watch TV. I like documentaries. But mostly, I draw."

He looks intrigued. "Really? I didn't know we had an artist living under our roof. What kinds of things do you draw?"

"I'm hardly an artist," I laugh. "Aspiring designer would be more accurate. Clothes. I draw fashion designs... or I try to anyways."

He tilts his head to the side. "Huh. Wow."

"What? You seem so surprised."

"I am," he admits. "I didn't peg you as the fashion type."

"I would have thought it'd be more obvious. What with all the glamorous clothes you always see me wearing," I joke sarcastically.

"I always think you look great," he argues, laying the charm on thick again. "You definitely have a very elegant style. I picked up on that. It's just that everyone I've ever known in the fashion industry is always so... full of themselves. You're so humble and modest and down to earth."

"You can take the girl out of the small town, but you can't take the small town out of the girl I guess," I shrug.

"I like that about you," he states frankly. "I like having that kind of influence around Millie. Sometimes I worry the lifestyle I've worked so hard to provide for us... I worry it might turn her into a certain kind of person."

"You mean a snob?" I laugh.

"Yeah. I guess you could put it that way."

I reach my hand across the table and squeeze his hand. It's entirely inappropriate, but this whole outing is inappropriate if you want to get technical about it. So I give myself a pass.

"You have nothing to worry about, Robert. Millie doesn't have a snobbish bone in her body. She's one of the sweetest souls I've ever had the pleasure of knowing."

He stares back at me, looking deep into my eyes, then finally nods. "Thank you. I think so too."

As we finish dessert and prepare to leave, I can't help but feel torn between my growing attraction to Robert and my fear of getting hurt. He might be the most incredible man I've ever met – but is it worth risking my

heart to find out what could be?

After dinner, he takes me for a walk along the pier. We walk in companionable silence for a while, the sound of waves lapping against the shore filling the air around us.

"Tell me more about where you grew up," Robert says, as we walk along the pier under the stars.

"Well, there were only a few hundred people in my town. We had one main street with a few shops, a church, and a school. Everyone was incredibly close-knit, which could be both comforting and suffocating at times." I pause, thinking back to my childhood. "My parents were strict, but loving. They instilled in me the importance of hard work and kindness."

"Sounds like a nice place to be... a world away from the city," he muses, his dark eyes reflecting the moonlight as we stroll along the waterfront. "Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes," I admit. "But I love the opportunities that living in the city has given me. Like meeting you and Millie, for example."

"I'm glad our paths crossed too," Robert replies softly, his fingers brushing against mine. The intensity of his gaze sends shivers down my spine, and I can feel the magnetic pull between us growing stronger with each passing moment.

It really is the perfect night. But I have an uneasy feeling growing in my stomach.

I wanted Robert to be my first because I had a feeling that he was the only one who could really give me what I wanted. And that feeling proved to be right. Then he felt the need to take me on this date, once again - if he was the only one who could show me how it's supposed to be done. I have to admit he was right again. This night has been more incredible than any date I've ever been on.

But there's a question nagging at me deep inside. How many things will Robert be so perfect for until we're forced to admit that... maybe it's because *he's* perfect for me?

"What do you say we carry on to our next stop?" he asks.

My eyes grow wide. "There's more?"

"Dinner is for getting to know someone. After dinner is for pulling out all the stops," he winks.

My heart races in anticipation of what else he could have in store for me. We get into his car and head back into the city. Robert is on his phone part of

the way, claiming he has a few quick work matters to attend to. I have to admit I think it's a little rude, but this is what dating a man as busy, important, and rich as Robert would be like. His lifestyle and everything in it doesn't come from working normal business hours.

The car pulls up to a strip of stores that all appear to be closed, but Robert opens the door for me anyway and pulls me down the sidewalk next to him.

"What are we doing here?"

"I called in a few favors," he explains. "Scheduled some after-hours shopping for you. Pick any store you want and we'll have a personal stylist waiting there for you."

"You can't be serious."

"I'm always serious," he quips. "I'm curious to know how Jessica Easton dresses if money is no object. Especially since you want to work in fashion."

"What? Really!?" I gape.

He nods and waves across the storefronts again, waiting for me to choose one. I can't help but feel like this is some kind of test. Is he trying to see if I could ever really fit into his world?

It gives me an uneasy feeling, but also I am not about to ruin a chance like this one. A billionaire man who's footing the bill doesn't have to beg me to start shopping.

He follows me into the store of my choice, and there is a team of people waiting there to assist us - just as he promised. It dawns on me that this must have been what he was arranging on the phone during the drive over. It's crazy how limitless the world is to him. It seems like he can just snap his fingers and get anything he wants.

And yet... he's denying himself the one thing everyone wants the most. He won't allow himself to have real romantic love... with me, or with anyone.

As I browse the racks of designer clothing, I can't help but wonder what Robert's endgame is. Is he just trying to impress me, or is there something more going on here? The personal stylist is extremely helpful, pulling out all kinds of outfits that are so far out of my league that I can hardly believe it. But I can't shake the feeling that this is all just for show.

"You look stunning in that," Robert says, interrupting my thoughts as I step out of the dressing room in a flowy, champagne-colored evening gown.

"Thanks," I blush. "But I don't think I can afford it."

"It's on me," he says simply, as if it's no big deal. "I want you to have it."

I'm speechless. No one has ever done something like this for me before.

"Thank you," I manage to say, my heart swelling with gratitude.

Robert insists on me picking out several more outfits, with accessories to match, before we head home. I start to get the feeling that this date was a cruel joke. Robert's not showing me what to expect of other men. He's reminding me that he's the only one who can ever give me all of this. It's like a Cinderella story. Only when the clock strikes twelve and I have to return back to the dingy attic, he's not going to come running after me or send anyone to find me.

No one else can offer everything he can. But he is completely unavailable. If I let myself forget that, I know I'm going to regret it.

After his driver loads the trunk up with my bags, all of which contain the nicest things I've ever owned, we start the journey back home. When we arrive, we get out of the car and walk slowly, as if we're both dragging this out as much as possible.

As we approach his building, Robert stops and turns to face me, his hand coming up to gently cup my cheek.

"Thank you for tonight, Jessica. It's been... incredible." He leans in, his lips inches from mine, the anticipation thickening the air between us.

"What are you doing?" I force myself to ask, taking a step back.

"Any man who takes you out and doesn't try to kiss you at the end of the night is an idiot."

"Right, okay." I want to keep playing along... but something inside me screams to protect myself from getting hurt, to not give in to this undeniable attraction again. I take another step back, breaking the spell that surrounds us. "Robert, I... I can't do this tonight. Thank you for everything, but a kiss is too much. If we do that, I won't be able to..."

His eyes search mine, a hint of disappointment and confusion flickering across his features. "I understand," he says, though I can tell that the sexual tension between us has only grown worse.

"Goodnight, Robert," I whisper, turning to walk inside, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Goodnight, Jessica," he echoes softly, watching me until I disappear behind the door.

As I ride the elevator up alone, I can't help but replay the events of the evening in my mind. *What am I doing?*

I enter my bedroom, my head swimming with thoughts of the night. The

air feels heavier as I close the door behind me, shutting out the world and the man who has shaken my very core. I take a deep breath, trying to regain some semblance of control over my emotions.

I change into my pajamas, the soft fabric doing little to comfort my conflicted heart. My anger at Robert bubbles beneath the surface – he said he wanted to show me what I deserved, but all he's done is make me want something I can never have.

As I crawl into bed, my body still tingles from the near-kiss, the ghost of his touch lingering on my skin. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to quell the ache within me. He's Millie's father, my boss – it's impossible for us to be together. But no other man could ever compare to him.

"Ugh, why does it have to be him?" I groan, burying my face into my pillow. It's not fair. It's not fair that he's the one who makes my heart race, who makes me feel alive in ways I've never experienced before. Yet he's also the one person who is completely off-limits.

I toss and turn, unable to find a comfortable position, my thoughts consumed by the man whose presence seems to be everywhere. I try to remind myself of his arrogance, of his selfishness – anything to dampen the desire burning within me. But it's futile; my heart refuses to listen.

I'm snapped out of my thoughts by a knock at the door. I sit up to find Robert slowly opening it, showing himself inside.

"You shouldn't be in here," I tell him, standing firm - no matter how hard it is.

"And neither of us should be feeling this way. But we do. Don't we?"

I bury my face in my hands, wishing it was easier to deny it.

He crosses the room and wraps his hands around my wrists, pulling them down and forcing me to look him in the eyes.

"Tell me you don't want me," he commands.

"You know I can't do that," I whisper. "Robert. If we're going to keep doing this, we have to have some hard conversations about what it means for my place here, in Millie's life. But you're not willing to do that. Are you?"

He shakes his head. "I can't give you any of that."

"Then maybe you shouldn't be here in my room," I snap.

But he doesn't move. "Do you want me to leave?"

I part my lips to tell him yes, that of course I want him to leave. But it's a lie. Everything in me is dying for him to stay.

"What I want and what I need are two different things," I sigh. "Which

one are you interested in hearing?"

"What you want," he says in a deep gravelly tone.

I pull the covers of my body, letting him take in the sight of me wearing nothing but my short silk gown. "I want you to climb into this bed with me... and show me more of what you think I deserve."

Robert doesn't need to be asked twice. He quickly gets rid of his clothes, revealing a toned body that makes my heart skip a beat. He climbs into bed with me and wraps his arms around me, pulling me close. My body melts into his, the heat between us intensifying.

Our lips meet in a feverish kiss, tongues clashing as we explore each other's mouths. Robert's hands roam over my body, igniting a fire within me that threatens to consume everything in its path.

I moan softly as he moves his lips to my neck, trailing kisses down to my collarbone. His touch is electric, sending shivers down my spine as I arch my back in pleasure.

"God, you're so beautiful," he whispers, his voice husky with desire.

I can feel the hardness of his body pressing against me, making me ache with want. I want him even more than I did the first time - now that I know what it can be like.

Our movements are rushed and hungry, our bodies colliding in a passionate frenzy. I lose myself in him, my mind consumed by nothing but the feel of his touch, the taste of his lips, the heat of his body against mine.

I open my eyes and study him for a moment, thinking back to those pictures I saw online of him with other women. I wonder what it was like with them, what they could do for him that I can't.

Is that why Robert is really so hesitant to consider this thing between us could be something more? Because I'm so inexperienced?

I sit up and take his hands into mine, pinning them up above his head and climbing on top of him to straddle his hips. It's scary to be the one in control, but it's a risk I'm willing to take if it changes the way he sees me.

"What are you doing?" he asks, the gleam in his eye making it no mistake that he enjoys it.

"You're not the only one who can fulfill fantasies," I tease. "Tell me one of yours."

He swallows hard, then shakes his head. "I can't."

"Yes, you can. And you will. I did it for you our first time together. You're the one who came in here even though I tried to behave and keep a

safe distance. Do this for me. Tell me what you want."

His brows furrow as he runs his hands up and down my body. He sits up and kisses me long, hard, and deep.

"You can't kiss your way out of this," I whisper against his lips.

He lets out a heavy sigh. "Make love to me. Like you really mean it. Like I'm the only man in the world."

I search his eyes, wondering if he's serious.

"Can you pretend that for me? Just for tonight?" he asks.

I nod slowly, feeling the tug in my heart that reminds me - there's nothing pretend about it. I could do that for Robert in real life, if that's what he wanted me to do.

I don't know how to feel about his fantasy, other than sadness that he thinks being loved in that way is so unobtainable for him.

But I know I can give it to him.

I push him back flat against the mattress and run my hands up and down his chest, digging my nails into his skin to show him how strong my need is.

He groans in response, his hands moving to grip my hips tightly as I lower myself down onto him. I take my time, savoring the feel of him inside me, the way he fills me up completely.

"I love you," I whisper against his ear, pretending it's all a part of the game.

Robert's eyes widen in surprise, his hands gripping me tighter as he pulls me down for a deep kiss. As I move down his body, I take my time, kissing every inch of his skin, feeling the tension in his muscles as I do. When I reach his waist, I take him in my mouth, feeling the hardness of him against my tongue.

"Take it slow," he warns. "Just a little bit at a time."

I wished I didn't feel so inexperienced at all of this, that he didn't have to coach me. But I want to make him feel good. That's all that matters.

I do as he says, taking him deeper into my mouth one small inch at a time. He moans deeply, his hands tangling in my hair as I continue to pleasure him. I can feel him getting closer, the tension in his body growing as he reaches the brink.

"Stop," he gasps, pulling me up to face him. "I want to be inside you."

I nod, feeling a thrill of excitement. I straddle his hips once more, feeling his hard length pressing against me. I take him in my hand, guiding him to my entrance as I slowly lower myself onto him.

He groans as I take him in, his eyes never leaving mine as I begin to move. Our bodies move together in perfect sync, our passion building with each passing moment. His hands grip my hips tightly, his eyes closing as he loses himself in the pleasure.

I speed up my movements, feeling myself reaching a peak that I never knew was possible. His fingers dig into my skin as he pulls me down onto him, his movements becoming more urgent.

"Come with me," he whispers, his voice thick with desire.

And I do. We both fall over the edge together, our bodies shaking with the release.

ROBERT

I find myself pacing in my study, trying to shake off the memory of Jessica's touch. It's as if her warmth has seared itself into my skin, and no matter how hard I try, I can't escape the desire that flares up whenever I think about her.

Its been weeks since we last slept together, but I haven't been able to get it out of my mind. I've turned cold towards Jessica in hopes of curbing my need for her, but nothing has squashed it. If anything, it just gets worse with each passing day.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, running a hand through my hair in frustration. I know what I need to do – it's just a matter of finding the courage to do it.

I can tell by the way she looks at me that she's feeling it too. And having to see her every day but not being able to touch her again is pure torture - for both of us.

I knew from the moment I first gave into this, I was headed for disaster. The longer I stop trying to deny the consequences of that mistake... *mistakes...* the better.

I sit down at my desk and open a new document on my laptop. The cursor blinks expectantly, waiting for me to make the first move. As I begin to type out the termination letter, my hands tremble ever so slightly. In all my years of making hard decisions with so much on the line, none have ever rattled me like this.

"Dear Ms. Easton," I write, pausing for a moment before continuing. "It is with great regret that I must inform you of my decision to terminate your

employment."

Just as I'm about to continue, there's a soft knock on the door, followed by Jessica's voice. "Robert? Are you in there?"

My heart skips a beat, and I quickly close the document before calling out, "Yes, come in."

The door opens slowly, and Jessica walks in, her eyes filled with concern. "Hey, I noticed you seemed a bit...off earlier. Is everything okay?"

"Fine," I lie, trying to keep my voice steady. But as her gaze lingers on my face, searching for the truth, I know she can see right through me.

"Is it about us?" she asks quietly, taking a step closer. Her proximity sends an electric shiver down my spine, and my resolve begins to crumble. "I know things are complicated, but you've been even more distant lately, and..."

"Jessica, I don't think this is a good idea," I say, my voice strained. "I've been thinking, and I believe it's best if we stop trying to pretend like we can go on like this. I told you from the beginning, I can't give you anything you need, and... If I can't do that, then..."

"Are you...are you firing me?" Her eyes widen in shock, and I can see the hurt that flickers across her face.

"Look," I sigh, rubbing my temples, "I'm just trying to protect my daughter. And you. We've grown too close, and it's not appropriate."

"Robert, I understand your concerns, but I promise you, I would never do anything to jeopardize Millie's well-being," Jessica insists, taking another step closer. Her green eyes implore me to reconsider, and it takes every ounce of willpower not to reach out and touch her.

"Jessica, please," I plead, feeling the weight of our unspoken attraction pressing down on me. "It's not about trust. It's about ending this now before things get ugly."

"Robert," she whispers, her voice barely audible as she looks at me with an intensity that makes my chest ache. "I won't let you push me away like this. Not when I know how much Millie needs me."

Jessica, don't you see?" I ask, my voice strangled as I try to control the frustration building inside me. "This –" I gesture between us, indicating the palpable tension in the room, "– is exactly why it's not healthy for either of us."

"Robert, if you truly believe that having feelings for someone else is unhealthy, then you have a lot to learn about relationships," she retorts,

crossing her arms over her chest. Her green eyes are filled with determination.

"You may be right," I say with a bitter smirk, trying to regain some semblance of control over the conversation. "But out of the two of us, which one of us knows more about relationships?"

"Maybe that's the problem," Jessica says softly, looking directly into my eyes. "What you've learned isn't the only way it has to be. You're so focused on protecting yourself and your daughter that you're closing yourself off from any possibility of happiness." She pauses, taking a deep breath before continuing. "I know you've had your heart broken before, Robert, but that doesn't mean you should punish every woman who enters your life. And it certainly shouldn't mean denying Millie the love and care she deserves."

Her words hit me like a freight train, and for a moment, I'm left speechless.

"Alright," I say finally, the word catching in my throat. "Let's say you're right. What do you propose we do?"

"First, let's both agree that our primary concern is Millie's well-being," Jessica replies, her tone firm yet gentle. "Second, we need to address the fact that we're attracted to each other. We can't just ignore it, Robert. It's not healthy."

"Fine," I agree, though the thought of discussing our attraction openly makes me uneasy. "And then what?"

"Maybe we should give ourselves a chance," she says hesitantly, as if testing the waters. "We don't have to jump into anything serious, but we can see where this goes... together. And if it doesn't work out, we'll figure it out. But at least we won't be denying ourselves or Millie the possibility of something better."

As I stand there, my heart pounding in my chest, I realize that Jessica is right. I've been so focused on protecting Millie and myself that I've inadvertently created a lonely life for both of us. Maybe it's time to take a risk – to see where life could lead us if I let go of my past fears and embrace the unknown.

My hands tremble as I clench them into fists, my jaw tightens, and my piercing gaze locks onto Jessica's fiery green eyes. She stands before me, defiant and unyielding, her chest heaving with the intensity of our disagreement.

"Jessica, you don't understand!" I exclaim, my voice rising in frustration.

"I can't risk losing control over everything I've built for Millie and me."

"Robert, you're only hurting yourself and Millie by keeping everyone at arm's length," she counters, her tone equally passionate. "You can't protect her from life – from feeling pain or experiencing joy. And you certainly can't protect yourself from falling in love."

The air between us crackles as we stand face-to-face, mere inches apart. My heart pounds wildly in my chest, fueled by the adrenaline that courses through my veins. Though I try to suppress it, I can feel the heat of desire burning through me as I take in the determined expression on her face, the curve of her lips, and the way her red hair tumbles about her shoulders.

"Love is a luxury I can't afford," I snap, my voice cracking. "I've lost too much already."

"Is it better to live a lonely life, then?" she challenges, her voice trembling. "To deny yourself and Millie a normal life?"

"Jessica, this isn't up for debate!" I shout, anger and fear bubbling up inside me. "I'm trying to do what's best for my daughter!"

"By pushing away someone who genuinely cares for both of you?" Her eyes flash with indignation, her hands balling into fists at her sides. "I may be new to your world, Robert, but I know what I see. You're afraid. Afraid of getting hurt, afraid of losing control. But life is messy, and sometimes you need to take risks in order to find happiness."

"Enough!" I roar, my voice echoing through the room. "This conversation is over."

My body trembles with fury, but beneath that anger lies a deeper, more primal urge – one that both terrifies and exhilarates me. The magnetic pull between us is undeniable, and as much as I want to maintain control, I can't help but be drawn to her.

"Is it?" Jessica's voice is low and seductive, her eyes locked onto mine. "Or are you just too afraid to admit what you really want?"

The question hangs in the air, challenging me to confront the truth. My resolve begins to falter, and for a moment, I'm on the verge of giving in to the desire that courses through me. But then reality reasserts itself, reminding me of the stakes at play.

"Jessica," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. "I can't."

"Can't or won't?" she challenges softly, her eyes searching mine for the truth.

"Both," I admit, my heart aching with the weight of my decision. "This is

a risk I can't afford to take."

"Then you'll have to live with the consequences of your choice," she replies quietly, her voice laced with pain and disappointment.

As she turns to leave, I'm left standing alone, the echo of our heated exchange reverberating through the empty room. The tension and attraction between us may be undeniable, but so are the conflicting desires and motivations that have driven us apart.

"Jessica, wait," I call out, my voice cracking with urgency. She stops in her tracks, her shoulders tense, but she doesn't turn back to face me.

I take a deep breath, struggling to untangle the knot of emotions that has taken hold of me. The thought of losing her is unbearable, but so is the thought of jeopardizing everything I've built for Millie and myself. As much as I want to maintain control, I know that I can't deny the truth any longer: I want her, more than I've ever wanted anyone.

"Jessica," I say, slowly closing the distance between us. "I'm sorry."

Her eyes flicker with surprise, and then something else – a glimmer of hope? – as she turns to face me. "What are you saying, Robert?"

"I'm saying that... I don't want to lose you." The words feel like both a confession and a plea, and as they hang in the air between us, I can see the effect they have on her.

"Robert," she whispers, her voice thick with emotion. "I don't want to lose you either."

And that's all it takes – the confirmation of our shared desire, our mutual need – to send us spiraling into each other's arms. Our lips meet in a searing kiss, our mouths hungry and desperate, tongues tangling together as if trying to claim one another. I run my hands through her hair, tugging gently at the roots, eliciting a soft moan from her.

"Robert," Jessica gasps, pulling back slightly to look into my eyes. "Are you sure about this?"

"More sure than I've been about anything," I reply earnestly, my heart racing in my chest.

As our lips reconnect, our hands begin to explore the contours of each other's bodies, mapping out a world of new sensations. My fingers find the hem of her shirt, slipping underneath to caress the warm skin of her waist. She shivers at my touch, her hands gripping my shoulders as she presses herself even closer to me.

I guide her back against the wall, needing her as close as possible, our

bodies pressed tightly together. Her hands slide down my back, grasping onto my hips and pulling me against her. The friction between us is electrifying, igniting a fire that threatens to consume us both.

"Robert," she moans into my mouth as I trail kisses down her neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive skin there. "Please..."

"Tell me what you want, Jessica," I whisper against her earlobe, my breath hot on her skin.

"You," she murmurs, her eyes heavy with lust. "I want everything you have to give."

And so, I give her everything – every ounce of passion, desire, and love that courses through me. We shed our clothes, our barriers falling away as we surrender ourselves to each other fully. My hands roam her body, worshipping every curve and hollow as if committing it to memory.

"Jessica," I pant, overwhelmed by the intensity of our connection. "You have no idea how much I need you right now."

"Show me," she breathes, her eyes dark and filled with desire.

And I do. We come together, our bodies moving in perfect harmony, the raw passion and vulnerability between us forging something powerful and profound. It's a connection neither of us ever expected, but one that neither of us can deny any longer. And as we cling to one another, trembling with emotion and exhaustion, I know that our lives will never be the same.

ROBERT

Nothing is so different over the next few days. Jessica carries on with her usual responsibilities, not pushing anything more than that. I'm grateful for the space to ease into what something different between us could look like, no matter how scary and uncomfortable it feels.

But Jessica does take more liberties as she inches into a new kind of role in our home. She questions me more, and I can't say it's a bad thing. She insists Millie needs more free time to be a kid and play. I'm hesitant, but it's exhausting to pretend like I have all the answers sometimes... So I give into her a little, relishing in the relief of not being the only who's responsible for it all anymore.

One afternoon, while the two of them are at the park, I settle into some work - a welcomed distraction. But am quickly interrupted by a knock at the door. I swing it open, completely unaware of the nightmare that's standing on the other side of it.

Instantly, my world crashes down in front of me.

"Robert," she says, her voice sending shivers down my spine. The last time I heard that voice was years ago before she walked out on us, leaving only a note behind.

"Carmen," I mutter under my breath. It's like saying the name Voldemort aloud or something. I glance around, half-expecting the walls to crumble or the earth to open up beneath my feet. "What are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you too," she replies with a smirk, her perfectly manicured nails tapping against the door frame. "I just wanted to catch up. It's been so long since I've seen my little girl."

"Little" is an understatement. Millie has grown so much since her mother left, but I can't help but feel a sense of dread settling in my chest at the thought of Millie having to deal with another heartbreak from her.

"Look," I say, trying to keep my cool. "You can't just waltz back into our lives after all these years and expect everything to be fine. Millie doesn't even know you anymore."

"Is that what you've told her?" she asks, her eyes narrowing as she crosses her arms. "That I just vanished without a trace? That I don't care about her?"

"Your actions spoke louder than your words ever could," I snap back, my fists clenching at my sides. "Now, I won't let you hurt her again."

"Really, Robert? You're going to play the protective father card now?" she scoffs. "I'm not here to hurt her. I just want to see my daughter."

"Millie doesn't need you," I hiss through gritted teeth. "She has me."

"Is that what you think?" she asks, her voice dripping with condescension. "You can never replace a mother's love, no matter how much money you throw at the problem."

I feel my blood boil as I stare into the cold, gray eyes of the woman who had once been the love of my life and Millie's idol. The fear of losing control of the situation—of not being able to protect my daughter—threatens to consume me.

"Get out," I growl, pointing towards the door. "You have no right to be here."

"Robert, don't do this," she warns. "I've already been in contact with a lawyer. I'm prepared to fight for my rights to see my daughter."

"Good luck. Until then, leave us alone!" I shout, my voice shaking with anger and fear.

I slam the door shut in my face, feeling the force of it like a shot to my chest. I'm a billionaire businessman who can close multi-million dollar deals with just a nod, but this? This has me shaking like a leaf.

"Robert!" Carmen calls through the closed door, her voice grating on my nerves. "I've emailed you my proposed visitation schedule. You'll find it quite reasonable, I assure you."

"Reasonable" like a shark circling a bleeding swimmer. I glance at the email notification that's appeared on my phone. I take a deep breath and open it, preparing for the worst.

"Alternate weekends... for *me*. Holidays split equally. Two uninterrupted weeks during summer break." My eyes skim the list of her demands, each one

feeling like a punch to the gut.

"Is this some kind of joke?" I shout through the door, my voice cracking at the end. She knows damn well these terms are anything but reasonable.

"Life isn't a joke, Robert," she replies icily. "Millie deserves to have her mother in her life."

"Yeah, she does. Except her mother is you so she's better off without," I mutter under my breath, my thumb hovering over the delete button. But I don't press it. I know deleting it won't really make this go away.

"Are you going to cooperate, or shall we let the courts decide?" Her words, laced with venom, send shivers down my spine. I picture her smirking on the other side of the door.

"My lawyer will be in touch," I spit out, the word tasting like bile in my mouth.

"Excellent," she purrs. "I look forward to spending more time with our daughter."

"Over my dead body," I whisper to myself, my heart pounding in my chest and my fists clenched.

I'm no stranger to battles, but this one threatens to break me. The thought of Millie's mother waltzing back into our lives fills me with dread. Millie deserves better than this. She deserves stability, love, and protection—and I'll be damned if I let anyone, especially her own mother, hurt her again.

My heart races as if I've just run a marathon and my hands tremble like an old man's. I throw myself into the chair behind my desk, trying to calm down.

"Robert?" Jessica's voice appears suddenly.

I don't know how long it's been since Carmen left. I'm just grateful Millie wasn't here when she came by. And I know with equal certainty that Jessica is the last person I want to be around right now.

"Is everything alright?" she asks, her wide eyes scanning me with concern as she enters the room.

"Perfect," I lie. "Just peachy." I rub my temples, hoping to erase the image of Millie's mother from my mind.

"Robert, you're obviously not fine," she argues, shutting the door behind her and crossing the room. "Talk to me."

She reaches for me, but I'm quick to throw up my hands. She takes a stunned step back, then softens a little and resides to sitting in the chair across from me.

"Did something happen while we were gone? Something with work?"

I don't want to talk to her about this. But this is happening, whether I like it or not. And as long as Jessica is around helping with Millie, she needs to know what we're up against.

I try to stay calm as I recount the episode of Carmen appearing on my doorstep. Jessica listens carefully, and waits to process it all when I'm done.

"If you need anything, I'm here for you," she offers after a long pause.

"Thanks, but this is something I need to handle on my own," I reply, not bothering to look at her.

"Maybe I can offer some advice?" She hesitates, biting her lip.

I sigh, pushing down my initial instinct to snap at her. *Fine, let's hear what she has to say.*

"Go ahead." I lean back in my chair and fold my arms across my chest.

"Perhaps you could try mediation?" she suggests, her voice soft but steady. "They might be able to help you see an outcome that's best for Millie, that you and her mom are too emotional to see."

I can't help but laugh. "First off, it's not even fair to call that woman her mother. Second, no stranger can possibly see what's good for Millie better than I can. I appreciate your concern, but you have no idea what you're talking about." My patience wears thin as I clench my fists under the desk. "This isn't some business deal that can be negotiated over a cup of coffee."

"Of course, I understand," she says quickly, her cheeks flushing red. "I'm sorry if I crossed a line."

"Apology accepted." I force a smile before picking up the phone, which is still buzzing with messages from Millie's mother. "Now, if you don't mind, I've got some calls to make."

"Of course," Jessica murmurs, retreating towards the door.

"Jessica?"

"Yes?"

"Next time you decide to offer unsolicited advice, remember that you're my nanny. Not my lawyer or my therapist, and you're not in any position to make decisions about Millie's well-being. Maybe I misled you by being so easy-going lately."

She lets out a breath like she's just been punched in the chest. "Easy-going?" she scoffs. "Since when are you ever *easy going*!? You told me you didn't want me to have to walk on egg shells around here, but that's all I ever do! I know this is hard for you, but don't take it out on me. Please understand that I just want what's best for you and Millie."

"Best for us?" I repeat, my voice rising in volume and pitch. "How the hell would you know what's best for us, Jessica?"

"Because I care about you both," she replies, her voice steady despite the tears forming in her eyes.

"Care?" I snort, feeling my blood boil. "You've been here for what, a few months? And you think that gives you the right to tell me how to handle my life? My family?"

"Robert, I never meant—"

"Enough!" I cut her off, my voice thunderous. "You're fired, Jessica. Get out of my office and out of my life."

Her eyes widen, and for a moment, she looks like she's about to argue. But then, she just nods, wiping away a tear.

"Very well. Just know that this time, I'm not going to talk you out of it. If after everything, you still only see me as an employee you can fire... then yeah, I think it's probably best if I just go." She turns to leave, her head held high despite the hurt that's evident on her face.

The office feels colder without Jessica, like someone sucked all the warmth out with a giant vacuum cleaner. I glance at the door she just closed behind her, and the bitterness in my gut grows heavier.

"Nice going, Robert," I mutter to myself, sinking into my chair and rubbing my temples. "You just fired the one person who genuinely wanted to help you."

My thoughts drift back to Millie's mother and her sudden reappearance, demanding visitation rights. The weight of it presses down on me, making it hard to breathe. How the hell am I supposed to deal with this? What if she convinces a judge to give her visitation rights? How am I supposed to feel safe leaving my daughter in her care for any amount of time?

I force myself to get up and go about my daily routine, but I can't concentrate. My meetings are a blur, my decisions half-assed. Even my damn coffee tastes off – as if it knows something is wrong and wants in on the misery party.

"Mr. Pierce?" My assistant timidly pokes her head into my office. "Millie is home. She asked if she could see you. Should I send her in?"

"Uh, sure," I mumble, trying to put on a brave face for my little girl. The last thing she needs is to know how much everything has changed now.

"Hi, Daddy!" Millie bounds into the room, all smiles and sunshine. It's a stark contrast to the storm brewing inside me.

"Hey, sweetheart." I force a smile, pulling her into a hug. "How was school?"

"Good! We learned about planets today. Did you know that Jupiter is the biggest planet in our solar system?"

"Wow, really?" I feign interest, hoping she doesn't pick up on the tension radiating off me like heat from a bonfire. "That's amazing, Millie."

"Where's Jessica?" she asks, looking around the room. "She didn't pick me up from school today. One of the drivers came."

"Uh..." I hesitate, my chest tightening. "Jessica won't be working with us anymore, sweetheart."

"What? Why?" Millie's eyes instantly fill with tears, and I can't help but feel like the world's biggest jerk.

"This is what happens with nannies. They come and they go," I reply, cursing myself for letting my fear ruin not only my life but also my daughter's. "But don't worry, we'll find someone new to help take care of you, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy." She snuffles, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "I just really liked Jessica. She was nice."

"Me too, sweetheart. Me too."

Later that night I find myself pacing back and forth, trying to shake off the gnawing sense of loss and longing. It's not like I haven't seen people leave before. Hell, I've practically made a career out of cutting ties and burning bridges. But this – this feels different.

"Ugh, get a grip, Robert," I say aloud, attempting to snap myself out of it. "She's just a girl. A small-town, innocent girl who probably wouldn't know what to do with you if she tried." I scoff at my own thoughts, but it doesn't help. If anything, it makes the ache worse.

Damn it, I curse under my breath, gripping the back of a chair. This isn't like me. What's happening?

Maybe it's all in my head, but the pang in my heart betrays me. For the first time in a long while, I feel utterly alone.

I straighten my posture and shake off the cloud of emotion. I've got more important things to worry about right now. Millie needs me now more than ever, and I can't afford any distractions. With a determined exhale, I push away from the window and return to my desk, focusing on what's most important – protecting my daughter from the mother who doesn't deserve her, who's bound to break her heart again if she gets the chance.

I sit down at my desk and start putting in some calls to my lawyers. I ask them to assemble the best team they can for this. I also have to put whatever measures I can into place to ensure Carmen doesn't pay us any more surprise visits.

It's surprisingly easy to get a restraining order in place to protect us, and it's a relief to get that one checked off the list. The legal battle is far from over, but each small victory feels like a step closer to freedom for my daughter and me.

The next day, I head to Millie's school to provide them with a copy of the order of protection, then do the same for each of her extra curricular activities. My legal team offered to do it all for me, but I knew I wouldn't feel at ease unless I delivered the documents personally.

The next few weeks are rough, but I keep reminding myself that it's all better for Millie in the long run. Maybe the same can be said for Jessica being gone. Things with her would have never landed anywhere good in the end.

Every sleepless night spent poring over legal documents, every missed bedtime story, every tear shed in frustration is all for Millie. It's not ideal, but I'm fighting tooth and nail to ensure she has the life she deserves.

But even as I try to focus on Millie and the legal battle ahead, I can't help but wonder if I've made the right choices. If pushing Jessica away was truly necessary. If maybe, just maybe, there could have been some other way.

In an effort to distract myself, I grab my phone and start scrolling through old photos of Millie. Her toothy grin and bright eyes remind me why I'm doing all of this. But each photo feels tinged with sadness now, knowing that Jessica won't be there to share in Millie's laughter anymore. The loneliness is crushing.

My jaw clenches with determination. I refuse to let this emotional turmoil derail me. I will protect Millie and fight for what I believe in, no matter how much it hurts. I owe her that much.

But as I close my eyes and try to sleep, I can't shake the feeling that something precious has slipped through my fingers. And no amount of money or power will ever bring it back.

JESSICA

Here I am, back in the chaotic whirlwind that is my family home – the same cramped house I grew up in. It's like a time warp, only now there are even more people crammed into it: my parents, my sisters, and their screaming kids. The walls seem to be closing in on me, but I'm doing my best to stay positive. Really.

"Jessie, can you watch the kids for a sec?" My sister, Lucy, calls out from the kitchen. Her hands are covered in some unidentifiable goo, and I can hear her youngest wailing in the background.

"Sure," I sigh, plastering on a smile as I scoop up my nephew. "Why not? It's not like I have anything better to do."

If only I was back at the place I had come to call home, with Millie where I started to feel like I belonged. But no, I'm stuck playing babysitter in this overcrowded madhouse while trying to forget about the grumpy billionaire who stole my heart... only to break it.

"Thanks, Jess!" Lucy beams at me, oblivious to my bitterness. I roll my eyes and try to focus on the cute, chubby cheeks of my nephew. At least he's adorable, right?

"Alright, kiddos," I announce to the small army of children gathering around me. "Who wants to play a game?"

"Me! Me!" they all shout, momentarily distracting me from the ache in my chest. As I corral them into a semi-organized circle, I force myself to push thoughts of Robert aside. He's gone, and I need to move on. Easier said than done.

"Okay, let's play Duck, Duck, Goose!" I suggest with forced enthusiasm.

The kids cheer, and I join in, determined to make the best of this situation.

"Jessica, dear, can you help me with the laundry?" My mom's voice drifts from the hallway, and I groan internally. The kids look at me expectantly, and I plaster on another smile.

"Of course, Mom," I say through gritted teeth. "Just let me finish this game." As I turn back to my eager audience, I silently vow to escape this place as soon as possible. I've had enough of playing happy families; it's time to rebuild my life – and I'll do it without Robert.

"Alright," I tell the kids, trying to ignore the pang of longing that hits me at the thought of him. "Let's play!"

After tending to an endless list of tasks from my family who all seem oblivious to how miserable I am being back here, I decide to go back into the city for a bit. I crawled my way out of this hole just fine before - long before I ever met Robert. Surely I can do it again.

I take a deep breath and slip on the silky blouse Robert bought for me during our date. It's been sitting in my closet, untouched since I first moved back home. The memories of his touch and the sound of Millie's laughter threaten to send me spiraling into sadness, but I shove them away. I can't afford to wallow right now.

I stride out of the house, chin held high, and start the long bus ride into the city. As soon as I arrive, I head to the one place I know I can always go crawling back to.

"Rothmans, here I come," I grumble under my breath, knowing full well what I'm walking into. But a job is a job, and beggars can't be choosers, right?

"Jessica! Long time no see!" My old boss greets me with a sleazy grin when I walk into Rothmans. Ugh. It's like being slapped in the face with a wet fish.

"Hey... Mr. Rothman," I reply, trying to sound more enthusiastic than I feel. "How have things been around the shop since I left?"

"Well, we had no problem finding a replacement for you, if that's what you were wondering," he laughs, rubbing it in.

I wasn't rude when I left by any means, but I definitely didn't hold back on my opinions about Mr. Rothman's managerial style and how harmful it was to the women who work here. Selling suits with good customer service is one thing. Expecting women to act like sleazy cocktail waitresses is another. I made my position on that clear, which felt so good at the time.

Now that I'm crawling back in here with my tail between my legs, I'm regretting every word I said.

"That's good," I force myself to say. "I'm glad things have been going well in my absence, but... well, I'm here because I was actually wondering if maybe... you had some openings in the schedule that I could maybe help with. The nannying gig I left for didn't go as planned, so I could really use something to help me get back on my feet. Even if it's only temporary or part time."

"Your job?" He raises an eyebrow. "You think after you told me off and left – that I'd just welcome you back?"

"Mr. Rothman, please," I plead, biting back my pride. "I need this job."

"Ha! Well, that ship has sailed, sweetheart," he scoffs. "Besides, I've got plenty of pretty young things lining up to work here."

"Really?" I snap, my patience wearing thin. "Because the way you let those old creeps leer at us and make inappropriate comments – I'm surprised anyone wants to work here at all!"

"Excuse me?!" Mr. Rothman's face turns an unflattering shade of red.

"Look," I say, trying to keep my cool, "I just think it's only fair for you to consider how you would feel if you had men grabbing your ass, and you weren't allowed to say or do anything about it but smile and use it as an opportunity to sell them more things. I wouldn't have been so quick to leave if it weren't for those conditions."

"Ah, well, thanks for your input," he sneers. "But I don't need advice from someone who thinks they're too good for this place. Obviously your attitude didn't serve you too well in your new gig either. Did you ever think maybe the problem is you? Good luck finding a job, Jessica. You're gonna need it."

His comments strike a nerve. The theme here is that I seem to be incapable of keeping my opinions to myself in the workplace. I'll give him that. But obviously the line I crossed as Robert's nanny was different. Worse, actually. And now I'm paying the price. Just the fact that I'm standing here begging for a job I don't even want back more than proves that.

"Fine," I spit out, my temper flaring. "I don't need your stupid job anyway."

With that, I storm out of the store, my head held high but my heart heavy. Another door slammed shut. But I won't give up – not now, not ever. I've come too far to let this stop me.

As I'm fuming outside the store, replaying my disastrous exchange with

Mr. Rothman in my head, I hear a voice behind me. "Well, that was quite the performance," the man says, amusement lacing his words.

I whip around to find a tall, dark-haired man getting his suit jacket adjusted by a tailor. Gray eyes meet mine, and I recognize him from a dinner Robert hosted while I was working for him – Christopher Black, if memory serves me right.

"Sorry you had to witness that," I say, feeling embarrassed. "But honestly, that man is infuriating."

"Infuriating or not, you stood your ground," Christopher says with a smirk. "So, what kind of experience do you have? I mean, besides arguing with former bosses."

"Hey!" I protest, my cheeks feeling hot. "That's not... Look, I've worked in retail for years, but I also have nannying experience. My true passion is fashion design. I thought working at this place would help me break into the industry, but obviously its proven to be a dead end."

"Interesting," he muses. "You're in luck. I just might have a contact in the fashion business who might have a job opportunity for you if I were to recommend you. If you're interested, that is."

"Really?" I can't help but feel skeptical. "Just like that?"

"Let's discuss it over lunch," he suggests. "It's on me. Promise I won't bite."

"Okay," I agree hesitantly. "I guess it won't hurt to learn more about the position."

"Capital," he replies with a grin. "Let's go."

As we sit down at a trendy café, I can't help but eye Christopher warily. He's charming, but I've been burned by rich, good-looking men before. Still, I need the job, so I take a deep breath and pull out my sketchbook.

"Here are some of my designs," I say, flipping through the pages. "I've never had any formal training, but I study as much as I can on my own. I hope these are... at least somewhat impressive."

"Somewhat?" Christopher raises an eyebrow, genuine surprise in his eyes as he examines my sketches. "Jessica, these are amazing. You've got real talent. I definitely think there's a place for you in the fashion industry."

"Really?" I ask, unable to suppress my excitement.

"Absolutely," he confirms. "I have some contacts I can introduce you to, and they'll be just as impressed as I am."

"Wow." I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Thank you,

Christopher. You have no idea how much this means to me."

"Think nothing of it," he says with a smile. "Now, let's enjoy our lunch. We've got a lot to celebrate."

As we dig into our food, laughing and sharing stories, I can't help but feel a flicker of hope igniting within me. Maybe things are finally looking up.

The last bite of my salad disappears, and I'm left feeling both satisfied and a little lost. Christopher has been nothing but kind and encouraging, but I can't shake the feeling that there's a catch. There's always a catch with men like him, isn't there?

"Thank you for lunch," I say, wiping my mouth with a napkin. "I really appreciate everything you've done for me today."

"Of course, Jessica," he replies, his eyes twinkling. "It was my pleasure. Now, I hate to be so forward, but I can't help myself. Would you like to go out with me sometime? On a date?"

The question catches me off guard, and for a moment, I almost say yes. But then, memories of Robert cloud my vision – the way he used me, the way he discarded me when things got difficult. I can't go through that again.

"Christopher, I..." I hesitate, searching for the right words. "I'm really flattered, and under different circumstances, I might have said yes. But given our professional connection, and some... past experiences, I just don't think it's a good idea."

His face falls, and a pang of guilt twists inside me. But he nods, his expression respectful. "I understand, Jessica. I won't lie; I'm disappointed. But I respect your decision."

"Thank you," I whisper, relieved that he's taking it so well. "I hope this doesn't affect the job opportunity."

"Of course not," he assures me, flashing a small, genuine smile. "Your talent speaks for itself. I wouldn't dream of holding that against you."

"Thanks." I return his smile, feeling a weight lift from my shoulders.

We finish up our lunch and part ways, the promise of a brighter future hanging in the air between us. As I walk away, I can't help but feel a strange mix of emotions. Pride in myself for standing my ground, hope for the future, and yet, a lingering sadness that reminds me just how much I miss Robert and Millie.

"New beginnings," I murmur to myself, steeling my resolve as I head back home.

It's time to face whatever comes next, with or without them.

I'm in the middle of folding laundry when my phone rings. My heart skips a beat, and I hastily shove a pair of socks aside to grab it. "Hello?"

"Jessica?" A man's voice asks. "This is Michael from the Madison Design House. Christopher Black is a mutual friend of ours, and he suggested we take a look at your work. I just wanted to let you know that we were really impressed by your portfolio, and we'd like to schedule an interview with you."

"Really?" I squeak, trying not to sound too desperate. "That's amazing! Thank you so much!"

"Of course," he says, his tone warm. "How does next Wednesday at 3:00 PM work for you?"

"Perfect!" My fingers tremble as I enter the appointment into my calendar app. "I can't wait."

"Great. We'll see you then, Jessica. Have a great day."

"Thanks, you too!" I hang up, and for a moment, I just stand there, staring at my phone screen.

"Did I actually just get an interview for my dream job?" I ask myself aloud, still not quite believing it as I plop down onto the mattress in disbelief.

Clutching the phone to my chest, I fall back onto my bed and stare at the ceiling, grinning like a maniac. My excitement doesn't last long, though. As soon as the initial adrenaline rush fades, the familiar ache of missing Robert and Millie creeps back in.

Why did working for them, living with them, have to feel so right? It's like the universe was playing a cruel joke on me - dangling a dream life right in front of me, giving me a taste... only to take it away again. And now nothing, not even a chance at the kind of job I've been waiting for, seems to compare to them.

I made a genuine connection with them, and losing that connection... *hurts*. My time spent with Robert and Millie meant something to me. But it's over now.

The sooner I accept that and start moving on, the better. I'm not ready for dates with men like Christopher Black, but this job interview is a great place to start.

I set myself back to doing laundry with renewed determination. "No matter what happens, I've got this. I'll make a new life for myself, even if it means letting go of the one I had with them."

I dive back into folding the pile of clothes, trying to ignore the lingering

sadness in my heart. But no matter how hard I try, it's impossible to shake the feeling that something important is missing from my life.

ROBERT

The stench of expensive cigars and even more expensive whisky fills the air as I sit in the dimly lit Suave Billionaire's Club, knocking back another glass like it's water. Pathetic, I know, but desperate times call for desperate measures, and I'm a man on the edge.

"Another one, please," I slur to the bartender. He raises an eyebrow at me, probably wondering if he should cut me off, but who is he to question Robert-freaking-Dawson?

"Rough night?" Edward asks, sliding onto the stool next to mine. He looks fresh as a daisy while I'm pretty sure I reek of desperation.

"None of your business," I snap, my vision blurring as I try to focus on him.

"Alright, alright," he says, holding up his hands defensively. "I'm just here for the booze and the company."

"Then you're in the wrong place, buddy," I mutter, my mind drifting back to Jessica. Sweet, innocent Jessica, who managed to worm her way into my cold, dead heart without even trying. It infuriates me that I miss her so damn much, but the thought of losing Millie in the upcoming custody battle is crushing me from the inside out.

"Come on, man," Christopher chimes in, joining our little pity party. "You can't keep drowning yourself in alcohol every time life gets tough. What would Millie think?"

"Millie doesn't need to see this," I growl, downing another shot. The room spins around me, but I refuse to let the tears prickling at the corners of my eyes fall. I don't cry in public... or ever, really.

"Look, Robert," says Aiden, the self-made real estate mogul, as he sits on my other side. "We get it. You're going through a lot right now. But you've got to keep it together, man. For Millie's sake."

"Easy for you to say," I snap, slamming my empty glass onto the bar. "You're not about to lose your daughter!"

"Robert, listen to us," urges Scott Madison, the gallerist who can spot a fake Monet from a mile away. "We're your friends, and we care about you. This spiral you're in isn't healthy. And it definitely won't help you with the custody battle."

"Thanks for the reminder," I scoff, anger bubbling beneath the surface. I know they're right, but admitting that would mean letting go of my precious pride, and that's out of the question.

"Besides," Luca adds, "don't forget about Jessica. She's been by your side through all of this, and you're just pushing her away."

"Jessica?" I snort, my vision swimming before me. "What does she have to do with any of this?"

"Everything," Edward replies, his voice softening. "She's the one person who's managed to crack that icy exterior of yours, and deep down, you know it. Don't let your fear of getting hurt again ruin a good thing, Robert."

"Fine," I mutter, grudgingly acknowledging the truth in their words. "I'll think it all over, okay? As long as it will get all of you off my case."

"Good," Ethan says, clapping me on the back. "Now, let's get you home. You've had enough for one night."

"Home," I murmur, the word feeling foreign on my tongue. But as my friends help me to my unsteady feet, I can't help but think that maybe, just maybe, things can still work out in the end.

"Jessica," I mutter under my breath, the name of the woman who's invaded my dreams and thoughts like a relentless storm. The one person who could make me feel alive again.

"Hey, watch it!" I bark as someone jostles me, nearly spilling my drink all over my expensive suit. It's just another faceless guy in this overcrowded club, but my anger is misdirected at him when it should be directed at myself. The truth is, I can't stop thinking about her, and it scares the hell out of me.

"Damn it," I whisper to myself as I slam back my drink, trying to drown my emotions in liquor. "Why can't I get her out of my head?"

"Robert," Ethan's voice cuts through my swirling thoughts. "You're not fooling anyone here, you know."

"Leave me alone," I growl, not looking at him. My hands clench into fists, knuckles white. "I don't need your advice."

"Clearly, you do," he retorts, his tone calm despite my hostility. "You're spiraling, man. You need to learn how to trust again."

"Trust?" I scoff, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. "After what my ex-wife did? Not likely."

"Look, I know you've been hurt before," Ethan says, his voice filled with empathy. "But not all women are like your ex, and Jessica sure as hell isn't. You can't punish her for another woman's mistakes."

"Fine," I huff, my gaze shifting to the dance floor, where gyrating bodies move in time with the pounding music. "But what if I screw up? What if I'm not good enough for her?"

"Then you'll learn from your mistakes and try harder next time," Ethan replies, placing a hand on my shoulder. "You're only human, Robert. But you won't know unless you give it a shot."

I shake my head, the room spinning as I do so. It's true; Jessica was nothing but kind and understanding since she entered my life. She deserves better than me, someone who can appreciate her and not push her away.

But she didn't want better. She wanted *me*, despite everything.

All she wanted to do was give things a try, to see where they went. I was just so convinced that it was a curse. The moment I let off on the reins of control I had worked so hard to establish in my life, and in Millie's, Carmen came sweeping back in like a punishment. The last thing I thought I needed was advice or concern from the hired help.

But she was more than that. Wasn't she?

As we stumble out of the club, I know that I have a long road ahead of me. But for once in my miserable existence, I feel like I have something besides work and Millie that's worth fighting for. And maybe, just maybe, that will be enough.

ROBERT

I'm pacing back and forth in the hallway of the courthouse, a bundle of nerves waiting to explode. For someone who's faced boardrooms full of cutthroat businessmen, I'm surprised at how utterly terrified I am. This is not just some billion-dollar deal that can be negotiated; this is my daughter's future, and I've never felt so helpless.

"Robert," my sister, Laura, says, trying to calm me down. "You need to relax. You have a strong case, and the judge will see that."

"Relax?" I scoff, running a hand through my hair. "This isn't some high-stakes poker game, Laura. This is Millie we're talking about."

"Trust me, I know," she replies, her eyes softening. "But you have to believe that everything will work out for the best."

"Easy for you to say," I mutter under my breath. It's true though; my sister has always been the more optimistic one between us. I wish I could borrow some of that unwavering faith right now.

"Besides," she continues, "you've done everything in your power to make sure Millie is safe and happy. The judge will see that too."

"God, I hope you're right." Still, I can't help but feel a knot of anxiety twisting in my chest.

"Hey, look at me," she commands, grabbing my shoulders. "You're an amazing father, and no one can take that away from you."

"Thanks, sis," I mumble, feeling a little choked up. Even I have my moments of vulnerability, it seems. But I'll be damned if I let anyone other than my sister see them.

"Come on, let's sit down," she suggests, leading me towards a bench. "We

still have a few minutes before the hearing starts."

As we wait, my thoughts drift to Jessica. She's everything Millie deserves in a mother, and then some. But I pushed her away, too blinded by my own arrogance and selfishness to see what was right in front of me.

"Hey, Earth to Robert," Laura says, waving a hand in front of my face. "Where'd you go?"

"Sorry, just thinking," I reply, forcing myself back to the present moment.

"About Jessica?"

"Is it that obvious?" I ask with a wry smile.

"Only to someone who knows you as well as I do," she answers, returning the smile. "Just remember, no matter what happens today, you have people who love and support you."

"Thanks, Laura." With a deep breath, I steel myself for whatever comes next. The future of my little girl hangs in the balance, and I'll be damned if I let her down.

"Mr. Spencer, please make your way to Courtroom Four," a court clerk announces, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Here we go," I mutter under my breath, feeling my heart pound in my chest as I stand up.

"Deep breaths, Robert. You've got this," Laura reassures me as we follow the clerk down the hallway.

Upon entering the courtroom, I notice that Carmen mom is conspicuously absent. Figures. Can't even show up on time for something this important. I take my seat at our designated table, my legal team flanking me on both sides. Laura squeezes my shoulder before taking her place in the gallery.

"Mr. Spencer," the judge begins, scanning the room with an air of impatience. "Do you know the whereabouts of Ms. Thompson?"

"Your Honor, I do not," I reply, struggling to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

Just then, the doors fly open and in stumbles Carmen, reeking of alcohol and looking like she's just crawled out of a gutter. Fantastic.

"Ms. Thompson, you are late," the judge says, barely containing his disdain.

"Apologies, Your Honor," she slurs, swaying slightly as she makes her way to her table. The whole scene would be comical if it weren't so damn tragic.

"Let us proceed," the judge sighs, obviously displeased but determined to

give her a fair chance.

"Your Honor, we are here today to determine what is in the best interest of my client's daughter, Millicent Pierce," my attorney begins, launching into her well-prepared argument. I nod along, trying to focus on her words rather than the pathetic spectacle that is Carmen. My little girl deserves so much better than this.

"Mr. Spencer has provided a stable and loving home for Millie since her birth. He is more than capable of caring for her on his own, without the interference of a woman who has proven time and again to be an unfit mother."

"Objection!" Carmen slurs, though it's unclear exactly what she's objecting to. The judge just shakes his head.

"Your Honor, Mr. Pierce is not only a devoted father but also an upstanding member of the community," my attorney adds, emphasizing my involvement in various philanthropic endeavors. "He has consistently put Millie's needs first and will continue to do so. It is our belief that granting full custody to Mr. Pierce is the only outcome that truly serves the best interests of the child."

As my lawyer finishes her impassioned plea, I can't help but think of Jessica. She'd be proud of me right now, standing up for my daughter like this. But instead of being here by my side, she's gone for good, probably thinking she'll never see Millie or me again. And it's all my fault.

"Your Honor," Carmen interrupts my thoughts, "I may have made mistakes, but I love my daughter too."

"Ms. Thompson, this is neither the time nor the place for emotional outbursts," the judge admonishes her. "Please allow your legal counsel to present their arguments."

"Right," she mutters, seemingly chastened, although it's hard to tell through the haze of alcohol.

"Proceed," the judge orders, and the rest of the hearing continues in a blur. All I can think about is Millie, and the lengths I'm willing to go to protect her happiness.

"Your Honor, I promise I can change. I know I've been a mess, but I really do love my daughter," Millie's mom slurs, swaying slightly where she stands.

"Ms. Thompson, please allow your attorney to speak on your behalf," the judge says sternly, clearly losing his patience with her.

"Right, right," she mumbles, looking dazed as she stumbles back to her seat. Honestly, it's like watching a bad reality show - one that could potentially rip my daughter away from me.

"Your Honor," my attorney continues, "we have presented ample evidence of Mr. Pierce's dedication to his daughter, and we believe that granting him full custody is in her best interests."

"Your Honor," Carmen interrupts again, this time even more belligerent. "I don't need some fancy lawyer to tell you I can be a good mother. I just... I just need another chance."

"Ms. Thompson," the judge sighs, rubbing his temples as if trying to ward off an impending headache. "You've had many chances. This is not a matter of giving you yet another opportunity to prove yourself. It's a matter of what is best for your child."

The room falls silent for a moment, the tension so thick you could cut it with a knife. The judge looks down at his notes, taking a deep breath before he speaks again.

"Given the evidence presented today, I have no choice but to terminate your parental rights, Ms. Thompson. Custody of Millie will be granted to Mr. Spencer."

A wave of relief washes over me, my legs suddenly feeling like Jell-O. I did it. I protected Millie.

"Thank you, Your Honor," I manage to choke out, my voice rough with emotion.

"Mr. Pierce, it is clear that you are a devoted father. I trust that you will continue to prioritize Millie's well-being above all else," the judge says, his gaze steady and serious.

"Of course, Your Honor," I reply, my heart swelling with determination. I'll do whatever it takes to give Millie the life she deserves.

As Carmen is led out of the courtroom by her attorney, I can't help but feel a twinge of pity for her. She's lost everything, and in a way, it's heartbreaking to see someone so broken. But at the end of the day, I have to put Millie first. And if that means cutting her out of our lives, then so be it.

"Congratulations, Mr. Spencer," my attorney says, shaking my hand. "Millie is a very lucky little girl."

"Thank you," I reply.

The judge's words play on repeat in my mind. *I trust that you will continue to prioritize Millie's well-being above all else.* I thought that's what I

was doing this whole time, but can I really say that's what I was focused on when I pushed Jessica out of our lives so suddenly? At a time when we probably needed her the most.

"Let's go celebrate," my sister suggests, looping her arm through mine as we exit the courtroom. "You've earned it."

"Sounds like a plan," I agree, eager to leave this courthouse behind and start our new life together. But as we make our way towards the exit, a familiar figure materializes before us.

"Robert," Carmen slurs, swaying unsteadily on her feet. "Wait."

"Are you seriously still here?" I ask, surprised she hasn't been escorted out by security yet. "Don't you have a bar to crawl to?"

Her bloodshot eyes fill with tears, and for a moment, I almost feel bad for her – almost.

"Please," she begs, mascara streaming down her face. "I want to be better for Millie. I really do."

"Good," I say coldly, not bothering to hide my contempt. "You should want that. But until you can prove it, stay away from us. Millie deserves so much better than what you've given her."

She flinches, as if my words are physical blows, and I can't help but feel a twinge of satisfaction.

"Come on," I tell my sister, not sparing Millie's mom another glance. "Let's go home."

As we leave the courthouse, I can't help but think of Jessica – her warmth, her kindness, and the genuine love she had for Millie. Even though our relationship was far from perfect, it's clear now that she truly cared about my daughter in ways her biological mother never has.

"Hey," my sister says softly, sensing the shift in my mood. "You okay?"

"Fine," I reply, forcing a smile. "Just ready to move on with our lives."

"Good," she agrees, offering me a supportive smile. "That's all we can do, right?"

"Right," I nod, resisting the urge to look back at Carmen as we walk away. Our future is bright – and it's time to embrace it, once and for all.

"Come on," my sister urges, tugging at my arm. "Let's go get Millie."

I nod, trying to shove thoughts of Jessica aside, and focus on Millie. She deserves better than both her mother and me. That thought weighs heavily on me as we drive to pick up my daughter from school.

"Hey, kiddo," I say as soon as Millie hops into the backseat. "How was

school?"

"Good," she replies, buckling her seatbelt. "We made paper mache masks in art class today."

"Sounds like fun," my sister chimes in, grinning at Millie through the rearview mirror.

"Can we get ice cream?" Millie asks, her eyes lighting up with excitement.

"Of course," I agree, smiling at her enthusiasm. "Let's celebrate."

"Yay!" she cheers, bouncing in her seat. "What are we celebrating?"

"Uh..." I falter, not wanting to bring up the custody hearing just yet. "Just us being together."

"Okay!" she happily agrees, none the wiser.

We pull into the ice cream shop, and Millie practically leaps out of the car. As we stand in line, Millie deep in thought over her flavor choice, she suddenly looks up at me with those big, innocent eyes.

"Will we ever see Jessica again?" she asks, her voice soft and uncertain.

I freeze, caught off guard by her question. "I don't know, sweetheart," I admit, my heart aching with regret. "But honestly, I hope so."

"Me too," she whispers, her small hand gripping mine tightly.

"Alright, Millie," I say, forcing a smile. "What flavor do you want?"

"Strawberry!" she exclaims, momentarily forgetting about Jessica as she points to the bright pink tub behind the glass.

"Coming right up," I say, turning to the cashier and ordering our treats. As we sit down, ice cream in hand, I can't help but wish Jessica was here with us, celebrating this milestone. But wishing won't change anything.

"Here's to family," I say, raising my ice cream cone in a mock-toast. Millie giggles and clinks her cone against mine, her laughter like music to my ears.

"Family," she repeats, and for a brief moment, everything feels perfect.

As we drive home, the sun dips low in the sky, casting a golden hue on everything it touches. Millie's face is covered in a thin layer of strawberry ice cream, and I can't help but chuckle at the sight.

"Having fun there, kiddo?" I ask, glancing over at her with a smirk.

"Best ice cream ever," she declares, taking another enthusiastic bite.

"Really? Even better than the one you had last week?"

"Yep!" she affirms, nodding vigorously. "But not as fun as when Jessica and I made sundaes together."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. Dammit, why does everything lead back to Jessica?

Millie's laughter fades into a contented silence, and I find my thoughts drifting to the woman I pushed out of our lives. The urge to call her gnaws at me, but my pride stubbornly digs its heels in. What would I even say? 'Hey, I won custody of Millie and thought you'd like to know since you're the only person who gives a damn about her aside from me?' Yeah, real smooth, Robert.

"Earth to Dad!" Millie's voice snaps me out of my internal debate.

"Sorry, sweetheart," I apologize, shaking off my reverie. "Just thinking."

"About what?" she asks innocently.

"Work stuff," I lie, not wanting to burden her with my emotional baggage. "Nothing important."

"Okay," she accepts, turning her attention back to the passing scenery.

I glance down at my phone, resting temptingly on the center console. It would be so easy to just pick it up and dial Jessica's number. But no, that's not how things work. I don't chase after people, least of all someone I wronged.

"Hey, Dad?" Millie pipes up, breaking through my thoughts once again.

"Yeah?"

"Can we watch a movie together tonight? Just you and me?"

"Of course," I agree, unable to deny her anything. "You pick the movie, and I'll make the popcorn."

"Deal!" she exclaims, her excitement contagious.

As we pull into the driveway, I can't help but imagine what it would be like to have Jessica here with us – laughing, joking, and celebrating our little family's victory. But for now, it's just Millie and me, and for now... that will have to be enough.

Jessica

I enter Morgan's office, clutching my portfolio like a lifeline. The floor-to-ceiling windows behind him make the room seem as if it floats above the city. I take a deep breath, trying not to be intimidated by the stunning view or the fact that I somehow managed to get a job here.

Of course if Morgan doesn't like the sketches he's asked me to prepare, my employment at his design house could change in a heartbeat.

"Ah, Jessica," Morgan greets me, leaning back in his swanky leather chair. "You've got something to show me?"

"Yep!" I squeak out, cursing my inner small-town girl for not having the courage to sound more confident. "Um, I mean, yes, I've got some new designs I'd like you to see."

"Let's take a look then," he says, gesturing to the sleek glass table in front of him.

I spread out my designs, trying not to shake as I do so. *Get it together, Jess. This is your moment.*

"Interesting," Morgan says, tapping his chin as he examines each piece. "Very interesting indeed."

"Uh, thank you?" I reply, biting my lip and praying to every deity I can think of that he means that in a good way.

"Jessica, these are exceptional," he announces, finally looking up from the designs. "Your use of color and texture is truly unique. I haven't seen anything like it in years."

"Wow, um, thank you so much!" I gush, my chest swelling with pride. *Did he just say my work was exceptional?* Pinch me, I'm dreaming.

"Keep up the good work, Jessica. You're going to fit in just fine around here," he says with a smile before shooing me out of his office with a wave of his hand.

"Thank you, Morgan! I won't let you down," I promise, stumbling backward out the door and nearly tripping over my own feet in the process.

"Can't believe it," I mutter to myself as I walk down the hallway, a stupid grin plastered on my face. "He actually liked my designs."

But as I walk down the hallway, the high fades, replaced by an all-too-familiar ache. I miss Millie and Robert more than I can bear. It's like there's a boulder lodged in my chest, growing heavier with each step I take away from Morgan's office. I try to shove the sadness aside, to focus on my success, but it clings to me like a stubborn shadow.

This pattern of sadness has become my unwelcome companion; every time something good happens, I can count on it to show up and rain on my parade. It's like winning the lottery only to find out that you've misplaced the ticket – a cruel joke that life seems to enjoy playing on me.

"See you tomorrow, Jessica," Monica, my co-worker, calls out as she waves goodbye.

"Bye, Monica!" I reply, forcing a smile onto my face despite the melancholy that threatens to swallow me whole. I gather my things and head for the exit, taking deep breaths in an attempt to shake off the gloom.

The moment I step outside, the cool evening air greets me with a soothing embrace. A part of me wishes I could just float away on the breeze, leaving all my worries behind. But instead, I trudge to the bus stop, my steps heavy with the weight of longing.

"Ugh, why is this bus always late?" I grumble to myself, checking my watch for the umpteenth time. It's bad enough that I have to deal with this heartache; I don't need to add public transportation woes to the mix.

"Excuse me, miss? Do you know when the next bus arrives?" a woman beside me asks, her eyes glancing nervously at the darkening sky.

"Your guess is as good as mine," I respond with a sigh, "but it should be here any minute now."

"Thank you," she says, looking relieved. We fall into silence, waiting together for the bus that will take us home.

As I stare off into the distance, my thoughts drift back to Millie and Robert. The way Millie's laughter filled the room like sunshine; how Robert's smoldering gaze could make me feel warm even on the coldest days. My heart aches for them, and I can't help but wonder if they miss me too.

"Finally!" I exclaim as the bus comes into view, its headlights cutting through the growing darkness. The woman beside me smiles in agreement, and we both board the bus, eager to put an end to this seemingly endless wait.

The ride home is a blur of streetlights and passing cars, my mind too consumed with thoughts of Millie and Robert to notice anything else. When the bus finally pulls up to my stop, I practically leap out onto the sidewalk, desperate for the fresh air.

When the front door of my family's home comes into view, I notice a small figure sitting on the front steps. My heart leaps into my throat as I recognize Millie, her wide eyes floating up to me as I make my way down the sidewalk.

"Millie?!" I stammer, dropping my keys in shock. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Surprise!" she exclaims, spreading her arms wide as if to encompass the entire room. I can't help but laugh at her dramatic display, even as my mind races to process the situation.

"Seriously, kiddo, what's going on?" I ask, crouching down to her level. Her grin is contagious, but I can't shake the feeling that something is amiss.

"Look up," she whispers conspiratorially, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

As I straighten and tilt my head back, I nearly jump out of my skin when I see Robert looming above me, an almost sheepish smile playing across his lips. In his hand is a bouquet of flowers so intricate and beautiful it could put a Monet painting to shame.

"Robert?!" I sputter, my heart pounding like a jackrabbit on steroids. "What are you... I mean, how did you...?"

JESSICA

"U h...guilt flowers?" I suggest weakly, attempting to maintain my sarcasm despite the fluttering in my chest.

"Jessica," he whispers, stepping closer. The flowers crinkle between us, forgotten now as the air between us thickens with possibility. "I—Millie's been missing you," Robert begins, running a hand through his black hair. "And I've had some time to think about what you said. You were right." He pauses, glancing at Millie. "I shouldn't let her be punished because I can be so insufferable and picky."

I blink, surprised by his admission. This is the same guy who practically invented arrogance, right?

"Wow, um, thank you for saying that," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

He nods, seeming relieved. "It's just... I need to do better. For her sake."

"Everyone makes mistakes," I assure him, feeling an unexpected warmth in my chest at his sincerity.

My heart does a little somersault as I look at Millie's beaming face. It's been too long since I've seen that infectious smile of hers. She rushes towards me, and I scoop her up into a tight hug.

"Jessie, I missed you so much!" Millie exclaims, her arms wrapped around my neck.

"Aw, I missed you too, kiddo," I reply, my voice cracking just a little. I try to ignore the way my own eyes are getting suspiciously damp.

"Hey, Jessica," Robert ventures, his hands shoved in his pockets. "I know this might be out of the blue, but if you're not busy today, would you like to

join us for a trip to the park? And maybe have dinner back at our place afterwards?"

"Really?" I ask, my eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

"Really," he confirms, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "What do you say? Are you in?"

"Of course!" I exclaim, unable to hold back my enthusiasm. "Let me just grab my jacket, and we can go."

"Great," he says, looking genuinely pleased. "Millie will be over the moon."

As I hurry to grab my things, I can't help but wonder what on earth has brought about this sudden change in Robert. Could it be possible that underneath all that arrogance and snark, there's actually a decent human being trying to claw its way out?

"Alright," I announce, pulling on my jacket and shouldering my purse. "Ready when you guys are!"

"Perfect," Robert replies, reaching down to take Millie's hand. "Let's get going then, shall we?"

"Yay!" Millie cheers, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

As we head out the door and towards the park, I'm filled with a strange mix of anticipation and uncertainty. But one thing's for sure—I'm not going to let this unexpected opportunity to spend time with Millie slip away. Whatever happens next, I'll be ready for it.

The park is alive with activity today, the sun casting long shadows over the playground equipment as children laugh and play. I can't help but smile as Millie dashes ahead of us, her pigtails bouncing, and Robert calling out a gentle warning to be careful. It's like watching a scene from a feel-good family movie, and I'm having a hard time believing it's real.

As we watch Millie scramble up the jungle gym, I find myself wondering what on earth has brought about this sudden change in Robert. He's acting like a completely different person—warm, friendly, even... fun. It's disconcerting, to say the least.

"Hey, Dad! Watch me!" Millie calls out from the top of the slide, breaking my train of thought.

"Alright, sweetheart," Robert replies, giving me a wink as he positions himself at the bottom to catch her. "Show me what you've got!"

As Millie shrieks with delight, sliding down towards her father, I can't help but feel both thrilled and confused by the transformation I'm witnessing.

What does all of this mean? Is he just putting on an act for Millie's sake, or is there more to Robert than meets the eye?

"Your turn, Jessica!" Millie commands, grinning from ear to ear as she jumps off the slide.

"Uh, sure," I agree hesitantly, wondering if my adult frame will even fit on the narrow metal chute.

"Come on, it'll be fun!" Robert encourages, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Alright, fine," I relent, climbing up the ladder and positioning myself at the top. "But if I get stuck, you're both responsible for rescuing me!"

"Deal," Robert chuckles, stepping back to watch the spectacle.

As I push off and hurtle down the slide, I can't help but laugh at the absurdity of the situation. Here I am, a grown woman, sliding down a children's slide in the park with a billionaire who, until recently, couldn't stand the sight of me. Life is full of surprises, isn't it?

After dinner, we all head back to Robert's place, and Millie is practically bouncing off the walls with energy. Eventually, her yawns begin to outnumber her giggles, and she reluctantly agrees that it's bedtime.

"Goodnight, Jessica," she mumbles sleepily, wrapping her arms around me in a tight hug.

"Goodnight, sweetie," I reply, returning the embrace before watching her disappear down the hallway towards her bedroom.

I'm still standing there, lost in thought, when Robert clears his throat. "Thanks for today, Jessica. It meant a lot to both of us."

"Of course," I say, smiling. "I had a great time too."

I start to gather my things, preparing to leave, when his voice stops me. "Wait, Jessica."

I turn to face him, eyebrows raised in question. "Yes?"

"Look, I know I've been...difficult," he admits, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. "But seeing you with Millie today—it's like you're the missing piece to our puzzle."

"Robert, I—" I begin, unsure of how to respond.

"Let me finish," he says, holding up a hand. "Our lives have been chaotic since Millie's mom passed away. And I've been doing everything I can to keep it together. But when I look at you two together, it feels like everything just falls into place, you know?"

Honestly, I'm not sure what to say. This is the most vulnerable I've ever

seen Robert, and it's both endearing and terrifying at the same time.

"Jessica, I need you to understand something," he continues, his eyes locked on mine. "Today, I realized that I can't let you go. We need you in our lives."

"Robert," I whisper, feeling a mix of relief and disbelief wash over me. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll stay," he pleads, his gaze intense and unwavering.

"Of course I'll stay," I reply without hesitation, my heart swelling with affection for this flawed but lovable man and his incredible daughter. "You two are stuck with me now."

"Thank God," he breathes, closing the distance between us and pulling me into a tight hug. It's unexpected but so incredibly comforting.

"Jessica, I... I'm sorry. For everything. I haven't been fair to you or Millie, and I want to make it right." His grip on my wrist tightens ever so slightly, as if he's afraid I'll slip through his fingers.

"Apology accepted," I say hesitantly, my heart pounding in my chest. This is so unlike the man I've come to know over these past weeks. "But... what now?"

"Can we start over?" he asks, his voice barely a whisper. "I want to show you that I'm capable of change, that I can be the man you and Millie deserve."

"Alright," I agree, swallowing hard. "Let's give this another shot." And with that, our lips crash together in a heated, desperate kiss that speaks volumes about our love, longing, and newfound hope for a future together.

As Robert's hands roam my body, pulling me closer to him, I can't help but marvel at the way his touch ignites a fire within me. It's electric, intoxicating, and downright sinful. We stumble through the hallway, leaving a trail of discarded clothing in our wake. My mind is a whirlwind of lust and desire, each coherent thought obliterated by the primal need to be one with this infuriatingly irresistible man.

"Bedroom," I manage to gasp out between kisses, my fingers tangled in Robert's hair.

"Right," he mumbles against my lips, guiding me toward the master bedroom as we clumsily navigate the dimly lit hallway.

Once inside, our bodies meld together on the plush bed, a tangle of limbs and ragged breaths. The passionate dance that ensues is nothing short of magical, each touch, each caress, each whispered word fueling the fire that

burns between us. It's a connection I've never felt before – a powerful, all-consuming love that leaves me breathless and reeling.

As we lay tangled in each other's arms, our sweat-slicked skin still tingling from the earth-shattering climax we shared, I can't help but let out a soft, contented sigh. "That was... incredible," I murmur, tracing lazy patterns on Robert's chest.

"Agreed," he replies, his voice low and husky. "I've never felt anything like that before."

"Me neither," I admit, privately marveling at the fact that this grumpy billionaire single dad somehow managed to unlock my heart – and body – in ways I never thought possible.

"Jessica," Robert whispers, his fingers gently brushing the hair away from my face. "I want you to know that I'm in this for the long haul. You and Millie are my world now. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure you both know how much you mean to me."

"Promise?" I ask, my heart swelling with affection for this man who, despite his many flaws, has wormed his way into my life and refuses to let go.

"Promise," he confirms, sealing the vow with a tender kiss. And as we drift off to sleep, wrapped in each other's loving embrace, I can't help but think that maybe, just maybe, fate brought us together for a reason.

ROBERT

I can hardly believe it's been an entire year since Jessica walked into my life. Now, here I am, standing in the audience of a packed fashion show for Morgan's design house, witnessing her talent on full display.

"Wow, Robert, you're actually attending a fashion event? Never thought I'd see the day," Edward smirks as he sidles up next to me.

"Ha-ha, very funny," I retort, rolling my eyes. "But this isn't just any fashion event. Jessica's designs are going down the runway tonight."

"Ah, I see," he says, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. "You're here for your little nanny, then?"

"Keep it down, would you?" I hiss, glancing around to make sure no one has overheard. Our relationship is still a secret, after all. Not that I'm ashamed of her, far from it. But the last thing either of us needs is the paparazzi hounding our every move – especially not with Millie involved.

"Relax," Edward chuckles. "Your secret's safe with me."

"Good," I mutter, turning my attention back to the runway. The lights dim, music begins to pulse, and the first model struts onto the stage.

"Damn," Edward whistles appreciatively. "That's one of Jessica's designs?"

"Yup," I say proudly as the model twirls, showing off the intricate details of the gown. "She's really outdone herself this time."

"Looks like you've got yourself a keeper there, Robert."

"Tell me something I don't know," I quip, unable to suppress a grin.

As the fashion show progresses, I can't help but marvel at the way Jessica's creations command attention. Each piece is a work of art, and it's no

surprise when the crowd erupts in applause as her name is announced. Pride swells in my chest like never before, not just for her talent, but for the woman she's become over this past year.

"Robert," Ethan slaps me on the back. "Your nanny's got some serious talent. Who knew?"

"Jessica's more than just a nanny," I correct him, bristling slightly at the dismissive tone. "She's an incredible designer."

"Alright, alright," he concedes, raising his hands defensively. "No need to get all defensive. I meant it as a compliment."

"Sorry," I sigh, running a hand through my hair. "It's just... she means a lot to me. More than anyone knows."

"Hey, I get it," he says sympathetically. "You've got something special with her."

"Something I plan on making sure she knows about very soon," I murmur, watching as the last model struts off the runway to thunderous applause.

"Sounds like you've got a plan," Ethan grins, clapping me on the shoulder. "Good luck, man. She's one in a million."

"Trust me," I say, catching Jessica's eye from across the room and sharing a secret smile. "I know."

The fashion show's after-party is in full swing at my lavish penthouse, and it's the kind of extravagant event that seems to have a mind of its own. The rooms are filled with laughter and lively conversation, with the guys from Suave mingling seamlessly among the invited guests. I can't help but smirk as I watch Edward Spencer try to out-charm everyone in his path, only to be met with amused smirks and knowing glances.

"Quite the party you've thrown here, Robert," Christopher Black comments, nursing a tumbler of whiskey as he takes in the scene from our vantage point near the bar.

"Only the best for Jessica," I reply with an affectionate glance towards her. She's currently engaged in an animated discussion with one of the other designers from Morgan's design house, her eyes twinkling with excitement. It's a sight that makes me feel like the luckiest man alive.

"Is that so?" Christopher raises an eyebrow, grinning knowingly. "You know, if I didn't know any better, I'd say there's something going on between the two of you."

"Really? What gave it away?" I ask sarcastically, rolling my eyes at his

perceptiveness. "Maybe it's just because we're both so damn good-looking."

"Or maybe it's the way you look at her when you think no one's watching," he counters, clearly enjoying himself. "Not like I'm judging, mind you. Just making an observation."

"Your observational skills are duly noted," I mutter, shifting uncomfortably under his scrutiny. I hate that our relationship is still a secret, but certain things need to fall into place before I can reveal the truth to everyone.

"Relax, Robert," Christopher chuckles, clapping me on the shoulder. "Your secret's safe with me."

"Much appreciated," I mumble, draining the last of my drink. It's time to make my move, and I can't do that with an audience.

"Excuse me," I say, nodding at Christopher before navigating my way through the crowd towards Jessica. She looks up as I approach, her eyes lighting up in that way that makes my heart stutter in my chest.

"Hey," she greets me softly, her voice barely audible over the din of the party.

"Hey yourself," I reply, unable to keep the grin off my face. "You're a big hit, you know. Everyone's talking about your designs."

"Really?" She blushes, tucking a strand of red hair behind her ear. "I'm just glad they liked them."

"Of course they did," I insist, reaching out to take her hand, making sure no one is watching. "You're incredibly talented, Jessica. And soon enough, everyone will know it."

"Thank you," she whispers, her smile so radiant it feels like the sun has come out just for me. "And thank you for this party. It's amazing."

"Anything for you," I tell her sincerely, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "Now, excuse me for a moment. I have a speech to make."

"Sure," she agrees, her eyes brimming with curiosity as I head to the front of the room.

"Alright, everyone!" I call out, clapping my hands together to command their attention. The room falls silent as all eyes turn to me. "Thank you all for coming tonight to celebrate the incredible talent and success of our very own Jessica Easton. Her designs were nothing short of breathtaking, and we're all so proud of her."

I pause for effect, glancing at Jessica, who blushes under the weight of everyone's gaze. "But there's something else I need to say," I continue, my

tone growing serious. "For too long, Jessica has been known as Millie's nanny, as my employee. And while that might have been true once upon a time, it's not the whole truth."

The room is filled with hushed whispers and curious glances, but I press on, my heart pounding in my chest. "Jessica Easton is not just a talented designer or a wonderful nanny to Millie. She's also the woman I love."

The silence is deafening, punctuated only by the sound of my own ragged breathing. I can feel Jessica's eyes on me, wide and filled with emotion, but I can't bring myself to meet her gaze. Instead, I focus on the faces of our friends, their expressions ranging from shock to delight.

"Robert... I don't know what to say," Jessica stammers, her voice trembling with emotion.

"Say you love me too," I whisper, finally daring to look at her. "Say that we can finally be honest with everyone about who we are to each other."

"Of course I love you," she replies, tears glistening in her eyes. "I've loved you since the moment I met you. And I'm so proud of us, of this life we've built together."

"Then let's share that life with the world," I say, my voice filled with conviction. "Let them see that we're partners in every sense of the word."

"Absolutely," Jessica agrees, her smile radiant as she wraps her arms around me, sealing our declaration with a passionate kiss.

Feeling the weight of the velvet box in my pocket, I realize that there's no better time than now. Our friends are gathered around us, our love finally out in the open, and Jessica stands beside me, radiant with happiness. It's now or never.

"Wait," I say suddenly, stopping her mid-kiss. "There's one more thing."

"What is it?" she asks, her eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

I take a deep breath and drop to one knee, feeling the floor beneath me as if I'm proposing to gravity itself. The room goes silent, anticipation crackling in the air like electricity. I pull the ring from my pocket, its diamond gleaming like a star plucked from the heavens, and hold it up to Jessica.

"Jessica Easton," I begin, my voice steady despite the pounding in my chest, "you have completely and irrevocably changed my life. You've shown me what it means to truly love someone, and you've given me the courage to be myself, even when it feels impossible. Will you marry me?"

For a moment, she just stares at me, her eyes wide and filled with tears. I can feel the tension in the room ratcheting up, everyone holding their breath

as they wait for her answer. But then, she nods, so vigorously it's almost comical, and chokes out a single word: "Yes!"

The room erupts in cheers and applause, our friends crowding around us to offer congratulations and hugs. Aiden Clark claps me on the back, his grin threatening to split his face in half, while Scott Madison raises a glass in toast, his eyes shining with emotion.

"Never thought I'd see the day, Robert!" Edward teases, his laughter infectious as he clinks glasses with Christopher Black, who's already engaging a journalist in an intense conversation. "But I've got to admit, you two make one hell of a power couple."

"About time, mate!" Aiden chimes in, clearly enjoying my rare display of vulnerability.

"Thank you," I say, struggling to keep my voice level amidst the whirlwind of emotions. "Your support means more than you could possibly know."

And as Jessica and I share another passionate kiss, sealing our engagement with the same fervor that began our love story, I can't help but think how lucky I am to have found her – this incredible, fierce, loving woman who's changed my life for the better.

"Let's celebrate!" I exclaim, feeling a surge of joy so powerful it threatens to lift me off my feet. And as we dance the night away, surrounded by friends and love, I know that whatever challenges come our way in the future, Jessica and I will face them together – as partners, equals, and above all else, soulmates.

The last of our guests have left, and the house is finally quiet – well, as quiet as it can be with Millie's infectious laughter echoing through the halls. Jessica and I had managed to coax her into bed after an hour of pleading and bargaining, insisting that tomorrow would bring more celebrations.

"Alright, little one," I say, tucking her in with a gentle smile. "Sweet dreams."

"Goodnight, Daddy." Millie yawns, her eyes already closing sleepily. "And goodnight, Jessica."

"Goodnight, sweetheart." Jessica leans down to press a soft kiss on Millie's forehead before following me out of the room, shutting the door behind us.

As we walk down the hallway, the silence between us is heavy with anticipation. I glance over at Jessica, her cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling

with excitement, and feel a familiar heat begin to rise within me.

"Jessica," I murmur, my voice low and husky as we reach our bedroom door. "I want you. Now."

Her breath hitches at my words, and she bites her lip, nodding eagerly. "Yes, Robert. I've been waiting for this moment all night."

"God, you have no idea how much I've wanted you," I confess, pulling her close and capturing her lips in a searing kiss. The taste of champagne still lingers on her tongue, mingling with the sweet essence that is uniquely her. Our bodies press together, desire evident in every touch, every caress.

"Robert," she gasps when we finally break apart, her chest heaving as she leans against the bedroom door. "I love you."

"God, I love you too, Jess." My heart swells with emotion, and I know that there's no turning back now. She has captured me entirely.

Without another word, I scoop her up into my arms, carrying her to our bed in one swift movement. Her laughter fills the air, and I can't help but smile as I lay her down on the soft sheets, her hair a wild mess around her face.

I hover over her, my hands tracing the curves of her body with feverish intensity. Every touch leaves a trail of fire in its wake, and I can feel the heat building between us, threatening to consume us both.

"Robert," Jessica moans, her eyes closed in ecstasy as I nuzzle her neck, leaving a trail of hot kisses in my wake. "Please..."

"Please what?" I tease, my voice low and gravelly as I trail my fingers down her stomach. "Tell me what you want, my love."

"You," she whispers, her eyes flying open to meet mine. "All of you."

Our clothes are discarded in a frenzy, scattering across the floor as we come together in a rush of heat and hunger. My body is alight with sensation, every touch from her hands and lips igniting a fire deep within me. I give myself over to her completely, lost in the pleasure of our connection.

But there's something more than just physical pleasure between us. With each thrust, each gasp, I feel something shift inside of me. A sense of belonging, of knowing that I've found my home in this woman.

As we move together, I'm struck by the realization that this is where I'm meant to be. With Jessica, in this moment, in this life that we've created together. It's not just about the physical release, but the emotional connection that we share.

And as we reach the height of our passion, our bodies exploding with

pleasure, I know that I'll never let her go. I'll hold onto her with everything I have, cherishing her for the rest of my days.

"I love you," I whisper, holding her close as we come down from our high. "More than anything."

"I love you too," Jessica replies, her voice soft and content as she presses a kiss to my chest. "Forever."

We lay there in silence, entwined in each other's arms, the only sounds the soft rustling of the sheets and our gentle breathing. In this moment, nothing else matters except for us.



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ONCE IN A LIFETIME (SNEAK PEAK)

GRUMPY BILLIONAIRES SERIES

Blurb

We were college sweethearts, destined to be together.
Zach was my first true love, and our future seemed inevitable.
Marriage, children, a lifetime of happiness—

it felt impossible for it not to happen.
Little did I know that Zach lacked the same confidence in us.
He used his ambitions and work as excuses,
constantly postponing our future
in a desperate attempt to buy more time.
But I refused to settle for less.

I made the gut-wrenching decision to leave,
shattering my own heart in the process.
Now, after a decade has passed,
our paths unexpectedly intersect once again.

Zach's life has been filled with empty flings, alcohol, and endless parties,
a futile attempt to numb his loneliness.
Meanwhile, I have found fulfillment

in the love I receive from the children I teach.
Unlike Zach, my heart remains open,
though my fear of being hurt by him again lingers.

Nevertheless, one truth remains undeniable:
Zach was and still is my greatest love,
the kind that only comes once in a lifetime.
Our second chance thrusts us into a whirlwind
of repressed passion and enduring love.

With age and wisdom, we now understand that the future lies in our hands.
Together, we must confront our past and determine if we can finally embrace
the future I once believed in so strongly.

I've never been to this part of town. Everything is bright and vivid, like a Disney movie.

I squint against the sunlight and step onto the sidewalk. And there she is right next to me, waiting for the traffic light to turn green.

Blonde hair. Red lips. Tight ass. Sensing my gaze, she turns to me and smiles. I smile back. That's where it ends. She goes in the opposite direction and I walk straight ahead.

If this was any other day, we would have ended up having drinks somewhere quiet and then head to my place. I would have been tearing off those jeans with my teeth. But no, I had to give in to Cassidy's insistence and go on a blind date.

Who goes on a blind date anyway? Isn't that why we have dating apps and clubs for quick hookups?

Angry with myself and Cassidy, I walk the rest of the block to the bakery in a sullen mood.

Cassidy and Ethan jump at the sound of the bell ringing above the door, announcing my arrival.

Both flustered, they stare at me as if I'm a stranger walking in on their love fest. They're married now, how raunchy can it get?

"Ever heard about knocking?" glares Cassidy.

I smirk when I notice her blouse half unbuttoned and she immediately hides behind Ethan to rectify it.

"There's a great big sign that says, 'Open'. How was I supposed to know you guys were big on exhibitionism?" I wink at them and Ethan returns it

with one of his own.

Cassidy ignores me. But I know she won't stay angry for long. It's not in her nature.

I look around the bakery and it feels like I've stepped into someone else's dream. I suspect a little girl who's obsessed with pink and still believes unicorns are real.

"Hey, nice place you got here," I try to sound as sincere as possible.

It doesn't work. Cassidy rolls her eyes and heads for the counter.

"Before you say something you'll regret, have a cupcake." She waves a chocolate monstrosity before me.

It's sugar-overload. I know it's bad for me, but my mouth starts watering and I can't take my eyes off it.

"Here," she laughs and shoves it in my hand.

"And spoil my appetite?" I joke before licking the icing off the sides.

Ethan grabs Cassidy by the waist and pulls her toward him. "It's good, isn't it?" he asks me, excitement on his face.

Oh man, if this is what being married does to you, I don't want any part of it. He's like a lovesick puppy around her. It's embarrassing to watch.

I shake my head a little too enthusiastically, and lick my lips for added effect.

He turns to his wife and beams, "Told you he would like it."

Cassidy playfully pushes Ethan away and comes up to me. "At least you put some effort into your outfit," she says and eyes me up and down.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I throw my hands up in the air, and pretend to be offended.

"Don't you dare give me that look, Zachery West!" There's that glare again. I wonder how Ethan deals with those eyes like daggers.

Maybe that's what the puppy persona is for—to avoid her wrath at all costs.

"I'm surprised you even showed up," Cassidy points out, this time less harshly. "With the reputation you have... I'm going out on a limb here."

I can't tell if it's a threat or a statement. It's hard to tell with women. They say one thing and then mean another. Confused, I look over at Ethan, but he's too busy blowing air kisses at his beloved.

I make a cracking sound with my invisible whip and he laughs.

"At least you have your sense of humor going for you," he says, and takes a seat opposite me.

“Don’t forget my boyish good looks and undeniable charm.” I give them my brightest smile.

“Yes, what woman won’t be blown away by your charm and charisma?” grins Cassidy, then she sashays over to the bakery entrance door and turns the ‘Open’ sign around to say ‘Closed.’

“I have a few ground rules before you meet my friend.” The serious tone in her voice makes me want to jump up and head for the exit.

Why did I even agree to this?

As if reading my mind, Cassidy purses her lips together and takes both my hands in hers. Looking me straight in the eye, she enunciates every word, “You’ll. Thank. Me. For. This.” And then she exhales. “But right now, I need you to please not be an asshole.”

“I’m not an asshole,” I scoff at her.

“Um, yes you are,” says Ethan, making sure he’s not within punching distance.

“Zach, come on, it’s just the three of us here. Let’s be honest with each other.” Cassidy puts on the brightest pink apron I’ve ever seen and removes a batch of macarons from the oven. They smell like my childhood.

“You’re telling yourself that you’re just going on this blind date to humor me, but you and I know the truth is that you’re ready to settle down.” She sounds so sweet and angelic. I want to believe her. I almost believe her.

And then Ethan erupts in a big roar. He’s laughing so much that he’s crying.

“Honey, that was beautiful,” he says in between chuckles. “But this is Zach we’re talking about.”

“And?” she asks with a deadpan look. “A tiger can be tamed.”

“What if I don’t want to be tamed?” I bend over the counter to grab a macaron.

Cassidy promptly hits my hand away. “They’re not done yet.”

“Why did you even set me up on this blind date? You know I don’t do well with surprises. I like to know what I’m up against,” I say and give her a questioning look.

She lets out a groan and takes a seat at the closest table. “I believe you have potential.”

“Potential?” I scoff. “I’m 35 years old. I think I’ve gone above and beyond my potential. Besides, what could I possibly have in common with this friend of yours?”

“A lot more than you think,” she half smiles.

“Like what?” I challenge her and wonder if it’s too late to bail.

Cassidy sees me eyeing the door, but instead of scolding me, she says softly, “Well, for starters, you’re both broken.”

I don’t know if it’s the tension in the room or if she hit a nerve, but my palms start to sweat. Ethan’s big eyes dart from Cassidy’s to mine as he waits for my rebuttal.

“I’m perfectly fine, thank you very much,” I say through gritted teeth.

“No, you’re not. You’re far from fine,” she sighs. “Otherwise we wouldn’t be standing here right now, having this conversation. I know enough to know that someone really hurt you in the past.”

I turn to Ethan. “Bro, you really know how to pick them.”

He doesn’t take too kindly to the joke and his face grows serious. “Come on, that was below the belt. Cassidy’s just trying to help you.”

“By setting me up with a complete stranger in a bakery?” The irony isn’t lost on me and I can’t help but laugh.

Cassidy and Ethan join me, and for a few seconds, the loud sound reverberates against the walls of the small bakery.

Cassidy catches her breath. “Did you think I’d tell her to meet you at Suave? She’d be eaten alive the second she set foot in there.”

“But come on, the bakery?” interjects Ethan. “The wholesome girl next door isn’t exactly Zach’s idea of the perfect woman.”

Cassidy shoots him a quick glance and holds her hand up. His mouth stays open but he knows not to say another word.

“By the perfect woman, do you mean banging body, full lips and big brown eyes?” she directs her question at both of us.

We both shrug, which means we’re kinda in agreement.

“Contrary to popular belief and what the bro code teaches you, no one ever finds their soulmate in a nightclub, bar, or strip joint.” Cassidy speaks with so much conviction that I’m inclined to believe her.

“So, where do you meet your soulmate?” I ask, knowing that I’ve fallen into a trap.

She smiles sweetly. “Well, here of course.”

Ethan slaps me on the back. “Come on, I have a surprise for you.”

He goes to the counter and brings out a bottle of whiskey and two coffee cups.

“My man,” I say and gleefully rub my hands together.

“I thought you’d need some Dutch courage just to help you out.” He pours the amber liquid into the cups and hands me one.

We clink the cups together and I take a big sip. I would be happy to down the bottle, but know I probably shouldn’t. I still have to be on my best behavior.

“Okay, I have a confession to make.” It’s only his second drink and Ethan’s tongue is as loose as a rubber band around a pebble.

“You’ve found out that Cassidy is really a man but you have to stay with her to keep up the charade?” I joke, and feel something wet hit the back of my head.

“Funny,” shouts Cassidy and gestures for me to return her soaked dish cloth, now lying at my feet.

“No, dumbass,” giggles Ethan. Yep, he’s about lightly salted. Could never handle his drink, especially whiskey.

“The guys have taken a wager on you,” he whispers.

Of course I wouldn’t expect anything less from Ethan, Edward and Robert.

“What’s the wager?” I ask and push my cup away just as Ethan’s about to refill it.

“Five thousand bucks says you’ll never make it to the second date,” he hiccups.

“Only five thousand?” I feign hurt and put my hand over my heart.

“Zach, you haven’t exactly been on a winning streak lately. When was the last time you were in a real relationship?” He’s serious now and attempts to straighten his tie.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I have meaningful thingamajigs. The difference between me and the others is that I don’t brag about my conquests,” I lie. He doesn’t buy it.

“Bullshit,” Ethan squawks. “If it’s any consolation, we all just want you to be happy. None of us want to see you lose this one.”

Cassidy jumps up and down excitedly and holds her phone to her chest. “She just texted me. She’s on her way.”

I take another gulp from my cup and smooth down my messy blonde hair. I instantly regret not getting that haircut.

“Nervous, bro?” smirks Ethan.

“No,” I reply a little too quickly and the word gets caught in my throat.

“Aww, look at him,” teases Cassidy. “He’s sweating.”

I use the cuff of my cashmere sweater to wipe away the thin sheen on my forehead. There are butterflies in my stomach. It's a weird sensation. I don't like feeling like this. I don't like not being in control.

"Hey, you forgot to tell me her name." I'm drowned out by the sound of the ringing bell above the door as it opens.

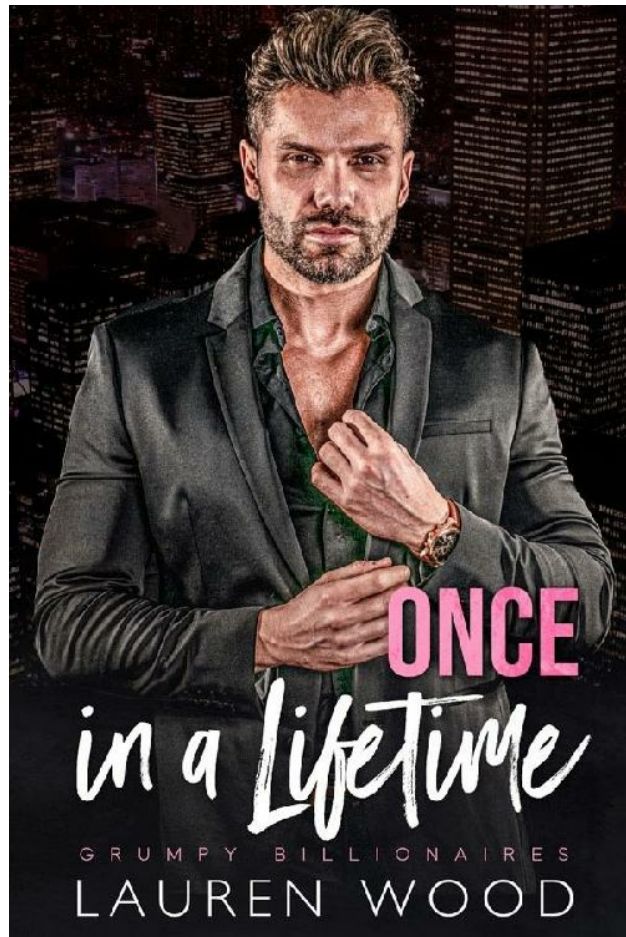
Our eyes meet. For a second, my heart stops and the blood in my veins turns to curd.

Is this Cassidy's idea of a sick joke? If it is, there's nothing funny about it. It's cruel and savage.

The ghost of girlfriends past is standing right in front of me with those honey colored eyes that still haunt my dreams some nights. I could never forget those eyes.

I had stared into them night after night back in college, drowning in their syrupy pools. Holding on for dear life. Hoping the dream wouldn't come crashing down.

It's Mia Rossi. I am well and truly fucked.



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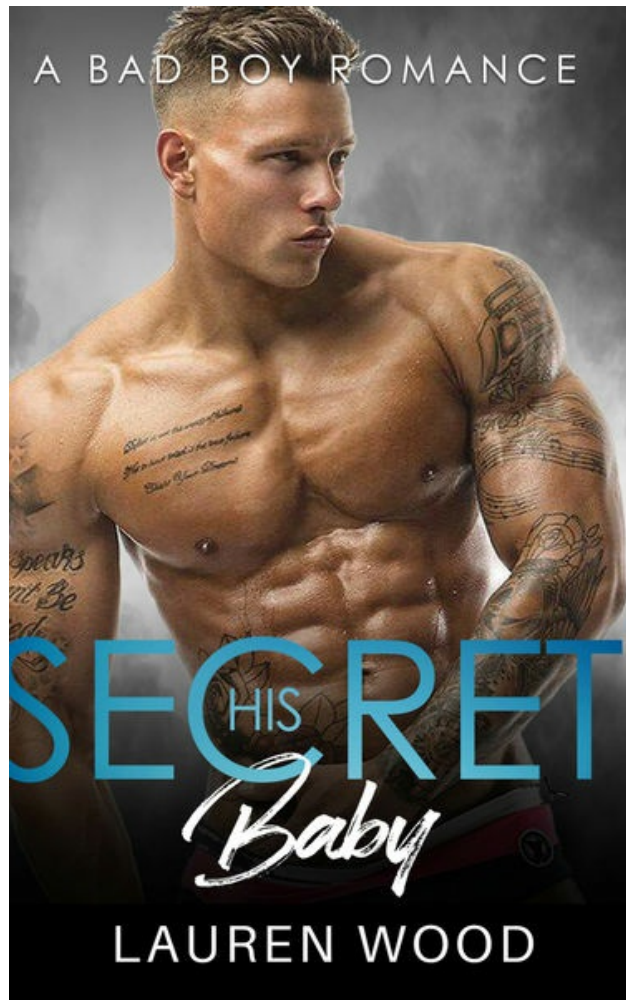
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