



SEE ME
AFTER
Class

A MEDICAL TEACHER STUDENT REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

AJME WILLIAMS

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A MEDICAL TEACHER-
STUDENT, REVERSE
HAREM ROMANCE

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CONTENTS

[Description](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Naughty Lessons \(Preview\)](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Want more Ajme Williams?](#)

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of authors imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers only.

All characters are 18+ years of age and all sexual acts are consensual.

DESCRIPTION

Three things on my revenge/detective masterplan:

- *Find out who killed my father*
- *Complete my medical residency with flying colors*
- *NOT fall in love with the three drop dead gorgeous murder suspects*

When my adoptive father died, I started a residency at the prestigious Oswald Institute. I have an ulterior motive beside my education - I want to uncover the truth about my father's death.

It all starts with a list of three names. Three men who want me to stop looking... and start submitting.

There's **John**, a charming psychologist... **Viktor**, an enigmatic, mega-smart doctor... And of course **Leon**, a charismatic heart surgeon.

At first, I blamed them for everything... but as tensions rise and the heat sizzles, I quickly realize there's no resisting the three silver foxes who rule Oswald.

Especially not when all three of them want me...

Dessie

“**T** here are two things I can say with absolute certainty, Dessie. One, the world will look for a hundred ways to break a capable woman. Two, you will never let it.”

I pushed back the rising tide of acrid regret that threatened to spill into my mouth. Before this, I had little reason to wonder what sorrow would taste like, even though it had been a permanent fixture in my life.

“From ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we consecrate thee to the ground. Let there be peace for thy soul.”

The somber, lullaby-like words of the priest cast a gentle spell over my heart.

I tightened my grip on my purse. Would Oswald finally have peace now that he was no longer here? Because there was none for me.

My last encounter with anything remotely resembling peace had been two nights before, sitting huddled in the cozy armchair by our home’s fireplace as Oswald recounted the happenings of his day.

Oswald... his warmth, his constant urge to live life to the fullest, and his big heart full of nothing but love for me.

I was not born of him, but there was no man I would rather have called my father.

The unfairness of everything hit me like a stone to my throat. We were supposed to see the world together. I blinked hard, pushing back the rogue tears that attempted to rise to the surface.

A bitterly cold wind swept over the black trimmings of my coat. I pulled it closer and looked up to the sky. Perhaps this was God's way of saying Oswald deserved an appropriate send-off, even though the funeral was a small, hushed affair.

Given how Oswald hated pomp and show with a passion, it had felt right to keep things limited to the immediate family.

Autumn descended upon Connecticut with urgent haste, a cool rush of change that swept through the quiet nooks where Oswald had once woven his existence.

It was here he had lived, loved, and ultimately, had bidden farewell to the world as a man who was deeply and universally beloved.

Bare trees, stripped of their verdant glory, stood sentinel against the dull, leaden skies, their skeletal limbs groaning under the season's weight. Piles of leaves, a painter's palette of fiery reds and burnt oranges, swirled and danced across the expansive cemetery.

Each gust of wind kicked up a whirlwind of these fallen fragments, creating a russet-hued ballet of autumn's decay.

“Miss Gardner?”

I bit down on my lip to keep myself from screaming. This was the hundredth time someone had spoken to me in that *‘I’m sorry this is happening to you’*, pity-riddled tone. I dug my nails into the soft flesh of my palms, now balled into fists. “Uncle Cuthbert,” I muttered. “Thank you for taking care of the arrangements.”

Oswald's lawyer responded with a brief nod. "It was the least I could do. It was a remarkably small send-off for a man of his stature and achievements. But, given how unexpectedly everything has happened, perhaps..."

His words trailed off into space, and I let them.

The final notes of the funeral hymn hung heavily in the crisp Connecticut air, the melody lingering like a ghost over the freshly dug earth.

As the pallbearers slowly lowered my father's casket toward its final resting place, I felt a tangible emptiness creep into the space around my heart. Each thud of the wooden box against the grave's walls echoed a reality I was unwilling to accept.

"Let us have a moment of silence for Oswald." Father Thomas's voice cut through the thick quiet, a knife sharpened with finality.

The gathered mourners bowed their heads, a sea of black attire that reflected the gray of the early winter sky. Their heads bobbed slightly in rhythm with the priest's words.

Father Thomas began to recite the Lord's Prayer in his sonorous voice. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

I knelt and picked up a fistful of dank autumnal soil, feeling the chilling dampness seep into my skin.

The texture was grainy, a tactile reminder of the cyclical nature of life. *Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.* I could feel the undercurrent of finality pulsating through the silence.

"Release the earth, child." Father Thomas's words held an odd blend of gentleness and gravity. "As you release this soil, release your pain."

I could hear him speak but remained on my knees, rooted to the spot. *This was the last thing I will ever do for my father.*

The tears were seconds away.

A gentle old hand curled like a claw around my elbow.

“Come, child,” whispered Ms. Wainwright. “He would have wanted you to be strong.”

I gulped and rose from my knees like a rickety old armchair. I raised my clenched fist over the gaping mouth of the grave.

I looked at the priest. Then, with a silent prayer of my own, I let go.

The clods of earth tumbled from my grasp, each granule a whisper of goodbyes, plummeting into the abyss with a soft, mournful patter.

It was done.

“He was a good man,” Father Thomas murmured. “His legacy lives on in you.”

What could he possibly know about my father’s legacy? I stared blankly at Father Thomas, wishing I could scream, shout, hurl blame at someone, anyone.

The sparse gathering around the graveside included me, the lawyer, and old Ms. Wainwright, Oswald’s assistant for the last three decades. Everyone else belonged to the domestic staff.

Ms. Wainwright followed me, and then the rest of the people gathered to pay their last respects. Solemn faces, each paler than the previous, filled the edges of my blurring vision. I kept my face deadpan and my head straight.

Just a few more minutes, and I could go home. A small and utterly ridiculous smile threatened to form on my lips. It took everything I had to resist it.

No one would understand why Oswald’s daughter, the supposed light of his life, was smiling like a fool standing by her father’s grave.

Not even if I told them this smile was a final, desperate attempt to make myself accept that home would never be the same, not without him.

With the last of the proceedings completed, I sighed and turned my focus on the lawyer and Ms. Wainwright. We

walked back to my shabby old Ford V8, all quiet. The silence stretched back to my father's little cottage-style house, set on the outskirts of the Gardner Institute estate, one of the best medical establishments in the country.

Once I parked, I stepped down from the car, followed by the two other occupants.

What remained of the cortège followed in a pair of apt black Daimlers hired for the occasion. I stepped out of the Ford and stood still until the hearse trailed a curve on the opposite path winding out of the wooded area, from where it would take the main road to Stillingbrook.

Somehow, with everything over, I was relieved. I could not bear to think of his lifeless form, the way the light in his eyes refused to shine, or how cold his fingers were when I held them, my own icy in shock.

These were not memories I wanted.

“Shall I drive you home, Ms. Wainwright?”

I cast a sideways glance at Letitia Wainwright, who responded with an emphatic shake of her head. “No, child, don't bother. I could use a long walk and some quiet. I imagine you'll have much to discuss with Mr. Merriweather.”

Ms. Wainwright was a creature of routine, and even if the very fabric of her life had been upturned this morning, that reality would never change.

For the last thirty-three years that she had lived in a small cottage near Oswald's own, she'd walked home after finishing the last of her day's chores.

It was a form of ritualistic healing for her, treading over crunchy leaves to her idyllic, honeysuckle-covered front door. I imagined it would give her a semblance of solidity this evening.

“Very well,” I said with a gentleness I could not muster for anyone else but her. “Go safely. I will see you tomorrow.”

She responded with a tight-lipped smile, her eyes blinking furiously. “Yes, dear.” With a brief pat on my arm, she turned

with surprising dexterity and vanished into the shadows of the tall trees.

I sighed as a hesitant cough punctuated the quiet air. “Miss Gardner, do you want to finish this?”

Dear old Uncle Cuthbert and his insistence on propriety. “You’ve known me since I was a snotty-nosed teenager, Uncle Cuthbert. We don’t need the formalities, least of all today. Come, let’s discuss everything inside.”

Guiding him inside the quaint, inviting home, I felt the grip of nostalgia tighten.

Both Oswald’s and Ms. Wainwright’s residences were initially laborers’ cottages adjoined to the grand manor now known as the Oswald F. Gardner Institute of Medical Research. While Ms. Wainwright reveled in meticulous maximalism, Oswald’s taste veered toward the refined Queen Anne aesthetic, an echo of his Anglo-Saxon heritage.

The hefty oak entrance, a horseshoe hanging for luck above it, opened into a circular hall. It branched out with naval-like precision into three adjoining chambers under the watchful embrace of oval arched wooden beams.

I remember my first glimpse of this home, struck by its whimsical charm. That, and his love for second breakfasts, had made me ask Oswald if he was actually a Hobbit or wanted to impersonate one.

He’d reassured me by saying that if he ever went on an adventure, he’d always take me with him.

So much for promises.

Oswald’s and my mutual love for Old-World English cottage core led to many adventures, scavenging yard sales and auction lots across the country in search of objects to complement his passion for oak wainscoting and handcrafted trinkets.

Glimpses of those treasures adorned the deep Edwardian sideboard in the dining room.

My high school writing trophy stood adjacent to a Chinese puzzle box. A series of Māori tribal masks punctuated one wall.

A Nepalese *kukri* knife, nestled within a blood-red velvet cradle, rested beside a glassy solar system model. The latter was a memento from my eighteenth birthday. Oswald swore he'd won it in a fight.

These little oddities had made this cottage a home for me.

Yet, today, I had an indescribable urge to pick up a chair and hurl it across the room, breaking and shattering the pristine arrangements.

I shook my head and focused my attention on Uncle Cuthbert, who was regarding me like one does a very sick puppy.

“Can we talk in the study?” I asked him, making a poor attempt to sound dignified. My voice came out raspy and broken instead.

“Of course, Miss Gardner.”

I resisted the impulse to snort and crossed two rooms to enter a long, low-beamed one, warmed by the buttery-mellow glow of artfully positioned lamps covered in Japanese silk.

Oswald's chair loomed ahead of me, situated behind a mahogany desk. I hesitated.

There was no way in hell I would sit in that chair. Instead, I stopped near the table and turned to face the elderly lawyer, focusing on the little lines spanning his neck. I could not bring myself to meet his gaze.

“It's all over the place right now,” I admitted. “I haven't had much time to review his papers.”

“That's understandable, Desdemona.”

His saying my name caught me off guard. Cuthbert Merriweather dropped into a roomy armchair that just about swallowed his frame. “You already know you stand to inherit everything from your adoptive father. But...”

His tone broke. He busied himself momentarily by taking off his glasses and rubbing the rims with surprisingly ferocious intent. “Ahem.”

“What is it, Uncle Cuthbert?” The question tasted dry on my tongue.

“It seems there are some outstanding issues,” he replied, his tone whispery with anxiety.

“Outstanding?” I examined the word in my mouth before trying to make sense of it. “Were there any debts, you mean?”

“No, my goodness!”

Uncle Cuthbert immediately met my gaze, shock and disapproval evident in his tone. “Your father died a wealthy man, Miss Gardner, and everything in his name, including the personal estate, passes to you.”

I shook my head impatiently, not minding that Uncle Cuthbert resembled a very old and pedantic spider at that moment.

He’d already told me I was next in line for the fortune my father had made over his lifetime. I didn’t care.

“What did you mean when you said ‘outstanding’?” I pressed.

Uncle Cuthbert’s fingers interlocked. His mouth dipped into a somber curve, the etched lines of grief bearing a renewed severity.

“Probate isn’t a mere formality,” he began, his voice tinged with a rare gentleness. “Especially given the unusual circumstances of his... demise. The autopsy results will reveal more.”

My retort came swift and harsh. “I was led to believe it was just a routine process.” I clenched and unclenched my hands involuntarily.

His nod was heavy. “True, but it appears new evidence has surfaced. I suggest you sit.”

Rooted to the spot, I stood rigid before Oswald's desk, my voice barely above a whisper. "No need. What's the new development?"

A voice, identifiable by its raucous harshness, spoke in the recesses of my mind. Whenever the demons came calling, it was always this voice. "*You already know, you pathetic waste of space.*"

An unseasonable trickle of sweat ran down my forehead. No. It could not be. *Everyone* loved Oswald.

His reluctant sigh was as ominous as a death knell. My breath hitched.

"I'm sorry, Dessie." His mouth pressed into a grim line. "I wish I could tell you something different from what I'm about to say. Oswald was murdered."

Dessie

T *here has to be another explanation.*

An hour had passed since Uncle Cuthbert had left, following a profuse series of apologies via which he'd tried to tell me he was sorry about everything.

But no matter how hard I examined the papers on Oswald's desk or how desperately I racked my brains trying to figure out why someone could possibly have the motive of killing him, I could not figure it out.

It felt like a personal failure. I was better than this. I'd spent years priding myself as the sixth member of The Famous Five. For context, growing up on a hearty dose of Enid Blyton had been the only way to stay sane as I bounced around two orphanages, three foster homes, and five schools.

At the age of fifteen, my mind was made up. I'd become a psychologist, or I'd die trying. I didn't know where to begin, but Oswald's email address about youth training programs on a website had been providential.

I've been between homes and schools, I wrote. I'm getting along, but I don't want to be fifty and still stocking boxes at

Walmart. My grades suck right now, but I need something real where I'm helping others. Is there any hope for me?

The next thing I knew, Oswald was standing at the doorstep of my final foster home with a twinkle in his cerulean eyes and a telling smile. The adoption process was a year-long affair, but he stuck it through. I'd asked him why later.

"Because I see great potential in you. I'm sixty years old, Dessie. I've given most of my life to my profession, built an Institute from scratch, and now, I want to sit back and watch someone capable tend to all of it with the same love I did. You're my living legacy."

The back of my throat felt raw, like someone with long nails had reached inside and scratched it until it was bloodied. "How will I keep up with your mind, Dad?" I'd asked him. This was back when I was just getting comfortable calling him my father. It didn't take a lot of time. In the first six months after adoption, Oswald gave me more love than I'd had for the last fifteen years.

"I know a good one when I see them," he'd replied, a faint chuckle punctuating his words.

Any insecurity I'd ever had vanished because of that love, the mere largesse of it enough to make me strive ten times harder to be worthy of being his daughter.

I'd done well for myself, to the point of graduating from UPenn and becoming a child psychologist in Maine. I had my own apartment in Newhaven. While it wasn't of the same stature as Oswald's home, it was enough. I'd earned every last cent I put into buying the place and furnishing it, and Oswald's pride in my achievements made everything much better.

My eyes fell on the faded keychain neatly stored on one end of Oswald's desk. It was the first gift I ever got him, from the first pocket money anyone ever gave me. I traced my index finger over the legend. *World's Best Dad.*

How could he be gone? How could someone *want* him gone?

My eyes blurred once again. I tried to recenter my thoughts by focusing on the desk. The surface was awash with brick-a-brack, weathered by time and speckled with tiny nicks and scratches from countless years of use.

On one side was a disarray of clinical paperwork, neatly stacked patient files, and sheaves of cutting-edge research papers, their edges curling slightly. Medical journals lay open to color-saturated pages that flashed the latest breakthroughs in bold lettering.

Nestled among them were conference badges and seminar schedules.

Nearby was a scattering of sticky notes, every square inch filled with hastily scrawled reminders and hypotheses in his tight, rushed handwriting, the blue ink contrasting sharply with the neon backgrounds.

To the side, a set of gleaming surgical tools sat in a sterilized case, their sharp silhouettes catching the soft glow of the desk lamp. Beside it rested a pile of scientific textbooks, worn and well-loved. The titles ranged from genetic engineering to advanced neurosurgery.

A multitude of photographs were spread across the desk, their frames as varied as their contents. Some depicted smiling colleagues and esteemed mentors, others the faces of the hundred-odd students he had mentored over the years, barring the sparrow he took under his wing.

At the edge of the desk was a faded coffee mug, stained with the ring of faded brews. Amid the flurry of intellectual chaos, a carefully tended Bonsai tree provided a rare note of tranquility, its verdant leaves a stark contrast to the beige walls of the study.

This had been my favorite place in Oswald's entire cottage, maybe because while he was alive, it was also where he and I would spend most of our time. He was a good teacher. One of the best.

He was the man who came home after spending endless hours at the Institute and still found time for me. Most

evenings, I'd wait for him to come and welcome him with a big hug and his customary drink— coffee with a disgusting amount of milk and sugar. He needed the caffeine hit but was an old softy who couldn't stand the bitterness.

Once he had unwound, I'd climb up on the desk or sit on a windowsill, and he'd tell me a story. No matter how busy my father was, he never made me think I didn't belong in his life.

And now he was gone. *Murdered with a lethal dose of morphine in his coffee*, Uncle Cuthbert had said. I wished I could reach inside my throat, take that raw pain out, and smatter it all over this room.

But I could not do that, so I tried the next best thing and called Sofie, a fellow survivor of the underbelly of Connecticut's orphanages and foster care systems.

"I heard the news."

Straight to the chase. I didn't expect her to sugar-coat anything, anyway. "I don't get it," I confessed, fiddling with the hem of my modest black dress. "This is Oswald we're talking about, Sof. Can you imagine anyone who'd hate him enough to kill him?"

In Connecticut, Oswald's life was the stuff of legends.

Oswald wasn't merely respected. He was beloved, cherished by a community far wider than the scientific circles in which he moved. Anecdotes about my father were woven into the fabric of medical lore, sparkling with wit, wisdom, and a dash of eccentricity.

One of my favorite stories about him centered around a groundbreaking conference in Boston where Oswald, unfazed by a misplaced luggage snafu, had delivered his keynote address in bright Hawaiian board shorts and a lab coat, winning a standing ovation and an impromptu award for 'Most Innovative Conference Attire'.

Then there was the time he'd spent an entire Thanksgiving Day in the lab, bent over complex genetic sequences, subsisting solely on a diet of cranberry sauce and cold turkey

sandwiches, until he had an epiphany that led to a pivotal discovery in gene therapy.

His heart was as expansive as his intellect, brimming with warmth, kindness, and an uncanny ability to make everyone feel seen. He made a habit of knowing every institute member, from the most distinguished researchers to the nightly janitorial staff. He remembered birthdays, acknowledged life events, and had a knack for appearing with comforting words and a steaming cup of cocoa at moments when the world seemed unbearably bleak.

To call Oswald popular would be a gross understatement. He was a mentor to many, a beacon of inspiration and a friend to all. His Rolodex was a testament to the lives he'd touched, brimming with contacts, each name a life he had positively influenced, a story he had become a part of.

“He sacrificed everything for the world,” I said bleakly, clutching the wooden table to keep my hand from shaking. “He didn't marry. His dedication to helping others came at the expense of his own chance for a family.”

Sofie's reply is muted and gentle. “Dessie, you know that never bothered him, not from the time you came around. You made him as happy as any biological child would have. I know you're grieving, but don't you dare feel guilty.”

Like always, Sofie had hit the nail on the head. She was right. Many emotions were raging through me right now, but the one that hurt the most was the indescribable guilt.

Work and life in Maine had kept me busy for a year and six months. Oswald and I spoke on the phone. I made promises to come see him as soon as I could, and I didn't.

I couldn't do enough. *I couldn't save him.*

“I wasn't even there when it happened, Sof,” I said, my voice thick with misery. “The janitor found him lying lifeless on the ground in his office.”

“Did the autopsy results come back?”

“Yes,” I said, my throat choking out the words. “Poisoned. He asked me to visit so many times. But I got too busy. I

couldn't even make time for the only human being who believed in me."

"Dessie."

I had begun rambling. "When I heard the news, I thought it was something else, you know?"

Sofie was silent, knowing I'd come up with other reasonings.

"Maybe someone wanted to poison someone else in the institute, and Dad drank the coffee meant for them. Or maybe the report was wrong. That makes more sense than... *this*. I'm right, aren't I, Sof? Tell me I'm right."

"Dessie." I could hear Sofie breathing through the phone. "Please."

I bit my lip hard. "Yeah. I'm talking nonsense."

"You're not, though. Oswald Gardner was a luminary, not just in medicine but in life too. People like him... there's an odd thing about them."

My brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"They inspire a god-like affection from others," Sofie explained. "A fervent, almost scary kind of adoration. People put them on a pedestal, and sometimes, the slightest mistakes can bring them crashing down. When it happens..."

I tried to understand the words she had left unsaid. "You're saying someone was obsessed with him?"

Outside, a barn owl hooted, low and slow. The nocturnal refrain, drawn out and languorous, hung heavily in the midnight air.

"I'm saying it's a possibility. You need to review his files and see if you can come up with anything, okay?"

"Understood," I murmured, my voice just above a whisper, before ending the call. I set the phone down, pressing the heels of my hands into my tired eyes, a futile attempt to stave off the gnawing fatigue.

The mirror on the far wall of the study reflected a gaunt specter of my usual self. My skin was washed out, adopting a spectral pallor that seemed to drink in the dim light. My lips were stark and unnaturally red, stark against my ghostly complexion, while my eyes, wide and searching, dominated my face.

With a heavy sigh, I pushed away and focused on Oswald's desk. Night was spreading its ebony quilt over half the world, lulling it into slumber while stirring the other half into the chaos of a new day.

But for me, the concept of rest seemed a distant luxury.

Paper after paper, I scanned each ink-filled line, each cryptic formula, each hurried note, desperate to find some semblance of understanding. Just as dawn began to paint the sky with streaks of pink, slicing through the velvety blanket of darkness, my frantic search bore fruit.

There, among the sea of research notes, was an unassuming scrap of paper, its ordinariness deceptive. Three names were etched in Oswald's familiar scrawl, and a single word that entirely altered their implications.

John Galbraith.

Viktor Magnusson.

Leon Vincenzo.

A ripple of recognition fluttered at the edge of my memory. Yanking my phone from the depths of my cavernous black coat, I swiftly typed in the first name.

John Galbraith was the Director of Psychiatry at the Oswald F. Gardner Institute of Medical Research. My pulse quickened.

Next, Viktor Magnusson, a distinguished senior researcher in the Oncology department.

And Leon Vincenzo, a highly-respected surgeon.

All three of them were nestled within the confines of the sprawling manor that housed Oswald's life's work. All three

men he would have known intimately, possibly even personally recruited.

What possible purpose could there be for their names to be tucked away on a seemingly inconsequential piece of standard A4 paper with just one quantifying word?

Unless...

Unless Oswald had uncovered something about these men. Something damaging.

Was it possible that this was a roster of suspects? Accusations of malpractice, financial misconduct, maybe fraudulent credentials?

“Murky waters hide secrets,” I muttered, tracing the one word under the three names.

Motives? It read, with a single question mark.

It boded well for me that there were likely only fifty people in the whole world who knew what Oswald Gardner’s adopted daughter looked like, and they were the only ones who had attended his funeral. Close family and loyal servants.

I had never set foot in the Institute, nor knew the people who worked there.

When Ms. Wainwright had relayed the shattering news of Oswald’s passing, I had been on the precipice of making my acquaintance with the Institute. But fate had other plans. By the time I was able to depart from my retreat in Maine, Oswald’s body had been moved.

Now, as I reflected on it, I acknowledged this delay as a strange act of grace. The plan quietly taking shape in the corners of my mind required me to be a woman unlinked, unbound, and utterly detached from Oswald Gardner.

I looked up at the mirror again, but this time, a sense of purpose rested in the shadowy corners of my eyes. I would find my father’s killers and pay them in kind.

The face reflected back at me bared her teeth.

Under the weak glow of a single table lamp, I stared at my phone. Only one man could help me get the wheels moving.

I punched in the number I had committed to memory, my heart pounding in my ears with every metallic click of the dial.

On the third ring, a deep, gravelly voice answered. “Hartley.”

I drew a steadying breath, my voice lowering to match his gravitas. “It’s me. I need your help.”

A pregnant pause on the other end before he replied, a note of caution creeping into his tone, “This line isn’t secure.”

“Old habits die hard,” I retorted, glancing at the phone, “But this line is as secure as they come.”

Hartley chuckled, a deep rumble over the line. “What do you need?”

“I need a new identity, one with connections. Wealthy ones.”

There was a pause before he responded, “Why?”

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t necessary.”

“What’s the situation?” His voice was businesslike.

“I’m investigating a murder,” I said, the words hanging heavily in the air, “At the Oswald Gardner Institute.”

Hartley whistled softly. “That’s the big leagues. You sure about this?”

“I’ve never been surer,” I replied, my tone firm and resolute.

Hartley sighed deeply, the sigh of a man burdened with knowledge. “Alright. I can get you set up as a Davenport. Old money, East Coast. Your parents would be trustees, well-respected philanthropists with a soft spot for medical research. Sent you to the finest boarding schools, Stanford undergrad, a year at Oxford.”

I blinked. “A Davenport?”

“The Davenports have enough clout to get you into the institute, and they’re well enough known that no one will question it. But they’re also private, even reclusive. It will explain why nobody’s ever heard of their darling daughter who’s suddenly shown up.”

I closed my eyes, letting out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. This was a start, a solid plan. This was my way in.

“Thank you, Hartley.”

“Just doing my job,” he replied gruffly, the sentiment lingering as the line went dead, leaving me alone once more in the dimly lit room with my thoughts and the hum of the dial tone.

“It’s not over, Dad,” I muttered under my breath. “It’s not over until I get them.”

John

*S*uck it up and get it over with, John. Doesn't matter if she's a trust fund baby or the President of America herself.

My brows knitted into a heavy scowl as I navigated the winding descent of the staircase that led to the imposing Oswald Gardner Research Institute.

It was a quintessential Monday morning, mirroring my discontent with an unrelenting show of gray. The sky was an uninspired canvas of sullen clouds, the wind gnawing at my resolve with its icy teeth.

Then again, it was hard to focus on anything else as a flash of audacious purple materialized against the monochrome backdrop, mocking the somber aesthetic of the institute I so deeply loved.

A sleek and unapologetically flamboyant Lamborghini was rolling toward me, its glossy surface glinting with arrogance.

As if I needed anything more to add to the irritation building, lava-like, in my core. My lips curled in a sneer. Our *guest* had a thing for excesses.

She's not a guest, I reminded myself. She's the new psychology postdoctoral resident.

Well, I haven't even met her, and she's a fucking nightmare already.

Dessie Davenport. I'd reviewed her resume and read enough of her work over the last few days to know she wasn't bad. She wasn't special, either. Securing a place here would have been impossible for someone so unremarkable if she hadn't come from money.

And that she did. Her reclusive but enormously endowed parents had left no stone unturned in ensuring their darling daughter had the best of everything served on a platinum platter. There wasn't too much about them on the Internet, meaning they preferred a reclusive life.

Pity, I couldn't say the same for the young woman who got out of the flashy car, her Louboutins crunching dry gravel as she strutted toward me. With practiced ease, I changed my sneer to a polite smile.

"Miss Davenport," I said, pushing the contempt out of my voice. "Welcome to the Oswald F. Gardner Institute. Did you have a good trip down?"

She nodded neutrally. "It was fine, thank you." She did not stop to shake my hand or ask for my help. Instead, she took a lingering look at the Institute before turning her back and returning to her car.

I watched, fascinated despite myself, as she pulled out her bags and suitcase, clad in those ridiculous heels, with absolute ease.

Self-sufficient for someone driving a Lamborghini. I almost smiled.

At least she didn't ask if anyone would take her bags and have them sent up to "her room". I'd been around enough rich people to believe the stereotypes. For a brief second, I considered helping her but decided against it.

She seemed the kind of woman who'd label me a male chauvinist pig for holding a door open or getting her luggage.

She traveled light, too. Only one suitcase, I noted.

“Follow me, please,” I said curtly, leading her into the grand hall. She matched her pace to mine, her face deadpan. Odd, I thought. Child psychiatrists were usually much more chipper, but this one was as grim as death and twice as pale.

She didn’t even blink as I stopped and wheeled to face her. “You can leave your luggage there,” I told her, pointing at an old oak refectory table flanking the left wall. “Let’s finish your interview first.”

She remained rooted to the spot. A second passed, then two. “Interview,” she finally breathed, her lips curling. Somehow, she made her reply sound like an insult instead of a question. “I was told I already got the post?”

Whatever redeeming thoughts I’d had about her in the last few minutes vanished to be replaced by mounting distaste. “You did,” I almost barked. “This is a mere formality.”

She continued regarding me with her heavy-lidded gray eyes, the light in them almost reptile-like in their intensity.

The girl was all eyes and lips, her tiny head surrounded by a wild crop of raven hair she’d tamed with a single silver clasp. She was beautiful, I reluctantly admitted, if gothic chic was your thing. Unusual, too.

Get over yourself, the self-deprecating voice inside me snapped. I sighed. “Every new resident goes through the same process, Miss Davenport.”

She waited a moment. “Very well. Thank you, Dr. Galbraith.”

I watched as she weaved her way to the table, dropping her bags with an audible thud. A living silhouette, she carried herself with an undeniable elegance, her form mimicking that of a high-fashion model, angular and skeletal.

Her attire was, in contrast to her choice of transport, somber, devoid of flair or personality.

Our eyes locked, and for a moment, her hollow gaze met mine.

“Shall we?” The words fell flat as we climbed the stairs in silence.

I wondered how old her old money roots were. It was a concept I despised. I studied her, unresponsive to the grandeur of the dual staircases, the ornate oak detailing, and the oil-rich history gracing the walls. To her, it was nothing special.

It was all too apparent, the air of unaffected indifference, a posh education mirrored in her refined accent, and the sense of entitlement that came with owning estates instead of homes.

“Have a seat,” I instructed as I ushered her to my office, striding past my rustic driftwood desk, a relic from my past life.

Her curiosity came alive within these walls, a visible interest piquing as her gaze swept across the packed bookshelves, a collection of worn textbooks and classic American literature.

She paid no attention to the ancient marble fireplace, focusing instead on the grand window offering a panoramic view of the picturesque valley beyond.

“Sit,” I repeated, an edge of impatience creeping into my voice. Unfazed, she sank into the opposing chair.

“Thank you.” Her words were polite yet empty, reminiscent of rehearsed childhood manners. As I flipped open her folder, I adopted a falsely cheery tone.

“So, what brings you to Stillingbrook?” I began. “It’s a tranquil pocket of Connecticut. Not much excitement here.”

“I started my practice in Newhaven, a far quieter segment of Maine,” she retorted, each word delivered with sharp accuracy. “If you read my file, you would know that I’m on the autism spectrum. Loud places unsettle me.”

I frowned, her disclosure surprising me. “That must’ve slipped my attention. What I did note, however, was the surprising youthfulness. You’re very young to have your own practice.”

“My clientele mirrors my youth. To them, anyone over fifteen is practically ancient,” she deadpanned, the closest she’d come to a joke. Even this was marred by her lifeless eyes and an austere mouth that seemed incapable of humor.

“This establishment is primarily a research institute.” I shrugged. “Those who still manage patients do so upon referral from larger organizations. Our credibility lies in our academic programs. Do you think you could adjust to a life without the business of practice?”

Her silence persisted, offering no answer to my question, which trailed off to an awkward death. My patience thinned, and my hand involuntarily stroked my upper lip in frustration.

“Well,” I started, breaking the silence, “the crux of the matter is whether you will be happy here. Do you foresee that?”

She held my gaze unblinking. “Happy? No,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “But the work, I believe, will bring satisfaction.”

Her icy gaze hinted at an underlying fire, a wild fury cloaked beneath the cool exterior.

I revised my initial perceptions. She was more than a trust-fund baby. Her nature hinted at her being potentially a problem child herself, possibly worse. Her affluent background could’ve conveniently erased any past indiscretions.

“I see,” I responded, meeting her chilling stare head-on.

Trouble incarnate, I thought, and she’s the last thing this place needs.

“I’ll begin unpacking if we’re finished here,” she asserted, effectively dismissing me. The corners of my lips twitched.

“Then let me extend a warm welcome to the Institute, Miss Davenport,” I replied, my tone an exaggerated mimicry of her polished accent. “Thrilled to have you join our humble family.”

She was already on her feet but drew in her breath with a small hiss at that. I looked down involuntarily.

Long white fingers curled with vicious intent into the sanded surface of my desk and left the mark of a nail dragging down. Just the one.

My gaze followed her as she retreated, her gaunt shoulders outlined by her austere black jacket, a stark resemblance to a malnourished Victorian orphan.

Likely, a rigorous dieting regime for vanity's sake.

An inexplicable wave of sympathy washed over me.

And also, she's not nearly as unattractive as you first thought, and maybe she's not that shallow, either, despite coming from money and possessing no real talent or ambition that anyone can see, I said to myself with scathing contempt.

God in heaven, what was wrong with me today? It wasn't like me to be so indecisive.

Forget her, I ordered my unruly subconscious. It was Monday, and there was plenty to do without worrying about this strange little rich girl doing her impression of Jane Eyre on the premises.

I had my own responsibilities, the mundane tasks of the institute and correspondences with the board of trustees, all in the wake of Oswald's departure.

And therein lay the true problem. *Oswald.*

The man who had plunged us into this chaos and left me to unravel it.

Oswald, the idealistic visionary with a bottomless bank account and a relentless sense of entitlement. Oswald, the professional nuisance who'd endowed a research facility with millions in his lifetime and who took it all away when he died.

In retrospect, if Oswald's will had been public knowledge, I would have—

The voice inside my head spoke once again.

There, there. What's done is done. You just need to find a way to get out of this mess.

Leon

“**W**hat do you mean, it wasn’t serious?”

Ruby’s voice was reaching a feverish pitch. Any louder, and she’d sound the same as the whistles from the decade-old pressure cooker my mom purchased on one of her trips to India.

“I mean exactly what I meant the last three times we slept together,” I drawled lazily, trying my best to keep my eyes open. Last night had been a long one. Ruby was a distraction. Usually, she didn’t mind that.

“You’re a pig, Leon Vincenzo,” she replied viciously, throwing the “pig” at me with such velocity that drops of spit flew from the thin opening between her lips and settled on my nose.

I sighed and fished out my handkerchief. I opened the folds carefully and wiped my nose. “That may be true, but it doesn’t stop you from coming to my room at ungodly hours and begging me to sleep with you.”

I wasn’t lying, for the record. For some reason, Ruby was convinced the way to my heart lay through my penis. She belonged to the group of humans who sought validation

through skin, thinking that the harder she fucked, the swifter I'd fall. Unfortunately, it didn't work that way for me. Commitment wasn't my thing.

Life was too short to take that kind of baggage on my shoulders. It was enough that I had my patients to comfort and their morale to uplift. Sex was purely a survival mechanism.

I folded the napkin, taking care that each corner went exactly where it was supposed to.

A little bit of the top end hung out, annoying me. Sighing exasperatedly, I redid the whole procedure until each side fell perfectly together. Tucking it back into the pocket of my pants, I flicked a dismissive gaze at Ruby. She was standing there, her hair disheveled, her eyes red with anger, and perhaps, the beginnings of a very visual breakdown.

I didn't have time to witness it or comfort her. My stomach growled audibly.

"Ruby, I'm sorry. I never want to hurt you," I said, keeping my tone measured and reasonable. "We should stop sleeping together. You deserve someone better than this, someone who can take care of you."

The change was immediate. Her eyes widened, first with fear and then with raw urgency. "No," she whispered. "I didn't mean that. Listen, I just need a timeout. It's been an exhausting week."

"Same," I replied calmly.

"Go get something to eat," she rambled. I noticed her beginning to pick the skin on her left index finger. She did it a lot when she was nervous.

Dermatillomania, I made a mental note to myself. A condition of compulsively picking, scratching, or digging into one's own skin. Quite an effective tool to relieve stress. I'd know.

"I won't take any more of your time." Ruby licked her lips. "Maybe we can get together tonight?"

She was doing the same thing she always did. And we'd repeat this little showdown at the same time, same place tomorrow morning. It was pitiful how some people were so easy to read. That would be all the women I'd slept with at this institute. It was a huge academic and professional stimulation. But in terms of physical gratification, OFG was growing more and more mundane. There was no thrill, no chase.

I shrugged noncommittally. "My schedule is packed. Let's do this some other time."

"Oh." Her shoulders fell, but she maintained her false cheery disposition. "Okay."

"Later, Ruby." I turned around before she could make a further embarrassment of herself and strode to the dining hall.

Disinfectant and the acrid, sweaty tang of ambition accompanied me as I crossed a crowd of harried residents. Clinical rotations were happening, which meant they'd be working directly with patients, diagnosing and treating conditions, and gaining hands-on experience. Back when I'd begun, this was my favorite part of residency.

My footsteps, in contrast to their rushed ones, were sure, slow, and loud. I stopped at the entrance of the dining hall, a lopsided grin on my face.

"Morning, Leon," John Galbraith greeted me, his green eyes crinkling with warmth as he flashed his signature grin. He was my closest friend at the institute.

"John, how's your morning thus far?"

"The usual," he replied, adjusting his glasses and avoiding answering me directly. "Speaking of which, have you met the new medical resident yet?"

"New resident?" I raised an eyebrow, my interest piqued.

"Ah, there she is," John said with a grimace, nodding toward the end of the hall.

I turned my head and saw her for the first time. Draped in a pristine white lab coat, she moved with an air of quiet confidence.

Her raven hair cascaded over her shoulders like a waterfall of ink, framing a face that could only be described as unconventionally sexy and a little sad.

But what captured me most were her eyes— a piercing shade of blue cold enough to reverse global warming.

“Wow,” I breathed, momentarily transfixed. “What’s her name?”

“Desdemona Davenport, although she may prefer to go by Dessie.”

Dessie. I rolled the name on my tongue. It tasted deliciously dark. “She’s... something else.”

“She also doesn’t look remotely interested in you,” John observed keenly. He wasn’t wrong. The new girl walked past the two of us, sparing only a slight nod at him. I got nothing despite putting on my best bed-breaker smile.

“Huh,” I replied. “Maybe she bats for the other team?”

“Or maybe,” John remarked, slapping a decisive palm on my shoulder, “you’re not her type. At any rate, you’d best leave her alone. There’s something off about her.”

John Galbraith was a man of many talents. Among them was his ability to sniff trouble from a country away. But just as he enjoyed staying away from it, I welcomed and embraced it. Trouble was my choice of breakfast, especially when it came looking like her.

“I’ll take your word for it.” I humored him anyway.

“By that, I’m going to guess that’s the last thing you’ll do.” He sighed resignedly. “I can’t stop you.”

“You can’t.”

“Be careful.”

“I will.”

John inclined his head, and I loped after Dessie Davenport, all thoughts of lunch gone from my head. “Hey,” I called out to her. No response.

Huh.

She paused at the foot of the stairway leading to the bedrooms for the junior staff. “Hey,” I breathed, catching up with her. “I’m Leon.”

Her shoulders stiffened for a slight second, and then, she did a half-turn. “I know who you are. I just don’t care.”

“Meow,” I said appreciatively. On the inside, I exulted. *It speaks!*

She began climbing up the flight of stairs. I watched her take two steps and stagger slightly, the weight of her Louis Vuitton suitcase clearly too much for her slight frame.

“Here, lemme help.” I bounded after her and caught her bag before it tumbled down.

“You’re not supposed to go up,” she pointedly remarked. “You’re too old to be here.”

I bared my teeth. “I have a thing for breaking rules.”

“You say that like it’s something good.”

“Spend some time here, Miss Davenport.” I hoisted the bag and fell into step beside her. “And you’ll see that a bit of rule-breaking does a lot of good for the nerves.”

She stopped. “Or, it could be that you break the rules because you think it’s the only way to get attention. It’s your insecurity speaking on your behalf. It isn’t as badass as you’d believe. At least, I don’t particularly care for it.

Quite the bitch, I thought to myself. *I like her.*

“What do you do, then?” I changed the topic entirely.

The staircase took a rounded turn before leading to the fourth floor, just under the attics.

“I’m a child psychiatrist,” she said with a touch of dry tiredness as we passed a number of doors belonging to rooms housing the junior staff. She stopped in front of the one that said *Davenport, D. C.*

“That’ll be me.” She gave me one more side glance. “You are very persistent.”

“About what?” I asked, surprised.

“You followed me up here.” She frowned pointedly. I read between the lines. You followed me up here even though I didn’t want you to.

Maybe she was scared of what could happen between us. My lips curled into a ghost of a smile. “I never take no for an answer, Desdemona Davenport.”

She turned the doorknob and pushed her door open. I lounged in the doorway, watching her deposit her bags on the compact lambswool rug by her even more compact bed. My eyes scanned the room.

At least she got clean sheets, a neat little pillow, and a desk for studying. Everything else about the room, including the clinical white walls, was shitty.

My quarters downstairs boasted rich mahogany accents, furnished with a minibar and complete with a king-sized bed. It was perfect for the occasional company, which was why I’d trudged a suitcase up here. I had kind of hoped I’d be entertaining the new girl tonight, but she was apparently Wednesday Addams in real life. Then again, even that oddity found a boy she wanted to kiss.

“You haven’t left,” she observed in that strange little way of hers.

“Are you dismissing me?” I asked pointedly.

“I’m not invested enough to care.”

I watched her push a stray black curl away from her face as she unpacked her bags. The contents were neatly arranged, separated into size-specific piles, color-coded, and methodically arranged. She took out each pile in descending order, beginning with her delicates.

Finally, toiletries spilled out of a compact waterproof pouch, their colorful containers contrasting sharply with the mundane surroundings. Black pumps and a pair of plain

bedroom slippers found their places beneath the unadorned, weathered plywood dresser.

The empty bags crumpled into forlorn, deflated forms beneath the simple single bed.

Did Miss Davenport pay this much attention to detail when she undressed with the intent to fuck? I became hard at the very thought.

Once she had pushed the bags under her dresser, she straightened and wheeled around, only to look right past me.

Was she ignoring me on purpose? I pushed the thought away. She was playing hard to get. There. That was a thought I could work with.

“One dinner,” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m asking you to come to one dinner with me,” I pressed. “If you don’t enjoy yourself, I won’t bother you again.”

She batted her long eyelashes at me. Her face remained completely unreadable. “If I agree,” she finally replied, “will you leave me alone?”

Oh, well. I’d take that as a win. “Sure thing.”

“Deal.”

Seconds later, an angry cough behind me told me the reason. The matron on this floor was Lorena McPhee, a thin, sly rake of a woman who hated having men of any description on her territory.

“Dr. Vincenzo,” she remarked behind me in that special, poison-laden, saccharine-soaked voice she reserved for those who encroached on her kingdom, “Thank you for coming to welcome our newest staff member. I’ll take over from here.”

I wheeled around. “I’m happy to show her around.”

“That won’t be necessary,” she said firmly. “Please don’t let us keep you from your lunch.”

She may have heard my stomach churning audibly.

I flashed her an ingratiating smile, my charm dialed up to full wattage. My efforts were in vain. Her lips contorted, soured by stubbornness. With a resigned shrug, I conceded the battle and made my exit.

Frustration gnawed at me when I overheard D.C. Davenport engaging in a far more cordial conversation with Lorena. Their voices carried through the corridor. “Thank the stars you’ve arrived, Matron,” she exclaimed, her words echoing softly throughout the narrow space. “I was at a complete loss for how to rid myself of him.”

Lorena’s response seemed excessively pleased. “Well, I’ve had plenty of experience in such matters, dear.”

The dulcet strains in D.C. Davenport’s voice were remarkably apparent when it wasn’t directed toward a man. Anger simmered within me as I turned on my heel, making a hasty descent down the stairs, two steps at a time.

As I rounded the corner while climbing down the stairs, I ran into Ruby. She stood like a gargoyle, her face a bright shade of red.

“So,” she breathed. “I followed you two.”

Of course, she did.

“How does it feel?”

I narrowed my eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Rejection,” she replied gleefully. “I heard what Davenport said, Leon. Sucks to be you, doesn’t it?”

I stepped forward and touched her arm. She jumped back. “Desperation doesn’t look pretty on you, Ruby. Don’t ever try that with me again,” I said icily.

Ruby wrenched her hand away from me and ran down the rest of the stairs without looking back.

I marched toward the hallway and spoke to no one. I took a steak, cooked rare like I liked it, and cut into it ferociously. D. C. Davenport would be warming my bed yet.

She'd break once I figured out her failing and twisted it around to my advantage.

Then she'd come crawling to me like the rest of them.

They always did.

Viktor

“Dr. Magnusson?” Her voice, small and unassuming, rang in my ears. “Are you listening?”

I was, but I felt a curious sense of being untethered from my body. It wasn’t evening yet, and I was already on a jittery high from all the caffeine in my system. The last few nights had been sleepless and hurried. But that wasn’t the main reason.

My hearing tried to comprehend the words the speaker in front of me shaped with her soft, small mouth. I’d never seen someone so unconventionally beautiful. Her eyes were a spectral gray, almost glacial in their transparency. She looked like a living ghost.

The arch of her eyebrows held the question she had asked and expected me to answer, except I hadn’t quite heard her. She reached out to touch the bare skin of my wrist. I jumped and took a quick step back, coming to my full cognition.

I was standing outside the lab, my arms stacked with notes for today’s class. A class that I was, by all intents, very late to. I scowled heavily. “I’m sorry, I’m very late.” I broke into a brisk walk, hoping this strange creature would leave me in

peace. I didn't care for the way she made me feel. *Exposed*. Yes, that was the right word.

She didn't seem to mind my reluctance to entertain her in the least and fell into step beside me. *Far too entitled for my taste*, I thought sourly. Her ego clearly made up for her small physical frame.

Nice, Viktor. Come up with all the reasons you can to hate her before you know her.

I grimaced. Maybe I was being too harsh with the new girl. "You were saying...?" I prompted, hoping she'd repeat what she'd asked initially.

"Yes, Dr. Magnusson. I read your paper on regenerative cell treatments. It's quite groundbreaking," she began, her tone reflecting genuine interest. "The part about using pluripotent stem cells to repair damaged tissues was particularly fascinating."

Hmm. We had a lot of serious students in this institute. And then, there were some others with a particular proclivity toward flattery. But why would the new girl flatter me? What was in it for her?

For the moment, I humored her. "That's one of the more promising aspects. The ability of these cells to differentiate into any cell type gives us numerous therapeutic possibilities."

"Your paper mentioned potential risks, though," she pointed out.

It did. I recalled the hours I had spent in the confines of the research lab, standing motionless with my sole focus on the Petri dish nestled under the microscope.

The late hours were irrelevant compared to what I hoped to learn. Unfortunately, the cells in the petri dish did not multiply in the controlled, precise way I had anticipated. Instead, they sprawled across the dish like an unruly, expanding universe. They had deviated from their intended path. If left unchecked, this meant they could lead to teratomas, tumors with unpredictable intent.

“It’s a significant challenge,” I remarked coldly, although internally, I was impressed by how thorough she was. “But I’m exploring gene editing techniques that could help increase the precision of cell differentiation.”

The new girl fell silent for a moment. We turned around a corner. “So, by editing specific genes,” she continued, “you would theoretically guide the stem cells more accurately?”

“Yes.”

“Funny, how we think we can control life,” she observed quietly. “In a way, you’re playing God, aren’t you?”

I stopped in my tracks. “Why would you say that?”

“You’re charting paths for living creatures that are external to you,” she replied slowly. Her gray eyes held no sentiment, no light. It was oddly unsettling. “It’s a form of being in control.”

I cleared my throat uncomfortably. “If you’d like,” I said, more to myself than her, “you can attend one of my classes and get a feel of what we do here.”

“Oh, okay.” She frowned. “Am I allowed to audit other people’s classes?”

“Of course you are,” I replied, all too hurriedly. “We’re all just one big, happy family here.”

I had reached my class. Students were filing in, some of them casting curious stares in our direction. The new girl paused at the same time as me and cast a tepid look my way. There was a flicker of what looked a lot like distaste in her eyes.

Damn, she makes me feel like I’m back in school and about to get my pants pulled down. “Not that I’m forcing you or anything,” I hastened to add. “It’s just something you can do, should you wish to.”

“What do *you* wish?” She threw the question at me, sudden and unexpected.

“Huh?” I was acutely aware that I’d begun sounding like a fish out of water.

She bit her lower lip, searching my face with that gray gaze of hers. “I mean, would you like me to attend one of your classes?”

I was out of my depth here. “Sure, if you’d like,” I repeated once again. “As I said, we’re supposed to make the new entries feel at home.”

“By getting them to attend classes? That’s... not the same as beer and a conversation, but when in Rome, I suppose.” Her riposte was dry to the point of being served on ice.

Okay, this strange being was getting on my nerves. I furrowed my brows at her. “I really am late. So, if you don’t want to attend this class, please excuse me.”

“You’re very far from home, Dr. Magnusson,” she replied, breaking the line of conversation completely.

I blinked.

“Does it ever get lonely?”

What the fuck?

I turned away from her. *Egotistical and intrusive*. I didn’t need more of this woman in my life. She was trouble.

“Thank you for accompanying me to my class,” I hurled over my shoulder. “But you seem to lack boundaries. I value my privacy.”

Her reply made me stop in my tracks. “Fair enough. I’ll leave you alone.”

Most would have hastened to make an apology or been offended by my choice of words. I had expected her to reply with something shrill and more affected. I almost stumbled as I veered around to look at her. She was retreating with a slow, unfazed walk, almost sauntering away. She did not seem offended in the least.

I watched her languidly stroll into the distance, only remembering I had a class to teach when a familiar hand knocked on my shoulder. Leon, looking like he hadn’t had mounted a living being in three days. Knowing Leon, that was akin to a lifetime of abstinence. He looked distinctly annoyed.

“What did the new girl tell you?” he demanded, sulking to the point of sticking his lower lip out. I frowned.

“I wasn’t listening.” For some reason, I didn’t want to share anything from our conversation. Not yet, anyway.

Leon responded with a petulant glare.

I sighed heavily. There was no escaping the inevitable discussion where he’d draw out all the things missing in my life. But it would have to wait.

“Leon, I’ll talk to you after class.”

Before he could come up with a response that would hold me back, I disappeared.

It was much harder to focus on the topic of today’s lesson. I was glad when it ended and I stepped out, sniffing the scent of caffeine that lingered in the evening air. Good. Coffee would be a welcome distraction from all of it. From *her*.

“We’re having that discussion, Viktor.”

Oh, hell.

Leon was right outside, leaning against the wall with a speculative smirk on his face.

“I need coffee,” I remarked.

“Who said I don’t?” He pushed off from the wall, and the both of us began making our way to the institute’s small cafeteria housed in the top floor, which was also home to the Oncology and Regenerative Medicine units.

We maintained a stoic silence until I had a cup of hot beverage in my hands. I dropped down into a corner seat by a window. Leon got himself a croissant and a cup of milk tea.

“They make those in the morning.”

“So?” he asked, raising one eyebrow at me. “Doesn’t make them any less flaky or delicious.” He bit into the buttery bread, tearing off about half of it at one go.

“You also chew like a rabid hyena,” I observed casually, nursing the scalding coffee. I took one sip. It was hot enough

to rival what hell would probably feel like. But I liked it that way. “Go on,” I sighed reluctantly.

“She spared you more time than she did me,” he complained immediately.

“I’m not surprised. You don’t seem like her type.”

Leon swore in brief, colorful Italian. I decided it did not merit a response.

“You moron,” he continued, talking with his mouth full of bread.

“I’m not the one about to choke on my food.”

“She literally approached you on her own, and you’re not even thinking about it?”

“Thinking about what, Leon?” I rubbed my eyes wearily. I had a lot of work to get to, and this one hour in the evening was usually the only respite I enjoyed.

Not today, not when Leon was practically breathing down my neck, knowing I couldn’t just up and leave.

“It,” Leon drawled with a knowing look. “Her. A woman, fresh on campus, seeking a mentor, maybe someone to guide her, show her the ropes. You must see it—she’s obviously taken a shine to you.”

I took another sip and tried to recall what else she had said before she narrowed on the stem cell research. “Her interest was in regenerative cell treatments for children with cancer,” I remembered out loud. “She was curious about the potential mental health side effects on young patients.”

Leon rolled his eyes so hard I lost sight of his irises for a second. “Are you seriously sitting there and telling me she’s hot for your *work*? Why didn’t I think of that?”

“You’re being sarcastic,” I observed tiredly.

“And you’re being a fool,” he replied congenially. “Is it a novelty for beautiful young girls to flatter older guys in Denmark?”

I squinted at him. “So, you’re sour. I’m going to hazard a guess and say it’s because you want to entertain her, and she’s not interested?”

“Fuck you,” he replied good-naturedly.

“Doesn’t answer my question.”

“Well, yes,” he replied, gathering the crumbs on his plate. “But let’s not lose sight of the main thing. I’m looking out for you. I always have.”

True enough. Leon and I didn’t have many years between us. In fact, I was older than him. But on our first day at the Institute, he’d seen me languishing in a bar with bloodshot eyes and decided he needed to mentor me.

I hadn’t asked for it, but with time, I came to appreciate it. My friendship with him was like a coat on a frosty day. It was something you just slide into without too much thought, but also something you can’t do without.

I pushed back my chair, rising to my feet with a hint of a smirk. “Of course, I never questioned your insight, Leon. Duty calls. I must head to my lab. But, should she seek me out again, I’ll be sure to hint that you’re utterly smitten, green with envy over her talking shop with anyone but you.”

Leon grimaced and stood up with me. “I’ll strangle you if you do. Come on, I’ll walk with you to the lab.”

“She makes me uncomfortable,” I told him as we neared my laboratory. “But that could be because she’s out to hunt, and I’m not willing to play chase.”

“Are you kidding me?” Leon scoffed. “That’s one of the best things about courting a woman!”

“You make yourself far too available,” I parried back.

“Yes, yes. I’m a man-whore and you’re a saint.” He smirked, pretending to be offended.

“I’m saying that you may need to try a different tactic with this one. But I have no doubt you’ll get what you want. Go on, now. Go be a lech somewhere else. I have work to do.”

He gave me a middle finger salute and sauntered away, curiously composed in a way I vaguely wished I could replicate but knew I was incapable of.

Leon would always be the most popular ladies' man in whatever room he was in, and if he wanted to have that girl with the strange gray eyes, then undoubtedly, he would succeed in the end.

I stepped into my lab. It was my world, but as I stood there, I couldn't shake off a growing sense of emptiness. I'd been at the institute for six years, leading cancer research. My work was my life, yet outside my lab, I couldn't remember a single personal connection that mattered. I tried smiling in the glass reflection. It was awkward, forced. Maybe it was my lack of social grace.

Leon said I couldn't even read a woman's signals.

But that girl with the gray eyes, she had asked about my work, then about me. I almost let my guard down. Her image lingered in my thoughts. Leon would probably charm her soon, and that would be that. But something nagged at me, an anomaly in my ordered life. Her name, her purpose, why she talked to me.

I shook my head. Distractions, they'd come and go. I'd handle it like I'd handled my parents. Like I'd handled all people, really. Because around people, the only persistent thing was lingering rejection. Even in the tenderest of relationships, the paramount constant was one person rejecting something about the other and attempting their hardest to change them.

No. My life was fine. I returned to my slides.

The new girl wasn't a problem yet. But if she became one, I'd do what I always did.

I'd find a way to get rid of her.

Dessie

A *month before Oswald's Passing*
“You know, Dessie, life is a fleeting thing. It's the impermanence that gives it meaning.”

Amid the sprawling Connecticut countryside ablaze with the fiery blanket of autumn, Oswald perched on a rustic wooden chair on the porch of our home. I stood, leaning against the wall. Oswald's eyes were closed. He looked tired. There were new lines on his forehead.

Occasionally, he would open his eyes and stare at the wall or the floor, not really focusing on anything specific. In my time in the profession, I'd learned to read some cues. As Oswald rested, his hands fidgeted with the hem of his jacket, tugged a loose thread, then retreated into his spacious pockets, only to emerge again. There was something going on, but I didn't know what.

“What's going on, Oswald? Spill it, will you?” I prodded, cradling the steaming cup in my hands. I took a slow, deliberate sip, feeling the warmth seep through my fingers. “Or, wait until I read your cues,” I added, drawing the cup closer and letting the ginger-infused vapors tickle my nose.

“Take a guess,” Oswald challenged me, a slow smile slipping onto his lips. “What does Dr. Gardner think?”

“You’re shuffling your feet on the carpeted floor, which is a habit you singularly despise,” I relayed, beginning to count his cues on my fingers. “A minute ago, a gust of wind sent a cascade of amber and gold leaves swirling out in the yard. You have an unobstructed view. On any other day, you’d be telling me to admire it. Today, you just flinched.”

I paused to take a breath and another sip.

Bless him, Oswald had mastered the art of my tea preferences. He stashed away Assam roast tins just for me. I savored the robust blend, mixed with a precise spoonful of sugar, the ginger zing finely crushed, and a generous double-dollop of creamer. It was a stark contrast to my coffee habits—unadorned, starkly bitter, reflective of my less-indulgent side.

“Cut to the chase, won’t you?” Oswald groaned and leaned back into his chair.

“I like studying you,” I remarked, setting the cup down on the tabletop beside me. “And based on what I’ve just read, would you say you are A-going through a senior-life crisis, or B-planning to pull a Bilbo Baggins and go prancing on an adventure without telling me, or C-exhausted and in need of a nap?”

Oswald’s smile grew bigger. “Well, I guess you could say it’s a bit of everything. I’ve been wondering a lot about endings?”

I frowned. “But what if someone could change that? What if someone invented a drug that could make people immortal?”

Oswald chuckled, his sound carrying all the wisdom of the world. “Immortality? That would be a curse, not a blessing. Imagine living while everything around you changes and fades away. No, the beauty of life lies in its transience, in knowing that it is a temporary gift.”

I refused to consider it. Oswald could get very annoying during these conversations because it all ended with him declaring that one day, he would up and vanish. “Wouldn’t it

be tempting, though? To hold on, to see what the future holds for humanity?”

Oswald’s soft features became rigid. “The future? Humans are the only living creatures that maim and kill for pleasure, Dessie. What good would it do to be around for ages and witness this at play?”

“But your profession,” I’d replied slowly, “doesn’t it make you naturally compassionate toward people?”

“Yes and no,” he replied, removing his glasses in a swift, practiced motion. As he polished the lenses with a brisk swipe of his shirt, his eyes met mine with a directness that cut through the air. “I care about easing pain where I can. That’s all,” he added, the words crisp and final.

I padded toward him and placed a firm palm on his shoulder. “Don’t, Oswald. Don’t let the dark days win.”

He looked up with a weariness that frightened me. While whimsical and at times just plain odd, Oswald had always appeared unbreakable. The man looking at me with tired gray eyes was not. “What if those are the only kind of days left, Dessie?”

THE PRESENT DAY

SUNLIGHT FILTERED through the towering windows of the Oswald F. Gardner Institute’s junior staff room, painting the room in a mosaic of light and shadow. The rays dallied upon the polished wooden floor, stretching the shadows of the furniture into elongated, almost spectral forms.

Nestled in an armchair that bore the comfortable signs of age, I gazed out at the expansive view.

The Connecticut landscape unfolded before me. The yew alley, its dark green boughs forming a corridor of mystery, led the eye toward the rose garden. Here, Oswald’s passion for nature’s untamed beauty was evident. The roses, a fierce contrast of blood red against the purity of white, seemed almost absurd in their vibrancy.

In the distance, the greenhouse stood, its glass panes catching the sunlight in a play of reflections. Something about

the way the light glinted off the glass made me frown. I shook my head and took another sip of the lukewarm coffee in my hand.

Making associations came with its perks. The floor matron had taken quite a liking to me, especially after I made my distaste for Leon and his attempts at flirting known. In fact, in the few hours I had spent at the institute, two things had become amply clear. One, I hated all men with the exception of Oswald. Two, something about this institute was very, very wrong.

I rubbed my eyes wearily and looked around the room. Leon's face had done a poor job of hiding his contempt when he came inside and looked at the minimal furnishings. But it suited me well. I wasn't here to be comfortable. I had a job, and it did not bode well to overstay my welcome or the lack thereof. Light played on the leaves outside, and I sighed and leaned back, pushing the chair into a gentle motion of ebb and flow.

Months ago, Oswald and I had a conversation that still lingered in the recesses of my mind. His words had stayed with me, surfacing in moments of solitude like now. Oswald was right. Humans are selfish pieces of shit. And that's why Oswald was gone before his time.

Why kill him, though? The question was like a permanent itch. The only way to know was to uncover more about the obvious suspects, which meant getting closer to them. The frown on my face deepened.

They were all insufferable in their own ways.

John Galbraith demanded respect on account of his seniority, but he didn't seem the type to give it back. He'd formed his opinion of me before I even materialized. That much was evident from the visible sneer on his face whenever he looked my way. At any rate, it was too soon to test him.

Viktor Magnusson was a house of cards. One push, and he'd collapse, but if I wasn't careful, he'd retreat into an impenetrable shell. He needed to be handled carefully.

Which left the easiest bait, Leon Vincenzo. I opened the website of the institute on my phone and looked dispassionately at his picture. He smiled shamelessly for the viewers, his academic and professional brilliance apparently enough to make up for the Casanova that he obviously was.

I stood up, and after an hour of restless pacing, perched on the edge of my single bed in the small room, my eyes glued to the entryway. What if my insults had been too much, and he wouldn't return?

"Well," I muttered to myself, "I can always hire a hooker, attach a wire to her, and get the job done. It'll save me the trouble of mounting him for information."

Even as I said the words, an unfamiliar wetness crept between my legs. I scowled heavily at the mirror, convincing myself that it was the sabbatical I'd taken from sex that was playing tricks on my mind. It had been a whole year, after all.

Filling the anxious silence, I pretended to read a book. My fingers were tense around the spine, but my eyes stayed pinned to the door. Hours ticked by, and my stomach grew tight with anticipation. Just when I was contemplating actually hiring a hooker, there was a polite tap on the door.

"Ha." Pushing back the relief in my tone, I strode over to the sparse wardrobe in my room.

The knocking was persistent.

"Just a minute," I called out, moving at a leisurely pace. I opened the wardrobe and fetched the white satin shirt I'd bought the same night I saw Leon's Facebook profile for the first time. I took my time, slipping out of what I wore and into what I needed to be in for this to work.

"Dessie?" The voice outside was growing impatient. "You ready yet?"

I stalked to the door and opened it slowly. Leon's mouth fell open as he looked at me.

"Patience," I purred at him, "is a big virtue."

I pulled him inside and shut the door behind us.

Leon

Called it, I thought triumphantly, smirking slightly as the woman in front of me stared at me with bedroom eyes.

“Fuck me,” she said, begging for it like I knew she would.

I wouldn’t be a dick about admitting this, though. I had thought this one would take more time. Before coming to her room, I’d mentally prepared myself for a longer courtship before I got her to submit.

Years of wooing women turn you into a pro at closet hiding, pipe-sliding, and dodging well-aimed flying shoes. With a target like D.C. Davenport, or Dr. Davenport, or whatever alias she fancied, a bit of caution wasn’t the worst thing. It didn’t mean I’d back off.

I just told myself that’s all it’d be.

Your self-deception is as thin as her excuses, Vincenzo.

Oh, shut up, I told the annoying voice inside my head. *I got this.*

My thoughts scattered as Dr. Davenport wrapped her slender arms around my neck and pulled me to her. “What are

you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that you’re very eager for someone who told the floor matron you were doing everything possible to get rid of me,” I remarked casually.

“I meant it,” she answered point-blankly. “At least at the time.”

“Why? And why this, then?”

She grimaced. “You talk too much, Leon Vincenzo. I thought you were a man of actions, not words.”

I smiled slightly. “Maybe I want to see what’s on offer.”

She loosened her grip on my shoulders and pulled back, questions burning in the intense light of her irises. “Is that so?”

I waited to see what else she would say. She dropped her hands to the sides of her waist, never letting her eyes move from mine. Her fingers moved to the buttons on her silk shirt.

“This is what’s on offer,” she said in a voice that could have been draped in velvet. She undid the first button slowly, batting her ridiculously long eyelashes at me.

“I have no qualms about what I want,” she continued, licking her lips as her fingers moved downward. “I want you to fuck me until I say I’m done. Nothing more or less.”

Whoa.

My heart skipped a beat. It had done that before, years back, when I had almost courted death. Was that what I was doing once more?

I had missed out on one of those supposedly life-changing, near-death experiences you are supposed to have when you’re within arm’s length of shaking hands with the Grim Reaper. Pity, because it could have made me a pretty good motivational speaker.

My eyes unfocused, but not for long. The woman in front of me had undone her entire shirt, and now, she was peeling it off her long arms. She didn’t stop until she had cast it aside on the sparse rug at her feet.

She frightens you, Leon.

That was the bland truth. How did you handle a woman so entirely sure about herself? She spoke like she was utterly and inexplicably aware of the world and her place in it. What the hell was I to do with that? It left little room for manipulation.

“Are you planning to pull a Sharon Stone from *Basic Instinct* on me?” I asked her, keeping my tone casual. Inside, I burned to know what her pussy tasted like.

She bared her teeth in an almost feral grin. “Maybe. We haven’t had too many interesting headlines in the news of late, have you noticed?”

“Ah.” I snorted, actually wondering if my name would feature in the headlines tomorrow. “That’d be some way to die.”

She frightened me. That was the truth of it. Hell, I didn’t even need to do the mandatory dinner and talk where I usually convinced women I was their escape from whatever miseries they thought they had to contend with.

But here she was, ready to fuck my brains out without my doing anything. It was sort of embarrassing.

She sat down on the lone chair in the room. She had conveniently turned it so it faced me. Her legs parted to reveal a hint of black lace.

I smiled. “You present a winning case, Dr. Davenport.”

She purred.

I walked over and sat down in front of the chair, folding my legs on the rough carpet.

My fingers gently glided down her arm, and a vivid tableau of mock headlines danced through my mind. I watched each goosebump rise in delicate response, like tiny pearls of intrigue surfacing on her skin, alive and flushed under my touch.

*PROMINENT SURGEON FOUND Dead in Junior Staffer’s Room.
Femme Fatale at Large?*

Leon Vincenzo Finally Fucks his Way to Death.

Connecticut Casanova Murdered with an Ice Pick, Lover Removes the Penis.

A sudden realization hit me—I was curious about her, pathetically so. Viktor’s words about not whoring myself out flashed in my mind. “Well, fuck me,” I muttered under my breath. It was a bleak thought, taking life cues from Viktor, a man more intimate with his work than any woman.

The last time Viktor had probably felt a woman’s touch? Must’ve been a fluke back in the nineties.

“I’m trying to,” she replied, a touch annoyed. “But you’re very slow. I have a lot of studying to do, so can we get on with this?”

I made a mock gesture of being stabbed in the chest.

“So, Leon Vincenzo,” she intoned. I noticed how sweet her voice sounded, even though she kept her face completely bereft of any and all emotions. “What gets you going? Perhaps a little show and tell?”

She undid the remaining buttons on the stark white shirt and pulled the folds aside just enough to give me a glimpse of her perfect breasts, rounded and pink. My mouth watered.

I touched the bare flesh of her thigh, taking pleasure in the immediate goosebumps. “Who are you, D. C. Davenport?”

The tips of her shoulders stiffened. “You know who I am,” she replied perfunctorily.

“I don’t know what to call you. Unless you’d like me to refer to you as Dr. Davenport when I fuck you.”

A shadow of a smile appeared on those thin lips.

Ha, I exulted. It smiles!

“You can call me Dessie,” she breathed as I took her hands and brought her down to the carpet. She didn’t resist.

Her muscles tightened as I spread a trail of kisses, beginning in the warm shell of her ear to the slope of her collarbone. She squirmed slightly.

I rolled the name on my tongue. “Dessie.”

“Don’t get used to it,” she murmured as my head moved downward to the perfectly rounded mounds of her breasts. “It’s something my friends call me.”

“I agree,” I replied huskily. “We can be a lot of things, Dessie, but we can never be friends.”

Dessie’s hands dropped to my shoulders, forcing me to look up and into the shadowed depths of her irises.

“Listen closely,” she hissed, her breath ragged with impatience. “Time isn’t a luxury I possess. If the intent was to play the courtship game, believe me, I wouldn’t be standing here, bare and exposed.”

“I’m still fully clothed,” I retorted, a smirk playing on my lips as I savored her mounting irritation. “Perhaps I prefer a slower pace. Does that irk you?”

Her lips pressed into a razor-thin line, a tinge of annoyance in her eyes. “Must you always fill the air with your words?”

In a swift, fluid motion, she lunged, pushing me down on the carpet. Her curly black hair cascaded around her like a wild storm as she forcefully brushed my hands aside. I found myself reclining on the coarse fabric, propped on my elbows, under her intense gaze. She straddled me, her demeanor that of a victorious empress.

“Don’t complicate this,” she commanded as if reprimanding a mischievous child. Her skin shimmered in stark contrast to the harsh, unflattering fluorescent light of the room. “I’m not going to spank you.”

She paused, a devilish glint in her eye. “Unless, of course, that’s what you desire.”

A reluctant grin tugged at my lips. Her audacity was astounding.

“And what about you?” I probed, stretching languidly. “Does the idea of control entice you?”

Her shoulders gave a casual shrug as she methodically unbuttoned my trousers. “Not particularly,” she admitted. “But

I'm open to exploring your preferences, no judgment. After all, it's hardly the most peculiar fetish I've encountered."

My gaze lingered on her small, perfectly shaped breasts, crowned with strawberry-pink nipples, as she leaned down to undress me. The proximity of her face to my growing arousal was predictably effective.

"You're full of surprises," I commented, striving for nonchalance. "You're far more liberated than you appear."

Her hand glided along my length with a practiced ease, forcing me to suppress a groan. Dessie kept her gaze lowered, intently observing the glistening tip.

"Appearances are deceptive," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "In the end, they're inconsequential."

Her words hung in the air as she enveloped the head of my cock with her lips, teasing before descending further. My head lolled back, overwhelmed by the sensation. Her mouth was an exquisite blend of warmth and pressure, drawing me deeper with each movement.

"This can't be real," I whispered to myself, disbelief coloring my tone.

Her nails grazed the sensitive skin beneath my balls, sending tingles up my spine. The sight of her dark hair bobbing in rhythm with her movements almost pushed me to the edge.

No. This wasn't how this would go down, with me completely out of control. I frowned and placed my hands on her shoulders, making her pause.

The frown reflected on her lips. "What?"

Her eyes, a stormy gray, were distant and detached. Strands of hair clung to her sweat-drenched forehead, framing her like a fallen angel.

Beneath her veneer of indifference, I saw it, the raw, undeniable desire. It was etched in the firm set of her chin, the taut line of her jaw.

At that moment, she was irrevocably mine.

I inhaled the scents of caramel and vanilla nestled between her breasts. “Tell me what Dessie stands for,” I persisted.

Her chest rose and fell. “Desdemona. Are you done interviewing me? If yes, can we get on with it?”

“Ouch.” I grinned into the hollow. “But also, happy to oblige, Madam. I do have one condition, I’m afraid.”

“What is it?” she asked, arching her back as my breath tickled her chest.

“I’m not fucking you for the first time in this hovel. You will come to my room in ten minutes.”

She pushed back immediately. Had I overdone it?

“Why ten minutes?” she asked suspiciously. “What are you going to do? Sharpen the knives?”

I laughed. “Nothing of the sort,” I replied warmly. “But I like to be prepared beforehand, and as delectable as this is” — I smelled her again— “If we’re to do this, we’ll do it right.”

Dessie

I gnoring the sharp pang in my chest, I draped the one robe in my closet over my body. This wasn't going the way I had planned.

Leon's demand for the change in territory did not bode well for me. Beautiful as his room would surely be, it made me powerless, like I was about to be hunted. Besides, I was one of those people who needed the comfort of my own space to function.

You're losing control before you even gain it. Way to go.

I ground my teeth together, frustrated beyond measure. I had Leon's room. I knocked on the door thrice, three precise raps. The footsteps sounded a good thirty seconds later.

The bastard is taking his time. He's enjoying this.

I'd show him.

He opened the door with a "Hello, Dessie," like I hadn't *just* had his cock in my mouth. I resisted the impulse to roll my eyes at him.

"Can I come in?"

“Of course you can.”

I crossed the threshold. It took me a minute to adjust my vision to the dim lighting in the room. Leon’s room was clearly made to suit his preferences. In other words, it screamed, “The resident here is a complete megalomaniac.”

It was state-of-the-art, dominated by a deep burgundy and cream color scheme. It screamed opulent warmth, the kind you can only manufacture if you have money, lots of it.

A large, plush armchair sat invitingly in one corner. It was positioned next to a mahogany bookshelf that almost rose to the ceiling. My eyes rested on well-thumbed copies of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* and Umberto Eco’s *Il nome della Rosa*.

Funny. I hadn’t pegged Vincenzo for a reader. And a serious one. I frowned.

Nestled among the Italian books were English fiction pieces, all too familiar to me. I made a mental note of the frayed spines of *The Great Gatsby* and *Casino Royale*.

“It’s so odd,” I said, unable to stop myself from moving closer to the bookshelf.

“What is?” Leon poured me a glass of red wine and came to stand beside me. I took the glass from him and drank a sip. Sweet, a little too much for my taste. Just like him.

“This,” I replied, tilting my glass slightly toward the bookshelf. “I didn’t think you were a reader.”

He chuckled. “I’m not. Those are just for show.”

He’s lying. He doesn’t want me to know this part of him.

“If you say so.”

I scanned the rest of the room, keeping my face as neutral as possible. On top of a sleek, black lacquered desk, there was an open diary bound in rich, navy blue leather. It was flanked by a vintage fountain pen, the gold nib glinting in the soft light from an Art Deco lamp.

The walls were rife with framed posters of singers. There was a vibrant vintage poster of Frank Sinatra mid-

performance, his smile filling the whole room. Just a few feet away, Luciano Pavarotti appeared in full operatic throwdown, hitting a high note that looked like it could summon the Grim Reaper himself for a duet.

Look at them. He's practically placed the two next to each other so it looks like they're about to rip each other's throats out.

Leon's taste was expensive, that much was apparent. Also odd. The walls are adorned with large, ostentatious portraits of the surgeon himself, captured in various heroic poses.

I snorted.

"I assume that is a snort of appreciation," he said brightly as he saw me looking at one that looked like he was on a billboard ad.

You can assume what you want. I'm just here to get the job done.

I turned on him, my hands fixed on both sides of my hips. He pointed his index finger to the four-poster bed that pretty much took up the entire northern corner of the room.

"Do you want to hear a bedtime story, angel?"

Angel. I liked the way it sat on his tongue.

What's this? Are you getting soft?

I shook my head and undid the velvet band holding my robe in place. It fell in a heap to the floor.



"ONCE UPON A TIME..." Leon murmured, his voice a soft rasp against my porcelain back. We were on his bed.

He paused, hovering above me—every muscle in his back taut with anticipation—and dropped a stream of butterfly kisses down my spine, barely touching my feverish skin. I shivered into the smoky rose linen pillows and arched my neck to further expose my throat to the touch of his lips.

"Leon?" I whispered, forgetting all thoughts of revenge in the moment.

“Yes, Angel...” he breathed, bringing his mouth in line with my ear, his fingers tracing a line from my hip to my navel and across the soft skin of my underbelly.

“First, I don’t remember giving you permission to call me Angel.” I groaned as he licked the lobe of my ear. “Second, you’ve started this story seven times now. Can you move past the first line, please?”

Leon laughed into the semidarkness. Outside, an owl called out in the night. Leon slid my earlobe into his mouth, rolling his tongue around the delicate nub of flesh, and bit down gently.

I groaned, the butterflies traveling from the expanse of my spine, down into the folds of my core and through my torso, straight to my flushed nipples.

“Once upon a time, a dark enchantress...” Leon’s tone was gentle. He stroked my bare ass and thighs with expert fingers. I pushed him off and sat up in one swift movement, grabbing him by the shoulders and pinning him down against the sheets between my knees.

He chuckled throatily. “Won’t you let me finish? Or, like, start?” His eyes, white-hot with desire, widened as they scanned me straddling him.

I had to admit, the admiration was pretty damn gratifying. I opened my mouth a little, smiling and leaning forward. I kissed him in a full-throated French kiss, tongue ablaze and hungry for his heady musk.

Is this part of the plan for revenge?

Shut up, I finally told the nagging voice of my inner conscience. *I’m getting to it.*

Ah. So you’re laying the groundwork.

Exactly.

“Go on,” I told him, straddling harder.

“The enchantress was a living, breathing enigma...”

“What have you been reading?” I asked, brushing aside an errant lock that had fallen over my eye. “Those are big words for that tongue, talented as it may be.”

Leon rolled his eyes and snorted. He tipped my chin gently to the side. “Don’t tell me my tongue is running out of surprises, Angel.”

“I like how you refuse to listen to me.”

“You’re going to like a lot more.”

I rolled off him and buried my face into his armpit, throwing my leg across his hips. His erection nudged my inner thigh, my own wetness grazing against his hip.

God, I thought. This man has the restraint of the devil. Lucky for him, so do I...

He drew his fingers through my wild curls, kissing my forehead.

Why is he doing that?

He drew the sheets over the two of us and stared at the ceiling. I noticed the shift in his energy. A line from a classroom play a long time ago drifted into my thoughts. *Heavy is the head that wears the crown.*

I was here because I had no other option. I needed to find out how Leon had killed Oswald. That was my purpose. This was work.

Didn’t mean I couldn’t enjoy it.

Leon slid his hand down to my core and slipped a finger into my wetness, anointing my clit in a slow, teasing circle.

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned, breathing in sharply and opening up my legs to accommodate more of his hand between my thighs.

“Once upon a time, a dark enchantress traveled many lands to find a new nation to charm with her devilish tricks.” He continued to circle his finger very, very slowly.

“She found one soon enough, a direct import from Italy.”

I laughed into the thick and unfairly soft curls on his head as he slid his fingers down and into my core. I grabbed his head and drew my breasts to his mouth. Leon licked his lips and blew air gently against a nipple. I groaned, pushing back.

He continued, "They were young. They fell in love, although that was the last thing on either of their minds."

Is he playing a game of chase?

Warning bells were going off in my mind, but my body was too in its element to give a fuck.

"Leon," I moaned. "Please..."

"Wait for it, woman." Leon bit down on my swollen under-breast, drawing a bruise from the pale skin around it. *Oh, heavens, please...*

He grabbed my butt and slid me on top of his, his cock firm against the lips of my core. I locked eyes with him.

"Hold on, Angel..."

"Torturer."

Mercilessly holding me firmly in place and inches from penetration, Leon continued. "The enchantress had an agenda. And the man she thought she had conquered wanted to know that agenda."

He rocked his hips back and forth, just giving my swollen pussy a slight taste of what was to come. I squirmed, partly in discomfort and partly because my whole body was on fire from wanting him.

I sank my knees into the bed, pressing myself down on him. He grabbed my wrists and held me in place.

"Enough," I said breathlessly. "I want you, now."

"Patience, angel."

"No." I slipped my hips up, tore my wrists out of his hands, and in one urgent movement, impaled myself on his now iron-hard cock.

“Oh, my fuck,” I cried out as I felt him fill me up. It had been a while, and I hadn’t expected it to feel *this* good.

He grinned up at me, responding with slow movements of his hips grinding up into my core.

“Are... you... quite... done... teasing... me?” I panted, sliding up and dropping down to match his rhythm.

“Don’t you want to hear the rest of the story, Angel?” he rasped between thrusts, now driving furiously up to meet me.

How is he able to string a sentence together in this state? Jesus...

“Tell me, torturer,” I called out, my urgent breathing now a series of raw whimpers.

“The man eventually found out what the enchantress wanted.” Leon paused and pushed me off him, only to flip me back onto the sheets.

Grabbing my knees, he splayed me wide open and drew his tongue once, twice, three times, up and down and up and down my aching, pining core.

I did the only reasonable thing and cried for mercy.

“Leon...”

“Who are you?” he asked, continuing to lick me with brusque force. “Who are you, Dr. D. C. Davenport?”

“Dessie,” I almost screamed as my legs began trembling. He was mercilessly stabbing the tip of his tongue and then pushing the rest in, again and again until I almost came, then and there.

He didn’t let me.

At the last moment, he stopped and lifted his mouth off my pussy to look at me. I was splayed, sweating, and heaving, the barely existent curve of my belly moving in tandem with my erratic breathing. My pussy glistened, ripe, just inches from his mouth. His sparse beard was damp with my juices.

“Dessie,” he whispered before reaching out to his nightstand. He withdrew an egg-shaped toy from one of the

drawers. “What is your deal, Dessie?”

I groaned as he turned it on and glided it over the top of my pussy while jabbing his tongue between my folds once more. Once. Twice. Thrice. I began convulsing.

My world went temporarily numb as I reeled from the onset of my orgasm. I exploded in waves, tumbling down from a high toward a depth that I hit like a diver going into a pool.

As I came, screaming out in submission, Leon no longer held back. He pulled me close and pierced his cock into me, driving in and out with merciless force. I cried out as he slammed in, pulled out completely, and then drove into me again.

His breathing grew ragged as he pushed in and out until I whimpered, “Not in me!”

“Never,” he called back. I could feel his legs begin to shake as he pulled out at the last moment. The warmth of his seed coated my skin.

I collapsed on the bed.

He towered over me, questions burning in his eyes, his cock still hard from the act.

I smiled back. I meant the smile to be innocent, as innocent as I could possibly make it, but his eyes never stopped burning.

“What are you doing to me?” he asked softly.

I shook my head, unfazed by his question. I used my elbows to push myself to a half-seated position and began putting my robe back on.

“You’re leaving?”

I arched my brow at him. “Would you like me to stay and cook breakfast for you? Perhaps make you some coffee?”

His face darkened for a second, but then his lips parted to a full-blown laugh, hearty and rich. Somehow, it warmed me in places it had no business doing.

“Touché, Angel. I have a feeling we’re going to get along pretty well.”

I pressed my lips into a thin line. “You do, do you? I admire your confidence, Leon Vincenzo.”

“Trust me, you should. It’s taken me years to cultivate it.” His words trailed off into the distance, and his hazel eyes softened. “Go, Dessie. Get on with your life.”

The man really did confuse me. Try as I would, I just could not read him. Not good for my resumé.

What are you doing, Dessie?

And then, it hit me like a ton of bricks.

Dessie

None of this is going according to plan.

I straightened abruptly, my spine rigid with forced calmness. My eyes met Leon's, his gaze smug and self-assured, irritatingly reminiscent of a cat that got the cream. I masked my inner turmoil with an indifferent shrug, even as my mind raced with churning thoughts. This was not the outcome I had envisioned. I was meant to steer this game, yet here I was, playing rat to his flute.

"Right." My voice was steady, but my hands betrayed me as I began picking at my nails. I stumbled, feigning nonchalance while clumsily checking my watch. "This has been... interesting, but I really must go."

Leon remained sprawled, a picture of leisurely satisfaction, a smirk playing on his lips. His indifference was like a slap in the face, fueling my growing resentment. He had no business looking so pleased, not now.

"Sure," he drawled, stretching languidly, his movements deliberate and teasing. "But don't you want to stay a bit longer? Maybe cuddle?"

My answer was sharp, a staccato note in the tense air. “Cuddle? With you? I think not. I’ve got places to be, things to do. This was a momentary lapse, nothing more.”

He propped himself on his elbows, his eyes following my every move. “A lapse, huh? You seemed pretty ‘in the moment’ to me.”

I turned my back to him with a jerk, avoiding his gaze. “Believe whatever makes you sleep at night, Leon. But right now, I need to leave.”

As I fumbled with my belongings, his chuckle echoed in the room, infuriatingly smug. “Then why are you taking so much time to go, Dessie?”

He was right. Of course he was right. I was drawing the moment out because I felt like an absolute failure. I was meant to ask him questions while I fucked him.

I was going to seduce him and get him to reveal the exact details of where he was and what he was doing the night Oswald died. I didn’t imagine he’d confess straight away, but eventually. I knew I would have to be patient and give it time.

And instead, I let *him* seduce *me*. Somehow, he was the one who took over, and now, I didn’t really know what to do. I frowned at the fluffy rug next to the bed, considering my next move.

The idea was that he’d give me the right answers because he’d be, well, in a pussy-haze. It obviously hadn’t worked because somehow, the asshole had turned the tables on me.

“I’m just making sure I have everything,” I replied lamely, acutely aware that I came with nothing except the lone robe on my body.

“Sure you are,” he retorted, not missing a beat. He clapped his hands together. “So, you can leave. But have some coffee before you go. You don’t need to be the one making it.”

My back stiffened. I didn’t want to invite more condescension, but perhaps I could glean some information. I needed to draw out my time. I angled my face to him. “Black, no sugar.”

His smile widened, became almost feral. “Just like your heart, huh?”

I didn’t gratify that with a response.

“Where are you going, by the way?” he asked, lazily buttoning his shirt. I noticed he left the top two buttons undone and almost rolled my eyes.

He handed me a cup of the hot beverage and I sipped. It felt good. His question did not.

“None of your business,” I retorted instinctively and then paused.

This is stupid. I’m doing this wrong. I’m not supposed to be antagonizing him.

“I only ask because if it’s not important,” said Leon, nodding toward the bed as he spoke, “we can, you know, go for round two.”

“SHUSH,” I said, flapping my hand at him. “I’m thinking.”

The room felt as if it held its breath, mirroring the tense atmosphere between us. Outside, the night in Stillingbrook wrapped the Institute in shadows, the moon casting a pink glow over the sprawling grounds. A gust of wind rattled the windows, hinting at hidden secrets swirling in the dark.

Nothing had really changed, had it? Leon was still eager for a dalliance, and I was still chasing the shadows of Oswald’s demise. So what if my ego took a few hits along the way?

Leon looked up, his expression one of cheeky triumph, reveling in the small victory of having his desires met. “Tell me what’s going on in that peculiar mind of yours,” he prodded.

Absolutely not. I was the inquisitor here, not him.

Pacing to the window, I peered out into the night, the grounds sprawling ominously before me. “I was just pondering,” I began, my voice slow and deliberate. “How long have you been part of this place?”

“Oh, years,” he replied nonchalantly, stretching out on the bed. “Six, maybe seven. I’m practically part of the furniture.”

“Huh.” My gaze shifted back to him, analyzing. “So you’re quite familiar with the inner workings, then?”

His grin widened. “Absolutely. And that’s precisely why you should befriend me. I could show you corners of this place you’d never discover on your own.”

His insinuation was blatantly sexual, but my interest lay elsewhere.

Liar, whispered that nagging voice of self-doubt. I quashed it with a raised eyebrow directed at Leon.

“I’m aware of your... reputation as the Institute’s slut,” I said coolly. His smile faltered. “But I’m more interested in your knowledge of the institute’s deeper secrets. The staff, the dramas, the unspoken truths?”

“Did you just call me a slut?”

My shoulders squared. I’d overstepped, but I refused to back down. “Am I wrong?”

He opened his mouth to say something, but then, he closed it just as quickly. “No,” he finally said, shadows snapping in his eyes. “Of course you’re not. Can’t deny what’s true.”

“I might enjoy a bit of fun,” he retorted, regaining his composure, “but I’m not an open book for your convenience. And if we’re exchanging barbs, what does that make you? Jumping into bed at the drop of a hat?”

“I never said I was judging,” I retorted, a little too quickly. “All of this was in jest. I’m all for living freely, regardless of gender.”

Great, now I’m rambling. *There goes the plan.*

Leon’s frown softened into confusion. I hurriedly continued, “I didn’t mean to imply a trade of secrets for... other things. I’ll find my bearings some other way. Let’s not blow this out of proportion.”

“Listen, you need to chill,” Leon said, hands raised in exasperation. “We had our moment, and now you need a favor. Just be upfront about it.”

I hesitated, taken aback. Was it really that straightforward?

“You mean, if I ask you for something, you’re just going to up and do it?”

Why was this thought so ridiculous to me? Maybe because I had to work hard to get everything. Maybe because Leon, no matter what he said, was not to be trusted. Never.

“Exactly,” he confirmed, as if reading my thoughts. He rose, a hint of annoyance in his posture. “I don’t appreciate your hostility, so I’m going to leave you to it.”

“Wait,” I blurted, a surge of panic rising. “I’m sorry. I’m just... not great with new people. I didn’t mean to sound like a total bitch.”

He paused, eyeing me with newfound curiosity. “I can get with that.”

I cocked my head at him. “Seriously? You literally charm the panties off every second woman you meet.”

“It didn’t work with you, did it?”

“I just...” I couldn’t find the right words, so I flourished my hands at the tousled sheets on the bed like a hapless chicken.

Leon’s face relaxed. Now was the time.

“I do need a favor, though,” I blurted out. “I promise I won’t go into verbal vomit mode and call you a slut again. You don’t even have to ever sleep with me again, if you don’t want to.”

Ew, Dessie. Cringe max. Did you just say he could sleep with you whenever he does want to? What’s wrong with you?

If Leon would have handed me a spade, all I’d need to do would be to dig my own grave in the middle of this room. To his credit, he only looked surprised. He blinked. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

Neither did I.

But I tried, anyway. “Unless, of course, you’re dying for another earth-shattering round of mediocre sex with me,” I blurted out, bravely pioneering new territories in the realm of awkwardness. “That’s totally on the table. Optional, but available.”

I paused, realizing I was not only digging my own grave but also furnishing it with cringe-worthy decor. “Anyway, that aside, what I really need is a Google Maps tour of this place. Where’s the lab wing? What’s edible in the cafeteria without risking a trip to the ER? You know, the basics for survival in this labyrinth of despair and questionable food choices.”

Leon continued staring at me before he spoke, his tone gentle in spite of all the scary crap I was spewing from my mouth. “Dessie, all you needed to do was just ask a little nicely. You do get that, right? I’m not here to hurt you.”

My shoulders relaxed. “I know you’re not,” I said slowly, shaking my head wearily. “I just...”

“You can tell me.” Leon folded his hands in front of his chest. “I’m not too bad of a listener.”

That made me smile. “Sure. Anyway, it’s basically just that I’m not too good at being nice to people.”

“Would you say that’s because people scare you, you don’t want to trust others, or you’ve been hurt too badly in the past and now you think people are shit?”

Run. Run, Dessie.

“I do that,” I said instead, blinking rapidly.

“Do what?”

“Throw questions like that.”

“Ah.” Leon walked over to the coffee table and made a cup for himself. “So, how about this? We finish our drinks, and then, I’ll show you around. No funny business.”

“What?” I wanted to sound weighty, but my voice came out all squeaky and wrong. “Now?”

He quirked an eyebrow at me. “Um... yeah? You are going out, right?”

I hadn't planned to, actually, since my destination didn't really count as out, but I nodded anyway. “Sure. Let me go get dressed.”

“Come on,” Leon said, setting down his cup and crossing the tiny room in one stride. He loomed large, like a giant in a dollhouse—a thought that irked me more than I cared to admit.

It wasn't just his physical presence. It was him, strutting around Oswald's territory as if he owned the place, oblivious to my real identity.

Playing the newbie was harder than expected, a role I'd worn too often before Oswald's time. My jaw clenched as Leon breezed through a whirlwind tour, but I played along. The closer he felt, the easier he'd be to manipulate later.

“So this is only one section of the residential wing, which actually loops around the whole building,” said Leon chattily. “Junior staff tend to fraternize pretty freely, surgeons and specialists as well, but the Research and Development geeks live in a world of their own, literally. The old man built them their own special little quarters, up under the roof of the main house.”

“The old man?” I queried, my palms suddenly a touch sweaty as I hurried down the narrow stairs in Leon's wake.

“OSWALD F. GARDNER HIMSELF, eponymous founder of this place,” said Leon, turning to give me a quizzical look. “Filthy rich, self-proclaimed philanthropist, and a doctor himself, believe it or not. He's dead now.”

I KNOW HE'S DEAD. I think about him every night. When I wake up in the morning, it takes me a few seconds to remember he's gone, and then all the dull misery comes rushing back.

No.

FOCUS, Dessie.

“WHAT WAS HE A DOCTOR OF?” I asked, keeping my face expressionless. “It wasn't mentioned anywhere on the

institute's website.”

“PSYCHIATRY,” snorted Leon, with all the ‘practical’ medicine man’s contempt for matters of the mind. “But he inherited a couple or three billions from his rich dad, so he endowed a research institute so he could play at being a benefactor to random poor people. Which is nice for us, right?”

“RIGHT,” I said in a subdued tone, though I was fuming on the inside. Not only did I have to bite my lip and stay quiet while Oswald’s memory was tarnished, but also, Leon seemed to have completely forgotten that I was a practicing psychiatrist myself.

BASTARD. Condescending, insufferable bastard.

“BUT ANYWAY,” continued Leon cheerfully, “the research wing proper takes up the left block of the house. We have only a couple of surgical theaters, but there’s a row of small teaching galleries on the right, just under the senior staff suites, and the central block is occupied by old Oswald’s pride and joy, the finest labs money can buy outside of Silicon Valley’s biotech bubble. We got lucky with that.”

“YEAH,” I muttered. “What happened to him?”

WE’D REACHED the main hall, which was deserted now. Precious autumn sunlight filtered in through the windows, leaving a golden wash of color across the old wooden floors.

“WHAT HAPPENED TO WHO?” said Leon, giving me another of those quizzical looks.

“DR. GARDNER,” I said. “How did he die?”

LEON’S GAZE DRIFTED UPWARD. “He was old. It happens. Except now we’re fucked, because nobody knows where the money’s going to come from anymore.”

I TURNED and followed Leon’s line of sight. Up on the first floor, John Galbraith stood looking down at us, frowning slightly.

HE WAS FORMIDABLE, I had to give him that. He had an air of command that I usually associated with the military, combined

with a keen intelligence uncluttered by any distractions. I was frightened of him during my interview, I remembered.

I SHIVERED SLIGHTLY NOW. Leon immediately moved closer.

“ARE YOU COLD? Do you want me to get you a jacket?”

I SHOOK MY HEAD. Somehow, I had the impression that Leon was putting on a performance for the benefit of the silent figure looking down at us.

“LET’S GO OUTSIDE,” he said suddenly, murmuring into my ear. I nodded and followed him out the massive oak doors to the drive.

I LOOKED BACK ONLY ONCE. John Galbraith was still there, immovable and impassive.

IT’S like he knew what was going through my mind. I didn’t like the feeling of being observed. I never had.

I TURNED TO LEON.

“THANKS FOR WALKING ME OUT,” I said in a low, hurried voice. “I need to go now, but I appreciate the talk.”

“NO PROBLEM,” he said, smiling a little curiously. “Anytime.”

I HURRIED off toward the line of trees leading to the two cottages at the edge of the estate, more unnerved than I liked to admit.

MS. WAINWRIGHT WOULD KNOW what to do here. I needed to go talk to her, at once.

Dessie

I let out a sigh of relief as I stepped into the comforting embrace of Letitia Wainwright's home. The garden, a cozy patchwork of colors, greeted me with its orderly flower beds. Begonias blushed in vibrant hues beside the proud blooms of rhododendrons, all nestled under a quaint stone arch leading to the old yew alley, a favorite haunt for local romantics.

Ms. Wainwright, with her usual composure slightly ruffled, opened the door, her eyes widening in mild surprise. "Desdemona, my dear. I wasn't expecting you today."

I chuckled softly. "I did send a text earlier," I reminded her gently. "Maybe you missed it?"

She laughed, a touch of self-deprecation in her voice. "Oh, texts and apps, they're a bit beyond me, I'm afraid. In my time, a good old phone call did the job."

I smiled warmly, stepping inside. "It's fine, really. I just wanted to ask you something. If now's not a good time, I can always come back."

"No trouble at all, dear. Do come in," she insisted, ushering me into her home.

Ms. Wainwright's cottage reminded me of a time long gone. I inhaled the scents of pine and something distinctly woody as I stepped inside. Warm shadows pooled in corners, chased by dancing tendrils of a gentle firelight. Bookshelves bowed, their racks lined with worn leather volumes. Sunbeams sliced through the latticed window, painting diamonds on the worn stone floor. Beautiful porcelain cups stood further inside, in glass cabinets framing a homely kitchen. The walls, adorned with rose-patterned wallpaper, created a warm, inviting backdrop for the treasured Derby China plates, each displayed with pride in glass-fronted cabinets.

A wicker basket sat on a fat kitchen table, spilling sun-kissed apples, their cheeks flush with autumn's kiss. In the living room, on the wall behind a plump sofa, a grandfather clock ticked a steady tempo. This was, in all, a space where a man's presence seemed almost unimaginable. Lace doilies and hand-embroidered rose cushions dotted the space, adding a touch of personal charm.

The house, impeccably neat and spotlessly clean, always struck me with its quiet, orderly charm, yet it held a certain stillness, a tranquility that bordered on lifeless. It was as if the cottage itself were content to rest in the memories of yesteryear, a peaceful haven untouched by the rush of the outside world.

Ms. Wainwright had always been inexplicably attached to Oswald and her work with him. I didn't even know anything about her beyond her role as my adoptive father's secretary who had come to help him run the Institute. She had stood by him through all these years, making sure he never wanted for company or sound advice. The head on her shoulders was incredibly level and good-tempered. Oswald relied heavily on her.

I felt a burgeoning spurt of guilt. I realized I had been far too occupied with my own feelings of loss following Oswald's passing. In doing so, I'd neglected to see that he had been Ms. Wainwright's whole life as well. I'd never thought to check in with her after he passed.

Now was the time. I cleared my throat. “How have you been coping, Ms. Wainwright?” I asked quietly. “Are you settling in, given the new changes? Considering how we never... I mean... after...”

The questions I wanted to ask died in my throat. It still seemed an impossibly painful topic to talk about. She picked up on the trail, though.

“After my employer passed and left me at a loose end?” she replied acridly. As she spoke, she laid down a pot of steaming milk tea and a plate of freshly baked scones on a small table in front of me. “Help yourself, dear. You don’t need to worry about my state. Oswald made sure I was taken care of.”

“I know,” I assented, reaching out to pour myself a cup. I loved the tea here, a strong Assam brewed with cinnamon, sugar, and a single chunk of ginger. “This house, and there are stocks he put in your name so you have a decent income for this lifetime. But that’s not what I’m asking, Ms. Wainwright.”

Silence fell between us. She pulled out a chair and sat daintily on it, crossing her legs in front of her. I poured her another cup and she accepted it.

Steam made her features retreat into a hazy backdrop for a second. She traced fingers over the delicate porcelain cup, painted with blackbirds. After some time, she exhaled audibly. “I worked for him for three decades, my dear. It is odd to suddenly wake up and not have... anything to do. But I am coping, as we all are and must. I try my best not to repine too much.”

Repine. So old-fashioned and quaint, I thought fondly. It was perfect for little old Ms. Wainwright in her curious cottage full of Old World charm.

“So, you harbor no regrets,” I pondered aloud. “That’s commendable. Yet, here I am, haunted by thoughts of all the moments I’d let slip away. Had I known the end was near, I would have never ventured far from home.”

MS. WAINWRIGHT, her tone brimming with an unusual intensity, countered, “That’s utter folly, my dear. Oswald’s deepest wish was for you to carve out your own path. He was acutely aware that it wasn’t right to confine you here, devoid of peers or diverse pursuits. His life may have been entwined with the shadows of that estate” —she nodded sharply toward the looming structure on the hill— “but he often confided in me his hopes for you to avoid the solitude that marked his own existence.”

“But I wasn’t living in solitude,” I argued, a hint of defensiveness in my voice. “My days in the house with him, and with you as our neighbor, were filled with contentment.”

Ms. Wainwright’s expression hardened, her voice adopting a brisk, authoritative tone. “Nevertheless, it’s undeniable that this place was no environment for a young soul to flourish,” she asserted. “I voiced this to him repeatedly, but did he heed my warnings? No. He was adamant about raising you within these walls, personally overseeing every aspect of your upbringing. It’s all in the past now, but as you well know, once Oswald set his mind to something, no force on earth could dissuade him.”

“I cherish the time I spent here,” I declared, a rebellious undertone in my voice. “This place was my sanctuary, my first true home. I never yearned for perfection. All I wanted was to make him proud.”

“And proud you made him,” Letitia Wainwright responded, her penetrating black eyes, undimmed by age, surveying me intently. “You were the living testament to his efforts, transcending the flaws of a substandard education to carve out a successful career and achieve financial autonomy. He often spoke of you as his crowning achievement, eclipsing all his other accomplishments. Desdemona Cassandra Miller Gardner, you also have no grounds for regret.”

Her words brought a surge of emotion, tears momentarily clouding my vision. “Thank you,” I managed to say, deeply moved. “Your words mean more than you know.”

She tutted sympathetically. “Oh, dear, I didn’t mean to distress you. Here, have another scone. I’ll add some butter for you.”

As she tended to the tea table, allowing me a moment to compose myself, I murmured an apology. “Sorry, Ms. Wainwright.”

“It’s quite alright.” Handing me a scone with a small bowl of cherry jam, she added, “You must try this, it’s homemade.”

IN THE TRANQUILITY of her home, with the soft swaying of yews in the waning sunlight, I relished the serene moment, a stark contrast to my turbulent thoughts.

Eventually, I broached the subject. “You must be wondering about my return to the Institute.”

“Yes, it did catch me by surprise,” she admitted, her tone cautious. “Not that it’s my place to comment, but when I heard you joined the staff, it was quite unexpected. I thought you’d be eager to leave the past behind.”

“I wish it were that simple,” I confessed. “But I felt a pull to be here, to honor Oswald’s memory. There are too many unfinished chapters in this story.”

Ms. Wainwright looked at me with a hint of disapproval. “You’re still so young,” she remarked, as if my youth were a temporary affliction. “And you were flourishing in Newhaven. Why abandon a promising future there? You’re free to explore the world, unburdened by financial constraints.”

A faint smile crossed my lips. “Oswald wouldn’t have wanted a life of frivolity for me. I believe he left his fortune for the betterment of the Institute, not for me to indulge in a life of luxury. That would contradict everything he stood for.”

“Indeed.” Ms. Wainwright’s gaze hardened. “But that still doesn’t clarify your presence here, or your decision to use an alias. Could it be a fear of accusations of favoritism?”

“That’s a part of it,” I acknowledged with a shrug. “But it’s not the crux of the matter. I’m here to delve into the essence of Oswald’s life, his work in this vast research institute and its

myriad complexities. Frankly, I don't possess the requisite expertise to helm such an endeavor."

"I should think not," Ms. Wainwright interjected, visibly taken aback. "That responsibility falls to the board and the trustees. You shouldn't have to shoulder such burdens."

"I'm also driven by a need to understand the circumstances of Oswald's untimely demise," I persisted. "The police haven't reached a conclusion. It clearly wasn't a natural death. Despite Uncle Cuthbert's attempts at obfuscation, the truth is that rumors are likely circulating far and wide, even if they haven't reached our ears yet."

Ms. Wainwright's posture stiffened, her face a mask of controlled emotion, betrayed only by the subtle quivering of her hands.

"I am utterly dismayed," she stated, her voice taut with indignation. "While I can't say I'm shocked—given the nature of people—I am deeply aggrieved to hear of such baseless speculation about Oswald's private affairs. You'd think people would have more decency."

"Is that your interpretation, then?" I queried, observing her closely. "That his murder was motivated by a personal vendetta?"

"What else could it be?" she retorted sharply. "You and I, the ones who cherished him most, are the only ones who might benefit financially from his passing. He had no other close kin or confidants that I'm aware of. So, it seems logical to surmise that the perpetrator was some sort of obsessed lunatic. In a large organization like this, such individuals are not uncommon, though the possibility of an outsider being involved seems unlikely."

Ms. Wainwright's gaze drifted into a distant, solemn reflection, seemingly oblivious to my presence.

After a contemplative silence, she addressed me, her voice tinged with sorrow. "I regret to hear this, truly. And it pains me more to think of you, burdened by such worries. But what

benefit lies in uncovering these truths? Oswald's return is beyond our reach. Does any of this truly matter now?"

I leaned in, my gaze locking onto hers with earnest intensity.

"It matters immensely," I declared, my voice resonating with passion. "Someone took his life, brutally and without mercy. I must uncover their identity, Ms. Wainwright. I implore you, aid me in this quest."

For the first time, I witnessed a flicker of fear in Ms. Wainwright's eyes. They widened, revealing her vulnerability, her hands intertwining anxiously.

"Me?" Her voice quavered. "What role could I possibly play, Desdemona? I'm merely an elderly lady, far removed from such sinister matters. And truthfully, I am reluctant to involve myself. It's all so harrowing. Do you genuinely believe we should pursue this path?"

"Yes, your assistance is crucial," I affirmed, sliding a tattered paper across the table. It was the list of names I had discovered at Oswald's home on the night we mourned him. Ms. Wainwright cast a nervous glance at the paper.

"I suspect one of these individuals is the culprit," I stated with a composed urgency. "Please, for Oswald's memory, help me."

Her eyes oscillated between the list and my earnest face, her expression etched with concern. "What would you have me do?" she inquired, her voice laced with worry.

I reclined, maintaining my intense gaze. "Tell me everything you know about them. Everything. I need to know, Ms. Wainwright, and you're the only one I can really trust."

"Help me understand why my father had to die."

John

I shut the door of my aging Honda with more force than necessary, frustration already seeping into my bones.

The day was shaping up to be a trial. My preferred grocery store in Stillingbrook was out of the Greek goat cheese I favored, a flat tire had delayed my return to the Institute, and to top it off, I was greeted by the sight of that garish purple Lamborghini belonging to Desdemona Davenport. Its ostentatious display only served to amplify my own feelings of inadequacy.

Why do I even persist? I mused bitterly. Managing the institute had always been a Sisyphean task, even under Oswald's leadership. And now, with the added pressure of securing government grants for the first time since the inception of our research projects, the presence of that extravagant car felt like the universe's cruel jest.

As if on cue, the owner herself appeared, just as I was making my way to the main building.

She rounded the corner of the southern wing with such haste, her breath coming in quick bursts, that I wondered if she had been running. Our collision was not gentle. I braced

myself against the warm brick wall to steady my stance and frowned.

“Watch your step,” I chided, instantly regretting the scolding tone of my voice. “Someone could get hurt with such carelessness.”

She lifted her eyes to meet mine briefly before quickly looking away. “Sorry. I didn’t see you there. Sir,” she added, the honorific coming as an afterthought.

I couldn’t help but wonder why I had to contend with her presence. Amid the current turmoil, facing such blatant animosity from a junior staff member seemed like an unnecessary burden.

“Be more cautious next time,” I said, a hint of irritation in my voice, fully aware that no amount of reprimand would alter her disposition.

After all, I had more pressing issues to attend to than her attitude.

“Yes, sir,” she responded, but her tone had shifted, softer, less defensive.

It was then I noticed her eyelashes, long and curling, casting delicate shadows on her cheeks. Her eyes flickered as she gave me a thorough once-over.

Surprisingly, she seemed less antagonistic than before.

The corners of her lips curled into a subtle smile, and despite myself, I found a smile forming on my own lips in response.

Desdemona smoothed her tousled hair, patting it down. “I was just heading to the dining room, sir. Have you had your meal yet?”

Was that an implicit invitation? I quickly brushed aside the idea of joining her for a meal. It wasn’t customary for senior staff to mingle with junior doctors during meal times, though I pondered the possibility under different circumstances...

But no, time was a luxury I couldn’t afford.

“You go ahead,” I replied briskly, noticing a spark of curiosity in her eyes.

“Alright,” she responded, her tone polite as she moved past me with a subtle, almost elusive grace. I watched her head toward the front doors of the house.

Impulsively, I called out, “I hope you’re settling in okay!” She glanced over her shoulder, offering a quick thumbs-up before vanishing inside.

Strange, I mused.

My gaze lingered on the path she had taken, leading to nothing more than some rose bushes and the yew alley near Ms. Wainwright’s cottage. The gardens were a common secret haven for Institute staff seeking privacy, despite our efforts to discourage such rendezvous. Ms. Wainwright had often bitterly complained about the ‘inappropriate activities’ near her home, seeing it as a stark reflection of the declining moral standards of both the Institute and society at large.

While I didn’t fully share her sentiment, if Desdemona Davenport was already arranging clandestine meetings, she was indeed moving fast. The memory of seeing her with Leon Vincenzo earlier that day crossed my mind, knitting my brow in concern.

Perhaps a discreet conversation with Leon was in order. I had a certain fondness for him. He was one of my earliest hires, and I sometimes felt more invested in his career than he was himself.

Considering Leon’s tendencies, he seemed more inclined to pursue romantic interests than professional ones. While it wasn’t my place to judge, I couldn’t shake off an uneasy feeling about Desdemona Davenport. It seemed like a complication Leon would be wise to steer clear of.

Lost in my thoughts, ruminating over the complexities of human relationships and the challenges posed by entitled youngsters, I navigated around the house’s perimeter and slipped through a side entrance hidden by a hedge. This led to

a narrow foyer and then a staircase that ascended to the more spacious accommodations on the second floor.

One of the perks reserved for senior staff at the Institute was a degree of privacy. For me, this was a mixed blessing. My close proximity to the office meant that many assumed I was perpetually on-call.

I ascended the stairs, heading to my suite. Oswald had invested significantly in renovating the house when he acquired it, and it was evident everywhere. Two old bedrooms had been combined into a spacious open-plan living and study area for my use, adjoining a bedroom and a compact kitchenette cleverly fitted into a former balcony.

My rooms were a sanctuary, a place of calm amid the sometimes tumultuous nature of my work. The challenges were manifold, but they were what made my role engaging.

That was, until Oswald's unexpected demise.

With a sigh, I poured myself a generous measure of whisky. The clock had swept past nine in the evening, yet my night was far from over. I powered up my laptop, resigning myself to the mundane yet necessary task of scrutinizing tax documents.

The night was agreeably serene. A gentle, cool breeze wafted through the open windows, carrying the sweet fragrance of honeysuckle. It was a small but appreciated comfort.

Gradually, my focus drifted. My eyelids grew heavy, not with the dry details of tax exemptions, but with thoughts of Desdemona Davenport. The enigmatic way she had looked at me earlier lingered in my mind.

I stared vacantly at the glowing screen, contrasting her earlier indifferent demeanor in my office with the subtly suggestive glance she had thrown my way more recently. There was an intriguing inconsistency there, a puzzle that piqued my curiosity, despite my better judgment. I found myself wondering, perhaps imprudently, about her allure beyond the professional façade. Experience had taught me that

such alluring mysteries often led to underwhelming revelations, but with Desdemona, there seemed to be a different kind of intrigue...

A sudden alert pulled me from my reverie. I sat up sharply, my attention snapped back to the present by the blinking red light on my desk.

The blinking light was an alert from my newly installed security system. Since Oswald's tragic demise, the Institute was rife with paranoia and fear. The killer was still at large, and nobody wanted to be their next target.

I WASN'T GENUINELY fearful of murder, but the idea of someone rifling through my personal belongings was deeply unsettling. To prevent such intrusions, I had equipped my office with surveillance cameras, a precaution to alert me of any unwelcome visitors.

Swiftly, I moved toward my computer and clicked on the icon for the security camera feed. As the system initiated, my mind raced with the possibility of apprehending an intruder myself—such an act could even bolster my position in future funding applications.

The feed flickered to life, revealing a slim figure hunched over my driftwood desk, shuffling through the stack of papers I had left scattered. My muscles tightened instinctively. I cursed myself for not having the foresight to acquire a firearm. The audacity of someone invading my private space, tampering with my documents, was infuriating.

The intruder seemed efficient, sorting through the papers methodically, each document replaced precisely where it was taken from. I leaned closer to the screen, straining my eyes for a clearer view, desperate to identify the trespasser. My reasons for concern went beyond mere privacy.

“Turn around,” I muttered under my breath, my hands gripping the desk edge tightly. “Show me your face.”

The figure methodically sifted through drawer after drawer, their head bowed, obscuring their identity. I noticed no weapon, a small relief, but still—

A gust of wind howled outside, stirring the linen curtains in my room into a dance. The sudden movement seemed to startle the figure in my office. They paused and looked up.

My heart skipped a beat as the camera revealed the intruder's face—a face I recognized all too well. The pale complexion, the intense focus in her eyes, the determined set of her mouth. It was a face I knew, one that should not be rifling through my confidential documents.

Desdemona. What the fuck are you doing?

Dessie

A gust rattled the window panes, a banshee's wail in the summer's death throes. Rain lashed against the glass, blurring the jagged charcoal silhouette of the mountains against the bruised purple sky. Inside, shadows pirouetted across the mahogany expanse of Galbraith's office, whipped into a frenzy by the storm's invisible hand.

I huddled beneath the desk, knees drawn up to my chest, a trespasser in the lair of a Titan. My fingers traced the worn leather of a chair leg, the chill of the storm seeping through the oak like a whispered threat.

Rain always meant renewal to me, a chance to wash away the past. Tonight, it was a cold, metallic shroud, muffling the world into a tomb of secrets. Galbraith, with his thunderous frown and eyes like chipped ice, was my only hope. His office would reveal something, I was sure of it. So, here I was, in secret, hoping I wouldn't get caught as I rummaged through his files.

"He's very competent at his job, my dear, though I don't think he's really a people person, strictly speaking," Ms. Wainwright told me earlier tonight. "Of course, men don't have to be."

I knew what she meant, though my experiences with men were probably vastly different from hers. But I didn't interrupt her. It was enough that she was trying to help me.

“An intimidating reputation speaks volumes about a man in a position of authority, whereas it would only be a criticism for a woman in the same position,” Ms. Wainwright continued, giving the list in front of her a profoundly disapproving glance. “One just has to accept these things.”

The faint hint of bitterness in her voice had resonated with me. I had every reason to distrust authoritative and domineering men on my own account. I remembered the way John Galbraith had glowered at me from the upstairs landing, as well.

But Ms. Wainwright was right about his work. I couldn't find so much as a hint of any financial discrepancies, nor of anything else that might be interpreted as sketchy. Though I didn't imagine he'd leave the evidence lying out in plain sight.

The contents of his desk were dealt with quickly enough. I knelt by the column of drawers and put his things back the way I'd found them. Unfortunately, his computer wasn't in the room.

Maybe he's being careful. There might be something on there that he knows could compromise him.

Surrounded by the dimly lit room, I felt a wave of frustration. The likelihood of uncovering anything valuable among the bookshelves seemed slim, yet I felt compelled to search. My gaze drifted to the walnut escritoire against the opposite wall, ornate and possibly superficial in its usefulness.

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning split the sky, casting an array of bizarre, almost spectral shadows throughout the room. One elongated shadow crept across the floor toward me.

I remained still, no abrupt movements. From my concealed spot crouched behind Galbraith's desk, I kept my eyes fixed on the door, silently counting.

One, two, three, four... On the fourth count, thunder rumbled, a deep, resonant sound echoing through the valley.

The scent of rain-soaked earth rose from the garden, filling the night air.

I stayed put, hidden behind the desk, my body taut with anticipation. Caution was key, even if it turned out to be nothing.

Another flash of lightning, this time with five distinct prongs, reflected off the polished window panes to my right. The brief illumination revealed a tall, imposing figure standing at the doorway.

The figure spoke in a deep, serious tone.

“Hello, Desdemona,” came the voice. “Come on out, please. I know you’re there.”

Panic surged within me. I weighed my options quickly. I could remain silent, hidden behind the desk, hoping to go unnoticed. Or I could emerge and face John Galbraith head-on. It wasn’t the safest choice, but I had never shied away from a challenge.

With resolve, I pushed myself up from my crouched position and stood, facing Galbraith. He observed me in silence for a brief moment.

Then, with a flick of his wrist, he switched on the light. The room was bathed in a soft, yellow glow, almost mimicking the warmth of a lit fireplace.

“And what can I do for you?” Galbraith asked, his tone feigning cordiality.

His expression betrayed his true feelings, though. A deep frown creased his forehead, signaling his anger. I couldn’t blame him. I’d be furious too if our roles were reversed.

I said nothing. It didn’t feel safe to provoke him any further.

Galbraith advanced further into the room, his eyes sweeping over me in a scathing appraisal. His look was so withering it could have seared my skin.

I simply held my ground, head high, relying on silence as my armor. In confrontations like these, words often betrayed

more than they concealed.

“Sit down,” he commanded, nodding curtly toward the chair in front of his desk. After a brief pause, I moved around the desk, swiveled the chair to face him, and seated myself.

Galbraith stood looming over me, his expression a study in restrained fury. The taut muscles in his forearms betrayed the effort it took to maintain his composure.

“Explain yourself,” he demanded sharply.

I remained silent. Both of us were well aware that I had no plausible justification for my actions. But that didn’t mean I was about to crumble under his scrutiny.

“What were you searching for?” His gaze darted to the pile of papers on his desk. “Who sent you?”

I could almost hear the unspoken accusations. In his mind, I couldn’t possibly have a personal interest in these documents. To him, I must be a pawn for some rival faction or corporate spy.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, barely. His face grew darker, hands shoving into his pockets.

“I should call the police,” he threatened, a prospect I dreaded. My hands tensed on the chair arms, preparing to act.

As he stepped closer, I tensed, fighting the instinct to recoil.

“Why are you here, Desdemona?”

In a flash, I sprang from the chair and bolted toward the door.

It was supposed to be simple. The wing was typically deserted after ten at night, granting me ample time to search his office unencumbered.

But Galbraith had somehow anticipated my intrusion. Not only had he detected the breach, but he had also identified me, despite the cover of darkness and my position behind the desk. As I raced for the exit, a realization dawned on me. I had

gravely underestimated Galbraith. The element of surprise was mine, yet he was swift in his response, his reflexes sharp.

I was almost free, darting around him in a wide arc toward the door, when Galbraith spun around with a swiftness unexpected for his size and snatched at my arm, yanking me back.

His grip was firm on my arm, his fingers pressing into the tender skin just above my elbow. Reacting instinctively, I aimed a sharp kick backward at his knee, hoping to throw him off balance. He skillfully dodged it, wrapping his other arm around my shoulders from behind.

Galbraith's body was a solid barrier against my back as he leaned in, his voice a low rumble of controlled anger in my ear.

"I don't want to hurt you," he growled, "but I will if you make me."

Struggling seemed futile. His strength was overwhelming. Reluctantly, I went limp, my efforts to resist fading.

"Good," he approved, his tone slightly easing as I ceased my struggles. "Turn around."

As he released his hold, I jerked away, nearly dislocating my shoulder in my haste to escape his touch.

"Wait," he commanded sharply. "Hold still!"

But I couldn't. Panic surged through me, intensifying when his hand neared my throat, constricting my breath.

Desperately, I fought, trying to pry his fingers from my skin, but he only tightened his grip, capturing my other wrist.

"I said, hold still!"

In the midst of our scuffle, my knees gave way, and we both tumbled to the floor, entangled in a frantic struggle.

This is bad. The thought flashed through my mind amid the chaos. *This is a disaster.*

I continued to thrash, driven by a primal urge to escape. Crawling, running, anything to get away.

But Galbraith's face hovered above mine, his features darkened by the shadows. A gust of wind whipped my hair across my face, momentarily blinding me. The room was intermittently illuminated by the stark flashes of lightning outside.

"Stop!" he bellowed, his voice barely audible over the roar of thunder.

I pushed against him with all my might, palms against his chest, but he was unyielding, pinning my arms firmly above my head.

"You asked for it," he hissed, teeth clenched in frustration.

Then, unexpectedly, he lowered his head and kissed me.

John

Desdemona writhed beneath me, her movements frantic in her effort to escape. My resolve was firm. I couldn't let her go, but the thought of causing her harm was the last thing I wanted.

That's why I kissed her, or at least that's what I told myself. The idea had been lingering in my mind, and perhaps, I hoped, it might distract her from her attempts to flee.

She resisted at first, her protest muffled against my lips, pushing back with a fierce determination. I had to secure her wrists with one hand while using the other to steady her head until she slowly yielded.

However, my own composure was far from steady. From the moment our lips met, I was in turmoil, lost in the forbidden allure of her kiss that I'd secretly longed for.

Initially, her lips parted hesitantly under mine. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't resist delving deeper, tilting her chin to explore the depths of her mouth, marking her in a way that felt like an invisible brand on her being.

She whimpered softly, her body squirming beneath me. My hand moved to her waist, tracing a gentle path up her side,

intensifying the kiss.

Her resistance faded. Her head tilted back, her legs yielding beneath mine. Desdemona's response shifted from resistance to a surprising softness, an unexpected willingness for someone caught in such a compromising situation.

I continued to kiss her, deeply, slowly. Her response was tentative at first, but gradually, her lips began to mirror mine, tentatively exploring the new terrain. It was like feeling a wildflower cautiously return a kiss.

Outside, thunder rumbled, and the wind's howl intensified. Reluctantly, I broke the kiss and stared down at her, my expression troubled. "What the hell were you doing here?" I demanded, my voice rough.

In the dim light, her gray eyes seemed to shimmer like molten silver, filled with a mixture of surprise and confusion—whether at her actions or mine, I couldn't tell.

"I was looking for something," she murmured, her voice distant, her hands now resting on my shoulders, mine tangled in her hair.

"What? No, wait," I cut her off as she leaned toward me again. "Tell me what you were looking for first."

"I don't know," she replied with a hint of defiance. "It doesn't matter. I didn't find anything, anyway."

Her lips briefly quivered, betraying her nervousness, but her face remained otherwise impassive, as enigmatic as a carved statue, holding its secrets tightly within.

A tiny tip of pink swiped her lips nervously, however, even though the rest of her face was carefully immobile. A stone statue couldn't be more secretive.

"Were you looking for money? Do you do drugs?" I rasped out. She looked startled.

"No," she said slowly. "Of course not. I have plenty of money nowadays, and I've never touched drugs in my whole life."

She looked like she could have bitten her own tongue off that very second. So that was a definite giveaway, then. Plenty of money, nowadays. Well, I'll be damned.

“So you were poor before this,” I guessed, and saw that my shot went home. Her hands dropped from my shoulders and she averted her gaze from my face.

I knew that expression. I'd seen it before, a thousand times over. Back in the old days, when I was growing up in Newark in a shitty clapboard two-bedroom house on a shitty street. Later on, again, in the emergency room at Saint Mary's.

There goes someone too ashamed to say they're poor and too proud to ask for help, said that look. I wondered if buying a fancy car and wearing a non-expression like marble was supposed to be a cure for that.

“Look at me,” I commanded her. “I don't care about where you came from. I just want to know what you're doing here now.”

Her moist pink lips parted. I almost thought she was about to confess.

Until she pulled my head down and kissed me again. It was a desperate attempt to distract me, and it completely worked.

I should have known better than to give in. I should have questioned her motives much more thoroughly. I knew she didn't break into my office for the sole purpose of seducing me.

It was just that she was so damn good at it.

Desdemona's hands clasped my head firmly, taking control of whatever there was left of my capacity for conscious thought and throwing it out the window. It was as wild as the storm outside. Later on, I would rank her ruthlessness at gale force twenty.

And I surrendered to the force of her will. How could I not? She was everything I had dreamed of, long before I ever met her.

Her hands were on my chest now, shakily unbuttoning my shirt. Her legs wrapped around my hips, moving in a rhythm as old as time itself. Soon enough, she maneuvered herself so that she was on top of me and began to unbuckle my belt.

Did she forget that she was going to run away at first? I suspected as much from the first moment she returned my kiss. She was just as overwhelmed by the tempestuous whirlwind of the attraction between us as I was.

I ran my hands up under the dark black hoodie she was wearing, revealing the pale skin of her belly. Her hands struggled to pull my trousers down, and instinctively, I found myself helping her.

You've gone insane, John, whispered the stern voice in my head, the one that had kept me sane and sensible all these years. *This is fucking lunacy.*

Outside, the rain beat down relentlessly, turning the night air into a sheet glass wall of shimmering water. The low light in my office did nothing to dispel the illusion of a sleeping, silent world empty of human beings and all our petty worries.

I wrenched my trousers and shoes off and grabbed Desdemona around the waist, forcing her to do the same. Her dark jeans and hoodie came off in a frantic flurry of movements in the dark, punctuated only by her shallow breaths and my heavier gasps.

She was gorgeous when she was finally naked. I picked her up and carried her to my desk, sweeping everything else off the surface. I laid her down like a ritual sacrifice splayed in front of me. My cock was already throbbing in the gap between her thighs. She moaned restlessly.

I leaned over her, trying to get a glimpse of her face. Desdemona's eyes were squeezed tightly shut. She clung to me as I placed the head of my cock at the entrance to her slick core, teasing her a little. Her legs were parted, feet dangling off the edge of my desk. She raised her hips to give me easier access.

I slid inside her, slowly but surely. Her throat contracted with the effort of taking my length. Her impossibly long eyelashes flickered as she watched the place where our bodies were joined, waiting for me to take her fully.

I WAS SO near the edge already, and I couldn't wait any longer. I thrust in with a fierce jab of my hips, and she gasped.

With her torso arched and her legs wrapped around me as I plundered her moist sweetness, Desdemona just looked like she belonged with me and under me. I wondered what I'd ever seen in my old, thrifted desk before I had her naked on top of it.

The feeling of her innermost muscles clamped around my cock was exquisitely painful, but in the best possible way. Her thighs shuddered and jerked as I began to slam into her. I raised her knees in the air and folded her legs back to give me greater access to her sweet pussy, now dripping our combined juices into the apex between her thighs.

I leaned over and swiped the tip of my tongue across her nipple before I bit down. Her most intimate muscles immediately squeezed around my length.

Interesting.

I did it again. Her taut thighs flailed in the air and she let out a soft scream, throwing her head back.

I buried one of my hands in her hair. "Look at me," I growled. "I want to see your face when I make you come."

I watched her pupils dilate as her transfixed gaze fell on mine, then on my cock as I continued to thrust into her eager crevice. There was nothing tender or sweet about this. Just the elemental ferocity of something as unstoppable as the storm in full flow, working up to the breaking point.

Her breasts trembled and shuddered each time I thrust into her, the nipples distended and delicious in the golden light bathing the room. *She is treasure and temptation and man's greatest downfall.* I recalled reading that line somewhere, once, in another life where I was still in possession of my senses.

I thrust again and again, working myself up to a fever pitch of excitement. This was everything I needed and nothing I saw coming. I reached the ragged edges of my self-restraint and knew with satisfaction that she was right there with me.

I pulled her up into my arms for the last few thrusts, needing as much closeness as humanly possible. She coiled her arms and legs around me, ivy around a tree trunk, and nestled her head in my shoulder. Her slender body rose and fell on my cock, working in perfect harmony with me. I rammed my cock up into her again and again, desperate for release.

It came like a crashing wave, taking me over. Desdemona's head fell back and she released an aching sigh. The muscles of her throat clenched, blue veins starkly protruding from underneath her translucent skin as she screamed soundlessly against the roar of the rain.

I lifted up one last time and thrust into her as deep as I could, then held still. I let go of my own orgasm, pumping endlessly into her womb, panting with the pure relief of agony.

She climaxed, her inner muscles clutching my pulsating cock in her final throes before she collapsed into my arms. I held her steady, letting my breathing slow down.

Outside, the cold rain still swept across the valley, obscuring the horizon. Desdemona nestled in my arms, warm and lithe and utterly mysterious.

"I should go," she mumbled into the sweaty skin of my shoulder. "I'm going."

"Okay." I was too exhausted to object. And if she wanted to escape, where would she go tonight, in this pouring rain?

"Okay." She reluctantly dragged herself away from me and stooped to gather up her clothes. "Two minutes."

It took less than that for her to get dressed. I was still pulling my trousers up when she halted at the door of my office, looking back at me without really seeming to see me at all.

“I shouldn’t have done it,” she said, almost to herself.
“This was really stupid.”

Yeah. You and me both, I thought bitterly as I watched her slip away out of sight.

Dessie

I hurried along the long wooden corridors as quietly as I could, praying I wouldn't wake anyone up. It was past midnight, though I had no right to be in the senior staff floor at any time of the day unless I was specifically called in.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

In the space of less than twenty-four hours, I'd had my mind turned inside out by two of the men who were on the list of most likely suspects for my adopted father's murder. If I was bent on revenge, then they'd had theirs already. I wasn't supposed to lose control like this.

At least the thing with Leon was planned, and it sort of worked out as the beginnings of a steady source of information.

Tonight with John Galbraith, however... this was different. This was me getting so careless that I allowed myself to be caught in what was starting to feel more and more like an ambush.

I froze in my tracks, just around the corner of the landing that led upstairs.

Was it an ambush? Did he suspect something?

He'd definitely asked some searching questions at my interview. When Hartley worked his magic and got me on the staff in the Institute, he hadn't mentioned anything about an initial interview with the most powerful man on the premises now that Oswald was gone.

Was that deliberate? Maybe there was something odd about my resumé, though in recent years, every other person you met was guaranteed to have odd gaps in their work history since Covid hit.

That was the new normal, but perhaps not here. Perhaps I had underestimated how closely knit the medical research community was likely to be.

Or maybe the car was a mistake. I probably should have driven up in a secondhand piece of junk. Junior staff were definitely not making enough to afford a Lamborghini, and if I hadn't been Oswald's principal heir, I wouldn't even have qualified for a car loan.

Which is why I did it. I didn't even know that much about cars. In Newhaven, I usually got around on the local buses. But Uncle Cuthbert told me it was easier to drive to Stillingbrook than to take a series of connecting trains, so I needed a car.

And for some reason, I bought the most expensive, most conspicuous car I could find online. Maybe it was the sight of the number of zeroes trailing Oswald's personal fortune that did something weird to my brain.

From the way he lived quietly in his little cottage on the grounds, nobody could have guessed that he could have easily afforded a mega-yacht and a fleet of private planes. I had no idea, certainly, and I didn't think I needed to hold back on splurging, since I was essentially arriving at a new place, with a new identity.

But the way Galbraith said *So you were poor before this*, like I had *Pathetic Little Orphan* tattooed on my forehead—that made me feel exposed and furious and panicky. He wasn't

supposed to be asking questions about my background. It was meant to be the other way around.

I crept up the last few steps to the junior staff floor and checked the landing. All clear. Not a soul awake apart from me, my guilty conscience, and John Galbraith somewhere a couple of floors below.

Once I was ensconced safely back in my room, I hurriedly stripped off my clothes and made for the shower in my tiny, attached bathroom. It took an effort not to linger over all the ways John and Leon had touched me, the different kinds of marks they had both left on my skin.

Afterward, I settled down in bed with my phone turned off and a slim canvas dossier on my lap. I had studying to do, and Ms. Wainwright would be rightly disappointed if I didn't add the information she had given me to the research I had already gathered.

It was now just past one thirty in the morning. The wind must have died down, though I only had a narrow window on the far side of my bed through which to hear it. Perhaps the electricity of the storm had affected my brain and tricked me into falling into Galbraith's arms so easily.

I tried to focus on the folder.

Galbraith, John. Son of Ted and Marianne Galbraith, born in Newark, New Jersey. Oldest of eight siblings, four brothers and three sisters.

Eight siblings. *Eight*. For someone like me, raised in permanent solitude, it felt like an overabundance of blessings.

I wondered if all his siblings had that same unforgiving, granite face, if they were all as successful and intimidating as he was.

I remembered something I'd read somewhere, about psychopathic kids going on to become either successful CEOs or successful serial killers later in life, and I wondered if his mother had ever noticed anything abnormal about him.

The origin story of a ruthless murderer, I reflected sleepily. There was a reason I had been attracted to child psychology in

the first place. Everyone had a story, a reason they turned out the way they did in the end. A series of clues to their past, levers that could be pulled and pushed to influence their future behavior.

I checked the names of John's siblings again. James, Paul, Luke and Simon, Leah, Ruth, and Naomi. Names picked out of the Bible, in the good old-fashioned way.

And yet John Galbraith would not be the first to violate *thou shalt not kill*, would he? I just needed to understand what would push him to that point. Maybe I'd find out tomorrow.

I wondered if Oswald had liked him, had perhaps even enjoyed talking to him when they met. On that thought, my eyes drifted shut and I fell asleep.



THE NEXT MORNING, I was in a mad rush. I had overslept and was therefore horribly late to the first meeting I had scheduled for the day, with the head of Psychiatry, one Doctor Sturry.

He frowned at me as I knocked quietly and entered the teaching gallery in the right-hand wing of the house.

"Ah," he said, peering over thick half-moon glasses. "Dr. Davenport, is it? Glad to finally meet you."

"Yes, Dr. Sturry," I said breathlessly. "I'm sorry for being late. I'm only just starting to find my way around the building."

"Well, next time, try to plan ahead," he said dismissively. One of the others in the small group of junior doctors on staff already gathered in the room gave me a sympathetic glance. "I have just handed out the training schedules for the week. How many clinic hours are you down for?"

"I have six at the moment, but I'm flexible, sir," I said, trying to appease him. It would be disastrous if I got on his bad side this early. "I've also had a patient transferred from my previous practice, but her appointments will be conducted remotely."

“Remotely.” He snorted. “In my day, psychiatry was supposed to be a personal, private matter, not a tiny person on a screen. It’s ridiculous.”

The woman who’d given me that sympathetic glance earlier nearly rolled her eyes. A man next to her scoffed openly.

“We’ve just been through a global nightmare of a deadly virus, Dr. Sturry,” he pointed out. “Was our entire profession supposed to go on hold for the duration of lockdown and quarantines and all the other trauma we’ve collectively endured? More people are in therapy than ever before. We’re all managing the best we can.”

Dr. Sturry didn’t seem to enjoy the interruption, but instead of replying to the male speaker, he pointed an outraged finger at me.

“You’re got children on your Zoom, have you? Children! How are they supposed to benefit from a tinny voice over loudspeakers telling them anything, eh? What happened to the human touch?”

“There’s a whole mini-generation of babies now who were born in isolation and learned to socialize only on electronic devices,” I replied quietly. “They’re used to it because they don’t know anything else. It’s the parents and grandparents I feel sorry for, mostly. They’re the ones who have to cope with a world they no longer understand.”

Dr. Sturry, who couldn’t have been a day less than sixty, glared furiously at me. There it was. *Boomer outrage incoming.*

I waited, my hands curled tensely at my sides. But after a moment, Dr. Sturry’s expression changed to one of resignation.

“I suppose you’re right,” he said wearily. “Even before the pandemic, I was getting too old for this nonsense.”

Now it was my turn to sympathize with him. “Not at all, sir. I am, as well. I’ve had patients refuse to talk to me if I couldn’t name every Pokémon in existence. A preteen once

bullied me because I'm not on TikTok. The generation gap is tough for me, too."

That got a little bit of a laugh, and even Dr. Sturry chuckled. "Bless their hearts, they don't know when they're lucky. Okay, well. All of you, off to your classes, then."

I had the feeling I'd passed a secret test of some kind and been found satisfactory. The intuition was confirmed by the nice woman who first made eye contact with me in the room. She caught up with me in the corridor and introduced herself.

"Hey, I'm Chelsea," she said brightly. "I'm on the junior research staff, so I don't know how much we'll be seeing of each other, but I can introduce you to some of the pediatrics peeps if you want."

Research? Perfect.

"Oh, so you work with Dr. Magnusson, then?" I said, pretending to be suitably impressed. "Wow, that must be something. I'm Dessie, by the way."

"I know," she said, grinning. "You're Dessie and you pulled up in a purple Lamborghini. You're famous, you know. Good for you."

Ouch. Did I want to be famous? I was really going to regret that fucking car, I could tell.

"I've got to head over to my first research lecture today," I said quickly. "Do you have the same one I do? Ethics of Medicine?"

"Oh, yeah, that's Dr. Galbraith's," she said casually. "Come on, hurry. He hates it when people are late."

I broke into a cold sweat. "Dr. Galbraith?" *Oh, no, oh no, oh fuck,* said a small voice in the back of my mind.

"Yeah, but he's not as scary as he looks," said Chelsea comfortingly. "Are you coming?"

I gulped. "Yeah."

It couldn't be that bad, could it? I hoped as I followed her into the lecture room. Into the yawning mouth of the beast.

What could he possibly do to me in front of all those people?

“Ah, Desdemona,” said a growling, all too familiar voice from behind me. “How nice to see you again.”

Dessie

I turned, and a stone dropped into my stomach.

“Hi, Dr. Galbraith,” said Chelsea winningly. She had a very nice smile, I noticed. “Can’t wait for the lecture!”

“Thank you, Chelsea,” he said politely, though his eyes were on me, grim and watchful. “Settling in okay, Desdemona?”

A series of explicit images flashed before my eyes. Him on top of me, me frantically tearing his clothes off, the way he looked when he was fucking me on the edge of his desk...

“Yes, thank you, Dr Galbraith,” I said politely, although it was an outright lie. If anything, I was profoundly unsettled and the total opposite of okay.

Chelsea shot me a curious glance as John Galbraith looked past us, up toward the rapidly filling seats in the room. I assumed nobody wanted to miss attendance when the Head of Oncology was lecturing.

“Good,” he said, and the mere sound of his voice had the heat coiling between my legs so fast, it was unbelievable. “See me after class, Desdemona.”

Oh, fuck. Oh, bloody hell.

“What was all that about?” whispered Chelsea in a furtive undertone as we hurried to a pair of empty seats in the back. “Did you piss him off already?”

You have no idea, Chelsea, I thought darkly, though I didn’t reply out loud. *You have no idea.*

I thought of Googling the possible sentence for breaking, entering, and industrial espionage on my phone under the desk, but then refrained. If John Galbraith wanted me to be in prison, I had no doubt that I would have woken up behind bars this very morning.

And besides, I didn’t want the phone screen lighting up my face like a spotlight from the back of the room. As it turned out, I had misjudged John Galbraith’s teaching skills. He was an excellent speaker, and he made the most of his subject matter with very little apparent effort.

The room hung on his words as he began with the words of the Hippocratic oath.

“I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant,

I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.”

John’s deep, sonorous tones rolled through the room. His voice reminded me of the thunder last night, unrestrained and terrifying when at full force.

“I will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures that are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism.

“I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon’s knife or the chemist’s drug.”

The chemist’s drug, I thought with a twinge of bitterness. Morphine in a cup of coffee, one of the traditional drugs for

euthanasia for the elderly. Among other things. Oswald's silent killer must have known that.

“I will not be ashamed to say “I know not”, nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient's recovery.”

I know not, I echoed in my mind. *I know not, and there is nobody else to ask. The patient has gone beyond recovery.* There was only the postmortem analysis to worry about. The cause of death was still officially undetermined.

I frowned. I shouldn't be salivating over John's deep, sexy voice when I should be thinking about Oswald's death instead. Nor should I have let Leon take control of my body so easily.

I remembered reading about the aftereffects of funerals during the pandemic. It was incredibly common for people who were grieving a personal loss to resort to frenetic sexual activity. It had something to do with feeling alive.

For myself, I suspected it had more to do with being able to forget grief. Since the day I heard that Oswald had been found dead, I began to live with the weight of his loss upon my shoulders. There was not a moment in the day when I was able to forget he was gone.

Well. Not a moment, except for those I spent with Leon and John. *Should I worry that there's something wrong with me?* It wasn't exactly normal to experience such intense attraction to two different men within the same couple of days, was it?

It wasn't something I could afford to ignore. There was a distinct threat in John's voice when he told me to see him after class, but also, a delicious promise.

You're losing it, Dessie.

John continued with his breakdown of the Hippocratic oath and what it meant in the modern day, especially in terms of large hospitals with legal liability that superseded the moral inclinations of private physicians. It wasn't a subject that had ever drawn me before. Children were usually simpler to deal

with, and institutions overall tended to be kinder to the underaged.

But listening to John now, I understood that when he said the word *oath*, he meant it in the old-fashioned sense. Not a legal contract with multiple, painfully elaborate clauses, but a strong and simple code of honor.

I wondered about him. If he killed Oswald, he was probably convinced there was a good reason for it. Speculating on what that reason might be turned my mouth bitter, but it at least took my mind off the upcoming and sincerely dreaded meeting with him.

I checked my watch and waited for the class to end. It was over far too soon, but John was surrounded by a crowd of appreciative junior staff, many of whom had further questions, so I was able to slip by and evade his notice.

I was going to go lurk unobtrusively outside his office, except for the fact that I was waylaid by Chelsea at the last second.

“Hey, what do you have next?” she chirped, unfailingly bright and upbeat. “I have to go do my lab reports, but do you want to meet up for lunch? We can sit together if you want.”

“That sounds amazing,” I said with an effort, though I meant it. She was the first genuinely friendly person I had met here, and if I survived the after class talk with John, she was the only person I wanted to hang out with.

“Cool! See you then.” She beamed and hurried away upstairs. I moped dejectedly in the opposite direction, trying to suppress the awful sinking feeling in my stomach.

“Desdemona.” *Oh, shit.* “Where do you think you’re going?”

I turned warily. “Sir? I thought you wanted me to—”

“My office. Now,” said John curtly, barely looking my way. I followed him through a pair of swinging doors into a part of the house completely unknown to me. The place was like a jigsaw puzzle put together by a blind madman.

Why didn't I ever look at the floor plan of the institute, level by level, and then memorize it? I chided myself. At least I wouldn't have embarrassed myself with senior staff twice in one day.

Though the way I'd embarrassed myself with the senior most member of staff just last night didn't bear thinking about, either. It was probably too late to worry about these things.

John shouldered open the door of his office and strode in. I hovered hesitantly by the door.

"Take a seat," he said brusquely. I crossed the same floor where I had surrendered last night with a feeling of tremendous regret.

What a stupid thing to do. I knew it now as I knew it then. The bright sunlight streaming in through the tall windows this morning lit up the desk, illuminating every detail. I could remember exactly what it felt like on bare skin.

I sat down hurriedly. "Sir."

He stood next to the desk. "Are you going to tell me what you were doing in here last night?"

"You know exactly what I was doing in here last night."

The words slipped out before I could catch them. I stared up at him, appalled.

"Before that," he said menacingly. "Why were you in here in the first place?"

There was no good excuse I could offer, and he knew it as well as I did. I merely looked at him, silent and stubborn.

John let out a deep, angry breath. "I see. Well, I guess I didn't really expect you to provide a satisfactory explanation. If you had one, I would already know it."

I didn't blink. I couldn't breathe.

Something about the way he said the word *satisfactory* was already turning me into a puddle on the inside. I couldn't risk it.

"But there will have to be... consequences."

Oh, fuck. He's going to fire me.

My stomach clenched. At that moment, I nearly blurted everything out.

Please, sir, I'm sorry. I suspect you of being a murderer, which is why I was going through your papers in your private office without permission. Please don't be angry.

Yeah. There was no point to that, was there?

John took my silence as further defiance. His thick brows clenched together. In this strong sunlight, I could see the light chestnut streaks in his hair really shine through. *What an odd thing to focus on.*

And his eyes. His dark brown eyes, surrounded by the beginnings of dark frown lines, the ones surmounting the harsh grooves that now marked his nose and mouth. *Fuck.* Chelsea was wrong. He was exactly as scary as he looked.

In all the thrill of the chase, I hadn't truly factored in the risk of getting caught myself. Big mistake.

"Get up," he said abruptly. I scrambled to my feet instantly, overtaken by panic.

"Hands against the desk," he ordered, picking something up from his desk. It looked like a wooden ruler.

I put my hands against the—wait, *what?*

I wasn't even sure I'd said the last part aloud, not until he snapped, "You heard me."

I snatched my hands away from the desk. "What the hell is this?"

John smiled mirthlessly.

"It's called confronting the problem, Desdemona." He thwacked the ruler into his palm. "Either I fire you, or you take the punishment for your snooping in a different way. It's your choice."

My eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

He cocked his head to one side. "Try me."

He *was* serious. He was completely serious.

He was actually planning to use corporal punishment, like I was some naughty school student back in the nineteen twenties or something.

And the truly appalling part was how seriously I was considering it. His voice had that kind of commanding, almost hypnotic quality. And if I didn't want to be fired—

I almost thought of begging, of asking if there was anything else I could do to apologize. Only the thought that I had already tried that other thing and had been completely unsuccessful in using it to get away scot-free changed my mind.

I dropped my eyes and put my hands back on the desk.

“Good,” he said in a tone of voice so matter-of-fact that I was ready to swear he did this all the time. Maybe he did.

“Now bend over.”

Shit. This was so utterly, unbelievably humiliating.

I lowered myself carefully, bending my arms at the elbows, uneasily conscious that for whatever strange reason, I was already wet in his presence.

An unconscious reaction to the memory of what happened here last night, I self-diagnosed with more hope than accuracy. I held my breath, waiting for the first blow to fall.

John took his time. He surveyed my shamefully abject position first before he went around the desk and stood behind me. Even when I couldn't see his eyes, I could feel the burning impact of his gaze on my skin.

And I was wearing a skirt today, of all things. It was a plain black linen one, paired with a matching black jacket and a stark-white top for contrast. Oh, the irony. In the morning, I thought it made me look like a professional adult.

Now it just made me perfect for the role of a disobedient schoolgirl, bent over the principal's desk. I winced.

The ruler swished down and hit me squarely on the ass cheeks. I bit the inside of my lips.

What a time to discover that I was really, really into being punished.

John

T *hwack!*
The sound of the ruler hitting the soft flesh of her ass cheeks vindicated a lot of the anger I felt when I pictured her in that stupid purple car.

I smacked her again, eliciting a tiny moan from her parted mouth. Her legs had begun trembling.

Perfect crescent moons leading down to the longest legs.

I wanted her. I wanted to bend her over that damn desk and fuck her brains out. But first, she needed to be taught a lesson. So, I brought the ruler down on her butt once more.

“Ow,” she cried out, wincing slightly. A slender crease remained where the surface of the ruler had touched the back of her coat. My eyes narrowed.

“Too much?” I asked her, conscious that this was not ordinary.

Her back arched, and she turned her face to the side to look at me, challenge rife in those glacial eyes.

Like the first whispers of dawn over a sea. Like silver and storm clouds, the drizzling of rain.

Shut the fuck up and focus, John. You have no business writing sonnets over her eyes.

A sonnet that is getting out of hand.

Her lips slanted in a half-smile. “Is that all you had to say, sir?”

The ruler came down once again, sharp and insistent. She cried out. “Yes!”

She’s enjoying it.

“Do you always respond this way to punishment, Miss Davenport?”

The slant widened. “No, sir.”

Thwack. This time, it was the palm of my hand making contact with her coat.

“Oh, yes!”

Thwack! A surge of satisfaction rose in me at the way she’d dropped “sir” in there.

“Is there enough cock here to keep you satisfied?”

I honestly had no idea where that question came from, but it was out of my mouth before I could do anything to stop myself. I waited for her to snatch the ruler from my hand and either hit me with it or threaten to report me to the authorities.

Surprisingly, or not, she shook her head.

Thwack! “When I ask you something,” I intoned, “I want a verbal answer.”

“Yes sir,” she panted, clinging to the surface of the desk for dear life. “There’s plenty of cock.”

Her eyes never left mine. Neither did the challenge in them.

“Who?” I asked, pushing down an unwelcome surge of jealousy.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, sir?”

The audacity. The way she said it, more like she was taunting me than asking a question.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

“Oh, my God,” she cried out. Her ass cheeks were noticeably red now. “Leon, sir. I fucked Leon.”

Of course she did, and of course he invited it.

I placed the ruler’s spine against her ass, stroking it gently across the layers of fabric hiding it from me. “You know, Dessie, I don’t think this is working. I think we need to get that stupid coat off you.”

Dr. Davenport began straightening with the intent of taking her coat off, but I put my hand on her back and pushed her firmly back down.

“Did I tell you that you could get up?”

Her shoulders stiffened. “No, but...”

I smacked her ass with my hand. Hard. “Stay where you are. Follow my orders, or you will be in a world of pain.”

Odd, how much I enjoyed punishing her.

Dessie put her hands back on the table. I slid mine down over her ass and grabbed the hem of her coat. I lifted it up and draped it over her back. Her skirt was cut just a little short.

How appropriate.

I smirked. “Tsk, tsk... this skirt is a little short, Dr. Davenport. Were you hoping to attract some attention?”

She shook her head defensively. “No, sir, I—”

THWACK!

“Spare me the excuses, Dessie,” I snarled. “You’re full of crap. All you do is lie, one on top of the other. You need to be careful because one day, all of them will come spilling out and it’ll be far too late.”

“I—”

Thwack! “I didn’t say you could talk.”

With the ruler firmly in place, I brusquely pulled her skirt down with my free hand. She wasn’t wearing underwear. Her ass cheeks were flushed from the impact of wood on them.

My cock throbbed painfully at the sight of her bent over for my benefit. Her pussy shone invitingly, wet and glistening with her juices.

“You seem to be enjoying this,” I observed.

She didn’t reply.

I parted her ass cheeks and trailed the ruler’s edge on the thin line of flesh that ran down to her core.

“Oh, my God,” she groaned. “Fuck me, sir!”

Thwack!

“Not so easily, Dessie,” I reprimanded her. “How do you think I feel, knowing you’ve been doing this same shit with my staff?”

“Sir, I—”

Thwack-thwack-thwack!

I rubbed my fingers between her legs, never touching her pussy, just teasing the tops of her smooth, rounded thighs.

“Please,” she panted.

“Please what?”

“Please, sir,” she groaned, squirming as I continued touching her. “Please bend me over and fuck me.”

My fingers slid closer to her needy pussy.

The door burst open. Leon’s head bobbed in. “Hey, John, I — oh...”

The bobbing head took one look at what was happening and disappeared. The door closed once more.

Dessie tried to straighten, but my hand kept her in her place. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Sir, Leon...”

“I don’t give a damn that he saw you. You’re too much trouble, Dr. Davenport. And you’re not going anywhere until you’ve learned your lesson.”

She moaned slightly, moving her hips and desperately trying to brush her pussy against my fingers.

“Tell me,” I asked her silkily. “How did it feel, fucking Leon Vincenzo?”

“Would you like it if I told you it was amazing?” she purred back, crying out loud as I slapped her ass once more. “Would you like it if I told you I rode the fuck out of him?”

Somehow, the idea of her straddling Leon, her head flying back and forth as she took his cock in her pussy, only made me harder.

I pulled my zipper down and moved behind her. My cock was rock-hard as I rubbed the tip between her slippery pussy lips.

“Do you like that, Dr. Davenport?” I teased the tip against her. “Do you like the feel of my cock against your pussy?”

“Yes!” she groaned, pushing her hips back and trying to suck me inside.

Thwack!

“Ask me nicely, Dr. Davenport. Ask me to fuck you till you can’t walk.”

She moved her ass slightly. “Please, Dr. Galbraith,” she purred. “Please fuck me hard.”

“Gladly,” I snarled, teasing her opening further, allowing the tip of my cock to press half an inch inside. “But only when you make me believe you really want it.”

“Oh, please,” she cried out, slapping her hands on the table. “Please fill me up, I want it so bad!” Her voice was convincingly breathless and desperate, turning almost to a primal growl by the end of the sentence.

Lies. All lies.

In all honesty, I didn't care. Right now, she belonged to me.

I teased her for a few more seconds.

"Please, sir, don't torment me any more."

"You sure?" I asked softly.

Her head cocked to the side. There it was again, with that gaze. *Silver linings and stormy seas.*

"Then take it," I snarled before slamming my length into her tight, welcoming pussy. She was so wet that I felt her juices soak the front of my corduroy trousers.

"You dirty little girl! Look what you've done to my trousers," I groaned as I pulled her hair back with my hands. "You have to be punished for that, and I know just how."

If her resounding, room-filling moans indicated anything, it was that she was far too into it to listen. She ground her hips back at me as I established a rhythm.

I increased my pace and plowed my cock into her, my hips hammering against her gorgeous ass. I could feel her clenching against it, the tightening so ridiculously delicious that it brought me straight to the edge.

Abandoning all hope of staving off the inevitable, I rammed into her with everything I had.

"Why... are... you... here?" I spaced the words with thrusts, going in, going out, claiming her as she cried out incoherently.

"Sir, I'm just a student," she moaned, still mocking me as I made her come. I wasn't about to let her go so easily.

Using a combination of her dripping pussy juices and my precum, I moistened the tip of my index finger and eased it into her puckered asshole.

"Oh, fuck!" she screamed. I grabbed the ruler I had lowered to the side and swung it against her cheek, hard.

She cried out, full of the sensation of her holes being occupied. "OW!"

“Don’t make so much noise,” I scolded her. “This ruler can bring you pleasure or pain. Which is it going to be?”

“P–Pleasure...” she whimpered.

“Pleasure, what?” I asked, preparing to bring the ruler down once more.

“Pleasure, please, Dr. Galbraith.”

“Good girl.”

I lowered the ruler and circled my finger in her ass, stretching her slowly until I could add a second one. All this while, my cock continued fucking her pussy, slow and steady.

“You’ve been a very naughty girl, Dr. Davenport. And for that, I’m going to have to fuck your tight little ass.”

“Sir, I—”

“Shh, don’t talk. Just listen.”

I had a second finger in her asshole now. “Reach back between your legs and start rubbing your clit for me.”

Dessie obediently slid her left hand out and pushed it back between her thighs, finding her clit and rubbing as instructed.

“Good,” I said slowly. “Now, when you are on the brink of coming, I want you to move your hand away from your pussy. Am I clear?”

She nodded and mumbled something unintelligible. I increased my pace of fucking her slightly.

“Don’t disappoint me, Dr. Davenport,” I whispered. “Or I will be very angry.”

Thwack! She whimpered as I flicked the ruler against her ass once more.

Thwack! “And you don’t want that, do you?”

“No, sir.”

“Very good.”

I balanced the ruler on her back and pulled out of her pussy, only to feed it back, coating it with her copious juices.

She was hot, so hot.

“Fuck, yes,” I groaned as I pulled out again, placed both hands on her ass cheeks, and pulled them wide apart to expose her puckered hole.

I aimed my cock at the center of her opening and began to press it home.

“OH, MY FUCK!” she cried out between gritted teeth as she felt the head of my cock begin to push against the ring. She began stimulating her clit wildly.

I eased into her with gentle, shallow thrusts until I no longer needed to hold her open. Her breathing had increased dramatically.

“How does that feel, Dr. Davenport?”

“Full,” she rasped. “So full.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No, please! Don’t ever stop.”

I thoroughly enjoyed the sight of my cock spearing into her asshole as it puckered and gripped me while I slid in and out. Soon, I was plunging my entire length into her ass.

Her breathing grew more and more labored as her finger worked overtime on her clit.

“I’m almost...” She moaned as I pulled out and focused on the ruler that was still hanging on for dear life on the small of her back.

“Take your hand away,” I ordered.

She moved her hand away as instructed, and I replaced it with the cool, varnished wood, rubbing it against her lips, clit, and then slapping between her legs. I increased the intensity.

Her legs responded by becoming jelly-like. “I’m coming,” she cried out, spasming as she came, hard.

I dropped the ruler. Reaching forward, I clamped my palm over her mouth and pushed my cock back into her ass,

pounding her until I erupted inside her asshole. She screamed into my palm as I dumped the last of my cum inside her ass.

Once I was done, I pulled out and moved away. "Straighten up," I told her, avoiding her gaze as she took a few minutes to breathe. "And show yourself out."

She fixed her skirt and pulled her coat back on. From the corner of my eye, I saw the way strands of her hair fell over her eyes. How her legs still trembled. How vulnerable she looked. I had this basic instinct that wanted to cross the boundaries that existed between us, pull her to me, and lock her in a hug.

"I'm sorry for what you saw, sir," she finally said, dallying for time. Her eyes looked hunted, but also defensive.

Questions, so many of them. "If I ask you why you were in my office at that ungodly hour, can I expect an honest answer?"

She continued regarding me with that tense look. "No."

A clang of railroad bells erupted in my mind. *Danger ahead. Danger.*

"Then there is nothing to apologize for," I replied brusquely. "Apologies only make sense when there is a purpose that defines them."

"I'm sorry you saw me," she quantified.

"But not sorry you were there, is that so?"

No answer.

She was like a train in the dead of the night, fleeting and powerful, cutting through my world with the precision of steel on steel. I realized there was much more to Dr. Davenport than the couture and the horrendously purple car.

My gut twisted, contorted by longing and the stark clang of those fucking bells. She was every cautionary tale made flesh, and if I wasn't careful, she would lead me to my ruin.

"Leave, Dr. Davenport."

Our eyes met another time.

Twin tunnels, I thought as I gazed into all that gray, *leading into an abyss*.

She nodded and slowly turned to walk to the door.

“Dr. Davenport?”

She paused. “Sir?”

“I don’t want you seeing Leon Vincenzo.”

The door shut with a soft thud as she left me to my thoughts.

Who are you, Dr. Davenport? What have you done to me?

Dessie

I stepped out of what had possibly been the most shameful encounter of my whole life and scurried to my room. As soon as I crossed the threshold, I dropped down on my threadbare bed and wrapped a beige stole around my shoulders. I was cold all over, like I'd just fallen into a massive bucket of ice water.

How had I enjoyed being humiliated this much? What the hell?

He had... he had literally ordered me to stay away from Leon. Normally, I would counter that. Today, I listened to him like a meek student and made a run for it.

My phone buzzed insistently. I sighed at the name on the screen before answering.

“Hello.”

“How is my favorite detective?” The voice on the other end was slightly muffled, like it had just been warmed with a dose of expensive whiskey.

I stifled the smile rising to my lips. I had a lot to worry about. I focused my attention on the lectern at the other end of

the room. Standing about waist-high, it was a comfortable little unit with a raised lip to prevent papers from sliding off. The stand was supported by a single, solid column branching into a stable, four-footed base with simple legs, splayed slightly for balance.

The sight of that slight curvature brought back thoughts of what I'd just done, bent over and splayed for Dr. Galbraith to fuck me. I blushed furiously.

“Dessie?” the voice asked tentatively. “Are you okay?”

Walking over to the lectern, I plugged in the cord for a string of fairy lights I'd found from one of my jaunts with Oswald. Each light, no bigger than a dime, was shaped like a tiny parachute, its translucent fabric catching and refracting the light like a miniature stained glass window. As I pressed the switch, the room, once shrouded in the bleakness of bare fluorescent bulbs, transformed.

A warm golden glow bloomed from each miniature lantern, cascading down the lectern in a gentle waterfall of light. The shoddy wallpaper, its once-vibrant colors now faded and peeling, seemed to come alive, bathed in the soft, golden aura.

The air itself felt lighter, imbued with a magic that had been dormant within the room's walls, waiting to be awakened. In that moment, the room wasn't just a place to speak but a sanctuary, a haven illuminated by a thousand tiny stars, and I had something close to Oswald returned to me.

A lump formed in my throat as I finally answered. “I'm messing things up, Hartley. I thought I was strong, but the people here...”

“They're two steps ahead?” he offered nonchalantly.

I choked back a resigned laugh. “You could say that.”

“How are you coping?” he asked gently.

The empathetic undertone of his voice was the last straw. “Well...” I sniffled, looking around for a handkerchief I could use to wipe my nose. “My life is officially the stuff of missteps, the kind that could make even a sitcom writer cringe.

Ever since I've set foot in this *delightful* institute, my knack for turning situations into a chaotic mess has grown ten times more impressive."

"Did you find anything?"

What was I supposed to say? All that was left was to call a spade a spade and admit I was just about as in control as a cat in a yarn store. Who knew I'd take the role of an errant student so seriously? The cherry on top of the mess was how clueless I felt. I had no map, compass, or sense of direction.

"No," I muttered. "I'm considering leaving."

"You can't."

The quiet determination with which Hartley delivered the words halted me in my tracks.

"You can't leave, Dessie," he continued. "I don't profess to know a lot about you, but from what I've seen and, well, survived" —he chuckled a little sadly— "you're not the type who can live with the idea of defeat."

But he didn't know how utterly out of my zone I was. I had begun *enjoying* whatever was happening with—*to*—me. And that was wrong. Right?

My life had become a big faux-pas. All I had ever done after coming to this damned institute was mess things up. At no point, neither with Leon, nor with John, had I managed to stay in control.

It was one thing to enjoy getting fucked by them, but a whole other thing to submit like I was a naughty student who needed to be put in place. I'd done that, and to make things worse, I had no answers. Nothing.

"It's like I'm talking to a brick wall," Hartley spoke playfully. "So, I'll hang up, but before that, I'll ask you a question. Let's say you give up, the way you gave up on us—"

"That wasn't—"

"Shh. I'm not done. Let's say you do. Can you go back to your life in Newhaven and live out the rest of your days knowing you didn't get justice for Oswald?"

“I—”

Click.

Hartley had me between a rock and a hard place. He was right, though. My leaving at this juncture would haunt me for the rest of my life.

But I needed a better plan. I crossed the room to the little corner where I'd kept my bag. I opened it and took out a big leather notebook. The first order of business was to build another identity, one that wouldn't limit me to my father's institute. Maybe it was this place and how suffocated it made me feel, even with all the openness around me.

You couldn't expect free skies around closed people.

“Okay. Time to make a few phone calls,” I muttered to myself.



THE AFTERNOON SUN hid behind a thick envelope of gray as I navigated the winding roads of Connecticut toward the city side of Stillingbrook. Anticipation thrummed beneath my skin, a tangible vibration that resonated with the rhythmic purr of the car engine.

My eyes kept lingering on the little sticky note I had attached to the driving wheel.

Interview with Dr. Alistair Thorne.

I hated interviews unless I was at the other end of the table. I resented the stupid questions that were oddly personal and, at times, even offensive.

Best get it over with, Dessie.

Dr. Thorne's office, located in the heart of Stillingbrook city, was housed in a peculiar building. It looked like a Frankensteinian patchwork of architectural styles that seemed to defy gravity, leaning precariously like a tipsy old man. The mismatched windows, each a different size and shape, blinked at me curiously.

I pushed open the creaky mahogany door, entering a space that conjured vivid memories. The scents of old books and pipe tobacco, familiar aromas from the library of Oswald, washed over me, transporting me back to a different time, a different life.

Thorne, shrouded in a swirling cloud of pipe smoke, sat behind an antique oak desk, tinted with the patina of age. His face, a landscape etched with the marks of time, was obscured by the haze, but his eyes were obsidian shards glinting in the filtered sunlight.

The interview that followed was a psychological ballet. Thorne's questions, sharp and precise, were designed to dissect my past, my motivations, the very fabric of my being.

“So,” he fired at me. “Oswald’s death. Shocking stuff.”

“Why do you say that?” I fired back.

He looked stunned by the bluntness of my question.

“The rumors—”

I scoffed, although the insides of my hands were clammy. “Rumors are the currency of the bored, Dr. Thorne.”

He stared at me for a second and then barked a short laugh. “I like that. But you have to admit, his death was quite the talk of the town.”

I felt a sting. “My father was a great man. I am not surprised.”

Mr. Thorne's eyes narrowed slightly. “Wouldn't you say the circumstances were mysterious?”

The man was set on forcing an answer from me. The harder he tried, I told myself, the more diplomatic I'd be.

I countered, my tone even, “Mystery often surrounds great men, doesn't it? Their lives, their deaths. It's the price of brilliance.”

He chuckled, a sound that seemed to reverberate off the bookshelves. “Well said. You have your father's wit. But let's talk about you. Your upbringing, before Oswald.”

The room seemed to shrink, the walls inching closer as memories flooded in, memories of cold floors, empty stomachs, and the perpetual feeling of being an outsider looking in.

Oswald had been my savior, lifting me from the depths of an orphanage that taught me more about survival than care. Stealing bread just to quell the hunger, hiding in shadows to avoid unwarranted attention—it was a life that I had left behind but hadn't forgotten.

"Everyone has a past, Mr. Thorne," I said, my voice steady. "Some more colorful than others. Mine has shaped me, but it doesn't define me."

He nodded, the sharpness in his eyes softening. "And what shapes you now, Dessie?"

I leaned forward, the light from the window casting a glow on the desk's surface. "I have a thing for puzzles. And we're all puzzles. Some just have more pieces missing."

He scratched his unkempt beard thoughtfully. "Would you say your life before Oswald taught you this?"

"It was a life," I replied, my voice softened with resignation. "Oswald saved me from it. Gave me a future."

Thorne leaned forward. "Saved, you say. From what, exactly?"

I met his gaze, unflinching. "From a life of invisibility. Of being just another forgotten soul in a system that didn't care."

"Ah, the savior complex," he remarked, almost to himself. "Not uncommon, for a man who cultivated greatness."

I shrugged. "Perhaps. But better a savior than a bystander."

Thorne smiled and then plunged into a further set of queries.

Each query was a loaded gun, aimed directly at my heart. I remained calm, my responses measured and precise. Years of rigorous training under the tutelage of my adoptive father had forged a shield around my emotions, allowing me to navigate the treacherous terrain with practiced ease. But beneath the

surface, I observed Thorne with an intensity that mirrored his own, dissecting his every gesture, every twitch of his lips, every nervous glance toward the window. The pregnant silences between his questions were the most compelling parts of the interview.

Finally, Thorne leaned back in his chair, the smoke from his pipe curling toward the ceiling like ethereal tendrils of thought. “So, Dr. Gardner,” he said, his voice gravelly but laced with a hint of amusement. “Why psychiatry?”

His question hung in the air, a challenge, an invitation to delve into the deepest recesses of my soul. I met his gaze, unflinching, and a fire ignited in my eyes. “Because it’s more than just a profession, Dr. Thorne,” I said, my voice clear and unwavering. “It’s an art, a dance on the precipice of the human psyche. It’s about peering into the darkest corners of the mind and finding the light within.”

Thorne studied me for a long moment, the silence stretching infinitely longer than it should have. Then, a faint smile, like the first rays of dawn breaking through the clouds, appeared on his lips. “An intriguing answer, Dr. Gardner,” he said, his voice a low rumble.

“Psychiatry chose me, Mr. Thorne,” I continued, my voice steady. “It’s not just a profession. It’s a commitment to understanding the human mind, to healing it.”

Our conversation shifted, and I found myself asking him questions, almost like a psychiatrist would. “If you had to choose between a peaceful life or a meaningful one, Mr. Thorne, which would it be?”

He seemed taken aback, then thoughtful. “Meaningful, without a doubt.”

“And why is that?”

“Peace is often mistaken for stagnation. Meaning gives life its flavor,” he answered drily. “Have you finished interviewing me?”

I smiled. “I think so.”

“Good,” he retorted, snorting to show he approved. “Because I like you and I want you to work with me.”

Bingo.

“Thank you, Dr. Thorne,” I breathed.

He nodded and initiated the paperwork. We discussed the terms of the lease, and as I left his office, I took back a sense of accomplishment. The space was perfect, a small yet inviting room with a large window overlooking a serene garden.

I drove back to the Institute. Overhead, the sky had begun to clear, patches of blue breaking through the grey. The trees seemed to stand a little taller, their leaves rustling in the gentle breeze. The sun dipped toward the horizon, painting the sky in rose gold. After parking, I stepped out and breathed in the crisp air.

“Hello. Busy day?”

I nearly leaped out of my skin at the deep, resonant baritone of Dr. Magnusson’s voice. An idea began forming in the back of my mind.

Dr. Galbraith had told me not to see Leon.

He didn’t say shit about staying away from Viktor Magnusson.

Viktor

The slight creature in front of me brushed aside a wild lock of raven hair as she looked at me. Why did it matter if her day had been busy? I half-expected her to walk away without answering.

She nodded briefly. “It has been, thanks for asking.”

I nodded quickly and continued walking toward the Institute’s main door. I had a class to teach, and I needed to be in my office, preparing material for today’s presentation.

“Dr. Magnusson?”

Desdemona Davenport ran to catch up with me.

“Yes?” I didn’t look at her.

“Are you going to teach a class?”

I nodded.

“Can I attend?”

I couldn’t deny the pleasure I felt at hearing the undercurrent of interest in her question. “You can,” I replied. “But I’ve got to go to my office first.”

“Okay. Cool.”

I hoped that was the end of it, but no. Dessie trailed after me, her heels clicking on the polished stone floor like a metronome keeping time to my annoyance. She spoke softly, her gentle voice a strange reckoning that threatened to chip away at my resolve.

Stop it. Stop thinking with your penis. You can do it. You've done it for about a decade.

We were nearing my office, the sterile white corridor a sea of white coats bustling about. Doctors barked orders, nurses hurried with charts, and junior staff scurried like ants.

“Hey, Magnusson—” Leon came barreling toward us with a swagger that could have rivaled John Wayne, his eyes glued to the phone in his hand.

He looked up, saw Dessie, and blanched. “Okay. Got an emergency I need to get to.” Without casting so much as another glance at us, he scurried away.

I frowned, caught off guard at his treatment of Dessie. “That’s unexpected.”

“Hardly,” Dessie mused. “I did turn him down pretty badly.”

She turned him down?

Drums began beating in my chest. Was there hope for me? Did that sound totally and categorically pathetic? I needed to get rid of her, and quickly.

“If you don’t mind, can we talk another time?” I asked, hating the hesitation in my voice and hoping she’d take the hint and gracefully retreat.

We reached my office door, and I fumbled with the keys, my fingers suddenly clumsy. A part of me, the part that enjoyed intelligent conversation and a witty sparring partner, wanted to invite her in. But the other, more cautious part, the part that craved solitude and control, urged me to push her away.

“Well,” Dessie continued, her voice surprisingly light, “perhaps you could give me a crash course sometime? I’m

sure there's so much I don't know about the human body.”

She leaned closer, her eyes glinting.

My breath caught in my throat. This woman was playing a dangerous game, testing the boundaries I had so carefully built around myself.

“Dr. Magnusson?” she teased, her voice barely a whisper. “Lost in thought?”

I cleared my throat, forcing myself to meet her gaze. “Perhaps I am,” I admitted, surprised at the honesty that slipped from my lips. “Lost in the complexities of the human mind, trying to understand why someone like you would be so interested in the minutiae of muscles and bones.”

Dessie laughed. It transported me to a breezy, sunny room by the sea, music playing on a lone wind chime. “Curiosity, Dr. Magnusson. Pure curiosity. And perhaps a little bit of...” She trailed off, her voice dropping to a whisper, “fascination with the man who studies them.”

My heart hammered against my ribs.

Is she flirting with me?

The idea was both exhilarating and terrifying. My hitherto dormant libido, buried under years of self-imposed aloofness and cynicism, raised its head.

She wants you.

The hope was too much, almost painfully so.

I turned away from her and walked over to my desk. “Dessie, you're excused.”

This was as blunt of a *get out of my office* as I could manage.

Pitter patter.

Her footsteps were soft, almost like raindrops falling on a cushioned surface. Somewhere in my subconscious, I registered slender arms moving up my back, trailing long lines.

“Viktor.” She spoke my name like cherry wine, her mouth lingering on the *k*.

My hands were shaking.

“Look at me.”

Don't. Don't fucking do it.

She moved her hands upward and touched my shoulders. “Please,” she whispered.

My breath hitched in my throat as she, by the sheer force of her words, turned me to face her. Her mouth was inches from mine, red like poison, the kind you could not stay away from.

If this is death, perhaps I choose it.

“Viktor,” she spoke again. “I—”

I did not wait for her to finish. I reached out, my fingers grazing her angular jaw.

“Is that all you’ll do?” Her eyes burned as she moved closer, leaving practically no room between us.

“Hardly,” I replied drily.

“Then show me what else you can do,” she replied tacitly.

My lips touched hers, tentatively at first. It was a soft whisper of a kiss. But the restraint quickly crumbled under the tide of my burgeoning need, perhaps amplified by the hungry little moans she gave. Her lips pressed insistently against mine, demanding more. In response, my tongue traced her lower lip, seeking entrance.

She opened to me.

Our tongues collided, exploring each other with a fervor that belied any hesitation. Her fingers wound into my hair, tugging wildly until I was anchored to her. My arms encircled her waist and pulled her body flush against mine, craving more of her heat.

“Oh,” she cried out into my mouth as I bit down on her tongue. Breathless gasps punctuated the air, the only sounds in

the otherwise silent room.

I finally pulled back, my breath coming out in ragged gasps as I stared at Dessie. There was a thin line of sweat on her upper lip. She was panting. Under the soft light of the sunset hour, she looked like a leopardess out for a hunt, narrowing down on her prized prey.

A whole jungle of analogies ran through my mind.

Praying for prey. Going for the kill.

I wanted to submit. She knew it. She took my collar and pulled me back to her, this time more insistently. Her lips crashed against mine, seeking the parting eagerly.

“Dessie,” I murmured into her mouth, knowing there was no way I could escape this, not when I didn’t want to. My hands traveled from her chin to her neck, clasping the slender thing. Did I want to choke her? Did she want me to?

“You reek of trouble,” I muttered, more to myself than her.

“Is that why you want me so much?” Her palm traveled downward and rested on my thigh.

Maybe, yes.

“Enough,” I said angrily, lifting her clean off the ground. I took her to my desk and sat her on the edge. Her legs curled hungrily around my hips. I leaned in to kiss her once more. I could have kissed her forever. She sucked in a gasp, arching her back as my fingers ran up along her spine. Our bodies pressed together, and in the name of all that was sweet, it was glorious.

Fire. I felt like I had been thrown into a pit of hot flames.

She sensed it. “Are you alright?” she murmured.

“More than,” I replied, my words roughened by desire. I drew her hips forward slightly, pressing us both together, long and hard enough to make her gasp once more. I bent my head toward her neck.

Instinctively, she tilted back, fluttering her eyes shut. “Taste me, Doctor.”

I planted kisses along her exposed throat, feeling the heartbeat beneath her skin every time my lips pressed down. She extended her hands and grabbed fistfuls of my hair, pulling me close. I bit down on the tender flesh between her neck and collarbone, sucking it in slightly.

“Fuck, that feels amazing.”

She wants me, I thought, elated, wild, almost perplexed. *Gods, she wants me just as much as I want her*. Her hands slid down my back but didn't stop there. Her deft fingers slipped past the band of my pants and slid around the sides to the front.

I had to say something, but I couldn't, not when there was a block in my throat. She undid my belt and stroked my already hard cock through my cotton boxers.

Two could play at that game. I responded hungrily.

Her skirt had traveled up, exposing a hint of lace dipped in red. I traced goosebumps on the bare skin of her thighs until I reached the telling wetness on the surface of her underwear. I felt her clench as I stroked between her pussy's lips. She let out a small moan and leaned into me.

“Fuck me, Dr. Magnusson.”

She wants this so badly.

Why, Viktor? Use your analogical brain, for crying out loud. Why does she want you so much?

The thought, persistent and unwelcome as it was, lingered, snapping me out of the moment. I broke the kiss and moved two steps back. She remained seated on the edge of the desk, her lips still parted, her breathing still uneven. All of her, from head to toe, was flushed.

“Why did you stop?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Because it was the right thing to do. You need to go.”

“Dr. Magnusson, I—”

“Get out,” I barked. “Now.”

Her eyes widened and she hopped off the desk. She took a second to fix her outfit and left without looking back.

I should have been wallowing in misery, yet strangely, I wasn't. There was a perplexing aberration in the air. Leon. He'd shown interest in Dessie. But on the way to the office, when he saw Dessie, he literally bolted. He was either embarrassed or angry.

That never happened. Women did that around Leon, not the other way around.

It wasn't that he considered women to be predictable fools. Rather, Leon was a tactician in the art of seduction, going at each one with surgical precision. His skill lay in crafting a persona perfectly tailored to each woman's desires. Whether it was embodying the quintessential no-strings-attached partner or morphing into the ideal, commitment-ready suitor, he executed each role with finesse. But here lay the conundrum. I was convinced that Leon had deployed his full arsenal of charm on Dessie, yet he hadn't emerged victorious.

How then, against all odds, had I managed to succeed where he had not? Unless she was playing me because she wanted something. The biggest question was... what?

I shook my head, a swift, dismissive motion to clear the cobwebs of confusion. Time was slipping through my fingers. I was teetering dangerously close to being late for class. With a sense of urgency, I gathered the necessary materials, papers rustling in my haste, and stepped briskly out of my office. I was so lost in my unease that I almost butted headfirst into the Head of Medicine and my best friend.

"Watch it, Vik," John said crossly. "What is it with everyone today? Just five minutes ago, I saw an intern turn into an accidental ice skater, sliding a good mile across the floor before crash-landing at my feet. And now, you're about to bury me in anatomy papers." He noticed the notes on the vagus nerve and smiled wanly. "You look tired."

"I'm late, John." My voice was a mix of apology and exasperation as I shuffled the papers once more, tucking them under my arm. "It's nothing, really. Just this new hire." I

paused, licking my lower lip briefly. “Something feels off about her, but I’m probably reading too much into it.” I attempted a dismissive shrug, but it was unconvincing.

John’s response was immediate, his eyebrows knitting together in a sharp furrow, a visual cue of his shifting thoughts. “The new hire? Are you talking about Desdemona Davenport?”

I nodded, surprised at the obvious reaction the name elicited in him. His forehead creased. the corners of his mouth turned downward, forming a deep, unmistakable scowl. “Has she... been up to something inappropriate?”

Now, I was capable of a lot of things, but I could never lie to John. So I didn’t gratify his question with a response.

His jaw tensed, and every feature of his face contorted in a mounting display of discontent. “This will not do. We have to catch her at her own game.”

What wouldn’t do? What game?

I stared at him. “What are you talking about, John?”

John sighed. “Come to the office after class. Bring Leon with you.”

Dessie

After Dr. Magnusson dismissed me from office—just when I was *this* close to having him right where I needed him to be—I decided to clear my head with a cup of coffee. I didn't feel like my usual black coffee would do the trick. Indulgences weren't my thing unless they were tempered with impulsiveness, which had happened when I purchased the Lamborghini. But it was already evening, I was cold, and my system needed a reset that involved lots of cream, an avalanche of sugar, and a shot of espresso so it would, legally, still be a coffee. Oswald would have been proud.

There was only one person in the world who could make me this drink, so I left the institute and meandered down to Ms. Wainwright's cottage. I mentally prepared myself that she might not be at home, but as luck would have it, I spotted her from the distance, sitting by the window on an armchair, her eyes closed in repose. She looked exhausted. I, for one, empathized.

Her slumber was a light one, because as soon as my feet crunched on a heap of rusty autumn leaves, her eyelids fluttered open. She looked sideways and her gaze fell on my

face. The expression on them stumped me slightly—she looked... almost *afraid*? But why? I shook my head. I was imagining things, or the darkening evening light was playing tricks on my mind.

The expression passed almost as soon as it had formed, to be replaced by something lighter. She raised her palm and waved at me, mouthing, “Hello.”

I waved back and walked down the flagstone pathway leading to her cottage. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the land. Each individual stone came alive with the glow of mature honey. The irregular shapes, worn smooth, felt comforting beneath my shoes. The gentle hum of chirping crickets filled the silence. Streaks of orange, pink, and purple had danced across the canvas of twilight overhead. Stars had begun to peek through the deepening blue.

Ms. Wainwright opened the front door, wearing a relaxed smile on her face. She gave me a once-over and her expression turned to one of disapproval. “My dear, are you desperate to catch a cold?”

“Hmm?” I looked down absentmindedly at what I was wearing. I had chosen a sleek, raven bodycon dress that, albeit hugging, was sparse for the bite in the air. The thin, clingy material offered little by way of insulation. Somehow, I hadn’t paid heed to the cold at all. But now, as Ms. Wainwright’s eyes narrowed, I suddenly became aware of a prickling chill sweeping over me.

“Come on inside,” she said kindly, “and I’ll fix you something warm.”

She clucked as she took my freezing hands and led me straight to her kitchen. I breathed in the familiarity of the cozy warmth of her home, especially the inviting aroma of something meaty simmering away in a pot. Something about Ms. Wainwright was deeply nourishing at the moment. Perhaps it was that we had both gone through a deep loss, monumentally so, and were both picking up the pieces left behind in its wake.

I let my face relax as I adjusted to the bright solitude around me. Her kitchen was a delightful hodgepodge of colors and textures. The walls were painted a cheerful buttery yellow. Exposed wooden beams, aged to a perfect patina, added a rustic touch, complementing the mismatched cabinetry painted in soft pastels, mint green, sky blue, and lavender hues.

Copper pots and pans hung from a wrought iron rack above the central island, their surfaces gleaming softly in the light streaming through the lace-curtained windows. The countertops were a patchwork of polished wood and marble. Every corner of the room was full, from the vintage floral teacups arranged on open shelves to the quirky collection of salt and pepper shakers that lined the windowsill. In the middle of this charming chaos stood an old-fashioned stove, where a large, cast-iron pot bubbled with the stew.

I sniffed the air appreciatively and moved toward the pot. “Is that your beef stew?”

Ms. Wainwright chuckled throatily. “Yes. I used to cook up a huge batch for you and Oswald every Sunday before you left Stillingbrook.”

I stiffened slightly, because I had an inkling of where this discussion was going.

“Are you still set on living out your days in this drab old place, my dear?” she asked softly.

But here was the thing. After meeting Dr. Thorne, the place didn’t feel like a beautiful cemetery any longer. I actually had things to do, things that didn’t involve only finding out who had killed my father, although that was still the first priority.

“Ms. Wainwright,” I spoke softly. “I don’t expect you, or anyone else, for that matter, to understand all of it. But don’t you think Oswald deserves peace?”

“He already has peace,” she said flatly. “War doesn’t exist in the midst of the dead, Dessie. It only plagues the lives it leaves behind.”

Fair enough.

I didn't want to argue about this any longer, so focused on the iron pot. The contents within were a riot of colors and textures— chunks of succulent beef, carrots, and potatoes chopped roughly, and verdant peas and corn adding pops of green and yellow. Thick steam rose, carrying rich overtones of garlic, rosemary, and a slight, biting undertone of smoked paprika.

A smile played on my lips. "I came here for coffee."

"Which kind?" Ms. Wainwright asked, busying herself with stirring the contents to make sure the browned meat absorbed all the savory juices of the broth.

"The *Oswald approved* kind," I replied.

"So be it."

Ms. Wainwright moved to a little coffee machine, which soon hissed and sputtered as it forced hot water through finely-ground coffee beans. She sang to herself as she worked. It was a familiar tune, but I couldn't place it.

"Did you find out anything else about the suspects?"

Vivid visuals played out in my mind. Me straddling Leon. Dr. Galbraith's ruler spanking me, hard. Viktor's fingers tangled in my hair. I gulped, but my throat was dry.

"No." I watched the dark, rich espresso dripping into the cup. The air filled with notes of caramel, roasted nuts, and a subtle hint of chocolate.

"It hasn't been that long," Ms. Wainwright observed as she prepared the cream, heating it in a small pitcher. She did it until it was fluid, not boiling.

"To think I considered therapy," I said, watching her with fascination as she began frothing the cream until it formed soft, airy peaks. "When I could just watch you do this."

"You've changed the subject," she observed once more, not looking at me. "Are they bothering you, Dessie? You must always remember that these are very powerful men. And where there is power, there is—"

“Danger,” I finished for her. “I’m well aware. It doesn’t stop me from wanting to get to the bottom of things. Imagine who else they could hurt, Ms. Wainwright.”

“You’re willing to hurt yourself for that? I thought you were more practical than this, Dessie.”

Ms. Wainwright’s disapproval stung. I had come to value her highly after Oswald’s passing. She cast a long gaze in my direction and sighed. “I’m sorry, my dear. I realize I have hurt you.”

I wanted to stick my lower lip out like a petulant child and say, “Yes, you did.” But I merely shrugged.

With a delicate pour, Ms. Wainwright layered the frothed cream on top of the espresso. I watched the cascade of clean white foam pour over the dark liquid. She stirred the contents until the drink was a creamy caramel.

“Drink,” she said, extending the quaint stone mug to me. I grasped the handle and propped myself against a wall.

The first sip undid all the weariness in my heart. “Oh, my God,” I exhaled. “If there is anything holy in this world, Ms. Wainwright, it exists in this mug.”

“Well, thank you, I suppose,” she replied drily. “I’m going to bundle up some stew for you.”

“You don’t need to—”

“I know I don’t need to, but I’m going to anyway. I can’t stop you from making your choices, Dessie, but I can provide some sustenance along the way.”

An hour later, I was walking back to the institute, a casserole of hot stew in a bag slung over my shoulder. The coffee had worked wonders. My mind was no longer fuddled. I would approach Dr. Galbraith again because it felt like I had more of an in with him at the moment. Leon was probably not talking to me after what he saw. I gleaned that from how he ran like a frenzied hare when he saw me with Dr. Magnusson earlier. And well, Dr. Magnusson would do his best to avoid me. I’d win him over, but not tonight. Tonight, I decided, I’d

go to my room after a shower, eat the stew with some crusty bread, and fall asleep reading *Rebecca*.

My heels clicked a sharp staccato against the polished mahogany floor of the institute, the echo dampened by the plush Persian rug that stretched underfoot. Warm gaslight bathed the grand entrance hall in a soft, golden glow, illuminating the intricate Victorian details etched into the dark wood paneling. I crinkled my nose at the familiar scents of pipe tobacco and aged leather. Reaching the landing, I was met by a sudden stillness, broken only by the rhythmic ticking of a grandfather clock at the end of the corridor. I started to climb, my hand brushing the cool railing.

Suddenly, a figure burst from around the corner, nearly colliding with me.

“Dessie!” Chelsea exclaimed, her voice breathless and strained.

I stopped, surprise etched on my face. “Chelsea? What’s wrong?”

Chelsea grasped my arm, her grip tight. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere. I tried calling, but you weren’t answering.”

Confused, I frowned. “What’s going on? Why are you out of breath?”

“It’s Dr. Magnusson,” Chelsea replied urgently. “He’s been looking for you. He wants you to meet him in the operating theater... now.”

My brows furrowed. “The operating theater? At this hour?” What an odd request... unless...

Chelsea nodded hurriedly. “He said it’s important. You need to go right away.”

I hesitated, my mind racing. Dr. Magnusson could have no reason to summon me for a late-night meeting in the operating theater.

Chelsea seemed to read into my discomfort. “Oh, don’t worry,” she said quickly. “He’s a saint. Maybe he needs your

opinion as a psychiatrist.”

In the OT? I squirmed inwardly. Plus, Chelsea didn’t know what that saint had been doing with me not three hours ago.

If it was what I suspected, I’d have to use it, him, to my advantage. Taking a deep breath, I threw my head back, squared my shoulders, and said, “Alright. Let’s go.”

I followed Chelsea as we wound our way through the bustling corridors, my heels clicking a frantic rhythm against the floor. Each step closer to the theater amplified the tension building inside my chest.

As we approached the operating theater, the double doors swung open, revealing a brightly lit room filled with gleaming stainless steel instruments.

Dr. Magnusson stood in the center of the room, his tall, imposing figure bathed in the harsh overhead lights. Somehow, the harshness only made him look God-like. He turned toward us, his eyes meeting mine with a piercing intensity.

“Dessie,” he said, his voice low and gravelly. “Finally. We have much to discuss.”

“I’ll get going,” Chelsea remarked. “See you, Dessie.”

I nodded.

Chelsea shut the doors behind her. At that very second, all the lights went off, casting me into an aching darkness.

A voice filled the blackness, all too familiar and tantalizing. “Time for your next lesson, Desdemona Davenport.”

Viktor

“Sit down,” I said, my voice silken as John secured the blindfold over Dessie’s eyes. “And behave, or else.”

Dessie didn’t seem eager to resist, at any rate. She was breathing shallowly, her face flushed. “What are you going to do to me?” she whispered as she sat down on the edge of an operating table.

“We’re going to see just how much trouble you’re worth,” said Leon, drumming his fingers on the surface of a table.

“Leon?”

“Who else do you think is here?” I asked.

“The three of you,” she replied immediately. It hit me. She knew what was going to happen. But she didn’t know *how*.

“Secure her,” John told Leon.

“What—”

“Did we say you could talk, pet?”

Dessie shut up immediately.

Leon carefully bound her wrists. She bit her lip and tried to keep her breathing steady as I leaned in close, my breath

whispering against her ear. “I want you to relax, Dessie. Consider this an examination,” I murmured, my voice a rumble.

Dessie shuddered. “Viktor,” she whispered. “Tell me why I’m here.”

“You know why you’re here, pet.”

My fingers traced along her jawline and down her neck, leaving goosebumps in their wake. I began kissing her neck, my lips soft and warm, my stubble rough against her sensitive skin. I nipped at her earlobe, sending a river of shivers down her spine. “You are completely at my mercy now, aren’t you?” I smiled against her skin.

“I’m going to undress you,” I told her softly. I unzipped the chain and pulled down the bodycon dress she wore, impatiently tossing it to the far end of the room. Even in the pitch black, her skin shimmered. From the back, Leon inhaled a sharp breath.

My hands trembled slightly as I undid the clasps on her bra and removed it.

I trailed my fingers down her chest, over her collarbone, and lower, down to her breastbone, eliciting tiny gasps as I brushed her bare nipples. She arched her back involuntarily, leaning in as my hands moved lower, toying with the waistband of her panties before I slid them down her thighs.

“Do you know why I wanted to blindfold you tonight, Dessie?” My breath was hot on her skin, lips pressed against hers. She shook her head no in response. “I want to give you an anatomy lesson.” I chuckled darkly. “First lesson, the clitoris.”

I stepped back. “Take over, Leon.”

Leon muttered something under his breath and leaned down. He positioned his upper torso between her legs and opened his mouth.

“Fuck,” Dessie cried out as Leon’s tongue traced her slit. She shivered as he circled her entrance before brushing against the small nub of flesh that made her gasp.

Her hips bucked off the table, but the binds on her hands limited her movement. She trembled under the onslaught of sensations. “That’s right,” he murmured. “You’re mine to play with now.”

Then, she felt him part her folds, exposing her to the cool air. His fingers teased at her entrance, tracing circles around her tight ring of muscles. She writhed, wanting more, needing... him. “You’re not ready yet,” he said, his voice low. “Viktor?”

“Say no more.”

Who is this? I’m not talking or acting like myself. I feel like a depraved, lecherous monster has taken over my skin. Maybe I was this person all along. Maybe all the monster needed to come alive was Dessie.

It didn’t matter. I wasn’t about to back away.

I got to working on her. When I was done, she was lying on the table, tilted slightly upward at an angle. Her arms were restrained by straps at the sides, and her feet were bound to stirrups, held apart in the air.

She was completely exposed to the three of us.

“Please,” she whined. “Let me go.”

It was John who spoke this time. “I’m afraid we can’t, Dessie. You must be punished.”

“What have I done?” she asked petulantly.

“The question is... how many of us have you done?” John fired back at her, growling as he spoke. “You’re going to learn the biggest lesson of your life in this theater.”

I took my finger and traced it around her pussy. “This, Dessie, is an anatomy lesson for the books.”

She eased into my touch. “Very well then, Viktor. Educate me.”

That sly little...

I stifled the smile that threatened to rise on my lips. Instead, I made my voice clinical, the way I would during a

lecture. I touched the rim around the hole, examining it with as much nonchalance as I possibly could. “Your clitoris is of primary interest to the observers in this room, Miss Davenport. It sits within the two lips of the labia. It is, oddly, a useless organ, but during intercourse, it might become engorged, as is the case with the breasts as well.”

“Are you—”

“Don’t ask questions unless I say you can,” I cut her off.

I moved to her side and began massaging her breasts. “Can you feel how the tips have hardened, Dr. Davenport?” I asked. “This is a normal response in the cold, or when you’re anticipating being fucked.”

She didn’t reply but licked her lips nervously. It was strangely satisfying, seeing her bound, exposed, and at my mercy.

I unzipped and removed my pants and folded my jacket and shirt up. I was already hard. “Dr. Galbraith,” I said. “Will you please gag Dr. Davenport?”

“Gladly.”

John moved forward with a handkerchief and bound it around Dessie’s lush mouth, drowning out her mewls. She tried to say something, but only muffled noises sounded from her throat.

“You are very wet,” I observed as I touched the area around her vagina. “Do you know what this means?”

She shook her head slightly, her eyes wide and doe-like.

“You’re sexually excited,” I commented softly. “The blood flow to your genitals has increased, which is why the vulva and clitoris swell and the vagina lubricates itself. It will make what I am about to do easier.”

Her eyes became helpless saucers as she looked at my penis. I positioned it to her entrance and pushed it in. The initial shock on her face adjusted as she relaxed, accommodating me. To my surprise, she purposefully clenched her muscles around my cock, making me gasp.

“You have some nerve,” I breathed.

I began to move in and out, faster. She felt exquisite, indescribably hot and soft. Her vagina expanded to accept my penis more and more. As I plunged into her, I used my fingers to examine her labia and clitoris. “Your clit is becoming enlarged. You feel warm and tight.” I kept my tone strictly even, not wanting her to glean how hard my heart was beating, how much I wanted this, her, *all of it*. I wrapped my hands around her slender waist, pumping my cock harder into her each time. I pinched her nipples as I pounded her.

“You are warm,” I said, vaguely aware that I was repeating myself. “Not so tight any longer.” I slapped her breasts quickly. She was becoming flushed, her pupils dilated. “And you are enjoying this more than you should. Maybe you’d like to say how you feel.”

Leon moved over and removed the handkerchief over her mouth. “Talk to us, Dessie.”

“I have nothing to say,” she replied, her tone feverish. “Just keep fucking me.”

As I fucked her, I massaged her clitoris hard and fast. She was shaking now, bucking her pelvis.

“Describe how you feel.”

“I’m about to come!” she cried out. “I’m about to come!”

“Describe it,” I repeated, my hips bucking wildly as I drove deeper inside her. My hands grabbed her hips, holding her in place as I took her. The smells of sweat and sex had filled the room as she arched and clenched around me, inviting me to move faster and harder.

“Like waves,” she whispered breathlessly. “Like endless waves.” Then, with a loud cry, she came, her walls clamping down on me. The view of her face, her wild head of hair, that single infuriating lock over the gray storm of her eyes... it was too much and my undoing.

“Come inside me,” she begged.

And I did. I did something even worse than that, though. I called her name out, like a prayer.

“Dessie.” My cock throbbed inside her.

“Dessie.” My nails dug crescents into her pale flesh.

“Dessie.” My heart beat wildly, wanting more, craving more.

Dessie. Dessie. Dessie.

Leon

Viktor moved aside quickly, his face a perplexed canvas, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. I watched him, puzzled. He'd obviously enjoyed himself. There was no need for him to act so unnerved. But I couldn't dwell on his bizarre reaction for long. My attention was diverted as Dessie's intense gaze fell upon me, her eyes sharp and questioning.

John, standing a few feet away, crossed his arms over his chest, his posture exuding authority. "You may think your lesson is over, Miss Davenport," he said in a firm, unwavering tone, "but you have a lot more to learn."

She, however, didn't respond verbally. Her focus remained steadfastly on me, eyes burning with an unspoken intensity. Despite her hands and legs being bound, she radiated a powerful presence. I approached her cautiously.

"Will you stand there," she asked, raising a brow as she spoke, "or will you kiss me?"

Our lips met in a fervent clash, a whirlwind of tongues, teeth, and unrestrained, hot, wet desire enveloping us.

“LEON,” John called out sharply, his voice cutting through the heated moment with clear disapproval.

I hesitated, the reminder of John’s expectations momentarily piercing the haze of passion. I nebulously recalled that he had wanted this to be as perfunctory as possible. Reluctantly, I pulled back from Dessie, giving a nonchalant shrug in response to John’s interruption.

“Am I ready enough for you now?” Dessie’s voice was laced with a mix of challenge and anticipation.

I reached out, my fingers brushing against her, feeling the wetness and warmth that Viktor had left behind. A dry chuckle, borne of the sheer strangeness of the moment, escaped my throat.

“Touch me more,” she implored eagerly. “I want to feel your hands on my nipples.”

My fingers encircled her breasts. Dessie let out a soft moan, the sound filling the room. I squeezed the perfect mounds firmly, my fingertips grazing over her hardened nipples. Leaning closer, my tongue flicked across one nipple, teasing it gently, while my fingers continued their tantalizing dance, rubbing the sensitive tips.

“Yes.” She sighed deeply, her voice a mix of relief and yearning as I enveloped the nipple with my warm, wet mouth, my lips forming a tight seal over the sensitive skin. Simultaneously, my right hand ventured lower, slipping inside her, exploring the wetness and heat of her core.

“You’re so wet, Dessie. Your pussy is so fucking wet and slick. Does that feel good? Do you like that, Dessie? Do you like it when I touch your pussy?”

“Yes, fuck yes!” She closed her eyes. My finger pushed up inside her, opening her before sliding back out, over and again, until I felt her begin to clench around it.

“Not so quickly.” I smiled, withdrawing immediately. “You have to earn your climax, Dessie.”

She stared at me like she’d been just denied a piece of her favorite candy, or whatever got that dark heart of hers beating

fastest. “Make me, then.”

I growled at her impertinence and slipped a finger slowly inside her once again, going at it until she began gasping. Then, I pushed two, then three fingers. At that juncture, I stopped, enjoying the look of primal pleasure on her face.

“Why did you stop?” she cried out. “Don’t stop!”

I merely shook my head. “That’s not how we ask, Dessie. Did your parents teach you nothing?”

Something changed in her eyes. I couldn’t place the expression that came over her. It was equal parts disgust and rage and something... something raw and needy.

“I apologize,” she finally said. “Please. *Please don’t stop.*”

“Good girl.” I twisted my hand, and my fingers plunged in and out of her while my thumb stroked her clit. She moaned harder, begging me not to stop. Her breasts heaved up and down, and she swallowed quick gulps of air as her clit tightened up. Her orgasm was quick and all-encompassing.

“Oh, m—” I didn’t let her scream into the air, soaking her cries up in a long, hard kiss. My tongue pushed deeper into her mouth.

“Please,” she begged. “Please untie me. I promise... I promise I’ll behave.”

I broke the kiss and looked over at John, who nodded stiffly. I undid the binds holding her in place, and Dessie’s fingers immediately worked on my scrubs, going at them until she had my cock wrapped in her hand. She stroked me, drawing beads of hot precum. She slid down in front of me and lifted the tip of my cock to her lips.

Words hitched in my throat as she parted her lips and licked the tip before taking all of me into the warmth of her mouth. She looked up at me as she worked my cock, her eyes burning with a challenge.

She knows what she’s doing to you, and she’s enjoying it.
The little...

Thoughts drowned out as her pace increased and she made suction-like movements. I groaned and bunched fistfuls of her thick hair, matching the pace of her mouth to my hips. Her hands went around and grabbed my ass, pulling me deeper into her throat.

Did the girl have no gag reflex?

“Mmm,” she cried out as her tongue circled me. Her mouth moved up and down, sucking me slowly. My hands moved to the back of her head. I began guiding her pace, compelling her to slow down.

“Easy there, tigress,” I said, attempting to steady myself when she refused to match my rhythm and let out a tiny grunt of dissatisfaction. She pushed her head back, letting my cock go with a *Pop*.

“Let me,” she insisted, her lips coated with precum and her own saliva, “take the lead. Please,” she added quickly.

I smiled. It was impossible to say no. She took my silence as a yes and swallowed my cock once more. At the same time, her hands went to my balls, cupping them in her soft palms as she dribbled all over me, sucking, licking, fucking me with all the strength she could muster.

At this rate, I’d finish long before I intended to. And that just wouldn’t be fair.

“Stop,” I ordered her.

She complied immediately. I lifted her up and turned her around to lean over the operating table. I fished out a condom from my coat pocket. Unlike Viktor, I wasn’t one for taking chances in this department. I didn’t need to add more to my reputation.

“Give it to me,” she demanded, no longer begging. I wouldn’t have denied her anyway. I wouldn’t be able to, not for the life of me.

I slipped the condom over my raging erection and stood behind her. “Be a good girl,” I drawled, “and open your legs wider.”

She let out a cry as I grabbed her hip with one hand and my cock with the other before guiding the tip to her pussy. I rubbed the slick surface before pushing inside. She was tight, so perfectly hot and just... everything I wanted.

Get your head out of your ass, idiot. It's just in the moment.

I braced myself and slowly pushed my cock inside her, then pulled back completely.

“Oh... OH!” The sigh of disappointment transformed to an all-out scream as I slammed into her the next second. I slowed down once more, enjoying her cries of discomfort as I fucked her with a patience she clearly didn't have.

She pushed back against me. “Please, please fuck me harder, Leon!”

When I couldn't take it anymore, I grabbed her ass in both my hands and plunged deep into her pussy. She let out a guttural moan at the same time as me. She tensed and released her muscles, inviting me to stretch her tight channel. My balls slapped against her skin as I fucked her, going harder than I ever had. She was mine. Mine.

No, she's not. There are others with vested interests in this room, dumbass. And they're taking turns fucking the girl you're fantasizing about.

“Fuck this,” I growled, pulling out. I turned her sideways and lifted her leg up and around me. My cock pushed further inside this time, and I just went for it. She cried and moaned, begging me to go harder.

“Fuck my pussy, yes!” She began spasming as I thrust, her pussy tightening as she came hard over my cock, squeezing down around me.

I captured her mouth with mine and swallowed her cries, my free hand tangling in her hair as I claimed her lips roughly. Her nails scratched my back as I fucked my way to my own climax, pounding into her, the blood in my head thundering as I shuddered and slowed until I finally stopped.

She kept her arms around my back for a long minute as we both took deep, long breaths. Something about this had been different from the last time we had sex. Last time, I'd only had a fleeting worry that she was doing things to my brain, things that I couldn't comprehend.

For the first time in this life, it felt like I was looking into a mirror. I took a deep dive into her gray irises, trying to read them. Nothing. She gave me nothing. Just as I was done, so was she. I pulled out while my head still tried to register how disappointed I was.

I'd wanted her to feel something else. Something beyond what I usually wanted from women. But that wasn't why we were doing this.

I steeled myself.

Desdemona Davenport was a persistent nuisance.

And when we were done with her, she'd be out of this institute and my life forever.

John

My turn. When I first broached the subject with Viktor, suggesting that Desdemona Davenport needed to be taught a lesson, my thoughts were a confusion of intuitions and suspicions, rather than a concrete plan.

The finer details of our course of action only began to crystallize hours later, as we found ourselves debating the irregularity of her interest in my office.

Our reasoning was solid. Her behavior had become increasingly puzzling. She had an uncanny fixation on the three of us, me, Viktor, and Leon. This was not lost on us, and it begged a myriad of questions. Why, out of all the members of our community, had she singled us out? There were others, equally notable.

We sifted through every interaction, every fleeting encounter we had with her, trying to piece together the mosaic of her intentions. It was like attempting to assemble a puzzle without knowing the final picture. The more we delved into the nuances of her actions, the more we realized that there was a layer of intent, a depth of strategy that we were missing. It

was as if she were playing a game of chess, and we were still trying to understand the rules.

I had wanted to consider her as someone entirely unremarkable. But as days turned into weeks, her peculiarity just didn't make sense. She never overtly sought our company, yet we would often find her in our vicinity. It was engineered, all of it. And that was why we needed to corner her.

This, at any rate, was what I told myself. I wouldn't fixate on the blood-red flush of her lips or the iridescent gray of her eyes or how she reminded me of everything I wanted to have, but couldn't.

No, I would not do that. Absolutely not.

She sat on the edge of the operating table. Her hair was wilder than ever, falling in a riotous mess down her shoulders. Her face was still flushed.

It was her eyes that made me irrationally angry, though. She had no business looking at me like that, like she absolutely understood the chokehold she had me in, and how I could do nothing about it. Nothing except try to get it out by telling myself that this was just basic, primal, disgusting. As soon as I'd had my fill, it'd be over. It'd be the end of it.

Sure. Tell yourself that.

I stepped forward, meeting the provocation that shone in her ocean of gray.

“Spread your legs, please.”

She did as I ordered. I stopped just in front of her and squeezed her thighs with my hands. Slowly, I moved them up until they reached the soft wetness centered between her legs. My fingers touched her. She moaned and arched her back.

Dessie eyed the bulge in my pants. Saying nothing, she reached for my belt.



Dessie

I PULLED Dr. Galbraith's pants down, impatience making me work quickly. Questions and guilt burned in my mind, but I didn't want to think about what I was doing.

Not when it felt so damn good.

Soon, I had his cock wrapped in my palm. I closed my eyes and explored its length, running my fingers over the long veins. I was acutely aware of his long, thick finger stroking the entrance of my core. I groaned softly, encouraging him to have at it.

I'd given myself a manicure last night, taking care to paint my nails a blood red. I didn't know what I was thinking—this wasn't a shade I'd normally choose. Right now, I languidly observed my hand dragging those nails down the sensitive underside of Dr. Galbraith's cock.

"Fuck," he growled as I reached further to cup his balls. They felt heavy and filled my small palm.

Oh, boy, there's a nice thickness here. I greedily circled the head of his cock and brought my thumb to my mouth to get a taste of him.

All this while, his eyes never left mine. What was he thinking? What did he want to do with me? Would he destroy me before I got what I came for?

Would I let him?

"Come here," he said roughly, bringing my head forward by grabbing a fistful of my hair. He smashed his lips against mine, bruising me with the demand in his kiss. I moaned into his mouth, parting my lips so his tongue could clash against my own. I took a deep dive, my hand jerking him off rigorously as his mouth claimed mine.

He broke the kiss. "Tell me what you're thinking," he asked, his voice carrying a quiet edge. "Tell me, Dr. Davenport."

I quieted the storm in my heart. "I'm thinking I'd like you to fuck me and spray your hot seed all over my tits while you rub me to an orgasm. Are you up for it?"

He didn't reply, but his hands began rubbing me quicker. My muscles tensed. "I've been very naughty, haven't I?" This was more of a statement than a question.

The corners of Dr. Galbraith's lips twitched. He wanted to say something, but he was *afraid*.

"Enough," he muttered to himself, taking his cock in his hand before placing it over my clitoris.

My body wants him so much... but my mind...

I moaned hard as he pushed his cock down to my waiting lips and inched teasingly, achingly, slowly into me. He paused when the wide head entered me and looked into my eyes.

Without blinking, we held each other's gaze. I squeezed my muscles around his shaft, making him growl once again. He put a finger in my mouth, and I let my tongue roll over it, tasting salt and my own need on the surface.

He slowly pushed on, deliciously stretching me until I was completely full. I smiled at him, almost feral, and without saying a word, began rubbing my clit as he began to move, compelling me to keep up. His eyes fell on my tits, watching them bounce as our bodies fused and broke with every thrust. I began sweating lightly. He leaned in to lick a single bead from the soft skin above my upper lip.

"God, do you know how sexy you are?" he asked.

What an odd thing to say to a research intern, I thought, staying noncommittal. It sounded odd even coming from a mouth so pedantic. Perhaps that was what made this all the more desirable.

I slid my hand from up my pussy, over my abdomen, and up to grasp my breast. As Dr. Galbraith fucked me, I squeezed my nipples. My head arched back as I moved in sync with his slow action.

"Do you want to know what I'm thinking?" he asked, his baritone rich and thick.

"Tell me," I said.

“I’m thinking you’re a little liar and you enjoy all of this too much for your own good, Dessie Davenport. And I’m thinking I can’t stop myself from wanting you. I hate that.”

Why is this so fucking hot? Why?

I started to pick up the urgency. He soon matched my need, thrusting vigorously. My ass moved on the table as he pumped me harder.

Softly moaning, I circled my clit with two fingers and felt a deep stirring in my body. Vibrations began billowing from inside and radiated in my very blood as I reveled in the sensation of my fingers and Dr. Galbraith’s large, thick cock deep inside me. I wasn’t too far from the edge.

The tension built inside as I knowingly stroked my clit, faster and faster. The world exploded into a billion glorious pieces, and I blanked out. There was nothing else except the delicious feel of Dr. Galbraith buried inside me, fucking my brains out. I grabbed him by the ass to get him in deeper, soaking in every second of my climax.

Slowly, my body relaxed.

“Stand back,” I ordered. I didn’t expect him to obey, but he did. He pulled out of me. I dropped to my knees on the floor and grabbed his slippery shaft, pulling him to my face. Without saying anything else, I immediately took him into my mouth. He was warm and soaked with my juices. I breathed in the scent of our fucking.

I never do this. What’s changed? My fingers continued their onslaught of my own clitoris, my nether lips wickedly wet as I worked on him and me. I ran my lips up and down, reveling in his silent grunts, knowing full well that he was seconds away from surrendering too.

Now would be a great time for a game of truth or dare. How did this always work? You take a man’s cock into your mouth, and then he becomes unable to think. Rationality goes for a toss. I could ask him if he killed Oswald right now, and I’d probably get an honest answer.

But I didn't want that, I realized. I wanted to keep fucking him, and I wanted him to keep fucking me.

How poetic.

I returned to reality as he grunted harder. "I'm going to come," he whispered raggedly.

I drew my mouth off him and took my hand away. "Then do it on my tits."

Dr. Galbraith took his cock in his hand.

I watched him stroke his cock as I continued pleasuring myself, moaning in ecstasy as I felt my second wave incoming.

Fuck, the sight of him stroking his own shaft is enough to get me off. There was something so hot about it, so perfectly wrong.

My face contorted as I began coming once again, the orgasm tearing through my body like rough waves at high tide. "Come for me, John," I cried out. He moved in to kiss me as I writhed with pleasure. I opened my mouth and our tongues lashed at one another.

He began coming as he kissed me, long ropes flowing onto my breasts. He groaned as he bucked and spilled himself on me. I pulled away to watch him. His muscles had tensed and he was shaking all over. His head tilted to the ceiling, and his jawline had become taut as he continued stroking himself until every last drop was spent.

"Kiss me," he murmured, his tone strangely soft. He pulled me up so I stood level with his shoulders.

What was stranger was that was all I wanted to do.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, and we made out like horny teenagers. His hands roamed over my back, under my ass, and up the sides of my body, sending shivers all over. It wasn't long before he was hard against my bare skin.

Footsteps sounded, breaking the silence between us. Viktor and Leon came forward.

“It’s not over yet, not for you,” Dr. Galbraith said with a glint in his eyes.

John

I didn't wait. I propped Dessie up on the operating table once more, parting her legs before impaling her with my cock.

She cried out at the sheer fullness of it and how *good* it felt.

Her face was contorted with rage and pleasure as I moved in and out while the others watched, stroking themselves. I enjoyed her abandon, ass half in the air, hips bucking wildly as I plunged himself deep into her. Her walls tightened around me as I fucked her. God, she was so hot, I had to hold myself back, else I'd simply...

I needed her to feel more, to hit all of her hottest spots. So, I took my time, using my hands and cock to explore her body. I paid attention to her moans and squeals.

"Oh, fuck, oh, yes," she moaned as my cock found a rhythm that worked for her. I took her hard, claiming her, firm and unrestrained. She hung on as she cried out my name, giving me everything she had. I could feel every slide of her incredible vagina against my shaft as I pushed in and pulled out, the ridge of my cock catching the rim of her opening. She was better than anything I'd ever felt.

“God, Dr. Galbraith! Please, *harder!*” Her head was thrown back as she invited me to keep going. My forehead beaded with sweat as I pumped, and my hair fell into my line of sight—but all I could really see was her, in all her glory as she took my thrusts. I met the back of her channel with the tip of my shaft, paused for breath, and readjusted my grip on her legs.

She looked beautiful. I could stay like this for a long, long time.

“Please,” she panted as she squirmed. I gave a few shallow thrusts. Her entire body tightened. Using my hands, I pulled her up, making her stand with one leg curled around my hip, my cock never leaving her body.

Leon came up behind her, his penis aligned with her pucker.

“Oh,” she called out before I buried the rest of her words in my mouth.

Leon bit down on her neck as he used a finger to lubricate her ass with her own juices before entering her, making her cry out in my mouth.

“Does it hurt, Dessie?” he whispered against her ear as he licked her earlobe.

She didn’t reply for a good second as Leon adjusted himself and she got used to the feeling of having us both inside her.

“Take me,” she muttered then, her shoulders heaving. “Show me what you can do.”

I could see her melting for us. It was in her eyes—a complete and total surrender. It was the first time Dr. Dessie Davenport had looked so vulnerable.

It messed with my head, made me want to be gentle, made me want to say shit like, *Let me make love to you*. Fortunately, I didn’t say that.

Instead, I slowly increased my pace in tandem with Leon until both of us established a steady rhythm of ebb and flow,

pulling Dessie deeper and deeper toward the precipice of her being. She cried out incoherently, asking us to fuck her, to make her come.

When it finally happened, her body pulsed all over my cock, shockwaves making her body shake until she called out our names again and again. I came seconds later, the impact of her release too much to keep up with.

She didn't give us time to breathe. Hell, she didn't take time to breathe, although we would have.

"You," she said hoarsely to Viktor. "Come here, now."

She almost pushed me away before Viktor took over and entered her. I'd never seen Dessie this... wild? Manic? Part of me was afraid for her.

What the hell is she doing? How is she going at this for so long?

What was she made of?

Viktor rubbed her clit as he entered her, moving in circles. "Is that it, Dessie?" he asked softly.

"Oh, fuck," she gushed. "Yes... right there, right on the top left c—" Not breaking stride, he used his thumb to send her spiraling as he drove himself in and out of her pussy while Leon fucked her from behind.

Dessie had lost all sense of being. She was screaming at this point. I secretly blessed the soundproof setting of the OT.

"Come for me, Dr. Desdemona," Viktor commanded. Working her bud and fucking her rapidly, he threw his whole, entire focus into her orgasm. She looked gorgeous, body flushed with a rose gold glow, pussy sopping wet but holding on for dear life, lips swollen, neck flush with love bites, eyes wide open but so, so lost.

Leon reached around and grabbed her breasts, tugging the nipples as his breathing grew labored.

"Ohhhh..." Dessie squeezed as her entire body bucked. I could *see* the tremors course through her in tiny shakes.

“Don’t stop! Harder, please! Take me, ride me, make me come!”

Her cries were complemented by groans from Viktor and Leon as she pushed back against their thrusts. Her breath came in taut gasps. She was right on the edge, and she just needed something to push her over the brink.

That was just the moment when Leon bit down on her earlobe and Viktor claimed her neck. That did it, and Dessie cried out as she climaxed, mumbling unintelligible words as their cocks and mouths continued their onslaught of her. They didn’t stop, slamming deep into her body until they joined her calls with their own guttural sounds, all of them climaxing a final time, within seconds of each other.

I watched all of it from a distance, wondering whether this was how sex happened out in the wild. Did love drive any animal except human beings? It wasn’t all instinct and the base need to reproduce, no. There were pack bondings that resembled what we humans might call families. Animals like wolves formed pair bonds to raise offspring more successfully. Swans mated for life. Birds cooperated in nest-building and chick-rearing. Animals also came with strong parental instincts, particularly mammals who would go to great lengths to nurture their children. This was necessary for species survival. But did animals also deny strong feelings? And more importantly, what was I doing?

It wasn’t that I felt bad sharing Dr. Desdemona Davenport with Leon and Viktor. I was never one for monogamous relationships. Indeed, I didn’t think they completely aligned with the human framework. But it was different here. I wanted Dessie.

I wanted her like I wanted all things dark and divine, in the depths of my wretched longing. It didn’t matter if I had to share her. That wasn’t the important thing. What made it all so crucial was that she, for the first time in my life, made me want to come out of a solitary existence that I had always loved.

Which was exactly why I needed to take her down. My eyes met hers once more, narrowing as she put her clothes back on. The rest of us followed suit.

An awkward silence descended throughout the room. Dessie was the first to break it, not with words, but simply by walking out of the room without saying anything at all.

Viktor was the first one to speak. “Did we get it all?”

I nodded briefly.

Leon coughed delicately. “I still don’t know how I feel about this, John. It’s one thing to have sex, but to exploit—”

“We’re not exploiting her,” I barked. “This is insurance for inclement weather.”

“Are you sure—”

“Yes, Leon. I’m sure.”

Leon fell silent at the edge in my words. I felt guilty too. I felt like we were putting Desdemona Davenport in a bind, and no respectable human being needed to go through what we were about to put her through.

But my sixth sense kept telling me I had to do it. She was out for blood. She wouldn’t stop until she’d cut us all.

Not unless we took her down first.

My thoughts felt like slow embers, burning me from the inside out. It was so easy to allow myself to slip and slide at this juncture. One wrong move, and everything would collapse. I couldn’t tell what it was that I stood to lose, but it would be monumental. I walked over to the table at the far end, a nondescript little thing that was too obscure to invite attention. Right on top, I’d affixed the only thing that could get Dessie to give us the truth.

The whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Dessie

I trudged up the stairs to the junior staff wing, each step feeling heavier than the last. The weight of my thoughts seemed to add to the gravity, pulling me down with each weary stride. Every living creature had a limit, a point beyond which they could progress no further.

Unfortunately, it increasingly felt like I was about to reach mine.

Pausing midway, I leaned against the cool wall, closing my eyes for a moment. The echo of my footsteps in the empty stairwell seemed to mock my indecision, my inner turmoil. I pressed my forehead against the wall, the cold surface grounding me back to the present.

For the absolute life of me, I could not understand why I kept navigating back to these men and why I let them use me, and why, for the love of God, did I enjoy it? My mind raced with conflicting emotions, a tumultuous blend of desire, guilt, and a strange sense of empowerment. It was a dangerous game, one where the lines between pleasure and self-destruction blurred.

I pushed off the wall, resuming my climb.

Each step felt like wading through a swamp of my own conflicts. I chuckled bitterly, the sound echoing off the walls.

I could keep telling myself I was doing all this to get to the bottom of Oswald's murder, but well, I'd be lying my ass off. The truth was more complex, tangled in a web of personal desires and professional duties. The murder was beginning to feel more and more like a façade behind which I was hiding my real feelings.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I paused, taking a deep breath. The corridor ahead was dimly lit, the bulbs casting long shadows on the floor. It felt symbolic, somehow – the light and dark intermingling, much like the shadows in my own heart.

I needed to face these conflicting parts of myself, to understand them before they consumed me. But for now, I just needed to get through the night. I sighed heavily, wondering why I had this innate need to complicate every single aspect of my life.

Oswald would tell me this was nothing but my inner need to please people. This was one of the few things about him that rubbed me the wrong way, always. He had a penchant for reading people, which was natural given his profession and long years of experience.

Whenever we would go traveling, he and I would spend at least an hour during the busiest part of evening out in a crowded marketplace, mall, park, or anywhere busy. Once we'd found our spot, we would sit there for hours at a stretch, watching the ebb and flow of human activity. Oswald used to call this people watching.

I remember sitting on a park bench with Oswald one crisp autumn afternoon, a rare moment of leisure in our otherwise hectic schedules. "There." He pointed to a young couple arguing under a nearby oak tree. "Observe them. What do you see?"

I leaned forward, my eyes focusing on the couple. "An argument, obviously. She's upset, and he's defensive."

Oswald chuckled softly. “Yes, but look deeper. Body language, Dessie, it’s all in the body language.”

The woman was standing with her arms crossed, her foot tapping rapidly. The man had his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. As I watched, she threw her hands up in exasperation, turning away briefly before facing him again.

“He’s apologetic but also frustrated,” I commented, my interest growing.

“And she’s hurt but doesn’t want to walk away,” Oswald added, nodding. “Now, watch this.”

As if on cue, the man reached out, gently touching her arm. She hesitated, then relaxed slightly, uncrossing her arms. They began to talk, their voices too low for us to hear but their body language softening.

“It’s a performance,” Oswald said, his voice low. “People are constantly playing parts, but most just don’t realize it.”

I smiled, intrigued by his perspective. “So, we’re all participants in a complex ballet of social interaction?”

“Exactly,” he replied, his eyes still on the couple. “And the most interesting part is watching when someone misses a step.”

We turned our attention to an elderly man feeding pigeons. A young boy ran up to him, startling the birds. The man’s initial irritation quickly turned into amusement as the boy apologized profusely.

“See, the pivot from annoyance to amusement,” Oswald pointed out. “Humans are remarkably adaptable, capable of swift emotional transitions.”

I nodded, observing the scene. “It’s fascinating, isn’t it? How quickly we can change our emotional states.”

Oswald leaned back, his gaze now surveying the entire park. “Every person here is living a story, Dessie. And each story is a puzzle piece of the human condition.”

I followed his gaze, my eyes drifting across the sea of faces, each absorbed in their own world. “Do you think we

could ever truly understand it all?”

He turned to look at me, his eyes reflective. “Perhaps not entirely. But the pursuit of that understanding is what makes psychology so enthralling.”

We sat in comfortable silence for a while, our eyes roving over the park, absorbing the subtle nuances of human behavior. It was in moments like these that Oswald taught me the most, not through lectures or textbooks, but through the simple, profound act of watching life unfold.

My heart felt like someone had dropped a stone in it. I sighed wearily.

By the time I reached my room, my energy was nearly spent.

Unlocking the door, I stepped into the familiarity of my small space. I dropped my bag near the door and made a beeline for the bathroom.

The hot water of the shower felt like a balm to my weary muscles. I let the steam envelop me, washing away the remnants of the day. My mind wandered through the events, dissecting everything the men had done to me, that I had *let* them do to me.

After the shower, feeling slightly rejuvenated, I opted for a quick dinner—an energy bar and a glass of water. It wasn’t much, but my appetite had waned with the day’s stresses. As I was about to turn in early, my phone buzzed. Dr. Thorne’s name flashed on the screen.

“Hello, Dr. Thorne,” I answered, trying to mask my fatigue.

“Good evening, Dessie. I hope I’m not calling too late.” Dr. Thorne’s voice was always calm and measured. “I wanted to remind you about tomorrow. We have an interesting case, and I’d like you to be there for the session.”

“Of course, Dr. Thorne. I’ll be there,” I replied, a sense of curiosity piquing my interest despite the exhaustion.

“Great. See you in the morning, then. Good night, Dessie.”

“Good night, Dr. Thorne.”

After ending the call, I set my phone down on the nightstand with a soft click, the familiar weight of it leaving my hand. Normally, it would remain close by, a nightly ritual where I’d scroll through YouTube to find a white noise video. The sound of a running fan, its steady hum playing for ten hours straight, was my usual pick. It was a soothing, mechanical lullaby that helped calm my frayed nerves, offering a semblance of peace in the night’s quiet.

ON MOST NIGHTS, I’d find myself drifting into a fitful sleep, managing four hours, six if fortune favored me, amid the ten-hour loop of whirring sounds. But tonight was different. Tonight, my mind was a carousel of thoughts spinning too wildly for the white noise to lull it into submission.

So, I turned away from the digital comfort, choosing instead to be alone with my thoughts in the silent darkness of my room. I slipped under the covers, the cool fabric of the sheets a stark contrast to the warmth of my restless thoughts.

Sleep was a cunning adversary this evening, evading me as hours ticked by. I curled into a half-seated, half-reclining position, staring at the ceiling, my mind a jumble of reflections, questions, and unspoken words. The night outside my window transformed slowly, a canvas of dark blue gradually invaded by streaks of blood-red sunrise, signaling the approach of dawn.

From my position, propped up against a threadbare cushion at the head of the bed, I watched this celestial battle unfold. The colors of the sky merged and clashed, painting a picture of the day’s reluctant arrival. A faint chorus of birds began to rise, their melodies a stark contrast to the night’s silence. Their songs were nature’s own symphony, far more organic and comforting than any white noise I could find online.

Gradually, under the watchful eye of the transitioning sky and the serenade of the early birds, my eyelids began to feel heavy. The turmoil in my mind started to ebb, giving way to a

weary, yet welcome, drowsiness. I finally succumbed to sleep, deep but short, as the world outside ushered in a new day.

Morning came far too soon for comfort, but I had my case to look forward to. I got ready just in time for breakfast. Leon was there in the dining hall but chose to avoid looking my way. It was for the best.

I grabbed a bagel and a cup of hot coffee, nothing too fancy.

“Hey, girl.”

Chelsea’s singsong voice sounded behind me. I braced myself for what she was sure to ask.

“Hey.”

“How was last night?”

Oh, if I could tell you...

I shrugged and ripped the bagel apart with my teeth. “Fine. He just wanted my opinion on a case.”

Chelsea nodded knowingly. “I told you! You never have to feel unsafe here, not with the kind of professors we have.”

I almost spat out my coffee. How were the students here so bloody oblivious to what was going on? I couldn’t partake in this conversation without feeling like I’d lose a million brain cells each second. “Chelsea,” I said apologetically, “I have to go. Let’s talk later.”

She looked a little hurt but bobbed her head. “Sure thing. See you after class, D.”

I stiffened at the “see you after class”. John Galbraith had told me to do the same thing, in a different tone, with different intent. A familiar rush swept through me, hot and uncomfortable. I shook my head as I walked away from the dining hall. Now was not the time.

After wrapping up my morning class, I made my way toward Dr. Thorne’s office in town. Stepping into the clinic, I inhaled deeply. Dr. Thorne had provided me with a space of my own.

My office was a blend of modern and rustic aesthetics. The walls were lined with sleek, dark wood bookshelves brimming with psychological texts and literature. My desk, a minimalist piece of glass and steel, stood by the window, offering a panoramic view of Stillingbrook City.

The Connecticut skyline, with its mix of urban structure and natural beauty, shimmered outside.

Two armchairs, upholstered in earthy brown, faced each other near the window. As I was arranging some papers on my desk, Dr. Thorne knocked and entered, a file in his hand.

“Good morning, Dessie,” he greeted me with a smile. “How are you settling in today?”

“Good morning, Dr. Thorne,” I replied, turning to greet him. “I’m just getting organized. Anything new?”

He handed me the file. “Actually, yes. There’s a particularly intriguing case I think you’ll find interesting. It’s what I hinted at last night.”

I opened the file and quickly scanned the contents. “Lila Monroe...” I frowned as the news headlines returned to me. “The kidnapping survivor?”

It had been all over the news a few years back. Delilah and Delpi Monroe were twins who had been adopted into a rich family. They were both child models, both immensely successful. So much so that both of them fell into a trap that involved a messy, heartbreaking kidnapping. Both were a month short of nineteen at the time. Delilah made it out.

“Exactly.” Dr. Thorne nodded, taking a seat in one of the armchairs. “Her case has garnered a lot of public attention. She’s written a book about her experience, but there are some... inconsistencies in her story.”

I sat across from him, my mind already analyzing the possibilities. “Inconsistencies? Like what?”

“Some details in her interviews don’t match up with what she wrote in her book. And there are parts of her story that seem... embellished, perhaps.”

I considered this, the wheels in my mind turning. “Do we think it’s a case of trauma affecting her memory, or something more deliberate?”

“That’s what we need to find out,” he said, his expression cloaked in shadows. “Your task is to evaluate her, try to understand what’s going on beneath the surface. But it’s a sensitive situation, Dessie. Handle it with care.”

“I understand,” I replied, studying the case details minutely. “When is she coming in?”

“Right about now. I’m confident you can handle this, Dessie. You have a knack for puzzles, right? This is a good one.”

Dessie

Apprehension gnawed within me as I examined the picture of Lila Monroe in the file. Something about it felt off, as if she were donning a persona for the public eye. Her smile seemed too practiced, too perfect. And those eyes... they held a hollowness that resonated with me. It reminded me of the path I could find myself on if I didn't unravel the truth about Oswald's murder.

The thought of living a life shrouded in lies and deceit was unbearable.

This case with Lila Monroe was more than just a patient evaluation. It felt like a dive into a complex, potentially obscured truth.

After Dr. Thorne left, I took a moment to prepare myself and the office for the session. Two quick cups of coffee did the trick for me. The adrenaline would be short-lived, so I hoped to put it to good use.

The city outside was bathed in the gentle glow of the morning sun, casting elongated lines that stretched across the room, adding a dramatic touch to the space. I arranged the

armchairs to face each other, creating an intimate setting that I hoped would foster openness and trust.

At precisely ten a.m., the door opened, and Lila Monroe stepped in. She was a young woman in her late twenties, her presence an intriguing mix of nervousness and poise. Her gaze flitted around the room, taking in every detail before it finally settled on me.

“Ms. Monroe, I’m Dr. Dessie Davenport,” I said, extending my hand toward her.

She reached out, her handshake firm. “Please, call me Lila, although some people prefer to go with Delilah,” she replied, her voice carrying a note of practiced confidence. Her smile was charming, yet it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

I returned her smile with a small one of my own, trying to make her feel at ease. “Please, have a seat, Lila.” I gestured toward the armchair nearest to her.

As she sat down, she adjusted her blouse, a small, almost imperceptible sign of nervousness. “Can I get you anything before we start? Water, perhaps?” I offered, wanting to give her a moment to settle in.

“No, thank you,” she declined politely, her hands folding neatly in her lap. Despite her poised exterior, there was an undercurrent of tension in her posture.

I took my seat opposite her, my notepad and pen ready, but my attention was fully focused on her. “Thank you for coming in today, Lila. I know discussing your experiences can be challenging, but I’m here to help you through this process.”

She nodded, a flash of vulnerability crossing her face before she composed herself. “I understand. I’m ready to start.”

As we delved into the session, I kept my observations sharp, looking for the subtleties in her expressions and responses. Lila Monroe was a puzzle. “I’m surprised Dr. Thorne referred me to you,” she admitted slowly, her eyes unfocused for a second. “He has been privy to all of my

personal history, right from when—” She stopped and swallowed.

Her hands trembled slightly as she steepled her fingers on her lap. I noticed the dainty French tips. “I apologize,” she continued softly. “You’d think that six years later, it would be easier to talk about.”

“It never gets easier, I’m afraid,” I told her, holding her gaze, “but you learn better ways to cope.”

I took my seat across from her. “With that said, I appreciate your coming in today, Lila. I understand this must be difficult for you.”

She nodded, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. “I just want to put all of this behind me.”

I opened her file, but my focus was on her. “Your book has received a lot of attention. It must be overwhelming.”

“It is,” she admitted. “But I needed to tell my story. For me and for my sister.”

I nodded empathetically. “Let’s talk about your experience. I understand recounting it might be hard, but it’s important for your healing process and for me to understand how far you’ve come.”

Lila began to speak, her voice steady at first but quavering as she delved into the details of her kidnapping. As she spoke, I paid intense attention, not just to her words but to the subtle cues in her body language. She would occasionally falter, her eyes darting away when mentioning specific details.

When she spoke of her sister, her voice cracked and her eyes welled up. “We were supposed to go through life together,” she whispered, a tear escaping down her cheek.

I handed her a tissue, giving her a moment. “Take your time, Lila.”

After a pause, she continued, but something in her narrative felt off. The way she skirted around certain topics, the inconsistencies in her timeline. It was as if she were dancing around the truth.

“Lila,” I interjected gently, “Can you tell me more about the night of the kidnapping?”

She hesitated, biting her lip. “I’ve told this story so many times. It’s hard to keep everything straight.”

I leaned forward, maintaining a compassionate but firm tone. “You don’t need to recount every tiny detail, only what comes to your mind right now.”

As she shared the events of the night, her story became more fragmented. She mentioned a woman but then quickly changed the subject. Her gaze was evasive, her hands fidgeting.

“Lila, who is this woman you just mentioned?” I asked, my tone curious but not accusatory.

She looked at me, panic flickering in her eyes before she masked it. “Just a figment of my imagination. I thought I saw someone that night, but I was wrong.”

I noted the discrepancy but didn’t press further. Instead, I guided the conversation toward her feelings and coping mechanisms since the incident. But throughout the session, a nagging thought stayed with me. Lila was holding back, hiding a crucial piece of her story.

After the session ended, Lila offered me a bright smile and left me to my thoughts. Dr. Thorne joined me shortly after. His eyes held a lot of scrutiny. “Well?”

I rotated a ballpoint pen between my index finger and thumb. “She’s not saying everything, that’s for sure. Something about her is off.”

“Tell me what that is.”

I reflected on the way she spoke, her mannerisms, the haunting in her eyes. “She’s built a perfect image of a girl in distress who’s managed to come out of trouble all by herself. It makes her a sweetheart—strong, vulnerable, and...” I hesitated.

“Go on.” Dr. Thorne encouraged me, his smile gentle, coaxing out my thoughts.

I hesitated for a moment, gathering my thoughts. “It increases her commercial value,” I finally said, my voice soft but certain. “She wrote a bestseller, didn’t she?”

“She did,” he affirmed, leaning back in his chair and tenting his fingers in front of him.

“I can’t tell how much of her story is real, but there’s definitely something else that we can’t see. I need some more time with her.”

Dr. Thorne nodded briskly, his eyes meeting mine with a sharp intensity. “Take all the time you need. She’s a regular.” There was a weight to his words, a gravity that underscored the importance of the case.

“Dessie...” he started again, his tone shifting.

“Yes?” I responded, looking up, my attention fully on him.

His smile softened, a warmth radiating from it that was both comforting and encouraging. “You and I are going to make a good team.”

Those words struck a chord within me, igniting a warm rush of emotions. It was the kind of feeling that came from gaining recognition, from being seen and valued by someone you respect. I felt a sense of belonging, a connection that had been sorely missing since Oswald’s passing.

In Dr. Thorne, I found not just a mentor but a confidant. He was senior, undoubtedly brilliant, and carried with him a sense of wisdom that was both grounding and slightly eccentric. I realized in that moment how much I had missed having someone to share the intricacies of cases with, someone who could offer guidance, challenge my thinking, and appreciate the nuances of the human psyche.

Before I could formulate a response, my phone vibrated in my pocket. Its sudden intrusion startled me. I pulled it out, my eyes narrowing as I read the message on the screen. It was from Viktor. His text was brief, almost cryptic. *Come to the greenhouse. It’s important.*

A swirl of emotions churned inside me. Annoyance, curiosity, and frustratingly, a spark of excitement that the

message ignited almost instantly. I found myself annoyed at my own reaction, at how easily my mood could shift. I didn't reply, choosing silence over engagement.

Turning to Dr. Thorne, I tried to keep my voice steady. "Dr. Thorne, do I have any other cases today?"

He looked up from his papers, adjusting his glasses as he met my gaze. "You do not," he replied, his tone suggesting he sensed there was something more behind my question. "Back to the Institute?"

I nodded. There was a hint of hesitation in my movement. "Yes." My voice was a mix of determination and a feigned indifference I didn't quite feel.

Leaving Dr. Thorne's office, I made my way outside. The journey back was nondescript, save my churning thoughts about Lila Monroe. After parking, I bypassed the main gate, my steps unconsciously guiding me toward a less-trodden path. The shadows grew longer, stretching out like fingers across the path.

The path to the Institute's greenhouse wound through the yew gardens, a labyrinth of dark, twisted green. I quickened my pace, the gravel crunching under my shoes with each hurried step. Light danced between the ancient trees, their branches swaying gently in the breeze, whispering secrets, telling me to turn back. But I couldn't.

My heart pounded in my chest, its rhythm syncing with the rustle of leaves. The air was thick with the scents of damp earth and moss, a heady, almost intoxicating mix. I glanced over my shoulder, the feeling of being watched prickling at my neck.

Ahead, the greenhouse loomed, a silhouette against the waning light. Its glass panels, fogged and dull, reflected the last rays of the sun, casting a kaleidoscope of colors on the ground. I approached with caution, my steps hesitant.

Reaching the door, I paused, taking a deep breath. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation, a sense of

something unknown, something lurking just beyond the threshold.

I pushed the door open, the hinges creaking softly. Warm, humid air enveloped me as I stepped inside. The greenhouse was a jungle of vibrant, lush greenery, an oasis of life amid the Institute's stoic architecture.

Dr. Viktor Magnusson stood among the verdant foliage, his figure partially obscured by a tall fern. "Dr. Davenport," he greeted, his voice echoing slightly in the enclosed space. "I've been expecting you."

He wasn't alone, I discovered. From behind an enclosed space, Dr. Galbraith and Leon emerged.

Viktor

The late afternoon sun, a tipsy painter drunk on crimson hues, splashed its liquid fire through the glass panes of the greenhouse. Emerald streaks, long and languid, slithered across the humid jungle that cloaked the interior in a verdant embrace.

An hour ago, I had parted the fleshy curtain of creepers, their tendrils sighing like mournful wraiths, and waited for Dessie's grand entrance.

She was, as always, spectacularly late. I, it seemed, forgot how to breathe when she finally appeared, a vision sculpted from moonbeams and alabaster. Her eyes, the color of twilight storms, flitted like restless butterflies between John, Leon, and me.

Leaning against a moss-covered railing, she was a porcelain doll misplaced in a riotous Eden. Her pale dress, as fine as spun moonlight, clung to her form like a whispered secret, catching the dying embers of the sun like shattered glass scattered on velvet.

My thoughts were getting out of hand, apparently.

“We have something to show you,” I announced, my voice echoing in the humid stillness. She didn’t react but proceeded to fiddle with the ends of her skirt.

She’d think she was in control if she could tell how hard my heart was hammering. But no. We were the ones manipulating the situation, us men. We had the footage we needed, containing every depraved act, every whimper of pleasure, captured in stark detail. This was evidence that would shatter her carefully constructed front and expose the truth of her willing participation in the previous night’s debauchery.

“Go ahead,” she said coolly. Her eyes met mine with an unsettling blankness. “Show me.”

I swallowed hard, the words tasting like ash in my mouth. “This is evidence. It contains... things from last night,” I forced out, shoving the data chip into her palm. “About what you did with us.”

She stared at the chip, her expression unreadable. Then, with a flick of her wrist, she sent it skittering across the cobblestones. It landed with a dull thud, nestled among the roots of a sprawling hibiscus.

“Keep it,” she said, her voice flat. “I don’t care.”

My jaw clenched. “You don’t care? Dessie, this is...” I sputtered, searching for the right words. “This is evidence. Proof that you...”

She cut me off with a cold laugh. “Proof of what, Viktor? That I enjoyed myself? That I’m not some fragile little victim you forced into their twisted games? You think I’m afraid of you, do you?”

Her nonchalance was like a slap in the face. How could someone be so nonchalant about something so... so violating? The image of her, flushed and wanton beneath us, burned behind my eyelids.

“Don’t you understand the implications, Dessie?” Leon’s voice cut through the tension, his face etched with surprise. “This could ruin your life.”

She shrugged, the gesture careless and defiant. “My life was already ruined the day I stepped foot in this goddamn academy. Men like you—you’ve all taken turns chipping away at me. What’s one more crack in a broken vase?”

Her words struck a raw nerve, twisting the knot of unease in my gut tighter. I saw ghosts etched into the lines of her face.

At that moment, I understood. This wasn’t apathy. It was a shield.

“Dessie,” I said, my voice softer now, “You don’t have to be this way. You don’t have to be so... broken.”

A flicker of something akin to surprise crossed her face. Then it was gone, replaced by a cynical smirk. “There’s only been one exception to the rule, Viktor,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “One man who saw me for who I was, not what I’d been through. And he’s gone now.”

Her words hung heavily in the air, a weight that pressed down on me. Who was this? Jealousy flared within, raw and ravenous. Was she seeing someone else?

John sounded irritated, too. None of us had thought Dessie would counter us this easily. “Enough of this sentimental drivel,” he snarled, his voice dripping with menace. “Perhaps what you need is to learn a lesson about the consequences of disobedience.”

Dessie’s face hardened, but there was no fear in her eyes. “Bring it on,” she replied softly, her voice laced with steel.

“Dessie—”

“Stop talking,” she spat at me. “If you have something to say, then show me.”

I didn’t get a chance to finish my train of thought. She kissed me then, her slender arms encircling me like ropes of ivy, and I lost all capacity for coherent speech.

This wasn’t like the other times. Something in me had changed, like I was surrendering to her, giving her more of myself. I let her kiss me harder, my hands desperately undoing the buttons of her clothes until she had nothing on her body

except skimpy lace underwear. Her lips parted against mine, and I possessed her mouth with sheer abandon, suddenly afraid of losing her.

I removed her bra, urgently tossing it aside. I needed her, I craved her, I had to have her right now. My hands snaked up to her waist, pulling her flush with my body. I ran my hands up her bare back, leaving trails of hot kisses down her neck, over her shoulders, to the valley between her breasts. I cupped them in my palms, brushing my thumbs against her nipples, already erect at my touch, their tips deliciously pink.

Leaning down, my tongue circled them until they grew stiff in my mouth, craving more attention.

She moaned and arched the crescent moons of her breasts right into my hands as I explored the sweet, honey-like alchemy of her skin with my tongue and teeth, grazing and licking, hoping and worshiping.

What is happening to you, Viktor? Get a grip on yourself.

My sane mind could worship a thousand other things, but I couldn't. I couldn't stop. I was falling. I went lower to grasp a luscious handful of her softness, kneading her buttocks in my palms. She gasped and ground against me, her hands reaching up to grab fistfuls of my hair.

I licked her nipples before biting down, sucking greedily. Reaching down, I hooked a finger under the line of her panties and brushed the mounting heat rising from her mound, relishing the feel of her wetness against my skin.

She moaned angrily, pressing her thighs hard to keep my hand stationed where it was.

I stroked upward to the tiny, delicious nub of nerves, making her quiver as I pressed down.

“That’s it,” she snarled, pushing me back suddenly. “Fuck me.” She slapped my chest, her eyes burning. Was it rage? Was it lust? Was it... confusion?

It didn't matter.

I picked her clean off the ground and carried her over to one of the benches. I sat down, with her straddling my lap. She undid my pants, working on me until my cock sprang free. I pushed the line of her panties aside, freeing her soaking pussy.

She didn't give me a second to prepare. She moved like a fox, going slightly up to grab my cock and impale herself with it.

"Yes," she sighed, her hands coming to rest around my shoulders. Her lips were close to my ear. "Come on, Viktor. Show me what you can do."

I let out a snarl and began drilling her, the pace slow at first. I released her panties, letting the line hit against my cock. It felt exquisite. I bit down on her tender nipples as she moaned.

She clamped her hands on my shoulders, bouncing up and down on my erection until I couldn't take it anymore. I steadied her with an iron grip and drilled into her, moving as fast as I could.

"Harder," she commanded.

I began moving faster, ramming my shaft in and out.

My nails dug into her skin as hers did in mine as she matched my frenetic rhythm. "Tell me," she whispered in my ear. "Who is undoing whom?"

My mind was circling with an abyss of thoughts that made no sense. There was her, only her. Only she made sense in this dark, useless world.

"Come for me," she murmured, clamping down hard on my cock. I shuddered, feeling her orgasm tear through her body and mine by extension as I flooded her with my hot seed.

She smiled victoriously before angling her head to look at the two other men in the greenhouse.

"Who's next?"

Leon

Seventeen years ago
A string-bean of a boy with eyes the color of espresso trailed behind his mother, Sophia Lorena. The boy was yours truly.

My mother's ebony hair, usually a river of glossy ink cascading down her back, was a tangled mess. Her face, etched with the laughter lines of a thousand summers, looked increasingly tired and tight, rouge smeared beneath her eyes like angry tears.

We were late for Zia Rosa's weekly gathering. I knew the drill. Mama, her voice a hoarse whisper, would recount the latest drama of her on-again-off-again romance with my father, Antonio Vincenzo, a baker with promises that crumbled faster than his biscotti.

The aunts would cluck their tongues, the uncles would mutter about family and honor, and Nona would sigh. Mama would take all the sympathy the same way she took her tea—greedily. We'd go home and repeat the same thing all over again.

The sun was a molten lemon smeared across a cobalt sky, casting long veils across the cobbled streets of Palermo. Zia Rosa's house was a riot of geraniums and sun-bleached terracotta. The aromas of simmering ragu and garlic bread spread the moment we set foot inside. It was always familiar but also always comforting.

Laughter was muted, tinged with the low hum of gossip. My mother, with her shoulders slumped, entered the kitchen, where the family's women had gathered around a scarred wooden table.

I noticed their eyes flicker on Mama's reddened cheeks. "Sophia," Zia Rosa, the family's matriarch, with her silver hair like a crown dipped in moonlight, spoke in a voice mimicking the rustling of leaves. "What has happened now?"

Her chin trembled. "It's nothing, Zia," she mumbled, her voice barely a whisper.

But the truth, a painful knot coiled in her throat, refused to be silenced. Tears welled in her eyes, spilling down her cheeks. "He... he lied again," she choked out, the words rugged and raw. "He swore he'd leave her, but he was at her shop today, and they... I saw them kissing!"

A gasp rippled through the room. The aunts huddled closer, their faces grim masks of disapproval. Uncle Vincenzo, his face thunderous, slammed his fist on the table. "That good-for-nothing gigolo! He brings shame to the name!"

I, pressed against the wall, felt a cold knot tighten in my stomach. I had seen this scene play out before. But today, something felt different. The anger was sharper.

Mama, her voice rising, her fists clenched, shook her head. "No more," she declared, her voice cracking but resolute. "No more lies, no more promises, no more pretending. I'm done."

But of course, she wasn't. Mama was good for a week following this incident. Then, Father returned and wooed her just as easily as he had a hundred times before. Years passed, six to be exact, before Father grew entirely bored of her and stopped coming around.

Life hardened Mama and turned her into something blunt. She ultimately ended up detesting Antonio Vincenzo and everything that reminded her of him.

I, unfortunately, topped that list. But then again, it was good learning.

Mama taught me that love, much like the sun, could scorch. Sometimes, it left scars that never healed. When I left Italy on a scholarship to the States, I promised myself never to make the same mistakes she did. I'd never let love break me. Ever.

THE PRESENT DAY

Time had passed, and here she was, with her sultry green eyes and her tongue darting out to wet her bottom lip. She looked so deliciously fuckable, maybe more so after she'd ridden Viktor to his apparent end. He looked like he'd just met God.

And I felt like I'd forgotten what my childhood had compelled me to learn.

My heart beat faster at the sight of her nakedness, memories of my mother's torment fading into the background.

"Come here," she urged hungrily.

Her body was hot against mine as I gathered her in my arms.

"Take your clothes off," she commanded huskily.

Your wish is my command.

Clothes gone, heart bared, I kissed her with wild abandon. Her scent intoxicated me, telling stories drenched in vanilla and flowers.

Without a word, I guided her toward the jet stream shower, my cock throbbing in anticipation. She smiled like a feral wildcat as I stepped inside and pulled her with me. My hand went to the curtain.

"Leave it," she said immediately, her eyes flickering to John and Viktor. "I want them to see."

Somehow, that didn't hurt me. There was something doubly exciting about fucking with an audience, all hungry for whom I had in my arms.

My heart thundered as she reached for my erection, cupping her delicate palm around it, stroking it up and down before she leaned down to wrap her tongue around the head, tasting me.

"You're so big," she whispered, her breath hot against my shaft.

I didn't reply, lost in the sensation. I let her fuck me with that mouth of hers until I knew I'd explode if it lasted a second longer. At that moment, I pulled her up and assumed the same position she had held.

Kneeling between her thighs, I traced the outline of her slit with my tongue, my breath fanning over her folds as I looked up at her.

"Taste you," I rasped. I licked desperately, led on by a stream of moans and her hips bucking against my mouth as she fed me her juices. She grabbed onto my shoulders, pushing me away. "I need you inside me," she said.

I stood up and pressed her against the shower wall. She lifted a leg and wrapped it around my waist, hooking me in as I slowly entered her until I filled her tight, wet, perfect core completely. She let out a guttural moan as I began fucking her, our bodies moving together in perfect harmony. My thrusts were slow and deliberate, hitting every spot as hot water crashed against and on us.

The lust in Dessie's eyes was unmistakable. Her hands snaked around my back. "Fuck me harder, Dr. Vincenzo. Now." Her nails dug into my skin.

Her body was a perfect fit for mine, and our mouths fused in a messy, desperate kiss as my hard length ravaged her. I dragged my tongue along her lower lip and growled, "Never ask so nicely if you don't mean it, Dr. Davenport."

She nibbled on my earlobe, sending a stream of shivers down my spine. "Go on and take what you want."

My hands roamed over her body, mapping every dip and curve. She was all soft skin and supple muscle, her nipples hard and lush. I slid a hand between our stomachs so I could stroke her clit while I fucked her, my pace building.

Her breath caught in her throat as her hips ground against my palm. “Say it,” I demanded, my voice roughened by the sheer need to gratify her.

She groaned. “Please.”

I grabbed her wrist and pinned it above her head, my other hand working on her. “Say my name.”

She glared up at me, but the same need shone through. “Please,” she purred. “Leon.”

I smiled. “That’s better.”

Our pace built like a poem that had gotten out of hand. Our bodies became slick with steam and a thin layer of sweat as we moved together. We fucked against the glass wall, our bodies slamming together in a primal rhythm that had no end. I could feel every curve of hers, every inch of her soft skin against me. She dug into my skin as if she wanted to mark me as hers.

Every mewl she made fueled my desire, making me want to push her further toward the edge. She cried out as I hit that sweet spot deep within her over and over again, bringing her closer and closer to the brink of release. She dug her nails into my back, urging me on.

With one final thrust, we both exploded in a wave of pleasure that consumed us. We clung to each other tightly as we rode out our orgasms together. As we came down from our high, I pulled out of her and held her close in my arms. We stayed like that for a few minutes, catching our breaths and basking in the afterglow of whatever this was.

Then, she sprang away from my embrace, her eyes immediately hardening.

“Dessie—”

She shook her head and stepped out of the shower, stopping just in front of where John stood like a statue. She

placed her hands on her hips, seemingly caring nothing about how naked she was.

“So?” she asked defiantly. “Are you waiting for me to fuck you? Because I’m tired, and I’m going to my room.”

Dessie’s blunt refusal landed in the air like a dropped anvil, silencing John with a force that seemed to suck the oxygen from the room. His planned riposte, whatever it was, evaporated, leaving him floundering like a fish gasping for breath on land. His head swiveled in a jerky pantomime of denial, chin jutting out in childish defiance that would be comical if not bordering on pathetic.

My lips twitched, the urge to guffaw a volcanic eruption threatening to crack my stoic façade. But John, when cornered, was venomous, and the amusement dancing in my eyes could easily morph into a target for his barbed wit. So, I swallowed the laughter, replacing it with a neutral mask that mirrored his stunned bewilderment.

We stood in silence as Dessie slipped into her clothes and walked out of the greenhouse, never turning back. John looked at the two of us as her form retreated in the distance.

“What the fuck was that?”

John

I hated rejections.

This was why it didn't take more than fifty seconds for me to leave the greenhouse and run after Dessie. How dared she?

How did she have the infuriating gall to reject me after fucking Viktor and Leon? What did they have that I didn't?

What could they do that I couldn't?

The glass panes of the conservatory warped my reflection, morphing me into a grotesque caricature of fury, teeth bared, fists clenched around phantom words.

But words wouldn't mend the gash in my pride, wouldn't erase the mocking glint in her gray eyes. No, I needed action, the primal chase, the thunder of boots against gravel. Rejected. Discarded. The greenhouse air, thick with the cloying sweetness of orchids, turned to barbed wire in my lungs.

I stormed after her, boots crunching on gravel, the glass panes of the greenhouse distorting my reflection into a hulking caricature of fury. The yew gardens beckoned with their sculpted gloom, the ancient trees guarding secrets under their

cloaking shadows. Here, the air was crisp, laced with the earthy tang of pine needles. The maze, a morbid masterpiece of clipped topiary, loomed, a skeletal monument to my broken pride.

I spotted her flash of crimson among the emerald darkness, a poppy against the verdant tapestry. My legs pumped with the primal urge of the chase, fueled by a cocktail of fury and something I refused to acknowledge—envy. Envy that she would—that she could ever—consider me as someone expendable, someone less important than my colleagues and subordinates.

Just as my fingers grazed the hem of her scarlet dress, she spun, gray eyes flashing defiance. “Let go, John,” she spat, her voice a whiplash crack against the stillness. “Haven’t I made it clear enough?”

But the fire in her eyes mirrored the inferno in my veins. Her impertinence was an ember to my furnace, and I surged forward, hands gripping her wrists like iron manacles. “No,” I roared, the word erupting from my throat like a caged beast. “Not until you tell me why.”

Her chin jutted out, but the tremor in her hands betrayed her. She was nervous. “There is no ‘why’, John. Just... no.”

But there was a reason. It festered in the space between her glare and the trembling of her lips. Was it the way I stared at her like she was the sun and I, a moth perpetually drawn to its flame? Or the possessive way I claimed her hand, the unspoken hunger burning the bridges between us?

“Don’t lie to yourself, Dessie,” I growled, pulling her closer. “This isn’t some foolish coincidence. You wanted this just as much as I did.”

The yew maze loomed around us, a silent audience to our tempest. I dragged her deeper, toward a secluded alcove where sunlight dripped through the foliage like honey onto moss-covered stones. The world narrowed to the fire in her eyes, the tremble of her lips, the frantic rise and fall of her chest.

“Let me go,” she whispered, but the defiance had waned, replaced by a tremor that resonated with the storm in my soul.

I didn't answer. Instead, I cupped her face, the heat of her skin searing through the callused pads of my fingers. Our breaths mingled, warm and humid in the cool air. Her eyes, those damned brooding pools of muted charcoal storm, searched mine, the resistance flickering like a dying ember.

Then, her eyes fluttered shut, and she leaned into me. My senses sharpened, every rustle of leaves, every chirp of a bird amplified a hundredfold. My fingers trembled as they traced the delicate curve of her jaw, then dipped into the surprisingly silky strands of her hair.

And then, our lips met.

It was a collision, not a caress. My mouth crushed onto hers, tasting the surprise, the trepidation, and then, a spark that ignited into a wildfire. Her tongue met mine, hesitant at first, then dancing with a desperate fury that mirrored my own. The taste of her was intoxicating, honeysuckle and rain, fire and spice.

Time ceased to exist. The yew maze vanished, replaced by the dizzying spiral of her touch. My hands roamed her back, fingers digging into the soft wool, then sliding beneath to trace the fiery curve of her spine. Each moan that escaped her lips was a brand on my soul, each tremor of her body a symphony of surrender.

We stumbled against a tree, her back pressed against the rough bark, my body a furnace against hers. My hands roamed, mapping the secrets of her skin, the tender curve of her throat, the forbidden hollow of her neck. Every gasp, every whimper, fueled the inferno within me.

Her fingers dug into my hair, anchoring me to this moment, to this taste, to this scent that would forever be etched in my memory. The kiss deepened, devouring, consuming. Tongues tangled, teeth grazed, a desperate exchange of fire and air.

There was a rawness to it, an urgency that spoke of unspoken desires, of boundaries both challenged and breached. My control, always precarious, slipped completely. I wanted to claim her, every inch, every breath.

My words died in my throat, choked off by the wild symphony rising from her lips. “John,” she breathed, her voice a broken echo against the rough bark. “Wait.”

The urgency clawed at me, but my name, whispered on a sigh, was a cool rain on the inferno. I pulled back, taking a shuddering breath, our foreheads pressed together. Her emerald eyes, still dazed with the fire of our clash, searched mine, the question lingering unspoken.

“Why?” I rasped, voice thick with the embers of the kiss. “Why now, Dessie? Why let me touch you like this if what you say is true?”

Her gaze flickered, a kaleidoscope of emotions swirling within—confusion, fear, and a hint of something I couldn’t decipher. Finally, she shook her head, releasing a wisp of hair that had tangled around my fingers.

“I... I don’t know,” she admitted, her voice barely a whisper. “One moment, I’m certain you are the one behind—” Her eyes met mine, the silvery depths shimmering with unshed tears. “Everything that has led to my ruin. Next, I’m lost in your arms, tasting fire on your lips. It’s like there are two Dessies, and I don’t know which one is real. The first wants this, you, them.”

Ruin? But what did I ever do to her? Was it because of that incident in the classroom? Or the operating theater?

My train of thoughts felt jumbled.

Her vulnerability, laid bare like a fragile orchid, tore at the protective shell I’d built around my own emotions. “And the other Dessie?” I asked, my voice soft, the growl long gone.

“She... she hates you,” she said, her voice a broken sob against my chest. “Hates what you make her feel, this... this wildness, this reckless oblivion.”

I cupped her face, tracing the line of her tears with the pad of my thumb. “Do you really believe I have ruined you?”

Her eyes met mine, searching, hesitant. “I don’t know what I believe anymore.”

A pained laugh escaped my lips. “Tell me who you are,” I said. “Tell me so we can stop this. So I don’t have to hurt you anymore.”

A flicker of a smile curved her lips. “Perhaps,” she admitted, her voice soft against my ears, “hurt is the only way through.”

And before I could protest, she pulled me back into the kiss. Her lips, no longer desperate, teased mine, nibbled at my earlobe, trailed fire down my jaw. My grip on her loosened. My breath hitched, the storm within me resting.

“Dessie,” I moaned, my voice laced with surrender, “you are impossible.”

“That’s what they all say,” she purred.

The challenge thrown down, I met her fire with mine, our breaths mingling with the rustling leaves as the yew maze held us captive in its verdant embrace. We played a dangerous game, each touch a whispered dare, each kiss a spark igniting in the tinderbox of desire.

Between stolen kisses, she questioned me, her voice a husky thread. “Why me, Dr. Galbraith? Why choose this? Because from what I can deduce, you’re making as much of a choice as I am.”

Confessions rose to my lips, surprising me with how authentic they were. I... she was years younger and so immature, yet, she held everything I wanted. Was it because I couldn’t have her in toto?

I sighed and relented.

“Because they are pale shadows compared to you,” I admitted, tracing the line of her collarbone with the tip of my finger. “You are a force of nature, Dessie, a tempest in a

teacup, and I wouldn't trade your chaos for all the serenity in the world."

Her smile was sad. "You sound like a lovesick poet, Dr. Galbraith," she murmured.

Perhaps that is true, I thought to myself. But my verse needs her.

No sonnet, no epic could capture the whirlwind that she was, but if she let me, I would chase all her storms.

What the hell is wrong with you, John?

I had no idea what I was doing, but the words were out of my mouth before I could quell the errant nature of their existence. "Give this a chance, Dessie."

Something happened, right at that moment. Her eyes gleamed for one quick minute, and then she was pushing me away.

"A chance," she breathed. "With just you, or all three of you?"

Honestly, it didn't matter.

"What do you want?"

"I want," she whispered, "you to stop lying." Her face had turned livid. "I want you to stop making promises that you can never, ever keep."

And then, Dessie turned and resumed running, only this time, I let her go.

I let her go because I had nothing to offer in response to what she had just said. There was nothing in me, nothing that could undo the torment within, because over all my years, rejection had been the only constant in my life.

It happened the one time I fell in love with a woman years ago. She rejected me because she thought work mattered more to me than any human would.

It happened when I didn't get into the college I was supposed to. An error in judgment, my father would later say. Didn't help the sting.

It happened when Oswald changed the whole trajectory of my life. He was my mentor before he lied and left me with more questions than answers.

A day came back to my mind. I sat in his office at the Institute, sifting through stacks of paperwork. But that day, files seemed misplaced, and crucial documents were missing. It was then I found the bank statements, or rather, the lack of them. The numbers didn't add up. The accounts that once held the Institute's vast resources were nearly empty.

Panic set in as I pieced together the puzzle. I recalled the last board meeting where Oswald seemed preoccupied, distracted. I thought back to the subtle hints he'd dropped about 'ensuring the Institute's future', which I had brushed off as his usual concern.

I immediately called our legal team. The office was soon abuzz with lawyers poring over documents, making calls. We discovered a series of unauthorized transactions and investments made in the months leading up to Oswald's death. Investments that were high-risk and completely out of character for a man known for his cautious approach.

As the legal implications began to unravel, it was clear we were dealing with a sophisticated case of embezzlement. The paperwork hinted at a web of offshore accounts and shell companies, a stark contrast to the transparent financial operations Oswald had championed.

The institute, Oswald's legacy, was in jeopardy, and I was at the center of this mess. The future of countless medical innovations and research projects hung in the balance.

To top it all off, my damned heart was, apparently, fine with getting shattered to smithereens once again.

I watched Dessie's form disappear until it was nothing but a fine line.

Leon and Viktor found me standing, rooted to the spot, thirty minutes later.

"Are you okay?" Leon asked.

Was I?

Would I ever be?

Dessie

The silence of my room slammed into me like a physical force. Door shut, I collapsed onto the bed, thoughts crashing through my skull like a rogue wave. Something didn't click. John, Viktor, Leon—their twisted possessiveness still simmered, but one truth burned bright. If they truly wanted me gone, the footage wouldn't be needed.

Oswald, I suspected, hadn't breathed his last through natural causes. So, what was I? A gnat buzzing around their gilded cage? No threat, no reason. Yet, they kept me alive and didn't silence me before I could unravel their secrets. A chilling thought coiled in my gut. Could their reasons for filming our rendezvous mirror mine? A desperate, twisted need to understand this tangled web we were all trapped in?

And if that was the case, who had *actually* killed Oswald, and why?

I tried to rest, but sleep eluded me. The sheets clung to me like damp ghosts as the stubborn shards of doubt kept growing until I couldn't take it any longer. By this time, dawn had spilled through the blinds, painting stripes on my exhausted face.

The men wanted to sear their names on my skin. I had no qualms about that because I wanted to do the same to them. They craved control and mistook my surrender for submission, but behind all that predatory hunger, there was vulnerability. I knew it because I felt it before, in the loneliness that was my life until Oswald found me. My brain clung to the logic of survival. They could have eliminated me. Oswald wasn't the only loose thread they needed to snip. If they were the killers I'd made them out to be, a little bit of searching would reveal he had an heir. But none of them had bothered with that.

Why? Where did the lines blur?

The question gnawed at me like a persistent tick as I dressed, the silence broken only by the cawing of a crow outside my window. A strange unease lingered, a discordant note against the morning's symphony of birdsong.

My feet, guided by a lingering urgency, led me back to Ms. Wainwright's cottage. The scents of lavender and damp earth wafted through the air. Ms. Wainwright knelt in her herb garden, rays glinting off her silver hair as she snipped rosemary with steely precision.

"Dessie," she said as I approached her. Her voice held a sigh. "How are things?"

I mirrored her disgruntled expression with a resigned shrug. "Not good."

"I can't say I wasn't expecting this," she replied.

I raised a brow. "Expecting what, Ms. Wainwright?"

She angled her face toward me, meeting my eyes with her own. "You to come to me in such a state. You have changed your mind about the men working at the Institute, have you not?"

The words hit me harder than a slap in the face.

"What? No, I..." I stammered.

She shook her head. "Don't bother lying to me, child. It does no one any good."

I gave up. What was the point of it, anyway?

“Let’s say you’re right,” I said resignedly. “Let’s say I’m here because I’m in a world of trouble, and I can’t seem to get to the bottom of Oswald’s murder no matter how hard I try. You’re the only person who can guide me, Ms. Wainwright. Is there anything, any tiny detail you might have missed?”

Something churned in her eyes. “I’ve already told you everything I know, Dessie.”

“There has to be more to it,” I mused exasperatedly. “I’m almost certain it wasn’t those three, fools though they are. I think... I think it was someone closer to Oswald, someone with direct access to his life, his habits, and his weaknesses.”

Ms. Wainwright was silent.

“Do you not agree?”

She placed her shears aside and turned to direct her full attention to me. “If that is the case, there is only one thing left to do.”

My heart stuttered. “Go on,” I rasped, the word clawing its way past a throat suddenly clogged with dust.

She hesitated, then spoke, her voice heavy. “He spent his childhood in a lonely house, swallowed by the Connecticut woods. He had a difficult childhood but built a name for himself despite that. I don’t know all the details, but he had a family once upon a time.”

“No!” I exclaimed, surprised. “That can’t be possible.”

In all the time that I had known Oswald, I’d never heard any mention of a family. Not once, not in all the publications that celebrated him, or all the news articles, or the Institute’s website. Surely, it couldn’t have been such a well-kept secret?

“Oswald’s truth was different from what you know, Dessie. These things... I could never think to tell you because coming from me, a third person, they would inevitably sting,” Ms. Wainwright murmured quietly.

My breath hitched. An image flickered in my mind’s eye—a young Oswald, eyes mirroring the forest’s depth, laughing

beside a woman, a child clinging to her hand. Happiness, fleeting and fragile, painted in shades of green and gold.

Letitia's voice broke the spell. "But it all unraveled, child. Like a spider's web, torn apart by unseen forces. The woman vanished, the child... lost. Oswald was left with silence and a hunger that no acclaim, no fame, could ever sate. Of course, he was a clever man. He'd never let this tarnish what was otherwise a celebrated image.

"He wrote off the woman from his will, blotted her very existence out of his life. But now that you believe the men at the institute may have nothing to do with his death, I'm forced to wonder if this ex-wife of his has re-emerged and is seeking her version of justice."

A cold truth gripped me. "You're saying that she had something to do with his death?"

Ms. Wainwright's shoulders drooped. "I'm saying he was a powerful man who had his fair share of enemies. And like you pointed out, sometimes, the most dangerous predators are the ones closest to us."

"Do you know anything about the woman?"

"Nothing." She sighed. "But I imagine there may be pictures in the old house. Perhaps an album or something similar."

That settled it.

My mind reeled. A tangible lead, finally. "I'll go," I declared, voice firm despite how I was unraveling. "Tonight."

Letitia gave me a sad smile. "Be careful, child. The past has a way of biting back."

I nodded briefly. "I'll get going, Ms. Wainwright."

Her face fell. She looked like she'd hoped I'd spend some more time with her. It hit me, how lonely and little she looked, although she had so many years on her. "I promise, you and I will sit down to a mountain of gossip once this is done and dusted." I smiled gently.

She returned the smile briefly. “Go on, then. You were never one to leave things half-done.”

I turned to walk back to the Institute, knowing full well that I would need a formal leave to visit Oswald’s house. I expected this to take at least tonight and all of tomorrow.

Taking the leave meant facing John.

I cursed under my breath as I headed straight toward his office. There was no point in delaying this.

My steps clicked against the polished marble floor. John’s office door loomed ahead, a polished oak barrier between him and me. I steeled myself and knocked.

“Who is it?”

“Dessie, sir.”

There was a brief pause that lingered in the air.

“Come in.”

John lounged behind his desk, his face remote.

“Dessie,” he murmured, the name rolling off his tongue like silk. “To what do we owe this... pleasure?”

I didn’t hold back. “I need a leave of absence.”

His brows shot up, amusement battling genuine surprise. “Leave? Where to?”

My voice, when I spoke, was devoid of the fire that usually danced in my throat. “To see family.”

His eyes, pools of bottomless blue, narrowed. “Family? What family?”

I frowned. “Where I’m going is honestly none of your business, Dr. Galbraith.”

“So you admit you’re lying. Once again.”

I had nothing to say to that.

“So, what then?” His voice, stripped of its quiet veneer, grated against my nerves. “Running off to some other bed, Dessie? Is that it?”

The question stung but with a dull ache. My laugh, when it came, was brittle and empty. “It doesn’t matter,” I said, the words tasting like ashes in my mouth. “What happened between us...” —I paused, searching for the right words— “all of us, it was a mistake.”

John looked thrown off balance. His voice, when he spoke, was a low growl.

“Mistake? You call that night, that surrender, a mistake? Don’t play coy, Dessie. We both know better.”

His eyes now burned with something possessive, dangerous. A wave of nausea washed over me.

“It doesn’t matter what I call it, John,” I said, my voice hard with resolve. “I just need two days off.”

He rose, his towering presence casting a shadow over me. His voice, laced with barely concealed fury, followed me as I turned to leave.

“It isn’t about the leave, confound you,” he roared. He strode over to me and shook my shoulders. “It is you, you with your damned impertinence and what you’ve done to us, to all of us!”

I didn’t flinch under John’s gaze. Even as bile rose to my throat, I remained steady. This time around, I was playing for keeps. “May I leave?”

He released me then, his expression remote. “Yes. Take your leave. Go where you will. Keep lying to yourself, Dessie. That’s what you do best.”

Dessie

I pushed all the hurt that rose from John's words into the background. There would be a proper time for me to sit back and reflect on all the wrong decisions I'd made in the last few days. But I had other things to do right now. I called Ms. Wainwright to get directions to Oswald's old house.

She answered. Her voice was oddly muffled, and I could make out the sound of wind in the background. She was going somewhere. Odd, considering she hardly left the confines of her little cottage.

"Yes, dear?"

"Ms. Wainwright, can you tell me the exact address of Oswald's old house?"

There was a telling pause. "Are you really sure about this, Dessie?"

"I am."

"Very well. You'll need to look out for an estate. 1349 Woodland Heights, Ashcroft, CT 06330."

"Okay," I replied, scribbling furiously. "Thanks, Ms. Wainwright."

“May I offer a word of advice?”

I held back on sighing. At least the advice, albeit irritating, would come from a place of care. “Yes.”

“If you must go, go in the morning. One seldom makes clever decisions in the death of night.”

She wasn't wrong there. My head was spinning from the weight of all the things I had learned and all I possibly would. “Okay, Ms. Wainwright. Thanks for everything.”

“You know I'm always there for you.”

The line clicked with a soft *whirr*. I kept my phone down by the nightstand and plopped down on the bed, rubbing my eyes wearily as I took out a notepad.

Lists comforted me. They were more than just a series of words and tasks jotted down on paper. In fact, they were my lifeline in a world that was, at present, as chaotic as Sephora on Black Friday.

I did an extensive search with the address details I fetched from Ms. Wainwright. To get to Ashcroft from Stillingbrook, I'd have to take the CT-15 north for about forty miles. I drew the trajectory with tiny little dots, marking the exact parts I'd cross to reach my final destination.

As I worked, a smile slipped on my face. This was nothing short of excessive, but it gave me peace. Each item on the list, from the questions I'd need answered to the documents I'd hunt for, resembled a tiny, orderly universe where everything had a place and I, most importantly, had control. This was especially comforting considering my life was about as organized as a toddler's birthday party. I took pleasure in wrapping my thoughts in neat, orderly rows that I would later check off with satisfying ticks.

The hours went by, and I entered a place of meditation as red met green and tiny little boxes appeared in front of spindly trees. There was something meditative about what I was doing, like empty coffee shops and the autumn breeze. I ended with a small note on figuring out where my socks had disappeared to once I came back to the institute.

Then, I hesitated before adding an additional reminder.

Tell John the truth.

With just two hours to rest, sleep was a lost cause. I lay still for a bit, then sprang into action. After a quick shower and a throw-on of jeans and a shirt, I was wrapped in my long coat. I wolfed down a coffee and a croissant, then hit the road, car purring into the morning quiet. Although daylight had sprung, the morning was terribly windy and cold.

A strong gust howled around my Lambo like a banshee wailing all my anxieties right back at me. Stillingbrook slept, streetlights casting lonely pools of yellow, still turned on. Letitia's words echoed in the roar of the engine. "A family, Dessie. A life stolen."

I took the CT-15 north, passing through stretches of scenic Connecticut countryside, with rolling hills and quaint New England towns dotting the landscape.

My eyes skimmed the map I had sketched on my notepad. In places, the ink was already blotted.

After the long drive on CT-15, I took exit 68N to merge onto CT-195 North toward Mansfield. The road here wound through thicker woodlands, with the dense canopy of trees offering a burst of fiery colors.

About twenty miles down CT-195 North, I turned left onto Ashcroft Road, a less-traveled path that delved deeper into the Connecticut woods.

Ashcroft seemed trapped in a time warp. Victorian houses huddled together, secrets clinging to their peeling paint and overgrown gardens. Every creaking porch swing, every boarded-up window, felt like a silent scream, a plea for forgotten stories.

It reminded me of a child's game, *Knock, knock. Who's there?* The town itself was the chilling answer. *The past, Dessie. And it wants to talk.*

After another ten miles on this road, I found Woodland Heights, a narrow lane on the right. The estate was located at the end of this lane.

Memories, sharp and unwelcome, pricked at me—children lost in the maze of foster homes, eyes full of questions no one answered. My years as a child psychiatrist had shown me the myriad ways silence festers, how family secrets morph into poisonous vines, choking the present in the dead grip of the past.

The Lambo purred to a stop before a wrought-iron gate, moss clinging to its bars like skeletal fingers. Beyond, a house huddled in the shadows, a Gothic silhouette against the moonlit sky. Tall windows gaped like empty eyes, the overgrown lawn a riot of untamed green. This wasn't just a house. It was a mausoleum, a shrine to a stolen life.

Heart hammering against my ribs, I pushed open the creaking gate and stepped into the overgrown wilderness. Each crunch of gravel underfoot felt like a desecration, disturbing the ghosts that roamed these grounds. As I approached the house, moonlight fell on a chipped plaque. *Thornfield Estate*. An appropriate name, I thought, sensing the thorns already piercing my skin.

The front door hung open, a gaping maw inviting me in. Inside, dust motes danced in the moonlight, weaving cobwebs of time. The air hung heavy with the stale scent of decay. I moved quietly.

A grand piano, keys yellowed with age, stood silent in the drawing room, its melodies choked by dust and whispers. A faded photograph on the mantelpiece showed a young woman with sunlight woven into her hair and a child clinging to her hand. My adoptive father, Oswald, stood beside them, a ghost of the happiness that had once bloomed here.

The upstairs rooms held a child's nursery, frozen in time with a rocking horse missing its rider. A dusty attic held trunks overflowing with letters, faded diaries, and brittle newspaper clippings.

I finally uncovered a file with my name on it and opened it to discover more newspaper clippings. In one, a headline screamed, *Hospital Raids Uncover Baby-Selling Racket*. My breath hitched.

My hands trembled as I began reading from the clipping.

In a shocking revelation, authorities have uncovered a decades-long trafficking scheme at Maryland, a trusted local institution. Investigations have revealed that the hospital staff, in collusion with an illegal adoption ring, were involved in the sale of newborns to unsuspecting adoptive families.

My throat was so dry it could have been a desert.

Investigators report that the hospital's maternity ward staff systematically targeted vulnerable families. Newborns were stolen and falsified as orphans before being sold in a lucrative black-market adoption network. The extent of this inhumane practice has left the community in absolute disbelief and horror.

Beads of sweat appeared on my forehead in spite of the chill. In the vague recesses of my mind, I recalled the reason. Cold sweats, signaling the incoming of a panic attack. I sifted through the remaining contents of the file before I found what I was looking for. My adoption documents. "My God," I whispered. "It's true." I wasn't orphaned. I was a stolen child.

"My birth parents..." I trailed off, my eyes scanning the redacted lines for some hint of who they could have been. As expected, I found nothing. But something must have gone wrong. God knows what it was. Maybe it was the starkness of my appearance or the clear fact that my face didn't fit the mold of a trophy child.

Whatever the reason, I ended up on the bottom shelf, discarded in the orphanage system until Oswald, like a lone lighthouse in a sea of shadows, spotted me and pulled me in, giving me a home.

My teeth had begun chattering. This was too much to take. No list could possibly solve this.

Who was the mastermind behind this? What heartless monster could orchestrate such a twisted play?

My mind reeled, questions spiraling like smoke before my eyes.

"This is why they invented the saying, you know?"

The stacks of papers fell from my hands in my effort to wheel around. I knew that voice. It was unmistakable.

“Hello, dear.”

“You...” I whispered. “You?”

My question hung in the air, a fragile thread unraveling in the silence. Then, as if triggered by my words, a sudden movement flickered in the corner of my eye. Before I could turn, a crushing weight slammed into the side of my head, the world shattering.

My head smacked the floor. Stars exploded before my eyes. The wind was knocked clean out of me.

Pain cracked through my skull like a sledgehammer, shattering the silence. I stumbled, my legs like jelly, my vision blurring.

Above me, that face swam into view. Sunlight caught in their eyes—hard chips of obsidian, glinting with malice. A smile, a predator’s grin, devoid of warmth. There was no love, no understanding in that expression, just cold calculation.

My fingers clawed at the dust, desperate to flee, but the world tilted in a dizzying spiral. The smile, the eyes, the face, they were the last things I saw before darkness swallowed me whole.

John

The crystal decanter glinted accusingly in the dim light, reflecting the storm brewing in my gut. My fingers traced the rim, the chill seeping through the glass a poor imitation of the icy grip fear had clamped on my heart.

Why are you afraid? You're the one who let her go.

Rich, I responded drily to the voice in my head. Weren't you telling me that I was losing my grip on my sanity?

To be fair, I still think you are. But you categorically told her to fuck off, and she did. What gives, John?

I didn't know. My last encounter with Dessie had left me raw, a flayed nerve exposed to the harshness of reality. Her quiet defiance, the veiled hurt in her eyes, had cut deeper than any blade. I realized now that I'd dismissed her far too cruelly, perhaps in my haste to curb the rising tide of protectiveness I felt toward her.

Didn't you say something about her going to warm someone else's bed?

I groaned inwardly. What the hell was I thinking? There had to have been a better way to handle things, but she got on

my nerves with the endless spiral of lies. One after the other, seemingly never-ending.

She had no family, that much was certain.

Now, guilt gnawed at my insides, a relentless parasite feasting on my sanity. Pushing the decanter aside, I slammed open the ledger to look at the cold numbers of the Institute's finances for the umpteenth time. The pressure, the constant, gnawing uncertainty, all of it was a suffocating cloak I couldn't seem to shed.

A knock on the door, sharp and insistent, shattered the oppressive silence. Leon, his usually jovial face etched with worry, filled the doorway. "John," he said, his voice a low rumble, "have you seen Dessie? She wasn't at breakfast, and her room's empty."

My throat tightened. "She's... she's on leave," I rasped, the words scraping against my raw nerves.

Leon's brows furrowed. "Leave? Just like that? Without a word?"

Shame, a bitter pill, burned my tongue. I couldn't lie to him. Not anymore. "She was here last night," I confessed, my voice dropping to a whisper. "I didn't give her the best send-off, I'm afraid."

Leon gave me a once-over before pulling back the chair in front of my desk. He dropped down on it and stretched his hands in front of me. "What do you think is going on, really?"

I raised a brow at him. "Are you asking for my opinion or approval? Because the latter doesn't really depend on me."

He smiled wanly. "Let's say it's a yes from her, although she's the hardest book I've ever tried to read. Would you be alright with it?"

The question had lingered in my mind too. It would, actually, be fine. I didn't look at Dessie as something I needed to possess all by myself. In fact, my feelings about her seemed to change and transition all the time. She was far too independent, her moods mercurial. From what I'd seen, she

wouldn't be comfortable within the confines of one suffocating relationship. And I didn't want that for her.

Right now, the only thing that mattered was getting her to a place where she felt comfortable sharing her truth with us. If she did, and if things actually did work out—ever—I was okay with her deciding what trajectory she wanted the relationship to take.

“There's something I haven't told you about her.”

Before I could fess about her going through documents in my office, the door burst open and Viktor emerged, his face ashen.

“John.” He faltered momentarily at the sight of Leon. “Oh, hello.”

“Join us.” Leon waved him over. “We're having an open discussion about Dessie.”

“Oh.”

Viktor looked like he was going to turn and vanish for a second, but then he decided not to and came over to sit down beside Leon. “I must confess, that is why I am here as well.”

“Join the party.” Leon scratched his chin. “What's eating at you?”

“Nothing,” he grumbled. Then, he looked at me and sighed. “I just noticed she's not here. And, well... I haven't been able to stop thinking about her. At all.”

“Welcome to the club,” I rumbled.

“Okay, but what were you about to say?” Leon asked impatiently.

“A few nights back, Dessie was in my office without my knowledge.”

“What? Why?”

I shook my head. “No idea,” I said honestly. “She was going through documents, her eyes wild with... something I couldn't decipher.”

Leon's eyes narrowed. "Documents? What documents?"

I told him everything from the night and last and how Dessie was masking what looked a lot like devastation.

"You know there's only one way to understand what the hell is going on, right?" Leon asked at the end.

"I hate the idea," Viktor interjected. "We aren't schoolgirls."

"Oh, shut up," Leon replied, waving at him like he was an annoying fly. "We're not doing it out of malice or to write long paragraphs under the guise of *Gossip Girl*. Let's just call it... necessary reconnaissance."

"But I thought we all agreed she's not the enemy."

"She's a mystery. That's just as dangerous, if not more."

I relented. "Let's go."

The three of us left the office and walked past hallways until we ascended the creaking stairs to the junior staff wing, the silence broken only by the rhythmic thud of our shoes. Dessie's room was eerily still, even by her standards. As we crossed the threshold, the air grew thick with the scent of coffee.

Viktor, his eyes like lasers, scanned the room. Leon, his movements gentle, began sifting through her belongings. I felt adrift, a lost ship in a sea of uncertainties.

A worn leather album, tucked away in a dusty corner, caught my eye. The name, embossed in gold, sent a jolt through me. *Desdemona Cassandra Miller Gardner*.

"For fuck's sake." I opened the album. The first photo was enough to break every last iota of sanity I'd retained.

Oswald Gardner. Beside him, standing in front of this very institute—possibly before I'd joined it—stood Dessie. The caption read, *Dad and I before we fought over the origins of beer*.

"You guys are going to want to look at this."

Leon came behind me, followed by Viktor. They looked at the same things I had. All of us were silent.

“Well, okay. So we know she’s lied about her identity. Why to us, though?”

Like pieces of a puzzle falling together, a scrap of paper fluttered to the floor. Viktor picked it up and held it up so all of us could see. On it, scrawled in her sharp hand, were our names, *John, Viktor, Leon*.

And below, *Which of these men killed Oswald, and why?*

The air crackled with a sudden voltage. The question, a poisoned barb, pierced the fragile bubble of control we’d constructed. We were no longer just observers, no longer detached players in a twisted game. We were suspects.

Dessie had been out for blood. Our blood. But...

We hadn’t killed Oswald. If anything, I only wished he were alive every second of every day so he could tell me what the hell was going on.

Leon snatched the paper, his face a mask of cold fury. “How could she think—” he snarled, his voice a viper’s hiss. “She thinks we’re murderers?”

Viktor’s hand clamped on his shoulder, a grounding force. “We need to find her,” he said, his voice firm despite the tremor in his hand. “We need to know where she’s gone before she gets into deeper trouble. I don’t—”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but the unspoken understanding hung heavily in the air, a silent specter of doubt and regret. Was that the reason behind Dessie’s abrupt departure? The thought that she might have seen us as liars, as manipulators, churned in my stomach. No wonder she had that look of utter misery etched on her face when she left. In her eyes, we were probably just users, poised to discard her when convenient.

“We need to find her,” I muttered, urgency threading my voice, “before she’s gone for good.” I straightened up, determination steeling my features. “Search the room,” I commanded. “Anything that might tell us where she is now.”

The next hour saw us turning her room inside out. We emptied drawers, flipped through books, and sifted through every crevice of her closeted space. My frustration mounted with each passing minute, the room becoming a testament to our desperation. I was teetering on the edge of a full-blown tantrum when Leon's voice cut through the chaos.

"Guys, over here!" he called from near her bed. We rushed over, finding him kneeling, holding a notepad he'd found tucked against the pillow. The front pages were raggedly torn off, hinting at hasty action. But there, on the back cover, was a little note, scribbled in Dessie's unmistakable hand.

Ms. Wainwright knows something.

Oswald's housekeeper. It was a thin lead, but it was all we had.

"We need to go," I said with absolute certainty. "Now."

Dessie

“I hoped there would be a better end for you,” Letitia Wainwright drawled. “In spite of your enormous proclivity for being a troubled child, I must say I took a shining to you.”

My breath snagged on frozen air, lungs refusing to function in the face of Letitia’s confession. “You?” I croaked, my voice a rusty hinge struggling to open. “You killed Oswald?”

Her smile, sharp as a shard of ice, glinted in the pale moonlight. “Someone had to, darling. After all, he couldn’t just keep rejecting me, could he?”

I was bound to a chair, I realized, as my surroundings came more into focus. I’d just recovered from what must have been a heavy blow. The taste of iron was rife on my tongue, salty to the point of being nauseating. The world seemed positioned on a see-saw, the portraits on the walls leering at me like grotesque puppets. This woman, the epitome of warmth and dusty teacups, had taken a life?

“Why, Ms. Wainwright?” I choked the words out. “And why—” I spared a glance at the room’s other occupant. “Her?”

Lila Monroe smiled serenely at me as she raised a glass holding amber liquid. "I'll wait for her to tell you that."

"Well, there was the thing about his rejecting my advances," Ms. Wainwright confessed. "It was quite wounding."

It made no sense that someone who was usually so practical would kill a man only because he had rejected her sometime in her past.

"You really want me to believe you murdered my father because of a spurned love affair from decades ago? I rasped, clutching at sanity frayed at the edges. "It's over for me, isn't it? Then why bother with the half-truths, Ms. Wainwright?"

Ms. Wainwright hummed thoughtfully before dragging a chair with surprising strength, given her spindly limbs, in front of me. It was just then that I noticed how lifelessly cold her eyes looked.

They mirror mine, I suddenly thought. Hollow. Bereft of any love or anything joyful.

Letitia's smile softened, a predatory sheen lurking beneath. "Ah, Dessie," she sighed, her voice a silken snare. "You were always the little thorn in my side, weren't you? Always defying, disrupting. I thought Oswald would tire of you soon, like the others. Then, it would be just us, as it was meant to be."

"Did you find the newspaper clippings in the file with your name on it?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

My mind reeled, piecing together the fractured fragments of truth. "That was you?"

"Oh, darling," she cooed, barking out a short laugh. "I was in this game long before you came. My husband and I practically began the service as our brainchild. It was how we built our fortune before the authorities got to us. When that happened, I was able to play damsel-in-distress and earn Oswald's sympathy."

"Why would he believe you?"

“Well, if you’ve noticed, he has a kink for fixing broken women.”

My throat felt drier than it had before.

“As I was saying,” she continued, her eyes momentarily closing as she spoke, “I appealed to him in the guise of someone who’d been tricked into doing this due to an abusive, controlling husband. He fell straight for that crap. Husband got jail time, but I escaped.”

Her eyes gleamed, feline-like in their ferocity.

“Plus, Oswald saw potential in me. I was so young back then, two years past thirty. He promised he would do his best to aid me, but given the viciousness of the system, I had to give up everything. Everything I had. In the end, it worked out because I got what I needed. A home, stability, and a man I fell hopelessly in love with. I tried my best to make him see how good we had it.”

So, there lay the truth of it. It wasn’t Oswald who’d hidden her past, who’d orchestrated the adoption racket. It was her. The woman who’d poured me chamomile tea and tucked me into bed, the very woman who’d orchestrated my arrival at this doorstep.

“Oh, before I forget, you are very gullible.” She smiled. “The whole estate belongs to Lila Monroe, who also happens to be my surviving daughter from my marriage. None of this is Oswald’s. The pictures were also engineered by her. She’s quite nifty, if you’ve noticed.”

“It isn’t possible,” I gasped. “The Monroe twins were adopted.”

Ms. Wainwright raised a brow, mocking me. “Oh, dear, sweet, stupid Dessie. Read between the lines, would you?”

“You...” My words felt like smoke. “You gave your own daughters away?”

“I didn’t give them away,” she spat, suddenly livid. “I created a better life for them so they could honor me when the time came. It is a reciprocal relationship, and if you were half

the daughter Oswald wanted you to be, you'd do much, much better."

My gaze darted to the woman by the doorway, her face a mask of porcelain calmness. "Lila?" I asked, knowing full well that I was dealing with someone completely deranged. "Why would you do this? What would you gain from it?"

Lila's smile, brittle and cold, shattered the façade. "Why the surprise, Dessie? We all play our parts, don't we? Mine is just more... thrilling."

Lila stalked beside Ms. Wainwright, her voice laced with venom. "When Mother told me about you, she didn't know we had a... history. My last session with you, Doc, left me feeling distinctly underdressed. You can only imagine how pleased I was when I heard your days were limited."

A cold tendril snaked down my spine as her fragrance, a heady mix of lilies and something unsettling, enveloped me. "Underdressed?" I echoed, my voice barely a whisper.

"Excruciatingly," Lila hissed. "Your questions were scalpels, dissecting my carefully constructed reality. You saw through the cracks, Doc. You knew I let her die, chose fame over family. And guess what? It was glorious. My book wouldn't have touched the charts with that dead weight around my neck, understand?"

Lila's smile was glacial, her eyes glittering with a manic edge. The air crackled with unspoken accusations, a twisted dance of survivor's guilt and unapologetic ambition.

I felt sick. So, so sick.

"You and I are not all that different, my dear," Ms. Wainwright interjected. "Your obsession with Oswald, with finding out what happened even though it won't bring him back..."

The air grew thick with a silence heavier than the dust motes swirling in the shafts of sunlight that speared through the cobwebbed windows.

Ms. Wainwright trailed off, admissions hanging heavily between us, then pivoted with a rustle of silk, her heels

clicking a staccato rhythm on the creaking floorboards as she headed for the opposite corner.

The estate room was a cavernous space with a vaulted ceiling draped in cobwebs. It housed a mismatched collection of furniture—a plush chaise lounge drowning under a shroud of dust, a grand piano with yellowed keys, and a tarnished silver samovar perched on a table in the far corner.

Ms. Wainwright approached the samovar with a practiced grace. She lit a fire, the dancing flames casting grotesque shadows on the dusty walls. Each flick of her wrist, each tilt of her head, held a practiced elegance, a cold beauty that chilled me more than the draft seeping through the cracked windowpanes.

The scent of something bitter and metallic rose from the steaming water as she added herbs from a rusty tin. My mouth felt dry, my stomach twisting. The samovar, its silver dulled by neglect, glinted. I knew the drink was going to be the death of me. Literally.

“You don’t have to do this,” I whispered, trembling. “Please.”

“What good is this life, Dessie?” she replied acridly. “No one wants or loves you. You know it yourself—you’re nothing but damaged goods. Why not let me help you? Maybe you’ll do better next time.”

My wrists throbbed with the strain, the ropes biting into my skin like angry ants. Muscles burned, sweat clinging to my brow, but the knots held firm. Just as despair threatened to drown me, one of the ropes, the one binding my right wrist, inexplicably gave a tiny hitch, offering a whisper of slack.

I had to buy more time.

“Ms. Wainwright,” I began, keeping my voice steady, “let me go, and no one needs to learn about you or your daughter. I’m not one to put my mouth where it doesn’t belong.”

Letitia, her eyes glinting morbidly, turned back to me. “But that’s just what you are, my dear. You simply can’t be allowed to live. Oswald loved you far too much, leaving you

everything—millions, the Institute—while all I got was a pension fund and a tiny house.”

Rage, hot and primal, surged through me, drowning out the fear. “You killed him because he loved me more? You think that justifies murder?”

Her smile was a twisted parody of pity. “Love, darling, is just a weapon in the right hands. And unfortunately for you, Dessie, your love is about to cost you your life.”

Panic tightened its grip. I had to move fast.

“I’m not drinking that swill,” I muttered as she poured a pale yellow concoction into a cup.

“What choice do you have, darling?” She smiled softly. “It’s either this or an injection.”

Leon

It was a fortunate thing that I had no cases to attend to this morning. Finding Dessie was the only and most important thing on our agenda.

John, Viktor, and I made a beeline toward Ms. Wainwright's cottage. I always found the woman a funny little creature with her silvery hair and those owlsh eyes. She gave me a distinct impression of someone who enjoyed solitude a little too much. But then again, every creature had a particular quirk. Perhaps this was hers.

Letitia's cottage was a ghost against the twilight, shutters drawn like blind eyes. Viktor, ever the impatient brute, didn't bother with knocking. Two swift kicks splintered the flimsy door, and we swarmed inside, boots thudding on dusty floorboards. The place reeked of stale flowers and something else, a cloying sweetness that reminded me of spiders in jungles at night.

"Lovely décor," I drawled, surveying the cluttered living room. It was all too perfect. OCD, perhaps?

Viktor, already waist-deep in Letitia's desk drawers, grunted something about a "hoarder's paradise."

John nudged me toward a pretty little staircase, decorated with what looked like painted vines. “Umm...” I choked out, suddenly hesitant.

“What?” he barked, already halfway up the steps.

“Not sure I dig exploring an old lady’s boudoir,” I mumbled, feeling like a schoolboy forced to dissect a frog.

John whirled around, his jaw clenched. “Oh, for God’s sake, Leon! Grow up.” He jabbed a finger at the staircase. “Most noble purpose you’ll ever have for sniffing around a woman’s bedroom, that’s for damn sure.”

I rolled my eyes before obliging him.

Upstairs, we stopped before her bedroom before John all but pushed me across the threshold.

As if summoned by my words, a photo on the mantelpiece caught my eye. A younger, softer-looking Dessie, her arm draped around a tall, bearded man with eyes that held the glint of distant galaxies. My gut clenched. “Viktor, check that picture frame.”

He yanked it off the wall, and a cascade of yellowed newspaper clippings spilled onto the floor. One headline screamed, *Local Artist Muses on Loss, Love, and the Allure of the Tragic*. Below, a familiar face stared back, a decade younger and sporting a wilder mane of hair. Oswald.

“Well, well,” I whistled, picking up the clipping. “Seems like Oswald’s housekeeper was a fan.”

Viktor grunted, his eyes scanning the other articles. “More than a fan, Leon. This woman was obsessed. Photos, interviews, even sketches of him... This is crazy. I wonder if Oswald ever reciprocated any of it. And more importantly, if Dessie somehow got caught in this mess.”

“What stalker ever gets what they want?” John breathed. “I’m going to see this as a worst-case scenario. It looks like this could lead us to Oswald’s killer.”

My heart hammered against my ribs. Could Letitia also be the reason Dessie was gone? Had she lured her away, wrapped

her in some twisted web of morbid fascination? The thought was cold steel against my gut.

A floorboard creaked above. Viktor, John, and I exchanged a silent look, adrenaline snapping in our veins like live wires. We tiptoed upstairs, each step a gunshot in the dead silence. The attic was a dusty mausoleum, cobwebs clinging to the rafters. Mice scampered around.

In the center, a makeshift shrine made me stumble back. Newspaper clippings plastered the walls, a mosaic of Oswald's life, concerts, awards, even a grainy paparazzi shot of him buying groceries. A single, faded flower lay wilted on a makeshift altar, its petals like drops of dried blood.

"Jesus, Leon," John whispered, his voice barely above a rasp. "She was worshiping him."

Viktor rubbed his eyes wearily. "How the hell do we figure out where to go from here? She could be absconding, for all we know."

John dropped down on an old chair. "Good God."

I sat down on the floor beside him, caring nothing for the dust. There was another stack of newspapers beside me. The topmost one had an interesting headline.

Bestselling author Lila Monroe buys 1349 Woodland Hills Estate in Ashcroft.

Ms. Wainwright had circled the whole headline multiple times. Beside it, in neatly scribbled handwriting, were the words *lure the rat here*.

A lead. A fucking lead.

"Look at this," I said, brandishing the newspaper in John's face.

He swatted at it angrily before I made him read the headline and the little note beside it.

"No time to waste," he said immediately. "Off we go."

Brakes shrieked like a banshee, tires smoking as I wrestled the Ferrari into submission. It chewed up the asphalt, the

speedometer needle a quivering captive between 120 and 140. Viktor, ever the stoic, looked vaguely amused, John a blur of clenched fists and muttered prayers.

My knuckles were white on the wheel, but the adrenaline thrumming through me was more champagne than nitro. We were on Dessie's trail, a cold scent turning fresh, and the hunt had me buzzing.

And so we did. The Ferrari devoured the miles, the wind whipping through my hair as the setting sun painted the sky in fiery hues. The radio crackled with static, a fitting soundtrack to the storm brewing within me. Every mile brought us closer to Dessie but also closer to whatever Letitia had planned.

We pulled into Ashcroft just as dusk swallowed the town. A two-story Victorian, shrouded in shadows, stood at the address listed in the clipping.

Right in front was Dessie's Lamborghini. I parked behind her, as quietly as I could, before we stepped out.

Viktor, with his usual impatience, was already charging toward the door, but with a hand on his shoulder, I stopped him.

"Wait," I said, my voice tight. "Something's off."

My gaze drifted to a window on the topmost floor. A flicker of movement, a flash of white against the darkness. John saw it, too, his eyes widening.

"Dessie," he whispered, and the world tilted on its axis.

Time stretched and warped. I saw Letitia emerge from the shadows, a teacup clutched in her hand, a deranged smile playing on her lips. Dessie sat frozen in a chair, her eyes wide with terror.

"Fuck this," Viktor growled, running to the door. He barged into it, breaking it open with a resounding *thud*. We barreled up the stairs and reached just in time to find Ms. Wainwright holding the teacup near Dessie's face, her hands trembling as her eyes met ours.

I launched myself forward, a blur of adrenaline.

My dive tackled Letitia like a rogue wave. The teacup clattered to the ground, shattering into a porcelain snowflake shower.

She wasn't, however, alone. A slender woman—I had seen her face on the clipping—ran toward us, her mouth open in an angry scream. She reached into her jeans and fished out a thin, razor-sharp knife, charging at me.

Fuck, she'll kill me.

This was when everything became a fantastic blur. I thought I saw Dessie fly past me.

I thought I heard her say, “Not so soon, you bitch.”

Dessie

The idiots had actually come to get me out of this mess.

I wanted to laugh, but I also wanted to hug each and every one of them.

It so happened that Leon's tackling Ms. Wainwright and almost getting killed by Lila was just the push I needed to free myself. With the two of them caught off guard, I tensed my body. Using a controlled jerk of my wrists, I twisted them inward, utilizing the slack in the rope like a fulcrum. It wasn't my most graceful movement, but it was effective. The weakened knot snagged on a rough edge of the chair's armrest, and with a satisfying snap, the rope parted. A bead of sweat stung my eye as I pulled my freed wrist from the remnants of the rope. It left a raw, throbbing ache, but the sting was insignificant compared to the surge of triumph coursing through my veins.

My scream ripped through the room as I hurled myself out of the chair, just in time to shield Leon from Lila. She lurched back, surprise momentarily eclipsing the manic anger in her eyes.

That was my opening. I surged forward, adrenaline pumping molten lava through my veins. My bound wrists, still throbbing, found purchase on her silk-draped shoulders. With a primal roar, I slammed my knee into her stomach, the air whooshing from her lungs.

She doubled over, gasping, and I didn't waste a second. My fist, clenched tight, connected with her jaw with a sickening crunch. Blood bloomed on her porcelain skin, mirroring the crimson stain blooming on my own knuckles. But the pain was nothing, lost in the white-hot fury coursing through me.

Lila, stunned and reeling, stumbled back. I pressed my advantage, raining blows onto her exposed ribs, each one a vengeance for every twisted manipulation. She tried to strike back, nails bared like talons. But cornered, she was nothing but a hissing, flailing mess.

A strangled cry ripped through the air. I whipped around to see Letitia sprawled on the floor, Leon looming over her, his face grim and determined. My gaze snapped back to Lila, but the fight went out of her as suddenly as it had ignited. She collapsed onto the floor, whimpering.

Then, darkness claimed me. The world spun, blurred, and dissolved into a velvety abyss.

I woke up what must have been a whole day later because morning light, dappled and warm, kissed my eyelids awake. I blinked, disoriented, the memories of the previous night flooding back in a torrent of confusion and pain. My hands throbbed, my ribs ached, and a dull throb pulsed behind my eyes.

But I was safe. I thought I was, at any rate.

I was swaddled in a soft, worn blanket, nestled in a bed that felt like a haven. The room was a symphony of muted browns and warm yellows, light streaming through lace curtains and illuminating a bookshelf overflowing with leather-bound volumes. A crackling fire cast dancing shadows on the walls.

A soft knock at the door sent a flutter through my chest. I watched as it swung open, revealing John's familiar face, etched with concern that softened into a gentle smile as he saw me awake. He held a steaming mug, the aroma of sweet milk tea filling the room.

"Dessie," he said, his voice thick. "You gave us quite a scare last night."

He set the mug on the bedside table and pulled up a chair, his eyes holding a new warmth. I reached for the mug, relishing in the comforting heat seeping into my chilled hands.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice raspy. "Where are Lila and Letitia?"

John's jaw tightened. "They're in custody. Let's just say Viktor managed to call the police in the nick of time." He paused, taking a deep breath. "Dessie, there's something you need to know. It's about Ms. Wainwright."

I tensed, a cold dread settling in my stomach. "What about her?"

"She... she wasn't who we thought she was. Turns out, she was the one who diverted Oswald's legacy funds."

My breath hitched. I thought what I'd found out about her was enough, but apparently not. "But how?"

John leaned forward, his voice low. "It was a clever scheme. She used her position as Oswald's secretary to create fraudulent invoices, siphoning off funds into an offshore account. She even bought life insurance for Oswald, naming herself the beneficiary. The whole thing was rigged to look like a tragic accident, leaving her with a hefty payout."

Every part of my body felt sore. I didn't know what to do with all the lies that had surrounded me, all the misconceptions, and everything I had presumed.

Leon strode into the room, followed by Viktor. All of them wore expressions that married exhaustion, relief, and faint curiosity.

“So, Desdemona Cassandra Miller Gardner...” John smiled. “Will you tell us who you are now?”

I let out a strangled laugh. “I will,” I whispered, “but you’re going to hate me after I do.”

“Somehow,” Leon mused, “we really doubt that.”

“Okay, then,” I said softly. Over the next hour, I told them everything, even though my throat hurt. The adoption ring, my never knowing my birth parents, all of it. I also told them how obsessed I had been about finding Oswald’s killer.

“I’m afraid I was about as obsessive as her,” I said between halting breaths. “After all, we were both obsessed with getting the approval of the same man.”

“There is a world of difference, Dessie,” replied Viktor warmly. “You were his daughter. It’s natural for you to want to seek his approval.”

“But I’m not even his blood,” I insisted, sadness overwhelming me.

“Caregiving isn’t limited to blood relations, Dessie,” said Leon.

In turn, they told me how Letitia had confessed to killing Oswald. She had visited him at his office and made him the offending drink. He, with the conviction that his trusted secretary could not hurt him, drank it without any thought.

In the end, his biggest fault was trusting the very woman he had saved. Ironic.

After all of us had shared everything, silence descended, thick and heavy. The warmth of the tea and the fire did little to soothe the chill that had settled in my bones. I felt adrift, the familiar world tilted on its axis.

“We’re going to find your real parents, Dessie,” John murmured, extending a hand to caress my forehead.

“But why?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper. “And why did you help me?”

John's gaze met mine, his eyes filled with a tenderness that made my heart skip a beat. "Because, Dessie," he said, his voice husky, "you deserve better. You deserve the truth, and you deserve someone who believes in you. We may not be the best company, but we want you to have that."

My heart was swelling. I felt like a fool, but not in a shameful way.

His words, simple and heartfelt, cracked through the wall of isolation I had built around myself. The tears welled up in my eyes, blurring the firelight and John's warm gaze. I reached out, my hand trembling, and he took it in his, his force grounding me like a steady lighthouse in a storm.

"THANK YOU," I choked out, the words thick with gratitude and a vulnerability I rarely allowed myself to show. "All of you."

Viktor finally stirred, his gruff voice softer than I'd ever heard. "Dessie, all things considered, you could've been a hell of a lot worse."

I blinked, startled. John chuckled, a low rumble that warmed the room. "Viktor's right. You played a dangerous game, but you played it damn well. And you won."

"Not entirely," I admitted, my throat tight. "I lost him, Oswald. And my trust..."

Viktor snorted. "Listen," he said, his eyes shining tenderly. "I've assessed the situation, analyzed my emotional state, and come to a definitive conclusion."

A nervous giggle escaped my lips. "Okay, I'm listening. Also, are you a little drunk?"

He smirked, the scar on his cheek crinkling. "Nope, stone sober. And madly, fiercely in love with you, Dessie Gardner."

My breath hitched.

"He's not the only one," Leon said, shuffling his feet nervously. "I never thought I'd say it in this life, but you bring out a goodness in me, Ms. Gardner. Something I didn't think existed."

John looked into my eyes. “I think it’s evident where we are going with this, Ms. Desdemona Cassandra Miller Gardner.” He smiled gruffly. “We love you. We want to see where this goes if, of course, you’re willing to do the same.”

Tears streamed down my face, not this time from guilt, but from love so overwhelming it threatened to burst my chest. “I don’t... I don’t deserve this,” I stammered, my voice thick with emotion.

You more than deserve it, Dessie,” John countered firmly. “You went to hell and back for love, girl. And here’s the thing about the trenches, Dessie—it’s not the going that defines you, it’s the loving you do while you’re down there, grappling with the worst of it. You fought tooth and nail because Oswald deserved better. That’s not madness, that’s a damn compass pointing true north.”

His words, blunt as they were, pierced through the haze of doubt clouding my mind. My actions, reckless and desperate, weren’t born of insanity but of a fierce, unwavering desire to give a man what he was due.

“The way you loved him, Dessie,” Leon chimed in, his voice husky with admiration, “the way you faced down monsters for him... that’s the kind of love we dream of. The kind that makes you walk through fire and come out singing.”

Viktor remained silent, but his gaze, intense and unyielding, spoke volumes. It was a silent validation.

And there, at that moment, I finally found a semblance of peace. My arms ached to hold them all. I got out of bed and stood, wobbling slightly. John pulled me into a tight embrace.

“Hey, group hug,” Leon interjected. He and Viktor joined in, enveloping me. I breathed quietly, surrounded by the love I never thought I’d find. I knew that home wasn’t a place but a feeling, and finally, finally, I was home.

“You guys aren’t morons after all,” I declared, voice muffled against the comforting roughness of John’s coat.

EPILOGUE

Dessie

The white walls of the Stonemoor Institution, one of the most renowned in the States for the criminally insane, pressed in on me, stifling and cold. Even the sparse light struggling through barred windows seemed diluted, bereft of warmth.

Ms. Wainwright sat in a wicker armchair, a picture of genteel composure, as if the accusations, the trials, were mere theatrical distractions.

My fingers itched to rip through that façade, to tear away the lies and reveal the monster beneath. But I took a deep breath, my voice steely when I spoke. “So, you seem to have done quite well for yourself. How does it feel knowing you’re never going to get the revenge you wanted? You had to kill Oswald to validate yourself, but did it give you anything worthwhile?”

Her smile, fragile as spun glass, didn’t falter. “My dear Dessie, always so dramatic. One must take one’s bows, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Your curtain’s fallen, Ms. Wainwright. And beneath it, all that remains is a web of deceit.”

My words, sharp as blades, seemed to prick through her composure. A flicker of fear, fleeting but palpable, crossed her eyes. I pressed on, relishing the justice dancing on the edge of my tongue.

“Your little scheme? Unraveled. The stolen funds? Restored. Oswald’s legacy? Honored, as he intended.”

Her hands, once so steady, trembled in her lap. “I hear you’ve written a book.”

“Oh, it’s more than a book,” I said, savoring the triumph in her flinch. “It’s a reckoning. A testament to the lives you shattered, the families you tore apart.”

She scoffed, but the sound lacked its usual conviction. “Trivial details, my dear. Collateral damage in the pursuit of something grander.”

“Grander?” I spat, disgust curling my lip. “You call stealing children grander? You call manipulating families, condemning them to live hollow lives, grander?”

Her eyes narrowed. “They were better off, those children. They went to richer homes, you understand? They got to live far more cushy lives, surrounded by comforts their birth parents could never give them!”

My blood ran cold. This woman, this monster disguised as a guardian, truly believed her own twisted logic. My resolve hardened like a shield against her warped morality.

“And what of the parents? The mothers left to grieve phantom deaths, the fathers robbed of their children’s laughter? Did you spare them a thought in your grand scheme?”

She shrugged, a gesture of chilling indifference. “Collateral damage, I repeat. A small price for art.”

Art. She still clung to that delusion, draping it around her shoulders like a tattered cloak. I wanted to scream, to shake

her until her lies crumbled, but I knew a different weapon would be more effective.

“The book, Ms. Wainwright,” I said, my voice dropping to a level that sent shivers down her spine. “It resonated. More than I ever imagined.”

I watched her eyes widen, the fear finally naked and unveiled. “What... what do you mean?”

“Parents came forward,” I said, each word a hammer blow. “Parents you told the same lie, those who also ‘lost’ their babies at birth. Who, thanks to John’s network and his connections, have been reunited with their children.”

Her face blanched, blood draining from her lips. “No... it’s... impossible...”

“Not at all,” I said, a cruel smile twisting my lips. “Your grand masterpiece? Unraveling thread by thread. Families restored, children embraced. And you, Ms. Wainwright, will spend the rest of your days in this tomb, surrounded by the ghosts of your cruelty, haunted by the love you so fiercely denied others.”

I rose, the final blow poised. “Oswald would have hated your truth. And now, the whole world knows you’re a monster.”

Pity, a bitter aftertaste, coated my tongue. But I swallowed it down, savoring the justice that stained my lips. As I turned to leave, her voice, brittle and broken, stopped me.

“Dessie... did you find... your family?”

I did not grace her with a reply because sadness shook me to my core. I walked out of the institute, clutching a small purse as tightly as I could. A Ferrari waited for me. Leon lounged in the driver’s seat.

“You okay?” he asked as I climbed into the car.

“Fine,” I mumbled. “I just needed to see her one last time.”

“You don’t need to justify anything.”

Leon drove us back to the Institute, where I would soon begin working as a part-time lecturer.

At about half-past two, John summoned me to his office. When I got there, Viktor and Leon were also inside, standing with unmistakable glee on their features.

I closed the door behind me. “What is it, you guys?”

“I just got a phone call from a woman named Margaret Manson,” John positively gushed.

“Who is she?”

“Well, we need to be careful since you’re quite famous now, and I don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up. But, I think we have cause to believe we have found your mother.”

Thank you for reading Dessie’s story. I hope you enjoyed it.

*Great news! **[You can binge read the entire WHY CHOOSE HAREMLAND SERIES HERE.](#)***

NAUGHTY LESSONS (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

A little bit of harmless fun on an online platform led to the biggest scandal of my life... and three hot professors in my bed.

“Welcome to Naughty Lessons. Are you ready for the hottest class of your life?”

It took one touch from them to turn my nice into naughty.

But it wasn't just my body they had...

They also had my heart.

Elijah, a literary genius, instantly transported me to the Victoria era of romance.

Noah's charm and expertise on psychology helped me see the hidden strength in me.

And **Benjamin**, my astronomy professor, made it clear that I was meant to be with all three of them.

My story with these hot men might have looked like a fairytale.

But a university director's dangerous obsession with me was landing us in deep trouble.

Now I needed my men to protect me.

That wasn't all.

***I also needed them to protect my heart while continuing to
make my body tremble for them.***

Rory

I liked the low heat of certain things. The warmth of travel. The lowering of the sun past twilight. The twist of the words in my new erotic novel.

A thin layer of perspiration nestled in the space between my upper lip and nose, a tell-tale sign that the baker, his hands dusted with flour and wet with his lady's love, was doing a pretty great job.

He pushed her up on the counter. A deft movement later, her long dress was up to her waist, and her legs were parted to allow him access to her sweet, warm honeypot.

The lilting chime of my bedside clock told me it was two am. My window was open to the night's balmy air, as living alone left me unhindered in my pursuit of sultry pleasures.

I moaned slightly, reveling in the loneliness of my studio apartment.

As the baker took his lady to sweet orgasm, my hands traveled down past my nightgown to the wetness blooming between my own legs.

There's just something about the way books depict sex, isn't there?

It was as if a flame had suddenly erupted, and all the things I'd never considered important were larger than life.

I rose from my bed as my moan transcended past a climax into something gentler. The hot air had calmed into a cool reprieve. Outside, cicadas whispered secrets.

An owl hooted in the distance, its rumbling voice a curious contrast against the rare *tsip tsip tsip* of a lonely Chimney Swift.

My phone's screen came alive with Chelsea's pretty face. Grinning, I answered.

"Hey there, bish." She laughed as soon as I picked up her call. "Are you feeling all ready for college tomorrow?"

I looked at the calendar.

"Honestly?" I asked her. "I don't know. I want to be ready. But after last time, it feels like I'd be expecting too much if I thought things would go well."

"Rory," she chided me, her words laced with gentleness. "Allow yourself some compassion, please. You were bullied so hard at that place."

I swallowed. My mistake at Clifton Peaks was falling in love with the wrong boy.

And telling him I was a virgin.

It had meant nothing to me at the time. I'd actually told him because I wanted him to be my first. Because until then, no one had made me feel the need to be intimate.

Sure, I'd had my fair share of experiences in high school. They'd sucked.

When you're that age—and especially if you're a boy—you're learning. And that means you're a terrible kisser who thinks licking teeth is the sexiest thing you can do.

That's what I learned from Dick, the first boy who ever kissed me. This was also the time I realized his parents had

given him the perfect name.

He'd snuck out of home in his parents' Range Rover.

At the time, these things were sexy.

Sneaking out of our parents' places to meet near school or some out of the way dirt road.

Making out like we were pros at it, when honestly, none of us had any fucking idea what we were doing.

I couldn't help giggling at the memory.

"Remember Dick?" I asked Chelsea.

"Dude, I am never going to forget him after what you described. It sounded like a baboon with their ass stuck up in the air, trying to go full Terminator on your mouth or something."

That was as accurate of a description as could be, honestly. Dick won me over to this point because he acted like a literal Chad, always talking like he knew everything about girls.

Then he stuck his tongue in my mouth and poked around like a slimy alien cactus. It was like he was a renegade Tooth Fairy, looking for loose molars in my mouth.

What sealed his fate, though, was his trying to paw at me as if it were the sexiest thing in the world. I wasn't having those sweaty, clammy hands scratching at my skin.

Heck, if I had an itch, I'd scratch it myself. What'd I need him for? I'd just jumped out of the car and run back home. Strike one. I'd been single all throughout my school days.

Boys stayed away from me because Dick made sure the whole school thought I was a stuck-up prude. That's not the kind of chick you want around you when you're learning about sex, right?

It should have been better in college.

And for the tiniest second, it was. I met this guy. He was three years older. An English Lit student. He could quote Rilke and Frost and make me see the world the way I wanted to.

I told him something he'd never expected to hear on one of our dates. It wasn't big to me. It was just important. A tiny little quirk. It had to do with waiting until the moment felt right.

I never heard from him again.

So, I'd apparently graduated from being the school prude to being at that age where being a virgin was the biggest sin.

It meant I was too choosy. It meant I was an obligation, that I'd have "expectations" barely-old-enough young adults couldn't cater to.

I never saw it like that, though.

To me, the only thing keeping me from going to bed with someone was connection. Say what you will, but I couldn't get my mind around a night's worth of dry heaving to wake up with no recollection of each other's names.

No one had made me feel the heat the heroine experienced from touching her baker. There was no raging fire in the pit of my stomach.

Nothing of that thirst that could only be satisfied with hands and mouth and a hard body pressing into me, kissing my lips and owning my soul.

That's what I want.

"Hey, you still here? Or are you dreamin' about some hot professor you're gonna meet tomorrow?"

I snorted. Somehow, Chelsea had this idea that the only way I was going to fall in love, the old, bookish kind of love, was if I found someone older.

There were days when I thought she was right. Men who were older came with experience.

They weren't looking to learn. They craved to *teach*.

Maybe that was what was missing from my life.

The bullying at my last college began the minute my ex told the entire freshman year about my virginal status.

Suddenly I was toxic, without ever being touched.

I earned the name, “The Strange Little Nun”. It was everywhere. And then, insufferable young brats left notes in my locker.

Telling me they’d show me a good time and that I’d fall hard for their cocks.

Yeah, disgusting.

I got to the point where I began considering transfers.

And that’s when East Harbor happened.

It was as if fate—and I wasn’t a big believer, but I couldn’t deny the occasional coincidence—wanted me to have another chance.

“Chelsea, do you think it’s going to be better this time around?”

My best friend knew me to my bones. She understood the fright behind the question. My heart was a fluttering sparrow in search of a home tonight, and I wanted to land.

Part of my insecurity had stemmed from being different. I had been a thick girl since forever— and it took me years to learn to love my body for what it gave me.

This time around, though, I wanted to embrace college life in all *my* glory. Beautiful, curvy, and in control.

I just wasn’t sure the world was ready for that.

“You’re going to be amazing, Rory,” she whispered. “I don’t doubt that for one second. But I do think you’re going to have to let your guard down a little.”

“I don’t know how.”

Correction. I did know how. I just didn’t want to try.

Love didn’t make sense to me at times. Maybe it was because of how my dad had broken my mom’s heart not once, but three times.

Each time, he kept returning with the promise to be better until, after the third betrayal, he got his new girlfriend

pregnant.

That was the last Mom and I heard from him. The cherry on the cake?

I was one year and one day old. He chose the other family over us.

I sighed. “It’s not ten yet. You want to meet up for a drink?”

“You know I’m never not down for that, girl.”

Club Mezunna was *the* place to be in town. Everything about it screamed teenage fantasy, from the eccentric cocktails to the low lighting.

Chelsea and I sat by the bar, sipping on our Negronis.

My best friend wasted no time in scoping out the patrons. Chelsea was a free spirit when it came to love, and she believed it could happen as many times as it needed to.

“Stop.” I frowned at her. “You’re not running off with a strange dude tonight.”

“Who said I’m looking for me?” She winked. “There’s this man who can’t take his eyes off you.”

I almost choked on my drink. “Who?”

“Oh, God, Rory, be subtle,” she replied, scandalized as I immediately whipped my head around.

True to her word, a Greek god looked at me from the end of the bar table. He was . . . fuck, he was handsome. He had to be older. Perhaps in his late thirties.

Salt and pepper hair. *Check.*

Ocean-blue eyes with flecks of green. *Check.*

Sexy evening stubble. *Check.*

He could have passed as a model or a college professor—I couldn’t tell which suited him better. He flashed me a wide grin, and I felt fire creeping into my cheeks.

“What do I do?” I asked Chelsea, panicking so hard I spilled a bit of the drink on my dress and the table.

“Girl, for the love of God, calm down!” She laughed. “This is no interview!”

“It’s as good as!” I retorted. “That guy’s looking at me like I’m some queen. I’d do better as a jester with this stuff spilled all over me. Quick, check whether I have popcorn between my tits!”

Chelsea was laughing so hard I thought she would end up spilling her drink too. But she checked my cleavage to make sure I wasn’t hiding pub grub anywhere.

“Honestly, it wouldn’t be bad if there were some popcorn here.” She grinned. “Makes you more of a keeper, if you’d ask me. Someone who knows how to enjoy life.”

I made dagger-eyes at her. “I was planning to stuff myself on popcorn and spend the rest of the night with Ben and Jerry’s.”

“The only two men in your life at the moment, right?” She rolled her eyes.

The only ones who count, anyway. No one could produce a better Cherry Garcia. I could fight to the death for that stuff.

I looked back once more, but the man was gone.

Heck, why did I feel so disappointed? And here I was, trying to get popcorn out of my clothes for him.

I cursed myself for thinking instant love could ever be a thing, especially for me. I didn’t even like reading that shit in books.

Nope, I was all for the old-world *time will tell* romance of Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester, and Darcy and Lizzie. But even they had an instant attraction, didn’t they?

Why couldn’t it happen for me, just once?

A frustrated sigh escaped my lips and, my head still turned away, I propelled myself from the bar stool and collided against someone’s shoulder.

This shoulder definitely didn’t belong to Chelsea.

“Hey.” I scowled, whipping my head around and immediately drowning in an ocean of sea-green.

“Hey.” He smiled and raised his glass at me.

Oh, it’s Mr. Too Good to be True from the other corner of the bar.

My mind felt like it was stuck in reverse.

He knitted his brows and gave me a lopsided grin that wrenched my heart.

Electricity. That’s what ran up my spine.

“I—”

Before I knew what I was doing, I was running out of the bar, Chelsea following close behind.

“Wait,” she called out, scrambling to keep up with me. “Wait, Rory!”

I didn’t stop until I was inside the car.

She glowered at me when she finally caught up. “What on earth, Ro? What was that about?”

I breathed rapidly.

Three-two-five-nine.

Three-two-five-nine.

As always, repeating the numbers, slow and sure, returned a semblance of sanity.

Why had I run?

I didn’t know, except I wasn’t ready to feel how that man made me feel.

It got me thinking there was hope for me. That I wasn’t doomed to die alone in a room surrounded by empty ice cream tubs, the TV set to my hundredth repeat watch of *Bridget Jones*.

I couldn’t risk ruining that fantasy for something much more unlikely to happen.

Life had taught me that love didn't work. It never had. It just sounded pretty in books.

The last thing I needed was to feel this *good* around a nameless stranger.

I sighed. "I don't know, Chels. I'm sorry. I just want to go home."

She considered me in silence for a minute.

"Let's go, Ro. You know I'm here for you."

I knew she was.

Chelsea was the only piece of safety, of familiarity I had left in my life.

With a new life just hours away from beginning, it felt okay to want to cherish that a little while longer.

As I drove back home, I couldn't help fixating on the stranger and his smile.

Years ago, I'd etched the tattoo of a fern on my collar bone, because even with everything going on in my life at the time, I had a perpetual nostalgia for new beginnings.

Something told me I'd just landed on the brink of one.

Elijah

I met this girl last night, Benji's message read. *She was beautiful . . . before she ran off and left me cold. Man, dating in this city sucks.*

It was just a minute past seven. I sighed and set my phone aside, turning my attention to the chirping of yellow-billed cuckoos outside.

The morning sun streamed through the windows, casting a warm glow over the room.

I took a deep breath and sat up in bed, my eyes immediately drawn to the large windows that dominated the far wall.

Beyond the glass lay a world of green, with trees swaying in the gentle breeze and birds flitting among the branches.

The apartment was perched on top of a hill, which meant that I had an unobstructed view of the surrounding area.

The trees were a mix of evergreen and bare, with leaves of all colors rustling in the wind. It was like living in a postcard.

As I got out of bed, I padded over to the windows and gazed out at the scene before me.

I spotted a red-tailed hawk soaring gracefully over the treetops, its wingspan impressive against the clear blue sky.

A pair of bluejays darted about, their vibrant colors standing out against the greenery.

A smile came to my lips as I heard the sound of feet scurrying in the distance. A minute later, my bedroom door burst open.

The love of my life ran across the room and straight into my open arms. I picked her up and planted a kiss on the tip of her little nose.

She scrunched her cherub-like face ferociously, an indication that she wanted more kisses.

I laughed. “D’you want more, darling?”

She nodded.

I kissed my little babe’s forehead, the tips of her long eyelashes, her blue eyes, and the little dimples on her cheeks.

She was the living, waking image of her mother. So precious, so tied to my soul.

My world would be utterly empty without her.

“So, what does Sally have on her timetable today?” I asked, feigning an air of importance.

“Nwum-bess.” She frowned at the name, as if the mere mention of it was offensive.

Sally had an articulation disorder that made it difficult for her to pronounce her “r’s”. It wasn’t too bad on some days, but even when it was, I found it precious.

She was new to the world of Xs and Ys and multiplication *tumbles* (as she liked to call tables), but like all other things, she was getting the hang of it so darn fast!

I wished I could cherish each moment with her and replay it in my head, again and again. I’d never get tired of watching her grow and become her own little person.

But she’d always be my baby first.

“You’re going to be so amazing.” I walked, Sally still in my arms, to the kitchen. Perching her on one arm, I made my cup of coffee before setting her down.

“What fruit would you like to eat, darling?”

She pottered over to the fridge and fetched a bowl of nectarines and some mangoes. I blended them with whole milk and made her some breakfast porridge.

The bell rang. Sophia, Sally’s nanny, was here. And right on time, because today was my first day at East Harbor.

I enjoyed teaching, but it was the connection with my students that drove me most of all. There was so much to learn from them, and even more to give back.

That’s what my wife loved most about me, too. But her memories were distant to me now, as was the time we’d shared.

Nothing, however, could touch the love that had existed between us. Nothing could surpass what we had created together.

A home. The most beautiful little girl in the world. So many good memories.

I let out a little sigh as Sophia entered the kitchen. Sally squealed and ran over to her. She picked her up and smiled at me.

“Thanks, Sophia.” I nodded at her, never not grateful for the solidity of her existence. She’d been here since Sally was two and my wife fell ill.

When things passed the point of being difficult to borderline impossible, she promised she’d stick around and give Sally the stability she needed to be whole.

It was rough weather there for a while, but she helped Sally navigate the worst of it in ways I never could.

She regarded me from behind her owl-rimmed glasses, her smile kind. “I got this, Mr. Taylor. Go on, now. You don’t want to be late on your first day!”

I chuckled. I missed Sally already. She cooed from Sophia's arms. "Daddy, can we go to the park later?"

Taking her from Sophia for just a wee minute, I cradled Sally in my arms so I could smell the coconut-jasmine scent of her baby curls and feel her warmth in my arms.

She gave me so much hope. Children did that. They took the old strings of our frayed hearts and tied them and made them stronger.

"We'll do anything you like, baby." I kissed her nose once more before setting her down. "But make sure you get all your studying done, okay?"

She nodded obediently.

I checked the time. I had to get going. "Okay, Sophia. Over to you."

My bag already packed, I made my way to the front door and turned at the threshold to wave to Sally.

I touched the tip of my nose, and she did the same. A tiny ritual.

"I'll be good," we both said in unison.

Inside the car, I finally called Benjamin.

"Hey." His voice rumbled from the other end. "Are you at school yet?"

"On my way. Tell me about last night."

"She was a beauty. All green-blue eyes and deer-like."

"And fate brought her to you, is it?"

Good old-fashioned Benjamin. He was someone you read about in a Charles Dickens novel. He had his little quirks, and all of them pointed to finding *The One*.

I did get where it came from, though. With June, I'd never felt any sparks.

Later, I realized this was because I'd seen her in a different light—and it was one of comfort. There were no butterflies in

my stomach because those butterflies to me were synonymous with anxiety.

June was like butter on toast, jam on a PBJ. In other words, she completed me in the most ordinary of ways, and that was why I loved her so damn much.

Benjamin was the astronomy professor at East Harbor, and true to his profession, he believed fate was responsible for everything.

We were a very unconventional trio.

The third being Noah, East Harbor's one and only psychology heartthrob.

The man could win over his students like it was nothing more than a game of Snakes and Ladders, and he'd mastered it.

After I lost June, these men helped me keep my head above water.

I was a young father, and I did not know how to survive. All I knew was that I had to make it because of Sally. She needed me, and I'd be there for her.

No matter how my heart split open.

It took me a whole year to find stable ground, and a lot of tearful conversations too.

There were days when things felt better, and then, the tiniest of things—a rubber band, for Christ's sake, or a bottle of shampoo that smelled of her—would send me rolling into a pit of depression.

They were more than makeshift fathers to Sally at that time. They came over every day, cooked for us, read her stories, and gave her hope.

It was like we'd become one family, and all we wanted was the best for my little girl.

We also had our own little indiscretions. One of them was calling me right now.

“Benji, I'll call you back.”

“Oh, I knew you wouldn’t listen to me,” he replied, sounding injured. “But I’m telling you, fate—”

“Yes, fate brought you a gorgeous girl who’ll show you the moon and the stars, Benji!” I rolled my eyes. “But it’s Naughty Lessons calling.”

“Ha!” Benjamin laughed. “I can’t believe we let Noah put us up to this. It still feels unreal.”

“It sure does,” I replied, grinning.

See, we were still men. And the one thing June told me, again and again, was to never stop living.

I couldn’t find a love like hers once again. That . . . it felt like a world I could not walk into yet.

But every so often, the boys and I did resort to other pleasures. Naughty Lessons had been a whole other plane, though.

When Noah had suggested it, I’d balked.

“But, think about it! It’s like this cool platform, and it has multiple chatrooms. You don’t even need to show your face in the masked one!”

“I don’t know,” I’d told him, frowning. “What if . . . it just feels weird, like talking about all of it.”

“Dear boy!” he’d scoffed. “You sound like a sweet summer child, only twenty years older. The best part of sex is the conversation and the dirty talk! Like, how does it even work without that?”

Cutting to the chase, he’d lectured me so hard I’d decided that joining up would be easier than listening to him ramble about sexy talk all day.

The fact that he’d almost started trying to seduce me with his words made me make the decision quicker.

But Naughty Lessons wasn’t like any other chatroom where you could just sign up and get wanking.

Oh, no, I had to go through the works—including a whole round of interviews in a posh office, with young ladies in

professional skirts and shirts, each one looking me up and down like I was a mannequin with three nipples instead of two.

I answered the call.

“Hello, is this Mr. Elijah Taylor?”

“The very same.”

“We are pleased to inform you that your membership with Naughty Lessons is now approved. You may join your first chatroom tonight.”

Heck, why did that excite me so much? It was like I suddenly had a whole new world to explore, something wild and free.

“Thank you.”

The second I hung up, though, I felt a slight twinge of guilt run through me.

June was long gone, but her memory was so real that at times it felt physical.

My mind went back to our last conversation, the one we’d had in our final days. I’d been filled with anticipatory grief back then.

It was as if my soul already knew she was on another plane, and I wasn’t willing to let her go there.

So I sat by her bed as she labored through her breathing, her eyes already distant.

The accident had crushed everything but her courage.

“Promise me, El.”

“Anything, my love.”

“That when you remember me, it will be with mostly joy, and maybe sometimes, a little bit of sadness.”

I’d resisted her words at first. *“Don’t talk that way. You know you’re gonna make it. We have the best doctors working round the clock for you. You have to—”*

“Sally is going to do just fine. You’ll see. She’s a strong girl. But I need you to remember to live too.”

“I can’t do it without you, June. I can’t.”

“You’ll never be without me. You won’t see me, not in the sense you’re used to, but the love—that can’t ever go. It’ll be there in your heart, reminding you of every good thing in this world.”

That alone had cost her a bout of coughing.

“Hush. Rest now.”

“Let everything happen to you. Feel all your feelings. And remember, life . . . life is the most beautiful gift of all. Here, at the very end, I see that now.”

My throat felt like someone had punched it. Raw, harsh, cold, all at the same time.

I almost hit a tree, but swerved at the very last second.

June had asked me to live in honor of her memory.

And yes, I enjoyed it. I meant to cherish all of it, so that when I’d go, I’d go out guns blazing.

It didn’t mean that it didn’t hurt at times. I didn’t want to go through this life alone.

But no matter how many dates I went on after her, no one made me feel warm.

And without the warmth, it was only ever sex.

Which was why part of me had agreed to this ridiculous online thing. Maybe I’d learn something from it.

Hell, maybe I’d teach some things too. Different from Shakespeare and Proust, of course.

I was sure the ladies at Naughty Lessons did not need a lecture on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or why I felt *Rebecca’s* heroine was also the antagonist.

Or maybe I’d prove myself wrong and find something meaningful. Who knew?

Come what may, it was Sally and me for now. Until I came across someone worthy of my daughter's love, I'd remain this way. Floating along.

And that was okay too.

It wasn't what June would have wanted, but then again, losing her wasn't what I'd wanted, either.

Life had this habit of tossing out surprises at every curve. And maybe that was what made it fun.

I parked my Jeep and stepped out, walking toward East Harbor.

This place. It could be my downfall, or it could be the grounds of justice, too.

A courtroom for getting even.

For now, I took a moment to bask in its beauty.

The stone-walled, Gothic-style university was a breathtaking sight to behold.

Its towering spires reached toward the sky, and the intricate stone on the walls was a work of art in itself.

I walked through a sprawling garden, lush with bright flowers and foliage. There was an air of peace here. Not what I'd expected.

Tranquility had no business being part of a place where there was so much evil at work. But then again, that was only tied to one man. And the boys and I would handle that.

Him.

In time.

Students sat by a pretty stone waterfront and set paper boats afloat upon its shore. I sighed.

The reality of my first class just hit me hard. Not unlike how I'd have felt if a bag of bricks fell on my head from the ceiling.

That would have definitely needed a hospital visit, though.

Smiling grimly, I entered the classroom.

The baroque influences were evident in the ornate carvings on the wooden desks and the intricate patterns on the ceiling.

There were large windows casting a soft, amber glow on the room.

I had to marvel at the desk, a masterpiece of craftsmanship, with its polished wooden surface and intricate carvings.

I'd always been a stickler for Old-World detailing.

My students looked at me as I launched into a clumsy introduction.

“Hello. I’m Professor Taylor, and I will be teaching English 106. I trust all of you have gone through the syllabus. What’s your favorite part of it?”

A girl on the front row let out a little giggle. I looked at her, stuck between a frown and curiosity.

“Yes, would you like to volunteer an answer?” My British accent came out involuntarily, although I usually did my best to gel with the crowd here. Some of the students at the back wolf-whistled.

She giggled harder. Then, the whole room broke into snickering.

Man, this was going to be harder than I'd thought.

I turned my back to the class and launched into an explanation of French-English History, which was the topic I'd prepared for today.

“More than a third of our current English vocabulary owes its very existence to the French vernacular.”

I still hadn't made up my mind whether I wanted to be an authoritative professor or a cool one. I ended by making up my mind on the spot. About fifty times.

“How d’you feel about that, my dudes?” I turned and flourished my chalk at the class.

Then I immediately backtracked. “I mean, what’s your opinion on this?” I raised my chin, trying to be more . . .

pedantic.

Man, I wanted to be back home cuddling Sally and reading to her.

This was a comic tragedy.

Then a portly old man came into the classroom and opened a thick file of papers. “Good morning, class, and welcome to Economics 341.”

I snorted. “Economics 341? Sir, you have the wrong class.”

He looked at me with raised brows. “Well, for the last fifty years, this classroom has been designated to Economics 341.”

I wanted to whack this old man, bless his heart.

That’s when a boy in baggy pants and dreadlocks groaned. “Hey, Prof Taylor, you got the wrong class, dude. Lit is in room 49 in the north wing. This is the east wing.”

Oh, fuck.

I stumbled out of class and ran toward the north wing.

Which would have been quicker had I not collided head-first with curly hair, waist-length, impossibly soft. Her eyes looked mortified at first, confused next, then apologetic.

“Sorry.” She raised her hands and took two steps back as I leaned down to help her pick her books up.

“I’m so sorry,” I muttered.

“No, I’m sorry.” She looked about as lost as me.

Those eyes, though. How were they so green? Or were they blue? Both?

Heterochromia. One iris was green as an emerald, the other shone blue like the Pacific. Oh, beautiful nature. She was like a fucking fairy forest.

Man, this was not the time for me to be inventing corny lines or going into apology overdrive. I retrieved my satchel and bolted.

The scent of jasmine lingered in my mind.

End of preview. [Read the entire story here.](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ajme Williams writes emotional, angsty contemporary romance. All her books can be enjoyed as full length, standalone romances and are FREE to read in Kindle Unlimited.

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