

The Art of

AWKWARD AFFECTION



A Romantic
Comedy

JALINA
JACOBS

THE ART OF AWKWARD AFFECTION

A ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA JACOBS

CONTENTS

Other books by Alina Jacobs

1. Lexi
2. Grayson
3. Lexi
4. Grayson
5. Lexi
6. Grayson
7. Lexi
8. Grayson
9. Lexi
10. Grayson
11. Lexi
12. Grayson
13. Lexi
14. Grayson
15. Lexi
16. Grayson
17. Lexi
18. Grayson
19. Lexi
20. Grayson
21. Lexi
22. Grayson
23. Lexi
24. Grayson
25. Lexi
26. Grayson
27. Lexi
28. Grayson
29. Lexi
30. Grayson
31. Lexi
32. Grayson
33. Lexi
34. Grayson
35. Lexi
36. Grayson
37. Lexi

38. [Grayson](#)
39. [Lexi](#)
40. [Grayson](#)
41. [Lexi](#)
42. [Grayson](#)
43. [Lexi](#)
44. [Grayson](#)
45. [Lexi](#)
46. [Grayson](#)
47. [Lexi](#)
48. [Grayson](#)
49. [Lexi](#)
50. [Grayson](#)
51. [Lexi](#)
52. [Grayson](#)
53. [Lexi](#)
54. [Grayson](#)
55. [Lexi](#)
56. [Grayson](#)
57. [Lexi](#)
58. [Grayson](#)
59. [Lexi](#)
60. [Grayson](#)
61. [Lexi](#)
62. [Grayson](#)
63. [Lexi](#)
64. [Grayson](#)
65. [Lexi](#)
66. [Grayson](#)
67. [Lexi](#)
68. [Grayson](#)
69. [Lexi](#)

[Sneak Peak](#)

[Synopsis](#)

1. [Lexi](#)
2. [Grayson](#)

[Read A Totally Awkward Engagement!](#)

[Family Tree](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)


[About the Author](#)

[Mailing List](#)

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OTHER BOOKS BY ALINA JACOBS

Check out other books about characters mentioned in this one on my website:

<http://alinajacobs.com/books.html>

*To all the boys with hauntingly beautiful faces and tragic backstories who we
fell in love with when we were fourteen and believed we could change.*

LEXI

There was something extremely demoralizing about running in the morning. I'd go home, but I was down to two work outfits I could reliably fit in, three if I didn't eat lunch.

The sweat froze in my snarled hair, my lungs were about to collapse, and my legs were threatening to give out. I'd been trudging down this path for what felt like an eternity, but really it had only been about thirty seconds, because based on past experience, that was the longest I was able to keep this pace without passing out.

"Look on the bright side. At least you're able to run," I reminded myself.

A woman who didn't look a day older than seventy-five jogged past me, pushing a little toy Maltese in a dog stroller.

"Keep up the good work," I wheezed.

She reacted like I was about to mug her.

"You're an inspiration!" I added as she fumbled in her pocket for pepper spray.

"Leave my dog alone!" she shrieked.

I was undeterred. Manhattan was nothing like Florida—no sunshine, no lazy beach days, and no nice people. Everyone was grumpy. Except yours truly!

A man in bright-orange work clothes was emptying the trash.

"Thank you for your dedication to keeping the park clean!" I called out.

He muttered something that sounded like "Why can't the city clean out all these crazy people" and ignored me.

"Your beard looks nice. Really accentuates your cheekbones." I flashed

him a thumbs-up.

“Lady, I don’t have any cash on me.”

“Compliments are free!” I chirped out.

I believed that you must be the change you want to see in the world. A random act of kindness could go a long way to making Manhattan a better place.

I slowed to a walk. Well, a limp. The most exercise I got on a normal basis was watching Henry Cavill’s Instagram workout vids.

When I moved to New York to start my glamorous life in the big city, everyone said that with all the walking, the pounds would just melt off. In anticipation, I had bought new clothes that were, let’s say, an aspirational size. However, no one said that the food would be amazing, or that there was so much of it. Everywhere. On every corner. Don’t tell Walt, but the food in Manhattan might even be better than the food at Disney World.

Yes, Florida girl here and unashamed Disney adult. It is the happiest place on Earth, after all.

I made sure my Minnie Mouse ears were still attached to my frizzy red hair. Did I look weird? Maybe, but if the sight brightened someone’s day, then wasn’t it worth it?

I waved to a homeless guy sitting on a bench.

“I like your pigeon’s sweater,” I called cheerfully. “Did you knit that yourself?”

“I did,” he said happily. “Thank you!”

I beamed.

See? Compliments make the world a better place.

“When you go back with all the other rat people in the sewer,” the guy continued, dropping his voice conspiratorially, “can you tell them to chew through the cables coming out of the UN? The messages to the aliens they’re sending out are messing with the airwaves, and I can’t get a good signal on the sports station.” He tapped the piece of wire duct-taped to his cheek.

“Will do!” I sang out and skipped off. Well, stumbled off. I had a megacrap in my leg.

“Just think happy, positive thoughts,” I told myself. “You get a sticker if you can run for fifteen minutes.” I had bought specialty stickers at a store that—get this—only sold stickers! Manhattan was awesome! We didn’t have anything like a specialty sticker store in my small Florida town.

“Thirty seconds down and fourteen and a half minutes to go,” I pep-

talked myself. “You can do it. You got this.”

I took off at an ineffective sprint. Last night McKenna and I had watched YouTube videos on running while eating frozen pizza. I wasn’t an expert by any means, but based on what I’d learned from the videos, my form was atrocious.

“It’s the thought that counts. A sticker for effort,” I huffed out, my breath a hazy cloud in front of me. My keys and phone, gripped in my hand, jingled as I ran.

Ahead of me, coming down a path that intersected mine at a diagonal, was a man who had perfect running form. Well, he had a perfect everything form—tall, broad shoulders, handsome face partially in shadow from his black hood, long muscular legs like springs propelling him forward—and he ran like an Olympian, body in perfect sync. The muscles under the tight workout jacket flexed as his torso twisted.

I swooned.

Then I sucked in a breath.

“Looking good, hot stuff!” I yelled out the compliment.

The man broke stride, and his head snapped toward me.

I flashed him a thumbs-up as I passed him and kept up my trudging pace.

“You. Can’t. Afford. New. Clothes,” I gasped out in time to my heavy footfalls.

Gravel crunched behind me. I moved aside to let whoever was behind me pass.

Instead a large hand grabbed the back of my sparkly green Tinker Bell jacket complete with fairy wings.

I yelped in surprise as the man I’d just passed spun me around to face him.

“Are you out of your mind?” His deep voice—rich, dark, baritone—rang out in the cold air.

I smiled up at him gamely. “Do you like this jacket? Bought it in a pop-up shop outside of Cinderella’s castle. It’s kind of expensive but worth it, if I do say so myself.”

The man’s face was in shadow, but I could see enough of his downturned mouth to know he was not amused.

“You are completely crazy.”

“Anyone out here running at cold-o’clock in the morning is crazy,” I joked.

“Look, lady, what you’re doing is dangerous. You can’t talk to strangers.” He pushed back the jacket hood to reveal dark-brown hair that fell rakishly over his forehead, piercing green eyes, and a strong jaw.

My eyes bugged out of my head. *Oh no. No, no, no.*

Don’t recognize me.

There are lots of people in this park. Just act normal. We’re being so totally normal.

I could feel my eyes flitting around in my head, trying to look anywhere except for at the guy who was my boss. Well, my boss’s boss’s boss. I was the assistant to the assistant to the secretary to Grayson Richmond.

The man who now stood here before me. All six foot five of him.

“Every stranger is a friend you haven’t met yet.”

Surely he didn’t recognize me, right? All those billionaires were so far up their own behind that they didn’t even know they had assistants.

I reached up to fuss with my Minnie Mouse ears, hoping that I looked disheveled enough that Mr. Richmond wouldn’t put two and two together and realize he’d seen me around his office.

His lip curled up into a sneer.

“Did you just move to this city?”

“No,” I said defiantly. “I’ve been here four months.”

“Small-town girl,” he mocked, “naïve, sheltered. You shouldn’t be out by yourself in the real world.”

“I’m an adult!” I shrieked.

“Who still believes in fairy tales and watches Disney movies.” He flicked one of the sparkly wings.

“Who doesn’t like Disney?” I shot back. “You insult the Mouse, I’m throwing hands.”

“So that explains why you’re waltzing around like some untouchable little princess, talking to strangers and feeding the local rat population.” A sneer on his perfect mouth.

“I’m doing good deeds. It’s telling that someone like you who just sits around all day in his fancy-pants penthouse and yells at his employees doesn’t see the power that positive affirmations have on society.”

When I was upset, angry, nervous, or scared, my voice got high-pitched—an unfortunate affliction which meant no one took me seriously at all. Now I was practically squeaking, I was so incensed.

Mr. Richmond’s eyes narrowed.

I babbled on, hoping he didn't realize that I'd actually been in said penthouse.

"People need compliments; people need human interaction, and I have to set the example."

"I don't give a shit about any of that. You cannot talk to strangers," he exploded.

"You're not my mom. I'll talk to whoever I want."

"You can't change the world with compliments and good deeds," he snapped. "The only thing you're going to do is get yourself hurt. You especially can't compliment strange men. One will kidnap you, and no one will ever see you again."

"News flash, *sir*, you're the only person who's come close to kidnapping me. Kidnapper!" I pointed at him.

He grabbed my wrist, his much larger hand now a vise.

I tugged my arm angrily.

My key ring, which was mostly composed of sparkly princess key chains, jangled noisily.

"I am not a kidnapper," he snarled, his deep, gravelly voice like a fairy-tale hero's. His eyes were dark, and his face was a mask of fury.

"Then let go of me." I tugged as hard as I could, but his arm didn't budge.

"Not until you promise me you'll stop talking to strange men."

His eyes flicked down to my wrist, then back to my face, then back to my wrist.

"Wait ..."

He twisted my arm. The keying clanged.

Crap-a-Dee-Doo-Dah.

His gaze zeroed in on the key fob for Richmond Electric.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"Found it. Was taking it back to the police precinct. You know, good-deed fairy here." My voice sounded like I'd been huffing helium.

"Do you work for me?" he asked slowly.

"No ..."

"You do. I think I recognize you."

"Technically I work for your assistant." I held up a finger. "Therefore, you need to apologize for yelling at me about talking to strange men. You're not a stranger. You are perfectly safe—if a little sweaty and anxious. You should try eating some cheese."

“So you knew who I was when you ...” He faltered.

“Called you hot?” I gave him a pained smile.

“You catcalled me,” he said, horror slowly dawning on his unfairly symmetrical face.

I was indignant. “I most certainly did not.”

“I’m your boss.” He was incensed.

“Don’t act huffy. I’m the one who should be offended. I work for you, and you didn’t know who I was.” I jammed my finger in his muscular chest.

“Stop changing the subject.” He slapped my hand away.

“Stop falsely accusing people,” I retorted. “I wasn’t catcalling you. I said that you were looking good. I didn’t yell out, ‘Clap those cheeks’ or ‘Daddy, let me hit that.’ Now that’s a catcall.”

He sucked in a breath.

“I was complimenting your form,” I said, enunciating the words. “Your running form. But don’t worry, I take it back.”

“You can’t take it back.”

“I take back my compliment.” I did a pantomime of snatching something out of the air in front of his face.

“Fine, as long as you don’t catcall strangers anymore.” He wagged a finger in my face like he was scolding a child.

I batted at his hand.

“You’re not the boss of me.” I sounded like Alvin the Chipmunk.

“Yes, I literally am your boss.” His eyes were dark.

“You grouchy, depressing Manhattanites will not suppress my Florida sunshine,” I declared. “I will continue to bestow compliments. In fact, I’m giving you a new compliment right now.”

His lips thinned.

“You have a very lovely deep voice and nice eyes,” I said angrily. “Does anyone else here think he has beautiful eyes?”

Everyone in the park was studiously ignoring us.

“Well, you do. Beautiful green eyes. So there. And you’d look better if you smiled.”

GRAYSON

I watched the short, dumpy redhead—*your assistant*—trudge in a plodding jog down the path.

A woman screamed as my assistant told her she liked her sunglasses.

Who does she think she is?

I dug through my memories for a name. Lexi Collins. My secretary had mentioned hiring another assistant a few months ago. I hadn't realized it would be that glitter-covered girl.

A sea of freckles on her face, short—extremely short—easy for someone—a man—to pick her up and carry her away, Lexi Collins was a problem.

I fought an ugly battle with myself not to follow Lexi, to make sure she wasn't kidnapped.

Despite what Lexi claimed, I was right. She could get kidnapped. In true New York fashion, people had pretended like they didn't notice our argument. I could have picked her up, thrown her over my shoulder, and walked off with her, and no one would have stopped me.

Exhibit A on why she couldn't go around complimenting strange men. Who knew what could happen?

I knew.

I shook off the feeling of dread then glanced over my shoulder. I couldn't see Lexi through the trees anymore.

Maybe she's already gone.

It wouldn't do for me to follow her now.

She'll be fine, I tried to tell myself. But it was no use—my natural state was all systems at DEFCON 1, just waiting for something horrible to happen,

waiting for the ax to fall. Now that I had amassed my billions, situated my company as the leading energy conglomerate east of the Rockies, and just closed out the successful development of the tallest residential skyscraper in Manhattan, I had run out of distractions. All that was left to do was spiral into doomsday scenarios.

I needed to find balance and closure.

Except now I was adding one more concern to my plate—whether or not my oblivious assistant was going to end up on one of those unsolved-mystery reality TV shows.

Why didn't Ms. Collins have any sense of self-preservation?

I fumed while I took a cold shower, fumed while I drove to the office, and fumed while I stalked to the glass-enclosed corner office. Employees scattered out of the way, the new hires from the fall still on edge from being in my presence.

I stood in my office at the window, an expanse of glass that offered some of the most amazing views in Manhattan. Millions and millions of dollars of glass on a tower with my name on it. All these billions, and for what? It hadn't meant a damn thing, hadn't gotten me what I wanted more than anything in the world.

At least it meant I could fire that redhead.

I sent a message to legal and HR.

Then she could be someone else's problem, someone else's worry to obsess over.

And when Lexi was gone, I was going to figure out how I was going to survive the rest of my miserable existence.

LEXI

The scalding-hot water sluiced down my hair, plastering it to my neck. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine that I was still in Florida, standing on the beach in the humid rain, the ocean soothing in the background.

Someone banged on the door of the bathroom.

“You’ve been in there an hour!” a man complained.

“Women need time to get ready,” I shot back over the sound of the water and the ocean music playing from my phone.

I turned off the shower and wrung out my hair. Technically these shower rooms were for people who biked into the office. Richmond Electric had developed a new way to connect decentralized green energy to the electrical grid, and the shower rooms were both a perk and a marketing opportunity to promote how much they cared, as much as a soulless corporation headed by a self-absorbed, coldhearted billionaire could care.

I let myself fantasize briefly about running a PR campaign, heartwarming and funny, about the company’s commitment to the environment. Ha! Like I was ever going to get to use my communications degree. I was just the girl who collected the dry cleaning. I wasn’t allowed to so much as proof a marketing brochure, let alone run a PR campaign.

“You’re getting paid,” I reminded myself as I smeared the steam off the mirror. Well, not that much. Free hot water was free hot water, and if it was on Grayson Richmond’s dime, all the better. Not to mention I didn’t have anything like this water pressure in my apartment.

There was more banging on the door.

“There are other shower rooms,” I shrieked.

Calm down, Squeaky Mouse.

That's what my dad always affectionately called me.

I had really been trying to keep my voice from sounding like a sugar-high kindergartener's, and usually I had it together, but Grayson Richmond had thrown me off.

How dare he? Sure, not everyone was appreciative of my compliments, but I liked to think that even if they brushed me off, at least subconsciously my kind words might brighten their day. But no one had ever gotten in my face and yelled at me for complimenting them.

"It wasn't a catcall," I said stubbornly. There was no way I'd think Grayson Richmond was hot. He was not. I wasn't attracted to men just because they were good looking. I was in it for the personality. And Grayson Richmond had a terrible personality.

I gave my frizzy red hair one more twist with the towel then hung it on a hook on the wall and stared at my porcelain skin, highlighted by almost-glowing purple eyes ... *psych!*

My eyes were muddy brown, the color of a neglected pool that was actively breeding mutant mosquitos. I was insanely jealous of Grayson Richmond's eyes. He didn't deserve those green eyes. I was a redhead. Green eyes should be mine. To be fair, green eyes would go better with red hair like my mom's.

You couldn't buy my color red in a bottle because it was so ugly no one wanted it. Curly and frizzy, my hair only looks good the first ten minutes after a shower at which point it dries out and goes *floof*. Was I regretting getting a layer cut? Yes. Yes, I was.

I rubbed sunscreen over my freckled skin. Even though Manhattan was perpetually overcast, I did not need another freckle. I didn't have a sprinkling of freckles where you thought, *how adorable*. I had you're-going-to-have-skin-cancer-in-your-early-forties freckles.

I swiped on mascara so I didn't look like a naked mole rat. For me there would be no makeover moment where I'd dramatically pin my hair up, dust blush on my face, and turn into a bombshell. Been there, done that. Let's just say that all talk of senior prom is banned in my house.

A lean man in his bicycle gear and glasses was tapping his cycling shoe angrily when I waltzed out of the shower room in a cloud of steam.

I couldn't help but compare him to Grayson in his workout gear.

There was no comparison.

“I’m complaining to HR about this,” the cyclist told me in annoyance. “Showers are for bike riders only.” He adjusted his glasses.

Instead of taking the bait, I looked him up and down, flashed him a thumbs-up, and grinned. “I can tell you really do ride a lot. You got those biker buns.”

He blushed and puffed up. “Really? Well, yeah, biking’s actually kind of dangerous, but I love it. You know, good exercise and gets your heart rate up. Don’t worry. I won’t actually say anything to HR. Have a great day.”

See? The power of compliments. And most men liked it when you told them they looked good.

So there, Mr. Richmond.

I left my towel on the communal drying rack in the basement locker room then swiped my key fob up to the executive floor.

“Hi, Regan!” I waved to one of the HR employees as I passed her office. “How are your Spanish lessons coming?”

“Oh my gosh. Well, I have apparently been telling people I want to buy a pickle when I really was asking how their day was going. So you know. Not great.”

“But you’re trying,” I said encouragingly. “That’s more than me. Here.” I peeled off a sparkly fairy sticker from my sticker compact and handed it to her.

She beamed.

The assistant and the secretary to Mr. Richmond had their desks off to the side of a mezzanine that overlooked the accounting floor.

Notice I said the assistant and the secretary had desks. I, as the assistant to the assistant, had a stool next to the assistant’s desk.

McKenna was already working.

“You made it just in time,” she whispered to me out of the corner of her mouth. “Anthym has been complaining you weren’t in yet.”

“I do so much unpaid overtime it’s not even funny,” I said, opening up her bottom desk drawer and riffling through for the Oreos I had stashed there.

Don’t judge. I ran a whole sixteen minutes today, and on an empty stomach, no less.

“Anthym had me trekking all over town last night so I could pick up a set of very specific snack items for the fancy gift basket she’s putting together for one of Mr. Richmond’s clients.” I twisted the Oreo and licked the cream off.

“Like, why didn’t she know sooner what she needed? I had to go to one guy’s home to pick up this freaking wedge of cheese.” I dunked one of my Oreos in my specialty coffee mug that was shaped like Cinderella’s pumpkin carriage.

“So sue me if I come into work at eight instead of six thirty like she does. I don’t even get paid that much; I don’t even have a desk.”

“Don’t let her hear you complaining,” McKenna warned. “She read a text message I was writing to Grenadine and bitched me out about not being grateful to be in the presence of Mr. Richmond because I complained that this office was freezing cold and I wanted to use my space heater.”

Space heaters, blankets, and hot-water bottles were verboten in the office. Maybe on the lower floors people could sneak them in, but here on the executive floor? Don’t even think about it.

I balanced my laptop on my knees.

At least I could sit down. Anthym forced us to wear heels, skirts, and pantyhose. She said this was a conservative office and we represented Mr. Richmond, and therefore we needed to do the company proud.

My hose were from the dollar store and held together by prayers and clear nail polish. My feet were pinched in the knockoff heels.

My inbox pinged with an incoming message. It was one of those mass emails that goes out—you know the ones where they’re like, “Please make sure that all employees use a lidded microwave bowl when heating eggs,” but everyone knows it’s about microwave-abuser Albert.

Yeah, that’s this email.

And it’s about me.

FROM: Brittany Dawn, HR Director

TO: Ladies of Richmond Electric

It has come to our attention that some people have been seen catcalling men around town.

I just want to remind everyone at the Richmond Electric family that even during nonwork hours, you still represent the company and its values. Let’s keep it classy, ladies!

Brittany Dawn

“OH MY GOD!” McKenna was snickering behind her hand. “You catcalled him?”

“I told you on the phone, it wasn’t a catcall,” I hissed. “I was paying him a compliment. He’s just too much of an antisocial grump to appreciate it.”

“Did you tell him he had a nice ass?”

“No.” I took a swig from my coffee mug.

“Because Mr. Richmond does have a nice ass, doesn’t he?” My friend waggled her eyebrows.

“Anthym never keeps me here long enough to get more than a glimpse,” I reminded her.

We both looked across the floor of the minimalist office space to Grayson Richmond’s office.

He paced behind the glass, like a big jungle cat. Or the Beast.

McKenna sighed longingly. “He’s so hot.”

“He is not.” I cleared my throat. My voice was starting to squeak.

“Yes, he is.” McKenna poked me.

“Just because he has money, everyone thinks he’s attractive. I know the real Mr. Richmond.” I glowered.

Mr. Richmond was staring out one of the floor-to-ceiling glass windows, striking and imposing. His strong chiseled jaw and straight nose made him look like a Disney hero.

Or villain. Belle’s nemesis Gaston had a strong jaw, I reminded myself as I sorted through the day’s emails, twenty of which were from Anthym with various demands. I think it made her mad that I’d never failed to meet a request of securing an item.

The fancy aged Portuguese cheese almost did me in, but the doorman remembered me from when I’d spotted him two dollars at a bodega and let me up to the French cheese importer’s apartment.

My inbox pinged with an email. It was from Brittany Dawn.

Hi Lexi!

Please come see me in my office for a chat.

“GODSPEED,” McKenna whispered to me as I slowly stood up and pulled at my skirt.

Anthym, my manager, was sitting in one of the white chairs in Brittany Dawn’s office. The HR director had a glass-enclosed view over the

mezzanine to the floor below, all the better to look out over Grayson Richmond's subordinates and remind them that HR was always watching.

"Lexi, let's chat," she said, with all the false perkiness of a middle-school mean girl.

The HR director patted the desk in front of the empty chair. There was a copy of the employee handbook on her desk, mocking me.

I sat.

"I cannot believe you would embarrass me like this," Anthym snapped before Brittany Dawn could get a word in. "How dare you! Mr. Richmond is god here. Your actions make us all look bad."

Do not squeak, I warned my voice. *If you do, I'm going to be fired, and then I'll never be able to afford that fancy tea you like.*

"I didn't catcall Mr. Richmond," I explained, trying to sound calm and in control. "I was paying him a compliment. There was a misunderstanding, but we've worked it out. Believe me, I am very anti-catcalling. In fact, whenever I'm out and I hear a man actually catcall a woman, I always yell at him and tell him I'm going to tell his mom."

Brittany Dawn clasped her hands in front of her on the desk.

"Now Lexi, I understand that you're just out of college—"

"A master's degree," I interjected. "I'm twenty-three and have a master's in communication."

Her mouth curled up into an impression of a smile.

"Just out of a master's degree program," Brittany Dawn corrected, voice syrupy sweet. "But that doesn't mean you have real-world experience. You're basically a child. And as such I know that you don't understand how adults in a corporate environment behave. You can't sexually harass your boss."

"*The boss*," Anthym railed, unable to fake Brittany Dawn's calmly patronizing tone.

"I didn't know it was him," I insisted. "He wasn't in his suit, and I know Mr. Richmond's suits. I pick up his dry cleaning, after all. He was in workout clothes. Also, why does no one in this city appreciate the power of uplifting declarations?"

"You said he was hot," Brittany Dawn reminded me, drawing her finger down the text written on an incident report.

Minnie's tits. I'm getting fired, aren't I?

"I said he was looking good, but I didn't mean it like *that*. And I wouldn't

have said anything if I'd known who he was. This morning was the first time I'd ever met the man."

"Lexi's lying; she called him hot stuff," Anthym snapped. "She did it because she's trying to become the next Mrs. Richmond. But guess what? It backfired. You made him very uncomfortable. He felt threatened. You should have seen how upset he was when I talked to him."

"Are you kidding me?"

Stop squeaking.

I cleared my throat.

"Are you kidding me? Grayson—"

"Mr. Richmond," Anthym interjected.

"*Mr. Richmond,*" I seethed, "felt threatened? How dare he? I'm five feet tall when I stand up straight. I look like I'm twelve, and people constantly stop me and ask me if I lost my mommy. He's the richest man in Manhattan and literally owns multiple city blocks *and* one of the tallest skyscrapers in the city, which is totally a phallic calling card, by the way, if we're really going to get out the magnifying glass and suss out who's being sexually aggressive to whom."

"Mr. Richmond takes these matters very seriously," Brittany Dawn warned.

"Believe me, I am not making a mockery of this company or of him." I saluted the HR director. "Me and my credit cards are very happy to have this job. In the future, I will never talk to Mr. Richmond in a sexually aggressive or any other capacity ever again. If you can just let me off with a write-up, I will return to my duties as Mr. Richmond's lowly assistant of the assistant to the secretary forthwith."

Brittany Dawn's nose scrunched up like I'd dumped a wedge of that very pungent cheese from last night on her desk.

"You can't just write her up," Anthym insisted. "She needs to be fired."

Crap.

"Please," I begged, my voice threatening to go full chipmunk. "Please don't fire me."

Brittany Dawn's phone rang. She held up a finger as she answered it.

"Understood ... Yes, sir."

She pressed the end call button. "Mr. Richmond would like to see you."

"Uh, he would?"

"*He would?*" Anthym was shocked.

“When?” My stomach churned.

“Now,” Brittany Dawn said, picking up her key card.

“Like *now*, now?”

GRAYSON

The door opened then closed with a soft *click*. Marius stepped into my office.

“What did this girl do, exactly, where you had to get the legal department involved to fire her?” he asked, coming over to stand next to me at the window.

Marius and I went way back. We had been roommates at Harvard then had stayed in contact. I appreciated him tolerating my presence as his roommate and had offered him the position as head legal counsel when I had formed my company.

I always trusted Marius’s judgment, and he had been worth his weight in rare earth metals just in structuring the initial contracts with the venture capital firms all those years ago.

I was sure what he did now was probably beneath his skill level, and I expected him to leave any day.

People always did.

There was always a better opportunity.

And better assistants.

“I cannot have my assistant working for me anymore, and Ms. Collins seems like the type to cause trouble. Hence legal.”

“Uh-huh.” Marius crossed his arms. “This is technically an HR issue, but it’s been a slow morning. So sure, I’ll be your emotional support lawyer.”

I glanced at him.

A smirk played around his mouth.

“You didn’t hit on her, did you?”

The anger, always close to the surface of late, rose up.

“I would never.”

“Dude, you have to lighten up.” Marius clapped me on the shoulder. “Why don’t you come out for drinks tonight?”

“I have to work,” I lied.

I had plans, but not work. It was Tuesday, after all.

Marius sighed. “I thought after you built all this, you’d take a break.”

“I can never take a break.”

“The world won’t end.”

“It might.”

The door opened.

There she was. Taller now in those ridiculous heels, Lexi tottered in like a helpless baby foal.

Absolutely kidnapping bait. A liability.

She crossed her arms. The buttons on her blouse strained and the shirt fabric gapped.

Stop staring at her chest. What the hell is wrong with you?

I met her eyes. Brown. Defiant.

“Narc,” Lexi whispered.

My eyes widened.

“You wanted to see her?” Brittany Dawn asked expectantly.

“I—”

Lexi’s curly red hair was sticking straight out of her head, like a cartoon character’s.

“Can’t you see?” Lexi said, spreading her arms dramatically and talking a mile a minute. “Mr. Richmond called me in here to chew me out. Finally thought of a good comeback from this morning?” She raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, that happens to me too. You can’t think of the really good zingers until you’re in the shower. Come on, lay it on me. Chop-chop!” She snapped her fingers.

“I have to go dig up a discontinued brand of cigars from the eighties along with finding an exact match of the custom wool fabric for that hole you put in your suit, not to mention have your riding boots resoled, which really, Anthym, that one’s a little too easy.”

Anthym gasped. “Don’t talk about Mr. Richmond in the shower.”

“What did you want to discuss?” Brittany Dawn asked pointedly.

I blinked and realized I had made a grievous error. I just needed Lexi

fired; I didn't need to do it myself.

It's because you haven't slept in days. You can't make important decisions on such little sleep.

I picked up the mug of black tea and tried not to stare at the buttons that were threatening to pop on Lexi's blouse and let her breasts spill out.

I took a large swallow of the scalding-hot water.

"You two are harshing his snarly, self-important, condescending vibes. It's the gestapo up in here. A man can't even cuss out his own assistant in peace. Shoo!" Lexi waved away the two older women. "Can't you see you're smothering him? Some people," she said to me, cupping a hand to the side of her mouth.

"Can we please fire her?" Anthym shrieked.

"But then who will sort our dear leader's underwear?" Lexi asked magnanimously.

"You're not supposed to be touching his underwear." Brittany Dawn was appalled.

"I was folding them Marie Kondo style, to bring joy to Mr. Richmond's life," Lexi said primly.

"Oh my god, you left the note," I said before I could stop myself.

The office was dead quiet.

I snapped my mouth shut.

Anthym slowly swiveled to face Lexi. "You're leaving him notes?"

Beside me, Marius strangled a laugh.

"Some of us are trying to make the world a better place." Lexi's hands were on her hips. "Besides, Mr. Richmond liked the notes, even though he won't admit it in his cold, dead, sunlight-starved heart," she added loudly, raising her voice.

"You're the one who's going to be trapped in a sunlight-starved basement if you keep catcalling strange men in dark parks," I growled at her, forcing myself to unclench my fists.

"Why do you care so much?" Lexi cocked her head. "Is this some sort of weird way of hitting on me? Do you want to drag me back to your sex dungeon?"

Marius sucked in a breath.

"Now I'm the one feeling threatened. He's catcalling me." Lexi pointed at me and turned to Brittany Dawn. "I want to file an incident report."

"I think we're done with this conversation," Brittany Dawn said,

snapping the employee handbook closed.

“Agreed,” Marius said.

The women filed out.

“Why did Anthym hire someone so unhinged and sulky?” I complained, glaring through the glass as my secretary and the HR director argued with Lexi.

She finally sat down on a chair, crossing her arms and kicking her feet.

Like a child. An annoying, whiny child. Why is she so short?

“I guess we need to give her a severance.”

“Dude, are you kidding me? You can’t fire her.” Marius was appalled. “Not after that. That was a complete shit show. What’s wrong with you? Normally you have it more together than this.”

“It wasn’t that bad, was it?” I said.

My lawyer barked out a laugh. “I wish I’d recorded it. Actually wait, no, I don’t. She could sue or talk.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes ...” Marius hesitated then plowed on. “But it might look ... well ... with your family history,” he said delicately.

I let out another strangled growl.

“Fine.”

“Lexi fetches your lunch and runs errands. You won’t see her; she answers to Anthym. Just forget she exists,” Marius advised me.

I took another swallow of scalding tea, my hand burning as I gripped the hot mug.

“All right. She stays. For now.”

LEXI

Should I have back-talked in the meeting?

No, but if I was going to be fired, I was taking Mr. Richmond down with me.

The door to the CEO's office opened, and the lawyer stepped out then walked over to my chair of shame.

When Mr. Richmond had this office designed, he must have wanted everything to be made for tall people. It was like working in the land of the giants. Sure, the chairs might be comfortable for someone almost seven feet tall, but for me, the chairs were way too big.

Stop swinging your feet.

One of my heels slipped off and fell to the floor with a loud *thunk*.

Marius gave me a curious look then turned to Brittany Dawn.

"We aren't going to fire her."

"Obviously," the HR director said, disgusted. They both looked over to Mr. Richmond, still pacing in his office.

Marius sighed.

"I'll just give her a write-up," Brittany Dawn said finally.

"I don't know why they didn't just fire you," Anthym railed when Brittany Dawn went back to her office to add a note to my permanent record. "You're a mess, your clothes are undone, and you wore this shirt twice last week. You need to go shopping."

I hastily buttoned up my shirt.

At my six-month review, I had been planning on asking for a raise, but that clearly wasn't going to happen. A part of me wished I actually had been

fired, just so I wouldn't have to endure Grayson Richmond breathing down my neck, insulting me, calling me into his office to yell at me, and then siccing his lawyer on me.

"Are you being fired?" McKenna asked me, eyes wide, when I returned to my stool.

"Stay of execution."

She squealed and hugged me. "You should be happy; that's great news!"

"I know, I know." I took a breath. "Unfortunately, I can't—literally can't—afford to lose this job, so I'm stuck with him."

"We're going to do drinks to celebrate," McKenna said firmly.

"Drinks?" Anthym slammed her agenda on the desk. "You're not doing drinks. You're going back to Mr. Richmond's penthouse to do your job." She clapped her hands. "Go. And stay out of his underwear drawer."



"HAPPY TUESDAY!" I greeted Nasr, the concierge at the tallest, fanciest residential tower in Manhattan.

He offered me a steaming mug of spiced chai tea along with some cookies.

"What a treat! You're extra chipper today. I hope that means your son did well on his exams."

The concierge's face lit up. "Top of his class," Nasr bragged.

"You must be so proud." I gave him a hug.

"He just has to figure out which college to go to. Oh, this is such a weight off my chest," the concierge said with a breathless laugh.

"It's because he has such an awesome father."

"My son appreciated your positive notes," he told me then scooped more cookies on my plate.

"I don't need all of those; we should leave some for other people."

Nasr dropped his voice.

"Hardly anyone is in residence, and when they are, they don't want cookies because sweets mess up their diet. Most people who bought these condos are only in New York a few days a month. Mr. Richmond is the only resident I see regularly."

"I can't imagine spending tens of millions of dollars on a condo I'm not

going to live in.” I shook my head.

When I had decided to move to Manhattan, I sort of had an idea of how billionaires lived that was mainly compiled from all the romance books I read. However, books hadn’t given me the up-close-and-personal view of what it really meant to be a billionaire.

You could have anything you wanted. Literally anything.

And Grayson Richmond wanted to lord over us peons in a penthouse located at the very top of a tower.

The private elevator dinged when it let me off at the penthouse level. I walked through the mostly empty space. It was devoid of personality. It didn’t even look like a staged home; it looked like a half-empty museum. In one vast room, called the grand salon, was a single gray bench that looked at a white-on-white giant canvas that hung on one wall. The casual living room didn’t even have a TV.

The study was the only room that had somewhat of a personality. It had a view over the city and a glass door leading out to the terrace. One wall held a bookcase filled with books. There wasn’t anything fun or spicy, just a lot of the literary classics, all bound in leather, along with a number of historical biographies, several antique busts, and other knickknacks.

I climbed up the curving wood staircase in the center of the empty penthouse, pretending like I was a princess floating up to her castle in the clouds, Mr. Richmond’s freshly dry-cleaned suit over my shoulder. The two-story floor-to-ceiling glass offered the most expensive view in the city. The tower was so tall that we were practically in the clouds. On a particularly overcast day, it really did feel like I was in a crystal palace in the sky.

The dry-cleaned suit was transferred to one of the identical wood hangers in the closet. I would let it air out for twenty-four hours in the airing vestibule of the master closet, because when you had a closet the size of someone’s house—and really, what man needed a closet that size?—why not have a vestibule for your closet? Then I would transfer the suit into the large closet with the rest of the identical suits.

I stroked the luxurious fabric. Normally I liked my men like I liked my Disney princes—silent and wearing fancy military dress. A suit was close enough, especially the way Grayson wore it. If only he didn’t have such a terrible personality, I might actually fantasize about him falling in love with me.

“Like I want anything to do with you,” I said to his closet.

I scowled at the row of identical dark suits hanging in the rich-mahogany-paneled closet. Then I took out my notepad.

Lightly perfumed, the champagne-colored paper had pink flowers pressed in it. In a sparkly pink gel pen, I wrote:

You have amazing style. A man who knows how to wear a suit is a gift.

So there.

I added smiley faces and hearts on it just for good measure then stuck the note in with his cuff links.

I wasn't going to hide my light under a bushel just because Mr. Richmond couldn't handle people doing nice things for him.

I put on the soundtrack to *The Little Mermaid* and twirled through his bedroom, which held only a bed, a dresser, and a single nightstand. Mr. Richmond didn't even have any fancy throw pillows on his bed. Just a dark-wood headboard and a dark comforter. Strangest of all, there were no curtains anywhere in the bedroom. Shoot, there weren't any curtains on any of the windows in the soulless penthouse. I supposed if your penthouse was located higher than everyone else's, you didn't really need curtains.

Or maybe Mr. Richmond was just an exhibitionist.

Or a narcissist.

Or just a weirdo. The man didn't have any carpet. Anywhere. Just cold, hard slate floors.

"His feet must be freezing in the morning when he gets up," I sang over the music. I twirled through the master bedroom and out into the wide hallway that overlooked the floor below.

"My beautiful subjects," I announced to the empty penthouse as I descended the staircase, pretending like I was wearing a big ball gown.

Was this professional behavior for the assistant to the assistant to the secretary?

Nope. Anthym would have a fit if she knew what I was doing when I was alone in Mr. Richmond's penthouse.

I dipped into a slightly shaky curtsey in front of the fireplace. It was gas, not wood burning, but you could still roast a marshmallow in it. Not that I had. I was tempted though.

I missed beach bonfires, and I missed the ocean.

I pulled the massive glass sliding door open and slipped out onto the terrace. The Brazilian hardwood decking was as empty and as devoid of

furniture as the living room. One single sad teak lounge chair huddled at the edge of the pool.

The pool water rippled with the breeze. It wasn't super windy though. The terrace was protected all around by ten-foot-tall panes of glass. Twice a month the window cleaners came out to make sure they were extra clean.

I went to one corner of the terrace and looked out.

I wasn't admiring the skyline. I was looking out at the ocean. We were so high up you could see the Atlantic, an expanse of blue past the gray of the city.

I closed my eyes, imagining that I was back in Florida, my toes digging in the hot sand instead of pinched in cheap plastic heels. It was warm there, and the sounds of the sea soothed me.

I opened my eyes before I could start crying from homesickness.

"At least you can see the ocean," I reminded myself. "Let's think positive and count our blessings."

Maybe I would feel better when it was warmer.

Winter in Manhattan had been, well, extremely unpleasant actually.

During the summer, when Mr. Richmond was off on a business trip, I was so buying an inflatable unicorn and using that pool.

"Speaking of blessings," I reminded myself when I walked into the kitchen that was literally bigger than my parents' house and in which I had never seen a single scrap of evidence that Mr. Richmond had ever cooked anything ever.

I opened the large fridge and regarded the bounty within.

It was Tuesday, and on Tuesdays I cleaned out the fridge.

I grabbed my backpack. Out came multiple reinforced reusable grocery bags and three insulated bags. Yesterday I had pre-stashed ice packs in Mr. Richmond's freezer. He hadn't noticed them in the past three months, so I felt safe with my plan.

Remember what I said about billionaires getting whatever they wanted?

Mr. Richmond wanted his fridge stocked with food—veggies, fancy cuts of meat, fruit, organic yogurt, milk, cheese, and other goods from those fancy imported food stores that make you wonder if they're some sort of money laundering front, because who in their right mind could afford to shop there? Then every single Tuesday afternoon, he would have it all thrown away and new food brought in Wednesday morning.

My boss never ate this food. In fact, he had a chef who cooked. Sure,

sometimes the chef would use ingredients in the fridge, but I always did an inventory on Wednesday, and a week later, ninety percent of the food would still be there.

“And he wants to throw all of this food away,” I said indignantly as I cleaned out the fridge.

Anthym had been very clear when I started that I was not to let anyone take this food home. Mr. Richmond wasn’t going to use it but also didn’t want anyone to have it.

“Dingleberry. Like there aren’t needy people in this city.”

Anthym had even said that Mr. Richmond expressly wanted one of his assistants to throw out the food because he thought the cleaners would take it home.

“You can’t trust the cleaners,” Anthym had lectured me on my first day on the job. “They’re shiftless. Just like that concierge. They’re all in cahoots.”

Well, they couldn’t trust me either.

“Oh my goodness, he has scallops,” I said, swooning as I pulled all of the groceries out of the fridge. “It’s a crime to throw these away.” I sniffed a huge slab of smoked salmon. “Delectable.”

The fancy cuts of meat went into one of the freezer bags. The herbs were carefully packed in a canvas grocery sack, and the fancy cheese and dairy went into another cold storage sack.

“Be still my heart,” I cried when I saw several familiar red boxes.

They were from Alessio, the premier, most expensive and exclusive restaurant in the city. In the largest box was handmade pasta in a rich cream sauce. The next held a duck confit and roasted potatoes that would crisp up nicely in my oven. The third held a slightly limp Caesar salad, and the fourth held a slice of my favorite dessert—ten-layer cake with chocolate ganache, hazelnut mousse, raspberry glaze, and raspberry mousse.

I wanted to sit there on the floor right then and take a huge bite of the cake.

“You’re on the clock,” I reminded myself.

I wouldn’t put it past Anthym to perform a surprise checkup now that she had me in her crosshairs.

I hastily stashed the takeout boxes in one of the canvas sacks and then set to work wiping out the fridge, prepping it for the next round of expensive groceries that Grayson Richmond wouldn’t touch.

GRAYSON

I dreaded and looked forward to Tuesdays, though with Lexi it was more on the dread side today.

I waited around after the nonfiring, watching as the hour hand moved to one thirty. Then I headed across town.

It was after the lunch rush, and Alessio wasn't crowded. I nodded to the hostess and headed to the bar to place my lunch order.

There was one specific spot I liked to stand at, because at that spot the mirror was perfectly angled to offer a clear view of the round booth by the corner window.

She was there. She was always there on Tuesdays.

No, not the redhead, thank god.

I scowled, thinking of Lexi—her messy clothes, her unruly red hair, leaving me notes in my underwear drawer.

“Good to see you again, sir,” the bartender greeted me.

Behind me, I heard her laugh.

“Could I have today's menu?” I asked in a low voice.

He slipped the embossed cardstock across the bar to me.

“Take your time.”

I didn't actually study the menu. I wasn't going to eat what I'd order anyway.

Isn't this the mark of insanity, to do the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result?

“I'll have the spinach salad,” I said when the bartender came back over, “the baked chicken, and the risotto.”

“You know,” the bartender said, “you can call ahead to order, and we can have it waiting for your assistant. You must be a busy man.”

He seemed slightly apprehensive when I frowned, thinking of Lexi at the restaurant, with her toxic positivity, glitter, and the slightly too-tight clothes.

I relaxed my features.

“I never know what I want to order until I arrive,” I murmured, not wanting to draw attention to myself. “But thank you for the suggestion.”

I waited and watched the mirror while the chef prepared the food, twisting a glass of water around on the coaster.

“COULD you add dessert to the order?” I asked the server when he came out with the food.

At the table behind me, the children were laughing as the grandfather told a silly joke.

“Yes, sir. Any preference?”

“Whatever is on hand.”

“Cake? Cannoli?”

“Cake is fine.” Anything was fine. This was just an excuse to remain a little longer in the sumptuous space.

The clock ticked as one of the servers carefully cut a slice of chocolate cake for me.

“Thank you,” I said. “Oh, and could you add desserts for that table over there? Put it on my card.” I inclined my head slightly. “Just please tell them that it was compliments of the chef, not me.”

“Of course, sir.”

I lingered as I pretended to calculate the tip in my head and signed the receipt. Then I collected the bag of food I wasn’t going to eat and exited the restaurant.

“See you next week!” the hostess chirped.

The experience had left me drained. I set the food in the back of my car and sat there in silence.

“You still have more items on your list,” I said aloud. I wanted to go home. I was exhausted. But it wasn’t like I’d be able to sleep.

I turned on the car and wrapped a navy scarf around my neck and jaw.

The women’s shelter was a few blocks away on a narrow street. Outside several children were playing with Pokémon cards. I shifted the box I was

carrying.

“You guys like Pokémon?”

The kids were immediately suspicious of me.

Good.

“I’ve got some here,” I told them, “to donate. You can ask the staff if you can have first pick.”

The kids perked up and raced ahead of me inside the shelter, talking excitedly about the cards they hoped they’d get.

“Just here with a donation,” I told the harried staff member who was trying to calm a sobbing woman. I set the box on the counter. “Some toys and games for the kids.”

Small ones that a child could keep safe in a modest bag and protect so the toys wouldn’t get left behind or broken.

“Also have Visa gift cards,” I said gruffly, “for anyone who needs one.” I handed her another, smaller box filled with plastic cards.

“Look at all of this!” the staff member exclaimed as she opened the larger box for the bouncing kids.

They dug in the box while the younger woman lifted the lid off of the smaller box and pulled out one of the prepaid Visa cards, five hundred dollars each, and sucked in a breath.

“This is this is very generous. Are you sure?”

Her eyes searched mine, probably wondering why anyone would randomly donate that much money outside of Christmas or Thanksgiving.

“I just like to give back,” I said with a shrug.

“Can I get your name so I can give you a receipt for taxes?” she called. “If you wait a minute, I can get the form filled out.”

“I don’t need it,” I said, already leaving, scarf still in place obscuring my features.

The children were laughing in delight behind me as I left the building.

The car smelled like chocolate when I climbed back in. I cruised through the narrow city streets, taking the long way back to my penthouse, feeling like I was having to return to prison, wishing something, anything, would happen to keep me from having to go back to that glass cage.

“Better than a concrete cell,” I reminded myself. “Turn that frown upside down.”

I waited a beat then snarled.

That was what had been written on one of the notes I had found over the

last few months in my penthouse. They were festooned with stickers, covered in glitter that got all over my clothes, and smelled like a teenage girl's perfume.

Figures that the messy, obnoxious redhead on my payroll had written them.

I needed to make her quit. It was too much for a man to have to endure. Anyone who had that positive of an outlook on life could not be trusted. Life was endless suffering. At least for people like me.

I swung the black sedan around a corner then cursed the distracting thoughts. I had turned on Colonial Street, where people sold all sorts of knockoff goods, like clothes, purses, and hats. It was teeming with people even though it was quickly getting dark.

Most people were dressed like true New Yorkers in blacks, charcoals, and navy jackets, heads down, steely eyes, wary body language. Except for one young woman wearing a bright-yellow jacket, chunky pink sneakers, and a sparkly blue sequined purse.

I slowed the car to a crawl, scowl setting in my face, tensing my forehead, the back of my shoulders tight.

She had no sense of self-preservation.

And yet, I couldn't stop staring at Lexi, the bright yellow of her coat like a flower poking through the ashes of a wildfire. I was very aware that I was in dangerous territory, especially since she worked for me. But it was like when my father first took me outside. Before then, my whole world had been underground—crowded and smelly, rotting plywood boards over clerestory windows—then one day, I'd seen the sun, so bright my eyes watered. I could still remember the way it had warmed my pale skin. It hurt to look at it, but I couldn't turn away.

I wasn't the only one.

There was a man hovering near one of the stalls, and he seemed too interested in Lexi.

LEXI

“**Y**ou are a godsend!” my downstairs neighbor cried when she opened the door to see me standing there.

Maria and her sister, her elderly mother, and her sister’s disabled twin boys shared a small one-bedroom apartment in my apartment building. I knew that money was tight for them since Maria’s sister couldn’t work and the boys needed a lot of medical care. The food I brought by every week was a big help for their family.

“Bless you, bless you, and bless your boss. What a wonderful man, that Mr. Richmond.” Maria’s mother hobbled over to me balancing on her cane.

I grimaced. “That’s a reach. My boss doesn’t know I’m giving this food away. He’d be pretty angry if he knew.”

“He would be happy if he knew how much this helped us,” the elderly woman insisted.

Maria started crying when I handed her the package of steak.

“And butter! We don’t need to go grocery shopping this week.”

Every week when I made my delivery, they were effusive with thanks. Nothing warmed the soul more than doing a good deed. Not that I needed any extra incentive to steal-slash-rehome food from Grayson Richmond.

“I can’t give you all the eggs,” I said apologetically. “Sheila’s husband isn’t supposed to eat meat, and I was going to let her have some eggs for him.”

“Of course, take all these eggs.” Maria handed me the carton. “The steak is plenty for us.”

“Take some chicken too,” I said, stuffing the package in her hands. “I

know the boys like it.”

While all the food Mr. Richmond ordered was way too much for one person, it didn’t go as far as I would like for the residents in the narrow, dark 1920s apartment building.

It was much cooler on paper than in reality. The hex-tile mosaic in the foyer was blackened with soot from the decades when Manhattan was heated by coal. The wall covering was grungy, and the elevator hadn’t worked since the nineties. McKenna and I regularly had to assist elderly residents up and down the stairs.

“I better go take these up while they’re still cold. You all enjoy!”

The lights in the narrow stairwell flickered as I headed upstairs to pass out free food to several elderly neighbors. Manhattan was expensive, and everyone was appreciative of the food, as it would help them make ends meet.

“I hoped you save some of that booty for us!” Grenadine called as I used my shoulder to push into the small studio apartment I shared with McKenna and her grandmother.

“Scallops, cheese, some chicken thighs,” I said as she and McKenna unpacked the now mostly empty bags.

“Any booze?” asked Grenadine, who did not want to be referred to as Grandma, because she wasn’t old goddamn it, and we could just call her Grenadine, so named on account of her father being a bartender.

“Mr. Richmond’s going to notice if one of his eight-hundred-dollar bottles of wine walks off. Not to mention, Anthym already has it out for me,” I said as I unpacked the bags. “I keep expecting her to pop out of the toilet to yell at me about not curtsying low enough to our esteemed CEO.”

Reptilian nails scratched on the linoleum floor, and Gizzy, my rescue iguana, trudged out from under the bunk bed, his five-foot-long body swaying with each giant step.

“How is mommy’s big boy?” I cooed at the iguana. I’d saved him during a hurricane when I was younger, and we had been best friends ever since. We both loved to eat, we both liked to chill with a Disney movie, and neither of us liked Manhattan all that much—Gizzy because it was cold, and me because I had the worst boss in the world.

“Do you want a treat?” The large blue iguana tipped his head back, and I scratched his throat.

“I swear every time I see that thing, he gets bigger and bigger,” McKenna

remarked.

“It’s like having my own dragon,” I said gleefully.

Gizzy nuzzled me, seeking warmth.

I grabbed a knife and cut up a zucchini for him while he paced around my feet, tail thumping against the peeling cabinet doors.

“You need to start sucking up to whoever is doing Mr. Richmond’s shopping,” Grenadine said, inspecting the shrimp. “You know, give him one of those emotional blow jobs.”

“My compliments are wholesome,” I protested.

“McKenna told me all about how you sexually propositioned the big boss in the park. I’m a terrible influence on you.” Grenadine cackled. “Don’t make that face. I’m the one who’s going to sleep with the building owner to keep them from raising the rents.”

“This is a rent-controlled apartment building,” I said automatically. “They can’t raise rents above city-prescribed levels.”

“Just you wait; they’ll find a way.”

“Let’s try to think positively,” I said. “You sound like our boss.”

“I’d do your boss,” Grenadine hollered.

“I wouldn’t,” I muttered.

I set the leftovers down on the cot that I used as a bed.

“I can’t believe Anthym is still letting you clean out the fridge,” McKenna marveled as she scooped the potatoes onto a metal tray, dropping one down for Gizzy, who was basically a walking garbage disposal. “She never let me clean out his fridge.”

“I can’t believe he doesn’t eat any of this,” I said, taking a bite of the cake because, hey, I’d had a hard day and I’d walked up all those stairs. “A meal at Alessio costs more than my rent.”

“One man’s trash is another woman’s treasure,” McKenna quipped, stealing a bite.

“I think Anthym is trying to show Mr. Richmond”—I spat out the name—“that she’s more than just a gopher. I think she’s trying to make him think that she’s totally wife material, that she can be a good corporate spouse.”

“You think?”

Grenadine scoffed as she started washing the arugula. “Women like her? I bet the only reason she took that job was to get her shot at snagging Grayson Richmond. I used to work with girls like that back in the secretary pool. Always angling for one of the men in upper management. They would time it

with their fertility so they'd get pregnant on date number three."

"Yikes."

"Can't imagine anything would be worth carrying the spawn of Satan." I scooped the duck confit into a pan on the stove and the pasta in another.

The studio apartment was too small for a microwave. I'd found one in a dumpster, but the electrical circuit had blown out when I'd tried to plug it in, so we heated food the old-school way, according to Grenadine, like they did in the seventies using a plate with tinfoil on top.

The steam keeps the food nice and moist, I told myself. Every cloud has a silver lining. Every single cloud.

Even the depressing cloud named Grayson Richmond?

Even him.

"Who wants a corporate robot?" Grenadine added as the apartment filled with the mouthwatering smell of duck-fat-fried potatoes. "Me? I'm angling for a hockey player. You know, one of those big dumb brutes with a cock the size of an eggplant."

I crossed my legs and winced.

Grenadine patted me. "You're making that face because you're still a virgin. Just you wait."

"Grenadine, you're not going to find a hockey player," McKenna said with a groan.

"She might. She just has to believe in herself," I reminded my friend.

"Damn right. Dream big. You'd be surprised. Older women are very popular on porn right now."

"La la la!" I stuck my fingers in my ears.

"Branch out, Lexi. You can't get off on a Disney movie," Grenadine lectured me.

The potatoes were sizzling in the oven, and the duck confit was steaming on the stove. The studio apartment was cozy and warm. Who cared about having a huge penthouse with a pool? Mr. Richmond's penthouse would never feel homey, even if he did lose his mind and have all the fireplaces lit.

McKenna cleared off the card table and dished out the leftovers.

"Damn," Grenadine said after taking a bite. "I think I just orgasmed."

Alessio's food was amazing—salty, fatty, melt-in-your-mouth bombs of deliciousness.

"I don't know why anyone would want to be a billionaire if they can order food like this every week—shoot every day—but be so desensitized to

the joys of life that they can't even appreciate it," I mused. "What kind of way is that to live?"

"I don't mind being desensitized if I get to live in a fancy-schmancy penthouse and have people bring me anything I want when I snap my fingers," Grenadine argued.

"I would just be glad not to have to wear business casual clothes ever again." McKenna sighed.

"You'd think if Mr. Richmond wanted us to look like cute little Barbie dolls, he'd give us a clothing allowance," I complained.

I ate my last potato then scraped the gravy off the plate with my fork.

"I can't believe Anthym had the nerve to call me out about repeating outfits. I wash them—well, sometimes," I said to McKenna's expression. "And it's cold right now anyway, so that means you don't sweat as much."

"Maybe you could buy a few more outfits," McKenna said delicately.

"I have clothes."

And I did.

"That was how this whole mess started. I could be flying under the radar right now repeating outfits and leaving anonymous notes in my boss's underwear drawer. But oh no, I needed to try to tempt fate and buy pants a size too small."

"Pants especially," Grenadine said sagely. "That's just asking for trouble."

"Not that Anthym would allow us to wear them," McKenna complained.

"Instead I have Grayson Richmond convinced I'm going to single-handedly destroy the sanctity of Richmond Electric and Anthym convinced that all the ovaries on Manhattan are going to implode if I don't do my feminine duty and pay more attention to my appearance."

"This is why body positivity is so important," McKenna said, tapping her fork on her empty plate for emphasis. "If you loved the skin you were in, you wouldn't have been out there running at the butt crack of dawn."

I checked my Minnie Mouse watch.

"Hot date?" Grenadine waggled her eyebrows.

"As if. I need to not lose my job, and that means I need a shirt that stays closed."



WHILE MANHATTAN WAS NO FLORIDA, and especially no Disney World, I firmly believed that anywhere you went had something special to offer; you just had to find the inherent good in the place. Then you were home.

Colonial Street was where I felt at home. It wasn't just that you could buy anything there at a price that would make Dollar General blush, and I do mean anything. That's where I got my laundry detergent and toys for Gizzy, not to mention work clothes. If you went at a certain time, locals would be selling homemade snacks for a little extra income. Tamales, Jamaican patties, lángos, any street food that was served quick and piping hot could be had on Colonial Street for a fraction of restaurant prices.

"You can't really count Alessio as dinner," I told myself as I bit into a piping-hot roll filled with smoked brisket. "We all split a meal, so it was more of an appetizer. Besides, you're not supposed to go shopping on an empty stomach."

I bought a hot spiced chai from a couple of teenage girls out with their mom and sipped it as I wandered down the street. Cars crawled by, sometimes stopping to call out to a vendor to make a purchase.

This was pure New York City. Everyone in my small Florida town had been aghast when I'd announced I was moving to Manhattan, but this here was community. It didn't feel like being in a big anonymous city at all.

It was unbelievable that Grayson Richmond was missing all of this sitting in his fancy penthouse.

I suddenly felt guilty.

This wasn't who I was. Mr. Richmond clearly needed someone to help bolster his spirit. I shouldn't leave him to wallow in his grumpiness. I needed to bring him out of his shell. That was the type of good deed Lexi Collins liked to pride herself in.

But he was just such a drag.

I'll just leave him some extra motivational notes, I decided.

Then thought, *And I'll buy him samosas.*

One samosa. Uno. Even if he didn't deserve it.

I doubled back through the crowd. The streetlights were on, and I wove through the shoppers, trying to find the samosa seller.

I peeked down one of the alleys, thinking I heard the seller's music. Colonial Street was located in one of the older areas of New York where the grid was a nest of alleys and back passages squeezed between buildings.

The air in the alley was chilly and damp.

Maybe this was a sign from the universe that Mr. Richmond hasn't yet earned a samosa.

"You looking for something?"

I turned. A man was blocking my exit.

"Just the samosa stand, but I think I changed my mind," I told him with a smile.

He didn't move.

"It's a great night out, isn't it?" I said, feeling slightly apprehensive.

Mr. Richmond's negative attitude is rubbing off on you. This isn't the 1980s. New York is perfectly safe.

The man took a step toward me.

GRAYSON

The man was approaching Lexi.

I knew it.

I knew she was going to get hurt or assaulted or kidnapped.

I looked for a place to pull over the car. I finally said fuck it and double-parked in the middle of the street. Horns honked as I stopped the car abruptly, threw open the door, and jumped out.

An angry man in a van yelled at me out the passenger window, but I ignored him, only having eyes for Lexi.

“Love that color orange on you,” Lexi was saying to the guy who was so obviously dangerous, so clearly someone who meant to do her harm.

She is insane, and you are insane to involve yourself.

But what could I do? This was what I’d vowed to prevent. Now was my chance to actually make amends, fix something.

“Come out with me,” the guy was saying.

If she agreed, I was going to lose it, not in an, I’ll-say-something-snarky way but in an I’m-going-to-jail sort of way.

“I’m busy,” Lexi chirped. “Thank you for the offer. I’m sure you’ll find the right person. You have a beautiful soul.”

No sense of self-preservation.

“You can’t dis me.” The guy lunged at her.

“You fucking piece of shit!” I shouted.

The crowd scattered, sensing a fight about to go down.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” Lexi yelled. Well, it sounded more like a squeak from one of those novelty rubber chickens.

“You better not be talking to my girl,” I said laser focused on the creep. I was going to kill him for touching her.

“Oh shit, man. I’m sorry.” The guy held up his hands.

“I am not his girl,” Lexi argued, trying to push around me.

I grabbed the back of her yellow jacket.

“And you, sir, need to respect a woman when she says no!” Lexi yelled at the creep.

“You better get her under control,” the guy demanded.

“No one is getting me under control.” Lexi pulled out a Taser, brandishing it.

Her attacker raised his arm like he was going to slap her.

I moved toward him, grabbed him by the throat, and lifted him up. His legs kicked as he squirmed.

I brought him to my face and slowed down my movement, channeling my father when he was at his most frightening, when he had us all cowering in a sludge of fear and self-loathing in front of him.

“If I ever see you again, I will skin you.”

I dropped him, and the guy scrambled along the dirty ground away from me.

“I was just playin’. I didn’t mean anything,” he choked out, face still red.

I didn’t say a word.

The creep swallowed hard then scrambled to his feet to stumble off.

I turned slowly to Lexi.

“I told you,” I said softly. I could still feel my father’s anger wrapped around me. I expected to see the same fear I knew all too well from my mother’s face, my brothers’ faces, my own.

Lexi didn’t seem fazed or scared. Instead she seemed pissed.

“I don’t need you to white knight in here swinging your hot dog around with both hands, trying to prove a point.”

“A hot dog?”

“I can take care of myself. I’m not some dumb small-town girl; I have a Taser.”

“It’s covered in stickers.”

“No reason it can’t have a little flair,” she said. “See, look, there’s Cinderella. Oops!” She yelped when the Taser shocked me.

I strangled a curse then slapped the pink Taser out of her hand.

“This isn’t even charged.”

“Jiminy Cricket. I knew I forgot something,” she muttered.

“I’m taking you home right now.”

“I’m here working.”

“I’m literally your boss,” I exploded, the cold, quiet anger giving way to the safer, hotter fury. “I never told you to be out here in the middle of the night wandering around dark alleys.” I grabbed her hand.

“I have pepper spray,” she warned, twisting in my grasp.

“And yet somehow I am not intimidated,” I replied as I hauled her toward my car.

“I’m supposed to be shopping; I need to find a new shirt.”

One that closed over her giant tits?

Stop it.

I mentally slapped myself.

“It’s dark and dangerous. You can’t handle yourself alone.”

“Guess you’re my new shopping buddy, because I was ordered to buy new clothes that are befitting the assistant of the assistant of the secretary of Manhattan’s most stuck-up, negative-Nancy billionaire,” she shot at me.

“I am not shopping with you.”

I picked Lexi up around the waist and hauled her the final few feet to my car.

“I’m telling HR on you,” she threatened as I practically threw her in the back seat and slammed the door shut. She brightened when she saw the paper sack. “Yum, is that cake?”

“You can’t have any,” I said automatically as she reached over the passenger seat.

“I won’t tell HR or hot-stuff McLawyer that you were manhandling me if you let me have the cake.”

Her backside was practically in my face as she rummaged for the food in the bag.

I let out a breath, trying to ease my grip on the steering wheel.

What if I hadn’t been there? What if I had arrived too late? What if—

She’s safe now.

“Just take the whole bag,” I told her with a sigh.

“Score!” Lexi and the bag retreated to the back seat.

“Best deal ever.” The paper sack rustled as she dug around for the cake.

“No, a better deal would be if you had extorted me for money.”

She wrinkled her nose.

“That’s mean. You shouldn’t blackmail people.”

“You just blackmailed me,” I reminded her. “So that makes you a hypocrite.”

“No, that makes me someone who just got her free cake early,” she said happily.

“Your what?”

“Er ... never mind. Dang, the fanciest restaurant in Manhattan, and they can’t even give you so much as a plastic fork.”

She leaned down and took a big bite out of the top of the slice of cake.

I was so startled I almost ran into a parked car, earning me a litany of curses from said car’s owner and horn honks from the cars behind me.

“Don’t do that,” I said sharply.

“Then keep your eyes on the road. Honestly, you rich guys you spend all your money on fancy cars and then don’t know how to drive them.”

I ground my teeth together.

“Where do you live?”

“You can just take me back to the office.”

“I will not. I’m taking you home.”

“The office.”

“Your apartment.”

I glared at her reflection in the rearview mirror. She had chocolate frosting all over her freckled cheeks.

Her tongue darted out to lick at it.

I swallowed. I did not find her attractive one iota.

You have to logically admit that it is the slightest bit sexy.

Thought killed, assassinated, nuked from orbit,

“Can you turn on the radio? It’s going to be a long drive ... back to the office.”

“I like the silence.”

“You can’t drive in silence. That’s sacrilegious.”

“It’s my car.”

“I’m your captive prisoner here in the back seat.”

My stomach clenched. I suddenly felt like I was going to throw up.

“Is this one of those fancy cars where I can connect my phone?” Lexi asked.

“No.”

“Yes, it is. I can see the logo right there.”

She leaned over to point.

“Don’t unbuckle your seatbelt.”

There was blessed silence in the back seat.

Then the car radio made a beeping noise I’d never heard before. Suddenly the sound of singing African wildlife blared at an eardrum-rupturing volume from the car speakers.

I banged on the dashboard, cursing whoever had decided it was a good idea to swap out honest-to-god physical buttons with a touch screen.

“I have the app on my phone, so I’m controlling the music,” Lexi yelled over the cacophony.

“Turn it off.”

The song ended. Then another equally oppressive song began, and Lexi sang along, not in key, and not very well.

This is hell. I’m in hell.

“Sometimes if you’re having a bad day, you can sing and it all goes away.”

“Just tell me where your apartment is,” I said slowing down as traffic stopped.

“Take a left here,” she said.

I put on my blinker to try to merge.

As soon as she saw I was distracted, Lexi shoved the door open.

“You didn’t put the child locks on!” She took off in that same awkward run down the street, disappearing in the crowd. Her phone was still connected to my car stereo, and singing circus animals mocked me.

“Don’t follow her,” I told myself firmly, finally figuring how to turn off the radio. “Sometimes we have to let nature take its course.”

LEXI

“**T**his is why you never had a real boyfriend,” I reminded myself as I rode the subway into work the next morning.

The surprise leftovers had been met with cheers from McKenna and a bottle of champagne from Grenadine when I’d arrived back at my sublet studio apartment.

Why hadn’t I just let Mr. Richmond drive me home?

Because even though I loved the building, it wasn’t anywhere close to the multimillion-dollar tower he’d developed. I was, truthfully, a little embarrassed.

Don’t be embarrassed, I heard my mom’s voice in my head. Any man who talks down to you because of where you came from is not your Prince Charming.

Not that Grayson would ever be it.

“Possessive dingleberry,” I muttered as I walked into the office, carrying the bag with the padded box holding an antique marble bust that was the partner to the one already on the shelf of Mr. Richmond’s penthouse study. I’d had to really dig deep and swap up favors in order to even score a meeting with the reclusive hermit who’d had it in his collection.

I’d spent a number of long afternoons where I’d gone and visited him for tea and listened to his fascinating stories. And I wasn’t being patronizing. He was fascinating and had traveled all over the world, but shut himself in after his partner had passed away. I’d gotten the art collector hooked up with a social media account and helped him find adoring fans of his historical videos. He was delighted and had just given me the bust.

“Anthym is going to freak,” I said giddily when I set the bag on McKenna’s desk. “Maybe she’ll overlook the fact that I’m rewearing this shirt.”

“Don’t worry too much. Anthym is out,” McKenna told me. “She is closing on her new condo and has to go sign the papers.”

“Must be a super nice place if she’s letting it interfere with work,” I said. “Mr. Richmond has that big presentation today for the bigwig clients.”

“Which I’ll need your help for,” my friend said. “Anthym gave me a list.”

“This means it’s my time to shine! Ugh, if only Mr. I-Hate-Praise had just accepted the compliment and gone on with his life, this might have been my ticket to a raise,” I said with a groan.

“Just stick it out another one year and ten months, then you can safely job-hop without people thinking you’re a flight risk.”

I sighed and looked out over the floor of Richmond Electric employees below us.

“I’m literally not going to make it.”

“Let’s look on the bright side,” McKenna coaxed.

I rallied.

“On the bright side,” I said, holding up a finger, “today I get to be an actual corporate assistant, not just the courier-slash-garbage collector.”

When I had first applied for the job of assistant to the assistant to the secretary of Grayson Richmond, I’d assumed that I would be one of those cute TV show assistants, the ones who knew everyone in the office, who, when the billionaire asks her to schedule him a meeting with a powerful senator, booked the meeting for that afternoon because she gets her nails done with the senator’s daughter’s nanny.

I had imagined myself as the woman behind the curtain making everything run smoothly for Mr. Richmond—helping write his emails, managing his schedule, keeping his life ticking along perfectly and efficiently.

Instead my job consisted of menial tasks and contradictory orders from Anthym. I didn’t even get to fetch Mr. Richmond’s coffee because that was McKenna’s job. I seemed to exist solely to clean out Mr. Richmond’s fridge and act as Anthym’s punching bag.

But not today! Today I was the one who fetched the coffee.

The meeting was midafternoon. The clients were scheduled to arrive in four hours and forty-five minutes. It was also a long meeting. Because

Anthym was out of the office, that meant McKenna was planning the meeting and I would run point.

“Leave everything to me,” I said, setting out Anthym’s meeting list next to mine, which was much longer, more detailed, was color coded, and had stickers by the mega-important points.

“Wow! And here I was worrying I was going to screw up the meeting and Anthym was going to turn me into a llama,” McKenna joked.

“A snack order has been placed at the bakery down the street. They deliver. FYI, Garrett Svensson is one of the attendees. I stalked his girlfriend’s Instagram, and he only drinks iced coffee, no sugar, tablespoon of milk, with a plastic straw. I have an order placed for that plus extra iced coffees in case anyone else wants one, even though it is dreary and cold outside and not iced coffee weather at all. I’ve also read through Mr. Richmond’s presentation. There was a typo—no judgment, I know you reviewed it—but I fixed it.”

“Thank god.” McKenna hunched over. “Anthym would have me fired if I’d let that slip.”

“I’m going to go test the presentation system and make sure it’s ready to go with a press of a button.” I grabbed my Swiffer and a bottle of cleaner and a cloth then headed to the executive conference room, which was dominated by a long, light-colored, reclaimed-wood custom table.

“The cleaners were in there last night,” McKenna told me.

“I see dust. Mace Svensson is coming, and he’s a germophobe. He’s too polite to say anything, but Mr. Richmond needs these people on his good side. Svensson PharmaTech is a big client.”

Getting down on my hands and knees, I spritzed the chairs while McKenna ran the Swiffer on the walls. I set out a table runner on the built-in buffet area in the back of the room, just in time as the caterers carted in the snacks and drinks.

I wiped off the condensation on the iced coffees and set them in a double bowl of ice to stay cool.

“What is this?”

McKenna flinched when Grayson Richmond stalked into the conference room, ten minutes before the Svensson PharmaTech representatives were due to arrive.

“Everyone’s more friendly when their blood sugar’s up,” I trilled.

“This is a full-on buffet.”

“It’s soft pretzels and a variety dips,” I argued with him. “In Europe we would have beer and wine, but I restrained myself.”

My boss scowled. “Does Anthym know about this? She never served food at meetings.”

“Probably why everyone looks like they want to jump off the mezzanine after coming out of one of those conferences,” I retorted.

“Just because you can’t act like a professional,” Mr. Richmond shot at me, “doesn’t mean that everyone else has a difficult time.”

“You’re hosting people,” I argued, feeling annoyed. “You have to provide food and caffeine. It’s three in the afternoon. People are going to be dead. Considering you’re an antisocial recluse who doesn’t have any home training or know how to act in public, maybe you can pretend to be the rational businessman and defer to the person who does actually know how to talk to strangers, who does know how to make people feel comfortable and welcome, who does know how to be a good hostess, and who does actually interact with people on a regular basis beyond just barking orders.”

My voice only sounded a little squeaky at the end of the rant.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop. Mr. Richmond took a step toward me.

McKenna’s mouth was hanging open, head swiveling back and forth between the two of us.

Our boss loomed over me, teeth bared. “Get rid of that food, and especially get rid of all those iced coffees.”

“No.” I crossed my arms. “I’m right. This is going to make the meeting go more smoothly. It’s a nice personal touch. You should count your blessings that you have wonderful assistants here to support you and make sure you look good for your big meeting. Take a moment to find joy in the small things, Mr. Richmond. It will help your blood pressure.” I patted him on the arm, and he stared down at my hand.

“I think,” McKenna said slowly, “that the clients are starting to arrive.”

Mr. Richmond turned on his heel, tugging sharply at the lapels of his suit jacket as he headed to the elevator to greet the first wave of clients.

McKenna fanned herself.

“I’m so nervous, and I don’t even have to talk to anyone. I just sit in the corner and take notes. I don’t know why you’re so calm.”

“I love meeting new people!”

Whenever Mr. Richmond hosted a meeting filled with rich and powerful

people, Anthym would always freak out, insisting that everything be perfect, though that didn't include snacks. She insisted we act like the King of England was visiting the office.

"Don't even look at them in the eye," she would order me before a meeting.

As if.

It didn't matter to me if you were rich—I was going to be my friendly self. I lived my life by Disney World principles: Make everyone feel welcome. If I ever had a family with lots of kids, mine was going to be the house that everyone wanted to hang out at.

I greeted the guests with a smile and a compliment no matter who they were.

"Welcome to Richmond Electric, everyone." I greeted the guests with a smile when Grayson Richmond escorted them in.

He was speaking to the CEO of Svensson PharmaTech, who was nodding along. So it wasn't like I was interrupting a big speech. Still, it earned me a dark look from my boss.

"Snacks!" one of the women exclaimed when she saw the pretzel spread.

"Just something to keep everyone's blood sugar up. We have coffee, green tea lattes, chai tea lattes, and herbal tea for people who aren't coffee drinkers."

The tendon in Mr. Richmond's neck was going to jump out and hit the wall as I poured out the frothy drinks for everyone.

"Thank god someone has some sense in this city," Garrett Svensson said in a clipped tone, grabbing two of the iced coffees from the tray.

"You can have all of them," Mace Svensson told him with a frown.

Could I be snarky and tell Garrett Svensson that Grayson Richmond wanted me to throw out his precious coffee?

Yes, yes, I could.

But that would not be professional. So I settled for flashing an extra-bright smile at Mr. Richmond.

McKenna was settling in at the back of the room to take notes while I passed out the meeting packets, notepads, and extra pens. I'd even provided a little map to let people know where the restrooms were or where they could step out to take a call if they really needed to.

Who's the best assistant in town now?

"Don't leave me," McKenna muttered when I was heading to the door. I

took a seat beside her.

Mr. Richmond wasn't looking at me, but I could feel him seething from across the room.

He's just mad he didn't think of the pretzels himself.

As someone who majored in communication and wrote her thesis on how to be authoritative without being a meanie, Mr. Richmond was, I hated to admit, a good presenter.

He didn't stumble around the presentation, nor did he sound too rehearsed. He spoke like he knew the material with the same surety as I could sing the Happy Birthday song.

His tone wasn't condescending, and he even peppered in a few choice jokes. When the Svensson PharmaTech representatives interrupted to ask a question, he was able to answer and smoothly incorporate the point into the presentation. Mr. Richmond seemed at ease but still in control.

I was mesmerized, watching the flawless performance, and the flawless man, who was wearing a charcoal wool suit that I recognized as one I'd just taken back to its home in his absurdly spacious master closet.

It wasn't just the height, the broad shoulders, and the muscular body under that suit—he had what my great-aunt had always called good Irish features. Chiseled face, straight nose, sensual mouth, and then those eyes. It wasn't fair. Green eyes like that were wasted on a man.

I have red hair; those eyes should be mine.

Green eyes locked on mine.

In the middle of his perfect presentation, Grayson Richmond faltered.

GRAYSON

People don't usually like to make eye contact with me, or if they do, then it's because they're trying to do that weird make-friends-and-influence-people bullshit.

But Lexi met my eyes, fearlessly, curiously, like she was peering into my soul.

You're being hysterical.

It was enough to throw me off my rhythm.

"And if you look at this graph, uh ..." I glanced back at the presentation.

Rookie move. You should always know exactly what's on every slide.

"This graph that ... It's our projected investment into asteroid mining to potentially supplant our rare earth material purchases, and to go after space force defense contract funding. And on the next slide ..."

I hadn't slept much last night. Again. My mind had found a new thing to obsess over besides the same old trauma. Now my brain fed my nightmares a steady supply of what-ifs of Lexi being snatched off the street by nameless, faceless ghouls.

I was losing it. Lexi was ruining not just the presentation but me.

Or maybe you were already being dragged toward the rapids before she came along and this is a correlation-versus-causation issue.

Instead of connecting visually with my audience as I made my way through the rest of the presentation, sheer force of will keeping me on track, I stared at the back of the room where Lexi was watching, a big goofy smile on her face.

When I flicked to the next slide, she shot me a double thumbs-up and

mouthed, “You’re doing great!”

The motion popped a button on her top, exposing a line of freckled cleavage.

She has freckles all over.

The thought short-circuited my brain, and I stood there, grasping at the melting strands of my presentation.

Lexi quickly flipped through her notebook. She still hadn’t buttoned her top back up, and she held up a cue card.

“Yes, we believe the non-diesel generator under development would be just the thing Svensson PharmaTech needs to ensure no interruptions during delicate chemical manufacturing processes.”

After the presentation and answering questions, I took the representatives down to our Research and Development floor to see the backup generator system.

“Nice presentation,” one of the Svensson brothers said to me.

“You just liked the food,” Garrett snapped at his younger brother.

“You’re the one who had three ice coffees.”

“I need these to function.”

I felt a twinge—of regret? Envy?—in my chest as the brothers lightly squabbled.

“I hope that you’ll consider how this new generator could be beneficial to your business,” I told the CEO.

“I’m very impressed,” Mace replied. “When are they online?”

“Still have to go through safety testing, but sometime in the next six to eight months.”

“Keep us posted.”

I felt like I was floating as I headed back to my office after seeing off the Svensson PharmaTech reps.

Normally meetings with any of the Svenssons were somewhere on the spectrum between epic disaster and firing squad, but today had gone strangely ... well, and it wasn’t even one of my better presentations.

The executive conference room was abuzz with activity. A number of employees were lining up to clean out the mound of pretzels Lexi had ordered.

I stood back and watched her, trying to understand her, deconstruct her.

The redhead was laughing and chatting with several of my employees. She somehow knew the name of and a personal fact about everyone she

talked to. Hugging several employees like they were long-lost sisters, she asked one young woman how her knitting project was going, inquired after the baby niece of a new hire, and gave another woman a hand-painted mug that read “Happy Dog Mom-iversery.”

She excused herself and came over to me.

“You did great today!”

Why can't she button her top?

“Someone is super grumpy though.” She whisked a plate in front of me. “I saved you some pretzels before the free food horde cleaned out the rest.”

She bounced up and down in those death-trap high heels, her still-unbuttoned top giving me an up-close-and-personal view to count the freckles on her chest.

Don't look down.

I took the plate from her just for an excuse as to why I might have been looking in the direction of her cleavage.

She looked down. “Crap-a-Dee-Doo-Dah.”

I couldn't help but follow the motion as she buttoned the top back up.

You need sleep. There's no way you would be with her if you were in your right mind. She's a mess and has no boundaries.

“Almost forgot.” Lexi beamed up at me and pulled out a small paper square from the pocket on her top.

“You get a sticker. Good job!” She stuck it on my suit.

I looked down with a frown at the sparkly smiling fairy that graced the charcoal lapel of my bespoke suit.

Before I could open my mouth to reprimand her, Anthym's voice rang out.

“Don't touch Mr. Richmond!”

LEXI

Being chewed out by Anthym in a normal scenario was demoralizing. Being scolded like a dumb little puppy in front of Grayson Richmond while he watched there, smug in his superiority?

Utterly humiliating.

And I just had to stand there and take it.

“You are not allowed to touch him.” Anthym reached out to snatch the glittery sticker off his lapel. It was not a cheap sticker. Mr. Richmond should be honored I gave him such a premium sticker.

“I thought *we* weren’t allowed to touch him,” I said dryly.

The secretary snatched her hand back and turned on me.

“Where is McKenna? Why did she order all this food? This is not how we do things at Richmond Electric. We do not serve food at meetings.”

At her desk, McKenna was frozen, the color drained from her face. If I couldn’t afford to get fired, McKenna really couldn’t afford to get fired. Her paycheck supported her and her grandmother.

How to break this news gently so that neither of us got fired?

“First of all, Anthym, let me just say your skin looks wonderful today. I wish I could get such a nice, even tone. And congrats on your new place. You’ve worked so hard for it, and I’m so proud of you.”

Anthym softened.

“The food was Ms. Collins’s idea,” Mr. Richmond said.

Jiminy Cricket. Way to throw a girl under the bus. And after I had given him a sticker too.

“You! You are not authorized to plan meetings. Why didn’t McKenna

stop you? Where is that useless—”

“She didn’t know; I did it behind her back,” I lied. “You were out, and I thought I’d be helpful.”

“This was a severe overstep.”

“The meeting actually went very well, and people were happy to have a snack. It wasn’t much—I didn’t want to make people sleepy, just pretzels and different schmears from this great bakery down the street. They have the cutest cat. Mr. Richmond didn’t have any complaints.”

Our boss was slowly backing away.

“Not going to defend me against an actual threat, huh?” I hissed at Mr. Richmond.

“This isn’t any of my business.” He looked mildly uncomfortable.

“This actually literally is your business.”

“I have to send some emails.”

“Fine, go back to your cage.”

Apparently I had been mistaken in thinking he had been begrudgingly mildly impressed with my efforts and hosting a meeting.

Here you were thinking he was attractive. Mr. Richmond is a spineless coward who only wants to be controlling when he thinks he can get away with it.

I never hated anyone more than I did Grayson Richmond at that moment.

“Why were you with him last evening?” Anthym demanded.

“I wasn’t. I was out shopping, just like you told me.”

“You were supposed to be finding me the bust Mr. Richmond wanted, not trying to steal my job.”

“I was just trying to help.”

“No one here wants your help,” she snapped. “You have some items on your to-do list. Get to it.”

“Already have the thank-you notes written and waiting for Mr. Richmond to sign. The bust is in a box by my desk.”

“You found it? Where is it?”

I handed Anthym the bag, glad to distract her from chewing me out about the meeting that I’d saved because, let’s be honest, who wants to sit through a two-hour-long presentation about emergency generators without a snack.

“And it’s authentic?” Anthym demanded.

“Of course!” I insisted. “I’ve been going to free lectures at the university and met this professor there who is writing a book on fairy tales throughout

history. But she does art verification on the side, and she's also a wonderful stained glass—”

“I don't care.” Anthym picked up box.

“Certificate of authenticity is in the bag,” I said as Anthym stalked off.

I sat down next to McKenna who fanned herself.

“Oh my gosh, I thought I was about to get fired. I need a drink.”

“One of the garbage collectors I said hello to this morning gave me an unopened bottle of wine someone threw out. We'll leave early and crack it open.”

“Bless you.”

“Too bad the roof deck on our building is condemned. Otherwise we could go up there and have a picnic.”

“We'll drink on the fire escape.”

“We should just go drink on Mr. Richmond's terrace.” I spat the name out. “The nerve of him.”

“That's how men like him are. The beauty is only skin deep.”

I glared across the minimalist office, through the sheet of glass separating his office from us peons.

The coward was on the phone pretending to talk to someone. I knew what he was doing. He couldn't fool me. When Mr. Richmond was actually talking to someone he paced in front of the window, not stood cross-armed at his desk.

Those green eyes flicked up and met mine.

I stuck my tongue out at him.

He recoiled.

If I had a fairy godmother, I'd, one, ask her for a job where I didn't have to wear pantyhose, and two, ask her to turn Grayson Richmond into a pumpkin.

Anthym strutted into his office to show him the bust.

“I feel so bad you took the fall for me,” McKenna said as we watched the exchange.

“You can make it up to me by tasting the wine first,” I joked.

Heels clicking on the floor, Anthym headed over to us and handed me the bag.

“You better not be planning on leaving early today.”

“Never,” I said, widening my eyes in what I hoped was an innocent look.

“We were just planning on leaving on time.”

“You need to take this to Mr. Richmond’s penthouse. Put it in his study. Then you need to clean.”

“The cleaners were there this morning, and they’re coming tomorrow,” I argued.

“They didn’t do a good enough job. I did a spot check earlier today while I was out,” Anthym replied, nose turned up. “They’re there listening to music while they work. I saw several missed spots on the baseboards. You’re going to fire them tomorrow morning and hire new cleaners.”

I blinked at her. “I can’t fire Mrs. Ortega. She’s going to be heartbroken.” If she knew I was going to be around when she was cleaning, she would bring me extra *tres leches* cakes or other goodies, and she always asked how my parents were doing. “We’re friends; she’s practically my grandmother. I can’t fire my grandmother.” My voice was rising.

“Not my problem. Mr. Richmond wants her gone. Now hurry up. You need to be done before he gets home.”

I’d thought I hated Grayson Richmond before. Now I loathed him.

“He’s a total beast, and he doesn’t even have an enchanted castle or dancing silverware to make him appealing,” I snapped as I packed up. “Fire Mrs. Ortega, who is the sweetest person ever? Mr. Richmond is a villain. He’s Maleficent and Gaston and the evil stepsisters all wrapped up into one horrible package.”

“What are you going to do?” McKenna asked.

I scowled.

“I’m not firing Mrs. Ortega. He can fire me first.”

GRAYSON

I regarded the Marcus Aurelius bust in my study.

The father of Stoicism gazed past me imperiously.

I carefully picked up the marble. It was almost two thousand years old and priceless.

I'd asked Anthym to try to find one a year ago on a whim. No one was even sure if this bust actually existed or not. Yet here it was.

Anthym had been pleased when I congratulated her on finding it but had acted coy when I'd asked her how she'd done it.

"I'm your secretary, just doing my job," she'd said then promised to have the piece safely delivered to the penthouse.

I turned it in my hands.

The stoic philosophy had helped drive me, helped focus me to be absolutely in control of every part of my life that I could, from honing my body and sharpening my mind, to making me laser focused on building my company and completing several successful developments. However, it was a lonely philosophy that preached caring about only the things you could control and ignoring the rest.

Marcus Aurelius would not have approved of Lexi and my need to control her.

"I'm not controlling; I'm not my father. I'm trying to protect her."

I should just ignore her, right? If I couldn't fire her, I should just send her off to my West Coast office and let her cater meetings and stay out of my life.

Something glittery fluttered to the floor from my chest. Had I worn that damn sticker the entire afternoon?

I carefully set the bust down on my desk and bent down to pick up the sticker.

Lexi was a distraction. But from what? I was already a billionaire and successful developer.

“You can’t lose focus. That’s how you go back to being a millionaire,” I said to the empty room.

I folded the sticker and threw it in the trash then set the bust carefully back on the bookshelf. I frowned when a bright triangle of pink poked out under the carved marble base.

Stoicism is about maximizing happiness *smiley face* not about denying the pleasures of life to win the misery Olympics. BUY SOME FURNITURE! xoxo – Marcus Aurelius

I crumpled the note and threw it in the wastebasket.

Lexi.

She was everywhere, just like her notes.

The first time I had found one of the notes, written on a square piece of bright-pink paper in loopy cursive, I had secretly been thrilled.

It was like something that happened in the books I’d loved as a child, where characters had friends or magical teachers to leave them secret notes and eventually save them from their horrible lives. I didn’t have anyone in my life who would have ever bothered to leave me a secret note. Hell, I got hundreds of emails a day. I shouldn’t want anyone to leave me letters.

Yet I couldn’t help but think of the kids in elementary school with loving parents who wrote them notes in their lunchboxes. They would roll their eyes and toss the paper in the trash.

I kept all those notes I’d found in my penthouse, wondering who they might be from. Maybe the cleaners? Though the few times I had spoken to them, we’d conversed in Spanish. I’d saved every single one in a box hidden in the secret drawer of my desk.

Then I found out they were from *her*.

I pulled open a drawer, pressed the two hidden buttons that would release the secret compartment, and pulled out a wood box. It was filled with scraps of paper and smelled pungently floral when I opened the lid, like that store at the mall that sold all those atrocious candles.

I stood up, intending to toss them all in the trash can.

Instead I pulled out the note I had crumpled, smoothed it out, then carefully placed it in the box.

Who does Lexi think she is? I had furniture. I didn't need any more furniture. Didn't want any more, didn't want to feel crowded, like I was stuffed in a cage.

I put the box of notes, still full, away. Then I settled down at my desk to manage my private venture capital firm. There was glitter on the imported leather blotter. I brushed it off.

It stuck to my hand.

"I am ignoring the things I cannot control."

I could control this investment fund. I ran many investment funds. The big one people knew about made investments in energy start-ups, nurtured them, then strongly encouraged them to sell to Richmond Electric.

No one knew about this VC firm. It wasn't on any of the TechBiz lists, and that was by design. I needed to remain anonymous so that I could help my family.

My family that hated me.

Well, I used that term loosely. I hadn't spoken to any of my five brothers since that day.

I had to help them; I owed them. Even after everything, they would always be my little brothers. So when I'd started making money, I wanted to be able to support them.

When I had turned eighteen and went to college and was finally legally in control of my finances, I'd finally been able to use what little savings I'd had to track down my younger brothers. Instead of a happy family reunion, Aaron, the second oldest, had written back and told me that I was dead to them and not to contact him or any of the rest of my brothers ever again.

I couldn't just leave them though.

Hence the VC firm.

I'd invested in all of my brothers' start-ups, and worked in the background to make sure their companies successfully launched. I ran the money through multiple accounts and financial firms to make sure it wouldn't be traced.

Now that my brothers' companies were being featured in magazines, there wasn't as much for me to do, nothing to distract me.

I wrote a few emails and signed off on the Series A funding Connor's CFO was asking for. When I finished, the sun was setting outside of the expanse of glass, the city far below me.

I stood up to pace in the room. Should I try to sleep now while it was still

light out or work out to exhaustion first?

I headed into the sitting room, where a single solitary couch sat in front of the fireplace.

When I'd first moved into the newly completed penthouse, I had marveled at the sunlight that streamed in from the glass, loved how clean and open everything was.

I had made it. I was finally going to be happy. *She* was finally going to be willing to welcome me back in her life.

And then ... nothing changed.

I sat down on the couch.

A square of blue paper poked out from one of the cushions.

Take a moment and appreciate the beauty of the ocean.

The note was written in sparkly silver pen.

I frowned.

A selling point of this residential tower was that the units like mine that were very high up had a view of the Atlantic Ocean, a rarity on this densely packed island of Manhattan.

I stood at the window and looked out, the setting sun behind me illuminating the city. There on the horizon was the ocean.

I looked, really looked.

When I'd first left my father's house, I'd promised myself that I would never take the sun or the trees or the sky for granted.

Yet, here I was. I'd had this penthouse not even a year, and I barely noticed the view anymore.

A flash of yellow caught my eye.

On the fireplace was another note.

Don't let this fireplace go to waste! (I know you never use it.) Throw a s'mores party for your friends.

If you even have any.

I did not have friends.

I scowled and looked at the gas fireplace. Annoyed, I turned it on. It roared to life, the flames heating the front of my legs.

"See, I have used this fireplace."

I left it on just to show her then stalked through the penthouse to the kitchen. I opened the fridge just to stare at all the food, a tangible promise to myself that I would never again starve.

There was a note in the drawer next to a wedge of cheese.

Thank you for the food. That chocolate cake was to die for!

Sparkly purple pen on yellow paper decorated with daisies.

“Why does she have so many sparkly gel pens?”

I stuck the note in my pocket almost cutting my finger on a piece of card stock. I pulled out yet another note.

Smile, handsome! You live in a penthouse.

I turned it over.

Bet you thought I was going to say something snarky about your lack of furniture. *winking face*

I snarled low in my throat.

Lexi was mocking me.

I tore through the penthouse, looking for any other notes she left.

There was one hidden in the kitchen cabinets next to the flour that said,

Yay, you're learning how to bake. Good for you! Call me if you need tips.

Her phone number was at the bottom.

The hell? It might have been an older note because the next one found was written in aggressively loopy cursive and said,

People are pack animals. Find a fellow lone wolf.

Included was a sticker of Tinker Bell blowing a kiss.

In a never-used guest bedroom was a note on bright-purple paper.

If you want to be happy, learn to be alone without being lonely. Or get a roommate.

Screw her.

I liked being alone. I had spent eleven years cooped up with a dozen other people.

I headed back to my study and took out my stationery—heavy, slightly textured paper with my name and company logo at the top. I unscrewed the top of my fountain pen and wrote Lexi a note. Then another and another. Then I hid them around the penthouse, smirking when I thought about her reaction at finding them.

The sun was rising when I placed the last note and stripped off my clothes to take a shower and face another soul-sucking day.

As I reached in to turn on the water, I was confronted with a final note, this one written in red Sharpie on a piece of plain white computer paper and taped onto the marble shower wall.

FIRE YOUR OWN DAMN CLEANER ASSHAT.

LEXI

Anthym was waiting for me when I stumbled into the office the next morning. The soles of the solitary pair of high heels I owned that Anthym had deemed acceptable for wearing to Richmond Electric were starting to come loose, even though I had clamped them together with extra-strength glue.

“No one told you to fire the cleaners. I can’t believe you,” Anthym scolded, dragging me over to her desk. It wasn’t lost on me that we were now in full view of the CEO’s office where Grayson Richmond was pretending not to watch me get chewed out.

“You told me—”

“I never. I love Mrs. Consuela.”

“Mrs. Ortega,” I corrected, narrowing my eyes.

“Firing people is not part of your job description, and I don’t want to get another complaint from Mr. Richmond about you overstepping again. This is the third time this week. Another infraction, and we will have grounds to fire you,” Anthym reprimanded.

“You’re deliberately trying to slander Mr. Richmond’s good name. He adores Mrs. Or—” She stumbled on the name.

“Mrs. Ortega.”

“Mr. Richmond told me he has a scholarship fund set up for her daughter to attend med school and that he’s appalled anyone would imply he was thinking about firing the poor woman. Shame on you.”

I glared at him.

He shook his head at me through the glass wall.

“Stop looking at him. From now on,” Anthym warned, “I don’t want you in the same room as him.”

“With pleasure,” I said through clenched teeth. “And I did just want to say, your hair looks great today.”

“I know.” Anthym preened and sauntered off to go complain about me with Brittany Dawn.

McKenna met me in the women’s bathroom. It was the only place to get any privacy in this glass prison of an office.

She locked the door. “What the hell was that?”

“He’s gaslighting me,” I seethed, kicking off my heels so I could properly stomp around the tiled floor. “He literally wanted me to fire poor Mrs. Ortega yesterday for some stupid reason, and now he’s acting like he never asked me to do that.”

“At least you know your note worked,” McKenna said apprehensively.

“I hate him.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this angry.” McKenna wetted a paper towel to dab my face.

In the mirror, my pale was flaming red. I looked like an angry spotted tomato.

“He’s such a villain. He’s a horrible person. I can’t believe I’m working for a man like that. He deliberately set me up just so he could scold me and make me feel small.”

I felt like crying. Unfortunately I didn’t weep like a beautiful Disney princess. I wailed and got snot everywhere.

“You just have to last a little longer,” McKenna said soothingly.

“I hate this job. I want to go home to Florida. I can’t believe Disney wouldn’t hire me.” Now the tears were falling. “That was my dream job. And they rejected me. Me! The world’s biggest Disney fan.”

McKenna wrapped me in a hug.

“Now I’m here stuck with the world’s worst boss. You couldn’t even make him the villain of a movie because no one would believe it.”

“I was saving this for an emergency.” My friend handed me a coupon on pink paper for a free cupcake from the Bippity Boppity Bakery.

“The bakery where we bought the pretzels yesterday emailed it to me as a thank-you. Said they had an influx of business from the Richmond Electric workers who missed out on the leftover pretzels after the meeting. They’re hoping they can cater more meetings.”

“Not if Anthym has anything to say about it.” I wiped my eyes.

“Things can’t be all bad if you get a free cupcake.”

I took a deep breath. “I know, I know. I need to be positive. I am grateful to have a job even if my boss is a self-absorbed monster. I have—well, have access to—a window with a killer view, and I’m getting a free cupcake.”

“You just have to find the good in every situation,” McKenna said, rubbing my back. “Even if Mr. Richmond has a tiny, shriveled heart, at least he’s hot!”

I blew my nose.

“I will never be able to see someone with such a terrible personality as attractive.”

“Strong words for someone who has not yet lost her virginity since moving to New York.”

“Keep your voice down!” I hissed. “I’m not looking for hookups. I’m looking for Prince Charming.”

“Like one of the Broadway actors?” McKenna wrinkled her nose. “Might be hit or miss asking one of them out, but who knows.”

“No, an actual Prince Charming, who’s kind and strong and has been waiting for me his whole life, who’s my soulmate. We will complete each other.”

“I’ll settle for someone with a slightly above average dick who showers regularly and does his own laundry,” McKenna deadpanned.

“You have to send out positive thoughts, and the universe will deliver.”



THE BIPPITY BOPPITY Bakery was around the corner from the dry cleaner where I took Mr. Lies-About-Firing-His-Cleaner’s suits. A vintage neon sign hung in the window, and the day’s offerings were written in neat chalk letters on the board on the wall illuminated by white sconces.

“I just love your bakery,” I gushed to the girl behind the counter as a tabby cat wound around my ankles.

She grinned. “It was a dream of mine to start a bakery, and then I just decided, you know what? Let’s do it. I love an inspirational story! Thank you so much for letting us cater your meeting and for telling all your employees about it. Business has never been better! We are more than happy to cater any

other meeting you all are having. Just let me know.”

I resolved then and there to do anything possible to make sure Richmond Electric gave Bippity Boppity Bakery more catering work. What was the point of being an assistant if you couldn’t even plan the snacks for meetings?

“I’m on a one-woman crusade to supply snacks at meetings,” I told the young woman.

And I didn’t mind going toe-to-toe with Grayson Richmond to do it either.

I felt terrible about cashing in my free cupcake coupon though. The owner was a small business woman just trying to make it in this city, just like me, albeit she was probably more successful. I pulled out my credit card.

“You put that away,” the baker insisted. “I saw that free cupcake coupon.”

“I might just use it another time,” I demurred.

She made a gimme motion with her hands.

“Do you like cherries?” she asked. “These cherries jubilee cupcakes are freshly made!”

I went ahead and bought five more of the big pink cupcakes and made a post on Instagram about the Bippity Boppity Bakery—not that I had that many followers, but every bit helped.

Then I headed to Mr. Richmond’s penthouse.

Nasr patted his belly when I offered him a cupcake.

“No, thank you, though they look delicious. I’m going to have to take home all these cookies. I was hoping to foist some baked goods on you.”

“Oh,” I said, having a thought. “There’s a new bakery that maybe we could add to the snack rotation? They have savory offerings, too, and I’m sure they would be happy to make custom snacks. We had them cater a meeting at Richmond Electric, and it was well received.”

“Could be nice to try something new,” he agreed.

I shifted the dry cleaning I held aloft over my head and fished out one of the business cards for the Bippity Boppity Bakery for Nasr.

I sighed as I rode the elevator up to the penthouse.

I did need to be more positive, I decided as I stepped off. My job could be worse. At least I got to see this view every day.

I hefted the dry cleaning up to the master closet and took yesterday’s suits out of the vestibule to be rotated back in. I placed the suits in the spot in the closet. Mr. I-Have-a-Penthouse-I-Won’t-Bother-Furnishing didn’t have his

clothes crammed together like I did in my closet. It was like an expensive boutique in there.

It was there that I saw it—a cream-colored triangle of paper sticking out of the breast pocket of one of the suits.

I carefully pulled it out.

Was it a note from a lover? Did Grayson have a girlfriend?

Don't snoop.

But I had to know what woman in their right mind was leaving *him* a note.

Besides me.

I left him notes, but they weren't like love notes. They were just little squares of happiness and positivity.

Be the reason someone smiles today ... or the reason they drink.

“This mother flippin’ ...” I scowled at the note, the name Grayson Richmond printed at the top of the creamy white paper in simple black letters. I turned the note over, but there was nothing else written on it.

“He thinks he’s going to put me out?” I muttered as I took the plastic off the freshly dry-cleaned suits and hung them up.

I took out my pink paper and a gel pen, blue raspberry colored, and wrote a note then stuck it on his rack of ties.

My heels clicked on the bare floor, inspiring another note.

I opened his underwear drawer to leave the note and was confronted with another piece of the heavy white paper.

I knew you'd look in here.

I sucked in a breath, grabbed the note, and replaced it with my own.

In the bathroom was another note folded and propped up on the shaving kit.

There is no reason for you to be in here.

I whipped out my pen and wrote on a square of blue card stock in gold gel pen—

Your fancy aftershave does not magically appear by itself, SIR!!!

I headed downstairs. Waiting for me in front of the fireplace in the sitting room was another message.

S'mores are an abomination, just like friends. Glad I don't have either in my life.

I pocketed the note and wrote him a new one.

True friends don't judge each other; they judge others together. Me

and my friends are going to be judging you tonight. So there.

Then I added another and stuck it in the couch for good measure.

If you're only going to have one couch in here, at least have the decency to center it on the fireplace.

"Everyone else likes my notes," I complained as I kicked off my shoes so I could more easily walk through the enormous penthouse to find whatever other snarky message Grayson had left.

I opened up the silverware drawer.

No one likes your notes, don't kid yourself.

"This ... heffalump."

I crumpled up the paper and opened the fridge, where his masculine handwriting, which wasn't quite a cursive but was more elegant than blocky letters and looked the way a duke might write, greeted me. Not that the words were as elegant as the handwriting.

I'm glad to hear you enjoyed the food more than I enjoy your toxic positivity.

Screw him. I headed into the grand salon and taped another note above the fireplace. Like I said, this was an obnoxiously large penthouse.

A TV would go very nicely here. Then you could watch a Mr. Rogers marathon and learn how to be a decent human being *Smiley face*

In his study were more notes to me, under the bust of Marcus Aurelius:

Some people bring happiness wherever they go. Some whenever they leave.

In the couch cushions:

Pessimism is a hallmark of superior intellect.

And on the bookshelf:

It's never too late to give up.

I sat down at his desk to pen furious responses, then I noticed it—taped to the window, another cream-colored piece of paper.

I snatched it off, expecting another snarky message. My eyes widened when I read it.

YOU'RE RIGHT, THE VIEW IS LOVELY.

GRAYSON

“Don’t suppose I can convince you to take a cookie, Mr. Richmond,” Nasr offered when I walked into the foyer of the tower.

“I told you to call me Grayson.”

“Habit,” he said. “Just had Mrs. Tremblay and her family come in for fashion week, and her mother does not want to be called by her first name. Cookie, Grayson?”

“I’m good, trying to watch my figure,” I joked.

“I would give one of my sons for your figure.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” I laughed.

“You’re right.” Nasr grinned.

“How are they?”

“The oldest is looking at colleges.”

“I told you I have a scholarship fund set up for your children.”

“And I told you that’s not necessary.”

“They should go to the best school.”

“Then they need to work and get scholarships,” Nasr said stubbornly.

“As soon as I find out where they’re going, I’m calling the bursar’s office,” I told him in mock seriousness. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

“I’ll accept if you take these cookies.” He thrust the box at me. “Give them to Lexi. She couldn’t take any more when she was leaving earlier because Mrs. Tremblay was standing right there. Oh! I shouldn’t have told you that. The cookies aren’t for the help.”

“I hope you’re giving these out to any staff in the building, and not

wasting the food, since they're the only ones eating them," I said, frowning.

"I am," he assured me, dropping his voice. "Just don't tell the board that."

"I am the condo board," I reminded him, also lowering my voice. "And I won't say a word."

"Good man." He slapped me on the shoulder.

I felt oddly lighter as I took the elevator up to the penthouse.

The tension settled in the back of my neck and dug into my temples when I stepped off the elevator and was confronted with the note on my front door.

Positive Vibes only. This means you, Grayson Richmond.

I pulled it off and stuffed it in my pocket.

I stalked through the penthouse and found another note above the fireplace when I headed to my study. I removed it then read it.

"As if I would ever own a TV."

The TV had blared constantly in the cellar, at the various group homes I'd occupied, and in the dorms in college. The one thing I had promised myself was that when I finally had my own place all to myself, I would never have a TV. I'd only have blessed silence. Books were enough for me.

And even if for some reason I did lose my mind and buy a TV, I especially wasn't watching children's shows.

There were more notes in the study. She'd found the one I'd left under Marcus Aurelius.

If you're fishing for a compliment about your behind, you got it! You have a nice butt. I can tell you work out. Keep up the good work ... HOT STUFF!!!

I bit down a smile. I would not give her the satisfaction.

There was another note on the bookcase.

Admit it. You smiled.

I rolled my eyes.

Upstairs on my bed was a piece of paper that was littering pink glitter all over the dark-gray bedspread:

So he can read and write but can't buy an armchair or a rug. The world is truly a mysterious place.

In the closet:

Wear this tie tomorrow. It makes those lovely green eyes pop.

There were notes in the bathroom, in my shoes, and in the music room with its solitary grand piano.

Lexi hadn't found all of the notes, I discovered with a perverse sort of

pleasure. I wrote a note to her and carried it to the kitchen to leave it for her to find.

There on the exact center of the kitchen counter was a single, solitary pink cupcake. Rose gold foil wrapper with a mound of pink icing and festooned with bright-red cherries. I circled the cupcake like it was a bomb going off.

The note was decorated with sparkly heart stickers.

Stop stressing so much. Everything happens for a reason.

PS: IT'S NOT TOXIC POSITIVITY IF IT COMES WITH A CUPCAKE *smiley face*

“You stupid, awful—” I let out a yell of anger.

Of all the well-meaning but useless things people said to me the years after I escaped my father, “everything happens for a reason” was the one I hated above all else. Everything did not happen for a reason. Sometimes horrible things happened to people who didn’t deserve it, for no reason at all. The terrible experience didn’t make them stronger, and it didn’t make them happier. It just made them miserable.

“Fuck her,” I snarled.

I should just throw the cupcake away, but I hated the thought of wasting food after never having enough of it.

If people actually lived in my building on a regular basis, I’d see if a neighbor wanted it, but Lexi was right. I was alone.

And that’s how I liked it.

LEXI

When I came into the office, there was a note wedged between the cushion of the stool and the frame:

This is a toxic positivity free workplace. That means you, Lexi Collins.

“Oh my god,” McKenna said slowly as she peered over my shoulder and saw Grayson Richmond’s name at the top of the creamy-white stationery. “Oh my freaking—”

“Shhh!” I hissed at her.

“He’s writing you notes. Are you having an affair?”

“Of course not! I have standards,” I said primly.

“You sleep on a cot in my grandmother’s studio apartment. The place smells like a terrarium.”

“I’m going to take Gizzy for his steam shower today,” I said, feeling bad.

Three people and a five-foot-long iguana was a lot to have in a small studio apartment. I was glad to have found McKenna on Facebook Marketplace looking for a roommate. Most people did not take pets, especially not exotic ones. I didn’t want to make her regret letting me live there.

“I can’t believe Mr. Richmond hasn’t found out.”

“He’s not as smart as people say he is. God doesn’t give with both hands, you know. He can’t be handsome and smart. Shoot, I could probably start living there and he wouldn’t even notice.”



THERE WAS no note on the door to his penthouse that afternoon.

Gizzy draped over my shoulder, I hurried upstairs to the spa room, pausing to let the iguana gaze out over the city to get a glimpse of the Atlantic Ocean.

“See? It’s almost like Florida.”

In case you missed it, yes, this penthouse had its own spa, sauna, and Japanese-style *onsen* complete with real rock on the walls and floor. It also had a steam shower that I knew Mr. I-Have-More-Money-Than-Brain-Cells never used.

Or at least I was pretty sure he didn’t. He hadn’t removed any of the notes I’d placed there over the past few months, so I figured Gizzy and I were safe.

I set out a small plastic beach umbrella and some palm fronds I’d swiped from the dumpster outside of a hotel that had hosted a 1930s-themed wedding.

“Think Florida thoughts,” I told Gizzy as I set the temperature for the steam shower.

The iguana paused, flicked his tongue out, then happily stretched out in the warm, humid air.

I left him to bask in the humidity then wandered through the penthouse to look for Mr. Pessimism’s responses to my notes.

“Pfft! You will watch a Disney movie one of these days,” I said, responding to his note above the fireplace.

In the kitchen, the cupcake still sat on its plate on the counter. Propped up on it was a note with three words.

I hate cupcakes.

I flipped the note over to write a response.

Then why do you buy a slice of cake every week???

You look amazing. You can eat a slice of cake, my dude. Also might help turn that frown upside down.

I took a big bite of the cupcake, the taste of fresh cherries exploding in my mouth.

“So freaking good.”

It needed something savory to go along with it though.

I went back to the kitchen to raid the fridge.

My boss never ate anything that was in there, so I didn’t think he would miss it.

Still ...

I set the cupcake down to write him a note.

Thanks for the charcuterie.

Then I sliced myself some brie and salami and took it into the ballroom. Because what penthouse would be complete without a ballroom? Especially one with no furniture in it.

I pulled a blanket out of my bag, wishing it was warmer so I could sit outside.

As it was, I set up near the window so I could pretend I was at the beach. Then I turned on the soundtrack to the music from *Cinderella*, the one from the nineties with Brandy and Whitney Houston, because if ever there was a time for that soundtrack, it was now. I connected my phone to the Bluetooth sound system in the ballroom.

Someone had really tried when designing the ballroom. It was two levels and had some nice little alcoves to make you feel like you weren't just in the middle of a glass box. Taking advantage of the two-story-high space, there was a mezzanine level with a small bar in a similar design to the larger one on the main ballroom level. If someone was the type of person who was actually social and hosted parties or charity events, that person might have placed some nice comfortable chairs and small tables upstairs for guests who needed a reprieve from the larger crowd downstairs but didn't want to feel as if they were being rude and leaving the party.

Of course the mezzanine was empty. The sunlight streamed in from the double-height windows, catching on the modernist blown-glass chandelier around which the stair curved.

The ballroom needed some decoration. If I had my own ballroom and stupid money, I would have it decorated in flowers every week and spend the majority of my time there living out my tween girl fantasies and throwing tea parties with the American Girl dolls and all their accessories that I could now afford.

"With the power of imagination," I said, striking a pose at the top of the stairs, "I now transform you into a princess."

I twirled around, humming *Cinderella's* transformation theme, then slowly descended the staircase, pretending like I was a princess gracefully floating down to meet her prince.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a big sparkly dress with layers of tulle and crystals. Nor was there a prince waiting for me.

Instead there was a very angry, very shirtless Grayson Richmond.

Fists on his hips, he glared at me as I counted steps so that I didn't fall and crack my teeth on the marble floor.

"Where's your shirt?" I blurted out over the music.

"This is my penthouse. I can walk around without a shirt if I want to." His deep voice echoed around the cavernous room.

"The better question," he continued as I fumbled with my phone to turn off the music, "is where is your sense? This isn't your home; you didn't buy this penthouse. You don't get to treat it like your personal play castle."

I was a short woman, but the way he was speaking to me was making me feel even smaller than I already was.

Don't let him see you sweat.

"What makes you think you have the right to be in here?" Grayson berated me.

I looked him up and down. "I'd just like you to know that you have very nice abs."

"Wrong answer." His voice dropped another octave.

I hurried over to my picnic. My voice was sounding suspiciously rubber-chicken-like as I said, "I, as your ever faithful assistant, have been waiting for you to arrive so I could give you your after-school snack." I cleared my throat and held the paper plate out to him.

"There's a bite taken out of that cupcake," he said slowly, eyes not leaving mine.

"You said you hated cupcakes," I reminded him.

"Why is it on the plate then?"

"Sometimes trying new food is scary, and you have to see that someone you trust is happy eating it and then you want a bite too."

I picked up the cupcake and took a huge bite. If the cupcake were smaller or if I hadn't taken such a large bite, it might have been sexier. As it was, I felt frosting smear all over my face.

"See?" I said, chewing, then swallowed. "It's safe."

I held it out to his mouth.

His lips thinned.

"You know," I added, tongue darting out to lick the frosting on my mouth, "when we go to Disney World, you're going to have to be open to trying new things. Otherwise you're going to miss out on the whole experience."

"Are you out of your mind? I'm not going to Disney World. I hate

Disney.”

I rolled my eyes dramatically. “You haven’t even seen any of the movies. Stop being childish.”

“And I never will. I hate watching TV.” His eyes narrowed.

“You hate everything; that’s hardly an excuse.”

A low growl from deep in that bare, muscular chest.

“You need a vacation,” I said stubbornly, “and besides, everyone has fun at Disney. Everyone.”

“You know how people say, ‘over my dead body,’ but it’s clearly an exaggeration?”

He grabbed the front of my shirt, the motion causing the plate balanced on my hand to tip over, scattering cheese and sliced smoked sausage all over the marble floor.

I gulped, as the backs of his fingers grazed my chest.

“I mean ‘over my dead body’ as in ‘you will have to drag my cold, dead corpse to Florida.’”

“At least your corpse wouldn’t complain when I put Mickey Mouse ears on it,” I retorted. “Probably would be a better roller coaster companion.”

As if he suddenly realized what he was doing and where his hands were, he abruptly released me.

“Get out.”

“I have to pick up the food you dropped everywhere. Like I said, adult toddler.” I picked up one of the pieces of cheese and lifted it.

“Don’t put that in your mouth!” Grayson was revolted.

“With an attitude like that, you’re never getting a blow job,” I said sharply.

“I ... you ... you ...”

I looked up at him.

Suddenly Grayson jumped in front of me, shoving me behind him, pushing us both back toward the double doors that led from the ballroom to the observatory.

“What the fuck is that?” he shouted as Gizzy plodded into the ballroom.

“It’s not—”

“Stay back, Lexi,” he barked at me, muscular back still pressing into my face. “Call animal control while I distract it. It’s probably one of those neighbors downstairs. I bet they brought this back with them. They eat all sorts of weird food.”

“That’s not dinner,” I insisted, trying to pry my way out from under his muscular bicep. “That’s Gizzy.”

“You brought your iguana to my house?”

“He was just supposed to stay in your steam shower.”

My boss blinked.

“You have him in my bathroom? We’re all going to get salmonella.”

“Oh, stop being such a baby. Gizzy sleeps with me every night. He’s perfectly healthy.”

“You are horrifying.”

Gizzy had made quick work of the cheese and salami on the floor and was eyeing what was left of the cupcake in my hand.

I handed it to him.

“Not the wrapper,” I scolded as Gizzy mouthed the cupcake.

Then the lizard turned, tail whipping, and held his head up, the dewlap under his throat flexing as he focused on Grayson.

Then he sprinted.

People not native to Florida see big lumbering iguanas and think they can outrun them.

You can’t. Iguanas are fast.

Grayson cursed as the huge, five-foot-long lizard sprinted at him.

Instead of running away, Grayson readied himself for a fight, the muscles in his chest bunched up, veins prominent.

“He just wants to lick the frosting on you. Also, sorry about that,” I said, racing after Gizzy. His tongue was darting out as he rose up on two legs to try to get the last of his snack.

I pushed myself in front of Gizzy to keep him from clawing Grayson. I knew from experience iguana scratches hurt.

Gizzy tried to climb over me, the force of him pushing me against Grayson’s chest.

My boss’s breath caught as I balanced my hands on him, the muscles rippling under my fingers. I was not thinking wholesome Disney thoughts.

I swallowed as Grayson inadvertently put one large hand on my waist to steady me.

“You look really tasty covered in frosting,” I said.

Jiminy Crickets, Lexi, can you keep something to yourself?

“I what?”

“No need to thank me for the compliment,” I said, the tail end of the

sentence a barely intelligible squeak.

Then I grabbed Gizzy and my bag and raced out of there before I could do something that would really get me fired.

GRAYSON

“**Y**ou were shirtless in front of your assistant?”

“That is not the takeaway from this story. She was eating my food and, I don’t know, dancing in my ballroom. She told me she wanted to take me to Disney World. Isn’t that harassment? She had an iguana. It attacked me. I was covered in frosting.”

“Did it leave a mark?” Marius asked.

“No.” I glowered. “She said I looked good covered in frosting.”

“Sounds like quite the party.” Marius raised an eyebrow.

“I need her gone,” I insisted.

Marius sighed heavily.

“Have you been sleeping lately?” he asked gently, reaching out to rest a hand on my arm. “I used to live with you, and I know you used to have trouble ...”

“I’m fine.” I tore away from him.

“I’m just worried you might be obsessing because—”

“I’m not obsessing. I’m fine. Lexi is fine. There’s no problem. She can stay employed. Forget I asked about firing her.”

“So you’re going to Disney World?”

I bared my teeth at him.

“It’s a joke.” Marius coaxed, “Why don’t you come out, have a drink, relax?”

“I’m busy.”

“Planning your Disney vacation?” A smile danced around his lips.

You should smile more, not for me but for you.

That's what the note had said in my running shoe, anyway.

I allowed myself a small smile.

"I don't think so."

Marius clapped me on the shoulder. "Hang in there. I'm here if you need anything."

"I always appreciate your legal counsel."

He saluted and picked up his coffee mug.

If I had been able to think quickly, I would have come up with a reason, maybe a contract question or asking his thoughts on one of the legal cases floating through the court systems, but now Marius was gone and I was trapped in my office, just me and my memories.

But not those memories.

The ones from yesterday.

With Lexi, eating that ridiculous cupcake, her tongue darting out, the way she had looked at me with desire ...

"You're imagining it," I growled, wishing I was at the penthouse so I could go into the home gym and slam my fists in the punching bag over and over until I felt like puking.

I tried to focus on the annoyance at her letting that scaly monster in my bathroom. It was unsanitary. The nerve of her to just waltz in my penthouse like she owned it, like she was entitled to it.

It wasn't the first time. It slowly dawned on me.

Logically this was not the first time that iguana has been in your penthouse, and you never noticed. That is a problem.

I was losing my edge. Outside the windows, dark clouds gathered, menacing.

Suddenly all the glass around me was unnerving. There was nowhere to take a break, catch my breath, and steady myself.

I knelt down under my desk, pretending like I was just rearranging the power cables, needing to not feel like people were staring at me even though there was no one on the floor. They were all out to lunch.

Marius is right. Maybe you do need a vacation.

The door to my office opened. A familiar pair of slightly raggedy high heels paused in the doorway then slowly made their way across the dark floor.

She was behind me now.

I slowly turned. I could reach out and slide my arm right up the pale

freckled leg.

There was the sound of paper sliding across a leather blotter.

I leaned back then stood up right in front of Lexi.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you to stay out of my office.”

I clapped my hand over her mouth before she could scream, hating how easy the motion came to me.

I practically pushed her away from me.

“Were you spying on me?” she said in that breathless, squeaky voice.

“This is my office. You’re the one sneaking in here.”

“I was just—” I could barely hear her, her voice was so high-pitched.

“You’re not having a stroke or something, are you?”

She fanned herself.

“Get it together, Lexi,” she scolded herself. She sounded like a coked-out chipmunk.

For some reason, I felt a laugh coming on.

I never laughed.

Get ahold of yourself.

“Oh my gosh,” she said, still fanning herself. She was turning red under all those freckles. “You’re laughing at me.” Her voice was the tone of Mickey Mouse tripping balls on helium.

I bit back the snicker.

“Stop laughing. This isn’t funny.” Her voice was like air being let out of a balloon.

“It is mildly funny,” I admitted.

“You think something’s funny?” Her voice went back to normal pitch. “I am shooketh. Let me hear you laugh!”

“No.” I clamped my mouth shut.

Lexi did a little jig in front of me.

“I’m a leprechaun!”

I clapped a hand over my mouth, shoulders shaking, willing the laughter to die.

“That is just sad. It’s not funny at all.” I cleared my throat.

She spun her index finger in my face.

“I’m going to make you laugh.”

“Never.” I took a step back, suddenly feeling like I was too close to her.

“I assume you’re in here to leave a snarky note.”

“My notes are not snarky, sir. My notes are sincere. Your notes are

snarky and mean.”

“I didn’t leave any mean notes,” I argued.

“You said no one likes my notes.” She crossed her arms.

The motion raised her blouse up.

My eyes flicked down.

Her skirt was unzipped.

There was a surge of fury in me.

Was she doing ... having ... *that* during lunch hour? The thought of another man’s hands all over her, under that skirt on the zipper, filled me with rage that had no outlet.

Lexi looked down following my gaze.

“Heffalumps and woozles.” She quickly buttoned up her skirt, doing a little shimmy motion to settle it evenly on her hips. “I had a big lunch, okay?”

I rubbed my jaw then held out my hand.

“You want a tip?”

“I want the note.”

Lexi wrinkled her nose, the freckles scrunching up, then walked over to me and slapped a piece of paper in my hand.

Self-consciously, she ran a hand through the fluffy curls of her red hair as I unfolded the paper.

I’m sorry I let Gizzy use your steam shower. He did enjoy himself though. Please accept a coupon for free decorating, party planning, cooking lessons, or other personal improvement as repayment.

“Why would I hire you to do any of those things?” I asked, glancing up from the note.

“Because.” She twisted her hands. “It was either that or a free hug, and I didn’t think you’d go for it.”

“You missed an opportunity to work in a dig about the sad, lonely, empty state of my penthouse.”

“You probably have some lingering childhood trauma or something that’s making you antisocial,” Lexi said flippantly. “It’s not nice to kick people when they’re down.”

She was joking—I knew she was joking—but it would have been less shocking if she’d stabbed me in the gut.

Outside, thunder rolled.

The elevator dinged.

“I think you’d better trot back to Anthym,” I forced out.

“I don’t trot. It’s a brief strut.”

LEXI

Anthym regarded me.
“You weren’t thinking about going in Mr. Richmond’s office, were you?” she demanded when she cornered me a few paces away from McKenna’s desk.

“Never! Girl Scout’s honor,” I lied, “and I am a huge Girl Scout. I always sold the most cookies. Staci’s daughter sells cookies. I bought a bunch, and I still have some stashed in McKenna’s desk if you want some.”

I bounced on my heels.

Normally I wouldn’t give Anthym a Thin Mint, but I would do anything to keep her from asking our boss if I had been in his office.

I held my breath as Anthym headed to talk to the CEO.

I willed Mr. I-Hate-Cupcakes not to snitch on me.

Anthym was pointing in my direction.

McKenna and I huddled next to her desk.

“She really has it out for you,” my friend whispered.

“No kidding.”

“She probably thinks you’re trying to go after Mr. Richmond.”

“As if.” I snorted.

“Those frosting covered abs.” McKenna waggled her eyebrows.

“I’ve seen better on Prince Eric.” I sniffed.

“Are you kidding me?” McKenna’s mouth dropped open.

Anthym was stalking over to us.

Darn it, Grayson.

But instead of chewing me out about being in his office, Anthym said,

“Mr. Richmond just asked if today’s meeting is going to be catered. I assured him it would be and that we have it under control. So who do you have doing the catering, McKenna?”

“I—the catering?” McKenna stammered. “You said when I asked you that we weren’t going to be catering. I-I don’t have any food being delivered.”

Anthym sneered. “You are the most useless assistant in corporate America. I never said to not cater this meeting.”

“But the meeting’s in half an hour!” McKenna cried.

“Mr. Richmond wants it catered,” Anthym snapped, “so figure it out.”

“How are we going to get food now?” McKenna was starting to spin out.

“God, do I need to do everything myself?” Anthym snapped. “Lexi, go down to that tacky little bakery around the corner and buy snacks.”

A clap of thunder rattled the windows, and rain pelted the glass.

“I can go,” McKenna said uncertainly.

Anthym snapped her fingers. “McKenna, go make sure the meeting room is set up. If anyone comes early, they can’t see Lexi. She’s an embarrassment to this company.”

“I forgot my umbrella,” I said weakly.

“I have one,” McKenna offered me as the driving rain started.

The umbrella lasted all of twenty seconds when I stepped outside.

“How could you forget your poncho?” I scolded myself as I fought the wind for the umbrella.

I was from Florida. I knew about hurricanes, and you didn’t bring an umbrella to a hurricane. You brought a poncho.

But I supposed I hadn’t considered Manhattan could get this kind of rain. I thought it would be snow that I’d have to deal with.

The cold water soaked my heels, softening the glue.

I pressed on.

The Bippity Boppity Bakery’s owner was filling a box with goodies when I hurled myself through the door.

“The weather out there is terrible,” the owner remarked as I handed her Anthym’s corporate credit card. “We could have it delivered, you know.”

“No time,” I said grimly.

“Yikes. I’m double bagging these so they stay dry. Nothing worse than a soggy croissant.”

The rain practically blew me away when I stepped outside. I shivered,

teeth chattering, and headed down the block back to the Richmond Electric tower. I was soaked in freezing water. I couldn't feel my fingers, my toes, or my nose.

I checked my watch. I had ten minutes. My heels were threatening to give up the ghost, and I begged them to please hold it together until I made it to the office.

The air conditioning was, like at most offices, on full blast, and I shivered in the elevator as I rode up to the executive office level.

There was a *slap slap slap* noise as I limped to the executive meeting room.

"Oh my gosh, you poor thing!" McKenna exclaimed when she saw me.

"I have fulfilled my sworn duty," I said through chattering teeth as I handed her the pastries. I took the plastic bags from her so she could set the pastries out on a tray. Then, limping, I made my way down the hall.

Clop slap clop slap ...

Mr. Richmond in a freshly pressed suit came around the corner.

Clop slap ...

I waved to him.

"Great weather we're having!"

A scowl settled on his face.

Clop slap clop slap scraaaape!

I yelped as the sole of my heel caught on the floor.

Now sure you might say short girl tripping in front of her super-duper—scratch that, *not* hot boss was such a cliché. But you don't understand. I could either stumble and break my ankle, or I could just tumble and roll and bounce back up like a gymnast.

I took the fall. Unfortunately, my clothes were too tight and I was too cold and numb to do a proper tumbling roll. Instead I just slid across the polished floor in my wet clothes with an audible squelch. My nose stopped inches away from a shined leather shoe.

"Stupid knockoff heels," I muttered through my chattering teeth as I tried to clamber upright.

Grayson leaned down, grabbed me by the arm, and hauled me to my feet.

"You look like a half-drowned rat."

"Better than a fully drowned rat."

"Don't you have an umbrella?" His deep voice conveyed extreme annoyance.

“Don’t you have a meeting?” I countered.

Sure, I could tell him I was fetching his pastries, but that would ruin the magic of assistants who had their lives together and planned ahead. Anthym would probably just tell him McKenna and I had screwed up, anyway.

Not to mention, after just face-planting in front of my boss, I needed to appear like I was at least marginally competent at my job. Even if it was just buying pastries.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said, still shivering, “I’m going to go sit under the hand dryer.”

GRAYSON

A leftover pastry was waiting for me on my desk when I returned to my office from seeing the meeting guests to the lobby. There was a note.

This is not a cupcake.

I sniffed the pastry then took a bite. The flavors exploded in my mouth. The flakey crust was filled with cheese, spinach, sausage, and caramelized onions. I took another bite then another, wolfing down the food like I was still back *there* with my brothers, fighting over the scraps my father would bring back.

Get ahold of yourself.

I forced myself to throw out the napkin instead of licking the crumbs.

You're not a child. Go buy another pastry if you want one that much.

I didn't.

Well, I did but, I needed to prove to myself I was still in control.

"Aww, did I miss the pastries?" Marius stuck his head in my office.

"What pastries?"

"You have crumbs on your suit." He pointed.

I cursed.

"Didn't save anything for your dear old roommate?"

I felt suddenly horribly, irrationally guilty.

"I'm just joking, man." Marius slapped me on the back.

"Was it that bakery nearby everyone's talking about? The one with the name that sounds like that Disney song— Bippity Boo Bakery or something like that?"

"So that's why she always buys from there." I narrowed my eyes.

“She who?”

“No one.”

“Your mom?” he asked carefully.

“No one.”

Marius gave me a long look then said, “I’m grabbing drinks with some guys from law school. You want to come? You’ve met them before. You might have fun.”

I shook my head. “I can’t. I have plans.”

“You have a date?” His face lit up.

“I don’t have a date,” I said irritably, “just plans.”

“Sure. Okay. I’ll text you the address if you change your mind.”



THIS WAS A TERRIBLE IDEA.

Wasn’t it creepy to be buying shoes for your assistant?

Lexi needs shoes. This is a good deed, like delivering gift cards to the women’s shelter.

The action was different though. Shoes felt intimate.

“Can I help you?”

The saleswoman took one look at my bespoke suit and expensive watch and had clearly made up her mind that she was going to sell me something.

“I need a pair of black women’s shoes. For a friend, for a gift.”

Lexi wasn’t my friend, I didn’t have friends, but I couldn’t very well tell this woman that I was purchasing high-heeled shoes for my assistant.

“Black,” I added. “Leather. Conservative. For an office environment.”

“Got it.”

She went to a wall and picked up a simple black heel. It sort of looked like the ones Lexi wore that were falling apart.

“Are these well-made?” I asked. “Can someone walk miles in them and they won’t fall apart?”

“As long as your friend isn’t trying to go hiking in them, then yes. These shoes are made in Italy, and each shoe is handcrafted. They’re all leather and very well-made. There’s a lifetime warranty.”

“Very well. I will take one pair.”

“What size?” the saleswoman asked.

What ... size?

The back of my neck felt itchy.

What size did Lexi wear?

How would I know? It's not like I was close enough to her to ever measure her feet.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"How tall is she?"

I showed the saleswoman where Lexi came on my body.

Because she was standing right next to you.

"About five feet tall. She probably wears about a size six, but it could be bigger or smaller," the saleswoman determined.

"Can I have one shoe of every size, from five to seven and a half?" I asked.

"Certainly. Let me box those up for you."

It would only be strange, I told myself as I drove home in the drizzling rain, if I actually gave the shoes to Lexi in person. I would just leave them for her to find by the stairs with a note for her to pick the shoe size that fit best and I would donate the rest.

We wouldn't have to actually interact with each other.

I nodded to Nasr as I walked to the elevator, the two large white paper bags in my hands.

"Mr. Richmond ..." he began.

"Apologies, I have to go make a call. I hope you have a wonderful evening."

I didn't want to have to explain to him why I had two bags full of women's shoes.

Sconces on the wall of the penthouse glowed softly when I walked inside. While I hadn't cared about the layout of the penthouse, leaving it to the architect's judgment, I had insisted on warm, soothing lighting.

After living in the cellar, where my father had insisted the flickering, buzzing fluorescent lights stayed on twenty-four, seven so he could see if anyone was trying to sneak up on him, and in group homes dominated by harsh blue prison-grade LED lights, it was a luxury to be able to control my own environment.

I went into my study and set down the bags on the sofa then switched on the desk light.

I cursed as I saw Lexi, frozen on the sliding ladder of the bookcase,

square of bright-purple paper in hand.

“Surprise?” She winced.

I unwound the scarf from my neck, trying to casually block the bags from her line of sight with my body.

“That lizard isn’t here, is it?”

“Gizzy? Safely at home.” She stuffed the note under one of the antique globes on the shelf. “Welp, my assistant duties are done, so I’ll just be on my way. Have a good evening.”

It seemed important to not have to give her the shoes in person. It was less creepy that way.

“Yes.” I nodded.

In her pocket, her phone started playing some Disney tune. She answered it as she scuttled out of my study.

“If you’re going to give me a heads-up, just text. Don’t call. My ringtone is loud.”

I huffed out a laugh, relaxing slightly. Lexi hadn’t even noticed the bags.

I settled down at my desk to write the note then flinched when Lexi’s red hair appeared in the doorway.

“Uh, I don’t know, like, how cool we are or not, but since I saved you a pastry, do you think you could do me a solid and not mention to Anthym that you saw me here?” She made a face.

I leveled my gaze at her. “I thought you were here on official assistant business?”

Stop talking to her. Just let her leave.

“Never mind,” I said. “This never happened.”

“It’s just that—”

“Can you just take the win?” I growled.

“I know you’re sensitive about people being in your space.”

“I’m not sensitive.” I bristled.

“I mean you are,” Lexi said, “but it’s totally okay. This is your space. I shouldn’t have invited myself in without asking. That’s not right. Just because I have an open-door policy doesn’t mean that other people do.”

“You’re not letting strangers live with you?” I demanded.

She shrugged. “If I had the room, I’d certainly let people crash at my place if they needed somewhere to stay. Some people just need a helping hand every once in a while.”

“That’s how you end up with a squatter,” I said flatly.

“Or that’s how you end up with a new friend.” She flashed me a grin.

“Anyway I’m totally not squatting here, I actually have an official address, I just—you have a dryer,” she said in a rush, “and my building doesn’t. I have to go to the laundromat. It’s a whole thing, and it’s so damp my clothes weren’t going to dry. So I borrowed your dryer. I totally just stayed in your laundry room. It’s not like I was wandering around your house naked or anything, er ...”

She made that high-pitched squeaking noise again, like she was a mouse faced with a very hungry cat.

“Oh, did you go shopping?” She finally noticed the bags.

Dammit.

“Of course not. I was just using those to carry paperwork.” The lie was easy.

“Do you need me to help you organize it?” Lexi offered. “Since I’m here.” She reached for a bag.

“No.” I growled.

Lexi started, looking up at me apprehensively in the low light from the desk lamp.

I felt horrible.

I didn’t want her to fear me, just to go away.

“It’s actually ...” I pulled out a box from the bag. “I bought you some shoes.”

Her mouth made a little O.

“Me?” She made that rubber chicken noise, pressing her hands to her chest.

“It’s not because I find you in any way charming,” I assured her, “or endearing. You can’t wear those shoes you have on. It’s a liability. You could hurt yourself on my property, and then I would be liable. Shoes are cheaper than a lawsuit.”

I stuck the box out to her.

She took it slowly and lifted the lid.

“Let me know if they’re the wrong size.”

“I don’t care what size they are,” she said in awe as she pulled the shoes out of the white tissue paper. “I’m wearing them.”

She placed the leather shoes on the floor. I could see they were too small as she tried to wedge her feet in.

“Maybe a bigger size?”

“I will cut my toe off,” she insisted, waving me away.

“Please don’t.” I pulled out another box and handed it to her.

“A five and a half? Even better.”

“What size do you need?” I belatedly asked her.

“Any size you got.”

I pulled out box after box. “Six, six and a half, seven, seven and a half.”

“Seven and a half,” she said dejectedly.

I handed her the box.

“My pretties.” She took out the shoes and placed them on the floor.

Something about seeing her wobble slightly as she slipped her bare feet in them, the shadows from the lamp contouring around her body, was intriguing, intimate, enticing.

“Just like Cinderella,” she sighed happily. “Though I think she probably had super-duper tiny feet. You’d think I’d have smaller feet too,” she chattered on, voice filling the study, “but you’d be wrong. I have huge feet. Huge hands too. It makes hand jobs awkward. It’s probably because I ate too much junk food as a child and stunted my height.”

I was still stuck on hearing her say hand jobs, and wanting to kill any man she’d been with.

It’s not any of your business.

“You ...”

“Made a very naughty joke, yes, I know. Don’t tell the folks at Disney.” Her shoulder slumped. “Not that it matters. I tried to keep my record squeaky-clean so the Mouse would hire me, and it didn’t work. Anyway.” She brightened up. “Thanks for the shoes! Now I can better assist you with ___”

“Don’t say hand jobs,” I deadpanned.

She let out a peal of laughter and clapped her hands.

“I mean, now I can be a better assistant who won’t embarrass Richmond Electric.”

I tilted my head. “You don’t embarrass the company.”

“You’re sweet.” She took a step toward me, spreading her arms out. “Thanks, Grayson. That was very kind of you.”

I couldn’t hug her.

Even though I wanted to.

Don’t be weird.

I halfheartedly raised my arms just as she put hers down.

“Not a hugger? A handshake then.”

Her hands still felt a little cold as I clasped her smaller one in mine.

“Let me drive you home,” I offered.

“No way! I have to take these babies out for a spin and make all the boys crazy!”

LEXI

“**D**id you rob a store?” McKenna’s grandmother asked when I walked into the tiny studio apartment where she and McKenna were drinking wine.

I leaned down to scratch Gizzy on the side of his head. The massive lizard bucked against my hand.

“Grayson bought these for me.”

“Grayson?” McKenna was speechless. “Our boss?”

“Man, the going rate for a blow job sure has gone up. We used to blow our bosses for a line of coke,” her grandmother remarked.

“Oh my god, Grenadine.”

“Did you have sex with Mr. Richmond? Is that why you said you had to go over to his apartment? Did you use a condom?” McKenna whispered.

“She better not have; she needs to get that child support money.” The wine in the elderly woman’s glass sloshed.

“You want to share that?” I asked weakly.

“Grayson didn’t give you a drink to get the taste out of your mouth?” Grenadine cackled.

“I didn’t sleep with him, and I didn’t give him a blow job!” I shrieked.

“Really? So you were butt naked in his penthouse and it didn’t turn into one of those weird porn situations where he came home, saw you there, and lost all self-control and you had sex on a washing machine?” McKenna asked.

“Ugh. No.”

Grenadine shook her head. “Still a virgin. At your age.”

“Grenadine, shhh!” McKenna hissed.

I grabbed the wine bottle from her and took a swig.

“Blech! How are you drinking that?”

“It was found in a garbage can. I lowered my expectations.”

“But don’t you lower them for Grayson,” Grenadine warned me. “He needs to be fucking you in a bed. Make him treat you like a queen.”

“Oh my gosh, what are we going to do with a baby?” McKenna fretted.

“You’re pregnant?” Martha called through the paper-thin apartment door.

“Gosh no!”

“It’s a boy?” she called.

“You need to get your hearing aid adjusted,” Grenadine yelled, hauling herself up off of the cot and shuffling to the door to open it.

“Do you know who the father is?” Connie, newly retired from her job but not from gossip and who had a sixth sense for drama, had materialized, and she peered at me.

She whistled when she saw my new shoes.

“I’m not surprised you have a list of potential fathers with footwear like that. How much did you spend on those shoes?”

“Her boss bought them for her,” Grenadine said.

“When’s the due date?” Martha asked, doddering around the tiny kitchen-slash-living-room-slash-bedroom.

“She’s not pregnant!” Grenadine shouted.

“My word.” Mrs. Turner, cane thumping on the floor, had invited herself into the conversation about my nonexistent affair with my boss. “Pregnant and unmarried. This neighborhood has gone downhill.”

“Hey!” Grenadine yelled, jumping to my defense while McKenna pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’ll have you cut off the free food list if you think you’re better than someone who sleeps with her boss for free shoes.”

“I didn’t sleep with him,” I said as loudly as I could. “Grayson gave them to me as a gift.”

“Only one reason a man gives a young woman two-hundred-dollar shoes,” Mrs. Turner said with a pointed sniff. “He wants something.”

“She’s not wrong,” Connie said.

“These are not two hundred dollars.” I rolled my eyes.

“Um, yeah, they’re not,” McKenna said, looking up from her phone. “They’re a thousand.”

I choked on my spit. “These are what? How?”

“Next time you trip, break something so he’ll buy you a new wardrobe,” Grenadine suggested.

“You have to give these back,” McKenna told me.

“I can’t give these back,” I fretted. “I don’t have any shoes. I threw away my other shoes, and now I don’t have anything to wear to work.”

“If Anthym finds out about Grayson’s gift, she’s going to flip out,” McKenna warned.

“What the hell kind of name is Anthym?” Connie asked, annoyed.

“A terrible one,” I concurred.

“Probably why she’s always such a cunt to you,” Grenadine said, ushering the other three older women inside. “She never got over her childhood name trauma.”

Connie shrieked as Gizzy lumbered over to her, his long tail almost knocking over the card table.

“I cannot understand how the landlords have allowed him to stay.” Mrs. Turner tapped her cane on the floor.

“You like getting all those fresh herbs?” Grenadine threatened. “Zip it. If the landlords are going to be raising rent, Lexi should be able to keep an exotic pet.”

“They’re raising rents?” McKenna asked, sounding upset.

Neither she nor I were going to be earning a raise anytime soon, if Anthym had anything to do about it.

“They just raised rents for the year. They can’t do it again,” I informed everyone. “There are laws.”

“They’re trying to get around the laws,” Connie argued.

“I heard that they were going to tell us to pay up, or they will have the building condemned,” Grenadine added.

“I heard they were just going to burn the whole thing down,” Connie said pessimistically.

“We need to just think positively,” I told them. “Let’s not fearmonger. It’s all going to be okay. I’ll email the city’s tenant protection agency.”

McKenna was hyperventilating.

“Why don’t you help me think of something nice to do for Grayson so I can thank him?”

“I can’t believe you’re on first-name basis.”

“Saying Mr. Richmond bought me an expensive pair of shoes makes it sound creepy,” I told her.

“Fair.”

“A thank-you note doesn’t seem to cut it. I need to do something really nice. A thousand dollars is a lot of money.” I wrinkled my nose.

“You mean like all the unpaid overtime we do?” McKenna snorted. “Give him a certificate for that and call it even.”

“Grayson’s finally emerging out of his shell and starting to venture out into society. He’s a fragile baby bird and needs a protector. I want to prove to him that when you do something nice, it comes back threefold.”

“You’re going to spend three thousand dollars on him?” my friend asked.

“Absolutely not. I was thinking about just ordering him some food from his favorite restaurant.”

GRAYSON

How was it Tuesday again?

I had the extra shoes in the trunk of my car. I was going to drop them off at a local nonprofit that provided business clothes to young women who were victims of domestic violence and were trying to become financially stable.

Of course I didn't just have the shoes. I had a check for them as well.

I glanced in the mirror that hung over the bar.

She had said in an interview she had given at the fifteen-year anniversary of the rescue that similar organizations had really helped her integrate back into society.

I wondered if she would soften toward me just a little if she knew.

Probably not.

It was clear she didn't want anything to do with me.

And yet here I was.

I hunched over, dipping my chin down to bury it in the scarf I was wearing.

"Do you need another moment to look at the menu?" the bartender asked me. "Or would you prefer I put in your appetizer order for now?"

"I know my order, thanks," I murmured. "I'll do the black garlic bruschetta, roasted cauliflower cannelloni, the grilled asparagus, and the seared trout with the potatoes and mushroom puree."

"Coming right up."

"Please take your time. I'm not in a rush," I said and crossed my arms.

I needed to stop coming here. Every Tuesday I pushed my luck that she

would recognize me. Once she realized it was me, she'd probably call the cops. There would be a restraining order and press. Marius would be annoyed with me.

“What a coincidink!”

I froze as the high-pitched voice carried across the bar.

“Great minds think alike.”

Oh no.

Lexi hopped over to me, brand-new leather shoes fitted like gloves to her feet.

“Imagine seeing Grayson R—”

“Shhh!” I hissed, holding my finger up.

“Don't shush me.” Lexi pretended to bite my finger. “I didn't know you were going to be here today. I'm not stalking you or anything weird like that.”

I wrapped an arm around her waist, tucking her to me, hoping no one would notice the obnoxiously loud redhead.

“We have to go.”

“But I didn't—”

“Shhh!” I hurried her past the table by the corner.

Fortunately, the kids were in the middle of loudly telling the grandparents about a movie they wanted to see.

“Why did we have to leave?” Lexi demanded when we were safely outside.

I looked around, distressed. My time with her had been cut short, and it was all because of Lexi.

“You—”

Lexi was confused, and it wasn't like I could explain why I was so angry.

“You look hungry,” she said slowly. “I came to buy you a special treat.” She held up one foot and pointed. “To say thanks for the shoes.”

“I'm not hungry,” I said brusquely.

“Did you eat?” Lexi asked.

“Sir?” the hostess poked her head out. “Your food is ready.”

“Thanks,” I said, then turned to Lexi. I pulled out my wallet. “I need you to go pay for and pick up the food.”

“Why?” she asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Because you're my assistant,” I snarled at her. “You work for me. You do what I say. So go pick up the food.” I struggled to control my breathing.

It is not her fault. Stop being so mean to her. Stop acting like your father.

But it was too much. Lexi had ruined my Tuesday afternoon.

She came back out moments later with a large paper sack.

“I made them give me forks. They don’t do plasticware over here, so I had to basically sell my firstborn child to get them to give me silverware. Also bought you some water. You look dehydrated. It’s fancy water with bubbles for your delicate sensibilities.”

Little did she know the type of water I used to survive on.

Lexi handed me the receipt and the credit card.

I stared at it.

“Dessert.”

“You don’t eat dessert,” she reminded me.

“You eat dessert,” I said, trying to figure out a way to have her do what I wanted without it bringing up too many questions.

“Go back in there and order whatever dessert you want, and”—she took the credit card back from me—“see that table there at the corner window?”

“Uh-huh.” Her eyes flicked back and forth from the window to me.

“Please have the restaurant put desserts for that table on my tab, too, but have them tell the guests it was on the house. They can’t know it was from me.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

I tried to stay out of sight, while still attempting to get a glimpse of the woman through the window.

She tucked a piece of her dark hair behind her ear. An aching familiar gesture.

The door opened, and the woman turned, attracted to the motion of Lexi with her unruly red hair, carrying a giant raspberry champagne cake.

“What in God’s name is that?” I hissed, pressed flat against the wall.

“That wall is dirty. People pee on that wall. Get away from that,” Lexi scolded. “This is a nice suit.”

The fact that she was carrying three-quarters of a giant pink cake that looked like it weighed as much as Gizzy did not turn a single head in downtown Manhattan as we headed to my car.

“You ordered a whole entire cake?” I exploded when we were out of sight from the restaurant.

“Nope,” she said, still walking carefully in her black heels. “I asked for a slice of the raspberry champagne cake. Matt said since it wasn’t a popular

cake and had been sitting there a little longer than they'd like, that I could just have it. He's a super nice guy, and he has an iguana too! Can you believe it? We're meeting up for a playdate with Gizzy and Maxine."

"You're not going on a date with the Alessio bartender," I said automatically.

"It's a pet playdate."

I snorted. "It's a ruse. I know what he wants."

"Clearly you don't, since his *boyfriend*," she emphasized, "is not a fan of iguanas, but tolerates Maxine because he loves Matt."

"How do you know all this? I've been going there for years, and I don't even know his name."

"Probably why no one there has ever offered you three-quarters of a cake before," she said with a sniff. "Anyway, where are we having our picnic? They wouldn't let me have any plates, so we'll have to eat out of the boxes."

"You couldn't convince them to give you plates?" I asked dryly.

"You were rushing me. I didn't have time."

"I have errands to run; we're not having a picnic."

"If you want to keep those magazine-worthy abs, you should eat."

A small part of me was pleased at the compliment, though I'd tear out my fingernails before admitting it.

She yelped as she tripped over a crack in the sidewalk. I rested my hand on her waist, steadying her.

"I bought you those shoes so you would stop tripping."

"It's not me! Manhattan is not wheelchair-friendly. Here, hold my cake. I'm going to file a complaint. The city needs to fix this."

Lexi snapped photos of the uneven sidewalk while I stood there holding the giant cake.

"Okay, I can take it back now."

She held out her arms. I ignored her.

"You'll trip and fall."

"You don't know that," she insisted, trotting next to me as I headed for the parking garage.

"And if I do trip, it's only because you're walking too fast. And before you make a nasty comment about short legs, I am also wearing a pencil skirt and cannot get a good stride."

"I don't know why women insist on wearing such impractical clothes," I said then cursed as Lexi's hand slipped into my coat pocket, feeling around.

“Don’t get your hackles up; I’m looking for the keys.”

She unlocked the car and then used the key fob to open the trunk.

“Are you returning the shoes?” she asked when she saw the boxes.

“Donating them. There’s a nonprofit around the corner—”

Lexi let out an earsplitting squeak, and I jumped.

“Oh my gosh!” Lexi squealed, her feet in those shoes making tippy-taps on the concrete parking garage floor. “We’re going to be kindness buddies!”

LEXI

“I can’t believe you like to do good deeds too!” I squealed while Grayson winced.

“I’m not doing good deeds,” he grumbled as I tried to decide if I wanted my cake in the trunk or in the back seat of the car. Even though it was covered with plastic wrap I decided the back seat was better. Then I could keep an eye on it.

“You were giving me so much grief about being nice to others, and yet here you are, giving things away to strangers,” I said as I set the bag of lunch on the floor of the car next to the cake.

“I am not complimenting strangers or allowing them to live in my home,” Grayson corrected. “I’m making donations.” He walked a few paces away to pick up an empty plastic bottle.

I swooned.

“And he picks up trash. Be still my heart. Oh, I see a piece of trash too! It’s mine!” I raced ahead of him to pick up an empty chip bag while Grayson shook his head.

He followed me to a trash can on the other side of the parking lot.

“What other acts of kindness do you do?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said shortly, tossing the empty bottle in the recycling bin.

“Kindness buddies!” I held up my hand for a high five.

He ignored it.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” I said, hurrying after him back to the car.

Grayson paused next to a dark-green SUV and flicked his hand. A crumpled hundred-dollar bill landed under a tire.

I grinned and kept grinning as I slid into the passenger's seat of the luxury car.

"You look demented," Grayson remarked as he slipped on his sunglasses. I clasped my hands together. "You're a nice person!"

He grunted and put on his seatbelt.

As soon as he turned on the car, "Part of Your World" from *The Little Mermaid* blared out of the sound system.

"Man, this is like being in the IMAX theater," I remarked over the music. Grayson turned down the radio with a scowl.

"Aww, Ariel is the representative of us redheads," I said as Grayson exited the parking deck.

"I don't have red hair." His mouth twisted in annoyance.

"In the sunlight your hair has a very, very tiny bit of red," I said, reaching out to point. "The tiniest."

"You're hallucinating; it's all that cake."

"Yum! Cake."

Grayson pulled up in front of a brick building with an ornately carved wooden door. A sign for the nonprofit, Mary's Nest, hung in the window.

A bell chimed over the door as we went inside, Grayson carrying the bags of shoes.

"Hi there!" I trilled to the volunteer at the front desk. "We have a donation for you all—some very fancy business shoes."

Grayson set the bags down.

"And a check," he added pulling an envelope out of his breast pocket.

"What a generous donation," the volunteer gushed.

"You all are doing wonderful work here," I told her.

"Let's go," Grayson said in a low voice.

I ignored him.

"Are there other items you all need? Any way we can offer more help?"

"How generous!" the young woman replied. "Job training is a big thing. A lot of the women we serve have bounced from an overbearing and often abusive father to an abusive husband, and they are afraid of their own shadow. They can barely make it outside let alone hold down a job. As much as we're thankful for the money, having volunteers to help transition these young women to the workforce would be a huge help."

"Just let me know when is a good time to come by, and I'll bring at the very least me and my bestie," I promised. "I'll also see if I can't convince

some of my coworkers to come too. I bet if lunch is provided, they'll totally be there. Here, I'm adding you on my Instagram. We'll talk and set something up."

Grayson tugged on my arm.

Before I could tell him to hold his horses, a young woman exclaimed, "Oh my God, it's you!"

Grayson froze.

Ex-girlfriend?

I looked between the two of them.

"I was never able to thank you properly for the car," the young woman said, teary-eyed.

"Grayson gave you a car?" I was flabbergasted.

"He saved me," the woman said, eyes wide. "I was able to move me and my daughter out to Pennsylvania and could get around for work because I had a car that wasn't breaking down. I just got promoted to general manager. I just came back in the city to drop off some donations; it's not much, but this organization helped me so much."

She dabbed at her eyes. "And so did you, sir. How can I ever repay you?"

"No need." Grayson looked uncomfortable. "I'm glad you're doing well. We really must be going now, Lexi."

I waved as Grayson shoved me out the door onto the street.

"You perform, like, aggressive acts of kindness," I marveled when we were back in the car.

"It's nothing," he said.

"And so modest. Let me tell you, I'm impressed. Though it is a little show off-y. I'm over here passing out compliments and stickers while you're leaving hundred-dollar bills lying around, giving people cars, and other Oprah-level good deeds. I can't compete."

There was a smirk on Grayson's lips.

"I guess you'll have to up your game," he teased.

I turned in my seat to look at him.

"You're a good man, Grayson Richmond."

"I'm not." His expression was dark.

"Of course you are," I said lightly. "Trust me. I don't care enough about you to lie to you to protect your feelings."

GRAYSON

Lexi was wrong. I was not a good man.

Marius knocked on my office door and stuck his head in, grinning.

“Does this mean you got in touch with your brother?”

“What? One of my brothers contacted me?” I stood up abruptly.

Marius seemed to realize he’d made a mistake.

“I’m sorry, man, I just saw the email go out about how the Mary’s Nest nonprofit is looking for some volunteers to teach classes to the trafficking and domestic violence victims they serve and instruct them on how to navigate corporate environments. The Angelique Foundation, the human trafficking charity your brothers Graham and Connor run, donates a lot of money to Mary’s Nest. I know you never go to those fundraisers they host, but I thought ... never mind.”

“You thought wrong,” I said tersely, sitting back down.

Marius worked his jaw. “Maybe you should try reaching out to them again?”

“No.”

“They’re all adults now,” Marius argued. “The last time you tried you were all still teenagers.”

“They don’t want me in their life. Drop it. Please,” I added.



BRINGING Lexi with me to the nonprofit yesterday had been a mistake.

She was like a virus—she infiltrated and multiplied, taking over

everything she touched, infecting it with her own brand of toxic positivity.

The redhead had co-opted my company, my home, my life, and also my mind. I couldn't get that song out of my head, the one she had played at deafening volume in my car that sounded like *dahhh du DAH du dah de duh*.

Obnoxious.

"You're being histrionic," I told my reflection in the window.

Lexi was collecting sign-ups and lunch orders from people at the desk she shared with McKenna, talking a mile a minute, alternating with taking sips of overly sweet coffee in a ridiculous mug made to appeal to princess-obsessed toddlers.

"Why can't she stay at her own desk? She's just so ... everywhere, so her."

It was irksome.

I stared at Lexi through the glass then realized she didn't actually have a designated spot. I fired off an email to the maintenance staff requesting an additional desk. She needed to be contained.

Then I gave in and googled my brothers' names.

There was Aaron. The last time I'd seen him, when we were kids, the hatred for me had been etched on his bruised face. Now here he was, a grown man, running Van de Berg Insurance.

Spencer was the next oldest, an easy smile on his face in the picture. He'd always been the one to try to make people laugh. Then Finn—quiet, impartial, perceptive. I'd invested in his drone company, and they'd just landed a large defense contract.

Graham was next, active with the Angelique Foundation in his free time when he wasn't running his data analytics company. Then came the youngest, Connor, the baby, who probably didn't remember me at all and only knew me from whatever horror stories our brothers told him.

I tore myself away from reading as the maintenance staff brought up another desk.

I watched Lexi ecstatically thank the maintenance staff and them shrug and point to me. I gave her a nod as she blew me a kiss with both hands.

The effusive scene triggered a memory long repressed, of my father pretending to be the benevolent patriarch as he would give one of the trapped women some token item designed to promote envy and hurt feelings.

I should have made sure Lexi had had her own desk earlier.

I felt sick.

I grabbed my briefcase.

“I had a last-minute meeting come up,” I lied to Anthym, “and will be out of the office the rest of the day.”

I got in my car, not sure where I was driving. I headed out of town for a while, sitting in silence. When I realized I was heading toward *his* house, I made an abrupt U-turn and headed back into town.

“It was because Lexi interrupted the Tuesday lunch,” I said to myself. “That’s why you’re acting strange.”

I needed to go for a swim in the cold water of the pool on my terrace, a particular luxury in Manhattan.

Count your blessings!

I was going to burn all those notes.

The penthouse was silent when I walked in. I took off my suit jacket then loosened the tie, removed it from around my neck, and threw it over the back of a lone chair. Then I undid the top few buttons of my dress shirt and unfastened the cuff links and expensive watch, feeling like I was suffocating. I kicked off the constricting dress shoes, removed the belt, then headed into the formal salon dominated by the large curving staircases that led to the upper floors.

But that’s not what drew my eyes when I walked in.

There by the window, sprawled out on a large beach towel, her red hair fanned out, was Lexi. Sunglasses on, headphones in, arms sprawled up behind her, one leg propped up—the curving thigh begged me to run my hands along it up the triangle of fabric between her legs, up to the swell of her tits under the bright-blue bikini.

My breathing was harsh; the hot arousal coursed through me. All I wanted was her—to kiss her, take her mouth, count every freckle with my tongue, spread her legs, rip the fabric of the skimpy bathing suit, and bury myself inside of her.

She’s here wearing hardly anything in my home. She must want me to take her, fuck her, make her scream in pleasure, never let her leave.

I never wanted anything as much as I wanted Lexi in that moment.

And I hated myself for it.

I let the hatred and loathing turn into rage because that was safer than this desire.

Then I let it loose.

I stalked over to her and bent down to rip the headphones off her head

and scream, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

LEXI

When I lived in Florida, I would go to the beach every day. Even when I had to bike five miles to the beach in college, I still went. I needed the ocean—I was like the Little Mermaid without the luxurious mane of red hair or the royal husband.

In Manhattan, there was no beach, at least not one that wasn't more than two hours away by bus. Not to mention it was expensive to go out to the beach. Sure, you could go to the “beach” on the Hudson River, but it was not the same as being on the ocean with all that raw, natural power and the hypnotic sounds of the waves.

The only way I could have my ocean time was here in Grayson's penthouse by the east-facing window. On a clear day you could see the ocean on the horizon.

When I knew he was going to be safely contained in a meeting, I would come here, spread out my towel, play my ocean sounds, and sunbathe, pretending I was at the beach.

I was half asleep, dreaming that I was lying in the sand, the sun warming me. I was going to lie here a little longer then take a swim in the warm waves.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?” a man was yelling at me.

“This is a public beach,” I murmured as my headphones were ripped off my head.

“Help! Police!” I shrieked, sunglasses askew on my face.

I pulled them off just in time to see Grayson leap backward.

“Jiminy Cricket.” I clapped a hand to my chest—my almost bare, bikini-

clad chest. “Soooo ... Obviously this is a very awkward situation but I just want you to know that this is not what it looks like.”

“Why are you wearing that?” he demanded from across the room. He was half undressed, barefoot, hair a little messy, breathing ragged.

“Can you come closer so you don’t shout?” I asked irritably, feeling embarrassed for being caught.

You’re lucky Grayson is so nice.

Any other man would fire his assistant immediately for sunbathing in his living room.

Grayson walked slowly, a curious, feral tomcat.

Hopefully, he didn’t give me cat scratch fever like the last stray I tried to befriend. I was still paying off those medical bills.

“I thought you were going to be at a meeting,” I began, trying to come up with some explanation on the fly that didn’t make me sound like a mooching lunatic. “Did it end early?”

“You are not my boss,” he snapped. “I am your boss. You don’t get to ask me about when my meeting ended.”

“Okay,” I said hotly, “fine.”

“Can you put some fucking clothes on?” he yelled.

“Can you stop swearing at me?”

“I can see your—”

“Oh shoot, I didn’t lose my top again, did I?”

Grayson made a strangled noise as I looked down, making sure everything was still contained.

“I tried surfing once and lost my top. Everyone laughed. Never again.”

I stood up and put my hands on my hips. “You repressed Manhattanites need to get out more. It’s like you’ve never seen a girl in a bikini before. News flash, this isn’t the 1920s. Women wear bikinis. I’ve lived in swimsuits ever since I was a girl. As long as your bits are covered, you’re good.”

“You can’t wear a swimsuit in my house,” Grayson forced out.

I rolled my eyes and bent down to grab the towel off the ground.

“I’m sorry I was once again taking advantage of your penthouse, but you have such a killer view, and hey, I’m a Florida girl in beach withdrawal. I’m doing some volunteer work this weekend for your favorite charity, so hopefully that can get me a pass on the bikini?”

I turned back around.

Grayson looked like he’d seen the hellfire from *The Hunchback of Notre*

Dame.

“That is not a bikini,” he hissed. “There’s no ... there ... you’re not ...”

“Thong bathing suits are very liberating, and they are practical because you don’t get sand in your swimsuit bottoms.”

Grayson let out a strangled growl.

“Dude, you better not come to Miami during spring break weekend,” I warned, “or you’re going to be seeing a lot more than this. I’d look like a nun in comparison.”

Grayson was practically spitting he was so angry.

“You are out of control. You have no sense of decorum, no sense of self-preservation. You just waltz through life thinking nothing can hurt you and that you can do whatever you want with no consequences, up to and including lounging around practically naked in your boss’s house.”

His deep voice echoed around the empty living room.

“And here I thought we were kindness buddies.”

“We’re not buddies. I despise you. You were put on this earth to drive me to drink and ruin,” he insisted.

“That’s dramatic. Guess the meeting did not go well.”

“Fuck the meeting.” If there were any furniture in the room, Grayson probably would have picked up a side table and thrown it through a window. “You’re not sorry. You just do whatever you want, damn the consequences.”

“Why don’t you let me make you some dinner as an apology,” I coaxed, wrapping the towel around myself.

“I don’t want you to cook me anything, I don’t want you to show up places you’re not invited, and I want you to stop using my house as a hotel,” he shouted at me.

“Yes, and one of those complaints is fair—I shouldn’t be using your penthouse—but the other two are not fair and are really histrionic. It’s not like I was stalking you when I showed up at that restaurant, and you can’t complain about the cake because you told me to go order dessert. What am I supposed to do when someone offers me a homeless cake to take?”

“Just say no,” he raged.

“Unlike you,” I shrieked back at him, “I don’t waste food. I don’t have a fridge full of food delivered to me every single flipping week that I don’t eat and then throw it all away. That’s weird behavior, and in fact it’s worse than weird. It’s monstrous. You know how many people need food, and you’re wasting thousands of dollars just to dump it in the trash every week.”

Instead of coming at me, Grayson reacted like I'd shot him, holding his hands up defensively.

"And here I thought you were a good person. Guess I was wrong. That was probably just a front for your secret, toxic behaviors. The food waste is probably the tip of that iceberg. You're just pretending to be a good person to mess with people. It's like the dessert for those people in the restaurant—you probably wanted me to think you were better than you were."

The words were mean. I knew they were mean, knew I was reacting out of embarrassment.

Do better, Lexi.

I opened my mouth to apologize but then Grayson said quietly, "I didn't know it was being thrown away."

"What?"

He looked hurt and sick.

"I didn't know the food was being thrown away," he said rapidly. "I thought it was being donated. I'm ... I'm sorry. That's not what I wanted."

"Why even buy all that food and bring it here then?" I said in confusion. "Just donate directly to the food bank."

"I need it here." His face was drawn.

"Why?" I pressed.

"You don't understand." He sounded plaintive.

I walked over to him and rested my hand on his forearm.

Grayson spoke rapidly, like the words had been waiting for the right moment to erupt.

"I—when I was younger we—I—my family was in a bad situation and I—there wasn't—we didn't have food a lot of the time. When we did, it wasn't like lettuce or anything green, and when I was finally able to, I just—I didn't want to *not* have food. I—I'm sorry I didn't want to waste it. I feel horrible."

And I felt like a downright witch, and not the good kind.

Grayson turned away from me.

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling awkward. "That's horrible but—"

"Just get out."

"Grayson—"

"I said get out."

GRAYSON

I jumped in the freezing-cold water with all my clothes on after she left, still draped in that oversize towel with brightly colored princesses on it.

What the hell had I been thinking?

I didn't know if I was upset about the food, the fact I had almost admitted everything about my childhood to Lexi, or the fact that I still couldn't stop thinking about her body.

"These are intrusive thoughts," I said, the words muffled under the water, the air bubbles rising to the surface.

I broke the tension of the water, shaking my head, spraying droplets to scatter over the pool.

The cold water had only barely helped me calm my racing thoughts.

"It's because you haven't slept," I told myself, climbing out of the water. The air was freezing, and while the chill numbed my body, it couldn't numb my mind.

I stripped off the wet clothes, leaving them in a pile on the terrace, and padded inside to the kitchen. I put on the electric kettle to boil water for tea because that seemed like something a normal person would do.

The leftovers from the aborted Tuesday lunch and a third of the pale-pink cake were in the fridge when I opened it.

Normally staring into the packed fridge was enough to calm me, but not today. I felt horrible about all the food I had wasted.

I'll make a donation to the food bank.

But it wasn't enough—didn't feel like enough.

I should sleep.

But I had slept yesterday, shockingly, considering it had been Tuesday.

One minute I had been lying there in the dark, laughing to myself about Lexi and that ridiculous cake, then the next the sun was streaming through the glass windows of the master bedroom.

That wasn't happening tonight.

It might have if you had been able to keep it together around Lexi.

I headed upstairs and changed into thin workout clothes.

I deserved to freeze.

It was misty outside on the sidewalk. The sun was quickly setting behind rolling dark clouds. Lexi had stolen all the sunshine with her when she'd left.

I let my gloved hands hang loosely by my sides, like I was looking for a fight, which I was. That was why I roamed the streets at night, like Batman, except I never actually did anything. It wasn't the 1970s in Manhattan, and especially in my neighborhood, there was nothing but wealthy to extremely wealthy people.

It was highly unlikely I was going to stop so much as a porch pirate, let alone prevent a kidnapping.

But what could I do?

I walked quickly through the misty rain, wading through the pools of streetlight, scanning the passing traffic.

There were more people out the further I went out from my upscale neighborhood.

As I walked, a part of me wished Lexi was there just for the distraction her chatter would provide.

Make no mistake, that was all I wanted.

I clenched my gloved hands. I couldn't think about her in that bikini. But honestly, if someone was going to sunbathe in their boss's house, why wouldn't they at least wear a full swimsuit bottom instead of ... *that*?

Maybe she's interested in you.

It wouldn't be the first time someone had inelegantly thrown herself at me. My wealth seemed to attract a certain type of woman.

I had acted on it once but swiftly learned my lesson.

However, when I had surprised Lexi, she hadn't thrown herself in my arms. Instead the incident had ended with her screaming at me.

Better than the alternative.

You mean the alternative where I made love to her on the towel?

Except that wasn't what I had wanted to do. I had wanted to fuck her

ruthlessly, endlessly.

It's a sickness.

I pushed myself into a run, trying to outrace the thoughts of lust of her freckled body, of her backside when she'd bent over.

A white van passed me, engine clunking as it drove down the street, windows dark.

I frowned at it. I was always suspicious of vans, for good reason. I tracked it as it turned on a side street.

You're not going to outrun it.

Maybe I should buy a motorcycle, but then I wouldn't be able to run myself to exhaustion just to earn a few hours of sleep.

The van pulled to a stop at the end of the block. A man stuck his head out. I peered.

He was talking to someone. A car drove past, illuminating the figure's bright-red hair.

Lexi.

LEXI

“**Y**ou got a package!”

“I’m a horrible person and I don’t deserve a package,” I said dejectedly when I walked into the cramped, dark studio apartment. I dumped my towel on the back of a rickety folding chair.

“Aw, did your sunbathing not give you a mood boost?” McKenna asked.

I slumped down in a chair.

“Grayson was there.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah.”

“He wasn’t happy, I take it?”

“Really?” Grenadine demanded. “That man wasn’t happy that he saw a busty lass in a bikini?”

“I was wearing a thong-kini,” I said with a grimace. “He was not amused.”

“Bullshit,” Grenadine insisted. “No red-blooded American male looks at an ass as nice as yours and thinks, I need to have that removed immediately from my house.” She tapped me on the hip with the wine bottle.

“He’s going through a lot,” I said, rubbing my face. “I’m pretty sure the big S was the last thing on his mind. That’s why he has all that food—it’s a trauma response thing. Grayson had a sad childhood.”

“No, he didn’t. He went to Harvard. His bio doesn’t say anything about him being a foster kid or anything,” McKenna argued. “I looked him up before I took the job.”

“Maybe he doesn’t advertise it,” I said dully. “Of course someone who

had a bad childhood is going to hoard food. I know that. I volunteer. I should have been more mindful. That wasn't nice of me. His mom was probably a domestic violence victim or something." I sighed and opened my laptop. "Maybe his family was homeless, and that's why he's donating to those charities. I should make a donation or something in his mom's name."

Anything to clear the guilt.

But when I searched for Grayson Richmond's mother on the internet, only corporate-fluff articles were coming up. His mother wasn't listed on his Wikipedia bio or anything.

"Hmm. I thought my Google-fu was stronger than that," I said as I started refining my search.

I finally found the information I was looking for on an obscure forum about unsolved mysteries.

"Blow me to Bermuda," I murmured, "he's *that* Richmond. Do you remember from, like, almost twenty years ago, when they found all those women trapped in that weirdo's basement? He had a bunch of kids down there too."

I leaned in, eyes scanning the screen, feeling even worse for Grayson.

"No wonder he's such a basket case," McKenna remarked as she read over my shoulder.

I both wanted to and dreaded reading more about Grayson's childhood. Thankfully I was spared when my laptop chimed with an incoming video call.

Or maybe not.

"Hi, Mom," I called out after clicking the green button.

"My little Disney princess," my mom gushed when she saw me.

My parents were in the living room of their cozy Florida bungalow. A mural of the "It's a Small World" Disney ride was behind them on the wall. A Mickey Mouse throw was on the back of the couch behind them. Yes, we were a Disney family.

I wasn't feeling like a Disney princess, though. I was feeling like I had just betrayed all my princess idols.

"The tracking website said the oranges arrived." My mom was giddy. "We sent them overnight."

I looked over to the box. Gizzy was eyeing it and practically licking his lips, if iguanas could do that.

"Yep, they're here."

“Squeaky Mouse!” Half of my dad’s face appeared on the screen.

“Barry,” my mom said in a stage whisper, “Lexi doesn’t like that name, remember?”

“But she was such a chubby little baby,” my dad said, getting teary-eyed. “She made the cutest little squeaky laugh.”

“Dad ...”

“I’m sorry,” he said, tears rolling down his face. “You’re just my favorite daughter in the whole entire world. Did I ever tell you how proud I am of you?”

“It’s all right, Dad.”

“No, no.” He blew his nose loudly. “I need to accept that my little Squeaky Mouse is all grown up. It happened so fast. Didn’t she grow up so fast, Cindy?” he asked my mother. “It feels like only yesterday we were riding on the toddler rides at Disney. Do you remember, Lexi?”

“Like I’m going to forget anything at Disney. I have that place memorized,” I reminded him.

“I know you’re still sad that they didn’t hire you,” my mom said sympathetically, “but you’re doing so well at your new job. It was a blessing.”

“We’re so proud of you! We follow Richmond Electric on Instagram,” my dad said. “Did you write any of those posts? There was a great one on there about how the company helped power that small-town pet rescue center.”

Behind the computer, McKenna winced.

She was in on my elaborate lie to my parents—that I had scored a cushy job in the Richmond Electric marketing department and was super successful and not some bottom-of-the-barrel assistant who didn’t even have her own desk.

Well I have one now. Thanks, Grayson.

And you repaid it by slumming in his living room and insulting his fridge contents.

My parents were waiting with bated breath for me to tell them about how my job was going.

Go big or go home.

“Oh yeah, that was a great one I came up with in the morning brainstorming session,” I said, hoping my parents couldn’t read the fib on my face.

I hated lying to them, but I hated disappointing them even more.

“I’m also working on organizing sessions for women escaping domestic violence situations and giving tips on how to navigate the corporate environment to help them become financially stable.”

At least that was something that I could be honest about.

“Oh, that’s wonderful. Isn’t that wonderful, Barry? What a lovely idea. All those poor young women. You know, if you do decide to give Disney another shot,” my mom said, “that would look fantastic on your resume.”

“But Lexi’s doing so well at her current job,” my dad argued. “You’re up for a promotion, aren’t you?”

“They’ll tell me soon at the six-month mark,” I said.

More lies. I wasn’t getting so much as a new notepad from the supply closet, let alone a promotion. Not if Anthym had anything to do with it.

“I hope you’re still having fun,” my mom said. “You’re in your twenties. You need to go out for drinks and see Shakespeare in the Park and go to the opera.”

All things that cost money. Money I didn’t have.

“She’s flashing her boss,” McKenna whispered to Grenadine. “Seems like she’s having a lot of fun.”

I glared at them over the top of the laptop.

“Oh, don’t make that face, Lexi. You haven’t told us about anything interesting you girls are doing.”

“It’s just the weather’s not great right now,” I said. “It rains a lot.”

“It will clear up,” Dad said assuredly. “It can’t rain forever. Eventually the sun will come out.”

My mom leaned forward. “Are you bringing a Prince Charming home anytime soon?”

“Don’t ask her that. We want you to find your happily ever after in whatever way works for you,” my dad assured me.

“Your dad and I met when we worked at Disney and were about your age,” my mom gushed.

“But no rush,” my dad added. “You can just concentrate on doing the best you can at your new job.”

“She can’t work too hard; she won’t have time to find her Prince Charming!” My mom swatted him lightly.

“Don’t lower your standards,” my dad added. “You deserve the best!”

And here I had lowered my standards just by taking a job that would

support my high-end sticker habit.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“We’re making things awkward,” my mom hissed at my dad. “Don’t you hear her getting upset?”

I cleared my throat.

“I’m fine.”

“Squeaky Mouse, we’re sorry.” My dad looked crushed.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I love you guys. I have to get some more work done.”

“You work too hard,” my mom chided me.

“Yeah, it’s hard to lie around in your bikini all day,” Grenadine whispered.

Cursed studio apartments.

“You show them that you’re the best gosh-darn communicator out there.” My dad swung his fist. “You’ll be running the Richmond Electric PR department in no time.”

“We love you!”

“So much! You’re our pride and joy.”

“Give Gizzy a hug from us.” My mom blew me a kiss.

“Enjoy the oranges. They’re a little taste of home.” My parents waved happily.

I kept the smile plastered on my face as I hung up, then slumped over dejectedly.

“I’m a terrible person.”

“You’re a woman on the edge.” McKenna patted my arm.

“You should have just shucked off the swimsuit and told that boss of yours to lick your taint.” Grenadine hooted.

“Grenadine, how much of that wine did you drink?” I frowned.

“Also, where did you get that? We don’t have money for you to be hitting up the wine shop. This is expensive wine. Anthym had Lexi buy this as a gift for the Christmas baskets Richmond Electric sent out.” McKenna clicked her tongue.

“I took a page out of Lexi’s book,” Grenadine cackled. “Paid a bunch of compliments to a guy—really stroked his ego, and he offered to take me shopping.”

“That’s not ...” I sighed and shook my head.

“The power of compliments, I guess,” McKenna remarked. “Maybe I need to start being more friendly.”

“Also I gave him a blow job, so your mileage may vary.” Grenadine shrugged.

“Lordy.”

I used a pair of scissors to open up the box, revealing a crate of lovingly packed oranges. Plump and round, they smelled like sunshine, citrus, and home.

Grayson might never have had a home.

I felt awful.

He needed some oranges to brighten his day. There was nothing like a fruit basket to bring a smile to someone’s face.

I climbed up on the counter to fish a wicker basket off from on top of the cabinets then grabbed a rag to dust it off.

“Don’t give him all of them. I wanted to make sangria. I have all this red wine,” Grenadine complained.

“How much wine did this guy give you?” I asked as I packed the basket with oranges and colorful pink tissue paper then tied a big gingham bow on it.

“Several bottles. He said it was the first blow job he’d had in a decade, and he was really impressed I could take out my teeth and give him the full effect.”

McKenna slowly poured herself wine.

“Maybe Grayson will fall in love with you and let you move into his penthouse and bring a friend?” she said weakly.

“Oooh! I want to live in a penthouse!” Grenadine perked up.

“A single, solitary friend.”

“Just for that, I’m not sharing my wine.” Grenadine sniffed.

I wrote a quick note then dug into the Ikea bag that functioned as my closet.

“I’m taking these to Grayson,” I said, shimmying out of my skirt and pulling on some leggings.

It was raining again when I stepped outside. It wasn’t romantic and warm Florida rain. This was cold and depressing. I held the basket close to me. I had covered it with a tea towel with—get this—a dancing Chip and Mrs. Potts design on it, but it wasn’t doing a whole lot against the rain.

The basket bounced awkwardly against my thigh, and my arm ached as I headed toward Grayson’s penthouse. If my conversation with my parents hadn’t been a complete lie and I had actually had a real job, I would have just

sprung for an Uber.

I was switching the heavy basket to my other arm when a white van pulled up.

There was a moment of apprehension—*it's just Grayson getting to you*—then the passenger-side window rolled down.

“Hey,” a man called from the dark depths of the van, “it’s the pretty redhead who said she liked my shirt last week. You remember me? Alfie? Let me give you a ride. It’s nasty weather out there.”

Something prickled at me.

Maybe I shouldn't get in this big white van ...

“Where ya headed?” The man was loudly chewing gum.

“Probably out of your way,” I said with a smile.

“Not a problem. I can take youse wherever you need to get to.”

“It’s about five blocks back that way,” I said, shifting the basket.

“Door’s unlocked. Just hop in.”

For some reason, my heart was racing. But the basket was awkward, and the rain was falling more heavily.

It's fine. You can text McKenna that you got a ride so someone knows where you are. It's not a big deal. He's just being friendly.

I reached for the door handle.

Alfie smiled.

“Don’t you fucking touch that door,” a deep voice growled right before a large hand grabbed me, jerking me back.

I screamed and dropped the basket of oranges. Then I was face-to-face with Grayson Richmond.

“Why are you out here in the middle of the night? Why don’t you have any sense of self-preservation?” he shouted at me. The tendons on his neck bulged. He was furious. He shook me roughly by the shoulders, making my teeth clack together.

“Do you have idea what could happen to you?”

I had already been discombobulated the entire day, and this sent me over the edge.

“I don’t know, maybe I could have been accosted and manhandled by a large, angry male?”

“This isn’t funny, Lexi,” he said through bared teeth.

“I’m not joking; you’re out of control.”

“That’s it. You’re coming with me, right now.”

He grabbed my arm.

I shook him off. “No thanks.”

“Do as I say.”

“Hey! Stop yelling at her,” Alfie demanded.

Grayson turned on him, something feral and animalistic in his green eyes.

Alfie yelped as Grayson latched onto the side of the passenger window.

The metal of the door creaked.

“You better keep the fuck driving,” Grayson said, the promise of violence laced in his words.

“Sure thing, mister.” Alfie floored the gas, and Grayson jumped back.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I backed away from him.

“You don’t understand,” he said, lips thinned.

“No, I get it,” I shot at him. “You keep calling me crazy, except you’re the one that’s crazy. You need help.”

I was still backing away.

Grayson advanced, singly focused on me. It was unnerving.

“You have to come with me where it’s safe,” he crooned. “I’m not going to hurt you, Lexi.”

I knew he wasn’t—knew that he wasn’t his father, but between his anger and the cold and the look in his eyes when he had shaken me, I was spooked.

“I’m going home, Grayson, and you should too.”

“No.” He shook his head again. “No, I can’t. I can’t.”

I backed away a few more paces then turned.

“Don’t follow me.”

GRAYSON

I picked up the basket and watched Lexi. Every instinct in me wanted me to follow her, to protect her.

“Your instincts are corrupted,” I reminded myself.

And yet ...

I kept walking, but not home.

I saw her at the end of the block when I turned a corner. I trailed her east, keeping her in my sights, but not letting her notice me.

Anyone who saw me would just think I was someone carrying home their groceries.

I trailed Lexi to a run-down apartment building. After watching to make sure she made it inside safely, I was finally able to relax and force my feet to take me home.

When I returned to my study, I sent an email to Anthym informing her that I’d decided to take a surprise visit to our southeastern plants and had her arrange the plane and hotel.

I didn’t want Lexi to feel uncomfortable in the office around me, but more than that, I didn’t trust myself around her, didn’t trust myself to be able to sit in my office and pretend to be normal while she was just outside the glass, perched on her desk, bringing me snacks, leaving me notes. And I definitely couldn’t risk surprising her in the penthouse again.

Work was exactly what I needed to take my mind off of Lexi Collins.



WHEN I RETURNED to Manhattan three days later, all the memories came flooding back as soon as I stepped through the door. I sighed heavily as I set my bag down. Part of me wished I was coming home to a dog or something, anything other than the empty penthouse.

Terrible idea. You destroy anything you love.

But maybe Lexi was right and I should buy some more furniture.

I wondered if she'd been there while I'd been gone. I closed my eyes and breathed in, wondering if I could taste her, the faint smell of salt, sand, citrus, and sunshine.

Well, I smelled the citrus.

The basket of oranges was sitting on the counter. I unpacked them, wondering if they were rotten. But the fruit was perfectly ripe; the smell of citrus flooded the kitchen.

I picked up the note on top of the oranges, frowning, and flipped it over.

To Grayson, it said in Lexi's loopy cursive. She'd gone with a sparkly orange pen this time.

I'm sorry. Please enjoy these oranges sent all the way from Dudley Grove from my family's orchard. Hope this taste of Florida sunshine chases off all the very unpositive, uncharitable vibes from me.

***Heart* Lexi**

I picked up an orange and peeled it. The juice ran over my fingers as I pried off a segment and took a bite, and the sweet citrus flavor exploded in my mouth. It was the most amazing thing I'd ever eaten. I didn't think I would ever be able to eat another orange after that. It was like eating pure sunshine, and it tasted like what I imagined kissing Lexi might taste like.

You can't think about that.

Except that I could easily.

I could imagine her mouth as plump as the fruit from her home state, how sweet she'd taste as I run my tongue over her lips.

Dangerous territory.

But kissing Lexi didn't feel dangerous as I closed my eyes and imagined it. It felt like salvation.

I finished off the fruit and washed my hands. The scent still lingered.

I should answer emails, work out, or go into the office, but all I wanted to do was be with her.

I grabbed two oranges then my keys, with only a half-baked excuse formed for what I was going to say when I showed up at her apartment

building.

But I didn't make it that far. I saw Lexi about halfway on the drive to her building, walking in the opposite direction. I circled the block then pulled up beside her and rolled down the window.

"Lexi."

She ignored me.

"Lexi, get in," I begged.

She turned her head slightly, pursed her mouth, then kept walking.

"Lexi, I'm sorry," I called. "Can you please just get in the car?"

"Ooh, no can do. See, my crazy, paranoid, aggressive boss doesn't let me take rides from strangers."

"He sounds like a real asshole," I said, driving slowly to keep pace with her.

"You need to watch the road," she told me.

I cursed as I almost hit an Amazon delivery truck.

"Lexi, can we please talk?"

"Can't talk to strangers," she replied.

After turning on my hazards, I double-parked and raced around the front of the car. I stepped in front of her to block her path.

"Excuse me." She glared at me.

"Lexi, please talk to me."

"I have pepper spray," she yelled, holding up a small pink canister.

"Very mature."

"And it's also very mature to attack and threaten someone when they're trying to be nice."

"That man wasn't trying to be nice," I snarled.

"You don't know that." She was infuriatingly stubborn.

"And you don't know that man at all."

"Yes," she said, "I gave Alfie a compliment, and he offered me a ride."

I crossed my arms. "What's his last name?"

"Well, um ... Russo?"

"Uh-huh. Phone number?"

"727—"

"That's a Florida area code." I cut her off.

"Jiminy Cricket."

"That's what I thought." I took her elbow.

She shrugged me off. "I'll just walk."

I had enough of it.

“I’m trying to look out for you.” I picked her up around the waist and physically carried her to my car.

“No, you’re not. You’re giving in to paranoia and negative thoughts.”

I opened up the back door and stuffed her in the car.

Her phone immediately connected to the sound system, and “A Whole New World” started blaring out of the speakers.

“Listen,” I said, turning around in the driver’s seat to look at her. “If you really want to walk, you can. Or I can drive you somewhere.”

“A billionaire moonlighting as an Uber driver on the weekend. I hope your shareholders don’t know you’re hurting for cash.” She clambered over the center console.

She was wearing black leggings, ballet flats, and a loose bright-purple sweater over a long pink tunic top that displayed the menagerie of Disney princesses. Some of her hair had escaped the ponytail, and she lifted her arms to pull out the sparkly scrunchie and comb her fingers through her red curls as she retied her hair up.

The image of her, her arms extended above her head as she basked in the sun, reappeared.

“If you wanted to come to see me, you should have just called last night,” I said, voice sounding harsh to my ears.

“Didn’t know if you’d pick up,” she said. “Besides, it was an apology present. You can’t just call the person you’re trying to give an apology to and ask for a ride.”

I strangled a snarl.

“You could have been hurt.”

“The only person who has thrown me into a car and kidnapped me is you,” she said tartly. “Twice, I might add.”

It was crushing.

Her face softened. “Sorry, that’s a low blow.”

My stomach sank. She knew.

“I, uh ... Sorry, I looked you up,” she admitted.

Of course people will know. I don’t know why you lie to yourself. On the internet, everything is forever, after all.

I didn’t say anything.

“That sounds like a difficult ... experience ... what you went through,” she continued softly.

“My mom had it worse,” I said, looking out the window. I wished it would rain to match my mood, but the sun was shining like spring was trying to sweep out the last remnants of winter.

“I don’t have any right to complain.” I started the car and headed in the direction Lexi had been walking.

The voices of singing cartoon characters swirled like a barrier between us. Or maybe it was just me. Lexi was tapping her foot along with the music.

“I didn’t know you were throwing it away,” I said abruptly.

She turned down the radio to look at me.

“That was not what was supposed to happen. With the food, I mean,” I said in a rush. “I didn’t want it thrown away. I just ...”

“I understand.” There was pity on her face.

I’d tried to go on a date once in college. Marius had insisted, said I needed to put myself out there. It was the friend of the girl he was dating at the time.

“Her friends all say she’s weird, and you’re a little weird, so maybe this is meant to be,” Marius had told me cheerfully.

Except her weird had been an obsession with cold cases and serial killers, and when I gave her my last name, her eyes had bugged out. Then her face had gotten that pitying look that Lexi now wore, and I had made an excuse that I’d forgotten a homework assignment and stood up and left the date.

I hunched my shoulders, waiting for the pity to give way to disgust.

But instead Lexi winked at me over the top of her sunglasses.

“Then I am happy to report that I’ve actually been stealing the food in your fridge and giving it to the people in my building. They’re on fixed incomes, and there’s a single mom living there with her disabled kids.”

“Oh thank god.” I relaxed and sat back in my seat, feeling irrationally happy.

“Not to mention, before I arrived, I think Mrs. Ortega was rehoming the food. Anthym might have thrown some of it away, but you know, not all of it.”

“Okay, good.”

“Everyone in my building is very appreciative. You really helped a lot of people.” She patted my hand.

I parked at a red light and looked over at her.

“I’m glad,” I said sincerely. “Thank you.”

“You can thank me by ordering food for two the next time you go to the

restaurant.”

“Three-quarters of a cake isn’t enough for you?”

“Not even close.”

A flash of motion in the rearview mirror caught my eyes.

“Get down,” I hissed to Lexi, pulling her down in her seat.

“Oh my gosh, do you pretend to be Harriet the Spy too?”

“No. Stop talking,” I whispered as we watched a happy family walk toward us on the sidewalk.

I could feel Lexi next to me, buzzing with excitement. “I know her! She was at the restaurant.”

“*Shhh!*”

The little girl was swinging between her mother and father while the little boy jumped and skipped happily in front of them.

“Don’t go too far,” his mom called.

“A Pokémon!” the boy said, jumping up and down excitedly and pointing at the blue-and-yellow toy sitting on the bottom step of an apartment stoop.

“It might belong to someone.” The mother sounded slightly exasperated, but she was still smiling.

“It says Eff Rrree eee,” the little boy spelled out.

“He was at the restaurant too! You gave them all free dessert. Are you the fairy godmother to this family?” Lexi squealed.

I clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Free. It’s free, Mama,” the girl insisted.

I could barely breathe.

“I guess you can have it then,” their mom said begrudgingly.

“Man, you two are the luckiest kids in the world,” their dad joked. “I always find money and free stuff when you’re around. I’m taking you with me to play the lottery next.”

“Don’t waste money on the lottery.” His wife swatted him lightly.

Their playful argument was absorbed into the sound of the city life as they passed my car.

“Oh my gosh,” Lexi cooed, practically bouncing in her seat. “You left a toy there for that little boy to find.”

“I might have.”

She beamed at me.

“Aww, you’re out here doing good deeds on your Saturday, just like me.” She opened up her bag and showed me the stickers and notes she had stuffed

in there. “Kindness buddies! I’m not handing out toys, though, just inspirational quotes.”

She gave me an adoring look.

“You are a good man.”

“I—” I closed my eyes. The cellar loomed, and the woman’s face was there—younger, angrier. I opened my eyes, wincing again at the sunlight. “I am not. You’re wrong. I’m a horrible man.”

Lexi already thought I was some crazy stalker and abusive boss. Did it matter if I told her? She couldn’t think any worse of me.

The words came rapidly.

“That’s my mom,” I admitted.

“Your—”

“And her new husband. Well not—my father wasn’t—He’s her husband. They’re married. They have two kids, and I’ve never met them, but you know, they’re my siblings, right? She hates me, always hated me. I look like him, my father, the guy who kidnapped her. I thought if I just—well, I guess it doesn’t matter now, she’ll always hate me, but I guess I missed her. Or maybe not. Probably though. But I wanted to do nice things for her and her family. I feel guilty, like I owe her, like there’s this massive debt I will spend the rest of my life repaying, and I have to make her life as easy and magical as I can to make up for everything. But I can’t just show up at her house with a check, right? That’s how you end up on a list, so ...”

Lexi’s eyes were big in her head.

I gestured helplessly. “So now you know my secret toxic traits. Like I said, I’m not a good man. Not like you. You’re so kind and good and this bright pure light out there in the world. You see the good in everyone. Shit, you don’t even swear. You’re the most pure, wonderful person I’ve ever met.” My eyes searched hers. “You make friends with everyone, and you know exactly who you are and what you value and you won’t let anyone corrupt the goodness inside of you.”

Lexi was shrinking down in her seat. She looked uncomfortable.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m sorry for the other night and sorry for yelling at you and sorry for trying to crush your spirit. I just—I didn’t want anything to happen to you. I couldn’t bear it. I really—it would kill me, I think.”

I put the car into gear. “So where do you want me to take you?”

“I—” Lexi swallowed, looking pale under those freckles. Then she turned to me.

“I’m not a good person. I’m a fraud!” she cried. “My dad worked his butt off, saved every penny to send me to college and then a master’s program. He is so proud of me, and my whole life plan was to work at Disney in their marketing department. I had interned there and worked at the parks every summer. My mom was Ariel at the park, and my dad played Mickey Mouse when they were younger. I thought that it was meant to be, that Disney was where I was meant to work.”

She looked miserable. “I graduated, applied there, and made it through two interviews. But then they didn’t accept me, and I didn’t have any other options because I thought I was going to get the job. After I was rejected, I had to go home and tell my parents that I had failed. That my dad had poured his heart and soul into me, had worked overtime and messed up his back, and it was all for nothing because I was a failure of a daughter.” Her mouth was trembling.

I just wanted to gather her in my arms, tell her it would all be okay.

“The worst of it?” she said, blinking back tears. “Was my parents didn’t even act mad at me, just told me I would find the perfect job. I couldn’t let them down, so I found this job online and lied and told my mom and dad it was a marketing job and that I had aced the interview and that I was making all this money, and they were so relieved and then so happy that I was a big success and awesome at marketing and had a great boss. I had to keep lying to them, and I’m still lying to them so that they don’t think they have a failure of a daughter.”

She wiped her nose.

“So now you know my toxic traits.”

LEXI

I'd never said that all out loud to anyone, how guilty I felt. I'd mentioned it to McKenna in a "please do me a solid" type of way, but not poured out the guilt and self-loathing to her.

But I had to Grayson.

It seemed like he would get it. We sat in the car, both on the most miserable carnival ride in the world.

The talking vultures from *The Jungle Book* crooned out a song about friendship. I turned it off, and we rode in silence.

Finally Grayson said, "My company does some work for Disney with the backup power at their Hong Kong park. If you want, I can ask them if they would consider putting you on their short list for the marketing department."

"Aww, Grayson!" I squealed. "You're trying to do a good deed for me."

There was a small smile on his face.

"Since I just got rejected, my plan was to wait a couple years to reapply, you know, bolster my résumé. But what a generous offer! I love a good, good deed. See? Kindness is its own reward."

I rolled down the window and waved to the lady in the car next to us.

"Your dog is adorable!" I shouted to her when she gave me a suspicious look.

I handed her a sticker. "Happy Saturday!"

"Thanks," she said, losing some of her irritation.

"Is this what you do every Saturday?" Grayson asked me.

"Who doesn't like a surprise sticker?" I asked him. "Here, pull over. I haven't passed out stickers in this park in a while."

Grayson snorted.

“The best way to feel better,” I told him firmly, “is to focus energy outside yourself. Doing good deeds can help you turn that frown upside down. You can’t feel bad when you’re making others happy.”

He sighed heavily and got out of the car.

I linked my arm in his.

“Happy Saturday!” I said loudly to a group of tourists.

“Oh!” one of the older ladies cooed. “And people told me that New Yorkers weren’t friendly.”

“She’s from Florida,” Grayson said in a monotone.

“Well, I’m from Texas, and I was just at Disney World.”

“I love Disney!” I gushed.



“I CAN’T BELIEVE we talked to those people for an hour,” Grayson hissed at me after I said goodbye for the fifth time.

“They were super nice. Look, she bought me a pretzel.”

“So you’re nice to people because they give you stuff?” he asked.

“Not consciously,” I argued. “It’s just a happy byproduct.”

“Uh-huh. Sounds fishy.”

“Ye who thinks the worst of people. Besides, my roommate’s grandmother gave a guy a blow job for a box of wine, so a free pretzel isn’t so bad.”

Grayson swore.

“It was that expensive stuff that we put in the holiday gift baskets.” I added. “If you’re nice to me, I’ll let you have a bite of my pretzel.”

Grayson narrowed his eyes.

“No blow jobs required,” I teased, holding it out to him.

He reached out, and his fingers brushed the back of my hand. His green eyes didn’t leave mine as he took a neat bite of the pretzel.

Not like me. I had mustard all over my face. My tongue darted out to lick at the tart condiment on the corner of my mouth.

Grayson’s eyes tracked the motion.

“Make every day magical. Happy Saturday!” I called to a group of girls who were determinedly having a boozy picnic with a corgi even though it

was, in my view as a Floridian, not at all warm enough to be considered picnic weather.

“No,” Grayson said.

I ignored him as the drunk girls waved us over.

“I love your sunglasses,” one of them squealed, making grabbing motions. “Let me try them on.”

“Selfie!” She pressed her face to mine and snapped photos while Grayson looked on in annoyance.

“I love your boyfriend,” another giggled. “Can I get a selfie of that?”

“Actually he’s my boss,” I told them conspiratorially.

Another swear from Grayson.

The girls all fell over in peals of laughter.

“We’re out here passing out compliments and stickers.”

“Stickers!”

“Let us see!”

“Sit, Grayson. Don’t be antisocial,” I ordered.

While I showed off my sticker collection, the corgi waddled over and plopped down in his lap.

“Have a drink. We made too many cocktails.”

“And bought too many snacks,” another girl added.

“Did you buy those pastries from the Bippity Boppity Bakery?” I asked as one of the girls offered me a cookie.

“We got there early, and there was already a line.”

“It’s totally becoming the now hot place in Manhattan,” her friend added.

After a long and drawn-out discussion on the best way to host a nostalgia-filled sleepover, I finally dusted off my leggings.

“I have more stickers to pass out. Enjoy the sunshine!”

“This is insanity,” Grayson muttered as I tugged him down the park path.

“Happy Saturday!” I trilled at a guy on a skateboard.

He took a sticker and flashed me a peace sign wordlessly.

“You try,” I ordered Grayson.

“I’m not—”

“Happy Saturday! Do it. Happy Saturday.”

“Happy Saturday,” he said to an older woman.

She looked him up and down appreciatively.

“It is a happy Saturday.”

I grabbed Grayson’s arm. “You just made someone’s day. See? I knew

that New Yorkers couldn't all be antisocial. It was totally the weather. You can't be unhappy when the sun is shining." I lifted my face up, letting the light bathe my face.

"No," Grayson said after a moment, "I guess not."

"You did such a good job," I told him when we were back in the car and heading in the direction of his penthouse. "You're an awesome kindness buddy."

I unpeeled a sticker and stuck it on his cheek.

"Cute!"

He peeled it off and stuck it to the dashboard.

I picked up one of the oranges in the cup holder and began peeling it.

"You know what we need?" I said to him. "A bonfire."

GRAYSON

Watching Lexi eat the orange was distracting. The smell filled the car, the juice ran down her chin, and the only reason I didn't lean over and lick it off was that I was driving and needed to concentrate on the road.

It was a struggle.

"Mhmm," Lexi moaned as she took another juicy bite of the orange. "Nothing is better than this." She slurped at the fruit. I dug my fingers into the steering wheel.

"Except eating it by the pool. We need to spiffy up your terrace. It's almost pool season, and that desolate wasteland isn't suited for a party."

I did not like parties. I only went to parties if Marius dragged me or if it was a work event. I treated parties like a trial I had to endure. I hated parties, but I would agree to anything Lexi asked in that moment. She smelled like sunshine and citrus and what I imagined a family vacation would be like.

"Don't worry," Lexi was saying, "we'll start you off small." She licked the last of the orange juice off of her hand, her pink tongue lightly tracing up the side of her index finger.

I want that on my dick.

I abruptly wrenched the steering wheel, turning into a parking garage.

"There is a shop here where you can buy what you need."

"The sunshine really must have gotten to you."

"Or not," I said.

"Too late. We're already committed." Lexi grinned.

The last foster mother I'd had before I'd been shunted into a group home

for the remainder of my childhood loved to shop. That was the only thing she liked and the reason she had so many foster kids crammed like puppies in cages in her apartment while she collected the checks from the government. She would take us with her to carry her packages as she spent hours slowly trawling through discount warehouses looking for a deal.

I hated shopping, hated how it stretched out into an eternity. Buying Lexi those shoes had been the first time in my life I'd willingly gone shopping for something that wasn't groceries.

Now here I was again.

Damn her and that damn orange.

The saleswoman in the upscale home goods store took a look at Lexi with her slightly sunburnt nose and her T-shirt and leggings, and though her facial expression didn't change, I could see the dismissal in her eyes.

"Can I help you?" she asked, though it was clear she wanted to do anything but.

I stepped up behind Lexi, resting my hand on her shoulder.

"Let's go."

The woman's eyes widened in surprise.

"But I want to find some furniture, and you said you liked this store," Lexi protested.

I ground my teeth.

"You look like you have excellent taste," Lexi said to the rude saleswoman.

If it were me, I would have told her that she just lost a sale based on her prejudice. However, somehow Lexi managed to convince the saleswoman in the next five minutes that they were best friends. Now the lady was showing her a selection of secret patio furniture. Lexi picked piece after piece.

"What?" she said when I protested. "Your terrace is huge, and you have one lone lounge chair. Not even two, just one, and nowhere to put your drink. Also can we get this?" she asked the saleswoman.

"It's a barrel," I said flatly.

"It's a drink table," Lexi argued.

"This is a better drink table." I pointed to a large metal-cylinder-looking thing.

"That," Lexi said, "is a firepit, and we'll take two."

"Those are custom items from Italy and made to order. But," the saleswoman said conspiratorially, "so that you don't have to go beg for

firewood, we have extra from a display, so I'm just going to give it to you."

"New favorite store," Lexi said happily.



"I CAN'T BELIEVE you were nice to her after she clearly thought you were a nobody," I said, turning to Lexi when we and the mound of packages were in my car. The special furniture Lexi had ordered was scheduled to be delivered in a few weeks.

"Maybe she was having a bad day," Lexi said as she unwrapped the chocolate bar the saleswoman had given her. "And yeah, I could have been mean, but now maybe she'll remember that the person she judged was actually fun and really nice, and she will be more open-minded in the future. Kindness pays dividends."

"I don't believe it," I said, backing out of the parking spot. "As soon as she saw me, she was going to do everything she could to make the sale. She was sucking up to you."

"You have to see the good in people," Lexi said. "And now we don't have to go buy firewood. Isn't that nice? Though what a rip-off, right? In Florida I can just go outside and find stuff to burn. Shoot, people will give it away, and here you have to buy it."

When we arrived back at my penthouse, I carried the firewood and the dopey barrel table inside while Lexi toted one of the bags with the large blankets in it.

"I should have bought some marshmallows," she said as we rode the elevator up.

"The firepit hasn't been delivered yet," I reminded her.

"Anything can be a firepit if you just pit it."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"That's because you're not from Florida." She dumped the bags on the couch in the living room then headed into the kitchen and started rummaging in the cabinets.

"I thought you had a ... yep!" Lexi surfaced with a giant can of tomatoes.

"I didn't buy that." I scowled. "Why is that here?"

"You didn't buy any of the food here," she said mildly. "But thankfully someone had the foresight to buy tomato soup ingredients."

She whipped out a can opener—somehow she knew my kitchen better than me—and opened up the can then dumped the tomatoes into a large stockpot, along with a container of chicken stock she'd pulled from the pantry, and turned on the heat.

“We'll let that sit,” she said and rinsed out the can. “Now let's light something on fire.”

“You're going to burn this tower down,” I complained, following her outside.

“Please.” She snorted. “I've been bonfiring since I was four.” Lexi set the empty can on top of another full can, filled it with shredded paper, and lit a match. When the paper was burning, she stuck one of the pieces of wood in the can. Then she busied herself arranging the anemic amount of furniture on the terrace, piling the large fluffy blankets she'd insisted I buy onto the lounge chair and placing the barrel just so beside it.

“Too bad the other lounge chair isn't here,” Lexi said with a sigh as she snuggled in the nest of woolly blankets.

I warily watched the can. The stick of wood had caught fire. Flames licked out. It was colder up here on the terrace above the city.

I didn't spend much time out on the terrace, really only to swim, then I went back inside. It was, I hated to admit, a large terrace. Suddenly the amount of furniture Lexi had insisted I purchase didn't seem so outrageous.

“Stop scowling. A fire makes everything better,” Lexi murmured from under the blankets.

I watched it another minute with suspicion. It didn't seem like it was going to blow up.

Lexi patted the lounge chair.

“Come here, kindness buddy. Sharing is caring.”

I gingerly sat on the edge of the lounge chair.

“Watch it!” Lexi exclaimed. “Someone doesn't have a lot of beach experience. Sitting like that is a one-way ticket to being dumped on your butt in the sand. Get in here.”

She lifted the blanket.

I hesitated a moment then gave in.

I wanted nothing more than to be next to her, curl up beside her, wrap my body around hers.

Don't be weird.

Lexi just wanted to be friends. She was probably doing this because she

felt sorry for me.

Still, the heat of her under the oversized blanket was intoxicating.

“How long have you lived here?” Lexi asked, wiggling her feet, her bare toes briefly pressed against the side of my leg.

“About six months.”

“And you haven’t had a chance to truly enjoy your terrace.”

“I’m busy.”

“You know, an act of kindness can be for yourself. Self-care is a thing. Oh, I know, I’m going to help you learn to practice self-care.” She grabbed my arm.

“I bought you very expensive shoes, and you repay me by forcing me to engage in self-care,” I said mildly.

“I’m helping you to enjoy life and reap the fruits of your labor.”

“You’re wrong,” I said, inching ever so slightly closer to her, letting one hand drift up casually to touch the tip of one of the red curls. “I swim.”

Lexi sucked in a breath and grabbed my jaw, turning my face to hers, our noses almost touching.

“You cannot be serious. You swim in that pool?”

“Like you said,” I told her, feeling the smile play on my lips, “I should enjoy the terrace.”

“Enjoy it, not torture yourself. That water is freezing.”

“You just break the top layer of ice off in the morning. The whole thing hasn’t frozen solid this winter.”

Her mouth parted in shocked horror.

I grinned at her. Our faces were practically touching now.

“It’s good for you. Bracing. It wakes you up.”

“That’s not healthy.”

“Don’t be so negative,” I teased. “You need to approach new things in life with a positive mindset.”

I wrapped her in my arms briefly then rolled us off the lounge chair.

“Look out, Manhattan,” I announced loudly. “Lexi Collins is trying something new, and she’s going to go into it with an open mind.”

Lexi screamed—not a scared scream but like a laughing scream, like in high school when the girls were just playing with each other. Her legs kicked as I carried her to the pool.

“You’re really setting a bad example for me,” I told her as she wrapped her arms around my neck holding on tightly. “Imagine if I acted like this

when you try to convince me to buy a living room set.”

“Don’t throw me in.” Lexi giggled and shrieked as I pretended to hold her over the pool.

“No? The self-proclaimed queen of positive thinking doesn’t want to try something new, huh?”

“Nope.”

Laughing, I swung her back over the wood deck.

She fit so perfectly in my arms as I carried her back to the nest of blankets on the oversized wood lounge chair. I tucked her back into the fuzzy throws then lay down next to her.

Lexi didn’t move away.

I cupped her face, tracing my fingertips over the freckles. I really wanted to kiss her, wanted to see if she tasted like the orange still, like sunshine that I even, after all these years, couldn’t get enough of. But I wasn’t sure if I should.

“I can’t lose you,” I murmured.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere. I really need this job,” she said, sounding slightly breathless and more than a little squeaky.

LEXI

The soundtrack to *Moana* blared from my phone, thankfully giving me a chance to get myself under control before I went full squeaky mouse all over Grayson.

“I have to check the soup.” I threw off the blankets. “You like grilled cheese? Of course you like grilled cheese. Who doesn’t like grilled cheese?” I said, scuttling out from under the blankets and practically sprinting inside the penthouse.

It was warmer than the outdoors but not as warm as being under the blankets with Grayson.

Had he been hitting on me? My experience with romance began and ended with Disney movies.

Sure, there was that awkward almost-encounter with one of the Chip ‘n’ Dale cast members when I was working my college summer job at Disney World. No, I wasn’t Ariel, unfortunately. I just sold those giant turkey legs. But Grayson was not wearing a chipmunk costume, and I was pretty sure that I couldn’t just manhandle him like a giant turkey leg either.

It was probably my imagination, I told myself. I’d had an overactive imagination as a child. I believed in Santa Claus wayyy too long, not to mention the Tooth Fairy. I loved fairy tales, especially any retelling of the classics like *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*.

Grayson was no Prince Charming.

But what if he were? Maybe I was Belle taming the Beast through the power of kindness?

As I stirred the cooked-down tomatoes and chopped some herbs to finish

the soup, I sang to myself.

What did I love to do most besides read, bake, and make someone's day a little better?

Sing.

New Yorkers frowned on singing. I'd tried singing in my building, in the park, and in the alley where I got yodeled at by stray cats.

But here in my boss's penthouse? I could sing my Disney adult heart out.

Could I sing? Let's just say my parents think I'm great.

I was singing "Once Upon a Dream," twirling around Grayson's giant kitchen and pretending all my animal friends were helping me finish the soup and grilled cheese.

I took a deep breath to launch into the part where the prince comes in then gasped as Grayson sang the verse from the doorway of the terrace.

"Oh my gosh," I breathed. "You're, like, really good. You should be on Broadway. You have a lovely voice."

"Why would I be on Broadway?" Grayson scoffed. "I came to see if I could help with anything."

"You can teach me to sing like that."

"I don't know how to sing. You play those horrible songs in my car so much they're all stuck in my head."

"I wish I'd recorded it," I swooned.

"I bet. Considering it will never happen again." He snorted.

"I will jump in that cold pool if I can hear you sing again," I promised.

"Hm." Grayson pretended to think about it. "No deal."

I set the blender on the counter. Before I could pick up the heavy stockpot, Grayson was there, lifting it up.

"You want all of it in the blender?" he asked me.

"Yes, please."

I scooped out the last of the cooked-down tomatoes and spices into the blender and let it whirr. Then Grayson poured it back in the pot for me.

As I stirred in the heavy cream, Grayson was already pulling out an unopened jar of mayonnaise from the fridge and spreading a little on the bread.

"Someone taught this man how to make a grilled cheese." I applauded.

Grayson smirked at me over his shoulder.

"Contrary to popular belief, I wasn't always rich. There was a time in my life where I had to cook my own food. But I didn't make soup or grilled

cheese as nice as this. It does not seem like Florida food,” he observed as he layered the slices of fancy cheese onto the bread.

“I used to work at one of the Disney dining experiences,” I told him as the grilled cheese sizzled in the panini press. Grayson, of course, one, had the room for a specialty kitchen appliance, and two, could afford said appliance. “We provided comfort foods with an upscale casual twist.”

“It’s like living in a Florida commercial with you,” he teased as he scooped the grilled cheese onto a plate while I dished up the soup.

“I just need to bring my alligator and exotic plant collection to give you the full Florida experience.”

“You don’t have an alligator, do you?” His expression was apprehensive.

“No, Gizzy is best as an only child.” I took a bite of the grilled cheese.

“Yum.” I closed my eyes. “Fancy cheese and fancy bread. Look at you eating the food in your fridge.” I poked him in the abs.

Grayson grunted and carried the food to the kitchen table.

“No judgment here,” I told him, trotting after him. “I’m saving it all for your empty penthouse. Now.” I whipped out my notepad and gel pen. “Let’s figure out your style so you can decorate. Do we like the Scandinavian look? Or maybe more industrial, though we’ll need some plants to soften things up so it doesn’t look like a renovated prison.”

“No plants,” Grayson said, hunched over his soup.

“No plants! But you get so much light here. There nothing but sunlight.”

Grayson had a dark look on his face.

“You can’t hate plants,” I argued. “Plants are low emotional maintenance.”

“I had a plant once, and it died. I killed it.” He said it so plaintively.

I squeaked out a laugh then clapped a hand over my mouth.

You shouldn’t laugh at people if they were baring their soul, but it was hard not to.

“Everyone kills plants,” I assured Grayson “Three of mine died last week, gosh darned succulents.”

“I don’t want to kill my plants, and since I clearly can’t take care of them, I shouldn’t have plants,” he said mulishly.

“Plants are difficult because they can’t tell you if they’re hungry or cold or if you didn’t rotate them exactly thirty-seven degrees and feed them filtered rainwater collected by moonlight. Then they just keel over. What you need is a dog. Dogs always tell you they’re hungry or want to play. It’s hard

to neglect a dog.”

“I can’t have a dog,” Grayson said. He seemed really hurt. “If I can’t be trusted with a plant, I certainly can’t have a dog.”

“You need a pet,” I argued. “You can’t just live here alone. It’s sexy when you’re in your twenties, and intriguing in your thirties, but you start pushing into the forties, people will talk. You’ll be a magnet for the neighborhood busybodies.”

“Can we just drop it,” he said, voice strained.

The rest of the meal was tense.

I decided I had definitely misread the tea leaves in thinking that Grayson might be interested in me. That didn’t mean I was kicking him to the curb. Oh no. Grayson was my new project. He was in need of many a good deed.

I texted McKenna when I left the penthouse to take a car service home, which Grayson had insisted on.

Lexi: Do you want to go to the pet store?

GRAYSON

After sleeping fitfully, curled up under the blanket that still smelled like smoke and Lexi, I woke up on the terrace in the cold morning, my breath fogging around me as the sun rose. I leaned back and stared up at the pink sky.

“Why do you have to ruin everything?”

Last night had been the first time I’d ever really felt somewhat close to normal, and I couldn’t let it go over a stupid fucking plant. And now it was Sunday, and I didn’t have the luxury of meetings, calls, or emails to distract me.

“This is one of a whole host of other reasons why your mother now doesn’t want to have anything to do with you.”

I shouldn’t have been so emotional about a plant. Lexi was right.

It was just that, when I had finally landed a job out of college, I had had this vision of how my life was going to go. I was going to be successful, with lots of money, a beautiful home, and a pretty, generically inoffensive, but also successful girlfriend who my mother would approve of. We would have a golden retriever and lots of friends. My mother was going to see that I was nothing like my father and want me back in her life.

But then my one shot at a relationship had flamed out, and the fern I had bought died.

Lexi thought my home looked like it belonged to a serial killer and I had no friends. The closest I had was Lexi, who was the exact opposite of what a good corporate girlfriend should be—not that she was ever going to be my girlfriend, and she sure as hell wasn’t my friend. My mother wouldn’t

approve of Lexi at all. My mother liked nice things, fancy restaurants, and had an understated style. Her hair was always professionally styled, makeup just so. She would find Lexi with her Disney-inspired clothes and flyaway curls and incessant chatter to strangers distasteful.

Good thing you didn't kiss her.

Except I wished I had.

Because while I lived my life by making choices I thought might finally earn my mother's forgiveness or at least tolerance, with Lexi it was the first time in my life I even considered saying fuck it and doing what I wanted.

The doorbell rang.

I opened it to see Lexi grinning up at me maniacally.

She carried a glass terrarium in her arms that was partially concealed by a pink checkered cloth. There was a leash looped over one wrist, which was tethered to ...

"Say hi, Gizzy!" she said in that high-pitched voice people used to talk to babies or small dogs, not five-foot-long iguanas.

The reptile lumbered into my penthouse.

"You're not giving him another steam bath, are you?" I demanded.

"No, I'm going to do that when you're out of town next week." Lexi stuck her tongue out at me. And just like that my mood lifted, the sunshine of her filling the penthouse, warming my soul.

I prowled after her, not too closely—Gizzy seemed territorial—as she headed to the open living-and-kitchen space.

She set down the terrarium on the kitchen island and rubbed her hands together.

"I have found the perfect pet for you. I'm so excited."

"Please take that cage back to the pet store."

"Voila!" She whipped the cloth off with a flourish. "Grayson. Meet your new pet rock."

"A pet rock?" I scowled.

"Yes. He has his own habitat. No plants, just sand. Here's his care kit." She handed me a paper sack. "A rake for the sand, cloth to polish him, and a scrubbing brush."

I huffed out a laugh and circled the rock habitat.

It was oddly touching.

Lexi, carefully like she was lifting out a baby bird, picked up the rock out of the terrarium. "Hold out your hands," she said softly.

“This is ridiculous.” Though I felt oddly happy about this inanimate rock.

“What are you going to name him?” Lexi asked, completely sincere.

“I don’t know.”

“I’m personally partial to Crumpet, but no pressure.”

I set the rock on the counter.

“Look, Gizzy, you have a brother,” Lexi said to the iguana, who rose up on his hind legs.

Suddenly I wanted a real pet, plant, baby with her so badly it hurt.

I reached out to turn her to me, lift up her face to mine.

“Thank you, Lexi.”

Then I leaned in and kissed her.

LEXI

His mouth met mine, and I closed my eyes and leaned into the kiss. It was fireworks over Cinderella’s castle, pumpkins into carriages, and fairy godmother’s magic. It was better than any movie kiss.

Grayson cupped my face as he kissed me, nipping slightly at my mouth, drinking in the taste of me, like I was everything he’d been searching for. The kiss turned hard, insistent. Grayson knew what he wanted. His tongue swept in my mouth while his large hands roamed over my curves, pulling me closer to him.

As one of his hands trailed up in the chest direction, I floundered, trying to disentangle myself.

“I, um, I actually am late to meet—well, we have a playdate,” I said looking around wildly for Gizzy.

Did I want the kiss to continue? Sure. But Grayson was acting like he wanted to do more than kiss, and your girl had not shaved anything anywhere.

“Gizzy, let’s go. We’ll let you and Crumpet get to know each other,” I called, scooping up Gizzy and tossing him over my shoulder. “Okay, bye! See you at work on Monday.”



“I DIDN’T REALIZE that there were this many iguana owners in Manhattan,” McKenna said to me in a low voice when I rushed up to her at the iguana meetup I’d organized.

Matt, the bartender from Alessio, was already there with his three-foot-long iguana, Maxine.

It wasn't hot out by any means, but we'd found a sunny patch of grass, and the more sluggish iguanas were starting to warm up.

I let Gizzy off his leash, and he lumbered over to the other reptiles.

I fanned myself. "Sorry I'm late."

"I'm just glad you showed up," McKenna said. "Reptile owners are weeeird."

There was a guy with a face tattoo who was baby talking to one small iguana. Another girl with green hair and a nervous tic was asking question after question to another guy who looked like he wanted to crawl under a rock and hide.

"Yep. That's us reptile people." My voice sounded high-pitched.

"Did Grayson hate his pet rock?" McKenna asked me.

"Nope," I said in a squeak.

"Really? He wasn't angry? Usually you have good ideas, but that one seemed a little questionable. Guess I was wrong, ha ha!"

"Ha ha!" I laughed, though it sounded more like air being let out of a balloon.

McKenna gave me an odd look.

Not able to contain it anymore, I grabbed the strap of her purse and pulled her close to me.

"Grayson kissed me," I squeaked in her ear.

Her mouth dropped open.

"Like a kiss on the cheek, right?"

"No, like his tongue was in my mouth."

"Oh my god." She clapped a hand over her mouth. "You know, before you got hired, Anthym took me out for drinks. I think she was still trying to pretend like she wasn't an alien wearing a skin suit. At the bar, she was going on and on about how amazing it would be to kiss Grayson. So was it? Was it amazing?" McKenna demanded.

"Not that I have a lot of experience, but it was the best kiss ever."

"Anthym's going to be so jealous!" McKenna pumped her fist.

"She can't know. You can't tell anyone." I grabbed my friend by the shoulders and shook her. "I'll get fired. I broke an employee handbook rule. Not to mention I'll never land a job at Disney if they find out I kissed my boss."

“A dick in the hand is worth two Disneys in a bush,” McKenna said sagely.

I dropped down on a bench.

“Maybe he made a mistake. Maybe he got overwhelmed by Crumpet.”

“Oh, you didn’t tell him that was the rock’s name did you, Lexi?”

“Crumpet is an awesome name for a pet rock.”

“So are you going to sleep with him?”

“Of course not.” I could feel the heat in my cheeks. Curse this pale skin.

“Oh my god, yes, you are. You should have slept with him now. Maybe you could have convinced him to buy us a nicer place to live.”

“The place we live is, you know, it’s fine. It’s a place.”

“My grandmother is convinced the landlord is trying to burn down the building and evict us.”

“I can’t worry about imaginary problems; I have a huge one.”

“Ooh, did you feel him up? Is it ginormous?”

“I didn’t touch his banana.”

“Oh my god, if you’re going to sleep with your boss—”

“I’m not.”

“—then you need to call it by its proper name.”

“I will not.”

“Cock,” McKenna said slowly.

“Oh my gosh.”

My phone rang, and we both jumped.

“Is it him?” McKenna shrieked.

I batted at her. “Oh my god, it is him.” I dropped the phone on the bench, and we stared at it while it rang.

“Answer it,” McKenna whispered.

I gulped and hit the green button.

“Hello?” My voice came out as a barely audible squeak.

“Lexi?” Grayson asked.

There was a pause, long and awkward.

“I wanted to apologize. I’m your boss, and I shouldn’t have—”

“Nothing happened,” I said, feeling woozy and breathless. “New pets make people emotional. Just think—if I’d shown up with a puppy, you’d probably have gotten me pregnant by now.”

McKenna clapped a hand to her forehead.

“Metaphorically speaking,” I added hastily.

“I don’t think you can metaphorically get pregnant.” Grayson’s voice was dry.

“You haven’t met my Aunt Kathy. She’s convinced she’s been pregnant for the past three years.”

“That sounds like a terrible medical condition.” I could hear him frowning.

“It’s not—well it is for some people, but not my Aunt Kathy. She just likes to be the center of attention and park at the stork spots at Target. She also told everyone she was dating a Navy SEAL, but it turns out he just worked at Waffle House, though honestly I think I’d rather have the boyfriend who worked at Waffle House because, you know, free waffles.”

Stop talking, McKenna was mouthing.

“Good talk. I have to go rodeo some reptiles!” I let out a high-pitched laugh that sounded more like SpongeBob and less sultry redhead.

“Uh-huh.”

“Ha ha. Ha. Ha.”

McKenna was slicing her hand across her throat.

“Ho—”

I hung up the phone before I could hear what Grayson was about to say.

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “Was that bad? Did I do a bad job?”

“Sure, if you were trying to make extra sure Grayson never ever wanted to kiss you again, let alone impregnate you.”

I slumped over on the bench.

“Then congrats, you did it!” She flashed me a thumbs-up. “But if you wanted to pop your cherry then ...” She blew a raspberry and flashed a thumbs-down.

“I don’t want to sleep with my boss, right?” I said weakly, looking up at her from where I was lying on the bench.

“He’s sex on a six-foot-five stick,” McKenna said. “Of course you do. Are you out of your mind? You know who I lost my virginity to? My drunk coworker at a bowling alley. Grayson was calling you to fish to see if you wanted to come back and bang.”

“I thought he wanted me to pretend like it never happened.”

“Then he would have just ignored it and gaslit you. He was totally interested.”

I sat up.

“I need to call him back.”

“No way. Your best bet is to make him so horny he forgets you threatened to have his baby.”

I tangled my fingers in my hair. “I’m twenty-five. Why am I so awkward?”

“Um Lexi, there’s gum in your hair.”

“Crap.”



“IS THE BALD SPOT NOTICEABLE?” I wondered the next morning in the Richmond Electric women’s bathroom mirror.

“Not at all,” McKenna lied as we inspected the patch of my hair where I’d cut the gum out. I had tried peanut butter, but Gizzy kept trying to eat it, and between that and the fact that Grayson had kissed me, I was too out of sorts to try to find a real solution.

Hence the scissors.

I had regretted it immediately.

Just like running from Grayson.

“Having a sex dream about your boss while sleeping on a cot in a studio apartment is that thing that really lets you know you’ve reached a low point in your life.”

“I’m sure Anthym has sex dreams about Grayson,” McKenna said as she touched up her makeup in the mirror. “You’re in good company.”

“I feel like I’m really fulfilling my destiny.” I crossed my arms. I was feeling horny and hungry.

“Anthym owns her own condo,” McKenna reminded me.

“This for the best right?” I said desperately. “Wholesome small-town girls don’t make out with their bosses.”

“He wanted to hook up with you, not make out,” McKenna corrected, “and you blew it.”

I groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

I chewed on my lip and fussed with my hair, trying to get it to cover the missing patch that stuck out like a tuft of grass from the side of my head. My hair couldn’t even do me the decency to lie down flat so I could properly camouflage the bald spot.

Someone like me didn’t belong with Grayson. Maybe all this time I

thought I was Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* looking for Prince Eric, when in reality I was the ugly redheaded stepsister from Cinderella.

“I can practically hear your negative self-talk,” McKenna warned.

“Just being realistic,” I said dejectedly.

“Except that you’re not. Grayson totally wants you. Come on, push those boobies up.”

“I—”

“You’re the one always telling other people to put yourself out there and be positive.”

“I think I might need to go shopping first.”

“Just unbutton your shirt.”

I looked down at my top. I had eaten the rest of the free cake for breakfast and apparently some of it was on my shirt.

“Anthym’s right. I’m a mess.”

“Grayson doesn’t care what’s all over your clothes because he’s going to be taking them off. And so are you.” McKenna snapped her fingers. “Take it off!”

“I can’t send him a sext,” I hissed. “I haven’t ever even had, you know.”

“One, you better take that information with you to the grave; two, you’re not texting him. You’re going to leave him a sexy note,” McKenna said, pulling one of those instant photo printers out of her purse.

“Oh my gosh.”

I wasn’t a model. I liked to think I could take a pretty good selfie, assuming I wore sunglasses, lots of makeup, and the angle was right. But a sexy photo? The bathroom air was a little chilly as I unbuttoned my blouse.

“Look cute,” McKenna ordered. “Make a sexy face. That’s ... no, Lexi, you look like a flounder.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I wailed.

“And now she’s turning bright red. We’re just going to crop your face out and sent Grayson a titty photo.”

“I thought this was a sexy-but-tasteful photo, not full-on porn.”

“Sometimes you have to pivot.”

“I feel like we might be overstepping boundaries with each other,” I said as I slowly removed my top and bra.

“We live together in a shoebox. You and I have seen more of each other and of Grenadine than should be considered humane,” she reminded me. “Now stick your chest out. Kind of curve your back and turn.”

“Ow!” Something twinged in my neck. “I’m too old for this.”

“So much negative talk. Think positive, sexy thoughts.” McKenna snapped a few photos with her phone camera.

“Do you think he’ll like it?” I asked nervously, putting my clothes back on.

“Straight guys like tits.” McKenna sent the photo to the miniprinter.

I paced around the bathroom as the photo of me appeared, bar by bar.

We both inspected the final product.

“So ... you’re not a model, and I’m not a photographer, but Grayson is going to cream his pants when he sees this,” my friend said confidently. “Now all you have to do is sneak by Anthym, creep into his office, and leave it in his briefcase.”

My stomach churned.

McKenna stuck her head out of the bathroom door.

“SEAL Team Sex, move out!”

GRAYSON

“See?” I told myself after Lexi had ended the call. “She doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

I had been too intense in my desire for her. I had frightened her.

“It was better that it ended,” I told myself viciously. “She’s your employee. You never should have touched her to begin with. It was good one of us had some self-control.”

I paced through the penthouse. I wished I could schedule another out-of-town trip so I didn’t have to sit in the office and see her in that tight blouse, her tits threatening to spill out. I didn’t have the self-control to watch her cross and uncross her legs when all I wanted to do was spread them and bury my face in the sweet heat.

“You have meetings all Monday morning,” I reminded myself. “You’re being hysterical. You’re barely going to see her.”



LEXI WASN’T at her desk when I returned from my second morning meeting. I had hung around in the downstairs conference room where the meeting was being held, chitchatting, something I didn’t normally have the patience for, because I wanted to make sure Lexi would be out for lunch when I returned to my office.

The executive floor was quiet when I walked to my office from the back stairway just to make extra sure I didn’t for some reason cross paths with her in the elevator.

I pulled the door to my office open and felt my chest clench.

Lexi was creeping along the floor on her hands and knees. I could just grab her hips and thrust myself inside of her.

I walked around the desk slowly.

“I thought you were in a meeting,” she said in a breathless squeak as she clambered to her feet, looking up at me with wide eyes. Tendrils of her hair trailed in her face.

I brushed them aside.

Maybe if I had been expecting her in my office, had been able to steel myself for it, I would have had more restraint.

“I’ll just, um, be going now.”

“Don’t move,” I whispered to her hoarsely.

Her chest was rising and falling. One of the buttons on her blouse was undone.

“Why,” I said drawing out the words, “are you in my office?”

“I, um ...” she said as I leaned down, barely keeping hold of the reins on my willpower, to press my lips to her neck.

“I was going to leave you a—a note,” she stammered.

“Were you?” I said mildly as I trailed my fingers down the bare skin of her arm.

Leave. Don’t go down this road.

It was too late.

I reached out to wrap my hand around her throat, not choking her, but letting her know she was mine. Touching her, being this close to her—it felt forbidden, like I was treading into the secret passageways of an enchanted temple and any minute a trap was going to spring.

I pulled Lexi to me roughly, making her gasp. The sound went straight to my dick.

Then I gave in.

I wanted to do terrible, wonderful things to her. I crushed my mouth to hers, my thumb stroking the soft skin of her throat as I kissed her. My tongue claimed her mouth like I wanted to do to her body.

I swallowed the whimpering moans she let out as I kissed her. I wanted nothing more than to spread her legs, prop her up on my desk, and take her. Instead I allowed myself one sweep of my palm under her tight skirt.

“You know the terrible thing about having glass everywhere in your office?” I said, releasing her. “I can’t just bend you over my desk and fuck

you.”

“That’s sounds like a serious oversight,” she said in a high-pitched, breathless voice as she adjusted her clothes, smoothing her shaking hands over the fabric of her blouse.

“Lexi,” I said to her.

She swallowed.

“Get out of my office.”

LEXI

“Did you leave it?” McKenna whispered when she met me at our desks.

“Stuck it in a side pocket of his briefcase. I don’t think I needed to leave him a note to get the engine reheated,” I said, fanning myself.

“Oh my god.”

“Shhh!” I hissed at McKenna then looked around, half-expecting Anthym to pop up and hit me with the employee handbook then fire me.

I fidgeted in my seat. “I’m pretty sure Grayson was. He wanted to F-word me on his desk.”

“Damn.”

In his office, Grayson was staring at me like I was prey.

I tore my eyes away.

“You have to go clean his fridge out right?”

“No, I mean, yes, I’m supposed to, but he just told me to get out of his office. He doesn’t want me at his penthouse,” I squawked.

“Trust me, he does.”

My experience with romance consisted of Disney movie rewatches and romance novels, the nice ones where they lived in a quaint small town or on a ranch and the first kiss was the end of the book. My boss just told me he wanted to turn me over and eff me on his desk. I was way, way out of my depth here.

“I mean, what do I do at the end of it? Give him a sticker?”

McKenna collapsed on her desk, laughing.

“I will buy you a year’s supply of ice cream if you give Grayson

Richmond a sticker after he blows his load in you. Come on.” She grabbed my arm. “I’ve seen enough Disney movies with you to know that right now what you need is a makeover.”



I RESISTED the urge to pull at the thong I was wearing as I moved like an animatronic doll while cleaning out Grayson’s fridge. Not only was I freshly shaved and had the stinging nicks to prove it, McKenna had also shoehorned me into the nice clothes I had brought with me, which were a size too small. I was a stuffed sausage. And Grayson wasn’t even here to rip them off of me.

I stood up.

“This is stupid; it’s the middle of the afternoon,” I said as I unlaced the stiff corset of the princess top. “Grayson’s not coming home in the middle of the afternoon.”

I put on some Disney music, though it felt a little perverse to listen to Mary Poppins sing about a spoonful of sugar when I had come over for an unplanned booty call.

Probably should have at least put that on your note, I decided.

I piled the bags of artisanal lettuce on the counter then sorted out the cheese. Grenadine had been miffed that Martha had gotten the brie last week and wasn’t shy about letting me know that some brie sure would go nicely with this wine she had paid a blow job for.

I yelped and dropped a block of cheddar as I heard footsteps echo through the empty penthouse.

Male footsteps.

Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.

Grayson appeared in the kitchen. His eyes were dark. He threw down his briefcase.

“Turn that fucking music off.”

I fumbled with the phone, almost dropping it, then the kitchen was silent, the only noise his footfalls as he slowly approached me.

I was holding my breath.

Channel every man’s favorite redhead—Jessica Rabbit.

Be sultry, not awkward.

It might have been a little easier if I hadn’t been practically duct-taped

into these clothes.

I backed against the counter as Grayson approached me.

He leaned in to me, our mouths almost touching. His hands traced up the curve of my hips, to the swell of my breasts under the corset princess top with the puffy capped sleeves.

“You’re trying to tempt me, aren’t you, trying to drive me crazy.” His deep voice echoed around the empty kitchen.

“Something like that,” I whispered back.

“You sure you want to do this? To bait me?”

The words were hot against my skin.

“Seemed like a good idea a few hours ago. Now I’m not so sure,” I said, more squeaky than sultry.

Grayson didn’t laugh at my quip. Instead he threaded his fingers through the ribbons that held the princess top on my rapidly rising and falling chest. His large hand cupped the back of my head, tangling in my hair.

He pulled my head back, then he was on me, kissing me, stealing my breath while his other hand worked under my clothes, hard fingers pressing into my skin. His tongue claimed my mouth while his other hand finished loosening the ribbons on my top and caressed my breast, pinching and teasing the nipple. I moaned loudly against his mouth, my nails grasping for purchase on his suit jacket.

When I thought I was about to pass out, Grayson moved down to my chest to take one of my breasts in his mouth.

I panted.

“Fuck,” Grayson growled, moving back up to nip my ear. “You sound like you’re about to come already.”

I did? I had never had an orgasm before. What if I sounded weird? What if he laughed at me?

I started to panic.

His mouth was back, taking mine as his hand worked under my skirt.

“So you were tempting me,” he said in that deliciously deep voice as he ran his fingers along the slip of fabric between my legs.

“You seemed to like the thong the last time,” I managed to squeak out.

Sultry, Lexi, you’re going for sultry.

But it was all I could do to stay on the roller coaster.

I let out a loud moan, my head tipping back, as Grayson trailed his fingers through the hot, wet heat between my legs. My hips bucked against his hand,

inadvertently seeking the pressure of his fingers.

“I need—”

“You want me to keep doing this?” he asked roughly, “or do you want me to fuck you, hmm?” He leaned down to take one of my breasts in his mouth again.

I let out a cry when his teeth grazed a nipple.

We had gotten way further than I ever had with Chip the chipmunk at my summer Disney job. What happened next? Did I offer the array of themed condoms in my bag? Did we do it here or go to his bed? Was it awkward if I asked that? Also, I didn’t think my legs were going to hold me up if we had to do it at the kitchen counter. I had, let’s say, not been keeping up with my promise of running and exercise.

You at least have seen a penis, so that is half the battle, right?

Though I was pretty sure that Grayson’s member was going to put what I’d seen poking out of the chipmunk costume to shame.

Maybe I should have prepared better. Like researched. What if he expected me to put on the condom? I was going to fail. It was going to be like that nightmare I would always have of coming into class and realizing I had forgotten to study for a test.

“I want to fuck you, Lexi. I want to fuck your tight little cunt.” He was still stroking me, but not giving me what I wanted which was ... I wasn’t exactly sure ... maybe to move his hand higher.

“Okay,” I gasped out. “Um, I just ...”

Honesty is the best policy.

“That actually sounds like a dandy idea. I’m just not really sure how this all goes. It’s kind of my first time ...”

Grayson swore loudly and jumped back like I’d sprouted tentacles. Then he caught me when I almost keeled over on the floor.

“Just a little woozy, don’t mind me. I’m ready to do this! I have condoms in my purse.”

I gave him a pained smile.

“No,” he said.

“No condoms?”

“No, I’m not doing this with you. Out.”

“But ... but ...”

There was an explosion sitting inside of my hips, and I felt like I was going to burst.

“But we—I need—”

“You shouldn’t have come.” His voice was harsh.

“We made out in your office.”

“I wouldn’t have if I had known you were ... that you’d never ... you’re basically a child.”

“I’m an adult,” I yelled at him, furious. “I have a master’s degree, and I illegally sublet an apartment.”

He swung around me, giving me wide berth as he grabbed my bag off of the counter and thrust it at me.

“We are never doing this again.”

You blew it, Lexi. Honestly is not the best policy.

“I want you,” I insisted. “I want you to do *that* to me.”

“You can’t even say it.” He spat.

Not sure what I was doing, I held eye contact with him then let my fingers drift to my mouth. “I want you,” I said, proud of my voice for staying at a respectable sultry octave.

“Don’t tease me,” he growled low in his chest. His large hand tangled in my hair, keeping me from leaning in and closing the distance between us to kiss him.

“Because if you don’t get out of here right now,” the threat was clear in his words, “I am going to throw you on your hands and knees and fuck you until you scream and not stop until you have to go to work tomorrow. You understand?”

I couldn’t tell if the butterflies in my stomach were excited or afraid or a little bit of both.

Maybe if I’d had more experience, I would have unfastened his belt and said something sexy like, *Only if I get to be on top for the grand finale.*

But I wasn’t. I was a chicken. So instead I just clutched my bag to my chest.

Grayson released me and watched me as I backed away.

“Stay away from me,” he ordered.

I nodded and fled.

GRAYSON

A virgin.

A goddamn virgin.

Fate was mocking me.

And you almost slept with her.

Almost.

You had your fingers in her cunt, your mouth all over her perfect tits.

I would have been the first man to take her, the first to fuck her, the first to see her with her legs spread, her head tipped back as she had a cock in her pussy.

I wonder if she's ever even come before.

I turned around and punched a hole through the nearest wall, barely registering the pain.

I blinked as I pulled my hand back out then stuck my fist under cold water, the stinging bringing me back to Earth.

There was a certain type of ... girl ... my father had targeted. He liked them inexperienced, liked the fact that he was breaking them, as he put it.

“No wonder your mother hates you,” I told myself. “You’re a fucking monster just like him.”

No. I wasn’t going to end up like him.

Lexi had to go.

Now.



“WHAT’S the best legal way to get rid of Lexi?” I asked Marius when I walked into his office.

Lexi would probably like his office. He had a comfortable amount of clutter. It felt like home, like someone’s office you might see on a TV show. It looked like a real person used it.

If you fire her, Lexi could end up with Marius.

That would mean I would have to see her everywhere, which I already did, but then I would have to see her with him, kissing him, knowing that I would never again hold her.

“What did she do this time, flash you?” Marius joked.

“No,” I barked, turning on him, then I reined myself back.

We’re in a work environment. Keep it together.

Marius looked concerned, maybe even a little wary. He nodded to my bruised hand.

“You doing okay?”

“I’m fine,” I practically spat.

“Okay, okay. Just a concerned citizen. Someone’s extra asshole-ish today.”

“Sorry,” I said, knowing I sounded surly. “I need Lexi relocated if we can’t fire her.”

“I’m obviously not in operations—”

“I can’t go to the COO about this,” I interjected.

“We can always transfer her to another department, or we can find her a job at a different company. I know a guy from law school who is looking for a paralegal. Maybe we could tell him to network with her.”

Find Lexi a new boss so she could lose her virginity to him instead? No thanks.

“That would be nice of you, thank you.”

We said no thanks. No thanks means you tell Marius to take that job offer and shove it up his—

I nodded. “I appreciate your help. I have a meeting to get to, but thank you for your time.”

Marius raised an eyebrow.

“I always have time for you, man.”



I WALKED into my penthouse and headed to my study.

Part of me was bereft at the thought of losing Lexi, but the rational part knew it was best to nip this distraction in the bud.

Marius was going to find Lexi a new job, she would leave, and life would go back to how it was before she showed up.

I unzipped all the pockets of my briefcase and dumped the contents out on my desk. I always felt better after reorganizing my briefcase.

A glossy piece of paper fluttered out of a side pocket onto my desk chair. Frowning, I reached down and picked it up then swore. It was a photo of a pair of large, perfect, freckled tits.

My pants felt tight.

I stared at the photo, hand over my mouth.

Those were her tits. I recognized the pale-pink nipples surrounded by a sea of freckles.

“Just shred it,” I told myself.

But I didn’t want to.

I wanted to stare at those tits, imagining my mouth over them.

“Is it really such a problem if you do sleep with her?” I tried to rationalize. “She does have a master’s degree. She clearly wants you.”

But I was her boss.

I couldn’t ... well, I could, but I shouldn’t.

Shred the photo.

Instead, I removed my suit jacket and loosened my tie. Carrying the jacket over my arm, I slowly walked up the stairs, the motion rubbing the fabric of my pants against my cock.

“You can’t jerk off thinking about your assistant,” I hissed at myself, but the voice of reason was being drowned out by the screams of lust.

I was never going to have her; that much was clear. But I needed this.

Then I would shred the photo.

I stepped into the master bedroom and was greeted by the smell of citrus.

I tossed the photo aside as I regarded the scene in front of me.

There she was, eyes closed, on her back on my bed, legs spread, hanging off the side. Her hand was between them, stroking the dark-pink flesh.

“Grayson,” she moaned.

The last shred of my self-control vanished.

LEXI

“**Y**ou did it!” Grenadine and McKenna yelled when I walked into the studio apartment.

“No, I didn’t, and I didn’t even bring the food,” I wailed.

“Awkward,” McKenna said with a grimace.

“No brie and no sex. Ain’t life a bitch,” McKenna’s grandmother stated.

“He found out that I was a ...” I lowered my voice. “A virgin.”

“You weren’t supposed to tell him,” McKenna shrieked. “Guys like Grayson don’t want virgins. They want sex kittens.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

I kicked myself, wishing I had at least thought to grab a wedge of cheese out of the fridge before fleeing Grayson’s penthouse.

“This isn’t over,” McKenna assured me, draping a tea towel over my shoulders like I was a disgraced boxer. “You just need to regroup and climb back on the horse.”

“The problem is she’s never been on the horse in the first place.” Grenadine slapped her mug of wine on the table. “You need riding lessons, missy.”

“Like actual horse riding? Because I took equestrian lessons in middle school.”

“I’m talking about dick,” Grenadine said.

I winced. I was not a fan of cursing or dirty words. You know, Disney adult etc., etc.

The senior citizen rummaged in one of the overstuffed cupboards and pulled out a book, *The Girl’s Guide to Hunting and Masturbation*.

“Tell me this is an ironic title.” I felt faint.

McKenna’s grandmother opened the large book.

I sneezed at the dust.

“Have you ever given yourself an orgasm?” she asked me.

“No!” I shrieked. I slammed the book shut. “I’m not about to start now.”

The elderly woman opened the book and tapped a series of black-and-white images.

“This,” she said, “is how you masturbate. There are step-by-step instructions. Have a glass of wine and get familiar with your likes and dislikes, then you can guide your boss’s tongue the next time you see him.”

“Maybe I need to call the whole thing off,” I groaned.

“No,” Grenadine and McKenna chorused.

“Here.” Grenadine flipped to another page, where there was a full-page spread of a photo of a woman’s reproductive parts. “See how she starts low? She doesn’t just go to the cockpit and start pushing buttons. Don’t immediately attack the clit, or you’ll get rug burn. You want a warm-up first, get the juices flowing. There are glands here, here, and here.”

“You need a vibrator,” McKenna said, turning me around in the chair. “Go straight to the source and stop all this hippie bullshit.”



“I KNOW what you were doing at Mr. Richmond’s penthouse last night.”

I jumped in my chair when Anthym’s voice slithered over me.

McKenna crossed herself.

“I wasn’t—I wasn’t doing anything,” I stammered.

“Exactly,” Anthym said in a mocking tone. “That’s why there was still food in the fridge when the chef came by with this week’s food.”

“Can’t he just move it all to the fridge in the catering kitchen, and I can come pick it up later?”

Anthym sneered. “I told him to just throw it away.”

“No!” I cried.

Anthym was immediately suspicious.

“You have to sort the trash,” I said in a rush. “I bet the chef didn’t sort out the plastic and separate the organic waste.”

“Yeah, I bet he didn’t because that’s your job.” Anthym stabbed her

manicured nail at me. “You’re on thin ice, Lexi. Get it together.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now go pick up Mr. Richmond’s dry cleaning. Then you need to find a gift suitable for the head of the Berlin office. We’re flying out in a couple of days. Don’t embarrass me. Bring me several choices tomorrow so I can review.”

After picking up the dry cleaning, I raced over to the penthouse and rushed to the fridge. It was packed with all the new food.

I felt horrible. Grayson hated the thought of wasting food.

I crossed my fingers as I went to the catering kitchen because, yes, this penthouse had not just a show kitchen but a catering kitchen off of the ballroom, along with a kitchenette in the home theater. The chef came every day to prepare Grayson’s meals and leave them for him in the main fridge.

Surely a chef wasn’t going to sit there and throw out a bunch of food. Surely not.

I cackled when I saw the catering fridge stuffed full of food, including the leftovers from Alessio.

“Score!”

I was feeling light as a feather as I took the dry cleaning upstairs.

I hadn’t meant to do it on his bed, but as soon as I stepped in the master bedroom, it was like I had started salivating. Everything went wet. I tried to ignore it as I carried the dry cleaning to Grayson’s closet.

Then I allowed myself the indulgence of lying back on his bed. I inhaled the scent of him on the comforter. That explosion that had been building inside of me yesterday was aching to come out.

I had barely so much as read a steamy romance novel let alone ... *that* ... but McKenna was right. I needed to at the very least know if I sounded like a dying dolphin when I came.

“It can’t take that long,” I decided as I kicked off the high-heeled shoes and shimmied off the pantyhose.

Heart pounding, I leaned back on the king-sized bed and let my hand sneak down under my skirt. I gasped when my fingers touched the aching slit between my legs.

I unbuttoned my top, imagining it was Grayson, his fingers *there*, pinching and teasing my nipple as his large hands stroked between my legs.

“Grayson,” I moaned as I stroked myself.

Suddenly large hands were on my thighs, forcing them wider.

I let out a cry as I opened my eyes and looked down to see Grayson's head disappearing between my legs.

"Funfetti," I gasped out as his tongue began to lick me *there*. I was panting and moaning as he traced the slit, his tongue swirling around the hard nub that I had just been teasing with my fingers.

I moaned as he lifted my hips to give him a better angle.

He was sucking on my clit now, and I tangled my fingers in his hair as I felt everything inside me tighten, building up to sweet release.

I came with a cry, hopefully not too high-pitched, but I was too lost, too swept away on the pleasure he gave me to really care. Grayson milked the aftershocks of the pleasure with his mouth, still licking me until the tremors stopped.

"Man, no wonder people do all sorts of crazy stuff for sex," I said, closing my eyes as I sprawled on his bed. "That was amazing."

"I thought I told you not to come back here," he said, straddling me on the bed. His deep voice reverberated around the room.

"Are you going to have your way with me?" I slurred, barely opening my eyes to look up at him.

"No." His voice was harsh.

He reached down and grabbed my blouse then ripped it in one smooth motion. He unhooked my bra and cast it aside.

"I can't believe you made me come," I marveled, looking up at him.

"Lexi, stop babbling."

"You're the first man who's ever made me come."

His breath caught.

"I want you to do it again," I breathed.

My legs were still splayed. He reached down to the zipper of the flimsy unlined skirt and tore it right down the seam.

"You broke the rules," he said in a low, crooning voice.

I gasped as his hand trailed over my body, tracing the underside of my breast then up to pinch a nipple.

"But I want a treat," I said.

His fingers trailed down to my panties.

"Girls who break the rules don't get a treat."

He flipped me over so I rested on my forearms and knees, butt in the air. I spread my legs wider, offering myself to him. I had clearly been hijacked by Tinker Bell's crazy aunt, the sex fairy, and she wanted Grayson in her *now*.

He stroked me between my legs, and I whimpered in anticipation. Then he plunged two fingers in my opening, making me gasp.

I rocked back against him as he stroked me with his fingers. I didn't think I had ever been that wet in my life. The panties I was still wearing were absolutely soaked.

"You can do better than that," I gasped.

He slapped me on the butt, not too hard, but enough to make me jump. Then he added another finger.

I squirmed against him, needing him to fill me with more.

"I want you," I moaned.

Grayson responded by grabbing my thigh, forcing it up, then pressing his face between my legs, mouthing me through the panties.

I whimpered as his tongue worked its way under the silky fabric while his large fingers still stroked inside my opening. He was taking me higher and higher.

"Grayson," I struggled out. I came with a cry, his tongue wrapped around my clit.

He let me fall on the bed in a heap. The mattress dipped as he crawled beside me. His fingers tangled in my sweaty hair.

He turned his face to me. I moaned as he kissed me hard. I might be thoroughly spent, but he was just warming up.

He kissed me till I was breathless, then he trailed kisses down to my breasts. He took one in his mouth, sucking and kissing and nipping.

He slid the wet panties down my hips then cast them to the floor. Then he pulled one of my legs to rest on his hip. His hand was back between my legs, and I let out a loud, helpless moan as he stroked the wetness once again.

"Grayson," I begged.

His head moved up to take my mouth again, his tongue swirling against mine as his fingers stroked me.

He kissed me like he stroked me, long and slow, taking his time, wanting to keep me on the edge of pleasure just a moment longer.

My hand draped over his shoulder to cradle the back of his head. I needed him closer to me as his tongue claimed my mouth.

My breath hitched, and I arched against him as he stroked me faster.

"Grayson ..." I whimpered. I bit his bottom lip as I came on his hand. Then I lay there next to him, panting, while he pressed kisses on my face.

"I can do this all night," he whispered harshly in my ear. "And I will if

you don't leave."

"Okay," I said. "Okay, just ..." I tried to hold up my hand. "Just give me like five minutes. And some water and a snack. Preferably carbs, but I'll take whatever's in the fridge."

Grayson huffed out a laugh.

"You are incorrigible."

"SAT word."

I leaned in to kiss him because I could, because we were, well, a thing. Some sort of thing. We weren't *not* a thing anyways, and Grayson didn't yell at me when I kissed his mouth or his nose or his jaw.

I wanted all of him.

Suddenly I decided I could, in fact, go the rest of the night. Especially if I could convince him to take off his clothes.

"I want you," I whispered to him and let my hands drift down.

He grabbed my wrist, turning me on my back so he could straddle me.

"Yes, take me."

He pinned my arms above my head.

"I told you, Ms. Collins," he said, enunciating the words, "I'm not going to fuck you."

"Sharing is caring."

He climbed off the bed, leaving me there staring up at the white ceiling.

"You have way too much self-control."

"No, I don't have enough," he replied, crossing by the bed to the lone nightstand to remove his cuff links.

When I was sure he wasn't looking at me, I sat up and quickly ran my fingers through my hair so I didn't look like a clown with half my frizzy hair flattened to my skull.

"Now you have had your hands ... you know"—I gestured to my nether regions—"maybe we could finish the ride."

"The person who parades around in her boss's house in a thong can't say 'pussy,'" he said dryly.

I felt my face flame up, and it was confirmed by Grayson's smirk.

"That's different," I said hotly. "That's just beachwear. That word is porno language."

"Get your clothes on and get out," he ordered.

I pulled on my bra and tried to salvage my ruined skirt.

I had a jacket, but it was not going to come anywhere close to covering

the skirt.

Grayson disappeared in his closet and came out with a long wool coat. It might have hit him midthigh, but on me it came practically to my ankles.

“Thanks,” I said as I belted it.

“You can have it dry-cleaned and return it to me the next time you come by,” he said, using his I’m-the-boss tone, like we hadn’t just been intimate.

Grayson’s eyes were dark as he watched me slip my feet into the heels that lay haphazardly on his bedroom floor.

Just say it, I told myself. You can’t walk out of here a virgin.

I stepped up to him.

“Are you sure,” I began in the smokiest voice I could manage, “you don’t want to put your cock in my soaking wet pussy?”

His eyes widened.

“See? I can try something new,” I whispered.

He leaned in to kiss me hungrily, while his hand grabbed the belt of the overcoat and tugged at it.

The soundtrack from *Encanto* blared from my purse.

“*We don’t talk about—*”

“Crap.”

Grayson stepped back while I tried to furiously cancel the incoming video call.

My hands were still shaky from the orgasms, though, and my thumb slipped and hit the wrong button.

Minnie’s tits.

“Just pretend you’re not here,” I hissed.

“*I live here.*”

“Hi Mom! Hi Dad!” I said as cheerily as I could manage while motioning for Grayson to get out of the frame.

“Squeaky Mouse!” my dad exclaimed.

Squeaky Mouse? Grayson mouthed.

I glared at him over the top of the phone.

“What’s wrong, Squeaky?”

“Barry,” my mom said, “Lexi doesn’t like when—”

“It’s fine,” I said loudly.

“Okay, I’m calling you Squeaky Mouse then,” Grayson whispered.

“Are you able to talk? Did we call at a bad time?” my mother asked in concern. “I thought you would be off of work now.”

“It’s always a good time,” I said in a strained voice as Grayson picked my underwear off the floor.

Do you want these? he mouthed.

“Just a second.” I held the phone to my chest and hissed, “Yes I want those. Underwear doesn’t grow on trees.”

He bent down and crept over to stuff the panties in my purse while I tried to furiously concentrate on what my parents were saying.

“That sounds interesting,” I said, hoping that made it sound like I was paying attention.

“I know, can you believe it? At her age,” my mother said.

“I can believe it,” my dad said. “Your aunt Kathy is a lunatic.”

“That’s not very nice.” My mom swatted him lightly in the stomach.

“Kathy’s not very nice,” my dad said in a dead-on Mickey Mouse impression. Up popped a hand puppet.

“You know, I feel so bad for Aunt Kathy, I really do. We will make sure to keep her in our prayers, won’t we, Lexi?”

Grayson was now leaning on the edge of the bed where we had just —*ahem*. To be more accurate, where I had just *ahem*. While I looked like I had been hit by a truck, Grayson looked crisp and fresh, like he’s just walked into the office.

What the fuck? he mouthed to me.

I grimaced.

“She’s too old for hand puppets,” my mom scolded my dad.

“You can never be too old for hand puppets,” my dad argued in Goofy’s voice. “Once a character actor, always a character actor.”

“We’d better let you go,” my mom said. “It looks like you’re busy house-sitting.”

“I’m actually hanging out here with my boss. We’re having a movie night and decorating party to try to find furniture for her new place. She wants my help since she’s so indecisive,” I lied to my parents. “And she’s so busy.”

You’re not staying here, Grayson mouthed to me.

“You have such a wonderful boss. I’m so glad you’re in a supportive environment,” my mother gushed to me.

“Let me see that billion-dollar view,” Dad begged. “Isn’t that something, Cindy? You can see clear through to the Atlantic Ocean.”

I shooed Grayson away as I swung the phone around to take my dad to the private upstairs terrace, because Grayson was special and had multiple

terraces, to show him the view.

Grayson dove to the floor.

“What happened to your hair?” my mom cried.

I felt the tuft of hair on the side of my head.

“Got gum in it. My own fault,” I said.

“Lexi, your poor baby hair.” My mom made a sad face.

“It’s fine, Mom. It will grow back.”

“Okay, I can tell we’re annoying you.”

“You’re not. I love you guys.”

“We love you more than the moon and stars,” my dad said in Goofy’s voice.

“She’s the best daughter in the whole world,” Mickey concurred.

“We love you, Lexi,” my mother sang out.

“Bye, guys! I love you! Talk to you again soon.”

I flopped down on Grayson’s bed after I ended the call. “Oh my gosh.”

Grayson’s eyes narrowed at me.

“Did you tell them this was where you were staying tonight?”

“Not exactly ... no.”

“You have a problem.”

“I told you, fellow secret toxic trait buddy, that I had issues.”

He shook his head.

“Now,” I said, “where were we?”

“You just had a FaceTime call with your parents. There were hand puppets.” He was incredulous. “I’m not going to fuck you now.”

GRAYSON

I regretted it immediately as soon as she'd left.

You should have fucked her.

I didn't want to be the one who ruined her though.

She didn't seem all that ruined when you had your tongue on her clit.

In fact, she had seemed pretty happy about it.

I had moved Crumpet the pet rock—I had to find a different name—to my study. I walked in and opened a drawer where I kept the small rake. Yes, a pet rock was stupid, but I found it calming to run the rake through the sand where he lived.

Sitting on top of the pile of stuff from my briefcase was a note.

You are amazing at oral sex.

There was a multitude of smiley face stickers surrounding the words.

“What the fuck?” I turned the note over.

This virgin has been pleasantly surprised.

More smiley faces along with cherry stickers that smelled—I sniffed them—faintly of fruit.

See, she's not traumatized.

But that was because I'd kept my clothes on and managed to snatch back some shred of self-control.

If she hadn't left when she had ...

You'd be fucking her right now.

And that would have been perfect.

Or the beginning of my demise.



IT WAS easy enough to stay away from Lexi in the days leading up to the big Europe trip.

Anthym kept her busy organizing materials, coordinating with the pilot, the hotel, and the other assistants in the Europe office.

I tried to ignore her and kept my back to her when she and I happened to be on the executive floor together. I didn't want to give her any ideas or make her think that what had happened that night was something I wanted to repeat.

Even though I did. Desperately.

It was like she had taken over my thoughts.

Even when I had gone to see ... *spy, you're spying on your mother*—I wasn't as anxious as I usually was because I was thinking about Lexi, replaying our last conversation and trying desperately not to remember how she sounded when she came.

"You look tired." Anthym sauntered into my office after the morning meeting. "We need you well rested for the big trip. Why don't you go home and relax?"

"I'll sleep on the plane," I told her gruffly.

"I'll have Lexi order you some lunch then."

"Anthym," I said trying to sound casual, "would you mind sending me an outline of Lexi's schedule?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion.

"Please keep this confidential," I said smoothly, "but I may start dating again. And I'd like to know when she will not be working at the penthouse."

"I see. Anyone special you have your eye on?" my secretary asked.

My redheaded assistant who was even now on the floor on her hands and knees crawling around assembling packets. I could make out the outline of her panties through the thin skirt material. It would be easy to rip it off of her.

"Can she do that in the executive conference room?" I said, irritable.

"Lexi." Anthym rushed out of my office. "This is unprofessional. Go to the conference room."

"But—"

"Don't argue with me."

Lexi glared at me as she started gathering up the presentation material, still crawling around on the floor. She noticed me watching and stuck her

tongue out at me.

I walked out.

“Anthym, its fine. She can keep working here. We’re under a deadline. I just need this all done.”

Anthym looked between the two of us.

“Hurry up, Lexi,” she said finally.

If we were here alone, I wouldn’t have hesitated to walk out there, push that tight skirt up and her panties down, and—

I shook my head.

Lexi was driving me insane.

I couldn’t wait for the flight that evening. I was desperate to have an entire ocean between us.

And desperate to have nothing between us at all.

LEXI

“**T**hat man has a scary amount of self-control,” I whispered to McKenna as we packed up the finished folders late that afternoon for the Europe meeting.

I snuck a glance at Grayson in his office as I made a lunch order online. He wasn't looking at me, which gave me a chance to study his profile, the strong jaw, straight nose, the mouth that gave sensual kisses.

My panties seemed to be perpetually soaked, which was unfortunate because Anthym was making us work eighteen-hour days to prep for the big Europe trip. I had been awake since four thirty, when Anthym had called me screeching about the gift baskets, and it had been nonstop since then. I was greasy, bloated, and jittery from too much caffeine.

Between Anthym's yelling and berating me and being under the constant gaze of Grayson, I was completely frazzled.

“As soon as it's confirmed they're on the plane, you and I are getting cocktails on the company card,” I whispered to McKenna. “I need a drink, and not wine that was rehomed from the trash can either.”

“Anthym will find out,” McKenna said out of the side of her mouth.

I tapped my nose.

“Your girl prepaid at that restaurant we bought the team dinner from last night. The hostess said she left a note for the bartender to have four cocktails waiting for us.”

“Stealing from the company—you've been corrupted by New York,” McKenna joked.

“Grayson owes me,” I said darkly.

“I thought you said the sex was great.”

“Yeah, amazing. Not that I had anything to compare it to, but I’m pretty sure he has ruined me for any other man except him at this point.”

I would have left him a note to that effect, but Anthym was breathing down our necks looking for anything that might cause the Europe trip to be a bust.

You’d think a man like Grayson would be able to finagle his schedule so that he could finish what he started, but he was all business, treating me like I was just another employee.

And maybe I was.

Maybe he was one of those billionaires who got off on sleeping with their assistants, like I was just a notch in his bedpost.

“You’ve been working for Grayson a while, right?” I asked McKenna when I was sure Anthym wasn’t around.

“A couple years.”

“Has he, um ... does he normally sleep with his female employees?” I asked, hating how high-pitched my voice sounded.

“He hasn’t slept with me,” McKenna said, “because, best friend or not, I wouldn’t be giving up my meal ticket for you. I had to listen to Grenadine have a sex dream last night while you were still out hunting down exotic New England bitters for Anthym.”

“No judgment here.” I held up my hands.

“I haven’t heard rumors of him doing the nasty with his employees though.”

“Maybe the rest of the women here have more self-respect,” I said dejectedly.

McKenna snorted.

“It’s a Manhattan rite of passage to sleep with your rich boss. You’re lucky that Grayson is at least hot. When he’s bored of you, then you can probably convince him to pay you off. Hopefully we can bump up the price so that we can all move.”

Worry churned my stomach.

“He’s going to get tired of me?” I squeaked out.

McKenna sighed loudly. “This is why normal men don’t want to be bothered with virgins. You get too attached. And you bleed.”

“Oh my gosh. I can’t bleed all over his bed.” I felt panicky. “This is going to be so embarrassing. It’s going to be like when I got my period in fifth

grade and I was wearing a white skirt.”

“Grayson’s pessimism is catching. It’s not going to be as bad as middle school. Think positive thoughts. You did horseback riding, right? So it probably won’t be a lot,” my friend assured me.

“Maybe I just need to stay away from him,” I fretted.

“No way! Do this for all of us who are trapped in the realm of terror created by Anthym. The assistant lowest on the totem pole is about to sleep with the boss Anthym’s been after since she stepped off that elevator for the first day on the job. She is going to explode with jealousy.”

“She cannot find out,” I warned. “You heard her. I’m on thin ice.”

“Don’t dillydally on this one,” McKenna whispered to me. “You’re going to have to regroom everything if you wait too long.”



I STIFLED a yawn a few hours later as I labeled the last of the metal boxes that were holding the presentation materials created by the marketing department.

The courier handed McKenna a form. Anthym was home, packing for the plane that was leaving later that night and begrudgingly allowed McKenna to sign.

“Done!” I crowed.

“I’m beat,” McKenna declared, kicking off her shoes and lying down on the floor.

My phone rang. I groaned.

“Hi, Anthym.”

“Why haven’t you packed Mr. Richmond’s suitcases yet? The flight leaves in four hours.”

McKenna mimed lifting up a glass to her lips.

“You told me to have everything laid out, but that you need to pack for him,” I said, my anxiety spiking.

“I am not packing for Mr. Richmond,” Anthym said tersely. “This is the most important trip of Mr. Richmond’s career, and you should have had him packed yesterday.”

“But I—” I stammered.

“Get it done immediately, Lexi, or you’re fired.”

The line went dead.

“I can’t believe she’s going to pass up an opportunity to sniff Mr. Richmond’s clothes,” McKenna remarked.

“She sets me up for failure,” I said to McKenna as I raced around, gathering my things. “I’m going to have to take an Uber over to the penthouse.”

“It’s rush hour. You better take the train,” McKenna called as I furiously pressed the down button on the elevator.

My heart was racing as I hurried through the lobby. I ran out of the office, wishing I had been keeping up with my running.

“Tomorrow. Since Anthym and Grayson will be gone, you are running tomorrow,” I wheezed as I raced outside to the train station.

“There’s a guy on the tracks,” a police officer told me as I almost tripped down the stairs. “Walk to the next station.”

“The next station is a different train line,” I gasped. “I’m not going to make it in time.”

The officer shrugged.

I looked around wildly. I could not be fired.

“Hey, it’s the sticker fairy!” a guy on a skateboard called. “Need a lift?”

I recognized him from the park. He still had the sticker I’d given him displayed on his scarf. The seashells and metal disks in his hair chimed as he gestured to the longboard.

“Oh my gosh, yes!”

Sorry, Grayson, but this was an emergency. Also, riding a skateboard didn’t count as getting in a car with strangers.

“Just become one with the board,” the young man told me as I took off my heels and stepped on behind him.

We zipped down the sidewalk while I mentally calculated how long it would take me to pack the suitcases and hanging bags.

Anthym was the worst. Why did she hate me so much? Maybe she knew about me and Grayson. I wracked my brain. Had I done anything to give away that he and I had been intimate? I suppressed a shiver.

Keep your head in the game.

I should have just gone ahead and packed the suitcases. I should have known Anthym was going to pull something like this, make me look like the bad guy.

At least I had a list together.

All you have to do is pack the bags. Just pack the bags. Give them to the

courier then cocktails.

“We have arrived,” the skateboarder announced.

I leaned up to give him a kiss on the cheek.

“You are my hero,” I told him. “Thank you.”

I pulled a sticker out of my bag. It was a big fancy sticker depicting Snow White and the seven dwarves.

“Rad,” the skateboarder said as I handed it to him. “Have a magical day, my dude.” He pressed his hands together and bowed to me.

“I’ll talk later, have to pack,” I called to Nasr as I raced to the elevator.

“Go go go!” I begged, checking my watch. The plane was leaving in a few hours. But the bags had to be delivered, and traffic was terrible.

“Think positive. Just pack the bags.”

The clothes were laid out in the master bedroom ready for Anthym to pack, because that was what she had—argh!!

“Breathe,” I told myself, but it was difficult to do.

I kicked off my shoes, grabbed one of the large suitcases, and tugged it over to the bed.

I was sweating, and since Grayson had ripped up the skirt that had a little more give, I was having to wear the skirt that was not as forgiving, especially if you ate lunch.

I unzipped the zipper then thought what the hell and shimmied it off along with those devil-worshiping pantyhose.

I was sweaty and jacked up on caffeine and about to lose my job. I needed to be able to move.

Packing was an art form.

Grayson’s shoes had their own individual shoe bags so they didn’t scuff each other. The suits went into the hanging garment bag, and the ties had their own special pocket.

I folded all the underwear socks and put them in their cubby in the metal clamshell suitcase. The toiletries were next. Then I carefully stacked the dress shirts.

The silver and gold cuff links and selection of expensive watches went in another small metal case with a lock.

I was securing the clasps on the last suitcase when a shadow darkened the bedroom door.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

GRAYSON

I chugged the last of my black tea then headed to the elevator. My self-discipline was hanging by a thread. The lack of sleep and the unsatiated lust were sending me into a death spiral to self-destruction.

This upcoming meeting was to discuss a potential buyout of a European energy company. The deal was being discussed in all the global business news publications and was a topic of conversation in the political realm as well. I was going to be meeting with politicians and cabinet members. Shit, representatives from the French military and the US military were going to be in attendance. It was the biggest meeting of my entire life.

And all I wanted to do was skip it so I could spend time with Lexi.

No, so you can fuck Lexi.

The inexperienced virgin.

If she didn't run around handing out stickers and compliments to people, I would have thought she was a plant from a competitor to sabotage me.

If she was, it was working. She was all I could think about.

Not the meetings, not brushing up on my German, not reviewing the names of the important people I would be meeting.

After the last discussion in the office before my employees all left to prepare for the flight, I had prowled around, pretending like I was doing a last-minute review of the material, when really I wanted to find Lexi, drag her into a storage closet, and fuck her until I could think again.

But she had already left.

Now I was going to have to spend the next week without her. As torturous as it was to have her near me but not be able to touch her, not

having her around at all was going to be unbearable.

I headed back to my penthouse to shower before I had to make the flight. A lesser man might intend to sleep on the plane, but not me. I had meetings planned during the overnight flight to Europe.

That's when I saw her.

I watched her giggle and laugh as the man with the blond dreadlocks bowed to her.

She looked around furtively, slipped on her shoes, and slipped inside the building.

Fury. I was filled with it.

She's mine.

"You should have fucked her. Now she found someone else. She doesn't belong to you," I growled to myself.

But she did.

And if I saw her in my penthouse alone, I was going to lose it.

Control yourself.

It was impossible.

I forced myself to drive away.

You can't keep driving.

Yes, I could. I could just go to the airport and get on the plane.

You were going to take a shower and shave. You need to shave.

But Lexi was still there.

She doesn't want you.

She was clearly with that skateboarder, the one who looked like he smelled like old yogurt and socks.

How could she choose him over me?

Everything—the stress, the lack of sleep, the fact that Lexi had come three times on my bed and I had to try to sleep there smelling the scent of her cunt—it was too much, and now she had moved on to some skateboarder who didn't have his own car.

Abruptly, I made a U-turn. A taxi driver cursed out the window at me.

I was fully aware as I sat in traffic, yelling at the cars inching down the road, that I was losing it.

I turned on the audio book of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*.

"*It isn't manly to be enraged,*" the audiobook narrator droned.

"Get ahold of your anger," I scolded over the sound of the authoritative narrator. "This is unbecoming."

I parked the car in front of the building and carefully handed the key to the valet.

When I walked into my penthouse, I was already half undressed. I was going to be late for the plane if I wasn't careful. Shower, change, shave then head to the executive airport. If Lexi was here, I was going to ignore her, because I was the master of my own choices.

I headed up the stairs, slipping off my undershirt as I padded down the hallway in bare feet.

"Lexi," I announced, keeping my voice controlled, "if you're up here, can you please let Anthym know that I'm about an hour out."

See? Perfectly in control. Emperor Aurelius would be proud.

Until I stepped into the master bedroom and realized it was a lie, a horrible lie. Marcus Aurelius didn't know what the hell he was talking about. He spent his days surrounded by elderly senators, and he didn't have Lexi parading around his penthouse half naked.

She was standing there in my bedroom, her panties covered with Tinker Bell pictures and wearing a blouse that barely skimmed her hips.

She looked up at me with wide eyes.

She didn't know what was coming.

"I thought the courier was going to come pick up these suitcases," she said uncertainly.

"Why, are you fucking him too?" I snarled before I could stop myself. My carefully built house of control was just a pile of sticks and papier-mâché, and she had blown straight through it.

Lexi looked hurt.

"You don't get to act all possessive and jealous after you kicked me out the other night."

"Wrong," I growled at her, stalking her. "You're mine. You were mine the first time I saw you. And I'm about to make sure you never forget it."

LEXI

Grayson advanced on me.

I scuttled backward and promptly tripped over one of the pieces of luggage on the floor.

He stepped over me. At first I thought that he was going to take me right there on the hard ground.

I could make out the erection through his dress slacks. It looked way bigger than anything that was in the book Grenadine had showed me.

“I can smell you from here.”

He crouched down, grabbed the front of my blouse, and lifted me up so my feet dangled.

I kicked them, trying to find purchase. My hands flailed out, pressing against the muscled chest.

“Put me down.” My voice shook with anticipation and apprehension.

Grayson set me down but still had a hold of my blouse.

His eyes flicked from my eyes to my mouth to my chest, where my nipples were visible through the thin fabric of the cheap shirt. He hooked his fingers in the neckline. Two of the buttons were already undone, and when he jerked his hand down, buttons pinged off of his chest.

“I thought you had a flight.” Swallowing hard, I reached out to slowly trail my fingers along the ridges of muscle, over the swell of his pecs down the washboard abs and lower.

He grabbed my hand, twisting it behind me, making me arch against him. He stopped a hairsbreadth away from me, and his lips barely brushed my cheek.

“This is your last chance to leave.”

I might have been able to make better choices if he hadn't been shirtless. Instead I held eye contact with him as I reached up to slowly unhook my bra and let it slide off my bare arms. Then I crooked my finger.

“I think we should try something new tonight. You do a good job, and I'll give you a sticker.”

“You—” He leaned in to kiss my hungry mouth hard. His tongue claimed me as his hands ran over my curves, cupping my ass, sliding up my body to my breasts.

His mouth was on my breast, sucking the nipple, making me moan.

It's happening!

His fingers pushed under my panties, and I bucked against his hand.

I tangled my fingers through his hair. “I need you,” I gasped out. “Take me!”

That sounded like what you were supposed to say in this situation, right?

He pulled back to stare at me, eyes dark. His hands settled on his belt buckle.

I gasped. “Are you going to make love to me?”

“No, sweetheart,” he said as the leather slithered out of the belt loops. “I'm going to fuck you.”

The belt hit the floor with a thud.

I took a step backward, then he was on me.

He grabbed me by the hair and threw me face down on the bed.

I felt a rush of wet heat between my legs. My panties had been drenched all day; I had been ready for him this morning.

One large hand was between my legs, spreading them, tugging at the soaked panties. He pulled them down to my knees and over my ankles. Then his hand was back between my legs.

I arched back against him, gasping in pleasure.

“You want my cock, don't you,” Grayson said roughly.

“Yes,” I mewled.

I heard a ripping noise, then something bigger than his fingers was sliding in the wetness between my legs. I whimpered in anticipation.

Grayson pushed the tip in. I bucked, but he held me down. He pushed in another inch, then another.

I gasped as his thick manhood filled me.

“Do you like that?” His voice was rough in my ear. “You like my cock in

your tight little cunt.”

“Yes,” I begged as he pushed in farther, my body stretching around him.

“Tell me,” he ordered, sliding in farther, making me moan.

Each word came out in a little pant.

“I ... like ... your ... thick ...”

“Cock,” he hissed sliding in another inch. He jerked my hair. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Cock,” I said then let out a loud moan. “I love your thick cock in my pussy.”

I let out a cry of pleasure as he slid in, the girth stretching and filling me.

“Oh my gosh,” I whimpered. “You’re so big.”

I let out a high-pitched cry as he pushed in the rest of the way.

I felt his teeth on my earlobe.

“You’ll get used to it.” He pulled out as I let out a cry deep from my chest, then he thrust into me, filling me all the way to the hilt.

I let out a cry of pleasure, seeing stars.

“You like that, hmm? You little virgin. You like being fucked by my thick cock?”

“Yes, oh yes.” I wiggled against him. His hips snapped, making sure I felt every thick inch of him settling inside me, inside my pussy.

He pulled out and thrust into me again. I let out a long, loud moan.

“How does it feel, to have a man claim you, take you, make you his?”

“S-sooo good,” I stuttered out.

All that muscle and sinew on top of me flexed, as that thick cock pulled out of me then rammed in me again.

His hand was tight in my hair.

“You like it when I fuck your tight little virgin pussy? Hmm?” He nipped my chin. “You like having me take your innocence, pretty little virgin princess?”

I wanted to scream, he felt good inside of me.

“Tell me,” he commanded.

“Fuck me,” I cried, “please.”

“Lexi,” he whispered harshly against my neck as he pulled out slowly, making me shudder. “I’m going to ruin you for any man but me.”

Then he was taking me, rutting into me.

I couldn’t catch my breath. My hips ached as he spread my legs, holding me up, angling me so he could thrust into me.

“Your cunt feels so good,” he grunted as he took me.

The pressure was building, and I moaned, “I’m about to—” I let out a cry as I spasmed around his cock.

Grayson leaned over me, his hand back in my hair, still thrusting into me, driving me up, up another wave of pleasure.

I let out helpless little cries.

“I told you,” he grunted as he thrust in me, “to leave.”

I couldn’t formulate a response, just let him take his pleasure in me. I cried loudly as I felt myself cresting. Then I was a shuddering mess on his bed. I clawed at the comforter as he pounded in me, keeping up that unrelenting rhythm until I thought I was about to pass out.

Instead I was coming again, my breath escaping in ragged gasps.

Grayson’s thrusts were more erratic, then his teeth were sinking into my shoulder as I felt him shudder inside me, large hand gripping my thigh as he came in me.

I groaned as I lay there on the bed, feeling him pull out of me. Felt him run a hand possessively down my back to cup my backside and squeeze.

“Hot dog,” I said when I could finally formulate words again.

I lifted myself up on one arm and turned my head.

Grayson was watching me, wary, cautious.

I smirked at him. “You’re a special snowflake.”

He startled.

“Most women don’t come from vaginal sex only,” I said quoting *The Girl’s Guide to Hunting and Masturbation*. “But you barely touched my clitoris, so good job.”

He seemed horrified.

I laughed and flipped over on my stomach.

Grayson swung his legs over the side of the bed.

I wolf whistled as I watched him head to the bathroom.

“If being a grumpy billionaire CEO doesn’t work out for you career wise, you should try out as a character actor at Disney World. You could kill it with the wine mom demographic.”

As Grayson came back out with a washcloth, the color drained from his face.

“Shit. I hurt you, Lexi.” He sank to his knees beside me. “I need to take you to the hospital. Oh god.”

I looked down. “Minnie’s tits. Stupid virginity.” I grabbed the washcloth

from him. “You know us virgins, we bleed and get attached.” I quickly swiped at the very small trickle of blood. I didn’t need to explain to the dry cleaner why I needed a bloodstain removed from a comforter.

What had I been thinking? Now Grayson was freaked out. I was being awkward. He was forever going to be scared by the thought of me. He was going to have to go out and bang a real woman to scrub the memory of me away.

I should have found someone else to lose my virginity to. Someone I didn’t care about. Now Grayson was just going to see me as an inexperienced girl and not want to be with me again.

“I shouldn’t have—I’m sorry, Lexi. I’ll—I’ll cancel my meeting and stay with you and—”

“Grayson?”

“Anthym. Jiminy Cricket.” I looked around wildly.

“Grayson, are you ready to go?” Her voice echoed faintly from the foyer.

“Does no one knock?” I squeaked as I raced around in a panic. “And yes, I do recognize the irony of my statement.”

Grayson grabbed me before I could run out the master bedroom door.

“Don’t go out there,” he hissed.

We heard heels clicking on the slate floor downstairs.

Grayson grabbed my clothes and shoved them at me then wrestled me down and rolled me under the bed. He ran to the bathroom and turned on the shower.

I felt the vibrations in the floor as a pair of high-heeled shoes entered the bedroom, and I shivered as the cold slate floor sucked all the warmth from my sweaty body.

“Grayson?” Anthym called. “We need to leave.”

I bit my hand so I couldn’t yell at her that he was clearly naked in the shower.

Although maybe that was the point. McKenna had said that Anthym had the hots for our boss.

The shower turned off, and I saw Grayson’s bare legs and feet appear in the sliver of the room I could see from under the bed.

Water puddled on the slate floor.

I need to buy this man a rug.

“Apologies for the delay, Anthym.”

“I, um, you—” she stammered.

Yeah, I knew what it was to come face-to-face with that magnificent chest.

“I just was going to have the driver grab the bags.”

“Of course. I’ll dress then be down in a minute.”

“Yes, well ... wonderful, Mr. Richmond.”

They stood there a moment.

“I’ll move the bags to the hallway,” Grayson finally offered.

Anthym’s feet left my view.

The bags scraped on the floor as he carried them out of the room. I was sure Anthym was ogling him.

That’s my chest; you can’t ogle that chest.

Except I had bled on Grayson and freaked him out and he was probably going to sleep with Anthym or some pretty French woman on the Europe trip.

Grayson went back to the bathroom while I slowly froze to death under his bed.

Anthym was coming up and down the stairs, probably hoping to sneak another peek of our boss.

I didn’t dare so much as peek out from under the bed even though I really wanted a towel or something warm.

Grayson’s bare feet crossed the room, then his socked feet crossed back a few moments later to the bathroom, then back to the closet again, now covered by pants. Then his dress shoes appeared in front of me.

I almost reached out to grab his ankle when the door opened.

“We need to get going.”

“Just putting on my tie.”

“You need help?” Anthym offered.

“I’ve managed this long,” Grayson said dryly.

“We can’t have the pilots waiting, is all,” Anthym said quickly.

Liar, I thought viciously.

I heard her leave and then the slip of silk along a starched linen shirt.

Grayson’s face appeared under the bed.

He cupped my chin and gave me a quick kiss.

“I’ll be back by Tuesday,” he whispered. “I can’t be away longer than that.”

My heart felt like it was going to burst at his words, until I realized that he wasn’t coming back for me.

Tuesday was the day he saw his mother.

GRAYSON

I didn't allow myself the indulgence of sinking into the spiral of what had transpired with Lexi until I was safely in Paris in the most upscale hotel in the area. We'd flown all night then immediately stepped into an itinerary of meetings, tours, and presentations. Now, twenty-five hours after I'd fucked her literally until she'd screamed on my bed, I could think about what I'd done to Lexi.

And hated myself for it.

I pulled my phone out of my jacket pocket.

I didn't have a text or call or anything from her.

She must hate me.

I shouldn't have come on this trip; I should have taken her to a doctor.

I was a monster.

I sat down on my bed.

Should I text her? That seemed too trite. I wanted to call her, but maybe that would put her on the spot. An email would be more formal, but I couldn't very well send an email through my Richmond Electric CEO email account to my assistant to ask her how badly she was injured when we had rough sex in my penthouse.

Marius would have a fit. It would be a massive lawsuit.

The suitcases sat unpacked on the floor of the hotel room.

I removed my jacket then tie then cuff links, needing something, however mundane, to distract me.

Had she been scared, hurt, afraid? Was she angry? Did she hate me?

"You're a horrible person. You shouldn't have gone back there. You

knew she was there,” I berated myself. “Why can’t you have more self-control?”

I closed my eyes.

Being inside of her had been decadent—the way she had clenched around my cock as she had come and come again. I was getting hard thinking about it.

“You’re never going to be with her again,” I told myself savagely, picked up the largest suitcase, and threw it on the bed.

On autopilot, I hung up the shirts on the wooden hangers provided by the hotel. Hidden among the shirts was a manila folder.

I picked it up and flipped it over.

TO THE CEO was labeled on the back of the envelope in Lexi’s loopy cursive.

I ran my thumb under the flap of the envelope and pulled out the glossy prints.

Grayson’s scavenger hunt! it said in big bright-pink letters.

On the back was a note.

I know you’re not going to enjoy the city. You need to live a little.

And I’ve made things easy for you.

Here is a list of five things you need to see in Paris before you leave.

Send selfies for proof and most importantly, have fun!

I felt a smile form then crushed the warm feelings.

She had slipped this in my suitcase before ... before I had ...

“You can’t punch a hole in the hotel wall,” I told myself.

I was tense, wound up.

“After we buy this company, you need to move to Europe until you can get rid of Lexi.”

I was going to need to tell Marius I had to pay off Lexi.

“Guess you can run the payment through that secret investment fund.”

My cell phone rang. I grabbed it.

“Richmond,” I said tersely.

“You’re not supposed to be in your hotel room.”

“Lexi,” I hissed, cupping my hand over the phone even though I was alone in the room. “How did you get my number?”

“I’m your assistant, Dopey.”

“Lexi ...”

“I hope you’re not sitting by yourself sulking,” she said. “Go out and see

the city! Eat a croissant and some soft cheese.”

“Lexi, are you all right?” I asked her urgently.

“Of course.” She sounded surprised.

The relief surged through me, and I sat down hard on the chair by the window.

“You were amazing,” she chattered.

I let the words wash over me. She didn’t hate me.

“Now I’m sitting on your bed, eating the apple tart you brought back from Alessio. But it’s not as good as you.” She lowered her voice. “I was thinking about what I want you to do to me when you get back.”

The tension left my shoulders.

I palmed myself through my pants.

“I wish you were here riding my cock right now,” I murmured. “And I was fucking your tight little pussy.”

“Grayson.” My name on her lips came out as a moan.

“Are you touching yourself right now?”

“Yeah.” Her voice went up an octave.

“Tell me,” I ordered. “Tell me what you want. I want to hear you say it.”

“I want ...” Her voice had a little hitch like she was close to coming. “I want to feel your thick cock in my tight ... little ...” She let out a cry, but it was more of a shriek of surprise than the sound of her coming.

“Uh, I’ll have everything cleaned up when you get back.”

“Lexi—”

“Go out and enjoy the city. Don’t forget to bring back something nice for Crumpet.”

I cursed when she hung up the phone.

Stood up. Sat down. Stood up again, went to the suitcase and picked up the itinerary Lexi had made. She had a little check mark box by each activity or site I was supposed to see. There was another note paper clipped to a sheet of stickers.

Give yourself a pat on the back when you cross something off your list.

My phone beeped with a message. There was a photo of Lexi face down on my bed in nothing but one of my dress shirts, her hips in the air, legs splayed, that glistening slit that had felt like heaven around my cock front and center in the frame, wet and ready for me to fill her. My pants felt tight.

I could jack off, but I wanted to save it for when I could finally come in

Lexi's tight, hot cunt again.

"You need a distraction."

I pulled out my running shoes from the suitcase. Lexi would be disappointed in me if I didn't do her scavenger hunt. Even though I hadn't slept, I felt oddly energetic.

Of course my sleep cycle was generally messed up from my childhood of never seeing the sun. In the cellar, you slept when you were tired—there was no bedtime.

There were a few people out on the streets when I walked out of the hotel.

The buildings weren't as tall as those in Manhattan, and I took off at an easy run, the Eiffel Tower in front of me.

Unbidden, a memory surfaced of my mother telling me that when she escaped, she was going to Paris to see the Eiffel Tower.

I had asked her if I could come too.

She hadn't answered.

I turned on the phone's video camera and pointed it to me, making sure I had the tower in the background.

"I wish you were here," I said to the video and saved it to my phone to send to her later.

Up next was the Louvre.

I video-called Lexi while standing in front of it.

"He's at a castle," she said happily when she answered. She was sitting in the empty ballroom in my penthouse, still in the dress shirt that let me see the outline of her pink nipples. She was wearing panties though, lacy pink ones. "I should have made you a paper crown and had you wear it."

"No, thanks." I smiled at her.

She blew me a kiss. "Give me a princess twirl!"

"A what?"

"You know, like a dramatic spin in front of your castle."

"This is a museum. There was a whole revolution. Did you miss that memo?" I teased.

"Hey, I went to public school in Florida." She made a face.

"And I was stuck in a cellar the first eleven years of my life, so no excuses," I joked. It might have been the first time I'd joked about it.

"You should eat a crêpe next. That was on your list." She clapped her hands, and her breasts jiggled under the white fabric.

"I don't think anything is open."

“Hmm.” Her phone moved down, and her breasts filled the screen as she typed in the phone.

“Sorry,” she said. “Your assistant is finding you an open *crêperie*. Five blocks south there’s a place still open. You need to eat a Nutella and banana crêpe.”

“I don’t want Nutella,” I said as I took off at a run.

“You don’t want any crêpe,” Lexi replied with a laugh.

The guy at the *crêperie* stand took a swig of coffee then asked me what I wanted.

“Nutella crêpe,” Lexi shouted from the phone.

I asked the guy if he had anything that wasn’t sweet.

“*Du fromage?*”

“*S’il vous plait.*”

We chatted in French while he made the crêpe.

He used two of the wide flat circular griddles, poured the batter on paper-thin, and sprinkled cheese and dried onion flaked on one.

“*Merci.*”

The other was smeared with warm, chocolaty Nutella.

“Your girlfriend wants you to have Nutella,” he said and handed the second crêpe to me.

“I cannot believe you speak French,” Lexi’s voice echoed from the phone when I stepped out of the tiny shop.

“My mother wanted to learn it,” I said, knowing she would understand.

“How is it? How is it?”

I took a bite of the cheese crêpe.

“Fucking amazing,” I said around the hot food.

“Eat the Nutella one,” she begged.

I took a cautious bite. “It is pretty good,” I admitted.

“Yes!”

I jogged back to the hotel, feeling lighter than I had in years, even after eating those crêpes. ***

A few nights later, when we’d flown to Berlin after a series of successful meetings, Anthym came up to me after I’d seen off the CEO of another company we were potentially going to purchase.

“Do you want to go grab a drink and go over the notes?” Anthym asked me.

“Sure,” I said, taking the dinner receipt and my credit card from the

server.

We settled at a nearby bar that was close to the Brandenburg Gate. The tourist attraction was on Lexi's list.

Anthym set her purse down, opened up her laptop, and began to go through the notes.

I tried to pay attention, but I was getting antsy. I wanted to go to the Brandenburg Gate and call Lexi, show her I was still working through her list.

"You know, I like Berlin a lot," Anthym said when we had the to-do list of emails and follow-ups completed. "I grew up in a military family with lots of siblings. You have a lot of siblings, too, don't you?"

I was immediately on guard.

"I'm not in contact with them."

"I'm not really with my siblings either, or my father," she added. She reached over to place her hand on mine. "If you ever need to talk, I think we might have something in common."

"Thank you, but you're my secretary. I like to keep firm boundaries in place." I stood up. "I think we should return to the hotel."

"Of course, Mr. Richmond," Anthym said after a beat then followed me outside.

I knocked on the window of the hired car and waved to the driver then opened the door for Anthym. She scooted over.

"Have a good evening," I said, not getting in beside her.

"Going to meet someone?" Anthym asked.

"No," I said, "just going for a walk clear my head."

Was she suspicious? I had my phone locked down. She didn't have access.

My father would always be hyper paranoid that my mother or any of the other young women were hiding a phone or sneaking messages out somehow. Seems that particular brand of paranoia was one more evil I'd inherited from him.

No one can get into your phone, I told myself. Anthym doesn't know about Lexi.

LEXI

“**Y**ou better make sure his penthouse is spotless,” Anthym’s voice chased away the last bit of sleep.

“That’s not your boyfriend, is it?” Grenadine called from the bottom bunk while I blearily felt around the studio apartment for a Kleenex to wipe the drool off of my face.

“You guys aren’t coming back for two days,” I said, trying not to sound hungover.

“And when we are,” Anthym practically spat, “he’s bringing some girlfriend there.”

My stomach sank.

“Grays—uh, Mr. Richmond has a girlfriend?”

“I don’t know where he found her.” Anthym sounded furious. “But he must have picked up a gold digger at some point on this trip. Probably in that hotel in Paris. The front desk clerk seemed very interested in him, and I think she might have made herself a copy of his keycard.”

I stared at the phone after the secretary hung up; the numbers on the screen glowed three fifteen.

Grayson had met someone.

“Anthym is out of control,” McKenna groaned from the top bunk.

“At least you know she’s not sleeping with Grayson,” Grenadine said cheerfully, turning on the lamp. She reached over to pat me on the head.

“Don’t worry. Grayson’s not keeping some French girl in his penthouse. They don’t shave their pits or bits. Men find that alluring because they can pretend to be cavemen in the bush for like a few days, but then the novelty

wears off when they're picking the tenth pube out of their teeth."

McKenna audibly gagged.

"Grayson will come crawling back to you," Grenadine said assuredly. "Just make sure you keep yourself groomed."

I swallowed. Gizzy stirred next to me on the cot.

"I don't care," I said, the words sounding hollow. "Good for him for finding someone. Grayson deserves to be happy. And I am happy for him. Besides, it's not like we had a thing. Well, we had part of a thing, but not something that you could put a label on. We aren't in a relationship. He's not my boyfriend. He's my boss that I had slept with one and half times."

"Stop trying to find the good," McKenna scolded. "Let's plot how to run Little Miss Frenchy out of town."

"How did I blow it?" I flopped back on the cot, and it screeched in protest. "I was too demanding, wasn't I? I got too attached. I shouldn't have called him or made him the scavenger hunt. I crowded him. I made him feel like I was trying to control him. I came on too strong, and I was bad in bed."

"Virgins are bad in bed," Grenadine agreed. "You should have had some practice before going after the big kahuna. It's not personal."

"What she means," McKenna interrupted, "is that you're awesome, and if Grayson wants some French supermodel instead of a homegrown busty American, that's his loss."

"No," I groaned, "that's his gain. She's going to be the perfect corporate wife, someone all the other billionaires will be jealous of."

"Screw him if he's going to be shallow," McKenna said.

"That's the problem. I shouldn't have screwed him."



ON TUESDAY MORNING, the bags arrived before Grayson did.

I tried not to sound like I was about to go to a funeral as I thanked the driver who brought them up to the penthouse.

"You were just the fun lay, and one day you're going to meet your real Prince Charming," I told myself soothingly.

Except I didn't want Prince Charming, I wanted Grayson. Even if he didn't like plants and didn't own any furniture and desperately needed to lighten up, I still ... well, I was falling for him. Hard.

I dragged the suitcases to the laundry room to sort out the clothes—suits and shirts to the dry cleaner, shoes to be polished, underwear in the hamper for Mrs. Ortega to take care of.

I wrapped my arms around one of the suit jackets when I took it out of the hanging bag. It smelled like him, that masculine woodsy scent.

I took another sniff.

Perfume. I smelled perfume. Women's perfume.

"Oh my gosh." I couldn't be there anymore.

"This is a sign to try harder to find a new job."

Sitting at my desk watching him and his French supermodel make out in high definition through the glass wall of his office would be too much to bear. I'd have to plan their dates, make dinner reservations, and pack carefully curated baskets for their picnics in the park.

I picked up the case with the cuff links and millions of dollars' worth of watches then glanced down at my own Minnie Mouse watch. It had been a birthday gift from my dad. At the time I had felt like a baller going to school.

Grayson did not want a girl who wore a Minnie Mouse watch. He wanted a woman who wore a Cartier watch like Princess Diana, or wore no watch because she didn't need to know what time it was because she was hot and rich and had people to tell her what time it was or where she needed to be.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," I scolded as I carefully made my way upstairs with the box.

Using a cloth, I polished the decorative metal before laying the watches carefully in the special watch drawer, because what was the point in being a billionaire if you didn't have your own watch drawer in your master closet that was bigger than McKenna's studio apartment.

"You don't even have your own studio apartment. You mooch off Grayson. No wonder he found a supermodel."

I heard his steps echoing through the empty penthouse as he came up the stairs and steeled myself.

Don't be weird, you're not his girlfriend. You knew he was going to have a real girlfriend at some point.

Maybe, but I thought I might be able to have a little bit of a chance.

You could still sleep with him.

I did have standards, though they seemed to be ever sinking.

I was not going to be his mistress, side piece, affair partner.

I squared my shoulders as his steps echoed through the master bedroom.

“Lexi,” Grayson’s voice was harsh. “Did you open the suitcase?”

I shut the watch drawer.

“Sorry, Mr. Richmond, I didn’t know you were going to be here. I’ll come back later and finish.”

I marched by him back into the bedroom. He followed me.

“You’re not leaving.”

“Yes, I am.”

His face went dark. He grabbed my arm, yanking me back.

“I told you to stay,” he growled, picking me up by the waist and shoving me against the wall. “I didn’t just spend the last week away from you, suffering as you texted pictures of your cunt and called me, telling me how you were stroking yourself on my bed, for you to stand here and tell me you’re done.”

His voice was raw, harsh. His cock pressed against me through the fabric of his dress pants.

“I—”

Grayson kissed me hard before I could say anything. I gasped against his mouth as his tongue parted my lips, tangling with mine. He pushed up the stretchy fabric of my shirt so he could cup my tits with his large hand.

I pulled off my top and bra over my head as he went after my breast, licking one nipple then the other.

“This is all I’ve wanted.” He breathed against me, then his mouth was crushing mine again.

I was swept away in his desire.

His belt came off and hit the floor.

“I want your mouth on my cock,” he whispered.

His hand tangled in my hair, pushing me down to my knees in front of him.

I wasn’t really sure what to do.

Grayson pulled down the zipper and took out his huge cock.

I was salivating.

Had that really been inside of me?

“Fuck, Lexi,” he hissed as my tongue flicked out to lick the tip of his cock.

His fingers still in my hair, he guided me to him, coaxing me to take his thick, huge cock in my mouth. He thrust lightly in my mouth, his hands guiding my head.

I moaned loudly.

His head tipped back, and he sucked in a breath.

“I need you. Do you understand?” he said roughly, pulling me off of him. “I can’t let you walk out of here.”

“I thought you said I could choose to leave,” I reminded him, licking off the taste of him.

He ran his thumb over my lip. His eyes were glazed.

“Oh, you can leave, sweetheart,” he crooned, “only after I make you come.”

Without warning, he shoved me forward, and the palms of my hands hit the hard floor. Then he was behind me, his mouth between my legs, licking me. My skirt was bunched up around my waist. My head was tipped forward, and my moans filled the air as he ate me out. It wasn’t slow or sensual; it was like he wanted all of me, *right now*. His tongue made sure, rough strokes over my slit. As he sucked on my aching clit, my head tipped forward, and I panted, feeling my legs tense up.

Then I was coming over the edge, crying out for him.

Grayson didn’t draw it out, nor fully let me give myself over to release.

His strong arm circled my waist, and he picked me up and tossed me on the bed.

I watched, wide-eyed, as he shrugged off the dress shirt and pulled the undershirt over his head.

He was like a movie star, and definitely not from a Disney movie, more like those HBO movies that my mom derided as soft-core porn. Which was why, no, she wasn’t paying for a cable subscription.

Grayson kicked off his pants. Then he was on me, kissing me, my mouth, under my jaw, hot, seeking kisses. He sucked on my breasts while his hand forced my legs wider, stroking me back into a frenzy.

He withdrew his hand, and hazily I watched him roll on a condom.

So that’s how you do it.

He ran the palms of his hands over me possessively then gripped my thighs, spreading them. His thick cock jutted out in front of him.

I whimpered, my head lolling back as he teased me with the thick shaft, playing with my clit, stroking it through the wet slit then dipping in my opening.

“I’m going to fuck you till you scream,” he promised. Then he took me with one hard thrust. I cried out in pleasure as he filled me with that huge

cock. He drew back and slammed in me again, filling me.

I wrapped my legs around his waist as he pounded in me.

“You like it when I fuck you, don’t you?” he said in that deep voice.

All I could do was squeak out a “Yes” as he pumped in me, filling me with that mind-numbing thickness.

I arched up, letting him take a nipple in his mouth.

His cock rubbed against my sensitive clit, driving me wild with pleasure.

“I’m going to—”

“Not yet,” he said harshly, withdrawing.

I moaned as he stepped back.

“Are you leaving after this?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I choked out.

“Then I’m giving you something to remember me by.”

He flipped me over on my front. His fingers were back, stroking me, dipping in my opening, then moving higher.

“I, ah—”

I heard another packet rip.

Then his slicked fingers were sliding in me higher, *there*.

I let out a gasp then a moan.

“I want all of you, Lexi. I want you to be mine forever,” he said, voice hoarse in my ear.

His fingers were still moving in me, stretching me.

“Or do you want to leave now?” He nipped my neck.

“Um later, definitely later,” I gasped.

One large hand spread my cheeks apart, while the other stroked me. Another finger entered me.

“You ready to lose all of your virginity?” The words were hot in my ear.

This was not in the book Grenadine had lent me.

“I want you to feel my hot cum.” Grayson curled his fingers in me, and I saw stars.

I was dripping wet. My eyes fluttered as he added another finger.

“Tell me,” he demanded.

“I want—” I began in a shaky breath. “For you to have all of me.”

“You’re mine, Lexi,” he growled as his fingers withdrew. “You will always be mine. I will always own you.”

I felt his bare cock press *there*. My hips ached as he spread them. I panted in anticipation, then he pushed in me.

I let out a high-pitched cry, my hips jerking, as slowly, inch by inch, he worked that thick cock into my ass.

I moaned low as he filled me, in a way I had never even imagined. I felt my body giving into him.

Grayson slowly pulled out, the sensation driving me wild.

“I could keep you here forever like this,” he said, voice gravelly as he buried his cock in me again.

“Grayson,” I gasped as he pulled back then shoved into me, harder this time.

“Tell me how much you want this.”

I let out high-pitched mewl of pleasure as he took me again.

His fingers pinched my nipple, rubbing my breast.

“That feels so good,” I moaned out.

“You like that? You like feeling my cock in you? Not an innocent little virgin anymore, are you.”

“Please,” I moaned as my legs spread wider, begging for him to fill me, to take all of me.

His hand moved off of my breast, down to my throbbing clit.

“Tell me what you want,” he ordered as he stroked me.

“I want—”

“Tell me.” He thrust into me.

“I want you to come in my ass,” I gasped out.

“Fuck, Lexi.” He took me with a series of long, slow thrusts then sped up, his hips jerking, his cock filling me.

It was nothing like the first time. It was headier, like being taken to the top of the highest roller coaster then hurtling down at top speed.

“I’m going—I need—” I cried out his name as I came, moaning as he continued to take me, take his pleasure from my body.

Grayson reached forward to grab my hair, twisting my head back.

“I’ve thought about this all week,” he hissed. He was taking me with abandon now.

I felt my legs seize up. His hand was back between my legs, stroking me while I twisted against him. I let out a loud, high-pitched scream of pleasure as I came again.

Then I felt him explode in me, filling me with hot cum. He thrust in me, erratically wringing that last bit of pleasure from my body.

Grayson withdrew slowly, making me moan, then dropped me on the bed.

He grabbed my jaw and kissed me roughly.

“You’re such a good little fuck.”

I sprawled on his comforter completely unable to move.

I am a jellyfish.

I heard his bare feet cross the floor. Then come back.

“Lexi.” He shook me.

“Lexi? Lexi!” He grabbed my arm, a tinge of panic in his voice. “Oh no, I’m sorry, Lexi.”

“Are you freaking kidding me?”

I had to really force myself to turn my head. Grayson looked distressed.

“Now, I’m just an inexperienced virgin, but you really ruin the mystique if you apologize immediately after giving someone the sexy ride of a lifetime.”

He gave me a look of wonder or surprise, then he kissed me long and slow.

“I’m obsessed with you,” he said, releasing me.

“Oh.” I pursed my mouth. “Yeah, that’s going to be a problem.”

“Who is he?” Grayson bared his teeth.

“Oh, heck no.” I sat up. “I will not stand for this hypocrisy. I am not going to be your mistress and help you cheat. However, if I were that type of person, I would not think it was fair for you to be getting some on the side while you’re parading your corporate girlfriend about. If you get a harem, I get a harem.”

I crossed my arms.

“I don’t want a harem,” Grayson yelled, nostrils flaring.

“Oops. Poor word choice. This is not about your admittedly freaky childhood situation.”

“It was not freaky. It was fucked-up,” he said flatly.

“Fine.”

“Say it,” he insisted.

“It was fucked-up,” I acknowledged. “And you’re fucked-up if you think that I’m going to continue sleeping with you while you parade your French supermodel corporate girlfriend around while I have to hide under the bed and pretend to be the magic little sex elf who disappears before you bring a real woman over. Oh, yeah. Anthym told me that you were dating and wanted me to make sure the penthouse was ready for the woman you were bringing over.” I glared at him.

His chin tipped down, and his mouth quirked. Then he looked up at me, green eyes bright under dark lashes.

“Lexi, the woman I am bringing over,” he said, dropping his voice, “is you.”

“I’m not your girlfriend,” I whispered back.

“We had sex, and I bought you a present,” he countered, bringing my hand to his mouth, punctuating the words with kisses.

He stretched out next to me on the bed, arm a warm weight on my back.

“That sort of makes me sound like your mistress.” I turned over on my side to face him, slowly, so he didn’t think I was trying to push him away.

“Or the girl I can’t stop fantasizing about.” He stroked my hair, winding one of the curls around his finger.

The anger and hurt that had been there moments ago had dissipated. His green eyes were warm, almost jewellike in the sunlight that fell from the tall windows.

I love his eyes.

“What are you thinking about?” he murmured.

“You want an honest answer?”

“Do I?” His voice was slightly strained.

“Probably not.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I’m wondering if the Beast and Belle had sex.”

Grayson rolled on his back and huffed out a laugh.

“Is everything Disney related?” he asked his shoulders relaxing.

“I’m from Florida; of course it is.” I dragged myself over to lay on top of him, stroking my finger down that straight, perfect nose. “You know, you warned me to stay away from you.”

“And I’m still warning you to stay away from me,” he murmured. “I’m not good enough for you.”

“The humblebrag is not a good look on you, sir.”

I traced my finger along his mouth because I could, because Grayson didn’t have a sexy French woman waiting in the wings, because he was the only place I was getting regular sex, and because I loved the small play of a smile on his mouth.

“Now I’m warning you: stick with me, and eventually you’re going to be making sweet, sweet love to me wearing Mickey Mouse ears.”

I kissed him softly.

“Did you complete your scavenger hunt?” I tapped my fingers on his bare chest.

“Yes, ma’am.” He saluted me.

“Good boy, and did you bring Crumpet a present?”

“I brought you a present.”

“Best kindness buddy ever.”

He took my hand in his larger one.

“That’s why I didn’t want you in the suitcase. I didn’t want you to see your present. I couldn’t wrap it because of customs. They think that just because I’m a billionaire I’m trying to smuggle gold bars or something into the US.”

“Little did they know you had your most expensive asset hidden in your pants,” I said, sneaking my hand down because, well what was the point of sleeping with a hot billionaire if you couldn’t cop a feel when you wanted?

Grayson sat up, slowly cradling me in his arms.

“You might want to take a bath,” he hinted.

“If I smell weird, it’s because you were drinking too much coffee and your cum smells weird and got all over me,” I informed him.

Grayson gave me a horrified look.

“My roommate is kind of a sexpert.”

“Is this the elderly woman who gives hand jobs for wine?”

“That’s the one! If I’m ever out of town, I’ll send her by to keep you well taken care of.” I waggled my eyebrows.

“Please God, spare me.”

I climbed off of him, my legs only trembling a little bit, and padded into the bathroom.

It wasn’t like the cramped porta potty of a bathroom in the studio apartment. This one had its own floor-to-ceiling window.

“Manhattan, I am no longer a virgin,” I declared in front of the window as the steaming water filled the tub.

The bathroom was legit larger than the studio apartment. Could use some plants and some art though.

I was slipping under the hot water when Grayson came back upstairs.

“All the way from Paris,” he said tossing a small pink ball into the giant tub.

I clapped my hands in delight when it started to bubble and fizz up.

“This is not from Marshalls. This is a fancy bath bomb.”

“Champagne?” Grayson handed me a glass.

“*Oui!*”

“And,” he said, handing me a slightly smashed croissant and a wedge of soft cheese, “this is from the most popular bakery in town. I was there first thing, and the old lady working there said I was hot and gave me two.”

“Of course she did!” I snapped the waistband of the silky black boxer briefs he was wearing.

“Gimme!” I took a big bite of the croissant. “You really gave me a workout; I’m starving.”

Gizzy, the smell of food awakening him from his nap, scuttled out of the shower and jumped into the tub with a splash.

“You brought your iguana?” Grayson practically yelled.

“I needed moral support,” I argued. “I didn’t know what I was walking into.”

I held the plate and a flute of champagne over my head.

“Gizzy, down,” I told the iguana as he climbed on me for the food then fell into the tub with a splash.

Grayson scooped Gizzy out of the water.

“It’s okay. Iguanas can swim.”

“Get out. You’re going to make people sick,” Grayson told the iguana as he set him down. “I’m glad I only have a pet rock.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t get Crumpet a present.” I sighed. “We clearly have more work to do on you.”

Grayson held up a finger, then he swept his arm in front of me.

On his open palm sat Crumpet in all his gray rocky glory, and on top of his head was a little red beret.

GRAYSON

As stupid as I thought it was to buy a present for a pet rock, it was worth it for Lexi's reaction.

"Aww, Grayson!" She kicked her feet in the water and giggled. "This is adorable."

She pulled me down for a kiss, and I deepened it, needing her. She was a balm for my soul. I wanted to tell her, make her understand, that she was my entire world.

Even though I wanted to propose marriage to her right then and there so she would be with me forever, her smile, her laugh, the bright vibrant light of her, I couldn't come on that strong. It would drive her away.

"You had a very successful trip. I approve."

"We did ink the deal, and the European energy cabinet didn't veto it."

"I'm glad you were able to get some work done around all that shopping and sightseeing." She snickered as I splashed her with water.

It was a perfect moment, and I wanted to hold onto it forever.

Yet my past would never let me be free.

The chime on my watch sounded.

"Oh," Lexi said when my face fell. "It's Tuesday, isn't it?"

"I need to get dressed." I stood up with a heavy sigh.

"I'll come with you," she offered, pulling herself up from the mound of bubbles.

"You don't have to."

"I want them to give me more free cake."

I held up a towel for her, wrapping her in it.

“So snuggly,” she purred. “It could almost double as a rug, hint, hint. My feet are freezing.”

“They are?” I picked her up while she laughed, and carried her into the bedroom.

“Do you need a hair dryer or anything?” I asked.

“A hair dryer is kryptonite for someone with my kind of curls. My hair and I have reached an uneasy truce. I leave it alone, and it tries not to go too far on the clown spectrum when I’m at work.”

“I like your hair,” I told her honestly.

“Did you just give me a compliment, Grayson?” Her eyes shone.

“Maybe.”

She clapped her hands. “Kindness buddies for the win!”

“I think I want to be a little more than your kindness buddy,” I said, dipping my head down to press my mouth to hers.

“Fine. We will be kindness fuck buddies.”

“I feel like I’m a bad influence on you,” I said as I went into my closet to select a suit to wear to the restaurant. “You didn’t used to swear.” I buttoned up my dress shirt.

“Didn’t used to swear, didn’t used to have sex, didn’t use to squat in my boss’s apartment.”

“Penthouse.” I smirked.

“Ego,” she retorted.

When I came out of the closet, fastening my cuff links, Lexi was tucking her shirt into her skirt.

“I hope there’s not a dress code at Alessio.” She wrinkled her nose. “You should have brought me something decent to wear from Paris, especially since you keep ripping my clothes up.”

“It’s not my fault that women’s clothes are so poorly made,” I argued as I deftly knotted my tie. “In my defense, I was going to buy you a new outfit, but they don’t sell things for big Americans in France.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Grayson Richmond.”

I held up my hands. “First off, your tits look better than anything I saw walking around Paris, so God bless America. Also, I went to a boutique to find you a scarf or something, and the sales clerks acted like a yeti had just walked in. When they found out I was American, they demanded to know if all I ate was beef, corn, and steroids.”



“I’M STARVING,” Lexi said. “Hurry up.” She grabbed my hand, tugging me as we approached the restaurant.

“We have to wait and make sure she’s at her table,” I said, dropping my voice and stopping Lexi. “She can’t see me.” Normally I had a whole system for sneaking into the restaurant—hiding my face with my phone, turning up the collar of my coat if it was the colder months.

I wondered if it was a mistake to bring Lexi with me. What had I been thinking? The last time she’d almost ruined the lunch.

However, I didn’t want to *not* be around her. I craved her presence, and a part of me had been contemplating perhaps for once forgoing the Tuesday lunch in favor of staying with Lexi.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go in,” I said urgently. “This is crazy, right? You think this is crazy, what I’m doing.”

Lexi gave me a look, but it was more empathy than pity.

“Sometimes when I’m homesick, I Google Street View my parents’ house. And I can just call them up any time day or night, and if I really wanted to push it, they would be on a plane to come visit me if they thought I needed a pick-me-up.”

She raised her shoulders then lowered them.

“I don’t know what I’d do in your position, but it would probably be something way more obtrusive.”

“Thanks.”

“Full disclosure, I’m super biased because I really need that free food, sooo ...”

“It’s become an entitlement, I see.” My mouth formed a crooked smile.

Lexi gestured me down and took a few paces so she was in view of the restaurant. “Looks like she’s seated. Coast is clear. Move out, team.”

She positioned herself on my left.

“You’re too short to block anyone’s view,” I hissed at her as we walked into the restaurant.

“Just pretend you’re whispering sweet nothings in my ear,” she said out of the side of her mouth. “The humidity is terrible today, and my hair adds an extra six inches. If we’re going to regularly be boinking, I’m going to need to keep an emergency supply of hair clips and scrunchies in your swanky bathroom because my hair is a disaster. Also, please invest in some silk

pillowcases.”

“I thought you wanted me to get a rug,” I whispered as we waited for the hostess.

“I want a lot of things for you, but I’m trying to meet you where you’re at.”

The hostess was too well trained in fine dining to act surprised when she saw me there with Lexi.

“Table for two?”

Lexi took a breath.

“The bar please,” I said quickly.

“Right this way.”

“I can’t believe I’m actually eating inside here.” Lexi was giddy. “I hope they have cake.”

“They always have cake,” I assured her.

I watched her fumble around on the barstool, jumping as she tried to get on it. When finally she was half climbing up the shoe rail on the bar, I picked her up around the waist and set her on the barstool.

“I was going to get up there eventually.”

“I decided to spare both of us the pain.”

I settled in my usual spot and checked the mirror. My mother and her new family—her real family—were happily passing the bread basket around.

“I love this herb butter,” my mother was saying to her father.

The first time I had seen them, when I’d inadvertently been at the restaurant for a business lunch years ago, her father’s eyes had held so much pain. Today, the pain was still there, but it seemed to have lessened somewhat, or maybe it was wishful thinking on my part.

I didn’t have children, didn’t know if I trusted myself to have children, but if I did and what happened to my mother happened to my child, I wouldn’t have been able to bear it.

“He doesn’t seem any worse for the wear,” Lexi was saying to Matt, the bartender, when I turned my attention back to them, wishing I hadn’t come, wishing I hadn’t dragged Lexi into this horrible swamp of maladaptive coping.

“It’s bad training,” Matt said as he expertly measured liquor. “People think that just because they’re iguanas they can’t be trained, but it’s not true.”

“Gizzy knows commands. He can do down and stay.”

“No, he doesn’t,” I said to her. “You can barely control that thing.”

“He’s leash trained, and he doesn’t run off like Marshmallow did at the iguana meetup.”

Matt sat a martini on the bar top.

“Do you have an iguana?” Matt asked me.

“He has a pet rock,” Lexi said proudly. “His name is Crumpet, and Grayson takes very good care of him and even brought him a little hat back from Paris. I should have taken a picture. It was so adorable.”

I made a strangled noise.

“You look like you need a drink,” Lexi said, sliding the martini across the bar to me.

I opened my mouth to protest then thought, what the hell. We were talking about iguanas and my pet rock. I took a long sip of the martini.

“Our mysterious owner becomes even more of an enigma,” Matt joked.

Lexi’s eyes bugged out.

“You own this restaurant?” she squealed.

“Shhh.” I put two fingers to her mouth.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said in a stage whisper. “You didn’t tell me you owned this place.”

Matt was looking between us with what could only be described as a shit-eating grin.

“He did us a good turn.”

“Please don’t mention it,” I said.

“No, no, go on,” Lexi said, resting her head on a closed fist. “It was a dark and stormy night ...”

“Afternoon,” I corrected.

“Right,” Matt said, throwing a towel over his shoulder. “The restaurant was about to go under. It’s my uncle’s place, his pride and joy. Opening a restaurant was always his dream, and he was so upset when the building owner kept raising rents. Mr. Richmond comes in wearing a long black trench coat.”

I shook my head at the dramatization.

“My whole family is crying. You know Italian Americans, we can’t resist a good world-is-ending panic. Mr. Richmond frowns then says, ‘I’ll save you.’”

“Be still my heart,” Lexi exclaimed.

“Just like that, Mr. Richmond buys the building and the restaurant, and now we run it. Life is good, and my uncle is happy. Mr. Richmond won’t

even let us give him free food.”

“Stealing from the restaurant you own is a terrible way to run a business,” I said gruffly.

“Bread basket is on the house,” Matt set the basket of warm bread and a small white plate of herb butter in front of us. “Excuse me, artisanal bakery selection with our house-made herb butter,” he corrected when an older man harrumphed pointedly from the kitchen.

“I never get the bread,” I told him.

“You never get the free bread?” Lexi was appalled. “You mean I could have had free bread and butter this whole time?”

Matt set a toxic-looking cloudy blue concoction in front of Lexi and spooned a dollop of foamy white stuff on top.

“Is that raw egg?”

“Drink your martini.” Lexi patted me on the hand.

“We served these on the Disney cruise, and no one was ever sick. It’s classic to put foamed egg white on cocktails,” she said, taking a sip. “Very popular drink. There’s also a mocktail version.”

She broke off a piece of the bread and swiped it in the butter then smiled at me. “Saving a beloved restaurant. I knew you were a good person.”

She stoked my jaw then leaned in to kiss me.

“I’m not,” I told her. “This is my mother’s favorite place, and she comes here every week. I didn’t want her to lose something that gave her so much happiness.”

“See?” Lexi said softly, squeezing my hand. “Good person.”

She picked up the menu. “I need to decide what to eat. Pasta, the duck, these crab-stuffed tortellini look amazing. What’s your favorite, Grayson?”

“I never eat here, just that one business lunch, and I don’t remember what I had.”

“I see those sad meals your chef prepares for you,” she said. “Baked unseasoned chicken breast, more kale than anyone should be forced to eat.”

“It’s healthy,” I said, breaking off a piece of the bread.

“Dip it in the butter,” Lexi insisted as I lifted my hand. “Dip it.”

I swiped it in the butter.

“We’re ordering the burrata with the winter squash and pesto vinaigrette, the scallops and gnocchi,” Lexi said, running her finger down the menu, “and the truffle risotto. That was amazing the last time you bought it, and I have been praying for your hand to be guided the next time you were at Alessio.”

“You didn’t want to just leave me a note?” I teased, lightly bumping my knee against hers.

“My notes are supposed to brighten your day,” she said primly, “not make selfish requests.”

“Someone told me that kindness was self-care.”

“Speaking of self-care,” she said, “how do you like your terrace?”

I gave her a confused look.

“All your new patio furniture arrived, that apparently you didn’t notice.”

“I was distracted,” I murmured against her neck.

“We’re using it tonight,” she declared.

“So you can try to burn down my penthouse again?”

“We’re making s’mores tonight.” She grabbed my tie. “And watching movies. I’m making popcorn.”

“I need to work.”

“You just had a huge successful trip,” she cried, “and you gave all your employees who went on it the next few days off to recover.”

“Yes, because they’re my employees.”

“Have you ever even used that movie theater?”

“I don’t have a movie theater.” I took a sip of my drink.

“You don’t—What the—Yes, you do!” Her voice rose.

I shushed her with a kiss.

“You have one. I’ve been in it, and we’re watching *101 Dalmatians*,” she whispered.

I frowned and pulled up the plans to the penthouse on my phone while Lexi rattled off the menu selections to Matt.

“Can we get another round too?” Lexi asked, pointing to the glasses.

“Coming right up. I’ll bring the plates out as the chef prepares them,” Matt promised her.

“I ordered fried calamari,” Lexi informed me. “You can’t eat that leftover. I don’t care how good your air fryer is.”

“Apparently I do have a home theater room,” I admitted to her, putting away my phone. “You’re right.”

She gave me an assessing look. “You know, when I first got the job, I seriously debated secretly moving into your penthouse. But then I thought you might eventually notice. Glad to know that you’re not observant.”

“I’m observant,” I protested.

“How many times this week did I wear this outfit?” she countered.

“Trick question. I wasn’t in the office this week.”

“Okay, last week.”

“I don’t remember what you were wearing last week. Except for my shirt, which you were wearing when you called me.” I nuzzled her neck. “You don’t remember what I was wearing.”

“On Monday of last week you wore the charcoal-gray suit with the tie with the pattern that looks like little hamsters, and on Tuesday you wore the navy suit with the green-blue tie,” she recited.

“I don’t have a tie with hamsters on it.” I scowled.

“It’s an abstracted hamster pattern.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“I’m pulling up a photo.”

“You have photos of my clothes? And people call me creepy.” I leaned my elbow on the bar top to look at her.

“No one calls you creepy,” Lexi countered as she scrolled through her phone. “People call you hot and unapproachable. Ah-hah!” She shoved her phone in my face. “Hamsters.”

I took her phone and peered at the zoomed-in image.

“I don’t see it at all.”

“Turn it this way. See, here’s his little hamster nose.”

“What’s in that blue drink?” I asked, taking it from her and sipping it. I gagged. “It tastes like rancid cotton candy.”

“And pixie dust and dreams.”

The server came out with a tray of small plates. Lexi immediately grabbed a forkful of the calamari and popped it in her mouth.

“So freaking good. Best thing I’ve eaten all day. Well, second best.” She winked at me when she said that. “Love being rewarded for hard work.” She slowly drew her tongue along the tines of her fork.

“So all this—the notes, the photos, the undressing in my penthouse and the,” I lowered my voice to whisper in her ear, “the self-pleasuring session on my bed was all a premeditative plan to win me over so I would take you to this restaurant?”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she said, poking me in the stomach. “I’m doing my job. I have a catalog of everything you own. That was so there’s a record if the drycleaners or repair shop damages anything.”

“Huh,” I said sitting back. “That’s actually pretty smart.”

“And the billionaire Manhattan male suddenly realizes that his suitcases

don't magically unpack and pack themselves. How, you may wonder, does this species of male ever find a mate? Why, he relies exclusively on his good looks, of course."

"I'm not that out of touch," I said, taking a bite of the ceviche.

She giggled.

By the time Lexi was ordering dessert, I realized that I had barely watched my mother at all. I felt guilty, like I was forgetting her.

"I want the cherry pie," Lexi said.

"Coming right up."

"It's a special occasion," she whispered to me and slid her hand up my thigh.

"Matt, can you send a selection of desserts over to that lovely table over there? I think we were a little obnoxious," she asked the bartender. "I don't usually day drink."

"That true?" Matt grinned at me as he cut a slice of pie for Lexi.

"No comment."

LEXI

As soon as we were back in the penthouse, Grayson's hands were on me.

"Looks like I convinced you not to go into the office," I murmured as he dropped the bag of food on the floor. "Wait. My leftovers."

"I'll bring them to you in bed," he promised as he picked me up and carried me upstairs, kissing me hungrily. Then he laid me down on his large bed.

I couldn't get enough of him. He was better than any fairy-tale hero because I was pretty sure Prince Charming didn't know how to do *that* with his hands. I suddenly wanted all of him completely.

He let out a breath as he let me push him on his back and straddle him.

"Definitely not the innocent little virgin anymore, are you?" His hands slid up my bare thighs, under my skirt.

I grabbed his jaw and kissed him, as roughly as he had done to me earlier.

"You're not the CEO here, Mr. ... CEO. Okay, that sounded better in my head."

He tipped back his head and huffed out a small laugh then hissed as I began unbuttoning each of the pearly-white buttons of his dress shirt, revealing that muscular chest. I raked my nails over the ridges of muscle, marveling at how his washboard abs flexed.

"You going to show me how well you can please me tonight, lover boy?" I asked and pulled my top off.

"We need to work on your dirty talk," he said, laughter in his eyes.

He sat up slightly and pulled off his shirt.

I pushed him back down and pawed at the bulge under his slacks, satisfied when he hissed. I pushed myself along his bare torso to his mouth.

“I want to ride your cock,” I whispered against his mouth as I ground my hips against his.

He kissed me hard. “That’s better.”

I shrugged off my skirt before he could rip another one, then pushed his slacks down and threw them on the floor. I palmed him through the fabric of the silky boxer briefs. My panties were soaked. All I could think about was his cock filling me, making me come.

Grayson reached up and unhooked my bra, letting my breasts fall free. He took full grasp of both of them, his touch making me gasp and arch back.

“You’re so fucking sexy, Lexi,” he said, voice strained with lust.

“Ha! You rhymed!”

He growled and pulled me down for a rough kiss.

I slid my panties down my legs, wanting to be rid of them, and his boxer briefs matched my pace. His cock sprang up, thick and huge.

I raised an eyebrow. “You wouldn’t happen to have condoms on hand, would you, you playboy?”

“Middle drawer of the nightstand. And if you weren’t about to ride my cock, I’d have something to say about your choice of terms.”

I raised an eyebrow again. “Someone’s a choosy beggar.” His hand was on my bare backside as I reached down to the drawer I was directed to and pulled one out. Then looked at it like it was about to turn into a frog.

“Silly virgin.” He took it from me, not breaking eye contact as he ripped the packet with his teeth.

I grinned manically. “Cocks are for k...—”

His mouth dropped open in horror.

“—redheads.” I winked. “You thought I was going to say something bad.”

“You are terrible.”

“I’m surprised someone who was raised in a hole in the ground even understood the Trix cereal reference,” I joked.

I rested my hand on his as he slid the condom over his throbbing cock. I was practically drooling, thinking about him in me. I straddled him again, resting my hand on those broad shoulders, and ground my hips back against his cock, making him curse.

His hands reached up to play with my breasts, rubbing his thumb on the

nipples, pinching and teasing until they were hard, sensitive pebbles.

I pushed the soaking-wet panties to the side, teasing myself with the head of his cock.

“You’re going to feel so good in my cunt, aren’t you,” I said, the words coming out in high-pitched gasps. “I want this thick, hard cock in my pussy.”

He strangled out a curse, his hands sliding down to grip my thighs, pushing me down against him.

“Let me fuck you, Lexi. I want to be inside of you.”

I rode up on my knees. His hands on my hips, I guided him into me, gasping blissfully as he filled me so perfectly. I rode up and down his length, his strong hands helping guide me. Each and every penetration built upon the last, and my gasps only grew louder. My breasts swayed in front of his face. Grayson, unable to help himself, raised his hand to my breasts.

The slow start didn’t take long to give into the rush of lust. Bucking on him, letting him fill me to the brim each and every time. His firm hands helping me along as he held me in place so he could fuck me harder and faster from below.

My entire body was vibrating on top of him as I let out moan after moan. We were completely entwined with one another, as close as two people could ever be. I felt such a powerful connection to him. Could it really be that L word? This quick? This soon?

My body completely believed. Something about the way he held me, the way his fingers found time to pet my clit as we fucked, making sure that it was every bit as good for me as it was for him.

We were so fully enraptured by one another, now acting on base, primal instinct and the need for greater pleasure and intimacy. I looked into his eyes, and it seemed as if our souls were connecting on top of everything else.

Every stroke of cock into me seemed like it would be the last I needed. I both wanted this to continue forever and yearned for that sweet release of orgasm.

But it would eventually come for me. That searing delight, pulsing through me again and again as I screamed for him at the top of my lungs. His groans were so quiet beneath it, but they sounded so sweet for me, a tribute to my body and my sexuality.

Wracked with orgasm, he kept fucking me, wanting to wring every little bit of wonderful sensation out of the moment he could. His warmth filled the condom, and even at the heights of everything else I was experiencing, I felt

the heat of his release, the things I did to him just as extreme as the things he did to me.

I collapsed on him, my arms wrapping around him. Another kiss, intoxicatingly sweet.

Grayson stretched out next to me, tracing his fingers along the skin of my chest, connecting the dots of my freckles.

“I adore you, Lexi,” he murmured.

He leaned over to kiss me softly. Then he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against him so that I rested my head on his chest.

I felt so safe and protected in his arms. I was about to drift off on a fluffy cloud of amazing sex when Gizzy padded out from the master bathroom and took a running jump to land on the bed.

Grayson cursed as Gizzy tried to crawl on top of me.

“I thought you said he was trained.”

“He’s better trained than Marshmallow,” I said darkly.

Gizzy opened his mouth to hiss at Grayson, who growled back.

“Off, Gizzy,” I told the iguana as Grayson moved out from under me.

Grayson looked at the large reptile warily.

“He’s clean. He just had a bath,” I reminded Grayson. “Go get Crumpet, and we’ll have a family bed picnic.”

“You just want your leftovers.”

I beamed at him. “Yes, please!”

I lay on the bed and blatantly ogled him as he sauntered over to pick the boxer briefs up off the floor—his broad shoulders that tapered to the narrow hips and waist, the washboard abs that led to the V of muscle to an extra-special part that could really give a girl a workout.

“And the male Manhattan billionaire,” I narrated in my best David Attenborough voice, “after successfully mating with the female, struts around in the brush.”

“I am not strutting.” He looked over his shoulder at me. His brown hair, which was usually carefully parted and combed in place, fell over his face, making him look younger, more rakish.

“Come here.” I crooked my finger.

He leaned down.

“You have a very nice butt.” I slapped the firm backside. “Compliments are important. Also you’re hot, and this”—I rubbed the bulge in his boxer briefs—“this is chef’s kiss.”

I dropped my voice to a playful whisper. “You’re supposed to say thank you when someone gives you a compliment.”

He cupped my jaw then leaned down and kissed me till I was gasping for breath.

“Thank you, Lexi.”

“Show-off,” I called after him.

I grabbed his shirt from where it hung off the end of the bed and slipped it on then lay back on the mound of pillows.

“This must be what Cinderella felt like after she moved into the castle with her prince.” I decided.

It was perfect. Grayson was perfect.

I started to let myself imagine what it would be like to actually date him.

You’ll have to find a new job.

I needed a new job anyways, so there, negative thoughts.

And if I got a new job that paid more, I might be able to move somewhere I could actually bring a man to who wore eight-thousand-dollar suits. Then he’d know for sure that I wasn’t just with him to mooch off his penthouse. We’d go to fancy restaurants, and the theater, and nice parties.

With my new job, I’d buy new clothes so that I could convince Grayson that I was corporate girlfriend material. Maybe I’d even buy that fancy full-coverage foundation and lose the freckles. Not to mention I could finally stop lying to my parents.

See? Silver lining to every cloud.

Grayson appeared in the doorway of the master bedroom.

“Fancy! He put it on a tray and everything. Gizzy, down,” I ordered the iguana, “and I’ll give you a treat.”

“I don’t think he understands,” Grayson said, approaching the bed.

Gizzy hauled himself to the edge of the bed and jumped off then waited patiently on the floor.

“Huh.”

Grayson stepped around him and set the tray down in front of me.

I picked up the container of gnocchi and scallops while Grayson poured me a glass of wine.

“So good,” I said, scooping a large forkful in my mouth.

Grayson ate a bite of the lobster salad.

“You didn’t try this at the restaurant,” I said, holding out a gnocchi for him.

He let me feed it to him then lay back down beside me.

I carded my fingers through his hair.

Then he pulled out his phone.

“I thought you weren’t working,” I reminded him.

“You said you wanted me to buy a rug,” he replied.

“Are you doing a little online shopping, Grayson?” I stretched my arms out. “Ah, the power of pussy! Yes, go ahead and laugh. You know you want to.”

He grinned as he swiped through rugs on a shopping website.

“Buy a big Turkish rug,” I suggested. “Not a super red one, something with a little blue in it. And we need a sitting area in here; it’s like a porno set.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I didn’t realize you were intimately familiar with what porn sets looked like. I’m starting to think I was sold a bill of goods.”

He reached up to cup my face momentarily.

“How about this one?” he asked, holding out his phone to me. “Does this rug meet your approval?”

I almost choked on a piece of pasta.

“It’s almost a hundred thousand dollars.” The words came out in a squawk. “Can’t you find something at Target?”

“You said a Turkish rug.”

“Not a one-of-a-kind antique.”

“Do you like it?” he pressed. “You’re the one who wants a rug.”

“So you’re perfectly fine walking around on freezing-cold floors?” I demanded.

He shrugged. “I’ve survived this long.”

“It’s like living with an animal,” I told Gizzy. “No offense to present company.”

I took the phone and looked at the rug. It was oversized with a symmetrical pattern. Because it was vintage, it was worn in some places more than others, giving the rug a nice patina. It wasn’t too red or too pink and did have some nice blue-and-green highlights.

“It is a beautiful rug,” I admitted, “but I’m not going to be the one to tell you to buy it. I can’t; it’s too much for me.”

“But are you saying I have excellent taste?”

“You’re sleeping with me, so obviously yes,” I teased, running my hand

over his bulging bicep.

Grayson took the phone back and pressed a button.

“Done. It’s bought. Should be arriving in a couple of weeks.”

I took a long sip of wine.

“Gosh, that was stressful.” I lay back on the pillows.

Grayson fed me a bite of cake.

“I wish I had some more of the burrata,” I mused.

“I’ll have the restaurant bring you some,” he offered.

“That is way too extra.”

“Says the woman who runs around handing out stickers to people.” He took a sip from the wineglass and typed something in on his phone.

“Just for that, we’re watching a double feature,” I said, “*101 Dalmatians* then *The Little Mermaid*.”

“No.” His expression that was open and relaxed a moment ago was now dark and stormy. “I’m not.”

GRAYSON

Can you not ruin everything? I scolded myself.

Lexi was looking at me in concern.

“I just—” I ran a hand through my hair. “It’s fine. The movies are fine.”

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to. I just thought—”

“I said it was fine.” It came out more harshly than I intended.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

You already opened up to her too much. Tell her you misunderstood. Tell her! She’s going to walk away.

“We could just read books instead,” Lexi offered. “I just downloaded a good one on my Kindle. It’s about this woman who gets abducted by aliens, but it’s a funny book, not like bad abducted. Uh, or ... er ...”

“Lexi,” I said desperately, “please don’t do that.”

“I’m sorry,” she said in a small voice. “I’ll try to be more careful.”

“No,” I said, resting my hands on her shoulders. “Please don’t censor yourself because you think I’m going to get angry or yell at you.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You could never,” I said helplessly. “I’d do anything for you.”

Her eyes searched mine.

“I don’t watch shows or movies or anything,” I said in a rushed whisper, “because the TV was constantly on.”

“In the cellar,” she said, eyes wide but glued to mine.

She grabbed my hands.

“There were six of us boys down there, and my father had placed a

crappy old TV there to keep us occupied. It was a small space, and we couldn't go outside, and the TV was on constantly—when we ate, when we fought, when we slept. After the—well, when I was in foster care, it was the same, just constant noise. All I wanted was—”

“Some peace and quiet,” she finished.

“I don't know why there's a movie room in the penthouse,” I explained. “I didn't want it.”

“Then have it torn out.”

“I don't know if you've noticed,” I said wryly, “but I'm a little behind on home improvement projects.” I squeezed her hands.

“You know what you need?” she said determinedly. “A trip to Florida. You can't be sad in the Florida sunshine.”

“Sure,” I said, willing to agree to anything if she just wouldn't leave me. “Pick a date, and I'll have the plane ready.”

“The plane?” Her mouth fell open. “I—but—”

“Sweetheart, if I have to go to Florida, I'm not flying commercial.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I don't know whether to be offended or happy.”

The corner of my mouth quirked. “Little of column A, little of column B.”

She punched me lightly in the abs. “Ow! You really do work out a lot.”

“Not much else to do when you're sleepless at three in the morning. It's that or drink,” I said with a dark laugh.

Stop ruining everything. You revealed too much already. Lexi doesn't want to hear about how you were shoved like garbage in a basement. She wants a strong protector who has his shit together. She's going to find someone else.

And I would lose her, having to watch her life from afar. Like I did with my mother.

She gave me an assessing look.

“You know what helps me when I feel down about how my life wasn't all that I thought it was going to be?”

“What's that.”

“A gratitude journal. You count your blessings and realize things aren't as bad as they could be.”

“So the very definition of toxic positivity.”

She scooped up the last forkful of cake.

“It's toxic positivity covered by a mound of frosting.”

I let her feed it to me. Then she leaned in to kiss me. I tasted the tart lemon of the cake on her mouth.

“What are you grateful for?” she pressed.

“I’m grateful for …” I hesitated.

I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Not for a moment. I knew that I shouldn’t be so obsessed with her, knew she deserved better, but she enchanted me like nothing else.

I ran my fingers through her curly red hair. “I’m grateful for those deep-brown eyes of yours.”

“Are you?”

I pulled down the blanket, uncovering her wondrous body. “I’m grateful for these curvaceous tits of yours.” I ran my hands over their soft warmth, hearing her purr beneath my touch.

“I think you’re missing the point of the question, Grayson.”

“Am I now?” Now bare before me, I threw myself over her, a hand running up from her pussy toward the rest of her body. “You asked me to name things I’m grateful for. The things that make me happy. And your gorgeous body is definitely making me very happy right now.”

I leaned down, kissing her, before reaching back into the nightstand drawer and pulling out a condom. I opened it and slid it down my cock, her small hand so quick to join me in rolling it out.

“I’m grateful for the sounds you make when I fuck you. I’m grateful for the ecstasy I feel when your pussy grasps my cock so tightly, the intensity of being inside you, and the heightened desire I feel for you.”

She laughed. “I’m going to be asking for more answers later, Grayson. But for now, you’ve earned a stay of execution. Because I want what you want. Fuck me, Grayson. Do it now. Do it hard.”

“So demanding.” I kissed her, then I thrust inside her, the overwhelming sensation forcing me to moan right alongside her. Her arms crossed around my head as she nodded enthusiastically, and I took her harder. Every inch of my cock was in bliss as her pussy throbbed around me, us rocking together. I wanted to hear her moans, hear her scream for me.

Her legs closed around me. I froze briefly as I thought about how I was truly grateful for her. She was exceptionally hot. Funny. Smart. Everything I wanted in a woman.

She scratched me a bit for daring to stop. I just laughed it off and reaffirmed my lust, pummeling into her as hard as I could without hurting

her.

We must have been so weak to one another, because I'm sure both of us could last longer than we did. But as soon as I heard her scream at the top of her lungs, her pussy squeezed me tighter and her body shuddered around me, sending me over the edge.

I held her in my arms. My cock still throbbed. I could easily go for another round.

"You get a sticker for that," she said, panting.

I gave her a smug look and leaned back, hands behind my head. "I probably deserve one."

"Glad to see you're positively drowning in self-confidence."

I trailed my hand down her curves, felt her move under my touch. There was rustling of paper. I looked down.

You did it! the sticker that had appeared on my chest screamed in bright-pink letters.

"This is a very pricey sticker," Lexi said, rubbing it. "But you earned it."

She added two more sparkly pink hearts to my chest. I peeled one off and stuck it on her nose then traced my finger down to her lip, memorizing her face.

"You know," I said, just to see her smile, "since the movie theater is already in the penthouse, it would be wasteful not to use it. And you did say you knew how to make popcorn, right?"

"There's that silver lining!" Lexi whooped and pressed playful kisses all over my face while I basked in her happiness.

She sat up and pulled my shirt back on. There was something highly appealing about seeing her in my clothes. I admired the curve of her breasts under the white fabric. Then I caressed her ass as she swung her legs off the bed. She tiptoed across the floor to the dresser.

"That rug can't get here soon enough," she said as she pawed through the underwear drawer, pulled out a pair of boxers, and slipped them on.

"If you get inspired to do more online shopping," Lexi called, skipping out of the master suite into the hallway, "some fuzzy unicorn slippers sure would be a nice addition to this monument to existential dread."

I barked out a laugh and pulled on a pair of sweatpants then strode out to find her.

Gizzy trudged after me, his long scaly body sliding across the floor. He paused at the stairs.

“Go use the elevator if you’re so smart,” I told the iguana.

He paced like he was going to make a jump for it to the chandelier.

“Not on my watch.”

I picked up the huge lizard. His clawed feet made bicycle motions as I carried him quickly down the stairs and set him on the floor.

I didn’t see Lexi in the kitchen or the living room. I grabbed a bottle of wine and glasses then crossed through the ballroom. I cut through the butler’s pantry and catering kitchen then out past the music room. Off a side hallway was a small dark room.

I paused for a moment when I opened the door.

No windows. Claustrophobic.

Pop pop pop.

Gizzy raced by me, attracted by the smell of hot oil popcorn and butter.

“I can’t believe you’ve never been in here. There was still plastic on the popcorn maker,” Lexi marveled as white fluffy kernels filled a square glass case.

The microwave dinged.

“I had no idea this was all here,” I said as she pulled a glass beaker of butter out of the microwave.

“Sure must be nice to forget a whole two hundred square feet you own in Manhattan,” she said, scooping the freshly made popcorn into a bowl and pouring the butter over it.

I uncorked the wine and poured her a glass then carried both glasses to where she was sitting on the long leather couch in front of a projection screen that spanned the entire wall in front of us.

Lexi steepled her hands and drummed her fingers together.

“What’s that look?” I asked, suspicious.

“Am I,” she grinned maniacally, “about to pop your movie cherry?”

“I’ve seen movies before,” I scoffed.

“In a theater?”

“Marius dragged me to a few in college. He wanted me to be more social.”

“Marius is now my new favorite person and an honorary kindness buddy.” Lexi took a sip of her wine. “I’ll have to settle for popping your private movie theater cherry then. *Like a virgin*,” she warbled as she pressed buttons on her phone.

“Have you completely hijacked my home automation system?”

“I’m in the source code.” She waggled her fingers at me. “Also, nice choice on clothing; I think that’s my favorite outfit of yours. Because you’re not wearing a shirt.” Her fingers trailed up my chest.

The blue appeared on the screen, and I’m pretty sure my hair was blown back as the sound system engaged and the Disney theme music blasted from the speakers.

“Getting lit!” Lexi whooped and held up her wineglass like a sorority girl.

I draped my arm around her. Aside from the fact that Lexi worked for me and there was a giant iguana scarfing down his own bowl of popcorn, it was almost like being on a date.

Lexi was half in my lap, giggling at the antics of the cartoon dogs on the screen, her bare legs bumping mine.

I absently ran my hands up her thigh, occasionally letting her feed me popcorn, somehow not that bothered by the dark or the flickering images on the projector screen.

“You know the best thing about movie theaters?” she whispered to me while several dogs were barking their heads off on screen.

Her hand slipped under my waistband. I jerked, and the popcorn spilled on the floor for the iguana to scarf up. I didn’t register it because she was sliding down my body, taking the top of my pants with her, my cock springing out.

She licked the tip of the head of my cock. I cursed in pleasure as she rained more kisses down my length, her touch delightful in any way that she gave it. A tongue soon followed, and all I could do was shudder in appreciation of her. Down to my balls, she took them into her mouth, sucking them so hard.

Her lips were divine, like she instinctively knew how to please me, her eagerness and desire making up for any lack of experience. My fingers were tangled in her hair, rubbing small circles on her scalp as she dragged her tongue up my length and left me shuddering with utter delight.

The whole time her eyes were locked on mine, enjoying watching me come undone as she sucked my cock.

She would get hers. I would see to that.

Lexi opened wide for me, licking her lips as she took me down her throat.

I gently ran my fingers through her hair as she continued. She had settled into a solid pace, going up and down my length as she massaged my balls in her fingers. Even as she had seemingly drained me dry twice in the past

twenty-four hours, I could feel the pressure building down there.

One hand on my cock, the other went down between her legs, touching herself as she sucked me off. The sight of her on my cock, hand between my legs, was enough to push me to the edge. It was all I could do to keep from coming in her mouth.

“Fuck, I’m ... shit, you’re really something special, Lexi.”

She hummed then slid back, holding my cock in her hand. The other hand unbuttoned my dress shirt that she’d been wearing, exposing the swell of her freckled tits.

“Why don’t you show me how much you really enjoyed me sucking your cock, Grayson?”

I erupted all over her chest, just as she wanted. I coated her tits in my cum, pulse after pulse exiting my cock and making a mess out of her. The seed leaked down her body, and I was captivated by the image in front of me. Of me owning her, of me claiming her, and how eagerly she submitted to me and wanted to be mine.

She took a little of the mess off herself with her finger and slipped it into her lips. “How’s that for dirty talk?” she asked, gaze smugly seductive.

I stood up and took her hand, helping her up to her feet. I then spun her around and pushed her back onto the sofa, putting my lips on hers. She needed to be an orgasmic mess as much as I was. I slipped my hand under the boxers she’d stolen from me.

She’s so goddamn wet for me. She made herself a gushing river just by sucking my cock.

My fingers sought out her clit, and I rubbed it as I plunged my fingers deep inside her, hearing those harmonic moans exit her mouth. I pumped them into her furiously, and her hands shot down to my wrist, gripping it and holding it in place.

I kept the pressure on, feeling her throb on my hand, her bucking and writhing in my grip. She screamed for me, the orgasm coming for her quickly, leaving the dress shirt clinging to her curves.

She snuggled against me with a happy sigh. “I love trying new things.”

I wrapped her in my arms and kissed the top of her head.

Lexi was half asleep propped on me as the dogs found their puppies and the mother dog was greeting them, ecstatic. I felt my chest constrict.

This is why I hate TV.

I left Gizzy to watch the rest of the movie alone then carried her to bed.

“You don’t want to watch the rest?” Lexi murmured in my arms.

“No, thanks.”

As I watched her sleep there in my bed, red hair spread around the pillows, I wondered how long this could possibly last.

LEXI

I was on the beach, basking in the sun, letting it warm me as the waves crashed softly on the shore. The sand was deliciously warm, and I snuggled back on my soft fluffy beach towel ... all while the sun beat down on me. My sunglasses were no match for the blazing hot ball in the sky

...

“Why is it so bright?” I mumbled and sat up with a snort.

Beside me, Grayson was sleeping deeply, peacefully. Unlike me, he did not drool or snore like an asthmatic pug. His arm that had been draped over me fell down to my lap. He murmured and shifted.

My heart skipped a beat as I looked down at him.

I wasn't sure I had ever seen him that relaxed. Usually there was an undercurrent of tension on his handsome face. I hoped I didn't wake him, though if the bright spotlight of the sun that was shining through the ten-foot-tall, glass, curtainless windows at six freaking thirty in the morning didn't wake him, I probably wasn't going to either.

I gingerly lay back on the pillow, wishing I had my sunglasses.

The studio apartment I shared with McKenna and Grenadine was never this bright. The only thing that was able to grow reliably was the mold in the bathroom.

He seriously needed some plants. I could grow a whole jungle in here—fruit trees, orchids.

I snuck my phone off the nightstand and put it on silent so I could scroll through Pinterest and plan a big breakfast. I'd make pancakes, bacon, fresh-squeezed orange juice—the works.

I frowned when I saw missed calls from McKenna.

Lexi: Sorry! I didn't get kidnapped.

Lexi: Just banging the CEO *upside down smiley face*

The phone vibrated in my hand with incoming messages.

McKenna: You better hope Anthym doesn't find out!!!

McKenna: She's been stomping around here super pissed.

McKenna: She and Brittany Dawn were locked in her office all day yesterday talking about who Grayson is dating.

Lexi: Wait, he gave everyone the day off.

McKenna: Anthym came in just to show everyone she's dedicated to the job. Not that she was working.

McKenna: You better come in today, otherwise she might get suspicious.

McKenna: I covered for you yesterday and said you were busy setting up Grayson's penthouse and making it look extra special romantic for his date.

Lexi: So you threw gasoline on a grease fire.

McKenna: Girl, you haven't been at the company long enough to rack up a full day's worth of PTO.

Lexi: And yet I work all that overtime ...

McKenna: Fucking your boss is not overtime.

Lexi: Oh my gosh! I just meant all that extra stuff Anthym has me do.

McKenna: Next time you're sucking Grayson's dick, convince him to take you on a nice trip somewhere. You should get some perks out of this.

Lexi: I did talk him into taking me to Florida.

McKenna: I said somewhere nice *tongue sticking out emoji*

I looked down at Grayson's sleeping form—the muscled torso, the curve of his backside partially hidden by the comforter.

I did not want to go back to that office. Not without him. And I was pretty sure if I told him I was going to work, then he was going to go to work, and

he really needed a break.

Lexi: Tell Anthym that I'll be in later in the day. I'm just going to clean up all the body fluids off the walls and sex paraphernalia from his hot date.

McKenna: She's going to blow a gasket.

McKenna: She told me Grayson dated a few times but never had a serious love interest. I think she was half pretending to be his wife, and now it's going to be you.

Lexi: Gosh, that sounds serious.

McKenna: Didn't you tell me you kind of sort of met his mom?

Lexi: Yeah, I guess that means whatever this is, is pretty serious.

McKenna: Play your cards right and you're going to be the next Mrs. Richmond!!! Can I please be your live-in Gizzy nanny? My grandmother can live on the terrace. She can't be allowed inside.

McKenna: She says she's going to start growing psychedelic mushrooms in the perpetual wet spot on the bathroom floor.

This ... *thing* ... with Grayson was becoming way more complicated than I thought it was going to be back when I was just fantasizing about my hot boss from the safety of my stool. Now I was in his home, his bed, his life. I lay back on the pillow, careful not to disturb him.

Decisions needed to be made. Hard decisions about what the future with Grayson looked like. But what if he didn't want to have a future with me? What if he just wanted to blow off some steam then bounce?

It will all work out. Everything happens for a reason, I told myself. You have an amazing man who cares about you, dinner yesterday was amazing, and you woke up to the sunshine this morning, all of the sunshine everywhere. Stop being so negative.

Grayson stirred next to me. Those big strong arms of his wrapped around me and pulled me close. He whispered in my ear, "Why are you already awake?"

"Might have something to do with the criminal levels of sunlight."

He moved so I could feel his throbbing cock, hard on the back of my legs. He propped up my thigh so he could rub his cock against me, teasing me, making me dripping wet for him. I moaned, arching back against him while he teased me with the head of his cock.

“From blushing virgin to horny little sex kitten.” He kissed me while he fumbled in the nightstand for a condom.

I was aching, ready for him.

Grayson’s cock slid into my sex, and it was as explosive of a pleasure as it ever was. I cried out as his hands pulled me into him, his fingers massaging my breasts then diving down between us, stroking at my clit.

It only took two thrusts before I was bucking against him, needing him to fill me, take me, let me know I was his forever and ever.

I craned my neck to kiss him, wanting to experience any and all of him, every little bit of him to the fullest extent he could give himself to me. Every penetration, every meeting of our bodies, every little bit of ecstasy he was making me feel drove me closer and closer to the edge.

His hand reached over me, massaging my clit, as he hammered into me. I gave myself over to him completely, crying out. I felt his cock pulse within me, as if my pleasure only turned him on even more. He adjusted his grip to take me with abandon, overwhelming me with his desire.

I felt myself come, then he followed, shuddering in me, cursing in my neck.

Grayson turned my face and kissed me softly. “I want this every morning, Lexi.”

I lay in his arms while he stroked my face.

See? He wants something more than just a fling, I told myself reassuringly.

I kissed him again, feeling my heart clench when he smiled softly at me.

“Don’t leave,” he said softly, reaching out to lightly grab my wrist.

“Just making breakfast. I think all the leftovers are gone. You can go back to sleep if you want.”

I pulled on one of his shirts and went downstairs to start cooking.

“Things aren’t so bad when you have pancakes,” I told myself as I mixed up an easy batter. There were berries in the fridge, because of course Grayson would have a drawer full of berries he wasn’t going to eat.

“He is now,” I said, dropping handfuls of blueberries, blackberries, strawberries, and raspberries into the bubbling circles of pancake batter.

Bacon was crisping in the oven, I had eggs in the frying pan on the stove, and I was even making my own syrup.

Gizzy, who was my eternal kitchen companion, made a barking sound when Grayson walked in. He was wearing loose black pajama pants slung low around his waist, no shirt. Just how I liked it. He wrapped his arms around me, snuggling me to him so he could press kisses to the crook of my neck, my jaw, and my mouth.

“Something smells amazing.”

“Just the smell of someone actually cooking the food in your fridge.”

I grabbed his firm backside.

He returned the favor by caressing my own, letting one hand linger briefly between my legs, and kissing me, tongue slipping in my mouth lazily, like I was his, no questions. He released me then opened the fridge and grabbed a water.

“I have tea for you,” I said, pointing to the steaming mug.

“Thanks, sweetheart.” He kissed me again then leaned against the counter, regarding me and sipping his tea while Gizzy padded in a figure eight in front of him.

“I think your lizard is hungry. He wants some bacon.”

I flipped the pancake over.

“I hope you like berries.”

His face had that dark expression on it.

“This food is for your neighbors,” he protested.

“I think they can survive missing a few strawberries.”

Grayson didn’t say a word, just stalked out of the room. I inwardly sank. I needed to do a better job of not triggering his moods.

“Here,” Grayson said, returning with a handful of gift cards. “Take them these.”

“I heart you so much.” I beamed at him, feeling relief that I hadn’t ruined the morning. I kissed him then I handed him his plate.

The Mickey Mouse pancake grinned up at Grayson.

He scowled. “Do I look like a five-year-old? I feel like you’re insulting my manhood here.”

“Who doesn’t want to start the day off with a smile?” I said and scooped pancakes on my own plate.

It was still too chilly to eat outside, so I had set the dining room table for breakfast.

I sat across from him then walked my toes up his leg.
He reached down to grab my foot.

“Since you’re on an online shopping kick,” I told him, “next on the list is some curtains. I found a place that sells automatic shades with a blackout option and a diffused-light option for when you need a little light.”

“I don’t need any shades, thank you.” He was guarded.

“It’s like being cooked under a microscope in your bedroom.”

“Sunlight is good for you.” His knife scraped against his plate.

“No wonder you have problems sleeping.”

Grayson carefully set down the utensils.

Darn it, Lexi.

“I guess you probably have other reasons you can’t sleep beside the lack of curtains, so never mind. Let’s just drop it.”

We had only been a thing for a few days, and I already couldn’t keep myself from bringing up his past trauma. The problem was that it touched everything. Nothing was safe.

“How’s your bacon?” I asked.

“Lexi,” he said.

“Too crispy? Your oven gets really hot. I made a mental note for next time.”

“Lexi,” he said loudly, “I told you that you shouldn’t have to guard yourself.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I protested.

“You can never.”

“You looked hurt.”

“It was unexpected,” he said carefully, searching for the word. “I’m not used to sharing myself so much with someone.” His whole body seemed to sag under the weight of memories.

“It was dark all the time in the cellar, not pitch-dark, just dim. Everything was shadowy; you could never quite make out what was in the corners. The only light was a couple of flickering light bulbs and those fluorescent lights that buzzed annoyingly. I didn’t realize how loud they were until I was out away from them. My father kept them on all the time; you couldn’t turn it off. They had cages on them, prison grade. Dad used to joke that it was because my mom had destroyed one of them once and tried to kill him to escape. My brothers and I just thought it was normal, though as I got older I more and more couldn’t stand it—the cramped quarters, the constant noise, the crush of

people, the sound of breathing. Aaron and I would fight all the time; Graham was literally climbing the walls. My youngest brother, Connor, he was glued to the TV like that little puppy from the movie.”

“Probably should have picked a different one,” I said, the food a rock in my stomach.

“Maybe I needed to see it.” He sighed. “I’m glad all the dogs got rescued and went to go live with their new dog parents.”

“Do you still talk to your brothers?” I asked carefully.

He shook his head sadly. “They hate me. Especially Aaron. It’s—it’s complicated,” he said to my questioning look.

“You’re family. Maybe give them another chance. I wish I had siblings.”

“They’re my brothers, but I don’t know if we’re really family.” He returned to his food. “Sorry. This isn’t a Mickey Mouse breakfast conversation.”

“You can tell me,” I said, wishing I could do something, could have done something.

“You left me a note once, reminding to enjoy the sunrise.” He gave me a crooked smile. “I don’t think most people remember their first sunrise, but I do. The sky was dark, which I understood, then it was as if the horizon began to bruise—first purple, then turning a lovely shade of blush pink, then tangerine, and finally there was the sun, huge and yellow and bright. It was like magic, the first time I saw a sunrise.”

My throat was closed up.

“And then, somewhere in the years after, I just sort of took that magic for granted.” He shrugged sadly. “Until you left me a note and told me to greet the sunrise. It was I think the first note of yours I found. I normally was in my office before the sun rose, taking calls with Europe. But that day, I watched the sunrise from the observation deck of my office tower. It was just as beautiful as the first time I saw it.”

“I knew you liked my notes.”

“I love your notes,” he said softly.

I wanted him to say he loved me.

“Are you sure you want to deal with me?” His smile twisted. “I talk of magical sunsets and girls trapped in basements over breakfast. I used to not be this bad, I think,” he continued conversationally, “though after Samantha left, maybe I used it as an excuse to further retreat.”

Now my knife was scraping across the plate.

“Samantha?”

“I built this penthouse for her,” he confessed.

“Nothing as magical as a first love.” I forced myself to smile.

“Oh no, I wasn’t in love with her. She was just ... a part of my life plan,” he explained. “I only took her out on a few dates. A few months after I met her, we attended her friend’s wedding together. I never even referred to Sam as my girlfriend.”

He dragged his fork through the eggs on his plate.

“This makes me sound like a horrible person,” he added, “which I am, but at the time ... I ... Well, I was trying to do everything and anything to become the kind of man my mother would want as a son. I thought if I had power, money, a nice penthouse, a college degree from an Ivy League university, and a wonderful wife, that my mom would be proud of me, and want me back.”

“That’s—”

“Messed up? I know. For what it’s worth, I don’t think there’s anything I could do to make her care about me.” He looked down at his plate. “Samantha was exactly the type of girl my mom would approve of. She was understated, always had her hair just so, came from a good New York family, and had a good job at a high-end art auction house. Not to mention, she owned a flat in London and a brownstone in Brooklyn, both impeccably decorated.” He cut off a piece of bacon. “Not that it worked out. Obviously.”

He gazed out the window. The sunlight sparkling on the pool reflected through the glass windows.

“I wasn’t the type of man Samantha ultimately wanted. The billions and corporate veneer weren’t enough to mask the fact that I had a terrible pedigree and no friends. She was smart enough to see that I was just going to make her miserable.” He looked around. “She hated this penthouse.”

“She’s been here?” I croaked.

“She saw the renderings and said even with furniture, it looked like a villain’s lair. You and her probably would have gotten along.”

“Sounds like it,” I said, voice faint and squeaky. I sawed off Mickey’s ear and stuffed it in my mouth, chewing while I desperately thought of something to say.

But what could I say?

If there was one thing I knew about Grayson, it was that his mom was the most important person in the world to him. He had built his whole empire to

impress her.

I had seen her in the restaurant. With her smooth skin, perfect makeup, and understated but expensive jewelry. She didn't laugh loudly, she ate her trout with a fish knife, and she wore clothes that didn't look like they had been rehomed from a dumpster. She probably lived in one of those movie set houses decorated in shabby chic, without a stitch of Disney paraphernalia anywhere.

Once Grayson realized that my lack of polish was holding him back from reconnecting with his mom, I was going to be out on my keister.

GRAYSON

Lexi seemed a little scattered the rest of the morning.

“You all right?” I asked, wrapping her in my arms and kissing her.

“Of course,” she said. But the smile was too bright, the tone of her voice a little too enthusiastic.

I knew what had happened.

It was the same thing with Sam. I had confessed to her one night why I couldn't sleep. She, like Lexi, had pretended to be sympathetic. But afterward, everything changed. She seemed to find fault in everything I did. Nothing was enough. Then I had accidentally overheard her talking to her fellow bridesmaids at that wedding at a manor house outside of London.

No, she wasn't cheating. That would have been easier to bear.

She was telling her friends how she didn't want me to touch her, how I was dangerous, cold, and that there was something wrong with me.

“He's just like his father,” one of them had said.

Sam hadn't disagreed.

I broke it off with her the night of the wedding when we were both drunk. It had started off as an argument because I wouldn't agree to decorate the penthouse with items sourced from the auction house where she worked, even though she had, in her words, already promised her boss who was also at the wedding that I would.

I had asked her if she was just with me for money. Sam had yelled at me that of course she was, because how could I expect anyone to love me if my own mother didn't love me. I left her there at the wedding and took the plane back to Manhattan.

I couldn't fault her though, not really. She was right.

My own mother didn't love me.

I was unlovable.

At first I had deluded myself into thinking my mom was going to come back for me eventually, that she just needed some time. That was what the social worker had promised me, anyways. Then I got older. I thought if I could just make enough money, amass enough power so that I could protect her, be able to give her anything she wanted, keep her safe, then she would want me back in her life.

But the letter I'd sent her with the magazine cover about me and my billions, offering her anything in the world, was returned to me partially burned. Then I wondered if maybe she hated me because I was male—that it wasn't me, it was my gender, which would be understandable and not really my fault. Until she gave birth to a son and loved him dearly. I saw it plain as day, every single Tuesday.

My mom hated *me*. There was something fundamentally wrong with me.

The first time I had ever truly felt normal was when I was with Lexi. Now she was realizing that I was not, in fact, normal.

I watched the redhead through the glass walls of my office. She seemed antsy as she sat at her desk. She was also pointedly not looking at me.

She hates me.

The best thing to do, the easiest thing to do, was to tell her we were done and have her transferred to another office.

But I couldn't; my soul needed her. I wanted to bask in the light of her just a little while longer.

Selfish bastard.

I was my father's son, wasn't I, in the end.

I wasn't giving Lexi up.

"Dealmaker of the century!" Marius knocked on the glass door and grinned at me.

I gave him a small smile.

"And you thought I was just going to France for vacation."

"I never thought that," Marius declared, walking in. "I know you don't take vacations."

I thought about the Florida trip I'd agreed to go on with Lexi.

If she even still wants you to go.

"You want to grab drinks over a late lunch and catch up?" Marius

offered.

“Sure,” I said.

His mouth dropped open.

“For real?”

“Unless you were just being polite.”

“Hell no. You agreed. We’re going. Here’s your coat and your scarf. Do not bring that laptop. We are going to a nice place. Drinks on me,” he said, shutting the laptop. “Well, on the company card.”

“Spend it all and let accounting figure it out, right?”



“YOU SEEM HAPPY,” Marius said, leaning back in the leather chair after we’d ordered.

“I don’t know if I’d say that,” I replied and took a sip of my water.

“Happy is maybe overkill, but you seem less miserable,” he observed.

“I feel less miserable. Been sleeping better.”

“New woman in your life?” he joked. “Ah, hence the request for the meeting off site.”

Marius tilted his head.

“So you’re not denying it. Fascinating.” He leaned forward. “Do you like her?”

“Obviously, if I’m with her.”

Marius grinned at me.

“Good for you. We should all hang out. I’d like to meet her.”

Was this a trick? Marius was a good lawyer. You shouldn’t lie to your lawyer.

I leaned forward.

“You already met her.”

What I thought of as his lawyer mask dropped over his face.

“She doesn’t work for you, does she?”

“I’m going to find her another job. But I may not have to.”

“Holy shit.” He adjusted the strap of his watch, a tell when he was deeply annoyed with what was going on. “Please tell me she’s about to quit.”

“Not that she’s said,” I admitted.

“It’s not Anthym, is it?”

“No, of course not.”

Marius seemed like he was waiting for me to say something.

“It’s Lexi. Ms. Collins. But, don’t worry, I think she’s about to dump me. You know, like Sam. Lexi deserves better than me.”

Marius gave me a pitying look.

“You really like her, don’t you?”

“She’s pure sunshine,” I said, staring out the window. “She leaves me notes and gave me a pet rock and made popcorn, and she made me buy a rug.”

“Now I really need to meet her. A pet rock.” Marius wore a shit-eating grin. “Did you name it?”

“Not just named it, I even bought it a hat from Paris,” I said and took a sip of my drink.

Marius doubled over laughing and slapped his thigh.

“Okay, Lexi is officially my new favorite person.”

“She makes me so happy. I didn’t think it was possible to feel this way,” I admitted. “But it can’t last.”

“Or maybe it can, but you have to put in the work,” Marius argued.

“Maybe I should walk away.”

“How much does she ... know?”

“A lot.” I hesitated. “She met my mom.”

“You’re talking to your mother?” Marius almost dropped his glass.

“I just mean she went to the restaurant with me. We ate there on Tuesday.”

“Wow,” Marius said, crossing his arms to regard me. “You never took Sam there, not that you two dated all that long. A few months, but still. That was the most serious I’d ever seen you with anyone.”

“I didn’t take Lexi there. She just ... she just showed up. She wants me to go to Florida with her.”

“That’s random.”

“She thinks I’m sad and I need the sunshine.”

“Look,” Marius said, resting a hand on my arm. “You deserve to be happy, or at least not miserable, and if Lexi is that person for you, go for it. I’m here for you.”

“But ...”

“But she needs to find a new job. Yesterday.”

LEXI

“Did you see her?”

I jumped as Anthym barked at me.

“That blouse looks amazing on you!” I was as chipper as could be when I turned to face her.

“Why are you evading the question?” The secretary’s voice was harsh.

“Who?” I asked, hoping my face didn’t give me away.

“The woman Grayson—I mean Mr. Richmond—brought to his penthouse yesterday. I assume she stayed the night?”

A good assistant always anticipates the needs of her clients.

I pulled out my phone and swiped to a staged photo.

“I don’t know, but I found these.”

Anthym snatched the phone from me and swiped through the photos I had taken of the skimpy lacy thong. Yes, it was mine, another aspirational purchase during those first few heady weeks when I’d first moved to Manhattan and had been planning on embracing my new life as a single girl in the city. It had lasted about as long as it took for the first credit card bill to come due.

“Where did they go? What did he plan? What did they do for a date?” Anthym fired off the questions.

“Um, well, obviously I wasn’t, like, *there* or anything,” I stammered out.

“Of course you weren’t there. God, I can’t believe I hired you.”

“I staged a very nice candlelit bath and had Alessio catered. They ...” I fished around. “Watched a movie, I think, and she made him breakfast. I made sure there were berries for pancakes and champagne for mimosas.”

My armpits were soaked in sweat.

Anthym stared at me a beat. I tried to project “innocent girl who was totally not banging her boss on the reg.”

“I can’t believe Grayson didn’t trust me to do this for him. I’m his secretary,” Anthym finally cried, turning away from me.

“He probably assumed you were going to take off yesterday. And today and tomorrow. You know, like everyone else on the big Europe trip.”

“He was supposed to be here,” she said tersely. “I came in in case he needed anything. He doesn’t take breaks or vacations. This girl must be a master manipulator.”

“It’s good Mr. Richmond is taking some time for himself,” I argued.

McKenna was sitting ramrod straight in her chair, carefully typing, trying not to draw Anthym’s attention.

The secretary clenched her jaw.

“I don’t trust it.”

“Where are those Girl Scout cookies?” I asked, rummaging in McKenna’s drawer after Anthym left.

“You watched a Disney movie with Grayson and made him breakfast?” my friend hissed. “The whole office is talking about the woman he’s supposedly met in France.”

We looked over to Brittney Dawn’s office, where she and Anthym and two of the female accountants were chatting.

“They’re going to find out.”

“What am I supposed to do? I have to throw her off the trail,” I squeaked to McKenna.

“You need to find a new job.”

Would Grayson be hurt though? Maybe he would think I was trying to get distance from him. After he had bared so much of his past to me, I didn’t want him to think I wanted to leave him because of it like Sam had.

“Hey, who ate all these Thin Mints?” I looked down at the half-empty packet.

McKenna wordlessly pointed to the crumbs on my shirt.

“I’m stressed; this is a stressful situation. But I have cookies,” I said, trying to calm myself. “And I have Grayson, and it’s all going to work itself out.”

Three more cookies disappeared.

“The power of positive thinking.”

“Oh, by the way,” McKenna informed me, “the landlord just issued notices to all the residents that they’ll be making improvements on the pipes and shutting off the water to the building during the day, and the only time we can use water is between two and five a.m.”



I PACED AROUND the studio apartment, on hold with the city.

Finally a woman came on the phone.

“Yes, I would like to report a violation at the apartment building on Thirty-Eighth Street, number 1502.”

“There have been a number of complaints. The landlord has assured us he is addressing them.” The woman did not sound like she believed my call was urgent.

“He’s not,” I protested. “He’s been threatening people, and he’s turned off the water.”

“We have paperwork filed from him, and he’s allowed to complete work on the building, ma’am.” That last word had an aggressive undertone.

She has a stressful job; don’t assume the worst.

“Then he needs to put us in a hotel.”

“He says he has the water on at certain hours, which complies with the code.” The woman sounded annoyed. “But we’ll make a note on the file.” She hung up.

“This is exactly why we need to go to Brooklyn where that landlord is hiding and break some kneecaps.” Grenadine shook her fist. “We’re going down there tomorrow to his house, and we need to tell him he needs to fix the building. Protest! You make a good sign, Lexi, and you have markers and poster board.”

I chewed my lip.

“I’m supposed to go to Florida, but I can cancel.”

I just had to tell Grayson, and then he would hate me and think I was trying to bail on him.

“Go to Florida,” McKenna assured me. “Your mom will be so disappointed if you don’t go. We can go protest outside the landlord’s house next weekend too.”

My eyes started twitching.

“My ... mom?”

My phone started ringing with an incoming video call.

“I can’t wait to see you this weekend!” My mom gushed when I had connected to the video call.

McKenna was looking up at the ceiling of the studio apartment, looking guilty.

“I—”

My mom made an exaggerated sad face, a leftover habit from being a former Ariel at Disney World. “I’m sorry, Orange Blossom, was it supposed to be a surprise?”

No, it was supposed to be Grayson and me alone in a quaint cottage on the beach.

“Yeah, a surprise,” I said weakly.

“I have your room all ready, including Gizzy’s basket,” my mom assured me. “Now I called to ask what kind of food Grayson likes.”

“McKenna said he only drinks tea.” My dad’s face appeared on the video screen.

I was trying very hard not to scream.

“I actually might have to cancel,” I said. “We’re all going to protest at the landlord’s house this weekend. He shut off the water.”

“Shut off the water?” my mom was horrified.

“Just during the day.”

“You think positive and light a candle,” my mom said solemnly. “This will all work itself out. The landlord’s probably just in a tough spot and is trying to balance everyone’s needs. Let’s give people the benefit of the doubt.”

“Right,” I said. “Let’s think positive.” Though I was feeling particularly negative right about then.

“Why don’t you bake him some cupcakes,” my dad suggested, “and help brighten his day?”

“With razor blades in them,” Grenadine hollered in the background.

“Do you want me to make baked ziti?” my mom asked. “Does Grayson liked baked ziti?”

“I don’t know if he’s ever had it,” I said through clenched teeth.

“No man can resist your mom’s baked ziti,” my dad boasted. “Grayson doesn’t have any allergies, does he? Do we need to call his parents and check?”

“No, absolutely do not call his mom.”

“Watch your tone, Alexandra. We’re trying to be good hosts for your very first boyfriend,” my mom chastised.

“I’m so excited. Maybe this is her one true love,” my dad gushed. “I’m putting this in the scrapbook.”

I slid a hand over my face.

“You better tell ol’ Grayson to bring some shorts; he can’t wear a fancy business suit here,” Dad said.

“We should buy him some clothes,” my mom said. “Barry, let’s go find him one of those Dudley Grove T-shirts.”

“That’s not Grayson’s style,” I said desperately. Grayson was going to step off that plane, take one look at my parents, and head right back to Manhattan.

“I need to go.” My eye was twitching. “I have to make cupcakes apparently.”

Maybe Grayson would let me make them in his penthouse, or maybe he would think that I was like Sam and it was a not-so-subtle hint for him to swoop in and throw money at one of my many problems.

Better not.

“Okay, we love you so much! We love you to the moon and back, Squeak—sorry, Lexi.” My dad started crying. “My grown-up wonderful daughter. She’s a woman now.”

“You told them I lost my virginity?” I shrieked at McKenna.

Her mouth dropped open, and she shook her head.

“Alexandra!” My mother was shocked.

Kill me.

There are no silver linings. Let’s just blow this whole place up and start over.

My dad was bawling now. “I’m going to be a grandfather.”

“Are you using protection?” My mother’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“I need to lie down,” Dad sobbed. “I love you, Lexi, but I need some tea.”

“I have to go take care of your father,” my mom said in a rush. “We love you, Lexi!”

“McKenna!” I shrieked when the call ended. “Why do they know I’m going to Florida?”

“I’m so sorry, Lexi,” McKenna begged. “Your mom called when you were with Grayson, and you know how she is. She knew I was hiding

something, and she started singing that song from *The Little Mermaid*, and she's so good. She sounds just like Ariel. Then your dad did the Flounder voice, and I thought, well, since you already met his parents, now he was going to meet your parents."

She held up a hand. "But I swear I did not tell them you lost your virginity."

"No, you did that all on your own, Lexi," Grenadine cackled.

"Oh my gosh." I tangled my fingers in my hair. "Grayson is going to freak out."



THE NEXT DAY I was antsy and frazzled. I was trying to watch Grayson but not make it look like I was watching him so Anthym didn't realize that we were banging.

"I can't take the stress of a workplace romance."

"Are you sure it's not just residual anxiety from yesterday because you're about to introduce a guy to your parents?" McKenna asked out of the side of her mouth.

"I definitely had nightmares yesterday about my parents meeting Grayson. They're going to sing at him. My mom will force-feed him casserole. My dad will ask him invasive questions and pepper him with embarrassing stories about me. We are going to have to sleep in my room."

"With all your stuffed animals and princess posters?" McKenna made a face.

"That's it," I said, standing up. "I'm pulling the plug on this trip."

"Maybe it will be fun. You have to think positive," McKenna reminded me.

"Or maybe Grayson is right, and I'm veering into toxic positivity territory."

I waited until I saw him head to the bathroom. Then I quickly followed once he had disappeared around the corner.

He was standing there, arms crossed, waiting for me when I snuck in.

"You shouldn't follow strange men into the bathroom," he whispered then kissed me. His arms encircled me, sliding up my skirt to rest on my waist.

“So about the Florida trip,” I said.

He released me and gave me an assessing look.

“You want to cancel,” he said coldly. “That’s fine. I can tell the pilots they aren’t needed. I should probably work anyway.” He turned away from me.

Ugh, you have to go on this trip now.

I slid my palms up his chest.

“No, we definitely can’t cancel, unfortunately.”

He turned back to me.

“My mom is expecting us,” I said weakly.

“Your mom?” he asked, cautious.

“No one can keep a secret around her,” I babbled.

“Sounds like someone else I know.” He raised an eyebrow.

“If it’s too much, which obviously it’s too much, you don’t have to go. I mean, I can’t tell her that *I’m* not going. She’d be devastated, of course. She’s making baked ziti.”

Was Grayson mad? Did he think I was trying to be manipulative and move him too fast into a real adult relationship when all he wanted to do was hook up with his assistant?

“So if you want to cancel, you can. You don’t have to go see my parents. I’ll just buy a plane ticket.”

He tipped up my chin. “Like you said, we can’t disappoint your mom.”

Footsteps approached. I raced to a stall and clambered up on a toilet while I waited for the VP of accounting to finish sucking up to Grayson.

I need to find a new job.

Except I didn’t want to leave Grayson.



I GREETED the flight crew when I climbed into the private jet. Grayson was already there, on the phone. A flight attendant offered me a flute of champagne.

I stood around awkwardly. I’d never been on a private jet. Only commercial flights, usually in the back and usually in a middle seat since I was short and it didn’t seem fair for me to have an aisle seat or a window seat.

But now that I didn't have to fight with strangers for overhead bag room, I didn't know what to do with myself.

Grayson was barking at someone on the phone then pulled out his laptop.

"Please take your seat, ma'am," the flight attendant said, gesturing to a seat on the other side of the aisle and opposite from Grayson.

I sat on it and slid back on the leather, feeling like an imposter in my breezy Florida clothes while everyone else wore business attire.

I thought again about Sam.

McKenna and I had looked her up last night, drinking wine while I packed, and McKenna stalked Samantha's Instagram. She lived a jet-set life and would be way more at home on this plane than I was.

I swung my feet off the edge of the white leather seat and waited for Grayson to finish his call.

I wondered what the flight attendants were thinking of me. Maybe one of them was friends with Anthym and was at this moment rattling me out. They were probably texting each other about how Grayson was bringing his dumpy assistant with the freckles and snarled hair onto a private jet and that they were going to some Podunk Florida town.

I should have brought my laptop so that it looked like I had work to do too.

Lexi: Can you call me and pretend like there's some super urgent issue that needs my attention?

Lexi: I think the flight attendants are talking about me.

McKenna: I'm pretty sure my grandma's about to get arrested at this protest, so I might actually have something important for you to do.

The plane was taking off. Grayson was still on the phone, now talking in French to someone.

Sam knew French, German, and Italian.

I knew how to say, "Hello! Welcome to Disney World!" in twenty different languages.

You just need to be friendly, I told myself firmly. The flight attendants were probably used to people being aloof and rude. But they had disappeared somewhere in the plane.

Grayson ended his call and smiled at me.

“You made it.”

“Yep.”

I didn’t know what to talk about. For once I felt at a loss for words.

“So this is a nice plane.”

“We had to take the small one,” he explained. “The local airport in Dudley Grove can’t handle the midsize or large plane.”

“This is the small one?” I looked around.

“Not the one I’d take to impress a woman.” The corner of his mouth quirked.

“I’m impressed.”

He got up to sit in the seat directly across from me.

“Lexi—” His phone rang again. “Excuse me.”

He left me to go back to his laptop.

The flight attendant came by with a tray of sandwiches cut into triangles.

“I really like your necklace,” I told her, determined not to get down on myself. Maybe she wasn’t mean; maybe she was just trying to do her job and thought I might be a snooty billionaire’s girlfriend. “Not to be nosy, but is that an homage to *The Aristocats*? I thought I recognized that pattern from Madam’s mansion.”

“A fellow Disney fan?” she asked in excitement.

“Huge fan. I worked at a few of the park restaurants and on a cruise.”

“I used to fly on their corporate jets,” she told me conspiratorially.

“I guess you can’t share any details.”

“We sign confidentiality agreements,” she explained.

At least I was safe from Anthym.

“But,” the flight attendant added, “I can say that there were secret Mickey Mouses hidden around the plane in the décor.”

“No way!”

While Grayson worked, I busied myself writing thank-you notes to the flight crew and chatting with them.

“Sandwich?” I offered, taking Grayson a small plate when he was done with his call. I guess I hadn’t realized how much he worked.

“It’s astounding how quickly you make friends with people.” He accepted a sandwich.

“I don’t know about friends, but Johnson is having a party for Mabel. She’s turning one, and he said we should stop by. His girlfriend is allergic to peanuts, though, so we have to be careful with what we bring for the potluck.

The pilot,” I explained, to Grayson’s confusion. “He just adopted a puppy.”

“This is the dog’s birthday,” he said slowly.

“It’s pet friendly, so I’m taking Gizzy. Carrot stick?”

Out the window, I could see the orange groves, a carpet of green as we flew low over the flat Florida landscape. I took the seat across from Grayson and buckled the seatbelt as we approached the small regional airport of Dudley Grove.

“Apologies, we’re ... going to have to circle,” the pilot said over the intercom, sounding a little confused. “It seems like there are people on the runway.”

“Oh no.” I looked out of the window.

There was a crowd gathered on the tarmac.

“Jiminy Cricket, the welcoming committee is here.”

Grayson frowned as he stared out of the window.

“I was hoping to gently ease you into life at Dudley Grove,” I said with a grimace. Great start to what was supposed to be Grayson’s vacation.

One of the airport workers came out to shoo people off the runway.

As we landed, I saw my parents in full regalia.

The flight crew waved at the cheering townspeople when we disembarked.

The mayor of the town shook Grayson’s hand enthusiastically.

“Thank you for flying into the Dudley Grove airport.”

A lesser man might have been thrown, but Grayson slipped easily into his corporate persona.

“Glad to visit this fine town,” he said smoothly.

The mayor puffed up and beamed.

“Boo!” came the calls from a group of counterprotesters.

“This airport was a waste of taxpayer money.”

“We won a grant to build this airport, and we have one flight to Orlando every other Thursday!” the mayor screamed at them, still grasping Grayson’s hand.

“City Hall is corrupt!” came the cries.

The mayor was furious. “This is a well-used airport. And now we have a direct flight to Manhattan. Come take your picture for the local newspaper.” The mayor practically grabbed Grayson while cameras flashed.

“Squeaky Mouse!” my father, wearing a bright-pink shirt covered in green flamingos, cried, scooping me up into a hug. The sign he was holding

jabbed my side.

“Oof.”

My dad was teary-eyed.

“You look so grown-up. You are so grown-up. You’re a real woman with a job and an apartment and a boyfriend.”

He pulled out a handkerchief embroidered with Mickey Mouse and blew his nose.

“We brought the car.” Mom pointed to the VW bus that she had hand painted with scenes from her favorite Disney movies. It was parked a few paces from the runway, because that was how we rolled in Dudley Grove.

“Where’s the guest of honor?”

Grayson was still glad-handing. There was a line of residents waiting to shake his hand.

“I made trail mix,” my mother added, pulling out a large Ziploc bag.

“We ate on the plane.”

“They served food on your flight?” My father was amazed. “Real food?”

“It’s a private plane, Dad.”

“Grayson owns it?” He pulled off his sunglasses.

My mom popped the top of a tube of sunscreen, squirted some in her hand, and started rubbing it all over my face.

“Mom!” I cried.

“You’re a redhead, Lexi; it’s hot here. I haven’t seen a cloud in a month. You’ll burn.”

“I see a sunburn right here,” my father said tickling my side.

Grayson is going to climb right back in that plane and leave.

GRAYSON

See? You were overreacting for nothing, I told myself on the plane. *Lexi wants you to meet her parents.*

It could be a red flag. Maybe a relationship wasn't supposed to move this fast. I didn't have anyone to ask though.

Well ...

Grayson: Is it bad if Lexi wants me to meet her parents already?

Marius: She quasi met your mom, so maybe she is trying to show you she's as serious as you are.

Grayson: What if her parents don't like me?

Marius: You are arriving in your own private jet, and you're tall and handsome. What's not to love?

Marius: I've seen you schmooze before. You're good at it because you don't talk incessantly about yourself.

Marius: Just pretend you're impressing clients or investors.

Right. Keep it light, don't venture into any deep conversations.

Unfortunately, here I would have no escape at the end of the night.

You can keep it together, I told myself as I stood up to button my jacket and smooth down my tie.

"We need to buy you some summer clothes," Lexi teased.

"I'm fine."

"You're going to have heatstroke in that wool suit."

Lexi was wearing a big straw hat, sunglasses, a breezy crop top, and loose white shorts in billowy fabric. She was handing out thank-you cards to the flight crew, telling them she was going to see them in a few days, and recommending where they should eat and the best beach spots in town.

It was a little surprising to see how many people had shown up for her arrival.

She's popular, I realized in shock. In high school she would have been that person who was on every committee and at the football games.

Gizzy lumbered behind her off the plane, seeming more relaxed in the Florida humidity.

Lexi talked to two middle-aged people who I assumed were her parents while I shook hands with the mayor.

You're stalling, I told myself as I nodded politely while he told me about the wonderful investment opportunities in the small town of Dudley Grove.

"Vito," Lexi's mom finally yelled at the effusive mayor, "leave the poor man alone."

She was as short as Lexi, but with a darker hue to her red hair. She grabbed me by the wrist.

"We're all just so excited to have you here, Gray. Can I call you Gray, or do you prefer Grayson?"

"Whatever is easiest for you," I told her.

"His name is Grayson," Lexi said, sounding almost annoyed.

"I'm just so happy Lexi's making friends in Manhattan," Lexi's mom gushed and gave me a big hug. "I'm Cindy, by the way. This is Barry, Lexi's dad."

A man with sandy-blond hair and freckles all over his arms shook my hand.

"It's very nice to meet you," he said in a strange sort of high-pitched voice.

"Dad," Lexi hissed, "you can't use the Mickey Mouse voice."

"Who doesn't like Mickey Mouse?" he cried.

"Barry, you're embarrassing her."

"Oh, Lexi." He gave her a hug. "You can have a hug, too, Grayson. We need more hugs in the world." Barry hugged me tightly. It was oddly endearing.

"You're going to cook in that suit," he fussed. "Take that off, take it off. Let's help him out of his suit, Cindy." I looked down, bemused, as Lexi's

mom started unbuttoning my jacket.

“Mom, stop it,” Lexi cried.

“I’m just trying to help him. I’m a mom. You know how I am.” She handed Lexi my suit jacket. “Put that somewhere Gizzy can’t get to. It’s mating season, and you know how all those iguanas are.”

Beside me, Gizzy hissed at another iguana that was in a nearby orange tree.

Lexi’s dad took out a brightly patterned short-sleeve shirt from his enormous backpack.

“Brought this for you. It’s got oranges on it. Now you’re really going to be a Floridian!”

Lexi snatched it from her father. “You do not need to put that on, Grayson. Can we just get in the car before the FAA fines us for loitering on the runway?”

“You’re not giving Grayson a warm Dudley Grove welcome, Alexandra Collins,” Cindy said in a warning tone. She beamed at me. “You do what you need to feel comfortable, Grayson.”

I accepted the shirt from Lexi’s father. “When in Rome.”

“See, Lexi? Grayson’s open to trying new things,” Barry said as I quickly shrugged off my dress shirt and put on the brightly colored replacement.

“Tall, handsome, and willing to seize life by the horns,” Cindy said we headed to the van. “I love him already.” She squeezed my arm. “Your mom must be so proud to have you as a son.”

“Trail mix!” Lexi blurted out. “My mom made trail mix.”

“It has my special supersecret spice blend. It’s ranch powder,” she whispered to me, “but don’t tell Mary Louise. You’d think ranch doesn’t go well with chocolate chips, but you’d be wrong. Try some. Oh, and sunscreen. You need sunscreen.”

I let her smear sunscreen on my face and neck and arms.

“Mom, stop being so awkward. He’s a grown man. He doesn’t need you to help him.”

“He still needs someone to fuss over him. Lexi, why don’t you put his bags in the car? Grayson, I hope you brought a swimsuit. The water has been extra beautiful and blue lately. We’re on the Gulf of Mexico side, and I don’t want to insult anyone, but our water is much nicer here than on the Atlantic side. And Barry saw dolphins out, didn’t you, Barry?”

“Lexi was very insistent I bring a swimsuit.” I walked behind Lexi and

picked up the bags easily to throw them in the trunk.

“I’m sorry about my parents,” she said out of the side of her mouth.

“Your parents are amazing,” I whispered to her.

She reached up. “You have sunscreen in your ear,” she said, stroking my face.

“Grayson, you can sit in front,” Barry called jovially. “That way I can give you the full Dudley Grove tour.”

Cindy and Lexi climbed in the back of the brightly painted van. The giant bag of trail mix was shoved in my lap, and Lexi’s mom handed me orange slices as Barry drove us through town. My heart clenched at how warm she was being.

“And that’s where Lexi used to take dance lessons. And that’s the local farmers market. We’ll take you there tomorrow. Lexi was crowned Little Miss Orange Grove three years running.”

I looked over my shoulder at her. “I can see it.”

“And this is the diner where Lexi had her first job. They have amazing cherry pie.”

Lexi made a strangled noise behind me.

“I do love cherry pie,” I said blandly.

“He’s so charming, isn’t he, Lexi?” her mother said to her.

“Mom, he can hear you,” Lexi said, carefully enunciating each word.

“Are you hungry, Grayson? I have baked ziti for lunch,” Cindy asked. “Do you like ziti? Lexi wasn’t sure.”

“You don’t have to eat it,” Lexi said desperately.

“If your mom cooks as well as you do, I’m sure it’s wonderful.” I turned back to smile at her.

Barry pulled the van up in front of a squat bungalow. The yard was overflowing with flowers, fruit trees, and a garden.

I climbed out of the car and helped Gizzy out. The iguana disappeared into the lush flowerbed.

“Where do you want me to put these?” I asked Lexi as I easily hefted the bags out of the back of the van.

“I can get it,” she said in a rush, practically yanking the bags out of my hand.

“I’ve got it.”

“Lexi, the man wants to help,” Cindy chided.

“Mind your manners, Squeaky,” Barry said to his daughter as I picked up

the bags.

“Thank you so much, Grayson,” Cindy gushed as I trailed her up the narrow stone walkway to the bright-yellow front door.

The Collinses ushered me inside.

The interior of the small bungalow was filled, and I mean literally filled—on the walls, on the ceilings, even the carpet—with Disney merchandise from all sorts of properties.

I tried not to stare.

“We’re a huge fan of Disney, in case you didn’t notice.” Lexi’s mom giggled.

“And oranges,” her dad added. “And Lexi.”

Lexi looked like she was going to have a fit.

“I see where Lexi developed her love of Disney.”

Cindy tugged one of Lexi’s wild red curls. “Mrs. Sanders gave me some new hair serum. She wants you to try it.” She shooed Lexi to the bathroom. “Grayson, please have a seat. Barry, get him some orange juice while I dish him up a plate.”

A glass covered in cartoon characters was handed to me, and I sat at the small wooden table.

“Now,” Barry said, sitting down across from me, “I have to ask man-to-man, because my daughter is very important to me, and I want to make sure she’s well taken care of and with a man that shares my values—”

“Please understand, sir,” I said, smoothly interjecting, “I adore your daughter. She’s everything I didn’t know I was looking for. She’s warmed my heart, and I can’t imagine my life without her.”

“Well, of course! She’s amazing,” her father scoffed. “Any man would be lucky to have her in his life. No, I have a more serious question. What is your favorite Disney movie?”

He grinned at me and winked.

“Oh, you leave him alone.” Cindy set a huge plate of steaming pasta in front of me. “We grew those tomatoes, zucchini, and onions ourselves,” she bragged to me. “A lot of people don’t like zucchini, but the trick is to pick it when it’s little. You don’t want them bloated and soggy with water.”

She set a plate in front of her husband.

Gizzy had his own small table on the floor and also received a plate of cut zucchini.

“But seriously,” Cindy said, sitting across from me. “What is your

favorite Disney movie?”

“There are quite a few good ones,” I began slowly. Ones I’d never seen. “I think *101 Dalmatians*,” I said since that was the only one I felt confident enough to discuss in depth.

“A Silver Age man.” Barry slapped me on the shoulder.

I had no idea what he was talking about.

Fortunately, Lexi returned. She had changed and was wearing that same blue bikini.

Do not think about her in a thong, not in her mom’s kitchen.

“You’re sunburnt,” her mom cried when she saw Lexi.

“I think I see another freckle,” her dad added.

A large spiky plant was set on the table, and her mom used a pair of kitchen shears to snip off a pointy end.

“You need some aloe vera, or you’re going to peel. Don’t you have that big important meeting coming up soon?” her mother asked as she smeared the sticky plant juice all over Lexi’s face. “You can’t peel at your meeting.”

“Did Lexi tell you she has a great job in marketing?” Barry boasted to me. “I told you she’s a real catch. They pay her a lot of money, and she’s getting a promotion soon.”

“She’s certainly a hard worker.” I kept my face a perfectly bland mask.

“Dad,” Lexi said sounding annoyed, “Grayson runs his own company; he’s not impressed.”

I wanted to tell them that I *was* actually impressed by her, but that would require that I either unravel the lie she’d told them about the status of her employment or that I fess up about the fact that my mom hated me and I had no family but that Lexi was very kind and understanding about the whole situation.

“Did you take him by that penthouse that you get to house-sit at?” her mom asked. “I think that’s very impressive. He’d be impressed by that. Did you know Lexi’s boss lets her stay at her house?”

“I’m taking Grayson to the beach,” Lexi announced loudly. She shoved a pair of swim trunks at me. “Let’s go before it gets dark.”



“IT SOUNDS like I need to buy a new house,” I teased after we’d walked a

ways on the empty beach. The town was small and supported by the orange grove. There wasn't anyone out, especially not so late in the afternoon.

"Ugh. I'm sorry about all this. You were supposed to have a relaxing vacation." Lexi fidgeted with the strap of her bathing suit.

I put an arm around her bare shoulders.

"Your parents are great," I assured her as we walked along the water's edge. The waves lapped at our feet.

"Yeah, and I'm an evil monster for lying to them."

I stopped and turned her around, resting my hands on her waist.

"I'm the last person who's going to throw stones."

"I hope not. It might upset Crumpet."

There was a smile on her mouth.

I leaned down to kiss her.

"You do need to tell me one thing," I whispered. "Are you wearing that thong?"

"It is Florida."

She spread out the beach towel she carried. Urging me down on it.

Her hands ran down my bare chest. Her touch always made me feel like I was a god who she wanted to worship. My hands shifted from her hips to her bikini top, which I untied and let fall away. Leaving a faint pink outline from the sun.

She unbuttoned my shorts and slid them down my legs, letting my cock spring free.

Lexi murmured appreciatively, stroking me and making sure I was as hard as I could be for her.

She pulled a condom out of the pocket of her short shorts then slid them off, arching her back.

"I'm going to make sure you have the full Florida experience. Including sex on the beach."

She licked her lips, tore the wrapper open, and slid down my body, rolling the condom onto me.

Straddling me, she ground her hips against mine. I hooked my fingers into the string of her thong bikini.

"I want to fuck you just like this."

I tangled my fingers in her windswept hair, pulling her down for a passionate kiss as she grinded against me, teasing my cock. I worked my fingers under the fabric of the skimpy bathing suit, stroking her while she

played with her nipples.

I leaned up and took one of her freckled tits in her mouth, making her moan, the sound lost in the sea breeze.

Her pussy was wet and hot, aching for my cock.

I couldn't wait any longer. I grasped her hips, pushed that skimpy little thong aside, then sheathed myself in her. Her head tipped back, and she cried out. Pumping my hips, I had her ride up and down my cock.

She was captivating. Her breasts bounced as I fucked her, and her lips were slightly parted as she panted in the humid air. She was small enough that my thumbs could hold her hips and I could tease her clit at the same time. Being in her felt decadent, forbidden.

I didn't deserve a woman like her. But she was everything I wanted.

I wrapped my arms around her, my thrusts more erratic.

"Come for me, Lexi," I murmured, feeling her thighs tremble.

She leaned back to balance her palms on my legs, giving me a better angle to fuck her tight pussy. I pounded into her, driving us higher and higher until we both came, crashing like waves on a beach.

Lexi collapsed on top of me. The heavy breathing was the only sound between us.

"I'm addicted to your pussy." I kissed her swollen mouth then picked her up and carried her to the warm ocean to wash off the signs of our lovemaking.

"Thank you for bringing me here," I told her honestly as we floated in the warm, salty water.

"This is the most fun you're going to have all trip, I'm afraid," she said. I kissed her, wrapping my body around her in the water.

The sunset was deepening to an indigo as we walked hand in hand back to the house.

On the porch, her parents saw us and started singing some duet from what I assumed was another Disney movie.

"Ah, young love." Cindy sighed. "I remember when we fell in love."

"I'm still in love with you, my Ariel," Barry said to Cindy, giving her a peck on the lips.

I could see why Lexi loved Florida and just loved life and people in general. Her parents were so unlike anyone I'd ever been around.

"Come, eat, eat!" A plate piled with grilled fish and heaps of arugula salad with fresh orange slices and a drink with its own umbrella were set in

front of me.

“So,” her parents said, smiling at me. “Where did you and Lexi meet?”

They don't know.

Fuck.

LEXI

What a tangled web of lies we weave.

I didn't know how my parents were going to react to the fact that I was dating the company CEO. My mom and dad had always been very firm with me when I had gone off on my Disney summer jobs and internships, emphasizing that I could not, under any circumstances, become romantically involved with my superiors in the Disney hierarchy.

"The Mouse will not approve," my dad had said solemnly.

"We met at an iguana meetup," I said in a rush.

"You have an iguana?" my dad asked Grayson.

"No, I do not," he said slowly.

"He was walking past," I interrupted, "and saw the iguanas. It was love at first sight."

"Yes, it was quite the sight," Grayson said smoothly.

I speared a scallop. "Nothing like fresh seafood."

"It is delicious, Mrs. Collins."

"Please, call me Cindy. We like to be casual here. This isn't Manhattan. Relax! Put your feet up."

"It is nice not to have to wear a suit." Grayson leaned back in his chair.

My dad toasted him with a mojito.

Grayson was the poster boy for polite, handsome, corporate boyfriend. He wasn't snooty and hadn't said a bad word about the town. He even kept his cool as my parents peppered him incessantly with questions about his childhood, which he masterfully deflected.

Meanwhile, I could barely keep it together.

“I’m sure Grayson is tired,” I finally said. “He’s been in Europe on a big important work trip, and he’s still jet-lagged.”

“You poor thing. I remember when Disney flew me out to Euro Disney to help train the French Ariels,” my mother said. “My sleep schedule was off for a month. I’m going to make you some orange-and-mint tea. It’s my own special blend, herbal, no caffeine. Lexi, show Grayson where he’ll be sleeping.”

“Oh my gosh, I’m not going to survive another day,” I whispered as Grayson padded behind me to my bedroom.

Wait, my bedroom.

I stopped short.

“You can’t come in here.”

He paused in the doorway. “Do your parents not want me to stay in here? I can sleep on the couch.”

“Of course you can sleep here. You two are adults.”

I screamed as my dad’s head appeared in the open bedroom window.

“Your mom and I are fine with it. I left condoms on your bed.”

“Dad, please.” I slammed the window shut.

“There is a Motel 6 in the next town over. We can stay there.”

“Alexandra.” My mom appeared in the doorway. “You cannot put that man in the Motel 6. There are bikers there, and they do not wash the sheets. What has gotten into you? I didn’t raise you to be like this. You’ve been in Manhattan too long. Grayson, here’s your tea and some toast with orange marmalade on it.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said through gritted teeth.

“It smells delicious, Cindy,” Grayson said in that rich voice.

She beamed at Grayson and kissed him on the cheek. “Sleep tight!”

I flopped down on the twin bed shoved in one corner of the room.

Grayson sat on the fussy pink chair in front of my small desk. The already-small room seemed cramped with the huge six-foot-five man in it.

I had not put a lot of thought into the sleeping situation. Between all my stuffed animals and novelty pillows, there was barely enough room for me on the bed. There was no way I was going to fit him on there too.

I think this might have been a mistake.

Grayson wordlessly set down the plate with the tea and the toast on the desk and picked up one of the many notepads I had lying around.

Confused, I watched as he opened a drawer and took out a pink gel pen.

The nib scratched on the notepaper, and then he held it up.

The walls are paper thin. We should be cautious.

I felt my mouth lift in a smile.

He flipped to another page.

I bet you're glad we already had sex on the beach because I don't think I could manage it with an audience.

I stifled a laugh as he scrawled on a new page.

Glad to see you turn that frown upside down.

He smiled at me.

I held out my hand for the notepad.

I'm sorry my parents are so crazy.

He took the notepad back, hesitated, then wrote.

I'm jealous.

I drew him a heart.

But in a good way, he added.

Not too late to go to the motel, I scrawled.

He raised an eyebrow and took back the pen.

I'd rather eat you out surrounded by the cold, soulless eyes of a thousand abandoned stuffed animals.

He quickly looked outside then held up a finger to his lips.

Almost gracefully, he knelt in front of me, hooked his fingers in the waist of the shorts, and slid them down.

I lay back against the mound of stuffed animals.

One of his large hands covered my mouth as he pulled at the thin straps of my bikini. His mouth was on me, licking my breast and sucking on my nipple. It was good thing he had my mouth covered because I would have cried out when his fingers slid under the swimsuit bottoms.

He suckled my breasts while he stroked me, then he pulled the fabric down.

I lifted my legs so he could slide the thong bikini bottoms off of me. He flung them to the carpet. I spread my legs for him as he dipped his head down to lick me, sucking on my aching clit, his tongue swirling down to dip at my opening then back up.

He sucked and licked me to a frenzy while I held onto the arm that covered my mouth, my nails digging into his sun-kissed forearm. The muscle and sinew flexed under my hands as he held me down while he licked me, his tongue bringing me to the cresting wave of pleasure.

A groan escaped through my nose as he milked the last of the pleasure. After he released me, I grabbed the notebook and scrawled in shaky handwriting, **Damn.**

He left me there and grabbed the tea to take a sip as he regarded me.

Then he wrote on the notepad, **If your parents weren't here, I'd fuck you 'til you screamed.**



GRAYSON HAD his sleeves rolled up and a pair of sunglasses on and the top few buttons of his dress shirt undone as we walked through the farmers market the next day. He was carrying a basket for my mother while she showed him around the market, telling him about how lots of restaurants from Orlando came here to purchase for their fine-dining menus.

“Grayson seems like a good man,” my dad said casually. We were staffing the family orange stand where we sold orange scones, orange marmalade, orange juice, and of course oranges.

“He is,” I agreed, still watching him with my mom.

“Do you love him?” my dad asked after a moment.

Did I love Grayson? I loved everything—the cute dog that the guy in the subway was carrying in a backpack, the chocolate-filled croissants at the bakery around the corner, the guy at the bodega who always sang the song from *The Little Mermaid* when he saw me, my favorite dark-pink sparkly gel pen that had the perfect flow rate and didn't smear. I loved stickers, cake with lots of buttercream frosting, and the beach.

But Grayson? It seemed a little trite to put what I felt for him in the same category. Grayson, with his notes, and the hat he bought for his pet rock, and the expression on his face when he talked about his mother, and the voice he used when he was having a conversation with Gizzy and he thought I wasn't listening.

“He's—I—we're ...”

My dad gave me a knowing look.

“Words just don't quite cut it. You need a song then. That's what I feel for your mom—it's bigger than love. It's a whole song with dancing seashells singing the chorus.”

“I need a whole Broadway musical for Grayson,” I said longingly.

My dad squeezed me to him then said with forced cheeriness, “I hope you come and visit us occasionally. I know Dudley Grove isn’t as exciting as Manhattan, but we always love it when you’re here.”

“I’ll come visit. I’ll come visit more,” I promised, feeling my throat close up.

“You’re growing up, Lexi,” my dad said kindly. “This is how things go. You meet your Prince Charming, fall head over heels in love, and then he whisks you off to his castle even if that castle is in Manhattan.”

I hugged my dad, suddenly feeling horribly homesick even though I was *right here*.

“I’m thinking we’ll do fishing after this,” Dad said, giving me another hug. “Grayson seems like he’s up for anything.”

“It’s a recent development,” I admitted, looking across the market to him, only to see a woman hurrying up to my mother.

“You need to keep that monster away from Lexi,” the woman said loudly. “Don’t you know who he is?”

GRAYSON

This was how it was going to be, wasn't it? I would never be able to escape it—escape my father, escape the cellar, escape my past.

“Now that is just plain rude, Mary Louise,” Cindy scolded the other woman.

“You can't allow poor little Lexi around him,” Mary Louise argued. “Look at him. He's a brute. She's your only daughter.”

“This is none of your business.”

“I just borrowed Emily Ragner's book from the library,” Mary Louise pressed. “I was listening to that new podcast about unsolved mysteries, and they mentioned the case.” She flipped open the library book. There on the cover was my brother Aaron's mother. I could still see the hatred in her eyes when she screamed at me, holding his bruised and broken body.

I tried to steady my breathing. *Don't make a scene.*

Then Lexi was there, grabbing my hand.

“You know what?” Lexi said to her parents. “I think we're just going to go.”

“No, you were going to stay another night here,” my mother protested. “Your dad had a big fishing afternoon planned.”

That's where my father had said he was taking me when—

“I actually do need to get some work done,” I said to Cindy.

“Do you have a girl trapped in your house?” Mary Louise demanded.

Lexi's mom turned around, opened up the top of her large water thermos she was carrying, and dumped it all over Mary Louise.

The other woman screeched and sputtered.

“How dare you?” She wagged her finger in Cindy’s face.

“How dare *you*?” Cindy slapped her hand away. “Grayson is our guest. Grayson, I am so sorry.”

I was already texting the pilot to ask him to get the plane ready.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” I choked out, “but I don’t want to cause any more of a scene. You can stay, Lexi,” I added. “I’ll send the plane back for you.”

I couldn’t be here any longer.

“I’ll come with you,” she told me, though the sad look she gave her mother wasn’t lost on me.



LEXI STILL SEEMED sad in the plane. The cloud cover was low as we flew into the city. The plane jostled us as the pilot navigated into Manhattan’s airspace.

“I’m sorry I made you leave.”

“You didn’t. It was my choice.”

“I could have been more insistent that you stay.” I let out a long breath.

“Oh, it’s not you,” she said, combing her fingers through her hair. “Even if I’d been there three months, I’d still feel homesick. Also doesn’t help that the Manhattan weather is giving London a run for its money. Besides that, must have been a shock.” She took my hand. “I can’t let you deal with that alone.”

You cannot allow your father to ruin her life too, I told myself.

I was trapping her with me—not in chains in a basement, but emotionally. Lexi felt obligated to shoulder my pain, and it would crush her. I knew, because I lived with it. Sure, she was bright, Florida sunshine now, but eventually, in a few months, years, a decade if I was lucky, it would be too much. The darkness would smother her, and she would be just as miserable as me.

“You can stay in Florida. Not just for the weekend but forever if you want,” I said in a rush. “Don’t feel like you have to stay here for me. I don’t need you here.”

It was clumsy and not what I meant.

Lexi seemed slightly hurt, but then she replied, bright and chipper as always, “Like I said, you can’t get rid of me that easily. I do need this job.”

“I can find you a new one,” I pressed. “A better one.”
“Maybe,” she said, sounding unsure.
Then the plane was landing.
You suck at this, at everything.
“Do you want to just get pizza?”
“I’ll just take you home then.” We both spoke at the same time.
“Oh, uh, sure. I guess you have work to do.”
“No, we can get pizza,” I said quickly.
“No, I should check in to see if I need to organize a fundraiser for Grenadine.”



“SO THIS IS ME,” Lexi said when the town car pulled up in front of the crumbling brick apartment building.

I stepped out of the car and pulled out her bags from the trunk.

“I’ll carry this up for you.”

“I can do it,” she protested.

“Do you have an elevator?”

“No,” she admitted.

I tipped my head. “You’re going to drag fifty pounds of oranges up three flights of stairs.”

“Four, but fine. Just let me make sure my neighbors aren’t out,” she muttered.

“Why, Lexi? I thought every stranger was a friend you just hadn’t met yet?” I teased.

She grimaced. “In this instance, more like a busybody grandma you didn’t know you were related to.” She slowly twisted the key in the lock of the front door, poked her head inside, and silently waved me in.

We took two steps before doors were flung open and people streamed into the lobby.

“Mr. Richmond,” an elderly lady cried throwing herself into my arms. Two young women with her were crying.

“Bless you, bless you.” They kissed my cheeks.

“I have tamales for you to thank you for the food. What a blessing!”

“Please keep your food for your boys,” Lexi told them, handing the foil-

wrapped plate back to a young, dark-haired kid.

Another elderly woman pinched my cheek.

“Such a handsome man, and you’ve been so generous sharing groceries with us. I’m old and don’t have any children, and I think of you like a grandson,” a teary-eyed, blue-haired little old lady said. “A very hot, handsome grandson.”

“Connie,” Lexi hissed.

“Yes, please do keep her under control,” another elderly but more well-dressed woman said. “He’s very well-bred, as you can see. Good sir, I have a great-niece you may be interested in.”

“No one wants your ratchet niece, Mrs. Turner,” another elderly woman hollered as McKenna, one of my assistants, helped her down the stairs.

We pretended not to see each other as the woman, who I assumed must be her grandmother, railed at the other elderly woman.

“Grenadine, please,” Lexi begged. “Grayson doesn’t want to hear all of this.”

“He should have stayed out of the swamp if he doesn’t want to get dirty,” Grenadine declared.

“Can I make a small request on the next grocery order?” Martha asked, pulling several coupons out of her pocket.

“He is not taking requests.” Mrs. Turner, visibly appalled, started batting the other woman with her purse. “You must excuse them. They do not come from good families,” she informed me.

Lexi was trying very hard to corral the chaos.

Two elderly men shuffled over to me, talking excitedly about the steak I had apparently gifted them.

“I had to hide it from my wife. She doesn’t let me eat red meat.” The elderly man sounded like he was trying to whisper but was telling me all this at a shout.

“Ask him if he can up the egg order to two dozen. I only got three eggs last week.”

I pulled out a stack of gift cards. “Maybe these can help cover any gaps.”

There were cries of gratitude, and one woman fainted.

“Martha’s just drunk,” Grenadine told me, shooing me away as I rushed to help the woman up. “Just leave her there; she’s used to it.”

“I need to be carried to my bed,” the woman said from the floor.

“No,” Grenadine barked.

“I’m sorry I can’t do more,” I told the small crowd of Lexi’s neighbors.

“And so humble,” Connie swooned.

“I hate to admit it, Lexi,” Grenadine stage-whispered to her, “but Mrs. Turner might actually be right. Your boss might be too good for you.”

There was more applause and old women hugging me and kissing my cheek.

I gave Lexi a quick peck on the lips while McKenna passed out gift cards to Lexi’s eager neighbors.

“See you later?”

She nodded and squeezed my hand.

LEXI

“I think he’s trying to get rid of me.”

“You took him to Florida where one of the local small-town characters called him a kidnapper, then she and your mom got in a fight,” McKenna said with a grimace. “That’s a lot for anyone. I think maybe you need to make it up to him if you want to keep him. Not that you’re not awesome, but that’s a lot for a man.”

“Did you even give him a blow job in the plane?” Grenadine asked.

“There were people in the plane, Grenadine.”

“Better call him and tell him you want to make it up to him.” The elderly woman opened one of the overstuffed cabinets in the small kitchenette. “I think I have a crotchless leather corset around here somewhere.”

“That’s very kind of you to think of me, but I’ll pass.” I let out a tired sigh. “It’s not that I don’t want to go to Grayson, but we just spent a lot of time together, and he is used to being alone. I don’t want to overdo it.”

“Maybe he’s worried that he scared you off,” McKenna suggested.

“He could never scare me off. I’m stubborn. But,” I added, “I think that he needs some closure.”

“Maybe you can convince his mom to talk to him,” my friend suggested.

I wrinkled my nose. “That might be too much. I was thinking maybe I can host a family reunion with him and his brothers. Siblings aren’t emotional land mines like moms, and who doesn’t love a long-lost sibling reunion? I’ll throw a surprise party and—”

“Probably not something you surprise someone with.” McKenna sucked in a breath. “Just saying.”

“You’re right. He needs to be eased into it.” I tapped my chin. “I just need to broach it to him in a nonscary way. Then he’ll see that I do care about him and do want what’s best for him.”

“If any of his brothers are single, I get dibs on the first double date,” McKenna said.

“You need to convince one of them to give us money to move.” Grenadine shook her head. “Priorities, people.”

“How did the protest go?” I asked.

“There was police brutality. McKenna was pepper sprayed.”

“Oh my gosh! Are you okay?” I felt guilty that I hadn’t been there.

I’ll make it up to them.

“Grenadine is the one who pepper sprayed me. She was trying to hit the police officer,” McKenna told me.

I opened my laptop and sat down to compose a note. A strongly worded note.

“Are you telling them to go to hell?” Grenadine asked.

“I’m telling them that they need to fix the following issue in the building or I’m involving the press,” I said as I typed. “I have photos, and I am not afraid to start a social media campaign.”

“The power of communication!” McKenna and I high-fived.

“I’ll print it on the nice paper at the office tomorrow and mail it certified.”

“I’m going to go pass the collection plate,” McKenna’s grandmother said, bustling out with a copy of the letter.



WHAT WAS the best way to suggest to someone who was convinced that his little brothers hated him to let me host a party for said brothers? And buy furniture and cater it, because Grayson really needed to start off on a positive note to rebuild the brotherly bond.

I had written a number of notes then shredded them until finally just settled for a good ol’ fashioned ambush.

A few days later, I was waiting around the penthouse for Grayson to return home. I’d lied to Anthym that he had a hot date that night with the mystery woman.

I'd been lying a lot lately. It wasn't like me, but I had been desperate—I didn't want my parents to be disappointed in me, I didn't want to become the center of office gossip, and I certainly didn't want to lose my job.

McKenna was right. I was really pushing Grayson to his limits lately, and a gossip storm at the office with everyone talking about how he was banging his assistant was for sure going to make him rethink our relationship.

Is that what we had?

He hadn't actually officially asked me to be his girlfriend. Maybe it was just assumed because I was staying over?

Or maybe he was just tolerating me, and once I became more trouble than it was worth, he would ghost me.

"If you love someone, let them go," I told myself. "Remember the Girl Scouts rule: leave the campsite better than you found it."

If Grayson was going to come to the realization that I wasn't actually the type of girl he wanted—and in the spirit of curtailing our lying, it was probably going to happen sooner rather than later—I at least needed to make sure that he was in a better place so that when he did find the perfect girl, he didn't screw it up.

My role was to be like Mary Poppins and whip the family into shipshape before the wind changed, and that meant Grayson was going to have a relationship with his brothers, so help me Walt.

I was making a list of what I needed to do for the party when the front door to the penthouse opened and Grayson's dress shoes echoed through the empty penthouse to the kitchen, where I was sitting on a stool, writing.

He didn't say a word, just crossed the room and leaned in to kiss me, then deepened it.

"Trying to figure out how to convince me to buy new furniture?" A smile played around his mouth.

"Something like that," I said, following him to the study and readying myself to make the big pitch. But Grayson didn't seem all that interested in listening to me talk.

I opened my mouth, and he was there, kissing me, tongue sliding in my mouth,

He spread my legs apart, pushed my skirt up, and hooked his fingers on my panties, pulling them down. His fingers against my bare pussy felt so freaking good. I leaned back on my arms as he kissed me and teased me.

My shoes fell to the floor, and I nudged him with my bare toes as he

shrugged off his jacket and loosened his tie.

My hands slid down to his slacks. I unzipped the fly, pulling at his boxer briefs until his cock sprang out. I undid the pearly buttons on his dress shirt, just to run my hand over that lovely chest of his. His body was for me to enjoy.

He pulled a condom out of his pocket then unwrapped it and rolled it up his cock. His fingers stroked me roughly, and I spread my legs for him, urging him in. He speared himself into me, sudden and powerful.

I arched back with a loud moan.

My legs closed around him as he went all the way inside me, and I threw my arms around his neck. I had him in my grasp, and I was never going to let him go. I was so dripping wet for him that I could take it all from him, and that's exactly what I wanted, him coming at me hard and fast, our bodies entwined, our tongues entwined.

Grayson had been treating me like a princess, but when it came to this, I wanted something far more adult. I wanted to be his queen. His consort. His lover.

Every stroke into me built the rising tide of lust for me, making me feel like I would drown in the pleasure. Every thrust built on the last. I wished this could be forever, but I also wished it couldn't. Being pushed so close to climax was some delightful mix of torture and orgasm, and I was wracked with indecision as much as I was wracked with desire for him.

I cried louder and louder in time to his thrusts, until the wave crested, the overwhelming flood of pleasure and something more.

He wasn't far behind. His grip on me tightened, and deep within I felt his cock shudder and as he pounded in me then came, his teeth in my neck.

He kissed the bite mark, then my nose, then my mouth.

"Grayson," I said. My voice was sounding squeaky. Maybe it was a sign that deep down I knew this reunion was a bad idea.

It's not. You're doing a good deed, not just for Grayson but for his brothers too. Family shouldn't be kept apart.

"Is something wrong, Lexi?" he asked me, his eyes searching mine.

"I think that you should reconnect with your brothers," I blurted out.

Just rip that Band-Aid off, no bedside care, no nothing.

Grayson drew back from me, shaking his head.

"No. They don't want to see me." He paced around the study as he buttoned his clothes.

“I don’t think they hate you that much,” I argued as I adjusted my clothes. “Besides, everyone likes a party. Free food and alcohol is a big draw.”

“You don’t understand,” he yelled. “You weren’t there.”

“This is why you need to embrace positive thinking. They already RSVP’d yes to the party,” I told him brightly. “You’re welcome!”

“What?” He sat down heavily on the couch.

“Well four of the five. I talked to their assistants. You’re on the calendar for this weekend.”

“Aaron?” he whispered.

“He’s the holdout, but I told his assistant that if she could convince him to go, I would totally take her out for drinks.”

“This is not a good idea,” he warned me.

“Positivity is a choice.”

Grayson closed his eyes.

I slid off the desk and went over to him.

“This is going to be good for you, Grayson. This is about growth and healing. Also I have some rose quartz crystals in my Amazon shopping card just to make sure the energy in the room stays balanced.”

Grayson looked mildly nauseous.

“You don’t have to do a thing except show up,” I assured him. “You’ll thank me later.”

And sure, a good deed really was supposed to be about the person you were helping, but the selfish part of me that I hadn’t of yet successfully squashed thought that, if this party was a smashing success, Grayson would see that I wasn’t just the girl for him but his soulmate. He’d ask me to be his girlfriend, and we’d be on our way to a happily ever after.

GRAYSON

“Concert this Saturday?” Marius popped his head into my office.
I set down my pen.

“Can’t. I’m having a small party.”

“Damn, and I didn’t get an invite,” he joked.

Maybe it was my projection, but did Marius seem a little ... taken aback?

“It’s for my brothers,” I admitted.

“Your—”

Marius sat down across from my desk.

“You’re seeing your brothers tomorrow night? All of them?”

I nodded. “Aaron hasn’t confirmed, and he may just end up nixing the whole thing. He could tell the rest of them not to come.”

“How? Why?”

“Lexi.”

“She really is the girl for you,” Marius marveled.

“I don’t want her to have a new job,” I said, the words spilling out. “I can’t lose her.”

“You can’t keep her trapped here,” Marius said sympathetically. “And yeah, that was a deliberate choice of words.” He placed a folder on my desk. “Job openings Lexi would be qualified for. I put out some feelers.”

I stared down at the folder and didn’t take it.

“After you have the party with your brothers,” Marius said, “Lexi will see that you’re putting in the work, getting serious about addressing your repressed trauma, and she won’t take offense to the not-so-subtle hint that she can’t keep being your employee.”

“She’s going to be so upset.” My voice sounded hollow.

“If you want, you can tell her it’s my fault, that legal has an issue with it. If you’re really smooth, you can tell her that since you don’t want to be without her, that you’d like her to move in. Of course, you’d have to buy some furniture. I’ve been to your place—it’s tragic.”

“Lexi’s already purchasing furniture for the party,” I said with a sigh.

“Are you excited to see your brothers again?” Marius asked me.

“I’m terrified,” I admitted.

“I met Aaron once at a charity function that I covered for you, and he was very nice. This will be good for all of you.”

“He hates me.”

“What happened when you were kids is in the past.”

But Marius didn’t understand. No one understood except, ironically, my brothers.



AARON STILL HADN’T CONFIRMED when I left my study to wade into the rush of caterers and decorators. Apparently the timeline was too short and Lexi didn’t want to waste money on purchasing furniture, so she’d found a staging company. They’d shown up with everything you needed to turn the penthouse into a home.

Someone else’s home. The pieces weren’t what I would have chosen.

There were plants everywhere, random throw pillows, lamps, and curtains. In the grand salon, on a newly delivered mahogany buffet, the caterers were laying out a spread that seemed more in line for a party of a hundred, not just me and my five brothers. Well, four.

I opened the door to the casual living room off the kitchen. It was as barren as usual.

Lexi hurried over.

“It’s like *The Wizard of Oz*. Don’t peek behind the curtain. You have a big penthouse, so I just had them do the music room and the grand salon and spruce up the terrace a bit more.”

“It looks good.” My voice sounded far away.

“You ready?” she said in excitement, sliding her hands over the lapels of my suit jacket.

“I just want to get it over with.”

“That’s not the right attitude to have. A positive mindset makes any experience a party.”

She ran her finger down the list in the notebook she was holding.

“Your brothers should be here soon. There’s more than enough food, and extra drinks are in the kitchen fridge. The wet bar is fully stocked, so you shouldn’t have a problem. Remember to have fun.”

“You’re not leaving.” I grabbed her roughly by the shoulders. “You can’t leave me here with them; you’re the one who planned this party. You can’t just leave.”

“Okay, okay,” Lexi said, patting me softly on the arm. “Calm down, big boy.”

“I’m not a horse,” I snarled.

She didn’t take the bait.

“I’ll just hang back and man the bar. We’re all just going to go with the flow.”

The caterers were packing up their carrying cases when she ushered me back out into the grand salon.

“Thanks, Juan,” Lexi said cheerfully to one of the men. “We’ll have the empty trays ready for you tomorrow. Have fun at karaoke!”

The noise faded away as the staff headed to the front door.

It slammed closed.

Lexi and I stood in the middle of my now-furnished salon.

She checked her phone then put it away.

The grandfather clock that had been placed in one corner of the room ticked loudly.

I desperately tried to think positively, to make myself believe that this was the beginning of rekindling my relationship with my brothers.

But all I could do was replay those horrible twenty-four hours that were the last time I had ever seen them.

The clock ticked.

My shoulders ached from the tension.

Lexi popped the tab on a can of sparkling water.

I was about to tell her to call the whole thing off and donate all the food to her neighbors when the doorbell rang.

LEXI

“They’re here!” I sang in excitement.

Grayson was wary and stiff. He didn’t make a move to the front door.

Even though I was super curious about how the reunion was going to go, I felt like it would be too forward of me to push myself in the middle of such a heavy, emotionally charged moment.

However, if Grayson wasn’t going to be a gracious host, someone had to.

“Look at all you good-looking boys!” I called when I opened the front door to see four tall, brown-haired, green-eyed men standing there.

None of them moved.

“And rumor has it they have money too,” I quipped. “Bet you’re popular with the ladies. Too bad I’m already taken.”

The one closest to me grinned slowly.

“Can I convince you to upgrade?”

“Depends,” I deadpanned. “How good is your karaoke?”

“I do a mean Kate Bush,” he replied.

“A man after my own heart. Now let me see if I have this right. Spencer,” I said, pointing to the one closest to me, “then Finn, Graham, and Connor the baby, though you don’t look like a baby.”

Graham ruffled his hair. “Yes, he does. Look at those cheeks.”

“Get off!” Connor complained, batting at his older brother.

“Let’s get you boys a drink.” I ushered them through the penthouse into the grand salon. “We have a number of imported scotches and whiskeys, all on Grayson’s dime of course.” I winked at the Richmond brothers as they

followed a few paces behind me. “And if you want something more exciting than twenty-thousand-dollar scotch, I have made Lost Boy martinis.”

“Meta,” Connor said with a snicker.

“You’ll rot your teeth out,” Finn told him.

“Grayson didn’t show up to his own party, huh,” Spencer said dryly as he walked beside me. “Guess he and Aaron have a lot more in common than they both want to admit.”

“I’m here,” Grayson said as I led the brothers into the grand salon. “Thank you for showing them in, Lexi.”

His brothers stopped abruptly, Spencer stock-still beside me.

I slowly sidestepped over to the wet bar to let the brothers have their space.

“This is great,” Connor said finally. “All of us here together again.”

“You don’t even remember Grayson.” Finn snorted.

“Of course I do. I’m not that young,” Connor argued.

“You’ll have to excuse him, he’s graduating from college this summer and thinks he’s grown,” Finn told Grayson, who just nodded.

He was still drinking in the sight of his younger brothers. I could see him memorizing their faces.

“What’s the itinerary?” Spencer asked after a moment. “I’m assuming hugging and crying isn’t on the agenda.”

There was another long painful pause.

Graham coughed.

Awkward. This is soo awkward.

“I just want to say—” Grayson began.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway, sounding eerily like Grayson’s footfalls.

The brothers all turned to look as the sixth Richmond brother appeared in the arched doorway.

“So you want me to trust you with my little brothers, and you can’t even bother to lock your front door. Fantastic way to show you’re serious about being in their lives.”

“Aaron,” Graham said, “we’re not children. Lighten up.”

The Richmond brothers all looked eerily similar—same height, coloring, straight nose, and strong jaw—but Aaron and Grayson looked the most similar. Maybe it was the dark anger and resentment that hovered just below the surface.

“I told you all not to show up,” Aaron said to his brothers, scowl on his face.

“They’re grown men,” Grayson said sharply. “They can come here if they want to.”

“Well, well, well,” Aaron said, slowly circling Grayson. “You think that just because you threw a dinner party that we should forgive and forget, just ignore what you really are.”

“Aaron,” Graham said forcefully, “let’s not do this tonight.”

“I think everyone’s a little hungry,” Connor said.

“There are refreshments,” Grayson offered.

“I hope there’s no soy, dairy, tree nuts, or shellfish,” Spencer drawled. “Connor’s deathly allergic.”

Grayson’s eyes widened imperceptibly, and he glanced at me.

“That table is the allergen-free one,” I said, pointing, because what assistant worth her salt didn’t plan for allergies. “Eat up, Connor.”

Spencer doubled over laughing. “Man, she’s good.”

“I’m not allergic, and I’m not eating whatever that stuff is,” Connor said flatly. “Spencer’s just being a dick.”

“I’ll have you know the cauliflower bites are actually pretty good,” I said primly.

Spencer grinned down at me.

“Eat one with a straight face and tell me that again. I dare you.”

Grayson was glowering at his brothers while I coaxed them to take some food and drinks.

“I hope Grayson didn’t make you cook all this,” Finn said to me as I loaded up his plate.

“Of course she didn’t,” Spencer said. “Cute girls get other people to cook for them.”

He picked up one of the cauliflower bites and popped it in his mouth.

“Sweetheart, I have to tell you this is absolutely disgusting.”

“Then don’t eat it,” Grayson said harshly.

“Do you have a dog or something I can feed it to?” Spencer asked, picking up his glass of scotch.

I sucked in a breath.

“Grayson doesn’t really do pets.”

“Animals tend not to want to be around psychopaths,” Aaron said sharply.

Grayson clenched his fists.

“Why don’t we come look at this view, Aaron,” Connor said to his older brother, pushing him out to the terrace. “I was reading about this tower development in *Tech Biz*. You can see the Atlantic Ocean from the deck.”

Grayson watched them retreat through the sliding glass doors that led to the terrace.

“Look.” Spencer threw an arm around Grayson’s shoulders. “I know you and Aaron have some bad blood, but just—”

“I’ve survived this long without him,” Grayson said harshly. “If he doesn’t want to put it behind us, then I don’t need him.”

“I think this man needs a drink. What’s your poison, Grayson?” Spencer asked, sauntering over to the bar and picking up a bottle of scotch. He read the label. “Macallan, Lexi? Is this a hedge fund party? I’m offended. Where’s the Glendronach?”

“Considering you all grew up in a cellar, I didn’t want to waste the good stuff,” I said before I could stop myself. “Oops, I didn’t mean—”

The brothers all burst out laughing, all except Grayson, who looked like he wanted to crawl in a hole and die.

“Nice,” Spencer said, toasting me with the bottle.

“I guess I did underestimate you, after all,” Aaron drawled from the side entry to the salon room that was in the direction of Grayson’s study. “A pet rock? And it was even wearing a hat.”

Grayson crossed his arms.

Finn stifled a laugh, and Graham’s eyes were sparkling.

“Fuck you,” Grayson spat. “Don’t go poking around someone else’s home without asking.”

“It hardly looks like a home,” Aaron sneered, advancing on him. “Did you hire a Broadway stage designer to throw some furniture in here to make you look human? The rest of this place is completely empty.”

My brain spun, trying to work out how to handle this. The evening had been dancing on the edge of disaster, and now we were tumbling over. Grayson was going to lose it.

“Aaron, shut up,” Graham warned.

“Grayson, no one’s making fun of you,” Finn assured his brother.

“You’re so touchy,” Spencer added.

“Connor had a pet rock; he named it Bert,” Finn explained. “His cousin on his mom’s side threw it in Lake Erie, and he complained to Aaron. And

well, we're going to plead the Fifth on what happened to the cousin. But it wasn't pretty."

"Your rock habitat is way nicer than mine ever was," Connor told Grayson, trying to hide his concern. "I should get another pet rock."

Grayson relaxed imperceptibly. I let out a breath I hadn't been holding.

"You know what? I have party games too," I said, voice sounding decidedly Mouseketeer-like.

Spencer's eyes flicked to me, looking all too much like a dog noticing a squeaky toy.

"Are we playing charades?" Finn asked.

"I think I'd rather play Twister," Spencer said, still looking at me. "Or maybe hide-and-seek."

"I have a series of icebreaker activities," I said, "so that you all can get to know each other."

Grayson was giving me a horrified look.

"We're playing Never Have I Ever. It's a drinking game."

"Because just what this shit show needs is more alcohol," Graham muttered.

"Let her host her game," Grayson snapped at Graham.

"You're lucky," I told Graham tartly. "I was going to host a pottery decorating class but decided to spare you. Here are the shot glasses." I pulled out a prepared tray with six wooden boards, each holding five shots.

"I'm going to ask a question, and if you've done that before, you take a shot. Here we go. Never have I ever run a red light."

None of the brothers took a shot.

"Wow! Look at that. You all have something in common!" I clapped my hands. "Next question." I pulled it out of the hat. "Never have I ever gotten a tattoo."

Graham, Spencer, Connor, and Finn all took a shot.

"You have a tattoo?" Aaron said to Connor in horror.

"You're going to get hepatitis C," Grayson scolded him. "I thought you said you were looking out for them." Grayson turned on Aaron.

"I did more than you ever had!" Aaron yelled at him.

"I highly doubt that," Grayson scoffed.

Finn tipped back another of the shots.

"I didn't ask a question," I protested.

"You look like you need this." Spencer handed me one of the green Lost

Boy cocktails. “Cheers for trying to change the beast. No good deed goes unpunished. Did anyone tell you how nice your hair looks tonight?” Spencer continued smoothly, “I feel like you don’t get enough compliments. A compliment is verbal sunshine, you know.”

Suddenly Grayson was there.

I shrieked as my drink spilled.

Grayson grabbed Spencer and shoved him against the rented bookshelf filled with expensive rented knickknacks. The scotch splashed on the floor.

“What the hell, man?” Spencer swore.

“Did you fucking for a second think I was going to ignore the fact that you’re fucking flirting with my girlfriend in my own fucking house right in front of me?”

GRAYSON

I was seething with jealousy.

An abstract ceramic sculpture toppled to crash on the slate floor as I shoved Spencer against the bookcase again.

“Damn, what the hell is your problem?”

“You,” I snarled at him. “You think I don’t see what you’re doing? Lexi is mine. You fucking touch her again, you even fucking look at her, and I’m going to rip your face off.”

I didn’t see Aaron’s fist until it was connecting with my nose.

I whirled on him and shook my head, flinging the blood dripping in my eyes.

Aaron slugged me in the stomach, and I hardened my core, taking the punch.

“Don’t attack my brother, you fucking asshole. I knew we couldn’t trust you after you left us to die. I knew you’d never change.”

“I didn’t leave you there to die. I saved you,” I choked out.

“Liar. You were Stuart Richmond’s little shit-eating sycophant. You were just as bad as him. You tortured us just like our father did.” Aaron took another swing at me.

I blocked it but didn’t fight back.

“I still have the scars you gave me.”

“I did it to save you,” I howled. “I did it to save everyone.”

“No, you didn’t.” Aaron was spitting mad. He tackled me, sending us careening into the grandfather clock. It toppled over with a loud clang, and the chimes started to sound.

“You sold us out. We were supposed to be brothers, a family surviving together, but you sold us out.”

We circled each other.

Aaron shrugged off his jacket.

I did the same, removed my tie, and threw it on the ground, our movements mirrors of each other.

“Poor Lexi.” Aaron didn’t look at her. His green eyes remained locked with mine. “She doesn’t know what kind of a monster she’s been living with. Grayson used to torture us, Lexi,” Aaron called. “Did he tell you that? Did he tell you how he burned me with a fork that was red-hot from a candle, how he would hold Spencer down in the toilet until he went limp, how he pulled out his own mother’s fingernail?”

“Grayson?” Lexi sounded like she was about to cry.

“I had to,” I pleaded, needing them, needing *her* to understand. “I had to. It was the only way.”

“Stuart wasn’t making you do those things,” Aaron raged. “You did it because you wanted to, because you wanted power.”

“No,” I shouted, “I did it because I had to make him believe I was like him, so he would take me outside so I could save you. I did it to save you.”

“Fucking bullshit,” Aaron swore.

Lexi let out a sob.

I looked over at her, needing her to understand.

Aaron used the opportunity to attack. He lunged at me, his knee in my kidney, his forehead banging into my bruised nose.

I groaned, stumbling back as he hit me.

“Aaron, please.” Lexi was there, pulling at his ripped dress shirt. “I think you all need to just talk this out.”

My brother shoved Lexi out of the way.

I saw red and sprang at him.

Aaron blocked the first few punches. He’d clearly been training how to fight since the last time we’d gone at it.

And so had I.

I could let him hurt me—I deserved it, after all—but he could not touch Lexi.

Our younger brothers swore as we grappled with each other.

All the hate, anger, and resentment that had been building probably since we were born spilled out. Aaron jammed his foot in my knee, causing me to

go down to the floor. I punched him in the gut and staggered upright then ducked when he threw a lamp at me. It went wide and struck the TV hanging over the fireplace.

Aaron picked up one of the side tables by the couch and slammed it over my back.

I yelled in pain and tackled him to the ground. He punched me in the ribs, but I slammed him back against the slate floor, now covered by a rug that we were smearing in blood.

“I know you’re a liar,” Aaron screamed, jumping up as the heel of his hand connected with my jaw. “It’s a lie you’ve been telling yourself for the last eighteen years, that you did it to save us. It’s not true; it’s not true because I tried to take him out.”

He hissed out the words through blood-specked teeth as we circled each other again. “I waited until our father came downstairs. I had a slingshot I’d made, and I hit him right in the eye. He was on the ground and I *had him*. We *could have had him*, but instead of helping me, you betrayed me. You hit me in the mouth then threw me to the floor while Stuart laughed. Then you helped him up.”

“Because Dad knew you were weak,” I barked out.

“You were smiling when you beat me,” Aaron screamed. “You just jumped and did what he ordered. You’re a fucking”—his fist slammed into me—“piece”—his elbow in my neck—“of shit.” His forehead banged into my jaw, rattling my teeth.

I hooked my leg around his, sending us crashing to the floor.

“You’re just like him. You even call him Dad.”

“Because that’s what he is.” I slammed Aaron back into the ground.

“Stuart’s not my father.”

“Yes, he is!” I screamed at him, my hands clenched around his throat. I released him when I realized what I was doing. I didn’t want to hurt Aaron, not Aaron who would curl up next to me when we were little, and I would tell him stories about cities on the moon and flying to outer space.

“Yes, he is,” I repeated quietly. “There’s nothing you can do to change it.” I stood up off of Aaron.

“You were weak,” I said quietly to him. “You were weak. Sure you took the shot, but you hesitated. You didn’t go for the kill. I knew you weren’t going for the kill; Dad knew you weren’t going for the kill. I had to hurt you. I had to. You were going to ruin my plan.”

“You had no plan,” my younger brother said darkly as he slowly rolled to his knees.

“I did have a plan. I was the only one of us who had the wherewithal to do what had to be done,” I hissed out through the pain. “I was the only one.” I took a shuddering breath.

“Run away, Lexi,” Aaron said. “Run away from him. Grayson’s a monster you can’t control.”

“It was my eleventh birthday,” I said, turning to Lexi, needing her to understand. “My father liked to play benevolent family patriarch. He came down into the cellar with a single cupcake. I remember how sad my mother looked, how pleased, almost smug my father was. The TV was blaring, playing reruns of *Gilligan’s Island*. That’s all Dad would let us watch on the TV, old shows, probably because he didn’t want us to know about the outside world. They were stuck on this island *again*. It was that episode, the one with the radioactive carrots, and I remember thinking, my god, these people will never get off the island, and we will never get out of the cellar. We were all doomed—me, my brothers, my mom, and even if we tried, it would be just like the gang, forced to stay on the island forever and ever. But then I thought, at least Gilligan and his friends tried, you know? They tried to escape. But had I ever tried? No.”

I pressed a hand to my aching ribs. “And so I made a plan. Right then and there, and it started with the cupcake. Normally our mothers wanted us to share. But when my mom told me to let the others have a bite, I told her to make me. She yelled at me, and I slapped her. My father laughed and told me to hit her again to make sure the lesson stuck, so I did. Then I ate the whole cupcake by myself. Dad was gleeful. He lapped it up. That’s when I knew my plan would work.”

Spencer looked at the floor. Lexi’s eyes were wide with horror.

“I calculated that it would take a year to earn Dad’s trust. I did it in three months. You’re right, Lexi,” I said harshly. “Compliments really do go a long way to manipulating people.”

“That’s not—” she whimpered.

“And yes, Aaron’s right. I am a monster. I did hurt my brothers, especially him, because he was the biggest and I knew he could take it, but I did it to save him, to save all of them. The end justifies the means. That wasn’t on any of your notes to me, Lexi, but it should have been. Because it worked. I was right.” I smiled a horrible smile. “It was the day after I beat the

shit out of Aaron.”

“You broke five bones,” he said, face a mask of hatred. “You could have killed me.”

“Yes,” I said harshly, “but he took me outside. Fishing. Then a baseball game. Dad was telling me all about how his father would spend Saturdays like that with him—the secret fishing hole then America’s pastime. The sun was brutal. My eyes were burning out of my skull. There was a policeman there at the entrance where they checked your bags.”

Graham had his arms crossed over his chest.

“I grabbed the officer’s gun,” I continued. “I was going to kill Dad. I didn’t know there was a safety on the weapon. Dad tried to smooth talk the police, but they threw him on the ground. I don’t think they believed me when I told them about the people trapped in the cellar. Dad was acting like I had mental issues and he was sorry for all the trouble. The police officer was doing overtime that day, it was hot, he didn’t want to take custody of a crazy kid, and Dad was making a good case. He could be charming, our father.” I talked rapidly before they could leave again, drinking in the sight of them, each one, even Aaron. Especially Aaron.

“I punched the officer in the face, and he arrested me. The police made Dad come down to the station while they dealt with me. A social worker got involved. I told her about my brothers, earned a one-way ticket to the foster care system for my trouble, and the rest is an incredibly lengthy Wikipedia entry.”

I turned back to Lexi.

“And now you know why I don’t talk to my brothers.”

LEXI

The penthouse door slammed as Grayson left.

I stood there in shocked silence.

“And now,” Aaron said to me, looking both similar to and unlike Grayson, “you understand why none of us want to be around him.”

“Stop being an asshole, Aaron.” Finn sounded exhausted.

Graham headed to the ice bucket and wrapped up ice in a cloth napkin.

I took a shaky breath.

“Grayson’s making himself out to be the hero and the victim,” Aaron spat as Finn dabbed at his bruised face. “He wasn’t just pretending; he enjoyed what he did. He is exactly like our father.”

“Dad wouldn’t have believed it otherwise,” Spencer said dully. “If Grayson hadn’t been a hundred percent committed, Dad wouldn’t have believed it, and we still would be down there.”

“No,” Graham said flatly, “we’d be dead. You can’t keep six grown men trapped in a cellar. Stuart would have killed us before we killed him.”

“Sorry your party got really fucking dark, Lexi,” Connor said. “On a positive note, this is really good lobster dip.”

“Take a to-go box,” I said weakly.

Aaron clutched his side, wheezing, as his brother tried to force-feed him scotch.

“It will take the edge off.”

My brain finally caught up to what had just happened, and I raced to grab a first aid kit.

Aaron was sitting on the broken ottoman when I returned. He grabbed my

hand as I dabbed at the cut on his eyebrow.

“Don’t trust Grayson,” he warned to me. “Sure, he might have saved us, eventually, but the only reason it worked was because our father saw so much of himself in him. You don’t want to marry him, and you certainly don’t want to have kids with him.” He released me.

“Put some antiseptic on that cut on his hand,” I told Finn.

Spencer unscrewed the top of a bottle of vodka and poured it on his brother.

Aaron cursed at him while I went to the storage closet to grab a broom and dustpan.

“I hope you’re not feeling too down on yourself,” Graham said behind me. “This was always going to end in disaster.”

“Maybe now that it’s out in the open, Grayson and Aaron can finally begin to heal their relationship,” I said determinedly.

“Do you always do that?” he asked me, cocking his head, looking so much like Grayson.

“What?”

“Try to find the good in every situation.”

“What else can you do?” I said simply.

Grayson’s brother picked up a mop bucket.

“You remind me of my mother,” Graham said, eyes narrowed. “It didn’t matter what happened or how bad things got, she was always a force of positivity.”

“Sounds like my kind of girl,” I joked.

“She got kidnapped and locked in a cellar,” Graham reminded me. “You should be more careful, be a little less happy-go-lucky. It’s dangerous.”

“Now you sound like Grayson,” I said acerbically. “You are two peas in a pessimistic pod.”

Graham snorted.

“The mysterious Grayson Richmond.” He shook his head. “Man, what a crazy fucking day.”

Connor and Finn were righting the couch when we walked back into the living room.

“Do you all talk to your mothers?” I asked carefully as Spencer helped me sweep up all the broken glass.

“Connor does,” Spencer said. “And Aaron. His mother worships him. Hates Grayson, though.”

“As she should,” Aaron said.

“Dude,” Finn said from where he was inspecting the broken grandfather clock, “stop oversimplifying things.”

“Aaron’s in insurance. What do you expect?” Connor rolled his eyes.

“I see my mom every weekend,” Graham told me. “She’s into all this new-age stuff, so there’s a lot of crystals and healing potions. She’s constantly trying to get me to go to her yoga retreat.”

“I see my mom occasionally when she’s up for it.” Spencer looked world-weary. “She told me that Siobhan, Grayson’s mom, hates him still. Blames him for everything. Every so often all our mothers get together and talk,” Spencer explained.

“I guess we’d better get Aaron to an ice bath,” Finn said, refusing my offer of a doggie bag. “I’ll just take a bottle of the Macallan if there’s any not on the floor.”

“I’ll take a doggie bag,” Connor said.

I beamed as I handed him the paper sack.

Finn and Graham grabbed Aaron around the waist and threw each of his arms over their shoulders.

“There’s a luggage cart at the concierge desk,” I said in concern, hurrying after them.

Spencer laughed. “Aaron, you want to go for a ride?”

“Don’t you dare put me on a luggage cart,” he growled.

The penthouse felt empty after they left. I called Grayson, but he didn’t answer.

I left him a note and turned out the lights.

I didn’t believe Grayson was beyond salvation. There was one more good deed in my back pocket. I was going to help Grayson get closure he needed to heal.

GRAYSON

Lexi wasn't at the penthouse when I returned that evening.

The party food had been cleaned up and packed away in the fridge. The carpet was ruined from the spilled alcohol and the blood. The penthouse felt horribly cold and empty even though there were more pieces of furniture in it, though many of them were broken.

I was sure my brothers had filled her head with poison after I'd left. They were right though.

I was just like my father. I had hurt my little brothers while my father had laughed.

There was still a bottle of scotch at the wet bar. I picked it up and took swigs as I walked through the penthouse.

Lexi had left food for me in the fridge. A note was on the container.

When life punches you in the face, eat cheese!

I pocketed the note.

My teeth hurt too much to chew.

In the study, Crumpet the rock was waiting in his stupid hat. I should work, to try to salvage something of the day. I hadn't been able to focus during the days preceding the party, and I had wasted all that time for what? Just to confirm what I already knew, that my brothers hated me, that Aaron wanted to break my legs, that they had all grown up free, yes, but close to each other and not to me. They had their own inside jokes, knew each other's mannerisms. They were all brothers, and I was the outsider, the villain, the common enemy. Now they were going to pull Lexi into their orbit, too, and take her from me.

I took another swig from the bottle. Picking up the terrarium under one arm, I headed back into the ruined salon.

I sat down on the broken couch and took another drink.

“It’s just you and me,” I told the rock.

The destroyed grandfather clock was making choked noises. I leaned back on the ripped cushion. My ribs ached. I should put ice on them, but it was probably too late—I’d have to live with the bruises.

I stared up at the TV mounted on the wall over the fireplace, the one Lexi had insisted on. There was a remote in the basket on the nonbroken side table.

I turned on the TV. There was a line through the picture, probably from where Aaron had thrown the lamp at me.

On the screen, a cricket in a top hat and a suit was talking to a wooden puppet who wanted to be a real boy.

I sat there and watched that whole fucking movie.



IT WAS TUESDAY AGAIN. I dreaded Tuesdays. I knew she hated me, but I still wanted to see her.

More than anything, I was afraid that one day I’d arrive at lunch and she wouldn’t be there.

Yet a part of me was also hoping to see a different woman, one with red hair and freckles.

“She’s not going to be there,” I told myself.

I had ignored Lexi’s calls and avoided her at the office. There was no way she would just show up at the restaurant, even though I wanted desperately to see her.

“Your girlfriend’s already waiting at the bar for you,” the hostess said after greeting me.

I nodded to her, trying to keep myself from running to Lexi.

Likely, she is here to break up with you and she chose a public place to do it, a place where she knew you weren’t going to lose your shit.

“Oh, your poor face.” Lexi winced when she saw me then slid a glass of whiskey to me.

“Marius dragged me to the doctor. Nothing’s broken, and I still have all

my teeth.” I hesitated, standing there, waiting for the blow to come.

“Sit.” Lexi patted the table next to her.

I steeled myself and sat gingerly on the stool.

Lexi took a deep breath.

“Obviously what happened at the party was hard for everyone, but I think that it’s a positive development in your relationship with your brothers. The next time you get together with them, you can start rebuilding your relationship from a place of honesty.”

I drew back.

“I’m never seeing them again.”

“Yes, you are,” she argued. “We’re hosting a dinner party once I find some dining room furniture.”

I searched her eyes.

“Didn’t you come here to break up with me?”

“Of course not.” Lexi was indignant. “I’m may not be in finance, but I’m not letting a hot asset walk out the door.”

“But you know everything about me now.”

“All your toxic secrets,” she agreed then looked down at the drink in front of her.

“I think,” she said slowly, “that you were in a very difficult situation, for anyone, and you were just a kid. You did what you thought was best to save the people you loved. I like to give people the benefit of the doubt.”

“That’s going to get you—”

“Kidnapped one day? Yeah, your brother Graham said the same thing. Maybe you two can get drinks some time and complain about it. ’Til then, I choose to see the best in others,” she said, nose in the air.

Her words were sweet relief.

I wrapped her in my arms, cupped her face, and kissed her mouth.

You need to tell her that she needs to find another job. I replayed Marius’s words.

But I couldn’t tell her now, not when I was close to losing her.

“I ordered you some soup,” she said, voice slightly muffled against my suit jacket. “Your jaw still looks bruised.”

“You should see the furniture.” I released her.

Lexi giggled.

“I shouldn’t laugh. We—well, you really, are going to have to pay for all of that.”

“I watched *Pinocchio* last night,” I told her suddenly.

“You watched a Disney movie?” she squealed.

“Shhh,” I said, holding a finger to her lips then kissing them. “You’ll ruin my reputation as a brooding mysterious billionaire.”

She clapped her hands. “You are having a breakthrough, and I am here for all of it.”

I took a sip of the whiskey. “Then you’ll be very excited to hear I’m thinking of changing Crumpet’s name to Jiminy Cricket.”

“That might confuse him,” she said solemnly.

“You think?”

“We might need to find him a pet rock therapist.”

I paused for a moment. “There’s not such a thing, is there?”

“I’m sure I could find someone to pretend to be a pet rock therapist. The bigger question is are you going to believe it?”

Matt slid a bowl of soup in front of me.

“It’s lobster bisque,” Lexi said. “It’s freaking amazing, and I’m ordering a whole vat of it to go.” She smiled at me. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks,” I said, meaning it.

“And I have one more surprise—well, not a surprise because it’s not like I dragged him over here in chains or something.” She made a face. “Sorry, that is extremely off-color.” She grabbed my hand.

“I’m organizing a meeting for you to visit your father.”

I yanked my hand back.

“No,” I snarled, low in my throat.

“Grayson,” she said, dropping her voice. “You need closure. You need to be able to move on. You need to face this demon. Marcus Aurelius would want you to look fear in the face.”

“Marcus Aurelius was a basement dweller who spent all his time studying Greek and Latin and navel-gazing.” I bared my teeth, feeling trapped, like I was back in the cellar.

“That’s no way to talk about a man whose bust lives in your office.”

“I can’t see my father; he doesn’t deserve visitors.”

“You’re a CEO, a major player in real estate development, and your net worth is a credit card number,” Lexi argued. “Believe in your infinite potential. This is going to be good for you; it’s going to be healing. Trust me.”

I still had nightmares about my father. The last thing on earth I wanted to

do was see him. I couldn't believe Lexi would do this.

She's just trying to help.

Not to mention she said she was proud of my progress.

It's just one quick meeting. Five minutes, and then I can live happily ever after with Lexi.

Shit, I could just create a job for her out of thin air at my covert investment fund. She would never leave me. I didn't want her to leave me. But now she was back, and I would do anything—crawl over hot coals, eat broken glass, see my father—to make sure she never left again.

“Okay,” I said faintly. “Okay, I'll see him. Just tell me when it's scheduled.”

Her face lit up.

“Oh, Grayson.” She smiled at me. “You won't regret this.”

I would, but the pain would be worth it, if it meant I could have her.

LEXI

“We need to talk about your commitment to this job,” Anthym said to me. “And to this company and to Grayson.”

“I’m very committed,” I said, hastily stuffing the note I was writing to Grayson under my laptop.

“Are you?” she asked, narrowing her eyes. “You seem to be spending an awful lot of time out of the office for some reason. I know you’re not out running errands for me either.”

Grayson was in his office, talking on the phone. He didn’t look up as I followed Anthym to an empty executive meeting room.

“Who is she?” Anthym demanded when we were alone.

“Who?” I asked, eyes wide.

“The woman he’s seeing.”

Minnie’s tits. Did she know? She couldn’t know, right?

I started to sweat.

“You have to have seen something,” Anthym insisted, pacing in front of me.

“You need to spy on them, Lexi,” she ordered. “Grayson hasn’t had his head in the game lately. This could cost people their jobs if this woman is too much of a distraction. We need to find out who she is. You need to find a way to be there when that woman is there. You’re friends with all the help, aren’t you?” There was a sneer on her mouth.

“We trade recipes,” I said weakly.

“Good. Ask them for intel. This woman is no good for Grayson. We need to get rid of her.”

Allowing myself only a quick glance at Grayson's office, I scurried back to my desk.

"She's on to me," I whisper-shrieked at McKenna after making sure Anthym wasn't eavesdropping.

My friend dragged me to the women's bathroom, where I proceeded to freak out in front of the mirror.

"She's going to know, and then I'm going to get fired. Everyone's going to know that I'm the assistant that sleeps with her boss. Grayson's going to fire me and then never talk to me. I'll be blacklisted around town. I'll never get another job."

"Okay, Negative Nancy," McKenna said. "Let's take two steps back. We manifest the reality we want to see. You don't want a reality where your life in Manhattan falls apart. Here. I have some lavender oil."

She dabbed it on a paper towel and wafted it in front of me. "Breathe in, breathe out. Anthym is never going to suspect you."

"She does."

"No, she doesn't. Anthym is shallow and thinks men like Grayson only go for the breast-implant supermodel types. She sees you as beneath him and her and pretty much everyone in the office. You're going to be the last one on her list."

"Gee, that makes me feel better."

McKenna shrugged. "I think you're awesome."

"Thanks," I said dully.

"Maybe you can hire an actress and take a few blurry photos of her in Grayson's penthouse," McKenna suggested. "That will throw her off the scent."

"It's not just that," I said. "Grayson said I'm not the type of person who his mom would approve of."

"The mom that won't talk to him?" She raised an eyebrow. "Who cares what she thinks?"

"Grayson cares."

"Mommy issues." McKenna fake sneezed.

"You don't understand; he's very attached to her," I cried.

"No offense, but he sounds unhinged," McKenna said. "Are you sure you want to keep doing this with him?"

"Grayson is working on himself," I told her stubbornly. "He's going to visit his father in prison and get closure."

McKenna made a noncommittal noise.

“Didn’t you say he had some hot brothers? Maybe you could swap him out for one of them.”

“I really like him,” I said softly.

McKenna sucked in a breath and winced.

“Is it because I was a virgin when I got with him?” I tangled my hands in my hair.

“Or the amazing sex generally, not to mention all the money,” McKenna suggested.

“You think I don’t like him for him.”

“I don’t think anything,” McKenna said. “But just in case things are about to go south, you might want to go ahead and apply for a couple more credit cards just in case you need a little extra safety net.”

GRAYSON

I was going to see my father.

Or maybe an asteroid would hit, or the warden would tell Lexi that Stuart Richmond had just been denied visitor privileges and wouldn't earn them back for another decade.

Look at me, engaging in the power of positive thinking.

I took a break from reviewing contracts, not that I was that effective. I should have been able to compartmentalize, but I was dreading seeing my father.

Opening my desk drawer, I took out the folder of potential job openings.

I should give Lexi options when I broke the news to her, come with solutions, not a problem she had to solve herself. I would give her three options: work with me at a job I created, and ... I flipped through the file.

I didn't want her to work with any of the Svenssons, so these three companies were out. And I had met the CEO of that particular company, and no, Lexi wasn't working for him. Therefore, the only real solution, the only one I could accept, was that she had to continue working for me in some capacity. Just not at Richmond Electric.

I closed the folder and stood up, buttoning my suit jacket. I should ask Marius the best way to structure the new job offer for Lexi at my covert investment fund. While I was at it, I should probably ask him about visiting my father. Maybe he would tell me it was a terrible idea legally speaking, then I'd have to tell Lexi my hands were tied, and wasn't it a shame, because she'd put so much work into organizing the visit.

Yes, Marius would think it was a terrible idea.

When I walked down to the legal department, Marius was in his office, laughing with someone on the phone. He waved me in.

I stood just inside the doorway.

“I know right? Like I wasn’t going to reread that contract before sending it over. I mean, what can you expect.? He went to Yale ... Yeah, I have to run. Catch you at the next alumni meeting. Grayson! The god has descended down from the mountain. So who are we suing?”

“Do you want to get lunch?” I asked.

Marius seemed a little shocked.

I didn’t know why, because it made more sense to talk about potentially damaging topics off site, for plausible deniability.

“Sure,” he said when I didn’t elaborate. “Let’s grab lunch. There’s this new seafood place on Thirty-First.”



SINCE WE’D ARRIVED outside the typical lunch hours, the place was busy but not packed. Marius sat across from me in a booth.

“I can’t tell if this décor is supposed to be ironic or not,” he said, poking at a giant plastic lobster propping up the salt and pepper shakers. “Like, are they going to bring out plastic bibs?”

“Lexi would like this place,” I observed.

Marius smiled up at the waiter. “How’s it going? I’ll have a scotch. Scotch, Grayson?”

I nodded.

Scotches were brought, and food was ordered. Marius was in what I deemed his handler mode, where he was trying to butter up people in order to broach a difficult topic.

I took a sip of my scotch and waited for him to ask me if I’d fired Lexi yet.

“So,” he said finally. “How’s your nose?”

“I sneezed this morning and didn’t feel like I’d been punched in the face.”

“Staying positive, I see,” he remarked. “Are you going to see your brothers again?”

“Lexi says yes, but I don’t think they’ll want to see me again. But I am going to see my father.” The words came tumbling out.

Marius's courtroom mask was on.

"Are you?"

"You can tell me it's a terrible idea," I assured him. "I won't be offended. I know that's a bad look for the company."

"Man, screw the company. Well," he amended, "not really—we have tens of thousands of employees across the globe—but I think this is a big step for you and a good step, and I'm here for you. I'll go with you."

"That's hardly in your job description," I said dryly.

His lips thinned. "I don't want you to have to go through that alone."

"I'll survive."

"There's surviving and then there's thriving."

"You sound like a self-help book." I looked down at my drink then back up at him. "So you really think I should go?"

"Do you want me to tell you it's a bad idea?" He cocked his head.

I sighed. "No, I want your honest opinion. Also I'm regretting my policy not to hire yes-men." I smiled wanly to let him know I was kidding.

"I'm not going to give you an absolute," he said, carefully weighing the words. "Because ultimately you need to make the decision, and then you have to live with it. However, you do need to think about the possibility that this might be your only chance to talk with your father. You never know what could happen. Stuart could die next week, and then there will be no opportunity for closure, to tell him how you feel, to ask him questions. That's it. Done. Finito."

"Seize the day," I said dully.

"If that's the answer you can live with."



MARIUS DIDN'T UNDERSTAND, I decided when I returned to the penthouse later that evening.

It wasn't just a matter of seeing my father or accepting the possibility of never having closure. My relationship with Lexi was on the line. If I bailed, I didn't know what would happen. She might write me off as a lost cause, she might get mad, or she might leave. Sure, there was a possibility that she would be kind and understanding, but I couldn't take that chance. I had thought Sam and I were on a good trajectory, and that had blown up in my

face. I was never going to have a relationship with my brothers, and I sure as hell wasn't having one with my mother.

Lexi was all I had. She was my only shot at happiness.

She was worth it. Right? She had to be. I didn't want to be alone anymore.

The broken furniture had been removed, I noticed, when I set foot in the penthouse.

Music filtered down from upstairs.

Lexi was in the master bedroom closet.

"Why are you here?" I said more harshly than I had intended.

She turned to face me.

"I told you I wasn't leaving."

"You want this? You want this now?"

Pushing her up against the wall, I kissed her fiercely. I ran my hands through her thick red hair and down her body. The plunging neckline of her blouse had been teasing me all day at the office, and her skirt clung to her, leaving me yearning for her bare legs without it.

"Take me. Take me hard, Grayson," she whispered to me.

I kissed her again and did as she asked. We fell to the floor of the closet. My hands were all over her, down to that luscious ass. I then unhooked her skirt and grabbed hold of her panties. I yanked them down her legs, revealing her pussy, soaking wet for me as she always was. My hands went to her clit, rubbing her strongly and roughly.

She was mine.

Forever.

She shuddered and gasped, but I refused to relent. I slid my fingers over her clit, just how I knew she liked it, loving how she melted in my hands.

Lexi moaned loudly.

"Tell me how much you want this," I demanded. "Tell me what a dirty slut you are, that you beg to be fucked on the floor of a closet."

Her eyes were wide in the dark.

"Take me," she breathed.

I wanted nothing more than her. All of her.

I scrambled to undo my slacks and pulled out my cock. I hastily opened the condom and rolled it on, holding her in place, just watching as I prepared myself to fuck her.

Her legs spread for me, exposing her glistening red slit. I gave her one

more stroke, then I thrust myself in, making her squeal in muffled delight. Her legs closed around me as I fucked her.

I did it hard.

I rammed into her again and again, my cock filling up every last inch of her pussy. She was so damn wet that she took all of me, breaking the moans with squeals of pleasure.

She's insatiable. She's perfect.

She's mine.

Her pussy squeezed my cock, and she clawed at my chest. I couldn't imagine life without her anymore.

Taking her harder, I drove us to the finish. With every thrust of my cock into her was the slight sound of flesh hitting flesh, the ambiance of our lust. She grew loud enough that it was a good thing the penthouse was so large and there were no neighbors to hear us.

Her body tensed up, then she was screaming for me. I had taken her enough times that I could tell when she hit her highest of highs, as orgasm wracked through her body. She did this cute little convulsion thing, her back arching up high before she gave out, nothing more than a shuddering mess.

I was following her. All of my muscles tensed up before the release that followed. I held her tight, the sudden roughness of our fucking giving way to me tenderly holding her in my arms, my cock still buried inside of her.

Panting heavily, she looked to the door.

"Don't ever leave me," I whispered to her then kissed her, needing her to understand.

"Hey," she said, resting her forehead against mine. "You called me your girlfriend the other day. It's like inviting the fey inside—you're not getting rid of me."

LEXI

“I need to invest in an eye mask,” I mumbled when the sun burned through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

Grayson was wrapped around me and cuddled me closer to his broad muscular chest.

Today was the day.

I already had my note written and slipped into Grayson’s suit pocket. I also had a nice relaxing evening planned for when he returned. I was sure he was going to be wrung out, but ultimately this was going to be cathartic for him. I was sure of it.

I grabbed my phone to check my email, to see if the city had gotten back to me about the lack of water. It was criminal. While Grayson was at the prison, I was going down to city hall to lodge another complaint. There were elderly and children in the building, for goodness’ sake.

I chewed my lip. I should have been doing more, earlier. They were my neighbors, but I’d had to deal with Grayson’s brothers and setting up the visit to the prison with his father, which had involved a shocking amount of red tape. The FBI had been highly suspicious of why I wanted to see him until I finally got through to them that the visit was for my boyfriend. Though maybe that was a good thing, considering what Stuart Richmond had done.

Said boyfriend stirred next to me.

“Rise and shine! The future is now!” I chirped.

He ran a hand through his hair.

I leaned down to kiss him. He grabbed the back of my head, kissing me harder.

“You want breakfast?” I offered. “I’m making omelets.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I’m going to work out first.”

It felt so intimate and domestic, us waking up together, me making him breakfast. I admired his body as he swung off the bed, stretched lightly, then walked to the bathroom, grabbing his exercise shorts on the way, gait perfectly balanced.

I think I love this man.

The feeling overwhelmed me, then settled.

It felt right, my love for him.

Grayson came back out and gave me a suspicious look.

“Why are you smiling at me like that?”

“No reason.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It feels like you’re plotting something.”

“Just the best darn omelet you’ve ever had.”



I COULDN’T JUST SERVE him an omelet, so home fries and onions were sizzling in the pan, and the biscuits were baking in a cast-iron skillet in the oven.

My mom had sent us home with orange marmalade, and it was out on the table along with butter.

“Just in time,” I said as Grayson came to the table, dressed impeccably in his suit.

He poured me coffee from the pot then put a tea bag in a mug of hot water for himself and took them both to the table.

I slid the omelets onto the plates. They were heaped with sausage, cheddar cheese, peppers, and onions and garnished with chives.

“Hot, hot,” I said as I scooped out the biscuits, placing two each next to the home fries.

“Do you want to read the paper?” I asked him as I slid the plate to him. “Or do you need to answer emails?”

“I can make calls during the drive,” he said. “It’s a few hours upstate.”

“Do you have questions or discussion topics for your father?” I asked him carefully.

“I’m not sure what I’m going to say to him, to be honest.” Grayson looked out through the window to the terrace.

“I know why he did it, because he could. I know that he’s not sorry. I know that he’d do it again if given the chance.”

“I think it will be good for you to see him locked away,” I said firmly.

“I suppose you’re right.”

We ate in silence.

Grayson seemed like there was a great weight bearing on him.

He hunched over the food, eating determinedly.

My phone rang, and I started. “The valet has your car pulled up. I already cleared your schedule for today. Honestly, I think you should take tomorrow off. I can try to sneak out for a little bit. Hopefully Anthym won’t notice I’m missing.”

Grayson stood up and kissed me, interrupting the babbling.

“Lexi,” he said, “I need to give you a different job.”

“A promotion?” I asked hopefully.

“No,” he said, his eyes searching mine. “You can’t work for me anymore.”

The words hurt, though I knew he didn’t mean them to.

Grayson and I are a team; he wouldn’t be doing this if he didn’t have a good reason.

“We’re in a relationship,” Grayson explained. “Richmond Electric is supposed to be a conservative company. The CEO can’t be dating his assistant.”

“Of course that—that makes sense.” I nodded.

“I’m going to find another job for you. Don’t worry,” Grayson promised. “I’ll always take care of you.”

“And I’ll always take care of you,” I said determinedly. “Just let me get my purse. We don’t want to be late.”

He kissed me again.

“I’m going alone. I don’t want you anywhere near the prison.”

“Sure, yeah,” I said. “I’ll be here, sending you positive thought waves.”

Change is good. Change is growth. Grayson is doing something difficult, and so can you.

GRAYSON

Maybe it was the cartoons Lexi liked to watch, but I had been expecting something more dramatic when the car pulled up to the prison, such as a haunted asylum. Instead the prison was a cluster of two-story buildings from the seventies, surrounded by layers and layers of barbed wire.

The guards looked bored when I walked through the front door after confirming my ID at several guarded gates.

Another guard waved me through after wandng me with a metal detector.

“You can stay with your father until three thirty this afternoon,” he explained, “but if more visitors come and there aren’t any tables left, then you’ll have to vacate for new visitors. Regulations allow a hug once at the beginning of the visit and once at the end, no touching otherwise.”

“Understood.” I wasn’t planning on staying the rest of the afternoon. And I certainly wasn’t hugging my father. I was going to check this box then finally be able to put my horrible childhood behind me.

“Vending machines are to the left,” a guard told me, inclining his head then stepping back to watch the sea of families visiting their fathers, brothers, and husbands in prison.

I hadn’t seen a recent photo of my dad, but I recognized him instantly. He was seated at a table that was anchored into the concrete floor.

Stuart had my same brown hair, though his was graying. Same assessing green eyes, same nose, same jaw, same mouth that always had a little smirk, like he knew something that you didn’t and you were going to regret it. He looked thinner and paler than I remembered from the last time I’d seen him. He’d always seemed bigger in my memories and my nightmares.

A grin spread on my father's face when he saw me.

"I knew you'd come eventually!" my father whooped. "Look at you, my boy, my son!"

I froze.

I had played this moment over and over in my head, imagining how he'd curse me, how he'd hate me, how he'd blame me, tell me I was worthless and try to make me feel small. I had prepared for all of it. Everything except for this.

My father regarded me with unabashed pride.

My skin crawled.

Just get it over with.

I sat down across from him.

Pretend this is a contentious board meeting.

"I told them all you'd come," Dad said in delight. "Let me look at you. Stand up," he barked.

Before I could stop myself, I stood up.

"My pride and joy. Come, sit back down." He looked around. "Where are they?"

"Who?"

"Your lawyers. Where are they? My lawyer is terrible. They mistreat me here, and he doesn't respond to any of my letters," Dad complained and shifted on the hard plastic swivel chair, also anchored to the floor. "They keep me locked in a tiny dark room all day, twenty-three hours a day," he said, speaking rapidly. "It's inhumane. I don't even have a window."

"Ah," I said, "first time?"

The dig didn't even register to my father.

"They only let me outside once a day, and the walls in the rec area are so high I can't see anything except for the sky. That can't be legal. You can't treat a person like that. You have good lawyers, don't you, Grayson? My beautiful son, just look at you. I always knew you'd be the most successful one." He reached for me.

I drew back.

"I didn't bring the lawyers," I said, voice cold.

"Next time, next time." He nodded. "My parole hearing's coming up, and we need to plan. I need to get out of here." Dad looked around wildly.

"You're the first visitor I've seen in in years," he said, squinting in the sunlight that streamed in behind me. "Can you believe that? Locking up a

person like that. The guards never speak to me. They just drop off the food and leave. Can you believe it?"

He leaned forward, eyes glinting. "I have a plan, Grayson. Look, here's the plan. I need you to buy this prison. I was reading about it in a magazine—billionaires like you buy prisons. You can buy this prison, and then you can get me a better cell. It can't cost that much, right? You have money. You have a shit ton of money, right? Isn't that a great plan?"

He finally stopped to take a breath.

I worked my jaw as he looked at me expectantly, like I was here to save him.

Fuck that.

"What," I said slowly, "did you honestly expect was going to happen when you kidnapped all those girls? You didn't think it was going to eventually lead to this?" I gestured to the stark cinderblock walls. "I mean, did you think at all? Did you think any of us enjoyed your torment, enjoyed being locked in a cellar with no sunlight?"

Stuart was indignant.

"You boys had a wonderful childhood. I gave you toys, your mothers all had each other—it was like a big sleepover."

"No it wasn't. It was hell," I forced out through gritted teeth.

"I lived there too," he argued.

"You came down for maybe an hour a day, and the rest of the time we were crawling all over each other like cockroaches," I spat out. "Do you even care about the conditions you kept your own children in?"

He frowned at me, like the thought had never fucking occurred to him.

"You ruined my fucking life, asshole. I am a shell of a person." I stabbed at my chest. "I can't function in the world. I am so alone. My god, do you realize that you ruined me?"

"Grayson, no, no. Grayson, no, I didn't ruin your life. I made you into the man you are." He laughed, raising his hands like he was praising the gods for his good fortune. "Look at you! I have magazines. They let me save them, the ones your picture is on."

He grabbed my wrist, his fingers weak and bony.

"There's no way you would have built that company from nothing without the adversity I put you through. You would have been just another spoiled brat, singing on Broadway or working as a bartender or something equally embarrassing," he said derisively. "Now look at you."

I yanked my hand back.

“The alternative to your actions wasn’t me being a Broadway singer or a bartender,” I said slowly. “I wouldn’t have existed if you weren’t a monster.”

“Exactly.” He slammed his fist on the table.

The guards yelled at him.

“By the way, you’re welcome,” he said matter-of-factly.

Fuck this shit.

“You owe me,” he sniffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “You owe me everything.”

“I don’t owe you shit. I’m going to let you rot here. I fucking hate you,” I whispered.

“You don’t mean that. We are the same,” my father said, tapping the side of his head. “No one comes to visit me, none of the girls, or your brothers. And I bet,” he added conspiratorially, “that they don’t visit you either. They hate you, don’t they? Just like they hate me. You and me, son, we are misunderstood men. I tell you, we’ve been wronged. They didn’t appreciate everything we did for them, did they? They didn’t appreciate what you did for them. Only I do.”

He pressed a hand to his chest. “You rescued them. I respect that. I know you haven’t visited me because you were worried I would be mad at you, but I’m not, Grayson. You were always my favorite.” My dad smiled at me.

It was demented.

He didn’t care. He didn’t care about any of it. He was safe and secure in his own little world. Consequences meant nothing to him.

This was a horrible mistake.

“I can’t believe I thought I was going to get any sort of closure from you,” I said, unable to stop my voice from catching. “You’re insane; you are fucking delusional. You aren’t sorry for what you did, and even worse, you seem unable to comprehend the amount of hurt and pain you have caused, not just to me, not just to my brothers and our mothers, but to their family and friends too.”

“You sound like that stupid judge.” My father crossed his arms and rolled his eyes.

“Fuck you,” I told him. “I’m done.”

“Don’t you sass me, boy. You take that back. I made you. Hey, sit down!”

I ignored him and stood up, buttoning my suit jacket.

“Where are you going? We’re friends, Grayson,” Stuart insisted. “I’m your best friend. I’m your only friend.”

“Wrong,” I told him. “I don’t have any friends.”

“Can’t you at least give me money for the commissary?” he whined after me.

I kept it together through picking up my ID and being checked for contraband, and was out into the parking lot before it really hit me.

I had been face-to-face with my father.

I opened the car door robotically, feeling like I’d just been thrown out of an airplane without so much as a pair of safety glasses.

“This isn’t fair,” I whispered.

It wasn’t fair. My father wasn’t some evil mastermind—the Moriarty to my Sherlock. He wasn’t a misunderstood but monstrous person, a Hannibal Lecter type character. He was just some man-child with low impulse control and delusions of grandeur.

What was worse was my very existence was a point of pride to him. He saw my accomplishments as his own. This whole time I thought I was giving him the middle finger, that I was proving that I wasn’t a worthless, weak child, that I was a force to be reckoned with, that through sheer force of will I was going to undo all the damage he had caused, or at the very least make restitution for it.

But the entire time he had been cheering me on from a twenty-by-twenty-foot concrete cell, totally oblivious to the irony of the situation.

And I had played right into his hand. Stuart was going to hold onto my visit for years, secure in the knowledge that he had a successful son and therefore he was a successful man by proxy.

“I never should have come here,” I said in gasping breaths.

Control your breathing.

“I never should have come.”

I wished I had let Marius drive with me. I felt so horribly alone.

I stuffed my hand in my pocket, looking for my phone, maybe to call him, maybe for an email to distract me. Instead my fingernail caught on a corner of card stock.

I pulled it out.

My hands were shaking.

I steadied them.

Be the reason someone smiles.

The sparkly pink letters wavered as I stared at them.

Yeah, I had sure been the reason someone fucking smiled today.

This fucking—*God*.

I balled up the note, suddenly furious.

“I can’t believe I let her talk me into this. I can’t fucking believe her! This is all her fault.”

LEXI

I checked my watch and stifled a groan. Anthym had been keeping me busy with meaningless tasks all day, peppered with demands for a plan of how I was going to find out who the mystery woman Grayson was seeing was. Now city hall had already closed.

I would go tomorrow, I decided, or maybe the next day. Grayson was going to need me.

“I bet he’s with her right now,” Anthym said, glaring at his empty office. “Grayson never takes PTO. Never. He usually works on the weekends, too, and I haven’t been getting emails from him on Sunday lately. This woman is ruining him. McKenna!” she barked at my friend.

McKenna’s eyes bugged out.

“You need to be on the lookout too.”

“I don’t go to the same places Grayson does,” she said nervously. “I don’t know how I can help.”

“We should start following him,” Anthym insisted. “We might even have to hire a private investigator. It’s our duty as his secretary and assistants. Did he say anything to you about another date tonight, Lexi?” Anthym demanded.

“Not that I recall.”

“I need to find a way to track his phone.” Anthym stalked off.

“We need to tell Grayson that she’s going unhinged,” McKenna said to me in a low voice.

“I can’t tell him that,” I whispered.

I checked my phone. There was no word from Grayson. I hoped he was okay. I wished he had let me come with him.

He should be back soon though, and I wanted to be there with a hot meal waiting for him.

“If Anthym, asks,” I told McKenna, “I went to go try to catch the mystery woman.”



THE PENTHOUSE WAS dark when I arrived.

That was weird. Grayson wasn't back yet. Maybe he stayed with his dad for a few hours?

I walked into the kitchen and flicked on the lights then shrieked when I saw Grayson sitting on a stool at the kitchen island, bottle of scotch in front of him.

“You're back,” I said, voice a little squeaky. I smoothed my skirt down. “So how did it go?”

“How did it go?” Grayson forced out the words. His green eyes met mine.

“Are you fucking kidding me? It was a fucking disaster.” He shook his head. “I can't believe I let you talk me into this. I can't believe I didn't see that you were manipulating me earlier. So fuck me, right?”

“I wasn't manipulating you. I was helping you.” I was reeling, off-balance. Why was he mad at *me*?

“No, you weren't.” He jumped off the stool. “That's giving you too much credit. You're just oblivious. You didn't think about how any of this was going to affect me, affect my family. God, my mother's going to kill me when she finds out I went to see him and how ecstatic he was that I was there.”

“He was happy?” I said in horror.

“Yes, Lexi,” Grayson said snidely. “You really brightened someone's day. Hell you brightened someone's whole fucking year. My father was over the moon. And though he didn't say it, I'm sure he's very grateful to you for sending me to him so he could gloat about how his son is a billionaire.”

I shrank in myself.

“That must have been awful,” I said in a small voice. “I'm sorry that it went poorly. But at least you went, right? At least now you know and you have closure.”

“Don't do that,” he spat stepping around the kitchen island. “Don't

fucking try to find silver linings and look on the bright side. There is no bright side. I fucked up by believing your nonsense—actually no, I fucked up believing that you believed your nonsense.”

He spread his hands. “Because the truth is, Lexi, that you are full of shit. The stickers, the notes, the random compliments—it’s all bullshit. It’s all performative. You don’t care. You don’t care about the woman walking her dog or the guy picking up trash or your neighbors or me. All you care about is pretending to be a good person.”

“Of course I care,” I choked out. “No one’s perfect, but you have to put positivity out in the world. It helps make the world a better place.”

“Ah,” he said holding a hand up, “except that you’re not helping anyone; you don’t really care about anyone. You just want to be able to pat yourself on the back and tell yourself that you’re better than the rest of us unenlightened sons-of-bitches walking around under a storm cloud. News flash, Lexi, no one likes your compliments. No one likes your positive notes. And I can see through that charade, see the selfish, self-absorbed person you really are.”

“I’m sorry that the meeting with your dad didn’t have a positive outcome,” I said, blinking away the tears. “I think that you’ve had a bad day and we should try again tomorrow once you’ve had a chance to process.”

“And there it is,” he said turning away from me, throwing up his hands, “the smug superiority.”

“I’m trying to give you the space to feel your feelings. This is cathartic. This is good for you.”

He turned back to me. “You’re pulling my strings for your own amusement. I am sick of having you in my life, fucking things up.”

“Fuck you,” I screamed at him, furious. “I didn’t fuck anything up. I was helping. I did this to help you, and it is helping.”

“Stop trying to take the moral high ground. You don’t have the moral high ground. The only reason you pushed me to visit my father, to see my brothers, is to make yourself feel better,” he shouted. “You didn’t care about me, you didn’t care about my family, you don’t care that you just made things so much fucking worse than they already were, because you get to congratulate yourself for doing something good.” He made air quotes. “You’re just going to skip along singing songs and telling yourself the word is fine when it’s not. You’re just a child. You don’t know anything, don’t know what I’ve been through, and can’t understand. All you care about is

fairy tales, but guess what? Most people are bad people. The world is a horrible place, and this?" He pulled a crumpled note of positive affirmation out of his pocket. "Is bullshit; it's worthless."

"I did this because I love you, because I want you to be happy." I was crying now, ugly tears with snot.

"No, you don't," Grayson sneered. "God, I fucking hate you." His fists were clenched. "You're so self-righteous and self-absorbed."

"No, I'm not, but you are," I railed at him. "You just want to lock yourself away with your pain and your guilt."

"Maybe I do, but at least the only person I'm hurting is myself," he said hoarsely. "Now get out of my house."



I WAS SOBBING UNCONTROLLABLY as I walked down the street. A cold rain had started, and the freezing droplets mixed with my tears, numbing my nose.

"He didn't mean it," I tried to tell myself. "He's just hurt. You can try again tomorrow. People have fights. And he's been through a lot. Give Grayson the benefit of the doubt. We're meant to be together. Things will work themselves out."

They had to.

I believed in the power of positive thinking, and I believed that Grayson was going to wake up tomorrow and realize he was wrong, that I did care about him.

Be a shining light in the world.

A guy was walking down the street on the phone, a little girl walking next to him.

"I love your coat," I warbled to her.

"I don't talk to strangers," the little girl yelled at me.

Around me, several people stopped. The little girl stuck her tongue out at me, and her dad rushed her away.

"Do I look that crazy?" I sobbed.

Probably.

I clutched my umbrella. Yes, I'd stolen it from Grayson's penthouse, but I was going to see him again soon, right? And then I'd return it.

A yellow cab pulled up to pick up a woman a few paces behind me.

I shrieked as I was splashed with dirty street water. I kicked a banana peel off my shoe.

“Can you watch where you’re going?” I yelled at the cab driver.

“Hey, calm down,” he yelled out the window. “It can always be worse, you know.”

I fumed. My feet squelched in my shoes as I hobbled toward my apartment building.

Briefly I thought longingly of Grayson’s giant bathtub. I would kill for a hot bath.

“He’s going to come to his senses tomorrow,” I assured myself. “He has to.”

Shaking off my umbrella, I slopped into the lobby of the apartment building.

“We need to get a posse together,” Grenadine was yelling as I looked around at the chaos.

Maria and her grandmother were sobbing and crying in their doorway.

Connie was berating Grenadine.

“It was because you let Lexi and McKenna move in. That was the final straw.”

“I can’t find my dentures,” Mo was saying. “I don’t know what happened.”

“Oh my god,” McKenna sobbed, running over to me. “It’s terrible.”

“What’s going on?”

“We’re getting kicked out.”

“What?” I cried.

“It’s horrible.” My friend handed me a letter.

I skimmed it.

“They’re condemning the building and demolishing it? They can’t do that,” I said helplessly.

“The landlord is filing for bankruptcy,” McKenna said. “How are we going to survive? You can’t find a place for rent this cheap in the city.”

I looked around at all the neighbors huddled in shock in the small lobby.

“What are we going to do?”

“Think on the bright side, right, Lexi?” Grenadine said determinedly.

“Here’s a baseball bat. I’m positive that the landlord will reconsider.”

“Grenadine, you were already thrown in the back of a police car once,” McKenna reminded her.

“Oh my gosh,” I whimpered as I slid down to the grimy floor. “He was right. I am delusional. I can’t believe I wasted so much time on Grayson when he didn’t even care.” I started sobbing. “He hates me—he said so—and now we lost the building. I’m so sorry,” I gasped out. “I’m sorry I was a bad friend and a bad neighbor. This is my fault.”

“You couldn’t have stopped this,” McKenna said gently.

“Yes, I could have,” I choked out. “If I hadn’t spent all the time I wasted on Grayson, trying to help him solve problems he didn’t even want me to be involved with, I could have. I could have saved the building.”

I sounded hysterical. My voice was coming out in a high-pitched squeak.

“This is my fault.”

“It’s that landlord.”

“Give her some brandy,” Martha said, pulling a bottle out of her purse.

McKenna fanned my face.

“You might want to go back to Grayson’s,” she said, sounding tired. “The letter says we have to all move in a week. Maybe you can sneak me in to let me shower.”

“I think he broke up with me,” I sobbed.

“I never believed you could keep that man,” Connie declared.

“At least she had a man,” Grenadine shot back and patted my head.

“You just wait until he’s had to provide his own orgasms,” the elderly woman assured me. “He’ll come crawling back. A man like that doesn’t even wash his own clothes. You think he wants to suck his own dick? He’ll be back, and we can all move in with him. Problem solved.”

I thought back to Grayson’s angry face, how he said he hated me, how he said I’d ruined his life.

“He’s done with me.” I let out a sob, succumbing to the hopelessness.

“We’re all going to be homeless.”

Then I tipped back my head and joined in the wailing.



“AT LEAST YOU’RE STILL EMPLOYED,” McKenna whispered to me the next morning as we took our seats.

Grayson wasn’t in his office. I just needed a nice quiet day. Hopefully, Anthym would be busy and I could sneak down to the cycle showers.

Before I could even turn on my computer, Anthym was headed toward me on a war path.

I braced myself, expecting her to complain about Grayson's mystery girlfriend.

Joke's on you, Anthym, I thought bitterly. *He's broken up with her.*

"You," she said, giving me a smug look. "We have a meeting."

I stood up and pulled at my clothes then followed her to Brittany Dawn's office. Marius, the VP of the legal department, was there. Neither smiled when they saw me.

Fine. We were all going to be miserable today.

I glowered at both of them.

I thought Marius might have winced slightly, but that could have been the hangover from the pity party we'd thrown in the lobby last night.

I crossed my arms.

"Lexi," Brittany Dawn said, opening up the employee handbook. "When you were hired to this company, we asked that you read and understand the employee handbook. On this page you will note that Richmond Electric does not allow for relationships between employees and their supervisors."

"Yep," I said. "Scored A on the quiz at the end of the webinar."

"We have evidence," Anthym snapped. "I know you were the mystery woman. You haven't been at Grayson's penthouse doing your job. You've been sleeping with him. Manipulative skank."

"You're just jealous," I shot back, which was not a nice thing to say, but my well of niceness was running dry.

"At least I'm not sending homemade porn to my boss," Anthym shrieked.

I felt like I was going to faint.

She can't know about that.

Anthym triumphantly threw down a set of screenshots of one of the naughty videos I'd sent Grayson.

Marius covered his eyes and swore.

Brittany Dawn scooped the pages off her desk.

"Sexting is also against the code of conduct," she said, flipping to another sticky-tabbed page.

"Screw the handbook. What about Grayson?" I yelled at her.

"Mr. Richmond is the CEO," Brittany Dawn replied.

"So the rules don't apply to him, huh? Marius you're a lawyer. The rules don't apply to the CEO?"

“Technically no,” he said, seeming mildly uncomfortable. “Gray—Mr. Richmond isn’t an employee. He owns the company.”

“Marius,” Brittany Dawn said sharply, “this is not an argument. Now Lexi, there is no evidence that Mr. Richmond actually had a relationship with you. The only evidence we have is the photos you sent to him and the frankly lecherous text messages. Not to mention all the notes you left everywhere, which you are on record admitting that you left him.”

“She’s been sexually harassing him. Grayson is in a fragile mental state.” Anthym crossed her arms. “She was manipulating him and blackmailing him. I’m glad I intervened when I did because she could have ended up pregnant and tried to steal half the company, then we’d all be out of a job. Grayson’s going to be relieved when I tell him what I found and that you’re finally out of his life.”

“How dare you!” I took two steps toward her. “I would never. And I’ll have you know that while we did have sex, I—”

“Wait,” Marius said frowning. “So Grayson didn’t give you these text messages?”

“I had to hunt them down,” Anthym bragged.

“How?” Marius asked her.

“I convinced Todd in IT to help me access Grayson’s cloud storage account and download everything,” she said, preening.

“Brittany Dawn, please process Anthym’s dismissal paperwork, effective immediately,” Marius said to the HR director.

“How dare you!” Anthym turned her rage on him.

“She hacked into the CEO’s accounts,” Marius continued, ignoring Anthym. “That is in direct violation of company policy.”

“I’m his secretary,” Anthym shrieked at the lawyer. “I have a right to view Grayson’s messages.”

“No, you don’t,” Marius said shortly.

“Ha! In your face!” I hollered pumping a fist. “I’m getting a promotion.”

“Lexi, you are still fired,” Brittany Dawn told me.

“But the evidence was obtained illegally.” I stabbed my finger on the employee handbook. “This isn’t fair; it takes two to tango. I’m suing.”

Marius sucked in a breath.

“This is a disaster,” Brittany Dawn hissed at him. “What kind of lawyer are you?”

“Lawsuit! Lawsuit!” I shrieked. “I want a lawyer.”

“You can’t afford a lawyer,” Anthym shouted at me.

“Contingency, beeyotch!” I mimed finger pistols. “Illegal firing. Illegal firing.” I tipped my head back and ribbited.

“God help me,” Marius muttered.

There was a knock on the door, and McKenna stuck her head in.

“Um, sorry, am I interrupting?” she asked, looking around in confusion.

“Mr. Richmond is here; he’s asking for you, Anthym.”

Brittany Dawn sighed. “Anthym no longer works here,” she said in disgust.

“You can’t do this. We’re friends,” Anthym complained.

McKenna clasped her hands to her face. “I can’t be the secretary.”

“McKenna, you’re in charge now, and you can hire who you need,” Marius informed her.

“You two,” he pointed to Anthym and me, “will be escorted out.”

Grayson was here. He thought he was just going to fire me and pretend like the last few weeks hadn’t even happened and I was some unhinged stalker so he could protect his own reputation?

Screw that.

No good deed goes unpunished.

“You motherfucker!” I yelled, making a break for it.

“Call security,” Marius commanded Brittany Dawn as he took a swipe at me. But I was small and ducked under his arm then sprinted for Grayson’s office door. Well, tried anyway. My shoes were still wet from yesterday, and my feet were numb.

Also did I mention that I had drunk way too much cheap wine?

“Grayson, you asshole!” I yelled as I careened across the slate tile to his office. One of my shoes fell off halfway there, and I lost my balance as I tried to keep running.

Grayson’s eyes widened as I barreled into the glass door. I threw it open and stumbled inside.

“You think I’m the one peddling toxic positivity, dipshit, when you’re the one trying to rewrite history, like you weren’t fucking me in your shitty penthouse. And yes, it’s shitty. It looks like an office building and not someone’s home. It’s the villain’s lair, which is exactly what you are; you’re the villain.”

“Lexi,” he barked. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You!” I screamed, mascara running down my face. “You think I ruined

your life? Not as much as you ruined mine.”

His mouth turned down.

“I shouldn’t have said those things yesterday. I didn’t mean—”

“Liar!”

“Lexi, please,” he begged. “I’m sorry.”

I almost, *almost*, wanted to forgive him and run into his arms.

But like Grayson said, I needed to stop being so naïve.

I took off my other shoe and threw it at him. “You like to descend from your tower occasionally on a whim and shower us peasants with fancy presents so you can lie to yourself that you’re not really that bad, that you’re not really a monster. But when shit hits the fan, spoiler alert, you’re just daddy’s little boy. Your mother is right about you, and if I were her, I wouldn’t want you in my life either. I should have taken a page out of her book.”

“*Fuck you, Lexi,*” he roared sweeping the monitor, computer, and piles of papers off his desk onto the slate floor with a crash.

“So you admit it!” I shouted jumping up and down and pointing at him. “You admit it. We did have sex. Stop being a hypocrite and fire yourself.”

Marius opened the door to the office, flanked by a security guard. In the background, another security guard was already escorting Anthym out.

“He admitted it,” I shrieked at Marius. “He was sleeping with me. Fire him.”

Marius hesitated and looked to Grayson.

“Get her out of here,” Grayson said coldly. “Ms. Collins is banned from the premises.”

Marius waved the security guard in.

“Joel, you can’t arrest me,” I said through the sobs. “We play foosball together, and I made you banana nut muffins.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Lexi,” he said, looking guilty, as he approached me.

“I’m suing,” I yelled.

“No, you’re not,” Grayson said, corporate mask snapping into place. “It’s your word against mine.”

“You think people are going to believe you’re not just like your father?” I spat.

“Fuck you,” he carefully enunciated.

Marius positioned himself in between me and the CEO.

“Once everyone calms down, Ms. Collins,” Marius told me as Joel forced

my hands behind my back, “I’d like to hope that we can all come to an agreement about a settlement. We’ll contact you, or you can have your lawyer contact us.”

“You can’t pay me off,” I shrieked at Grayson. “I cannot be bought.”

“You’re acting like a toddler,” he said as I threw myself onto the ground while Joel huffed and puffed.

“Fuck me,” Marius muttered.

“You’ll take the settlement,” Grayson continued snidely. “You’re terrible with money, and you need to pay off your credit card debt.”

“Grayson,” Marius said, “shut the hell up.”

“Ms. Lexi, please,” Joel begged. “Just don’t make a scene.”

But a scene had been made, lit, and was making its Broadway debut.

Everyone on the floor below was looking up at the mezzanine. Several people had cameras out.

“Fight the power!” I yelled down at them. “Love yourselves. Recycle.”

Joel gently shoved me into the elevator and swiped his card. Then a few minutes later, I was standing shoeless on the sidewalk in front of Richmond Electric.

“Ms. Lexi, let me call you a cab.”

I looked up at the glass tower that loomed above me.

“Grayson is right.” I was sobbing again. “I am bad with money; I can’t afford a cab. Settlement,” I yelled plaintively. “I need a settlement. Can you tell them I’m ready for my settlement?”

“I’m sure they’ll call you, Ms. Lexi,” Joel said kindly while I wept.

“Look, my daughter’s just getting off the night shift. She’s a plumber. If you sit tight, I’ll have her drop you off somewhere, okay? Just wait here a moment.”

I nodded, still making heaving, sobbing gasps.

He patted me awkwardly on the shoulder while I took out my phone.

“Lexi!” my mom exclaimed when the video call connected. “What a surprise! Oh, Orange Blossom,” she cooed, her face a mask of concern. “What happened?”

“I just—” I couldn’t talk, I was crying so hard. “I don’t know.”

“Barry,” my mom yelled. “Barry, something’s wrong with Lexi.”

My dad rushed into the frame.

“We’re going to come get you,” Dad said firmly.

“No,” I choked out. “Please don’t waste your money. It’s been awful

here. I know you say that Collinses aren't quitters, but I want to quit. I just want to go home."

GRAYSON

Marius seemed angry after Lexi had been hauled away.

“What should we—”

“Grayson, just go home,” he said brusquely, “and let me deal with this.”

He handed me my briefcase.

I felt like shit.

Because you are shit.

Her words replayed in my head. She was right though, wasn't she?

You are just like your father. You had a good thing with Lexi, and you ruined it, didn't you? You hurt her. You are a monster.

I parked in front of my building and handed the keys to the valet.

“Welcome home, Mr. Richmond,” Nasr called. “By the way, your assistant is up there.”

“Thank you,” I said, rapidly pressing the up button.

She was giving me another chance. Lexi was going to take me back. I just needed to figure out what to say ...

But it wasn't Lexi waiting for me in the kitchen when I dropped my briefcase on the floor.

“Grayson,” Anthym cried when she saw me.

“I am so sorry about what happened today,” she said, face a mask of sympathy. “Lexi is a horrible person, and I'm sorry I ever hired her.”

“You are supposed to be fired, Anthym,” I said, suddenly exhausted.

“I know,” she told me, “but I just wanted to see you. I'm worried about you.” Her hand rested on my arm. “I've always cared about you.” Her hand

slid up to cup my face.

I knew what she wanted.

A part of me was so lonely and empty I almost, *almost*, entertained it.

“I always take care of you.”

Her hands were a warm weight.

“Right, like that bust of Marcus Aurelius,” I said dully.

“Of course.”

“How did you find it by the way?” I asked absently, not sure if I wanted her to leave yet, to be completely alone.

“I, uh—” she stammered.

Holy shit.

I let her squirm as she realized she had been caught in the lie.

“Hmm?” I asked.

Her babbling and expression made me recall a memory of my mother. I was maybe six, and one of the other girls had ratted her out that she had been hiding a magazine under one of the floor tiles. My father had slowly wound her in, letting her flounder, letting her feign ignorance until he had dropped the bomb that he had known about the transgression all along.

That was the point I had realized I hated my father.

What the fuck are you doing, Grayson?

“Look, it’s obvious you didn’t find the bust. I bet it was Lexi,” I said in disgust, “because it’s always her, isn’t it? And I bet you were the one who wanted to fire Mrs. Ortega and throw out all my food.”

“Asshole,” Anthym spat at me. “You really are a cruel man.”

“Yes, I am. Now get out of my house before I call the police, and then you really can’t find a job in this city.”

She stomped to the door.

I waited to hear it slam then frowned and went to investigate when it didn’t.

“Hello?” a man called from the doorway and knocked on the open door. “You the homeowner?” Two men in work boots and coveralls dragged a large Turkish rug into the hallway.

“We have a rug delivery. Installation’s included, sir,” the delivery man said. “Do you still want it in the master bedroom?”

“Sure,” I said, voice sounding hollow.

I stood in the kitchen while they installed the rug upstairs.

Lexi was right, my mom was right, my father was right. I was a horrible

person. I was just like him.

I opened the fridge to stare at all the food inside, aching for some comfort.

There was a note taped to a shelf in her handwriting.

Things aren't all bad if you have cake.

I carefully removed it, feeling my throat closing up.

Fleeing the kitchen, I took refuge in the study, breathing in the smell of the leather-bound books.

“It’s better that I’m alone,” I said aloud.

But in Crumpet’s terrarium was another note.

Just because you’re alone, doesn’t mean you have to be lonely. Sing a song!

The note was decorated with sparkly butterfly stickers.

I stuck it in my pocket along with the pet rock she’d given me.

“The man of the hour,” the delivery man said when I stepped into the master bedroom to ask if they needed anything. “Sign here, please. Also, we found this under the bed when we were moving it.”

He handed me another note.

You are the light of my life.

“Someone must really love you,” the delivery man said, crumpling up the plastic protective wrap for the rug. “You have a great evening.”

After they left, I tore through the bedroom, throwing all the clothes on the floor, stripping the bed, dumping out all the dresser drawers. There were notes everywhere—in the pockets of my suits, folded up in origami cranes in the watch drawer, tucked in folded socks.

You are special.

I am not defined by my past; I am driven by my future.

I’m freeing myself from all destructive doubt and fear.

Though the past might be ugly, I am still beautiful.

On the headboard a note was tucked into the small crack where two pieces of wood joined at the corner.

I pulled at it and unfolded it.

Know you are loved.

I dropped it on the bed and looked around desperately.

They were everywhere, Lexi was everywhere. It was torture. I was going to find her notes for years. I was never going to get over her.



LATER THAT EVENING, I was sitting on the terrace in front of the unlit firepit when the oversize glass door slid open.

Marius approached me, like you might a wild animal, bottle in one hand, two glasses in the other.

“Want some company?”

“I should go to work,” I said, leaning my head down to rest on my knees. “I didn’t do anything productive today.”

“Yeah, you actually had a negatively productive day,” he joked.

My lawyer sat down beside me on the wood deck.

The sound of expensive whiskey being poured into a glass broke the silence.

“You have a nice view,” he remarked as we stared out over the skyline.

“That’s what Lexi said.” I turned my face away from him.

Marius sighed.

“What happened?” I asked him softly.

Marius snorted. “HR made everyone delete the videos, and then McKenna suggested bribing people with a free lunch as an apology for the disturbance. As a distraction, she launched a contest for people to send in a cute picture. Then she seeded a flame war, as she called it, on the company message app about whether it was fair to allow baby pictures in the contest since that’s all anyone was going to vote for and people without small children don’t have a fair shot. She wants a promotion, by the way.”

“I guess she deserves it.”

“Message boards got ugly though.” Marius knocked back his glass. “The complaints about the rigged contest filtered their way to Reddit, and now the whole internet is ablaze. A contact of mine says that the evening news is doing a bit on it. Brittany Dawn said she’s shutting the whole thing down and is sending out a nasty email.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Brittany Dawn was pissed. She grilled McKenna hard. She cracked and admitted that she texted Lexi, and that’s what was suggested.”

“God help me.”

“I think people have already forgotten the events from this morning, though. So I’m trying to look on the bright side. It could be worse right?” He poured us more whiskey.

“No,” I said, “I don’t think so. I ruined the best thing that ever happened to me.” I picked up the glass and took a drink.

“Grayson’s first heartbreak.” Marius squeezed my shoulder.

I raised my head.

“I’ve had my heart broken before.”

“You didn’t seem upset when Sam ended it.” Marius’s eyes were curious.

“Not Sam,” I said, looking out to the horizon. The storm was breaking, heading south.

“No, my first heartbreak was when my mom refused to see me after the rescue. I kept begging the social worker and my foster parents, the FBI agents, the police, everyone. They kept stalling, saying just give her time. I finally ran away from the foster home and showed up at her parents’ house. Her dad screamed and threw a ceramic frog at me that was sitting on their porch. She was watching from her bedroom window. She didn’t come down.”

I drained my glass.

“This doesn’t hurt as much as that, so I’ll be fine. I’ll survive.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I lied.

Actually the whole thing was a lie. Lexi’s leaving hurt so much more.

I spun the empty glass around in my hand.

Marius refilled it.

“So is this the part where you read me the riot act as my lawyer?”

“Yes, as your lawyer, please do not so much as google Lexi’s name. I’ll handle it from here.”

“I won’t,” I promised. “Thanks for your help today.” I shifted my weight to stand up. “I guess you have plans tonight and want to leave.”

“Don’t do that, Grayson,” Marius said, grabbing me by the collar of my shirt and pulling me back down. “Don’t push me away.”

“You already have been working overtime.”

“Dude.” He shook me. “I’m your friend, Grayson. There’s no overtime hours. It’s a twenty-four, seven, three-sixty-five gig.”

“I don’t have friends,” I said automatically.

“Of course you do,” Marius said kindly. “I’ve been your friend since freshman year. I’m here for you, man.”

“You work for me,” I reminded him.

“Because you are a good friend and offered me a piece of the very

expensive pie you were baking,” he said with a laugh. “In fact, you’re an amazing friend.” He slapped my shoulder.

I gave him a small smile. “You’re a good friend. I don’t deserve you.”

“Of course you do.” He gave me a bear hug.

I hugged him back roughly.

“You, me, friends.” Marius flicked my ear. “I’ll write you a note so you don’t forget. You want to go out and get another drink? Drown your sorrows?”

“I don’t know. I just—I want to go home,” I said dully.

“But—”

“Not here. This place is a prison. I keep finding Lexi’s notes. They’re everywhere; she’s everywhere. I think I need to book a hotel room or something.”

“Hotels are depressing,” Marius said, dragging me to my feet. “You can come crash with me.”

“I don’t—”

“Bro, I’m not asking you. Just come on. First we’re going to eat something and sop up all that alcohol.”

LEXI

I slid my feet in the flip-flops I was wearing. I had lost my shoes, and unlike Cinderella, there was no prince searching the kingdom for me. Not to mention Gizzy wasn't a cute little mouse and was instead a five-foot-long iguana that was making the other fliers very nervous.

He hissed softly at my feet. I had him in his harness, and several people were taking photos.

Screw Grayson. Actually no, fuck him.

Sometimes "Jiminy Cricket" just didn't cut it, and you needed a real, hardcore swear word.

McKenna: I wish I could come tell you goodbye!!!

McKenna: I'm coming to Florida to see you.

McKenna: Promise.

Lexi: Save your money. You'll need it.

McKenna: Girl, I am going to the beach. Just need to hire a new assistant, though Brittany Dawn might just kick me out herself. It's a shit show over here.

McKenna: I don't know what we're going to do. Brittany Dawn is freaking out.

I sighed. I already felt horrible that my neighbors were being kicked out of their homes. Now I had just made McKenna's life even more difficult, right when she needed to find a new place to live for her and Grenadine.

My friend didn't have the luxury of running away to her parents' house.

If I was truly a good person, I would stay and help her and Grenadine. Grayson was right. I was selfish, and I was tired, and I wanted my mom and dad and my bed and my stuffed animals and to just be able to forget about the world.

I did owe McKenna though. I scrolled through my contacts and called her.

There was distant yelling when she answered.

“Girl, how are you?”

“Terrible, but you sound worse.”

In the background, Brittany Dawn and Marius were screaming at each other.

“As a communications major, I have a few ideas for how to make this a nonissue at the company,” I told her. “Do you have a pen and paper?”

“You’re doing Grayson a favor?” McKenna asked in surprise after I detailed my plan. “After everything he did to you? Let him burn!”

“I’m not doing this for him,” I said angrily. “I would let him hang. I’m doing it for you. Make sure you tell Grayson that he owes you a big promotion, a huge raise, and a bonus when you fix this for him.”

“Flight D528 to Orlando,” the flight attendant announced.

“Say hi to your mom and dad for me,” McKenna said.

The plane ride to Florida was bumpy. I spent it huddled in my seat, head against the window, Gizzy in my lap.

I had failed. I was a failure.

I lost everything. Especially Grayson.

Did you ever really have him, though?



GIZZY and I were the only passengers on the small propeller plane that made the biweekly flight into Dudley Grove.

“I was going to cancel the flight,” the pilot hollered to me as I stepped up onto the noisy aircraft, “since you brought the terrible weather with you from New York. But don’t worry, I’ll getcha home.”

My parents were waiting on the tarmac with signs. My dad was wearing a Goofy poncho complete with floppy plastic ears and buckteeth while my mom was in her Little Mermaid poncho.

I shouldered my bag and picked up Gizzy to carry him down the steps.

“Squeaky Mouse,” my dad cried when he saw me. I fell sobbing in his arms.

“Aw, Squeaky Mouse,” he said, petting my damp hair.

“It can’t be all bad,” my mom coaxed. “We have each other, and you’re home here in Dudley Grove. The weather’s not nice today, but I bet the sun comes out tomorrow.”

“I can’t deal with your toxic positivity,” I shrieked at her. “And the sun isn’t coming out tomorrow because I checked the weather report, and it’s raining for the next ten days.”

“Alexandra ...”

“She’s having a bad day. Just let her be, Cindy,” Dad said.

“I can hear you,” I yelled.

“I made homemade orange chocolate thumbprint cookies,” my mom said. “Why don’t you eat some in the car?”

“I don’t deserve cookies,” I sobbed out. “I’m a fraud.” I took a gasping breath.

“No, you’re my princess. Sure, you’re having a setback, but New York is a tough city. You just need a break, and then you’ll go back to your fancy job and kick butt.” My dad punched me lightly in the shoulder.

“I can’t. I got fired,” I sobbed out.

“But you were doing so well,” my mom cried. “You were going to get a promotion.”

“I lied,” I choked out. “I lied about everything. I didn’t have a good job; my job fucking sucked.”

“Language, Alexandra,” Mom chided.

I wiped at my face, smearing my makeup.

“I was just the assistant to the assistant to the secretary. I picked up my boss’s dry cleaning and cleared out his fridge and ordered food for meetings. I never so much as coughed on a marketing campaign, and I wasn’t making any money, and I wasn’t up for a promotion, and that fancy penthouse didn’t belong to the company. It belonged to Grayson. Who was my boss. Because I was sleeping with my boss. And then he fired me.”

My mother’s nostrils flared.

“I am appalled, Lexi. I cannot believe that.”

My dad looked furious.

“I know! I’m sorry I wasted your money. I’m sorry, Dad. I’m sorry I’m a

failure.” I doubled over, sobbing.

“Oh, Lexi.” My mom gathered me into her arms. “I’m not mad at you. That Grayson—”

“I’m glad I didn’t take him fishing.” My dad clenched his fist.

“It’s not his fault.” I wiped my nose with my sleeve.

“Of course it is,” my dad declared.

“Hey!” he yelled to the pilot. “When is the next flight? I’m going to Manhattan to give that man a piece of my mind.”

“Dad, don’t,” I begged.

“He can’t treat you like that.”

“I think he and I were both toxic.”

“You’re not toxic,” my mother scoffed. “You’re always nice to everyone. You bake people muffins, leave thoughtful notes, you’re helpful, and you give compliments.”

“I think I overstepped with Grayson,” I admitted.

“Hogwash. I don’t believe it.”

“I convinced him it was a good idea to go visit his father in prison.”

“Yikes,” my dad said after a moment. “You mean the one who kidnapped all those girls?”

“I thought I was being helpful, but he was so angry, and then ...” I gestured helplessly. “Things just imploded.”

“You were trying to do the right thing,” my mom said gently. “That didn’t give him the right to fire you.”

My dad handed me a Kleenex.

“I might have told him in the heat of the moment that he was just like his dad and it was no wonder his mom never loved him,” I said with a wince, hating myself for taking Grayson’s biggest insecurity, information he’d entrusted me with, told me in confidence, and used it as a weapon against him. It was the very definition of a low blow.

“Double yikes,” Dad said with a grimace.

“That wasn’t very nice,” my mom chastised.

“I didn’t mean it! I really loved him,” I admitted sadly. “And I screwed it up. I should have just left his past alone. Because now he hates me.”

GRAYSON

It was Tuesday again. I stared up at the plaster ceiling in Marius's prewar co-op. A weight rested heavy on my chest.

The face of a cat appeared in my vision.

The door that was opened a crack opened wider.

"Moose," Marius hissed. "Moose, get off of him."

"He's mad I'm in his room," I said, sitting up. "He's a smart cat if he's able to open the doors."

"Just lock it," Marius said. "Then he can't get in."

Moose meowed at me, and Marius picked him up.

"You coming with us for a run?" Marius asked me.

"Sure, just let me grab my clothes." I rubbed my face.



MOOSE TUGGED at his leash as he loped beside us on the path as we ran.

"Are you going to see her?"

"I thought you said not to talk to Lexi," I reminded him.

"Definitely don't do that," he said quickly. "No, your mom. You going to see her? It's Tuesday."

"Yeah, it is Tuesday."

I never missed a Tuesday lunch.

But I still had last week's Alessio leftovers in my fridge. McKenna was probably too busy doing actual business work to come clean out the food. I made a mental note to call Nasr and tell him he and Mrs. Ortega could have

anything in there they wanted.

The office had settled down. No one seemed to recall Lexi's firing and subsequent outburst. People were, however, writing me annoyed emails about the photography contest, which had been cancelled, reinstated with different rules, then canceled again.

Lexi had been right. They weren't talking about the fact that she and I had slept together.

My heart ached when I thought about our last angry exchange.

I wanted to go to her apartment, stand outside her window, and beg her to forgive me.

She said she hated you, remember?



THERE WAS ALWAYS a rush of dread and anticipation on Tuesday afternoons. That maybe this would be the day that my mother would recognize me and come over.

But today, while the dread and anticipation was there, it wasn't because of my mother.

I was thinking about Lexi, wondering if she was going to be waiting at the bar for me, brilliant smile on her face as she talked a mile a minute with the bartender.

But the bar was empty when the hostess escorted me to my usual spot.

I was crestfallen.

Of course she's not going to show up, idiot. She thinks you're just like Dad, not to mention you told her you hated her and you fired her.

A bread basket was set in front of me.

"I'm not eating," I told Matt.

"Something to go then?"

I glanced up at the mirror. My mother was behind me at her usual table, holding out a bite of seared scallop on her fork to her husband.

"I'm just going to have a whiskey, then I have to run," I told him, talking out my wallet. "Also add dessert for the table by the window? Thanks."

I handed him my card and downed the drink while he ran it. Then I took the card back and left the restaurant.



I DIDN'T GO to Alessio the next Tuesday, paralyzed when the alarm chimed.

Another Tuesday passed, then another. I told McKenna to start scheduling meetings for me Tuesday afternoons.

"Van de Berg Insurance just called," McKenna said, knocking on my open office door. "They want to know if you can come to a lunch meeting at Camelli's. I told them it was last minute, but I'd ask."

"Sure, why not?" It wasn't like I had other plans.



RICHMOND ELECTRIC HAD a whole department to handle the various insurance companies we did business with all over the country; therefore I typically didn't meet with the insurance representatives myself. I expected to see the CEO, Wolf Van de Berg, waiting in the private dining room when the hostess led me in, but instead, five pairs of green eyes looked up at me.

"Is this an intervention or a hit?" I asked dryly.

"This," Spencer said, standing up, "is lunch."

"You invited him?" Aaron exploded at Spencer.

Spencer shoved me in a seat next to him. Aaron glowered at me from across the table.

"This is an alcohol-free lunch by the way," Finn remarked, "so that we don't get banned from Camelli's."

I frowned. "I received an invite from Van de Berg insurance." I was still unclear on what was happening.

"You what?" Aaron spat.

"I had Graham spoof the number of your assistant," Spencer replied, popping an olive in his mouth. "Super convenient to have a hacker in the family."

"It's not hacking," Graham said, rolling his eyes.

It sounded like a conversation they'd had a million times before. My heart ached for the relationship I had missed out on with my brothers for the last eighteen years, the time I would never get back.

"All of us meet for a late lunch every Tuesday," Spencer told me. "Thought you might want to join."

“I don’t want him to join,” Aaron snapped.

“Aww, but your nose is all healed up,” Graham said with a chuckle.

Aaron stood up and wiped his mouth.

“You all want him here? A traitor?”

“It’s not like he sold us out to the Russians.” Finn took a sip of water.

“He went to visit our father,” Aaron said, shoulders tense as he grabbed the edge of the table. “We all agreed not to visit Stuart. We all agreed not to let him know that we even think about him. And yes, Grayson, I found out because I monitor who Stuart communicates with. Isn’t it just telling that you’re the first of all of us to visit him? So if the rest of you want to be around Grayson, that’s your prerogative. But I’m leaving.”

“Aaron, sit down,” I said quietly.

“Fuck you,” he spat.

I held up a hand.

“I’m not going to force them to choose between you or me, Aaron. Honestly, I’m not worth it. I’m a real piece of shit. And I feel bad. But I’m not asking you for forgiveness. I know I don’t deserve it.”

I stood up. “I hurt you, all of you, and I know you’ll never be able to trust me, but I swear I thought I was doing the right thing,” I said helplessly. “I thought it was my best shot to rescue all of you.”

“Stop being histrionic.” Spencer snorted.

“For what it’s worth,” I added, “I don’t care if you hate me. You’re all free now, and so are all our mothers. If that’s the price I have to pay, so be it.”

“What have you ever done for us,” Aaron demanded, “except fuck us over?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. I didn’t want to throw this back in their faces, because I didn’t want to make it seem like I was using money to control them, to force them to have a relationship with me, to twist their arms and make them forgive me, because that seemed like something my father would do.

But since I was on a bridge-burning streak, what the hell?

“You mean besides investing in Finn, Spencer, and Graham’s start-ups, and giving Van de Berg insurance a number of extremely lucrative contracts, and bailing Connor out of jail when he got arrested in Monaco and making sure all charges were dropped?”

“You were arrested?” Aaron turned to the youngest brother.

“Er ...” Connor sunk in his chair. “It wasn’t my fault.”

“But sure, I never do anything for you all,” I said, turning to look at each of them. “I love you all dearly. I’ll always be here for you, whether you want me to or not. Anyway enjoy your lunch.” I headed for the door.

“Did you get it?” Aaron called after me.

“Get what?” I paused, hand on the door handle.

“Closure,” he asked quietly. “When you saw Dad, did you get closure?”

A laugh escaped me.

Then another.

My brothers looked at me apprehensively.

Graham half stood up in his seat while I collapsed in laughter against the door.

“It’s funny,” I gasped out. “It’s funny because—” I wiped at my eyes. “It’s funny because I didn’t have to do any of this. I didn’t have to push myself; I didn’t have to spend sleepless nights building my company. I could have just been a bartender and busked with a guitar in Times Square, maybe had a girlfriend, or a cat, or at least some friends. None of this mattered. None of it. I’m so fucking miserable, and none of this mattered.” I straightened my clothes and picked up my briefcase.

“No, Aaron, to answer your question, I didn’t get any closure. But you’re free to go visit Stuart if you want. You’ll draw no judgment from me. Word of warning, he’ll spend the entire time complaining about the piss-poor conditions of the prison and begging you to score him a better cell, one with natural daylight. It’s a real sore point for him.”

A laugh escaped Aaron’s lips.

“First time,” he quipped.

I bit back a grin.

“That’s what I said, though Stuart didn’t get the joke.”

Aaron smiled at me.

“What a piece of shit.”

“Such an understatement.” I shook my head.

For a minute, I could see the boy my little brother used to be in Aaron as he smiled. Even though it was probably going to get me punched in the face, I impulsively hugged him. Instead of throwing me through a wall, my younger brother hugged me back.

“I’ll miss you,” I whispered and ruffled his hair.

“Sit,” Aaron said when I stepped back to leave.

“I have to go to work.”

“Then count this as a working meeting,” Aaron told me. “Connor’s trying to break into real estate development, and we’re trying to talk him out of it.”

“I made money in real estate development,” I said, taking a seat.

“You spearheaded one of the biggest developments of the last thirty years,” Graham countered. “Connor’s trying to be a slumlord.”

“I can’t have a slumlord as a brother,” I said, frowning.

“Thank you!” Finn threw up his hands. “Someone get this man a drink.”

“This is a nondrinking lunch,” Spencer reminded everyone.

“Really?” Aaron said dryly. “Because I saw you pouring a miniature bottle of something into your mocktail.”

“Now who’s the snitch?”

I smirked.

“This is the building I’m looking at; it’s not on the market yet,” Connor told me, pulling up the address on his phone. “I get first dibs. I’m coming in with an all-cash offer, me and one of the Svenssons. He lives down the hall from me at Harvard.”

Graham passed me the phone, and I frowned as I read the address.

“You can’t buy this,” I stated.

“You’ve been outvoted.” Finn elbowed Connor.

“Give me the contact for the seller,” I ordered.

Connor looked to Aaron. “He’s going to buy the building himself.”

Aaron shrugged.

“Now,” I said, baring my teeth at Connor. “That’s Lexi’s apartment building, and I will be purchasing it.”

LEXI

“Well, it happened,” McKenna said when I answered the phone. “What happened?” I asked sleepily. I flopped over on the mound of stuffed animals.

Gizzy, lounging at the foot of my bed, hissed softly.

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I wake you up?” McKenna asked.

“I needed to get up,” I said with a sigh. From the kitchen, I could hear my mom singing beautifully as she made lunch.

I’d been sleeping later and later over the past few weeks, staying up late into the night, anxiously applying for jobs and cyberstalking Grayson. Unfortunately, I hadn’t gotten a response from any of the jobs I had applied for. My parents had even called some of their old contacts at Disney to see if there were any job openings.

“Someone bought the building,” McKenna said.

“Oh no.” I hung my head. I had tried, in between sobbing fits and eating homemade orange sorbet, to stop the destruction of the building. But the bankruptcy proceedings had begun, and everyone at the city I talked to said it was hopeless unless I wanted to buy the building myself.

“Who bought it?”

“Not sure.” I could hear her shrug. “Some investment firm.” In the background was the murmur of the Richmond Electric office.

“McKenna, can we go over the schedule when you’re—oh, my apologies. You’re on the phone.”

“One minute, Mr. Richmond,” she said.

“You have to go,” I said dejectedly and hung up.

Tell Grayson I said fuck you.

I lay back on the bed.

Everything was so screwed up.

I had no job, no money, I was living in my childhood bedroom, and I wasn't even helping my parents out with cleaning or in the orange grove or even keeping them company because I just hid in my room all day.

You need sunshine and sea breeze.

But I had brought the depressing Manhattan rain and cold with me, and the weather outside was miserable.

"You can't keep doing this," I told myself. "This cannot be the next however many years of your life."

After grabbing a notebook from my desk drawer, I opened it, intending to force myself to write down five good things about my life currently.

Except there was *his* handwriting in the notebook.

I traced the letters with my fingertip then tore out all the pages, crumpling them up as the tears fell, smearing the ink on the page.



I WAS HAVING another sleep-until-one-p.m. type of morning when I felt my bed sag with weight.

I blinked my eyes open.

My mom was there, a look of concern on her face.

"Sorry, Lexi," she said softly.

"I should get up."

"You can sleep if you need it." She rubbed my back between my shoulder blades, like she did when I was a kid.

"You're disappointed in me."

"Your dad and I would never be," she said kindly.

"Obviously Dad's not," I joked desperately. "He's my number one fan."

"Then that makes me your number two fan." She gave me a sympathetic smile.

I felt like crap.

"I could never be like you. My hair isn't as nice as yours. I never got picked to be Ariel, or work at Disney." I sniffed. "I moved to Manhattan, and I'm not marrying my first love like you are."

“You’re young, Lexi. You’ll find another job, and you’ll meet someone new.”

“I don’t want anyone new. I wanted Grayson, but he was so awful, at the end. Maybe he always was, but I just refused to see the bad in him.”

“Sometimes,” my mom said gently, “we meet someone who becomes one of the most important people in our lives, who leaves such an indelible imprint that it fundamentally changes who you are. Sometimes you marry that person, or become fast friends, but then sometimes you leave them, knowing that they have forever changed you. Maybe that’s you and Grayson.”

“He got more out of it than I did,” I said.

“Relationships aren’t transactional.” My mom tucked a piece of my hair behind my ear.

“You had to have learned something from this experience, right?” she prompted. “Maybe how to set boundaries? Maybe now that you know what you want, you know what’s at stake? Not to mention, you flew in a private plane and spent the night in a beautiful penthouse. That’s something. Most importantly, you got to know a very complicated person and understand how that kind of terrible life experience *really* affects someone. With that knowledge, you can be more empathetic if you ever have to deal with someone like Grayson in the future.”

“That’s just more toxic positivity,” I said dully.

My mom gave me a knowing look. “I never said change was always good. Sometimes change is just change.”

She hesitated then said, “I read the book, the one Mary Louise was peddling around town. Let me tell you, Grayson had a horrible childhood. It would be a nightmare for a grown man, and he was just a little kid. It breaks my heart as a mother.”

“You’re supposed to be on my side. You’re my mom, not his,” I said petulantly.

“I’m always on your side, Lexi. Maybe this is for the best. Maybe moving on from Grayson is right for both of you. I don’t know. But you need to think about what you want the rest of your life to look like. You’re young, the future is bright, and opportunities are endless. You can be so much. Be grateful for the experiences life has given you and be open to new ones.”

She patted my shoulder.

“Why don’t you get up and help us in the orange groves? There’s a

rainstorm coming. We could use another pair of hands.”

I thought about my mom’s words as I dressed.

Maybe she was right and I needed to let Grayson go, move on. He had treated me horribly. If he walked through that door right now with flowers and an apology, I’d send him packing.

I was never going to get over him though, never going to forgive him for firing me in front of the whole office like I was some tramp.

Mom is right. Screw Grayson Richmond.



I WAS out in a rain poncho in my dad’s orange grove, helping him check the trees, when my phone rang with an unknown number from New York City.

“Grayson, that better not be you,” I yelled when I answered the phone then cringed. “Uh—I mean, hi, this is Lexi Collins.”

“Ms. Collins.”

“Oh my gosh, Grayson, it is you.” My heart raced.

Don’t you dare, I warned it. He’s dead to us. We’re moving on, remember?

“My apologies, this is Spencer Richmond.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, forcing back tears. “You guys sound really similar on the phone.”

“Do we?” he said in surprise.

I sniffled. “Yeah.”

“Is this a bad time?”

“No, I’m just awkward.”

“I saw you applied for a job at Van de Berg Insurance.”

“You work there?”

He laughed. “No, but Aaron does. I have a guy on the inside who helps me poach candidates from them.”

“Isn’t that—”

“Illegal? Only if you’re not related. This is just sibling rivalry,” Spencer said cheerfully. “Anyway, I’d like to hire you.”

“You need an assistant?”

“I need a communications manager,” he corrected. “My last one just got poached by Svensson Investment. I’m shocked they hadn’t already snapped

you up, considering your crisis managements skills are jaw-droppingly good. I'm jealous."

"What crisis management skills?" I said in confusion.

"The whole scandal at Richmond Electric with the assistant who was sleeping with her conservative boss? Not a blip. All anyone is talking about are if company-hosted contests are fair or not. There's a whole cottage industry springing up about how to run companywide contests so you don't piss off your employees. It's lunacy," he said cheerfully. "So when can you start?"

"Depends. How much are you paying?" I joked.

He said a number.

"Just a moment," I squeaked and bent over to try not to pass out.

Lexi: Spencer Richmond just offered me a job!!! For a crap ton of moola.

McKenna: Negotiate.

Lexi: But it's so much money ...

McKenna: F*** negotiate bitch!

"Up that number by thirty thousand," I said, happy that my voice didn't squeak once, "and you have yourself a deal."

Spencer laughed.

"Deal. Can you start in two weeks, give me time to get you signed on? I have an international conference coming up."

"Yes," I said. I was going to have to beg my parents to drive me in the VW bus to Orlando to catch a flight, but I would hitchhike to make it back to Manhattan.



"YAY, LEXI!" my parents cheered.

My job offer letter had a place of honor at the table. Even though they hadn't asked for it, I wanted to show them that this time I actually had a real legitimate job offer doing work that I had gone to school for.

"Hold it up. Let me get a picture." My mom held up her camera.

"Put Gizzy in the picture too," my dad coaxed as I posed for photos.

In the days after the call with Spencer, I'd been productive while waiting for the official offer letter. I had picked up trash that had washed up on the beach in the morning, helped several of the elderly town residents ready their homes for the incoming cold front, and written a freelance article for the local newspaper. I had only thought about Grayson four times. And I hadn't cried once.

"We knew you could do it, Lexi." Mom gave me a noisy kiss on the top of my head.

"McKenna's going to be so excited that you're moving back," my dad said, eyes dancing.

I sent her the photo of the job offer.

Lexi: It's official!

McKenna: Woooo!!!

McKenna: Now you can come back and live with me and Grenadine if you can stomach it.

Lexi: I thought they were tearing down the building?

McKenna: Apparently whoever bought the building is renovating it.

McKenna: And they're putting us up in hotels for part of it while they do the work.

Lexi: Wait, what? I thought they were tearing it down?

McKenna: It's a spring miracle! Those expensive candles with the herbs and crystals really worked.

Lexi: I'm suspicious. Real estate development companies don't do stuff like this out of the goodness of their hearts.

McKenna: Maybe this company is different.

McKenna: You're the one who always says see the best in people.

The old Lexi had, but no more. I had learned one thing from Grayson—be suspicious so you can head off nasty surprises. I'd been too la-di-da about red flags the first time around with the last landlord.

This time?

I wasn't dropping the ball.

After dessert I made a pot of coffee then sat down at my laptop to do some sleuthing. Whoever the shady LLC was that had bought the building

had done a good job of covering their tracks. There were LLCs owning LLCs owning corporations, and each one was under a registered agent.

I finally tracked down what appeared to be the original owner of the chain of LLCs—another LLC registered in Albany.

Then I dug up the information on the now-dissolved law firm that had originally filed the paperwork for the business. Bleary-eyed, I read through the firm information. It was owned by none other than Marius, the lawyer from Richmond Electric.

“Minnie’s tits,” I said, sitting back on my fuzzy pink chair.

“I heard that, Lexi,” my mother yelled from the kitchen, where she was clanging pans around.

“Sorry, Mom,” I called.

I checked the time. It was seven thirty a.m. Richmond Electric started early.

“This is Lexi Collins,” I said to the receptionist when she answered. “I need to—”

“I’m forwarding your call to the legal department, Ms. Collins,” the receptionist said abruptly.

Hold music blared through the receiver, then Marius was on the phone.

“Hi, Marius, it’s Lexi. Look, I know—”

“Ms. Collins,” he said, cutting me off, “we need to speak with you and your lawyer in person. We cannot have this conversation over the phone.”

“But I need to talk to Grays—”

“If you need a recommendation of law firms, please refer to the New York State Bar Association website. Good day.”

Dumbfounded, I went out into the kitchen to help my mom with breakfast.

She tsked and combed my hair with her fingers.

“Did you sleep at all last night?”

“I think Grayson bought McKenna’s apartment building,” I said to her.

“Why?” She grabbed her spatula and flipped pancakes.

“I don’t know. He hates me, doesn’t he?”

GRAYSON

“What did she say when she called?” I asked Marius, trying to keep my cool.

“She wanted to talk to you.”

“Why didn’t you put the call through?” I tried not to sound angry.

“Because the last time it went so well.”

I resisted the urge to pick up my mug and throw it through the glass wall.

“Look,” Marius said, sitting down in front of me. “This is a delicate operation, these settlements. Everything needs to be aboveboard, or a judge could reopen the case. Lexi needs to have a lawyer; she can’t just call up and hash out a payment over the phone. And you can’t come anywhere near this meeting.”

I nodded miserably.

“Right, I understand.”

“I know you’re upset,” my friend said. “I’m trying to protect you and this company, and Lexi, honestly.”

“Yes, I know.”

But the wound that had never actually healed had been reopened. I could still see her face as she screamed that I was just like my father.

I rubbed the back of my neck as I stood at the window, looking out over the city.

“She wasn’t calling because she missed you or wanted to see you,” I told myself viciously. “She just wants a check.”

I turned back to my desk, sat down, picked up the rock that now lived on my desk, and turned it around in my hand. It was a nice rock, I thought. I

could imagine Lexi picking the perfect one out, probably chatting with the clerk. Was there a clerk? Was there a pet rock store in Manhattan, or did she just grab this out of a rock pile in some restaurant courtyard?

I guessed I'd never know.

Lexi would always be a hole in my heart.

The door to my office opened with a soft whoosh.

"Yes?" I said, not looking up.

"There's someone here to see you," McKenna announced.

"I didn't have anything on my calendar."

"So now your own mother has to make an appointment to talk to you."

The rock fell out of my hands to the floor.

"Hi, Grayson," my mother said, walking into my office as McKenna softly shut the door.

Siobhan approached my desk.

I just stared at her, unable to think, unable to process why, how, she was here, in my office.

"But it's Tuesday," I said in a whisper. "You're not supposed to be here on a Tuesday. You have lunch."

And wasn't it ironic that even though this was what I had wished for, worked for, sacrificed for, ever since I'd escaped the cellar, now that she was here, I'd trade it all for Lexi to be standing there instead.

It's because you're a horrible son.

"I skipped lunch today actually," my mom said.

My brain finally caught up to what was happening.

"Mrs. Daniels," I said, abruptly jumping up. "May I offer you anything? Water? Coffee? Tea?"

"Your secretary already offered," she said.

We stood there in silence for a moment. The last time I'd been this close to her, I had only come up a little over waist height.

Now I loomed over her.

Worried that I was being intimidating, I sat down heavily in my chair then bent down to pick up the rock off the floor.

"I didn't see you at the restaurant today," my mom said finally, peering over the edge of my desk to see what I was doing. "In fact, I haven't seen you in a few weeks."

I set the rock on the desk.

"I'm sorry," I said, looking up at her then away. "I shouldn't have been

there. And I won't come anymore."

"It's a free country; you're allowed to go to a restaurant."

There was another long pause while I struggled with what to say. But what could I say? I'm sorry? Please forgive me even though I don't deserve it? I miss you? I have money for you, but it's not a settlement?

It felt cold and corporate.

But then wasn't that what I was now?

"You know," Siobhan said, tipping her chin up, "the first time I saw you there at Alessio, I had nightmares for a week. I was furious. That restaurant was my safe zone, where I could pretend to just be normal, and you had invaded it."

I closed my eyes.

"I'm sorry." The words were hollow.

"I had a panic attack right before going the next week, thinking I'd see you there. My parents didn't know what was wrong; they were so worried."

I'd never hated myself more than I did at that moment.

You're just as bad as your father.

I couldn't look at my mother, letting her words cut me.

"The next Tuesday, there you were again. And the next Tuesday and the next. I began to look forward to seeing you there, so I could silently let you know that you weren't going to steal this from me too. I would lay awake at night and obsess about you coming over to talk to me, about what you would say, about what I would yell at you. How I would pick up one of those slices of cake you were always sending over and throw it in your face."

She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, a hauntingly familiar gesture.

"One day I met a guy, and I really liked him, despite everything. Soon he joined in on the Tuesday lunches. He wanted to go over there and confront you when I told him who you were." She smiled softly. "You know, cause a scene, fight you. But I was worried you might hurt him."

"I would never." I shook my head.

She gave me an assessing look.

"I expected you to grow out of it, realize that you weren't getting a rise out of me. But you just stood at the bar, week after week. I was thrilled that you looked desperately unhappy. It felt like I was beating you, like I was winning."

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"The years passed, and I married that man, had children. And I felt what I

thought I'd never be again." She sighed heavily, her eyes shining with tears. "Happy."

I felt sick. I wanted to curl up and die.

"Soon you were just a fixture of the restaurant, like the furniture. I didn't think much about you at all. I had small babies, and I was busy helping my husband with his business. Every Tuesday afternoon, there you would be, at the bar, getting your paper to-go sack. And every Tuesday, week after week, month after month, year after year, you looked more and more miserable, more and more depressed, retreating in yourself, like you were just being crushed under the weight of, I don't know—guilt pressure, stress, work. The world. I stopped being happy about it. I just felt sorry for you."

I looked up at her. She gave me a small smile.

"And then, one day, I saw that short, red-headed girl come into the restaurant and boss you around, then walk out with almost a whole entire cake."

I smiled at the memory.

"What's her name?" my mom asked softly.

"Lexi, uh, Ms. Collins. Lexi Collins."

"I like her a lot. She's just perfect for you." Siobhan grinned at me. "I couldn't stop laughing to myself the rest of the day whenever I thought about you two arguing about that damn cake on the sidewalk. How absolutely appalled you were, and she gave not one flying flip. The next week she was back, chatting it up with the bartender, making you, for once in your life, eat there. I'll never forget that for as long as I live. It was the first time I ever saw you happy, not just at the restaurant, but ever. You were always such a serious child, even as a baby. You never smiled at me; I couldn't make you laugh. It was like you knew what a horrible place we were in and you hated me for trapping you there."

I pulled out a box of Kleenex from my desk and offered it to her.

"I'm sorry I was such a shitty kid."

She dabbed her eyes, careful not to smear her makeup.

"You look like him, you know."

I was crushed.

"I know," I said hoarsely.

She shook her head.

"No, not him. My grandfather, Grayson Mathews." She gave me a pained smile. "I used to be so furious I had given that name to you. It nagged at me

over the years, especially when I had my son, that I had wasted the most perfect name in the world on you, the name of my beloved grandfather who had died before I could be freed.”

“I can change it if you want,” I offered.

“I didn’t realize,” she said, swinging her purse around so she could dig through it, “until I saw you laughing with Lexi, that when you smile, you look just like him.”

She set a black-and-white photograph down and slid it across the desk.

In the photo was a man, her grandfather, at Disneyland, of all places, grinning like a fool in front of the famous castle.

“He loved Disneyland, would take his kids every summer, load them up in a station wagon and drive all night.”

I barked out a laugh. “Did he?”

I slid the photo back to her.

“Keep it,” she said. “I have another copy.”

“Thank you.”

I stared down at the photo, at the smiling, happy man, his arm around a small girl who stared up at him adoringly.

“Do you need anything?” I asked my mother. “I built all of this for you.” I gestured to the office. “To take care of you. Repay you. I know you must hate me, and I’m not trying to buy you off, but I just have all this money,” I finished lamely.

She carefully folded up the Kleenex.

“I don’t actually hate you. Maybe for a while, yes, but just because you were an easy target. It was simpler than hating myself, my parents, the FBI, everyone. One day I ran out of energy to hate.”

“I hurt you, and I’ll never forgive myself,” I swore.

“Grayson,” my mom said, sitting down across from me, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. “Nothing that happened was your fault.” Her words were careful.

“Of course it was,” I scoffed.

“No. It was Stuart’s fault.”

“Sins of the father,” I said, crossing my arms.

She began to tuck her hair behind her ear then stopped herself.

“I know that you don’t believe me, because when people said it to me, I didn’t believe them. But it’s not your fault.”

“I’ll give you anything you want to make it up to you,” I promised,

needing her to know how deeply sorry I was.

“I don’t need anything from you,” she said simply.

“Oh.” I felt deflated. My laptop dinged with an incoming email, a reminder that I had built my empire for nothing, because my mother would never forgive me.

“You already did a lot for me and my family,” she added. “I know you invested in my husband’s company. Joe dug into it,” she said to my questioning look. “He said he wanted to know exactly who controlled his company.”

“Smart man.”

“He’s a good man. And so are you.”

“I’m not,” I told her, straightening up.

“Lexi seemed to think so. She can be loud.” My mom tipped her head.

“Yeah.” I huffed out a laugh.

“I take it that the reason I haven’t seen you the past month is not because you two ran off to live happily ever after?” she asked.

I lined up the pens on my desk.

“It’s better that she’s not with me anymore,” I said, finally realizing the truth of the words, fully accepting the bone-crushing weight of a future without Lexi.

My mom stood up and came around the desk. She bent over and cupped my face, like she used to do when I was little.

“It’s okay if you’re happy, Grayson. You don’t have to be miserable for me.”

“I went to visit Da—Stuart,” I said abruptly.

Siobhan jerked her hand back.

“Why?”

“Lexi told me to.”

“She did?” My mom was horrified. Betrayed. Hurt.

It felt more normal, easier to bear than her kindness.

“Lexi wanted me to have closure. Also reconnected me with my brothers, and gifted me a pet rock.” I help up Crumpet.

“You really love her.” My mom’s eyes searched mine.

“I love you too,” I said heavily. “But that doesn’t mean anything, does it?”

My mother regarded me.

“You know what? I take it back. I think you’re a little bit at fault. Just the

teeniest, tiniest bit.”

“Right,” I barked out.

“You want to make it up to me?”

“Anything you want,” I promised.

“Go after her. Go after Lexi.”

“I can’t do that. She hates me,” I pleaded.

“No,” my mom said, “she loves you.”

LEXI

T *hump!*

Headlamp lighting my way, I raced through the short grass that surrounded the large orange trees in the town square to the iguana that was lying on the ground. I picked it up, wrapped it in a tea towel, then carried it to the large plastic tub that held more blankets and a heating pad. Iguanas were not native to Florida and were designed for perpetually warm climates. During the rare occasions that Dudley Grove experienced a cold snap, the iguanas short-circuited, falling out of the trees like we were in the plague times.

The wind shifted, and I was pelted in the face with freezing rain.

“I will persevere!” I shouted over the raging storm. Three more iguanas were knocked out of a nearby orange tree.

The smallest one went tumbling in the wind, and I raced after it, poncho flailing behind me. I picked it up and fought back through the blowing rain to the plastic tubs.

As my headlamp swung, I saw a man holding a large black umbrella, placing two more iguanas in the tub.

“Kindness buddies!” I yelled. “Thank you for saving an iguana.”

The man straightened up.

“Grayson?” I yelped.

Through the pouring rain, green eyes regarded me. Cautious.

“Don’t you have an umbrella?” he asked me as I approached.

“Ponchos are far superior.”

The wind tugged at the large umbrella in his hand.

I set the iguana in the container.

Grayson pulled the lid over then shifted his umbrella to the other hand.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, searching his eyes for something—love, sorrow, understanding, an apology, an explanation.

But his face was an unreadable corporate mask.

“I came to bring you a note.” He reached into his breast pocket, pulled out an envelope, and handed it to me.

He stepped up to me, holding the umbrella over us, and pushed back the hood of my poncho. Heat radiated off of him.

I tried to ignore it as I ran my thumb under the flap of the envelope, breaking the seal. Inside was a thick piece of pink cardstock.

In Grayson’s neat economical handwriting was written,

I’m sorry.

In one corner was a minimalist sketch of a rock in a beret with tears running down its face.

“Aww, is that Crumpet?”

“I take him to the office with me,” Grayson admitted.

“Did Richmond Electric change their pet policy?” I joked.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have your settlement check,” he continued in a rush, “but I’ll make sure you’re given what you need. I treated you horribly, and you were just trying to help. I was rude, ungrateful, and horrible to you. You didn’t deserve that, and I’m so sorry, Lexi.”

“I’m sorry too,” I said desperately. “I shouldn’t have pushed you so far. My parents love me to a fault. Probably getting into the enabling territory to be honest. Only child, yadda, yadda. So I don’t really understand what it’s like to be you, to have horrible parents.” I waved my hand.

“Also, don’t worry about the settlement check. You saved my apartment building, and that’s a good deed times a hundred. Donate my settlement money to charity if you want.”

“How did you—” He scowled. “Never mind. I can’t just leave you high and dry.”

“One, it’s raining,” I said, pointing up at the sky, “and two, I have a job.”

“Here? At the diner?”

“Nope. At Spencer’s company. Your bro called me personally and offered it to me,” I said happily. “It’s in communications, so I don’t have to lie to my parents anymore.”

Grayson’s face was a cold mask.

“I see,” he said finally. “I wish you best of luck on your new job.”

He took a step back.

“Oh,” I said, deflating. “Well ... thanks.”

I waved to him, and he nodded then turned away.

I stared down at the note in my hand, the rain making the ink run on the paper. I pulled my poncho hood over my head, my fingers numb and fumbling.

Ahead of me, Grayson was a silhouette in the dull light from the streetlamps.

I couldn't tell if it was the rain or if it was tears running down my face.

Grayson paused then turned back, jogging across the soggy ground.

“Lexi! Lexi, wait,” he called.

He threw the umbrella down and cupped my face.

“Lexi,” he said, the rain pelting his face. His chest was rising and falling, his eyes frantic.

“Did you know,” he said, “that you are the first person to ever say you loved me?”

“That's really sad,” I said, a lump forming in my throat.

His hands fell to his sides.

“I used to think that you were the only person I had ever loved. But that's a lot to put on someone, isn't it? Even you. But you helped me realize that there are other people in my life that I care about and who care about me. You did that for me; you expanded my world, brought me a type of peace I didn't think I would ever be able to experience. I'm sorry I said that you ruined my life, because you didn't. You're the best thing that ever happened to me.” His eyes were sorrowful.

“In fact,” he said, his voice catching, “you're the only good thing that's ever happened to me. I know I don't deserve it, and I know that you deserve better than me, but I'm a selfish, horrible person, and I want you to be there with me, telling me you love me every day. Because I love you obsessively, deeply, horribly, and I don't want to leave here without you.”

“Grayson—”

“Trust me, I know that's not really your problem,” he added. “I can't force you to forgive me, no matter how much money I throw at you, or what I promise. More than I want to be happy, I want you to be happy, and if that's with Spencer, then so be it. You deserve to be happy.”

“Whoa, whoa! In no reality am I dating Spencer. I have had enough

awkward moments this year and am now in my season of boring introversion. I will manage to contain myself. Besides,” I added with a smirk, “Spencer’s not the hottest Richmond brother.”

Grayson’s expression was cautiously hopeful.

“I don’t have anything worthwhile to offer you.”

“You mean besides being blessed with height, good looks, a hot body, and billions of dollars? The humblebragging isn’t a good look on you.”

Grayson gave me a crooked smile.

I swiped a lock of his wet hair off his forehead.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slightly soggy note.

Be Mine.

I hesitated as I looked at the note, thinking about what my mom had said, that maybe some things just weren’t meant to be.

I shook my head.

He was crushed.

“I think that maybe we need accept that we were impactful people in each other’s lives and move on,” I told him, trying to keep my voice steady.

“I can’t,” he sobbed. He fell to his knees in front of me. “Lexi, I can’t.”

“Sometimes self-care is saying no,” I said gently. “We can still be friends.”

“Lexi,” he said simply as the rain drenched him. “I don’t want to be your friend. I want to wake up next to you every morning. I want to bring you coffee in that eyesore of a mug you like. I want to tell you every day that I love you. I want you to know that you’re the most important person in my life. I want to adopt a plant with you or a puppy or have a baby with you. I want to marry you. I want you to be mine for the rest of my life.”

He grabbed my hands.

“People like to say that they are willing to die for the person they love, but dying’s easy. I will live for you, really live. I’ll shop for furniture and memorize all the songs you love and surprise you with weekends in Florida to visit your parents. I’ll write you love notes and leave them in your underwear drawer, and yeah, occasionally they’ll be snarky and they’ll probably be written in black ink, but sometimes to surprise you I’ll steal one of your pink gel pens and write you a love poem.”

He kissed my hand.

“Lexi, I love you, not just for what you’ve done for me—expanding my world, giving me my family, my friends, enriching my life—but for who you

are. Your crazy red hair that I love, the way you laugh when you find something utterly delightful, the way you prop your sunglasses on your nose, the way you flop on a towel on the beach like you're in heaven."

Gosh, I was still so in love with this man.

"You want us to move on, taking the knowledge that we've impacted the other with us into the future. But I can't. Sure, I might continue to exist, perhaps be happy eventually, but I won't be whole, not like I am with you. You fit perfectly in my heart. But if you really want me to go," he said, standing up, "I will. I don't want to be like my father, ruining your life with my obsession."

Green eyes bored into mine.

"Know this. I will always love you. I will always wait for you—ten, twenty, thirty, forty years, when we're old and gray and you decide you want to give me another shot, I'll be waiting there for you. I'll always wait for you. Even though you deserve better. Maybe you'll find someone who loves you more than me. But I'll never find anyone I love more than you. I'll always love you, Lexi." He reached out to stroke my face gently, his fingers trailing through the rain droplets.

I was crying now, my hands over my face. Did I really want to walk away from Grayson? I wondered what my life would be like. Would I meet someone else? Maybe, or maybe not. Would I be happy? Sure. I could find happiness anywhere. But I didn't think I'd ever find what I had with Grayson. I imagined him waiting, waiting, for years, decades, like he'd done for his mom. I knew he meant it: He would wait for me forever.

And now I was full on, snot running down my face, sobbing.

"You know," I said, reaching in my pocket for a soggy tissue. "Someone once told me to stop being so naïve."

"He might have been incorrect," Grayson said softly.

"I think he was," I told him. "Because I believe in fairy tales and handsome heroes with tragic backstories and happily ever afters. I believe in love, and I believe that we can become better people."

"Lexi, I want to be your happily ever after," Grayson said, resting his hands on my shoulders.

"I also believe I love you, and I believe that you make me happy," I said, smiling up at him. "I want a happily ever after, but more importantly, I want it with you."

He gathered me against him, tipped my head back, and kissed me, softly

at first then harder like he never wanted to let me go, like he was finally home.

“I love you,” he breathed. “You are my bliss.”

“And you’re my happy ending.”

Grayson kissed me again, swinging me around.

And sure, it wasn’t warm romance-movie rain—it was an unseasonably cold torrential downpour—but a moment, a person, didn’t need to be perfect to be wonderful.

Grayson set me down.

“Your poor suit. The dry cleaners are going to be annoyed,” I said, trying to brush the mud off.

He kissed me again.

“Don’t worry about that. You’re not my assistant anymore. You’re my girlfriend, and I want to make you happy and give you anything your heart desires.”

“I’m your girlfriend, and I will take your clothes to the dry cleaner,” I sniffed, “especially since clearly you’re the type of man who sleeps with his assistants.”

I slapped him on his backside.

He grinned at me then chased down his umbrella, under which several iguanas were cowering.

I opened up the lid on the vented container, and he gently placed them inside.

“Wait, Grayson,” I said in shock. “It’s Tuesday. Did you miss lunch with your mom for this?”

“I haven’t been going,” he admitted. “Alessio just isn’t the same without you. Anyway, my mom didn’t have lunch today either.” He waited a beat. “She showed up at my office and wanted to talk.”

“Oh my gosh!” I gasped. “You saw your mom. That’s amazing.” I wrapped my arms around him, giving him a big hug.

“I am so happy for you,” I told him, trying and failing not to cry.

“Yeah,” he said, wiping my face with his thumb and nodding. “Yeah, it was amazing. And it’s all thanks to you. Siobhan said she really liked you, said you’re perfect for me.”

“And you’re perfect for me.”

He leaned down and kissed me again. His mouth was warm, and I let the strength of him envelop me.

“Okay, so there is one thing I want, actually.”

“Anything.”

“You, me, Crumpet, Disney.”

“I will take you to Disney. I’ll rent out the whole park for a night,” he promised.

“As much as I want to have the whole park to myself, you have to have the full Disney experience,” I told him. “That means lines, that means screaming children, and that means walking around in mouse ears, eating giant turkey legs at nine in the morning.”

He sucked in a breath.

“No take-backs!”

GRAYSON

Lexi's parents were not happy to see me when I carried the stacks of large plastic containers into the Disney-themed kitchen.

I set the containers carefully in the corner of the adjacent mudroom while her parents glared at me.

"Mr. and Mrs. Collins." I cleared my throat. "I understand I hurt your daughter, and by proxy you, very much with my actions, and I am deeply sorry and will be happy to make it up to you in any way you'd like. I know you hate me for harming your daughter, and I don't blame you. I'm glad Lexi has you all in her corner. You're good parents," I told them.

"Turn those frowns upside down. Grayson is very sorry," Lexi said, skipping into the kitchen. She had changed into dry clothes. "He apologized."

"Did he roll around in the mud groveling?" her mom asked, frowning.

Lexi took my arm while I silently dripped on the tile floor.

"Awkward," she said out of the side of her mouth.

Her dad was the first to relent.

"Squeaky Mouse hasn't been this happy since that third Cinderella movie came out, so I guess I can forgive and forget," Barry said begrudgingly. "But by golly, don't do it again. This is Florida, and I will feed you to the alligators."

"Barry," Lexi's mother scolded. "You can't feed Grayson to the gators. He's too big. They'll leave chewed-up parts everywhere. Not to mention, Lexi heard you, and she can't keep a secret to save her life. No, you poison him and bury him in the orchard."

I bit back a curse.

“This is very unusual behavior for them,” Lexi whispered to me.

“Oh, my casserole is burning!” Cindy rushed to the oven.

“Save the burned bits for Grayson,” Barry said.

“Lexi, why don’t you help Grayson find some dry clothes then hand him a mop so he can clean up the mud he got on my floors,” Cindy said.

I followed her down the narrow hallway to what I assumed was her parents’ room.

“Full disclosure, my dad bought this outfit for you. You didn’t have a chance to wear it fishing.” She whipped open the doors to a shallow closet. “Ta-da!”

“Are those pajamas?”

“No, this is outdoor wear,” she said, holding up the neon-colored matching short-and-shirt set.

“I’d rather freeze in my suit.”

“You’ll get pneumonia,” Lexi said, unbuttoning my jacket. “Also, this outfit comes with matching socks.”

“Are you sure you want to take me back?” I whispered, gathering her in my arms.

I kissed her quietly, softly, as she ran her hands up my bare chest.

“I want you,” I murmured, “but your mom’s casserole is getting cold.”

“You know, I never thought I’d say this,” she whispered, “but I’m ready to go back to Manhattan.”

Ten minutes and a blow dryer later, I sat down at the table in the vibrant Hawaiian shirt and shorts.

“I hope your suit isn’t ruined,” Cindy said as she dished up a heaping helping of seafood casserole. “You can’t be out in a storm like this without a poncho. Barry, don’t we have an extra poncho for Grayson?”

“Dad, no,” Lexi said as his face lit up with a gleeful smile.

“I have the perfect poncho.”

“Grayson’s not—”

Barry came running back in the kitchen. “Ta-da!”

He unfurled a black-and-red poncho decorated with giant mouse ears.

“It’s perfect,” I said diplomatically. “Thank you.”

“You don’t like Disney,” Lexi argued.

“Actually,” I said, “It’s grown on me. It might be genetic. My great-grandfather was apparently a big Disney fan.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I smiled, not sure if I felt sad or happy. “My mom gave me a picture of him.”

Lexi’s eyes shone.

“That’s awesome.”

I pulled out my phone to show her and her parents the picture I’d scanned.

“Aww,” Cindy and Barry cooed. “You have his smile.”

“Funny. That’s what my mom said.” I took the phone back and pocketed it.

Cindy dabbed her eyes.

“Eat,” she said, picking up my fork and handing it to me. “Lexi, have some salad. Grayson, don’t take the burned piece. You’re our guest.”

“Be our guest!” Lexi’s dad broke out in song. I joined him while Lexi and her mom clapped along, laughing in delight.

“We should do a movie marathon tomorrow.” Her dad slapped the table.

“Actually, I’m flying back to Manhattan tomorrow with Grayson so I don’t have to worry about booking an airline ticket,” Lexi told her parents.

“You should come visit,” I told them. “I’ll send the plane for you.”

“We need to buy some furniture first,” Lexi said. “Your penthouse is pathologically empty.”

“Or it’s a thoughtfully provided blank canvas for you to work, Lexi.” I smiled at her. “Every negative has the opportunity to be a positive if you just expand your mind.”

Her parents beamed at me.

“Doesn’t Grayson have a wonderfully positive attitude?”



THE NEXT AFTERNOON I carried Lexi’s things into the penthouse. Gizzy lumbered behind us. The warm weather had returned, and I coaxed him out onto the terrace.

“I’m so glad to be home,” Lexi shouted in the empty penthouse.

“I thought Dudley Grove was home,” I reminded her.

“It is, but in case you didn’t notice, it’s not like I’m able to decorate the bungalow the way I want it.”

“Not enough glitter?” I asked wryly.

She stuck her tongue out at me.

“I’ll have you know I have sophisticated design taste.”

“Someone is going to make a very good corporate wife,” I said, tangling her in my arms.

“Ooh, I wonder who that could be.” She laughed when I tipped her over. “Guess I have to nix my princess theme idea.”

“I’m buying a house in Dudley Grove,” I told her as I led her upstairs. “So I can have a bed I can fuck you on without director’s commentary from your parents. Feel free to decorate that to your princess-obsessed heart’s content.”

She took a flying leap to the bed.

“We’re going to have Little Mermaid sheets.”

“You can have whatever you want.” I leaned in to kiss her hungrily.

She raised an eyebrow and tossed the last of her clothes aside.

“Whatever I want?” she said against my mouth as I untied the ribbons on her sundress.

“I already agreed to the Disney trip,” I reminded her, unhooking her bra. “So please show mercy on me.”

Lexi grabbed my hands, running them up her soft curves to her tits. “All I want is you,” she said softly, lovingly, a beautiful caress.

Naked and alluring, the sight of her made me wonder how stupid I was to ever have risked losing something so goddamn beautiful.

I hurriedly took my shirt off, tossed it to the side, and flipped her over. We shared another kiss, as dizzying as the first time.

Lexi giggled playfully as I rained kisses down her body—on her neck, her collar, her shoulder, to her chest, her breasts, sucking on each of her tits, satisfied when she gasped. The descent continued, going across that soft abdomen of hers and toward my goal.

Her pussy.

Dripping and ready for me as it ever was, I leaned in and planted a kiss right on her clit and watched the pleasure ripple through her. My fingers slid into her, making her good and ready for me.

I sampled her, my tongue darting out to taste her. Her gasps were music to my ears. I let my tongue explore every bit of her before settling on a good, steady pace of it thrusting in and out of her, a tag team with my fingers, the one currently not inside of her teasing her clit.

She tensed up beneath me, her hands, shooting down to take full grips of

my hair, pulling at me hard as she moaned for me. I took it as extra evidence I was doing a good job.

The faster I pushed her, the stronger the orgasm started to wrack her. Her most sensitive spots were being overloaded by my love, and she tossed and turned beneath me. Despite the pleasurable torture, she thrust her pussy into my face harder.

It wasn't long before she was heading for climax. She screamed my name at the top of her lungs, her legs around my head, squeezing me like a fucking vise, all before she gave out and lay flat on her back, breathing heavily.

"Come on," she urged, "you said anything I want. And I want that d on a silver platter."

I dropped my slacks, my boxer briefs following, my cock springing up, aching and hard for her.

She pushed herself up, looking between my legs, her smile massive. She licked her lips as she stared at my cock.

I crawled on top of her again, sharing another kiss, embracing her fully. Our tongues entwined. I reached over to my desk to get a condom, only for her to snatch it out of my hand. She tore it open with her teeth and then rolled it down my cock with her hand.

Another kiss followed as she pulled my cock toward her slit. I pushed in, gently, knowing now there was nothing to rush us along. Bit by bit I entered, and the rush of her enveloping me in return was so intense. I surprised myself every moment I didn't just come instantly, knowing how good she felt.

But I had an iron will when it came to pleasing the woman I loved.

I ran my fingers through her hair, and after I was fully inside her, I started rocking. Back and forth and getting the party started. She was quick to match my pace, ever driven to please me as much as I was driven to please her.

Staring into her eyes, I saw the woman who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. My future wife. And potentially the mother of my children.

If that's what she wanted, anyway.

Our gentle lovemaking became less gentle. Affectionate enjoyment of the other only lasted so long, until lust took over and drove us into animalistic instinct. Not that that was any less of a way to show affection for the person who was your soulmate.

The speed increased, and I took her harder. The sounds of her voice filled the room, backed up by the rhythmic thumping of flesh against flesh. I felt every wince of pleasure she did, the lead-up to orgasm so intense for her that

it made me forget just how intense it was for me too. A finger on her clit, though, made sure she was feeling a little something extra, and if I gave her ten orgasms to each one I had, I still wouldn't find that a fair trade.

She cried out in pleasure, and I held her close, letting her ride out her bliss as it wracked her more and more. I had to grit my teeth then bite my tongue just to hang on, to stop myself from coming before her. I had to stay strong. Pleasing her meant everything in the world to me.

Finally, I heard that familiar piercing scream of utter orgasm. It ripped through her, and she was slamming her hands into the mattress.

The tension gave way to bliss, and I flooded into her. I fell forward, my arms wrapping around her as I felt the orgasm pump through my body, until all that was left was a sensational echo of our sexual dedication to one another.

I kissed her again. As long as she was near, I would be forever satisfied.

"I love you," I whispered to her softly.

Lexi seemed to study my face, staring into my eyes, reading my soul.

"I love you more than anything, Grayson Richmond," she said. It felt like a solemn promise.

"I'm not worthy of your love," I said, voicing the deepest, darkest secret of all.

Lexi wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed our noses together.

"No one is ever worthy of love, but we all deserve it," she said.

We lay like that for a moment, faces pressed together. It felt like the start of something big and new and wonderful.

Lexi pressed a quick kiss to my jaw.

"In the spirit of my lover boy giving me whatever I want ..."

"Can you please choose a different pet name?"

"Sugar daddy, stud muffin, sex kitten ..."

"That's you," I growled, wrapping my arms around her.

"Fine. Big G it is."

I snorted a laugh.

"We need to buy you some furniture." Lexi picked up her phone. "I am going to need a hammock chair, and also I want one of those inflatable airplane slides so we can do indoor sledding. Don't worry," she added when I winced. "Only those in your inner circle will see it." Then Lexi said, "Oh no" while scrolling through her phone.

"You can have the airplane slide," I said mildly.

“Not that.” She showed me her text messages. “You know how you’re doing renovations at the apartment building and very generously housed all the residents up in a hotel? Grenadine just got kicked out.”

“How? They only moved a few days ago.”

“She was hitting on the front desk clerk, and they have a zero-tolerance policy.”

I traced the freckles on her collarbone. “Does Grenadine need a place to stay?”

She wrinkled her nose. “That is a good deed too far.”

“Some kindness buddy you are,” I said, punctuating the words with kisses.

LEXI

“Happy housewarming!” my parents exclaimed.

I wiped my hands and ran from the kitchen down the hall, to the foyer.

I am investing in some roller skates, I decided.

“Grenadine, I told you not to open the door without seeing who it is,” I reminded her when I skidded to a stop in front of my parents.

“There is a doorman downstairs,” she yelled back. “No one unsavory is getting up here.”

To earn her keep, so she said, Grenadine had taken to wearing a French maid’s costume around the penthouse.

“Squeaky Mouse!” My dad wrapped me in a big hug.

“Our little girl is all grown up and has her own castle,” my mother said, hugging me to her chest. The array of metal buttons with cheerful sayings dug into my collarbone.

“Mom, this is supposed to be a nice party. We have a number of billionaires coming, plus, hopefully, a super special surprise guest of honor.”

“I’m wearing my nice vest,” my mother protested, looking down at the colorful embroidered garment.

“This party is off to a great start,” I muttered.

“That’s right, sweetie, stay positive!” My mom pinched my cheeks.

“We need a butler,” Grenadine complained as my dad dragged his suitcases inside.

“Are you sure it’s okay for us stay here?” Dad asked me.

“Of course. We just have a bit of a full house.”

“Let me help you with that, Mr. Collins,” Marius offered as my parents dragged enough luggage for a six-week stay into the grand salon.

“Tell your man to hire him as his butler.” Grenadine jammed her finger at Marius.

“I already have a job, ma’am,” Marius said.

His cat, Moose, jumped on top of the suitcase and hissed at Gizzy, who was plodding by.

My dad wrapped me in another big hug.

“I haven’t seen you in a gazillion years. I think you got taller.”

“She bought a new bra,” Grenadine said walking by, duster slung over her shoulder. “It vastly improved her posture.”

“Drinks? Does anyone need a drink?” I asked loudly, herding them into the kitchen and out of the way of the caterers who were setting out the food.

“Are you hungry?” my mom fretted. “You look peaky. Let me make you a snack.”

“Mom, we have a ton of food for the party. The caterers went overboard.”

“Caterers?” My mom was horrified. “I’ll have to make some pigs in a blanket. Thank goodness I brought that cooler. Didn’t I tell you it was a good idea, Barry?” she said to my father as several packages of mini wieners appeared on the kitchen counter.

“Mom,” I begged.

“Don’t be afraid to accept help, Lexi,” Grayson’s deep voice said. His eyes were dancing.

“Fine,” I said, throwing up my hands. “Pigs in a blanket it is.”

“Oh, come here, Grayson.”

My mother rushed over, gathered him into a hug, and kissed his head.

“How’s my favorite almost son-in-law?”

“Hint, hint.” Grenadine cleared her throat. “Someone needs to propose.”

“I’m going to check on the caterers.”

I had a whole itinerary planned. There would be toasts, snacking, and grand tours of the finally decorated penthouse that was looking much homier.

“Shoo,” I told Gizzy, who was eyeing a platter of fruit.

I waved the caterers out then made sure all the knickknacks and throw pillows in the grand salon were picture-perfect.

“Sorry I’m late,” McKenna said, coming into the grand salon with bags of ice.

“You can move here too. It will be like a sleepover,” I offered.

“Or I could stay at a hotel and *not* in my boss’s house with my grandmother and have room service.”

“Smart woman,” Grayson said dryly.

McKenna took in her grandmother’s maid outfit with a thousand-yard stare. “I hope you’re wearing underwear.”

“Women my age don’t need it. I’m dry as those dead air plants Lexi has in the laundry room.”

“Crap-a-Dee-Doo-Dah, I forgot those were in there.”

“They weren’t on the schedule,” Grayson said, pulling out his phone and opening up the spreadsheet he’d insisted on starting to make sure the plants I’d added to our family didn’t die. He showed me the spreadsheet. “If you buy a plant, it has to go on the schedule.”

He hurried off to go try to save them.

“Are his hot brothers here yet?” McKenna whispered to me.

“No, but they better be soon.” I helped her unload the ice in the catering kitchen freezer then headed back to the real kitchen.

“It’s a real workout living here,” my friend remarked.

In the kitchen, my mom and Grayson were making soothing noises over the desiccated air plants.

“We’ll let them soak and see how they do.” My mom gently placed them in a bowl of water.

“I can order a box of ten from Amazon for twenty dollars,” I told them.

“Lexi.” My mother clicked her tongue. “That’s not how we Collinses do things. Now Grayson, you have to make sure not to let Lexi near that aloe vera plant I brought you. She has a tendency to overwater them.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Where’s the gift table?” my dad asked, coming in with several Disney-themed gift bags.

“Dad, you didn’t have to,” I said as I followed him into the grand salon.

“I am seeing a severe lack of Disney in this penthouse.” He winked. “Got you a cuckoo clock.”

“Grayson doesn’t want that,” I hissed.

Though my boyfriend had said I could have anything I wanted, it was his home, too, and I wanted it to be a reflection of both our tastes.

I limited the Disney to some framed vintage movie posters here and there. But a cuckoo clock?

“You’re not spoiling the surprise are you, Barry?” my mom demanded

when she carried in a platter of steaming and golden pigs in a blanket.

My dad made a face and reached for a bruschetta.

I slapped his hand away. “Grayson’s brothers aren’t here yet.”

“You can have a pig in a blanket,” my mom offered. “Don’t spoil Lexi’s party; she tried so hard.”

The pigs in the blanket were arranged artfully on a platter with several dipping sauces in the middle.

Grayson picked one up.

“This is amazing, Cindy. You’re such a good cook.”

My mom preened. “It’s just a little something I whipped up. The everything bagel seasoning really makes it snap.”

“Did someone order a stripper?” Grenadine’s voice rang out from the foyer, where male voices boomed.

“I’m going to have to steal your maid,” Spencer joked to Grayson. He wheeled a luggage cart holding a big box into the grand salon.

“Pigs in a blanket!” Grayson’s brothers tumbled in behind Spencer.

“Oh, wait. I didn’t know we had to bring a present,” Connor stated when he saw my parents’ gifts.

“I reminded you,” Finn shoved him lightly.

“No wonder Connor flunked his last semester,” Graham growled.

“Connor.” Grayson clicked his tongue.

“I was too busy starting my business to study,” Connor whined.

“He’s taking summer school,” Finn said. “It’s a stain upon an already desecrated family name.”

Connor tried to lock his brother in a headlock. Moose the cat swiped at them from his vantage point on a nearby shelf when one of them got too close.

At that moment the cuckoo clock in the oversized bag on the gift table started shrieking. From the box on the luggage cart, barking could be heard.

“What the—”

Spencer was practically bouncing up and down.

“I know you had an itinerary for the party and that gifts were later, Lexi, but I must insist Grayson opens this at once.” He gestured grandly to the box.

“Can I put my name on it?” Connor asked.

“Hell no.”

A black nose pushed the top of the box off.

“Is that a puppy?” Marius exclaimed. “Wow, Lexi, you’re a miracle

worker. Grayson is a changed man if he's getting a dog."

"The puppy was not on the itinerary," I said, trying not to sound hysterical because, I mean, dead plants were one thing but a puppy? My eye was twitching as I looked at all the carefully selected furniture just begging to be chewed on by a dog.

"You have to look on the bright side," Spencer reminded me with a laugh and pulled the top off the box. "Dalmatians are very Instagrammable."

The puppy took one whiff of the food then hopped out of the box, sending the luggage cart careening away as he sprinted to the pigs in a blanket to a chorus of screams from McKenna and me.

Gizzy took one look at the Dalmatian puppy and hissed. The dog stopped short of the table.

"Good boy." Grayson tossed Gizzy a snack.

The puppy, seeing that Grayson was wearing a black suit that could really use some white fur, practically jumped in his arms, licking his face.

"His name is Pongo—real imaginative, I know—and he was dumped on the side of the road. The Dalmatian rescue picked him up, and now he's going to live with you," Spencer said casually.

"A real happily ever after," Graham stated dryly as the dog started peeing on my brand-new carpet.

"He's just a puppy," Grayson said softly, giving the puppy a very gentle shake to startle him midstream, then picked him up and carried him outside.

"I'm not a real maid," Grenadine declared. "I'm not cleaning it up."

"I'll get it," Grayson called from the terrace, where he had deposited the dog on the planting bed I had installed to liven up the space.

I was already racing for paper towels.

"You know," Finn said as he helped mop up the floor, "I used to be jealous of this penthouse, but it's a risky proposition living up here with a dog."

"No kidding," I said.

The dog raced through the penthouse, barking at everyone and everything.

"Where's Aaron?" Grayson asked apprehensively.

The doorbell rang.

"Coming!" Grenadine hollered.

The dog raced after her, barking its head off.

Aaron made a disgusted noise when he walked into the grand salon,

carrying yet another Dalmatian puppy.

“I was bringing the dog, Spencer,” he said. “What the hell?”

“Language,” my mom chided.

“Mom, Aaron’s a grown man,” I said in exasperation.

“He is also in the C suite of a conservative company, and there are standards to uphold,” she said primly.

“My apologies, ma’am.” Aaron nodded his head.

In his arms, the puppy yawned sleepily.

Dogs were so not on the itinerary.

“Well, happy housewarming,” Aaron said, handing Grayson the smaller puppy.

“Is her name going to be Perdita?” Connor asked.

“You can’t name your dogs Pongo and Perdita,” Finn complained.

“That one,” Spencer said, pointing to the larger puppy that was wiggling out on the floor, “can barely function. If you change his name now, you’re in a world of hurt.”

Grayson held up the smaller puppy.

“Is she hungry?” I asked as Pongo and I both jumped up, trying to see the small puppy in Grayson’s arms.

“Did you guys bring kibble?” I asked his brothers.

“They need special raw diets,” Grayson said as he and his brothers took the dogs outside.

The small puppy seemed to shake off the last of her nap, and she explored the terrace while Grayson kept a watchful eye. One of his brothers brought out the pet rock with a shit-eating grin on his face. Pongo promptly tried to eat it.

“Grayson is going to be such a good dad,” McKenna practically screamed in my ear.

“Oh my gosh.”

“You can’t say you weren’t thinking it.” She poked me in the side.

We watched as Grayson and Marius carefully introduced Moose the cat to the puppies. One swat from Moose, and Pongo was firmly informed of where he stood in the hierarchy.

I anxiously sent a text message to Nasr to see if my special guest had arrived.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” McKenna asked me in a low voice, reading over my shoulder.

“Nope. I think it might be a very bad one.”

Grayson and his brothers tumbled back inside, laughing, the dogs bounding around them. Grenadine played bartender and passed out drinks. I watched the scene, goofy smile on my face. Grayson looked so happy.

My dad slung an arm around my shoulders. “Even if they ruin the furniture,” he joked, “dogs and kids are completely worth it.”

“Hint, hint.” McKenna elbowed me.

The doorbell rang, and my stomach churned as I raced to the foyer.

“You came,” I said.

Siobhan looked at the framed photo of Grayson’s great-grandfather hanging on the wall in the entry.

“Not sure why I did,” she said dryly as I ushered her in.

“We have food and alcohol.”

“Good. I’m going to need a drink.” The two children and her husband, Joe, followed me as I led them gamely into the grand salon.

Grayson’s mom entered the living room warily.

There was a collective intake of breath from his brothers.

“Hello, boys,” Siobhan finally said. “You all have grown up.” She studied Grayson’s brothers as they looked at her, stunned.

“This is Niles and Franny,” she said, pointing to the kids beside her. “Grayson’s half-siblings.”

“A puppy!” the little boy holding her hand shrieked.

Siobhan hefted the plant in the bag she carried.

“I see I’ve been outshined in the gift department.”

“Grayson is a very caring plant dad,” I assured her, “and this is going to be a wonderful addition to the family.”

Grayson was wary and guarded, his corporate mask on.

My mom was having none of it.

“Have a pig in a blanket.” She shoved a platter in front of Siobhan.

“*Mom.*”

“Lexi, she’s a guest.”

“There’s catering,” I assured Siobhan, who was too polite to make a face at my parents, who were decked out in their Florida best for the housewarming party.

“I just have to give you a hug,” my mother insisted, wrapping her arms around Grayson’s mom. She was wearing flip-flops and came barely to chest height on Siobhan, who was dressed impeccably in heels and a silk cocktail

dress.

“I’m Lexi’s mom.” She showed Siobhan one of the many buttons she wore on her vest that proclaimed, LEXI’S FAN CLUB! “And your son is just wonderful.”

“Can’t really take any credit for that.” Siobhan glanced at Grayson.

His expression didn’t change.

“That woman needs a drink,” my father said jovially, pressing a cocktail in her hand. Barely taller than I was, he was the least intimidating man on the planet.

My parents ushered Siobhan away, leaving Grayson with his siblings and Siobhan’s husband.

Grayson didn’t say a word.

“Thanks for investing in my company,” Siobhan’s husband said finally.

“Don’t mention it,” my boyfriend replied.

Niles tugged at Grayson’s pant leg.

“Can I please play with your puppy?”

“Do you two want to go out to the terrace and meet the dogs?” Grayson knelt down; his face softened.

“Yes, a puppy!”

“I wanna puppy!” His siblings jumped up and down.

“We’ll just have to watch them all with the pool,” Grayson said to Siobhan’s husband.

“You have a pool?” the little girl shouted. “You didn’t tell me he had a pool, Daddy. I didn’t bring my swimsuit.”

“We’ll come back another time so you can swim in the pool. This is a nice party,” her dad promised then looked up at Grayson.

“Whenever you want,” he assured him.

“If it’s a nice party,” Grayson’s sister demanded, “then why aren’t we using the pool?” She ran to the sliding glass doors. “Oh my gosh, there’s a unicorn in the pool!”

Hey, I can’t live a life completely devoid of whimsy, corporate girlfriend or not.

Joe sighed.

“She’s five so ...” He shrugged helplessly. “We’ll look at the unicorn later, sweetie.”

“Do you want something to eat?” I offered, bending down.

“Pizza!”

I winced. “We don’t have—”

“I made bagel pizza bites!” my mom crowed.

The kids and several adults gathered around in excitement.

“Your mom texted me and made me buy her bagel bite ingredients,” McKenna admitted. “I can’t say no to your mom, Lexi.”

The little girl went up to my mom. “You look like the Little Mermaid.”

My mom beamed. She lived for these moments.

Then she and Grayson broke out into a duet from the movie, while his sister repeated, “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, it’s happening!”

“I didn’t know you could sing,” Grayson’s mother said, looking at him oddly after the song ended.

“He’s practically perfect in every way.” My mom squeezed Grayson’s arm.

“A fellow nonsinger, I take it?” Siobhan asked me wryly.

“Singing is not Lexi’s gift to the world,” my dad said diplomatically.

“One moment, please.” Grayson excused himself and headed outside to where Pongo was barking at his reflection in the water, dangerously close to falling in.

I raced out after Grayson.

We shooed the dog away from the water, redirecting him to one of the toys the Richmond brothers had brought.

Inside my parents were regaling Siobhan and her daughter with tales from life as Disney cast members, while several of the Richmond brothers were flirting with McKenna, who was all too excited with the attention.

Aaron snapped at them then recoiled when Grenadine said something lewd.

Grayson snickered.

I sighed.

“This was not the elegant housewarming party I had planned for you.”

“Was it ever going to be?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re right it was always going to be an awkward mess. I’ll just give in and embrace my inner Florida woman. Next week I’ll have this whole place covered in inflatable flamingos.”

He was looking at me, smiling, face easy, body relaxed.

“A three-billion-dollar tower, and you’re the most breathtaking view here.” He leaned down, pressing his mouth to mine. “Lexi, I love you, more than you can know.”

I let him kiss me again, really let myself feel it.

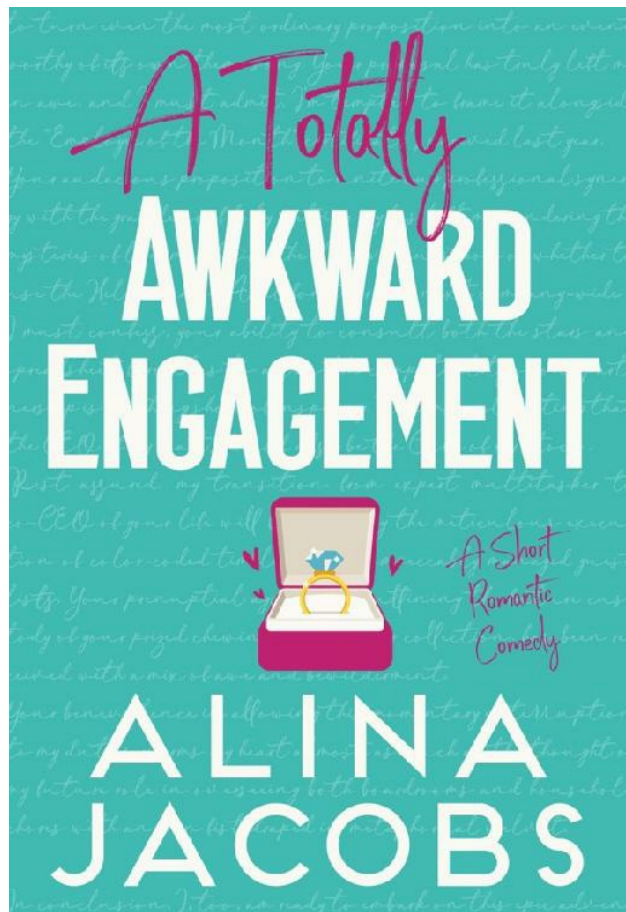
“And I love you. I was going to say ‘more than a Cinderella loves her prince’ but you’re way better than any prince.”

Pongo was barking furiously at the plant Siobhan had brought.

“Sorry your life is so much more chaotic now.”

“No,” Grayson said, kissing the top of my head. “My life is beautiful.”

SNEAK PEAK



SYNOPSIS

This is a Grayson and Lexi bonus short story. With a little help from his mother and brother's Grayson has a Disney worthy engagement planned... that is if Lexi will say yes.

LEXI

“Smile! You’re in the happiest place on Earth.”

It was eight in the morning, and we had early admission to Disney World. I was dressed for the Florida heat and humidity with a breezy romper, oversized sunglasses, a hat, and sneakers. Always sneakers.

Grayson was ... not—white dress shirt, light-gray slacks, and dress shoes were not what I would recommend anyone wear in the height of summer.

I handed him the sunscreen. “When you fall down from heatstroke, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“You said you were going to take pictures,” he said, slipping on a pair of sunglasses that made him look like an undercover CIA agent.

“Someone get this man some ears!” Spencer clapped a plastic set of Mickey Mouse ears on Grayson’s head.

My boyfriend scowled. Between the ears, sunglasses, and the rolled-up white sleeves, he was very much my fantasy come to life.

“You really know how to make a girl all hot and bothered.” I fanned myself. That earned me a small smile from Grayson.

“Let’s get some blackmail material,” Graham crowed as he slung his arm around Grayson and snapped a selfie.

“Get off.” Grayson shook off his brother.

Grayson had promised to try his best to enjoy himself on this trip for my sake, but we had only been in the park half an hour and I felt like Grayson was already being pushed to his limit.

“We have another eight days of this,” I reminded him, squeezing his hand.

“So you’re going to have to dig deep,” his brother Aaron said dryly.

“Remind me why you’re here?”

“It’s family bonding time.”

“I’m not staying for eight days,” Finn declared.

“Then you’ll have to make it count,” Grayson said, taking off the plastic ears and placing them on his littlest brother’s head.

Yes, you read that right. If the trip wasn’t going to be challenging enough for Grayson, I’d convinced his mom and her family to come.

Niles jumped up and down. “I love Disney!”

My parents, dressed head to toe in Disney, complete with custom sneakers, cooed and sighed.

“There’s nothing like taking a child to Disney World and experiencing the magic through their eyes,” my mom said wistfully.

“I remember the first time we took Lexi,” my dad stated, getting choked up. “She was such a chubby little baby.”

Out came the portable photo album.

“Dad.”

“Look at her in her Mickey Mouse hat.” He wrapped an arm around me.

“And here’s Lexi dressed up as the Little Mermaid,” my mom said.

I felt the familiar twinge in my chest. I had never achieved my goal of playing a princess at one of the parks.

“Here she is with Barry. He was still playing Mickey Mouse then.” She shoved the pictures at Siobhan, who inspected them politely.

“Mom, we need to go get in line for the rides.”

Grayson’s little sister was looking around, mouth open, taking in the magic of the park.

“Franny spent two hours this morning getting ready,” her father informed me as the little girl in a big sparkly dress twirled around in front of us.

“I have to meet all the princesses. All of them,” she insisted.

“Aren’t the lines long?” her mother said cautiously.

Grayson and his mom looked equally uncomfortable to be surrounded by so much Disney.

She had toned down her usual sophisticated, chic style, but was still no match for my mom in her poufy skirt, disco-ball-bedazzled mini backpack, sparkly princess shirt, bright-pink-and-purple sneakers that lit up, and fairy wings. Her red hair was threaded with glittering butterflies and seashells. She looked like a vacationing princess and was attracting quite the gaggle of little

girls.

“We are going to see the princesses,” she cooed at Franny. “I know the Fairy Godmother, and she’s offered to help us meet all of them.”

“You know the Fairy Godmother?” Franny screeched. “Mommy, she knows the Fairy Godmother.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Siobhan said, “but you know the Fairy Godmother might be busy.”

“I already texted her.” My mom held up her phone and beamed.

“She literally knows her,” I explained to Siobhan. “My great-aunt plays the Fairy Godmother.”

“Ah.”

“Let’s go!” Franny shrieked, taking off at a run, her father and my parents in tow.

“No, I want to see Star Wars,” Niles wailed, “and Darth Vader.”

“Heck yeah, we’re going to see Darth Vader!” Grayson’s brothers whooped.

Niles immediately cheered up.

“We need to get him all decked out first,” Grayson said.



“Is Disney just as magical as you remember?” Grayson asked me as we waited in line for one of the new Star Wars rides.

“Always.” I sighed happily.

Behind us, several kids were screaming bloody murder because their parents didn’t buy them one of the pricey novelty balloons being sold.

Siobhan swore as someone got too close to her with a dripping ice cream cone.

“Bad word, Mommy,” her little boy, newly dressed up as a storm trooper, scolded.

Grayson stoically applied sunscreen while his brothers secretively did tequila shots in line, and Aaron angrily took a conference call.

If I was a cast member, I would have ratted them out. But I was a guest, so I kept my mouth shut.

“I don’t have *Star Wars*-themed ears,” I said, digging through my bag. “I can’t really ride the ride unless I have the correct ears.”

“Can you wear the blue ones?” Grayson asked, using his polite corporate tone with me.

“You mean the Princess Jasmine ears? Absolutely not.”

“Wear the green ones, perhaps?”

“You’re not taking this seriously,” I said, too sharply, wishing I was with my parents and Franny as opposed to Grayson and his brothers. Then I felt guilty. This was Grayson’s first time at the park, and it was up to me to make it magical.

“Wear the wedding ones.” Connor and his brothers pulled ears out of my bag and put them on their heads. Niles literally rolled on the ground in laughter as Grayson’s brothers mugged for him. It earned us several dirty looks from nearby families.

“Step up to the yellow line,” a cast member called as we heard the clanging of a returning roller coaster.

“I want to ride up front!” Niles shrieked.

“Me too!” I shrieked back at him.

“Yes!” The little boy jumped up and down.

At least someone was having fun.

“Niles, stop screaming,” Siobhan begged.

One of the cast members was directing us into different cars of the roller coaster.

“Could we please sit together?” I asked the cast member.

“Oh my god, Lexi?” she screamed.

“Courtney!” I hugged her. “Hi.”

“Oh my god, after the ride, come see me! And totally, you all can sit together.”

“Do we have to?” Aaron asked, putting away his phone and squeezing in the coaster next to a stoic Grayson.

I sat in front with Niles, Spencer behind me.

Niles and I screamed our heads off on the coaster, which to be fair was geared more for smaller kids, but hey, if you didn’t scream on a roller coaster, what was the point?

“We have to do that again,” Niles insisted when the ride was over and Grayson and his tall brothers were unfolding themselves out of the small cars.

“Heck yeah!” Grayson’s brothers whooped. “Then celebratory giant turkey legs.”

“Giant turkey leg!” Niles was in heaven.

Neither Siobhan nor Grayson looked particularly game for either suggestion.

“Niles, don’t you want to go on a new ride?” his mom asked.

“We’re going to be here a week,” Spencer reminded her. “The man knows what he wants.”

Niles led the group back to the end of the line that we’d just spent an hour and a half standing in.

Courtney grabbed my arm before I could follow them.

Grayson hovered, and I introduced him to her.

“I can see why Lexi never came back to work at the park,” Courtney said, grinning at him. “Oh my god, Lexi, I have to steal you for a bit. I’m on break. You have to come get a coffee with me.”

“It’s all right,” Grayson assured me. “I knew you’d be a celebrity here.”

“I’ll catch up with you guys,” I promised.

“Bring back memories?” Courtney elbowed me.

“So many happy memories.”

“Come on! Hannah’s still here. She’s going to die when she sees you.”

I took a long look at Grayson. Was he mad I was ditching him? I was definitely going to make it up to him.

“See you later?”

He just nodded.

GRAYSON

I knew Lexi, a self-avowed Disney adult, wasn't going to stick by my side for the duration of our stay. How could she? This was her old workplace. Of course she was going to want to reconnect.

However, I was now left alone with my family—only my family, since Lexi's parents had disappeared into the bowels of the colorful park.

I wished I had done a better job of bribing Marius to come early. Then at least I wouldn't have been the odd man out.

My brothers, as they often did, had fallen into their usual pattern of trading inside jokes and engaging in familiar interactions with each other. It was like I wasn't even there. They were in their own little world, Aaron snapping at them while they goaded each other into a giant turkey leg eating contest while Niles cheered.

Beside me, my mother, eyes unreadable behind dark sunglasses, crossed her arms and sighed.

"You know," she said to me under her breath, "I hear they let you drink here at the Disney hotel outside the park."



"YOU LOOKED LIKE YOU NEEDED A RESCUE," my mom said when the drinks arrived. We were sitting at the air-conditioned hotel bar. Around us people in blue vests with gold Mickey Mouse pins circulated around the gem-inlaid tables. I assumed it was supposed to mimic being in one of the ubiquitous princess movies. It wasn't my taste, but I could order a scotch, and that was

all that mattered.

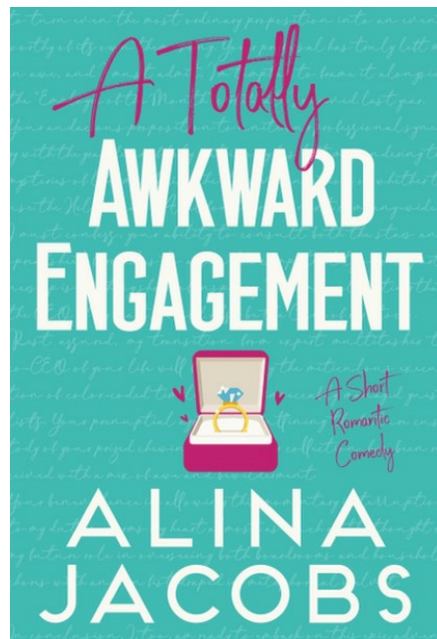
Look at me being positive.

“You staying for the entire week?” I asked my mother.

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FAMILY TREE

Richmond Brothers

From oldest to youngest

Grayson Richmond

Aaron Richmond

Spencer Richmond

Finn Richmond

Graham Richmond

Connor Richmond

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If you like steamy romantic comedy novels with a creative streak, then I'm your girl!

Architect by day, writer by night, I love matcha green tea, chocolate, and books! So many books...

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