



BE MY
Valentine
PROMISE



N I A A R T H U R S

BE MY VALENTINE PROMISE

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Make It Marriage Holidays Book 3

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NIA ARTHURS

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Written by Nia Arthurs

Edited by Jalulu Editing

Cover Design by Cormar Covers

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

She's my wife... whether she remembers me or not.

Cynthia Bradshaw is gorgeous, outspoken, and as stubborn as a bull.

When a car accident wipes her memories of me, I'll need more than a marriage certificate to convince her I'm her husband.

I'll have to win her heart... *again*.

Easier said than done.

Cynthia insists she doesn't date white guys and I definitely fall under that category.

It's a slow journey to win her back, but I've got a head start.

Her body hasn't forgotten my touch and she still craves my kisses.

But the closer we become, the more memories resurface.

And there's one secret that must stay buried forever.

Can I woo my wife before Valentine's Day?

Or will the truth tear us apart when it's finally revealed?

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I
CYNTHIA

MY EYES BURST open as panic overtakes my body. White ceiling. White lights. A steady, loud beeping to my right.

Pain flashes through every nerve, but it's worse in my head.

Feels like a massive hangover on steroids.

Someone peers at me. A woman with dark hair and eyes. She flashes in and out of focus, but I can tell she's wearing a nurse's uniform.

Her eyes double in size when she sees me stirring and I hear her calling for the doctor. A moment later, she dashes out of sight and I'm left there, frozen, in pain and staring at the ceiling.

I wait for an explanation to appear out of thin air. Preferably set to song and dance so it's easily digestible in a three-minute sequence.

But all I get is silence.

And pain.

So much pain.

There must be some reason I'm lying on my back in a hospital, agony flaming through my head. I didn't wake up this morning and decide to rent myself a room in the emergency ward.

Or did I?

What did I do this morning?

I think as hard as I can, but nothing comes to me.

It's like a wasteland in my memory.

I draw a total blank.

Why can't I remember?

A door bursts open.

Footsteps thud.

A whirlwind of activity and chaos ensues.

The bed makes a soft mechanical sound as it lifts me up so I can see the people around me.

There's the nurse.

And a man.

He's gorgeous in that 'in your face' way. The kind that belongs on magazines and billboards. Pale skin. Stunning hazel eyes. Square jaw. Strong, Roman nose. His black hair is messy enough to convince me he really didn't put much effort in styling it and yet the crazy bed-head works for him. I have a feeling any hairstyle would work for him.

He's wearing a wrinkled shirt under a brown coat. I can tell that he's the built, never-miss-leg-day type. A jock. Yet there are tiny indents on his nose from glasses.

The hot nerd.

But nerd is in right now.

And his charisma is way more appealing than any nerd I know.

He's obviously the type of guy who'd get attention just pumping his car with gas. Or reading a book at the library. Or breathing.

His poor girlfriend.

Anyway, Gorgeous Guy and his personal life is none of my business. He's not my type on several accounts. As long as he

can explain what I'm doing here and why my head hurts so much, I'll be good.

"Are you..." My mouth feels like it's stuffed with cotton. I want to ask him if he's the doctor but my throat's decided now's a good time to become an old man with a lung disease and I start hacking up a storm.

"Here." Gorgeous Guy rushes to a plastic cup on the nightstand and tilts it at my lips.

I start to drink greedily.

He hauls the cup back before my thirst is sated.

I give him the stink eye.

"Too much isn't good for you," he says.

Who gave you the right to decide that?

Oh right.

He's a doctor.

"Glad you got up." His eyes fill with tears. "I was scared you wouldn't."

Weird. Are doctors usually so emotional?

He grabs my hand and holds on tight. I stare at his pale fingers wrapped around mine. His wedding ring glints in the light. It's a thick golden band that presses into my skin.

My brows knit even tighter.

Do doctors normally touch their patients like this?

I don't know.

I've never been the type to get sick. Mom always said that, out of her three kids, I used to tackle flu season like a boss.

The door whirs open and a short, older man with tufts of grey hair and blue eyes strolls into the room. A white coat billows behind him and thin lips stretch into a cheerful grin.

"Doctor Carlos," Gorgeous Guy says.

"I see our patient is up." He nods at me. "Welcome back, Mrs. West."

Mrs.

Why is he calling me ‘Mrs’?

“Your husband was worried sick.” Doctor Carlos checks my heart monitor. “Didn’t leave your side for three weeks. We had to chase him out regularly just to get him to eat.”

There are several problems with that statement. ‘Three weeks’ being one of them.

As in, I was in this hospital for *three weeks*.

But the bigger issue is...

“H-husband?”

The room goes still.

I push through the fog in my throat and clarify, “I have a husband?”

The doctor juts his chin down. “Yes.”

My eyes widen.

I don’t remember getting married.

Well, I remember wanting to get married. Desperately.

But the actual event?

Gone.

Everyone in the room studies me intently. I feel their stares like lasers drilling into my body.

What? What am I missing?

“Don’t you remember your husband?” the doctor asks stiltedly, like a teacher who desperately wants their student to know the answer to the question they’re asking.

“Where is he?” I glance at the door, waiting for my husband to stroll through. I’m sure as soon as I get a good look at him, it’ll come rushing back. The day we met. The marriage. The wedding. The honeymoon.

Oh Lord, yes.

We probably had an epic honeymoon because I've been saving myself for that special day and I have a lot to catch up on.

"Did he..." I clear my throat because it's still scratchy, "did he step out?"

Gorgeous Guy looks horrified.

The nurse shoots the doctor nervous looks.

The doctor studies me like I'm a lab experiment gone wrong.

I ignore them all and rise slightly, waiting for my chocolate prince to rush through the door, throw his arms around me and hug me tight. He'll probably be big and fit. Huge muscles. A beard that's full and lined up. Gorgeous, thick lips. Idris Elba meets Morris Chestnut. All the smolder and swagger in the world.

Oh yes.

Thank you.

I would like my husband to please stand up.

"Honey." Gorgeous Guy touches my hand again. It's a tentative grip this time. His thick eyebrows are drawn tightly together.

Honey?

I lick my lips. Pull my hand away as unease wraps around me.

Now that I think about it, the doctor came in later.

Dr. Carlos. It's right there on the *real* doctor's pocket.

So who is Gorgeous Guy?

"Honey, it's me." Gorgeous Guy taps his chest frantically. "Don't you remember?"

A gasp builds in my chest.

The wedding ring.

The concern for my well-being.

The white guy?

No.

Nope.

I didn't marry a Caucasian.

I know myself.

I like them brown. Of African descent. Chocolate down to their toes.

There's no way I married outside of my race.

No freaking way.

"What day is it?" I glance around. "Is it April Fool's day?"

"It's the end of January," the nurse says.

"Is it?" I don't remember New Year's. Or Christmas. Or Thanksgiving.

Gorgeous Guy swings his head to the doctor and asks in a low voice, "What's wrong? Why can't she remember me?"

Dr. Carlos winces. "Mr. West, I think we have a problem."

My eyes widen when I lift my hand and notice a giant rock sitting heavily on my finger.

Terror zips through my body.

Oh yes we freaking do!

A loud beeping sound pierces the air, building on the tension that just mounted to deadly levels.

The nurse hoists herself around my bed. "Mrs. West, you need to calm down."

"I'm not Mrs. West!" I shriek.

Have I been caught in some parallel dimension? Or am I dreaming?

What kind of twisted reality is this?

The heart rate monitor gets louder and louder until it sounds like it's about to explode.

“Cynth.” Gorgeous Guy pounces on my hand.

I flail until he’s off. “Don’t *touch* me.” My legs kick under the thick blanket. “Don’t you dare touch me.”

Hurt crashes through his eyes.

My heart pinches, but I ignore it.

I have to figure out what’s going on. Aliens? A walking nightmare? My consciousness trapped in a video game?

There’s no way this is real life.

None.

“Mr. West,” the doctor calmly pulls on Gorgeous Guy’s shoulders, “it might be best if you’d step outside.”

“Okay.” The word gets pushed out with a sigh of frustration.

I glare at him. *Imposter.*

He pins me with a bewildered stare.

“I love you, Cynth.” He has the audacity to murmur tenderly at me as he passes my bed.

I tear my eyes away from him, my heart pounding—though not as wildly as before.

“Alright, Mrs—” the nurse freezes like one caught in the acts of a heinous crime, “I mean, *Cynthia*. Just take deep breaths.”

“Deep breaths,” I repeat.

“Mm-hm.” She glances at the monitor. “Hee-hoo.”

“Hee-hoo.”

“Hee-hoo. Hee-hoo.”

We both sound like idiots.

“Cynthia,” the doctor begins, “can you tell me your last name?”

“Bradshaw.”

He stiffens. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.” *This is easy.*

And yet the doctor’s lips tighten with worry.

“What did you have for breakfast three weeks ago.”

My mouth opens and I expect something confident to tumble out, but it doesn’t.

I draw a blank.

The doctor exchanges a look with the nurse. It’s pregnant with unspoken words and it makes me want to pop open their conversation bubble until all the secrets spill out on my head.

The nurse winces.

The doctor blinks three times.

What kind of Morse code is this?

Before I can figure it out, the door bursts open and a tall, dark-skinned woman with coiffed black hair and pure red lips barges into the hospital room. She’s wailing loudly, her red fingernails flailing through the air like she’s part fly swatter.

I burst into tears the moment my gaze collides with her warm brown eyes. “Mommy!”

Sure, this *could* be a fancy video game simulation and maybe the woman in front of me is nothing but zeroes and ones, a configuration of my own mind, but she’s my mommy and that’s enough to comfort me like a warm blanket on a cold night.

She touches my leg. Immediately, my body’s flooded with the thought that everything’s going to be okay. It’s the power of the mother. The ability to make every problem feel small.

It’s been that way since I was young. Mom was hugs on Sunday afternoons after grueling church services. She was sewing machines and patient hands on top of mine as she taught me how to make clothes. She was band-aids and a hug when I sprawled to the ground after my ill-fated ‘photoshoot on the treadmill’. She was there when the first guy who asked me out bailed after hearing about dad and his ‘machete’.

Yup.

A machete.

Most overprotective fathers just boast about their shot guns. But my dad? He says he wants an ‘up close and personal’ experience.

“Cynthia!” Mom throws her arms around my shoulders. She smells like baby powder and that thick blue gel she used to put in my hair as a kid.

Pulling back, I note the deep wrinkles in her skin and around her lips and mouth.

When did mom get so old?

My eyes slide past her to the door. “Where’s dad?”

As if my words conjured him, my father steps into the room.

He’s a small man with skin a rich shade of mahogany and lean limbs. Mom is taller than him, a fact that he is inestimably proud of. Claims he ‘shot out of his league and hit a three-pointer’.

“Cynthia, baby.” Dad rushes to my bed side.

Seeing the tears in his eyes automatically starts the waterworks for me. I’m a huge ‘daddy’s girl.’ My father spoils his kids rotten but, since I’m the youngest and live at home, I get a lot more of the spoils to myself.

He bats away a fat tear from his cheek.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen dad cry.

Ever.

“Dad, are you okay?” I glance over his leg, noticing the speed that he’s moving. “You’re not wearing your cast.”

Dad goes still as a statue.

It’s such a harsh distinction.

One moment, he’s in motion.

The next, he’s skidding to a stop so hard smoke pours from his sensible brown loafers.

“Honey...” Mom’s eyes dart between mine like she’s searching for the answers to life’s greatest mysteries. “Why would you ask that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Dad hurt his leg three years ago. He’s been walking fine ever since.”

My mouth turns dry as cotton. “He did?”

“Yes.” Dad nods.

Mom trembles. “Don’t you remember?”

Dread pools through my veins. The cotton turns to sawdust in my mouth. “No. I don’t remember anything.”

“Ma’am.” The doctor clears his throat.

“What’s wrong with her?” Mom shrieks, her jaw trembling and her eyes burning with so much fire she’s about to burn this entire room down. “What’s wrong with my baby? Why can’t she remember?”

“Ma’am, just calm down.”

“I *am* calm!”

No she’s not.

Even *I* can see that.

Dad places a hand on her arm and shakes his head slightly.

The fire in mom’s eyes loses some steam. She’s still visibly wound tight, but at least she’s not screaming anymore.

My head aches harder, like someone took a bat to my cranium and went all ‘Mexican piñata’ on me. Drowsiness pulls at my entire body, but I fight it with everything I have.

“What am I doing here?” I ask. “Am I sick? Is it... do I have a terminal illness?”

Every head swings my way.

Every eye fastens on my face.

You know those moments in class when you raise your hand, thinking you’ve just said *the* most intelligent, inspiring,

and witty phrase in the world and your peers just start laughing at you? I'm getting those same vibes here.

Only, in this case, the laughter is replaced with horror.

I reach for mom's hand. "And there's some weird guy outside claiming to be my husband." I keep my voice low because I don't want the nurse and doctor overhearing. They could be on that imposter's side. "I don't know what's going on here, but we need to be careful."

"Why is she saying that?" Dad spits gruffly. "Doesn't she remember Bear?"

"Bear?" I scrunch my nose. *What kind of name is Bear?*

The doctor shakes his head. "As I was explaining to Mr. West before you arrived, there seems to be a problem."

"That's pretty obvious," mom snaps.

I groan as my head starts to spin.

"We took a look at her scans..." the doctor is saying, but his voice sounds like it's coming from a can. Tinny. Distant.

Worry gnaws at my chest.

Dad hurt his leg three years ago. Why can't I remember that he already got surgery for it?

"... there was some swelling in her brain. The area where memories are stored..."

The doctor's voice gets further and further away.

Mom's wail sounds like it's not even real.

I see her go down from the corner of my eye.

Dad covers his mouth, his gaze shuttering like the weight of the world just landed on him.

It's okay, dad. I'm okay.

But I can't speak.

My eyelids are so heavy they're like twin anchors on my face.

I collapse into the hospital bed, surrendering to the darkness.

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BEAR

I DIG my fingers into the bottle of iced tea, my stomach in knots.

This is wrong.

I shouldn't be here, sitting outside, waiting for news to travel from Cynthia's hospital room to my ears.

The distance between us is too great.

This isn't where I belong.

I should be in there holding her hand, assuring her that everything will be okay.

I should be in the thick of it.

Lifting her up.

Caring for her.

The way I have since we met.

The way I always will.

Standing outside is too harsh a punishment.

The condensation from the bottle coats my hand.

It's slimy.

An unwelcome sensation.

Kind of like the feelings that hit me when the love of my life looked straight into my eyes and told me to 'get off'.

There was no warmth.

No spark.

No love.

Her voice was harsh. Too harsh.

Reminded me of the first time we met.

That night, she was the life of the party.

Chocolate skin and scarlet lips.

Freedom in a red pantsuit.

Vibrancy in motion.

She had her hair in this huge afro that billowed freely. No pretense. No shame.

She knew who she was and she wore it with pride.

I was enamored by her. Tried my best to get her attention. She blew me off because I didn't fit her idea of the 'right' guy.

That Cynthia got won over by my persistence.

But if she's back with no recollection of our life together...

I shudder. Run a hand through my thick hair.

The sounds of the hospital rattle around me. Gurneys squeaking over tiles. Footsteps—so many footsteps. Doctors marching to patients. Nurses plodding wearily to their desks. Loved ones pacing in anxious strides. I could produce a track based on those varying thumps alone.

Thud. Thud. Thump.

It's enough to drive me crazy.

The urgency. The never-ending motion.

The circle of life and death.

Healing and sickness.

I wish I wasn't so intimately acquainted with this place.

It's been three grueling weeks. Days that blurred into one another. My back on a hard hospital cot that wasn't built for a man as broad and tall as me. The constant anxiety. The fear that my best friend wouldn't open her eyes again.

Three weeks.

Every day was torture.

Every day I battled the thought that I would have to let her go.

In all that time, I had only one desire.

Just wake up, Cynth.

I begged, pleaded and bargained with the Almighty to see those bright brown eyes again.

But it seems there's a price to pay for my wish being granted.

Give and take.

Someone woke up, but it wasn't her.

It wasn't *my* wife.

I take a swig of the iced tea.

At that moment, Mrs. Bradshaw storms out of Cynthia's hospital room. "Amnesia. She has amnesia."

I choke mid-sip. "What?"

Mrs. Bradshaw pins me with a frustrated look. "A bunch of hacks."

"She really doesn't remember anything?"

"Nothing for the past three years." She plants dark hands on her hips.

My eyes slide back to the door. "What are they doing now?"

"I don't know. I got kicked out. Apparently, I'm too 'emotional' and 'I'll get in the doctor's way'."

I twist around to stare at the door. The need to jump up and storm into Cynthia's hospital room is strong, but I try to tamp it down.

She doesn't want me in there.

It still stings.

A heavy wrinkle forms in the middle of Mrs. Bradshaw's forehead. "My daughter..." Emotions crack her voice and though she's trying to appear strong, the mask is breaking apart. "My poor Cynthia."

"It's okay." I wrap my arms around her.

Her head drops against my shoulder. "What are we going to do, Bear? She doesn't remember that her father's cast has been off for *years*." Mrs. Bradshaw eases back. Her eyelids shimmer with some kind of glittery eyeshadow and her lips are a dark red. Cynth got her love of fashion and making statements with her appearance from her mother. "She doesn't remember you."

"I got that." My jaw tightens. "What did the doctor say? When will she get her memories back?"

"He said we'll have to wait and see."

My stomach lurches. "You mean..."

"There's a possibility she can get her memories back with time, but there's also a possibility that..."

"She won't." The words fall out of me and slam to the ground.

It took me a year to get Cynth to admit she loved me.

I chased her relentlessly and though I always said I'd do it again if I had the chance, starting from square one after so long...

Exhaustion shoves me back.

I curl over. Plant my elbows on my thighs. Bury my face in my hands.

Mrs. Bradshaw rubs my shoulder. "I know how you must be feeling."

No, she really doesn't.

I doubt anyone will get how devastating it is to receive a phone call after a major fight with their wife.

“The vehicle registered in your name has been found in a ditch...”

My breath thickens.

Damn. I never want to feel that kind of horror again.

I glance at Mrs. Bradshaw. “Does she remember you?”

“Yes. She remembers me and her dad. She also remembers her job and all her friends at the studio.”

I do quick mental calculations. “She was working with Summer when I met her. It makes sense that those memories are old enough to stick.”

A phone rings.

It’s hers.

Mrs. Bradshaw plucks it out of her purse and sucks in a deep breath. “It’s Francine. I should get this. Give her an update.”

“Sure.”

As Mrs. Bradshaw strides away to speak to Cynthia’s oldest sister, I hear footsteps approaching.

“Happy freaking birthday to me!” Summer strides into view. She’s a short and curvy woman with dark skin and long, black hair. In her grip is a bunch of helium balloons with the words ‘fashion’ printed all over them.

My eyes widen. “Summer.”

“Where is she? Where’s my best freaking gift ever?” Summer walks right up to the hospital door. “Bear, can you open this?”

“She’s not ready for visitors yet.”

“That’s fine.” Summer lifts her shoulders in an easy shrug. “I’ll wait out here until she is.” The fashion mogul makes herself comfortable in the chairs. The balloons bounce against each other, their cheerful appearance clashing with the stark white of the hospital walls.

I take the seat opposite Summer.

The shrewd businesswoman eyes me. “You look like crap.”

“Always nice words to hear.”

“Did you ever leave her hospital room?”

I glance at the door that’s barring me from my wife. “Only a few times. To meet with my team. We had a deadline that we pushed for despite...” I blow out a breath. “Despite everything. Thankfully, I had my laptop with me.”

“You worked in that room? How? I thought you needed a studio to produce music?”

That’s not true. Technology’s evolved to the point that almost anything can be done if you’re willing to get creative. Since I own a company that produces music for movies and video games, I’ve got an extra license to be as unique as possible.

“I didn’t have to do the actual sampling,” I explain to Summer. “That’s a lot more involved and you do need a studio. The team moved things around so I just did editing. Added a few synths and tweaked the drumbeat. Thankfully, I had enough of the sound to work with and...” I glare at her. “Did you just try to distract me?”

“It worked for like two seconds.”

“Do I look that bad?”

“You ever seen bird poop caked on a windshield?”

I scowl.

Summer frowns. “My intel said Cynth doesn’t remember you. That must suck, huh? What if she never remembers you again?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“But *if* she doesn’t, what are you going to do?”

“I—”

“Where’s the patient?”

Saved by Colin.

My friend stumbles toward us and collapses into the chair beside me. He closes his eyes, sighing like a balloon losing air.

“Who called you?” I wonder.

“One of the nurses.”

Summer snorts. “You mean one of your little conquests.”

“Hey, baby,” Colin flirts without even looking her way, a sloppy grin on his lips, “you can always hop on this train if you’re jealous.”

Summer sneers. “You wouldn’t be able to handle all this.”

“Now that’s a challenge.” Colin pops an eye open. “Care to take this to an empty room so I can show you what a good time is?”

Summer slants him a disapproving glare.

“Did someone say ‘good time’?” asks a familiar voice.

Summer spins around. “A!” She squeals. “What took you so long? I texted you an hour ago.”

“Feline fashion emergency, boss,” Ally says as she lopes to the waiting chairs. “There was a client demanding we change his Persian cat’s wardrobe for a couple’s shoot.”

Colin opens both eyes. “He took his cat to a photoshoot?”

“No,” Ally sings, setting her purse down on the chair as if it’s a child. Flinging her curly hair over one shoulder, the model-turned-personal-stylist corrects Colin. “He took a couple’s photoshoot *with* the cat. As in the cat was the other half. As in...”

“I get it,” I mumble.

“Wow.” Colin blinks in mild horror.

Ally glances at me. The sun hits her light brown skin and emphasizes the concern in her eyes. “What’s the latest update?”

“She doesn’t remember him,” Summer blurts.

Colin snorts. “What is this? A Nicholas Sparks novel?”

“You read?” Summer gasps.

Colin digs his hand into his pocket. “Give me a minute. I think I have a safety pin somewhere with your balloon’s name on it.”

“Jerk,” Summer spits.

I shake my head at Ally. “There’s not a lot of information yet. They’re still running some tests.”

Mrs. Bradshaw returns to the waiting room, a worried crease between her brow.

Colin launches to his feet and offers his chair. “Mrs. B, you look lovely as ever.”

My mother-in-law chuckles, though it’s weary and restrained. “Colin, it’s been a while.”

“Too long if you ask me.” He winks.

Her smile gets a little wider. “You’re here for Cynthia?”

“Yes.” Colin smacks my shoulder. “This guy’s been walking around like a ghost since the accident. I’m hoping he can turn back into a real boy now that she’s woken up. The company’s falling apart without him.”

“No, it’s not,” I argue.

“Yes, it is. Me and Bianca are holding it down the best we can, but we don’t have your ear for the winners.”

“It’s not like things have changed that much. I still produce from the hospital room.”

“No offense, Bear,” Colin scratches the back of his neck, “but your compositions lately have been... real dark.”

“Dark?”

He glances at the others. “Our client asked for a pop-feel. Bouncy and breezy. It’s the part of the movie where the family gets together and they’re in a good place, you know?” Colin points a finger at me. “This guy gives us a Draconian score heavy on the cello. Think hopelessness and depression on strings.”

“Oh.” Summer slants me a pitying look.

Immediately on the defensive, I glare at Colin.

Can anyone blame me?

I compose what I feel and, lately, my life’s been pretty freaking terrible.

Maybe some people can fake joy in their music, but I’m not the type.

I didn’t start out to be a film and video game composer. My background is in business and music was a hobby. But one day, I realized I had a knack for putting emotions into symphonies.

Music can move a soul and the best scores are the ones that punch you in the gut gradually, so gradually that you don’t even realize you’re getting emotional until it’s too late.

Since Cynthia’s accident, I’ve been able to dig up all the darker emotions of humanity—fear, anxiety, worry, anger. It’s like an overflowing well. A buffet of negative feelings.

Latching onto the distraction kept me sane.

The door opens and Mr. Bradshaw pokes his head out. The joking and playing around stops like a record scratch.

Mrs. Bradshaw jumps to her feet. “Is she up?”

“Yes.” My father-in-law nods.

Doctor Carlos steps out and notices Summer, Ally and Colin gathered. “So many people aren’t allowed in at once. We don’t want to overwhelm her.” His sharp eyes slide to me. A hint of sympathy courses through his expression, but his voice is hard when he says, “No one is allowed to upset the patient. It could be very harmful to her recovery.”

Translation: *stay away from Cynthia.*

The instruction hurts like a beast.

I curl my fingers into fists, fighting the wave of anger that consumes me when Summer, Mrs. Bradshaw and Ally tiptoe into the room, leaving me behind.

There's no way I'm sitting here, so close to my wife and yet so far.

"I need a drink," I mutter.

Colin, to his credit, doesn't point out the half-filled bottle sitting on the floor next to my feet.

"Me too." He slaps my back.

I stride to the nearest vending machine and slam my coin into it.

Choosing a soda, I press the button.

Nothing happens.

I slam my hand on the machine. "Come on."

Nothing.

Again.

Slam.

The entire machine rocks.

"Let me." Colin shoves me aside and presses his fist over the vending machine's glass. In two quick knocks, he frees my drink.

"Thanks," I growl, my heart thundering.

When I turn around, I find my friend eyeing me intently.

"What?" I snap.

"Isn't this kind of a good thing?"

"What the hell did you just say?" I inch into Colin's space, my eyes burning a threat.

He doesn't even flinch.

The bastard.

"She's awake. She's alive. And she doesn't remember what you said to her before..."

"Shut your mouth," I warn.

“You can make a different choice this time,” Colin continues because, obviously, he’s got a death wish. “You don’t have to tell her this time.”

“You think I wanted this to happen?” I hiss.

“Of course not.” Colin glances around. Lowers his voice. “But it did. There must be a part of you that’s relieved you can start over.”

“No there’s not.” Damn. Did I answer too fast?

“Freaking liar. You said that too fast.”

Dammit.

He steps toward me. “You’ve got a second chance to make things right with your wife, bro. You’ve got another chance to keep what happened a secret, do you understand what I’m saying? She doesn’t have to find out again.”

My chest rises and falls as I glare at him.

But I don’t swing a fist.

I don’t tell him off.

I don’t say anything.

Because, deep down in my chest, I know he’s got a point.

CYNTHIA

I REMEMBER SUMMER.

She's my boss. Her hair's long and straight. She's wearing a black sparkly jacket over a patterned blouse and skinny jeans. Prada shoes confirms she's a woman after my own heart.

Gorgeous and petite, she carries herself like a queen.

Which she is.

Summer started a personal shopping company at the incredibly young age of twenty-five. Sure, she might have gotten a leg up from her golf star father and heiress mother, who networked like crazy to get her that first little push, but that's beside the point.

She took her first loan of a hundred thousand dollars and made it *work* where plenty other businesses have failed.

I smile as she teases me about all the clients who are waiting for my return.

The fact that I have clients is shocking.

My last memory is of me struggling to gain a foothold in the business.

At least some of these surprises are good ones.

The woman beside Summer is a friend.

Ally.

I remember her too.

Ally's tall. Like ridiculously tall. She used to be a model, which accounts for her spindly arms and willowy figure. Despite the fact that she already towers over most people, she's wearing heels and is unabashedly confident.

Summer and Ally.

Faces I know.

People I trust.

Loved ones who don't claim to be married to me.

I remember.

That feels pretty freaking awesome after the morning I've had.

As we chat, I keep staring at them and thinking '*I know you*'.

It's an internal cheer. The kind you'd give to a baby when he makes his first steps.

It's nothing to write home about. It's not like he's playing piano better than Mozart. It's not like he's climbing Mount Everest or curing cancer. But the fact that the baby managed to get it done *at that stage* in his life warrants the squealing, the video taping and the posting it on every social media platform available.

I know you, guys.

Anything that can conjure those words gets the biggest gold star.

My boss and co-worker—who are more like friends if memory serves me right—leave not too long after their visit.

Summer tells me to keep the balloons on my nightstand. They bob up and down, moving to the tempo of the air conditioner that blows cold air in my direction.

The silence falls sharply when the door closes behind them.

I miss the chaos.

Now I'm stuck with my chasm of a memory bank and far too many questions.

I sit up as mom brings me a bowl of soup.

Ugh. Hospital food.

Whoever made this has no idea what the word 'seasoning' means.

Dad pats my foot. "Princess, after the doctor runs through the last examinations, you'll be free to go home."

"Awesome. I'm dying of hunger for some reason."

"Oh, are you?" Mom chuckles.

"Enough of this bath water." I push away the soup. "Fire up the grill, dad, because I'm thinking I'll stuff myself on some barbecue ribs and potato salad." My tongue darts out and I lick my lips, already drooling at the thought. "Maybe some key lime pie to finish off."

"Ah... Cynthia," Mom says nervously.

I keep talking because the daydream is too sweet to give up. "Or should I go with peach cobbler instead?"

"Your stomach won't be able to handle all that food." Dad gives me a stern frown.

"Why not?" I whine.

"Honey, you've been eating food through an IV." She squeezes my hand. "It'll take a while until you can have solids again."

I moan. "This is a nightmare."

Mom sets the spoon down on the table that's pulled over my lap. Her lips press into a firm line. I know she's going to bring up a topic I won't like to hear.

"Sweetie, why don't we talk about your husband now?"

"Mom..." I groan.

Dad holds my hand and squeezes. "Bear's really worried about you, Cynthia. You should have seen him over the past

three weeks. He was right by your side the entire time. We had to bring him a change of clothes just so he could shower.”

“So he’s against showers.” I roll my eyes.

“No, he was that set on being right here in case you woke up. He didn’t want you to open your eyes and not see him next to you.”

“Dad,” I cling to his hand, “you know me, don’t you?”

He nods.

“You know what I like and what I don’t like.”

“What’s your point, Cynthia?”

“Since I was a teenager, I’ve been obsessed with a certain type of look...”

“Okay.”

“I don’t remember changing that preference.”

“Looks aren’t everything, sweetie. Take me and your mother. I have no idea what she saw in me, but she gave me a shot when she could have gotten a tall, muscular guy instead.”

“That’s different.”

“Why?” Mom asks, her eyes sharp.

“Because both you and mom are...”

“What?” Dad arches an eyebrow.

I haul the words back before they escape. “It’s different.” I finish lamely. “And the fact is, I can’t see myself dating someone like him.”

“Someone like him?” Mom gets tense.

“Yes. Someone... with that... appearance.”

“You mean because he’s white.”

“It’s called preference.”

“It’s called a *marriage certificate*, Cynthia. I can’t believe you.” Mom throws her hands up, her voice blistering. “Do you hear your daughter right now?”

“Dear...”

“No, she’s being ridiculous.” Mom points a red nail at me. “The only person who was as torn up as we were about your accident was Bear. And now she’s hating on him just because he’s not black. I sincerely can’t imagine how hurt he must be right now because you’re acting like this.”

“Honey, let’s calm down.”

“I *am* calm.” She glares at him. “I’m just disappointed. I didn’t know I raised my daughter to judge people based on the color of their skin. Not when we know how it feels to be treated differently because of the color of ours.”

“It’s not just because of that,” I defend myself. “You expect me to throw myself at him, but I don’t remember the guy.” My fingers dig into the blanket and my voice climbs. “I don’t remember falling in love with him. I don’t remember kissing him. I don’t remember saying ‘I do’ to him. He’s a stranger. He could be an ax murderer. For all I know, he could be the one who caused the accident and put me in this freaking bed!”

“Cynthia Grace Bradshaw!” Mom hisses.

Dad clears his throat. “Why don’t we show you some pictures, hm? We’ll prove that you at least knew Bear enough to trust him.”

Anxiety rushes through me. I want to say no, but I’m also highly aware that if I don’t agree, mom’s going to have a fit. She already looks like she’s going to tear this hospital up for Bear’s honor.

If they care about this random guy so much, that *must* mean something.

Right?

Maybe if I do see some pictures, this will all come together in my head.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to.” Dad touches my arm. “The doctor said you should take it easy.”

“No. It’ll help.”

“Alright.” Dad nods at mom.

She takes out a cell phone and hands it over to me. “This is yours.”

“Mine?” My eyes widen at the shiny device. “Nice. Did I get a promotion at work?”

“Bear bought it for you.”

My shoulders slump. “Oh.”

“He spoils you,” mom says with a glare, as if she wants to turn me over her knee for accepting all Bear’s ‘supposed’ gifts and not remembering him.

“Right...”

On the phone screen is a photo of Gorgeous Guy.

Not even me *and* him.

Just him.

There’s no way I did that.

My phone screen is always a glamor shot of me.

Always.

I’m not a narcissist, but I do like looking at myself. The fact is... I’m not bad to look at. Sure, I might not be everybody’s cup of tea and years of elementary school bullying pounded that truth into my head, but I’m proud of my journey to self-confidence. It wasn’t an easy road.

I used to get teased daily for my flared nose, my ‘kinky’ hair, and my big, thick lips that stretched across my face. In my teenaged years, I fried my hair with perms and considered getting surgery done to make my nose more European just so I could fit in.

It wasn’t until I attended an African fashion show, where the models all looked like me—big noses, big lips, and big bodies—that I realized how foolish I had been to hate what I’d been born with.

This is my face.

These are my lips.

This is my nose.

And it's beautiful.

All of it.

Once I accepted that, there was nothing that could stop me.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Mom asks.

"Give me a minute." I frown at the picture of Gorgeous Guy. The screensaver is of him in a studio. The lighting is dim, but I can make out a computer screen as well as a sound board in the background. My eyebrows crinkle. "What does he do?"

"He's a music producer."

"Quite successful," Mom adds.

Like that matters.

Dad pulls a chair up and sits on it. "You met him while he was the DJ at a party."

"A DJ?" I gasp.

No way did I get married to a DJ.

"It's more like a hobby. His main business is producing musical scores for successful films and video games." Dad studies me intently.

I wince as I struggle to remember.

Nothing.

I tell them as much. "None of this is ringing a bell."

"That's okay." Dad rubs my hand.

I open the phone and scroll to my social media account. Thankfully, I'm signed in because I have no idea what my passwords are right now.

A gasp tears out of my throat when I see my socials scattered with pictures of me and Bear.

"We were Instagram official?" My eyes widen. That's worth more to me than a marriage certificate.

Dad's brows crease in puzzlement.

I scroll through the comments. They're mostly positive. Although I do see one that calls me a 'sell-out' for marrying a white guy.

I wince because I don't remember doing that at all.

My fingers stall on a grainy video of us together. We're in bed and Bear's hands are around my waist. They're big hands. Pale as a napkin. They clash against my dark brown skin like a drop of milk in a mud bath. My shoulders are bare except for a silk spaghetti strap and Bear's chin which is nestled against my neck.

"Guys, can you believe my husband?" I coo to the camera. My hair's wild and billowing, smushed slightly by Bear's head.

He's all up in my afro.

One of the most sacred parts of me.

I let him into my hair.

The me in the video says, *"I asked him what he wanted for his birthday and guess what he told me?"*

Bear turns to me with half-lidded eyes. His silky hair's mussed and his lips press my skin. *"I said I only want you."*

"He's so good to me."

The video ends.

Silence fills the room.

Shock holds me spellbound.

I either took my marriage public or this is a really elaborate ruse.

"That doesn't prove anything," I croak, holding on to what's left of my sanity while despair hurtles at me like the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs.

"Cynthia." Mom's voice spikes with indignation.

"Not everyone who posts happy videos on social media are actually in happy relationships. Maybe it was a front. Maybe it was an act."

“Why are you fighting the truth so hard?”

“I don’t *feel* married, mom.”

“But you are.”

“But it’s not real to me.” I clasp my fingers together. “You say those words, but they don’t mean anything right now. My soul doesn’t stir. If I was married to him, if I loved him, amnesia shouldn’t be enough to erase him from my mind.”

“You’re not living in a fantasy world, Cynthia. This is real life. And in real life, your car skidded on the road. You fell into a ditch. You hit your head on the steering wheel and now you can’t remember your marriage.”

“And in real life, people like me and people like him don’t...”

“Don’t what?” Mom barks.

Dad gets up suddenly and takes mom by the shoulders. “We’re obviously not getting anywhere. Cynthia, why don’t you rest and we’ll go find the doctor?”

“I don’t want to rest,” I argue.

Dad arches an eyebrow, dragging me back to my childhood days when one hard look from him could silence me. I genuinely hate disappointing my father and the fact that I’m upsetting both of my parents right now doesn’t sit well with me.

I let out a deep sigh. “What if I... meet Bear instead?”

“Honey, there’s no need to rush,” dad reminds me, but there’s a hint of approval in his tone.

“No. It’s okay. Send the man in.”

Mom narrows her eyes at me. “If you make any ridiculous accusations, Cynthia Bradshaw—”

“See! Mom just called me Bradshaw. Can the hidden cameras come out now?” I glance around. “Anyone?”

Mom growls.

Dad wrestles her back. “We’ll be outside.”

The door opens.

Shuts.

Silence.

I flop back in the bed. Hauling the blanket over my face, I groan loudly. “Can this nightmare *end* already?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying for the past three weeks,” murmurs a highly amused voice. “It felt like I was living in limbo without you.”

I jolt in surprise. I was so caught up in my tiny meltdown that I didn’t even hear the door open and close. “Bear?”

“That’s me.”

I hear a chair shriek against the floor and imagine the tall, handsome guy from earlier dragging himself closer to the bed.

Of course, I can’t *see* that. Right now, the world is shrouded by a blanket and what bleeds through the threads of the comforter are shadowy and grey.

“Apparently, we’re married,” I say, still partially blind.

“Apparently.”

Bear’s voice is a deep, low baritone. I can still tell that he’s not black, but it’s not too far off from the tremor of a man with my skin tone.

“I don’t remember you.”

“That’s been made very clear.”

I start to relax and peel the blanket off my face.

Bear sits calmly next to me, his eyes intent on mine.

Time to pull my big girl pants on.

Sitting up, I focus on him. “Alright then. Let’s talk.”

OceanofPDF.com

HAVE you ever seen someone so completely in their element that they fill you with awe?

It could be an athlete, body primed for the sport. Hours on the grind. Perfecting that three-pointer until they can catch nothing but net in their sleep.

It could be a singer, voice hewn from hours and hours of practice. Learning the difference between singing from their diaphragm and singing from their head. Capable of pushing their ranges to superhuman tones.

It could be a painter, a designer, a writer.

In my case, it was a woman.

A woman with dark brown skin.

Lips redder than temptation.

Eyes so bright they could drown a man.

She walked into a room and it made way for her. It expanded to fit her personality and laughter and magnificence.

Everywhere she went, people followed.

Drawn to her.

Drawn to *it*.

That confidence.

That surety of self and the acceptance she'd found inside her strengths and weaknesses.

I fell into her and I found my way back to life.

She held me in awe.

The moment I saw her.

That very first second.

I knew I wanted her close to me.

The caveman inside demanded ownership. Demanded I mark my territory.

She refused to be contained.

Danced just out of reach.

Always out of reach.

I know what it's like to long for someone and I know what it's like when that longing is finally returned. When that love is full and results in a knee hitting dirt with a tiny ring between thick fingers and sweltering nights, two bodies twining in a bed that creaks.

I lived that.

My life.

Our life.

But looking at Cynthia right now, she doesn't look like a woman in her element.

There's nervousness and mistrust.

There's sharpness. Edges. Knives poking out of her skin like a porcupine.

Careful, don't get too close.

I was her oxygen once.

And now... she's lit a match and burned everything down.

My fingers dig into my thighs as I try to keep my tone cool and gentle. Casual. I'm not trying to overwhelm her. The love we shared—*share*—cannot become a burden.

I'm coaching myself and watching her intently.

This is a dance where any wrong move could mean stepping on her toes and making things worse.

And after that night when she jumped into her car and took off...

I'm being careful.

That can never happen again.

"You can ask me anything." I lift both my hands. "Whatever you like."

Her eyes narrow.

I wonder what I've said wrong.

"This." She lifts her phone and shows me the screensaver.

It's a picture of me at the studio.

My eyebrows tighten until they're almost touching. "What about it?"

"Why are you there?"

"I work there," I say hesitantly.

"Not," she rolls her eyes, "not why you're in the studio. Why are you the screensaver on my phone?"

My lips ease into a smile. "Oh that."

"Oh that?" She tilts her head.

"You lost a bet."

"I did?"

"Yeah." I fold my arms over my chest.

"We were playing the video game I was working on and ___"

"I'm sorry, what?" She holds up a hand.

"We were playing—"

"I don't play video games."

Irritation rises in my chest and sticks to my tongue.

Is it possible that Cynthia has an evil twin?

The one I was married to was the nicer one. Someone with a little less attitude. Someone with a little more patience.

This can't be her.

Even when I was busy chasing her, Cynth was never this brusque with me.

I remember her being polite. Cold and clear, but sweet.

Right now, she's not bothering to hide the fact that she's not feeling me.

The animosity is raw like a nudist with guns blazing.

I suck in a deep breath. My words are measured and a little stiff. "You do. You started playing when you met me."

"And when did I meet you?"

"Three years ago."

"Convenient. The exact point where my memories were wiped."

There's a hint of suspicion in her voice that I don't like. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing." She waves it away, a smile on her face. But I know my wife and I know every one of her smiles. This one is the fake grin reserved for fussy clients she really can't stand. "How did our... you know, romance start?"

My heart bucks because, even in this harrowing situation, the memory of that night still makes me a little breathless.

"You were at a party for one of your clients. I was the DJ."

"I heard that." She presses her lips together.

"Our eyes locked and I came over to talk to you." Sweat beads on my neck like it did back then. I knew I was aiming at a target that was way too high for me, but that didn't stop me from trying. "I threw a few lines. They got shot down right away, so I switched tactics. I gave you my number and told you to contact me if you ever needed a DJ." I rub my beard. "To be honest, I wanted you to call, but I didn't hold my breath."

“And why was that?”

“You made your,” I gesture to my face, “preferences clear.”

“I only date black guys.”

My gut tightens. “That’s what you said in no uncertain terms.”

“And yet I married you.”

“After a year and a half of dating.”

She shifts in the bed. Her thick hair’s slicked into a ponytail. She was lying down for three weeks. I couldn’t keep her sitting up long enough to tease out her afro. It was hard work just moisturizing her curls. I knew she would kill me if her hair was dry when she woke up.

I still remember how the nurses stared at me like I was crazy when I pulled out all the tubs of natural hair butter and gels from my duffel. Heard the way they giggled when I walked down the hallway of the hospital to get more water for Cynthia.

But I knew—*know*—my wife.

I figured it was better to moisturize her hair and skin regularly.

Cynthia sighs. “I don’t—”

“Remember. Yeah. I got that.”

She rubs her forehead and I can sense her frustration, not at me but at herself. “I’m really sorry. I am. It seems like you had a life with a version of me that doesn’t really exist.”

Cynthia’s wrong.

She did exist.

The person she was with me, the life we had together, it wasn’t a freaking mirage.

This woman in front of me, she’s the temporary one.

She’s the imposter.

What if she's not? What if she's like this forever?

The thought frightens me. I lean forward. "Look, it's okay. You can take your time."

Her brown eyes flit to me.

"And once you're back home with me, I'm certain the memories will start coming back."

"I live with you?"

My lips press together. "We're married."

"I don't think so."

"You don't think *what?*" My voice hardens.

"That I'm going to live with you."

Of all the blasted things to say—

"Cynthia."

"I don't know you and I don't feel comfortable living with a stranger."

"I'm not a freaking stranger, Cynth."

She flinches. "That's what it *appears*, but until I'm completely settled with the idea, I'd prefer to live with my parents."

"Fine." My chest rises and falls.

"And this," she wiggles the ring off her finger.

A growl rips out of my mouth. "What are you doing?"

"Here. I think you should have this back."

I close my fingers so she can't hoist the wedding ring on me. "No."

"Bear—" Her nose scrunches and she gives me a befuddled look. I hate that I find her so freaking adorable right now when she's tearing my heart out of my chest. "Is that your real name? Bear?"

"No, it's a nickname."

“Ah.” She seems to toss the information into the ‘Don’t Care’ bin. “Let’s be adults about this.”

My hands close over hers until she’s got the ring tucked into her palm. “I can accept anything you want.” My voice drops to a gruff whisper. “But I’m not taking that back.”

At the brush of my fingertips on her skin, a shock of electricity hits me.

She feels it too.

Her breath hitches slightly. Dark eyes flick to my arm before she hastily pulls her hand back.

The electricity lingers.

I think I might be in trouble.

Big trouble.

I’m still in love with my wife. I’m even more in love with her now that I’ve tasted what it was like to almost lose her. It’s given me an intense appreciation for her and a renewed urgency to be close to her.

And she doesn’t want any of it.

She doesn’t want me.

Cynthia’s gaze seeks out the door as if willing her parents to come back.

The door remains closed.

The tension between us remains heated.

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips.

I follow the trace of it.

My pants tighten.

Reel it in, man.

It’s been three weeks of missing her, missing her laughter, her body against mine, her fingers on my chest or running through my beard. Seems I’ll be missing that for a lot longer.

Cynthia tugs on her left ear. It’s a sign that she’s uncomfortable and desperate for something to say. This

woman has never been a fan of silence. She loves the noise, the chaos, parties with friends, music and dancing. I'm a social guy too, though I don't *crave* it the way Cynth does.

"You'll remember," I say with conviction.

"I..." She clamps her mouth shut.

"I'm not a figment of your imagination. I'm not some crazy schemer. I'm your husband," I say firmly. "And I love you. That won't change because you don't have the memories of our time together. The truth is right there inside you. Even if it hasn't risen to the surface yet."

At that moment, the door opens and her parents walk in.

Mrs. Bradshaw glances at me, her eyebrows arched hopefully.

I shake my head.

Her shoulders slump.

I'm sure she's not as devastated as I am.

Disappointment and weariness bundle together in the middle of my stomach.

I rise to my feet. Cynthia is doing her best not to look at me and I can only handle so much of her shutting me out. She's stubborn when she wants to be and the problem is, so am I.

This isn't the way I imagined things would go when she woke up.

I prepared myself for the worst.

Obviously, those preparations weren't enough.

"Bear," Mr. Bradshaw calls, "can I speak to you?"

My footsteps sound loud and abrupt in my own head.

Every breath pulls my lungs taut.

Mr. Bradshaw opens the door for me and gestures to it. I walk out first, turning to study him as he shuts the door firmly and faces me.

He's not a tall man by any means. I tower over him. But height doesn't mean a damn because, in my eyes, this guy is ten feet tall. He's got a solid marriage that's managed to last over thirty-five years. His three children followed their dreams with their parents' full support and now they've become well-known, successful members of society.

He's a good father and a good husband.

Unlike *my* parents.

Dad couldn't keep it in his pants and mom couldn't either. They cheated on each other so much that it's a wonder they managed to stay together as long as they did.

But I'm not thinking about my parents right now. That's a headache for another day and I've got a wallop in front of me already.

Mr. B squeezes my shoulder. "How'd it go?"

"She doesn't want to come home and she tried to give me back her ring, so... you know... pretty great." The line is delivered flatly. I sigh. "What did the doctor say? Is there anything we can do to jolt her memory?"

"The doctors say we can't rush the process. He repeated that stressing her out could cause more irreparable damage."

I run my fingers through my hair. "I'm going crazy, Mr. B."

"I know, son. I know. But we have to be patient."

"I've never been lauded for my restraint."

"You'd prefer what?"

"To have Cynthia back."

"Outside of that."

"I don't know." I blow out a breath. "A way to get through to her. She's—we've grown past this stage. I'm not knocking her preferences. I only wish she'd open herself up to me. She's resisting me more than she did when I was chasing her the first time."

“You’re trying to make things normal again, but this is an abnormal situation. Moving too fast will scare her and frustrate you both.”

“So I should let her return the ring?” My voice snaps with anxiety. “Let her run away from me and fall in love with someone else?” Just the thought of it makes my stomach twist into knots. “No way.”

“Bear, you can’t rush her. I’m not saying it’ll be easy, but look at things from her perspective. Reality is stone-cold for her. In her mind, regardless of the pictures and the ring on her finger, she *is* single and you are a stranger.”

“But—”

He lifts a hand and sagely says, “Nothing is worse than a pushy, aggressive, imposing stranger. Especially one everyone is claiming you should be in love with.”

“I’m not giving up on her.”

“I didn’t say that you would. If you really love her, you will adjust yourself and move at her pace. She’ll come back to you when she’s ready.”

“How can I do that when her pace is ‘stay the hell away from me’?”

Mr. B steps closer. “What attracted her to you? How did you approach her when you first met her?”

I think of Cynthia at that party. Her laughter booming through the air. Her body dancing to the music. She was all on her own and she was loving every second of it. Completely comfortable in her own skin.

At that moment, every heterosexual man was intrigued by her. And every woman was eyeing her in jealousy, trapped in their coiffed hairstyles, high heels and makeup that couldn’t sweat.

“Those things haven’t changed,” Mr. B whispers, “they’ve just... been forgotten. Give it time and the things that attracted you to each other will resurface.”

Mrs. Bradshaw slips out of the room, her jaw set. “You okay, Bear?”

I nod. It feels good to know that Cynthia’s parents, at least, have my back.

“We’re going to fix this,” Mrs. B says determinedly.

“Dear...” Mr. B starts to caution her.

I jump in before he can kill the gleam in her eye. “How?”

“Cynthia’s moving in with us.”

My heart drops to my toes.

“But,” she adds, a smirk curving her full lips, “we still have an extra guest room.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean,” she leans forward, “when you pack Cynthia’s bags, pack yours too.”

Mr. B gasps.

My eyebrows hike.

“That’s right, Bear.” She pats my shoulder. “You’re moving in with us.”

TWO WEEKS Later

CLOTHES ARE A CALLING CARD. THEY'RE A FIRST IMPRESSION. They're an expression of who you are, who you want to be, and where you want to go in life.

There's a saying that goes 'clothes don't make a man', and while that's true, clothes are a good indication of what the man will make of himself.

It's why I take my job seriously.

Why I consider my skills a superpower.

Being a personal stylist isn't just about finding the right shade of pink or covering a problem area with a sash or a tie or a fabulous shawl.

It's about peering into the heart of a person. Sliding past bluster and lies and insecurities. It's about pulling the most beautiful sides of them out of the shadows and into the light where the rest of humanity can admire it.

It's *work*.

And I love it.

Most of the time.

"This looks *horrid*," Amber, a willowy model at the start of a bustling career sneers at me. "Absolutely ridiculous."

It's been two weeks since I left the hospital and I'm thinking I need to send Amber there in my place.

"What exactly don't you like about it?"

"It's not naked enough."

I sigh heavily. "If you show any more skin, you'll be exposed."

"That's the point, darling." She flashes her too-white teeth at me. In this town, perfect teeth cost five grand a crown. Anyone can tell the girls who've had dentistry done. They never choose to accentuate the gums and teeth they've been given. It's always a full transformation. A forcing of flaws into perfection so that nothing is unique.

Me? I love uniqueness.

I love every inch of the weird and the funny-looking.

Because those things can't be replicated.

"Summer told me you were one of the best." The prima donna arches a plucked eyebrow at me.

"I am." There's no need to hide from it.

I'm not the best swimmer.

I'm not the best singer or rapper or daughter.

I can improve in many areas of my life. Drastically.

But when it comes to my job? I'm the freaking king.

"You said your interview was important," I add.

"It is," she snarls. "Why do you think I paid an arm and a leg for you to come all the way to me?"

We usually host clients at our downtown building. It's much easier there since we have an insane array of clothes to choose from.

Lugging several pounds of Louis Vuitton, Tom Ford and Versace across town, up apartment stairs and into condos is not a fun time. Nor is it cheap.

"Didn't you do any freaking research?"

I blink languidly. “I did.”

“Then?”

“I chose clothes that would hide the baby.”

She freezes.

Her perfect mouth opens and then closes.

I keep my hands in front of me, staying calm. “It’s okay that your body’s changing. You can feel sexy and powerful without showing all your skin. You look stunning in this.” I glance over the finished look—a Versace blouse with just a hint of cleavage and a pair of wide trousers that flare at the ankles.

She’s covered from head to toe and still manages to emit sultry appeal.

“You asked for sexy business casual. You got it. Everyone will be paying attention to your words. Not your breasts.” I arch an eyebrow. “If you still have a problem, you can change.”

She turns pale. “You know about...”

“Yes.”

“The tabloids?”

“No.”

“Will you tell?”

“Never.” I shake my head. “I promise.”

As a stylist, I’m given entrance into the most vulnerable parts of my client’s lives. Few people skip down to our shop just to treat themselves. It’s usually because they’ve been broken. Because they need to build themselves back up and clothes are the first step in a mental and emotional shift.

Amber sinks to her knees, her expression full of panic. Gone is the know-it-all model with an inferiority complex. In her place is a vulnerable young woman tossed into the rabid, shark-infested waters of the fashion industry. An industry

where, at any moment, she can be replaced by someone more hip or exotic.

“Is it that obvious?” She gasps.

I sink to my knees with her. “Not to most people, but my sister’s a midwife. I learned how to spot the signs pretty quickly. You’re a few weeks along, but you managed to hide it well.”

“I couldn’t...” She sniffs. “I couldn’t kill it, but having it is going to kill my career.”

For a moment, a weird sensation courses through my chest. It happens so quickly that I’m not sure if I imagined it.

Amber’s sobs rise in volume.

I squeeze her hand. “The father?”

“Wants nothing to do with me.” A tear spills down her cheek. “What do I do?”

“I think you already know what you want to do.” Rising, I help her up. “And I think the announcement you’re going to make today of going into acting is the right move for you and the baby.” Turning her around, I gesture to the mirror. “All clothes make a statement and this says ‘I am a woman. I am a mother. And I am incredible.’ Alright? You don’t have to feel insecure or less than when you’re not a sex symbol. You bring more than your body to the table. And I think you have an amazing career ahead of you.”

She nods. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

She gives me a hug. “I’m sorry for being cranky.”

“I accept your apology.”

She laughs.

I gather the rest of my stuff, give Amber one more hug, and lug the garment bags out of her cushy apartment.

By the time I get to my car, I’m sweating bullets.

It's a sweltering day in the city. The sun is out for revenge and it's so hot the sidewalks are melting. Birds have retreated to leafier trees where they protest the heat with loud chirps.

I start the car and turn the air conditioner all the way up to ten.

While the air cools, I pull up my phone.

The screensaver is back to a photo of me.

It's an image from an event I don't remember attending.

A wave of anxiety hits me when I watch that photo, but I force myself to stare at it until a vein pops up on my forehead.

"Ah!" I shriek, clutching my head.

Nothing.

I still draw a blank.

During the check up last week, the doctor told me not to push myself. Claimed I could seriously damage my head if I beat myself up over something my brain's holding back from me.

But it's been two weeks! I should have remembered *something* by now.

Funny enough, I'm not the only one desperately trying to reclaim the last three years. My parents have been trying too, although their mission seems focused on restoring my memories so they can restore my marriage.

Lately, they bring Bear up randomly in conversation. It's so obvious.

Dad's not as bad, but mom is a terror.

At least Bear is keeping his distance. Dad told me mom asked him to stay in the guest room and he refused. Smart man.

He's dropped by a few times, mostly to hand over the stuff I left in his house. Sometimes, he'll look at me with those big blue eyes and I'll hurry away.

I haven't forgotten the way my body betrayed me in the hospital. There I was, thinking that everyone was surely lying about this 'me and Bear being married' thing and then he goes and sets my body on fire with one innocent brush of his hand.

Blasphemy.

The greater the distance I keep from him, the better for me.

Shaking my head, I call Summer.

She picks up on the third ring. "Hey."

"Hey, Sum. Just letting you know that I've finished with Amber."

"And you came back in one piece?"

"She even promised to refer her friends."

"Oh, you're the best for a reason, Cynthia!"

"Thank you. I accept acknowledgement in the form of cash and Prada."

Summer bursts out laughing. "That can be arranged."

"Is there anything else on the schedule?"

"Not unless you count Ally's insistence that we all drive to the beach for a mandatory swimsuit photoshoot. She's trying to get more male clients and nothing says 'come check us out' like—"

"Women in bikinis."

"Ally and her craziness. Remember when she tried to hire a blimp for our fourth anniversary and nearly burned down the entire city?" There's laughter in Summer's voice.

Mine is tight. "Um... no. Not really."

She freezes. And then immediately starts apologizing. "Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry, Cynthia. I totally forgot. I mean, you forgot. I mean," she groans, "argh, I didn't upset you, did I?"

"No." I hope she can't tell that tears are forming in my eyes.

It's the scariest thing to feel like you don't even know yourself. Or at least the self that had been living for the past three years in your place.

People don't realize how much they change day to day. For me, it's like some other person had been living in my skin. Like someone stole my life away without my permission. It's icky and upsetting.

There's a sudden and loud noise on her end of the line—sounds of a door opening and closing, muttered voices, and a car engine starting. “You've been pushing yourself too much lately,” Summer says. “Just leave the work on your desk. Take the rest of the evening off.”

“Summer, I told you not to treat me differently because of my memory loss.”

“No, this is a reward you deserve. We all hate dealing with Amber. She's the fussiest client ever. You're owed much more than a few hours of downtime.”

“Thanks. I'll head home then.”

“Sure.” Summer hangs up.

My hands shake on the steering wheel.

My nerves are shot.

I hate that my friends are tiptoeing around me. I hate that my parents are trying to do stupid crap to get me to remember my own life. I hate that my world's become this nightmare of lost memories and black holes in my mind.

I want just one normal day.

Just one moment when I don't feel like a complete idiot for not recognizing someone who clearly knows me or not remembering an event or milestone that everyone should know.

With a sigh, I force myself to drive home.

Dad's car isn't in the garage, but there's a shiny SUV on the sidewalk.

Bear is here.

My stomach tightens and I hesitantly step into the kitchen.
“Mom?”

No answer.

Another step. My eyes dart around like I’m a ninja in a spy movie.

Bear’s not in the living room. Did he go down the hall to the guest bathroom?

“Mom!” I call a little louder.

“Dear.” Mom yells from the second-floor. “Give me a minute. I’m just getting changed.”

I slip my shoes off and pad to the fridge.

Maybe Bear isn’t here. Maybe one of mom’s friends has a vehicle just like that and they’re waiting outside for her to go somewhere with them.

The tension rolls off my shoulders.

Relaxed, I pour myself a glass of water.

“Hey, Cynth,” a deep voice rumbles.

I shriek and jump. The glass cup slips out of my hand and shatters at my bare feet. Water and ice scatter everywhere. A glittering sea of pain. Take one step and shards of white will turn into red.

I’m trapped.

My brain whirs as panic overwhelms me.

How do I get out of this?

Before I can find a solution, I’m hauled off my feet.

It’s so instantaneous.

One moment, I’m standing.

The next, I’m floating over the floor.

And it’s not because I’ve developed some Marvel-superhero powers. It’s because Bear’s decided that he’s going to sling me over his shoulder like I’m a sack of potatoes.

That's right.

I don't even get the bridal style carry.

I get the tip of my nose to his butt crack.

"Put me down!" I shriek, kicking out.

"No." He speaks so calmly too. So freaking condescendingly.

I start flailing harder. "Put me down. Put—"

He drops me, not so gently, on the long, island counter. My butt hits the marble and it's cold against the back of my thighs.

Mom's footsteps thump down the stairs. She doesn't come all the way down, but I see her silky robe fluttering around her legs. She bends down to look at us.

"I heard something crash. What happened?"

"Cynthia dropped a glass," Bear growls as if I did some cardinal sin.

"And he grabbed me and tossed me over his shoulder like a... a caveman!"

"Oh did he?" Mom's voice crackles with amusement.

"She was going to cut her feet walking on broken glass barefoot."

"That is my prerogative." It's a stupid argument. I know that. There's no sane person who *wants* to walk on glass and cut up their feet. But something about Bear keeps unnerving me. And it gets worse every time we touch.

He's big and handsome and hot.

And he probably knows it.

I shroud my discomfort and fear with sass and continue the ridiculous argument. "You don't throw me around like I'm a rag doll. I'm a woman and I have a right to walk on glass."

Bear just rolls his eyes and heads to the broom closet. I'm surprised he knows where that is and it's yet another clue that he's been to my parents' house before.

Mom scolds me from her perch upstairs. “Cynthia Grace, that is no way to behave. You’re being completely ridiculous.”

Gritting my teeth, I glare at mom. “What is he doing here? I don’t think I have any more clothes at his place.”

“He’s staying here, sweetie.”

Her words breeze through one ear and come out the other.

Then they double back.

I freeze as my heart starts thudding.

Whipping my head around to mom, I shriek, “What did you say?”

“Oh honey. My phone’s ringing. I’ll be right back.”

“Mom!” I shout.

She disappears in a flutter of silk fabric and perfume.

I press my palm into the counter and start to shove off when Bear reenters the kitchen and barks, “Don’t move.”

“Who are you to tell me what to do?” I snap.

“Wait until I clean this place up first.” His back muscles bunch and flex as he sweeps the glass into a pile. “You can still get hurt.”

“Why do you care?” I spit.

He stops. Looks at me with a smolder in his eyes. “You really don’t know the answer to that?”

I glance away, nostrils flaring. “Whatever you and my parents are planning, it won’t work. I’m not going to change my mind about you. I know myself and I know I wouldn’t have become the person you think you fell in love with, so if you’re expecting me to—”

“My pipes burst,” he blurts, giving me a dark look.

“What?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

I ball my hands into fists and press them to my sides because that totally unrelated cause for his presence stings.

And I don't know why it does.

“Good.”

“But,” he leans on the broom stick, “now that I'm here, I *will* make the most of it.”

My eyelashes flutter. “W-what?”

“Watch yourself, *Mrs. West.*” He enunciates the last name that I have yet to claim. “Because I haven't given up.” Challenge blares in his intoxicatingly blue eyes. “In fact, I'm just getting started.”

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“WHAT ARE the odds that your pipes burst and you have to move in with your in-laws?” Colin chuckles on Monday morning. It’s our first day of work on one of the biggest blockbusters of the summer.

Technically, we haven’t been chosen yet, but we have passed the first stage which means the producers of the movie and the executives behind the production would like to hear more from us.

It’s a big deal.

Which is why I’m trying to focus instead of chat.

Colin seems to have other priorities.

“I mean, you couldn’t book a hotel or something?”

“Are you kidding? They would have been totally offended if I did that.”

The moment Mrs. B found out about my pipes, she claimed it was a sign and insisted that I pack my bags.

“So you moved in with your in-laws,” he says again, as if it’s the craziest thing he’s ever heard. “I mean, I love Mrs. B but... she strikes me as the type who’d get into my business.”

“You try saying no to that woman.” I pull my headphones on as a sign that we should get back to work.

“Like mother, like daughter, huh? You’ve never been able to say no to Cynthia either. I mean, she’s talked you into some

weird crap over the years.”

“Are you going to chat all day or will we get to work?”

“Option A.”

I throw a wadded up musical sheet at him.

He dodges it easily. “Weak throw. You sure you played basketball?”

“Screw you.”

“Has Cynthia regained any more of her memories?” Colin asks, being his usual blockhead self and happily barging into areas that are none of his business.

“No.”

“That’s bittersweet.”

“Would you stop that?”

“What? We both know the moment Cynthia starts remembering what happened before the accident,” he draws a thumb over his neck in the classic ‘*beware death*’ sign, “you’re going to wish she didn’t.”

I launch up from my chair.

Colin darts around to the other side of the booth.

“Hey, knuckleheads!” A familiar voice calls out.

“Bianca saved your scrawny butt,” I warn in a low voice.

“Hey,” Colin sticks out his rear, “ladies love this butt.”

Bianca saunters into the room and hauls her knapsack over her head. “Are you comparing butts again? How many times have I told you that I have the best one?”

“Yes, you do.” Colin makes a show of checking it out.

Bianca flips him off.

I calmly interject. “Actually, I have the best and that’s final.”

“You wish.” Colin sticks out his tongue.

Bianca scowls. “Sometimes you two are worse than women.”

“Yet you come back for more everyday.”

“Okay, one, you’re a sleazy dog, Colin and two, I put up with you because I believe in Bear. The fact that you’re his friend is his only miscalculation, but I forgive him for that because I’m a good person.”

“Guys, can we focus.” I rise to my full height and glance at my two co-workers.

They’re more like family, really. Bianca quit her job at one of the last standing, network radio stations to slum it with me and Colin as we build a legacy of our own.

And Colin’s the son of a rock star legend, which means he’s been in show business since he was a toddler. At twenty-five, he’s a networking genius with contacts all over the industry.

I wouldn’t be where I am today without them.

But they also drive me up a damn wall.

Not as much as Cynthia does.

I grit my teeth when I recall the incident with the shattered glass yesterday. You’d think I’d kidnapped Cynthia the way she was fighting and squirming in my arms.

But I’m not going to lie.

I enjoyed it. A little.

Having Cynthia’s soft, curvy body so close... it’s been a long time.

All the squirming didn’t help matters. Desire zipped straight to my pants and made it impossible to look directly at her without kissing her.

I can tell that she feels the chemistry.

It’s there in the little lip bite. The flare in her eyes. The way she lingers on me when she’s supposed to be furious and throwing daggers.

That's the face she makes when she's ready for me to take her to our bedroom.

And hell, I want to have my wife so badly I can taste it.

I have no idea how I'm going to survive living with her in such close quarters and not being able to touch her.

That's why I turned Mrs. Bradshaw down when she originally suggested I move in to their place. I know Cynthia West like I know my own hand. That woman is the most *stubborn* person I have ever met and if she's decided that she's not married to me, it's the gosh-darn law and no one, not even the government via a marriage certificate and official wedding registry can change her mind.

I know.

I tried.

Cynthia sent the documents back to me with a polite note informing me that 'these could have been forged'.

That woman is going to give me a damn aneurysm.

I pull the neon headphones around my neck and slide my eyes over to Colin. "What's the competition looking like for the bid?"

"Fierce." Colin pushes out his lips. "We're up against studios that are bigger than us with bigger budgets."

I curse under my breath.

Comparing wallet sizes isn't my style, but this is an important play. We get this contract and our studio will be set for a long time.

It's not the *biggest* opportunity I've been offered, but it is the one that'll keep me in town.

And right now, I need that stability.

Bianca furrows her dark brows. "If they spend money on gobbling up licenses to well-known tracks, they might edge us out. Big movie companies prefer sure things to uniqueness."

“I’m not worried.” Colin grabs my shoulders. “Our captain, over here, can hunt out gems like a bull dog.”

I brush him off. “We’ll have to pull out our bag of tricks to impress them.”

“New beats?”

“New singers.”

“Do we really need them?” Bianca tosses her long black hair over her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, B.” Colin snorts from his perch in the sofa that runs parallel to the sound-proof wall. “If they suck, you can flash your vampire teeth and scare them out of here.”

“Colin.” I warn.

“It’s the truth. She’s always mean to the pretty ones.”

“It’s not my fault the pretty ones suck.”

“No, you just get strangely territorial when they start flirting with Bear.” Colin points at me. “The moment they make googly eyes at him, you go all German Shepherd.”

“Say one more word and you’ll find this pen in your neck.” Bianca lifts a hand.

Colin’s eyes bug. “Did you hear that, Bear? She just threatened me with violence.”

“Guys!” I rub the bridge of my nose. These two are so exhausting.

“Don’t think I won’t,” Bianca whispers one last parting shot.

Both Colin and I know she *would*. The black leggings, black shirt, and black combat boots she wears daily scream ‘lethal’. With her dark hair and the broody purple lipstick on her lips, the words ‘back-off’ are basically tattooed on her forehead.

My phone starts ringing.

It’s mom.

I glance at Bianca and Colin. “Let’s sort out the tracks we’ve been chewing on and see what we can expand in the next few days. The other production companies are going to play it safe, so I’m thinking we hit them with something off the wall.”

“Sure.” Bianca smiles.

Colin nods. “Ay-ay, captain.”

I head out of the booth and into the small hallway for privacy.

My limbs tighten.

I shake them out in preparation for what will be another tiring conversation. With a deep breath, I put the phone to my ear. “Hey, mom.”

“Henry, hi. How are you sweetie? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, I heard about your wife, dear. And that accident. Is she still alive?”

“Mom,” I rub the bridge of my nose, “what do you want?”

“Honey, I’m just concerned. I know you live and breathe by that woman. Now that something’s happened to her, I hope you don’t go off the wall and do anything stupid like give her your kidney.” Mom smacks her lips. “People really aren’t to be trusted, you know, Henry. You just take care of yourself first.”

“Like you did?” I can’t resist the barb.

It’s low.

It’s immature.

But it still feels good.

Mom sighs. “How long are you going to be angry, dear?”

“I’m not angry. I’m just wondering. You heard my wife was in an accident. Instead of flying here, you called to tell me not to care about Cynth in her most vulnerable time of need. Seems legit.”

“I’m training you to protect your heart.”

“Mom, I’m a grown man. The lessons you and dad taught me are already learned.” A knot forms in the back of my neck. A constant anxiety whenever I speak to them. “Is that all?”

“No.” She sounds nervous.

“Mom.”

“I met someone, Henry. I think he’s really going to stick this time.”

“Maybe.” Unless he follows her philosophy of caring about yourself more than everybody else.

“We’re equals. We love each other equally.”

“You keep telling yourself that, mom.” I hear music coming from the studio and lower my voice. “I have to go.”

“Make some time to come up soon. I really want you to meet him. He was so excited when I told him my son works on movies.”

“I just make the music, mom.”

“It still counts,” she counters stubbornly.

“I have to go.”

“Bye, son. Love you.”

I tuck the phone into my pocket and wilt against the wall. Mom’s philosophy of loving herself and putting herself first is great in theory, but it resulted in her sleeping with a man she met at work. Repeatedly.

Dad slept with his secretary to retaliate.

It got ugly and messy and loud.

So loud.

Nightly arguments that I had to drown my head in music to escape.

The advice to love myself first is a good one, but my parents’ type of self-love seems to thrive at other people’s expense.

My chest caves in with a sigh.

Family issues have their time and now isn't it. The fight to win the movie bid is on and I can't let Bianca and Colin down.

After composing myself, I turn around, open the door and step into 'the office'. It's the term Cynthia uses for the studio and though it was meant as a joke, it's caught on.

The room is made of treated wooden panels. There's a thick carpet on the ground to absorb even more sounds. The booth is separated by a thick glass pane that allows the producer to see the singer or band inside the recording room.

The latest monitors and engineering equipment sit on the table. An assortment of cables run neatly to the bottom of the desk so it's not a jumbled mess. The wires are clipped and color coded so they're easy to identify.

That's Cynthia's touch too.

'There's no reason your workspace can't be neat and fashionable' she used to say.

Damn. She's everywhere. There on the couch, flashing me heated looks as I work late into the evening, rushing up against a deadline. There in the recording booth, cranking out a pitiful rendition of her favorite tunes.

I miss her so much that I can actually hear her voice.

Wait a minute.

I *am* hearing her voice.

Colin whistles under his breath. "Do my eyes deceive me? Is it Mrs. Cynthia West, herself, making an appearance at our humble studio?"

Cynthia steps into the room, her eyes darting around. "That's Ms. Bradshaw to you."

In the corner of my eye, I see Bianca's brows quirk.

Stunned, I jump out of my seat. "Hey, I didn't expect you to stop by."

"Mom insisted I bring this to you." She shoves a lunch box at me. A scrumptious smell fills the room.

“And you just,” I step closer to her, drinking in her scent and her dark brown skin, “happily went along with it?”

Her breath thickens when I advance. “She made a convincing argument. Said seeing this place might trigger something.” Cynthia licks her lips and takes a decided step back. “It doesn’t.”

My heart is pounding. I don’t respond to the tiny bite in her words because I’m too busy gazing at her to notice.

She’s wearing a bright yellow crop top with a leather-type pencil skirt. It would make no sense on anyone else, but on Cynthia, it’s perfect.

She’s always been a trend-setter and I’m glad she hasn’t forgotten that much. Her hair’s in two braids that fall down her shoulders and I know that those are called ‘extensions’. They suit her outfit with a mix of sexy and funky that I like.

My pants tighten.

That I really like.

“Hey, Cynth, you remember Bianca, right?”

“Hi.” Cynthia offers her hand.

Bianca takes it hesitantly, confusion in her eyes. Handshaking isn’t the normal thing one does to people they’ve met before.

Awkwardness falls between the two women and it spreads out to the rest of us.

Cynthia bails quickly. “This was... fun, but I should go.”

I walk behind her and put my hand on her waist. Her scent, something savory with a hint of coconut, makes my heart skip a beat. Damn. She always smelled like a tropical haven too.

She stiffens. “What are you doing?”

“Why don’t I walk you back to your car?”

“I’m not blind, Bear. I can find my way back to my car without your assistance.”

Colin grins like a fool. “You tell him, girl.”

“Even so,” I drop my head close to her ear, “I want to go anyway.”

She can’t just dip in and dip out like that.

I need a little more of her to get me through the day.

“And I have something I’d like to discuss,” I add.

Cynthia lets out a breath. “Okay. Fine.”

We walk outside and she’s stiff as a board, her plump, perfect lips tightly shut.

I turn to her when we’re in front of her car. “Valentine’s Day is coming up.”

“And what does that have to do with me?”

“The pipes at our—my—place are going to take a while to fix. It needs to be pulled out and redone entirely.” My eyebrows arch. “That means I might be living at your parents for a while.”

Her eyes fill with horror. “A... while?”

“You don’t want that, and I want you, so let’s strike a deal.”

“Excuse me?”

“Why don’t you stop avoiding me like I’ve got an infectious disease and give me a chance?”

“And if I do?” She steps forward.

Her chest brushes mine.

Her eyes spark with challenge.

“You might get your memories back.”

“That’s no guarantee.” Her voice quivers a bit.

I can’t resist the urge to slide my finger down her cheek. “If you don’t remember me by Valentine’s Day, I leave your parents’ house and stop trying to spark those memories.”

Her eyes slide over my face.

Dark fingers curl in my T-shirt and I'm pretty sure she doesn't even know she's doing it.

My body lights up at the simple contact.

“How about this?” Cynth murmurs.

“Mm.”

“I either remember you by Valentine's Day...”

“Or?” I lower my head.

“Or,” she whispers, “we get a divorce.”

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CYNTHIA

“THAT’S A LITTLE HARSH,” Summer says, poking Ally in the side with the toe of her Prada pumps. “That’s harsh right?”

“That’s beyond harsh,” Ally agrees, chomping on some popcorn.

“I figured that out when Bear angrily stormed back into his studio after I brought up the ‘d’ word.” I tilt my head back on the couch. I’m currently lounging on the fluffy rug inside Summer’s boutique, my Jimmy Choos dangling off my toes.

I remember Bear’s look. Hurt had seared across his blue eyes. For a second, I wondered if he’d yell at me.

But he didn’t.

And I kind of wish he had.

“I feel like a crummy human being,” I admit.

“You should. Hurting Bear is like kicking a giant, fluffy puppy.”

“Puppy?” I laugh. Have they seen him? Bear’s name perfectly suits his large build, intimidating presence, and grumpy tendencies.

“I mean, yeah, he looks all huge and scary, but when you get to the heart of the guy, he’s pure marshmallow and incredibly loyal.”

“Loyal? He looks like a playboy.”

“Looks are deceiving.” Ally wags a finger.

“Why do you think he’s a playboy?” Summer asks, staring at me.

“Because he’s...” I think of Bear’s incredible arms. He tends to wear wife beaters at home that show off his bulging biceps and broad shoulders. Paired with the sweatpants that ride low on his hips and reveal tan stretches of skin with a hairy line straight to his—

“What?” Ally asks.

“Because he’s not bad looking,” I admit tightly.

“Because he’s hot?” Summer laughs.

“For a white guy.”

“No, no.” Ally shakes her head. “Your husband is hot. Period. And I’m saying that as a purely objective observer.”

“Besides, just because someone is conventionally attractive doesn’t make them more or less prone to cheat,” Summer says. “Ugly guys cheat all the time.”

“Preach!” Ally waves her hands in the air.

“And I can’t imagine Bear ever being unfaithful to you.” Summer twirls her hair around her finger. “The guy is head-over-heels in *love*. You got him to model a speedo for crying out loud.”

“Bear? A speedo?” I snort.

“It was for a charity fashion show and let me tell you, honey, we sold out that night.”

“I can’t imagine him doing that.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t volunteer for it in a million years. But he did it because you batted your eyes at him and cooed ‘please’. Our model had bailed and we needed a naked man on stage, pronto.”

“That didn’t happen.”

“We were right there.” Ally points between herself and Summer.

“She’s right,” Summer confirms.

“What I don’t understand is why you even brought up the topic of divorce?”

I squirm and grab for Ally’s popcorn. “Give me some of that.”

“You might regain your memories later.” She hauls the popcorn out of my reach and some kernels bounce along the floor. “And then what? When you realize that you loved him, you’re going to marry him again?”

“It’s been two weeks and I haven’t recalled a single memory of him.”

“Yeah, but you must have *some* attraction. He’s big and hunky and in love with you.”

I shove my hand in the popcorn. “He’s also MIA.”

Summer’s eyes bug. “Really?”

“I’ll be honest. I was avoiding him the past couple weeks. But since our conversation in the parking lot of his studio, *he’s* avoiding me now.”

Bear comes home late and leaves early too. Mom tried to coax me into delivering a lunch box to his studio again and I outright rejected that. It’s humiliating. I’m never going back there.

“What do you expect?” Summer applies lipstick in the reflection of a small mirror. “You hurt his feelings.”

“It’s more than that.” I tilt my head and chew thoughtfully.

“Either way, you should probably clear the air. Divorce is a serious thing. Especially for Bear. Look at it from his perspective. The guy had a loving wife one day. One car accident later and his wife is telling him she doesn’t remember him, she doesn’t love him anymore and she wants a divorce. It’s enough to break a guy.”

Ally nods. “I agree with Summer.”

“You guys suck.”

I throw popcorn at Summer and then at Ally.

Ally responds by dumping the bowl on my lap.

Popcorn and salt rain over the carpet.

Summers squeals. "I'm not cleaning this up!"

"I'll do it." I push myself to my feet and grab the vacuum.

Summer rises too. "Cynth, you're coming to the Valentine's Day gala tonight, right? One of our clients gave us tickets."

"But it's not even Valentine's Day yet," Ally points out.

Summer just rolls her eyes at her.

"Sure. Sounds like fun." I agree.

I thirst for any chance to dress up. Since waking up in the hospital, I haven't gone all out with my outfits.

Summer grins. "Just give your name to the attendant. The ticket should be there for you."

"Are we meeting here before we go in?"

Ally laughs. "Girl, Summer doesn't attend any of these fancy ceremonies with us girls."

"I have a small rotation of bachelors who keep me entertained." Her smile is mischievous and so is her wink.

"Alright then." I turn to Ally. "You and me?"

"I'm not going," Ally says. "I hate the pretense of Hollywood. If I didn't love clothes so much, I wouldn't go near it." She presses a dark hand to her forehead and pretends to faint. "Alas, I'm cursed to be forever entwined because of my affair with fashion."

"You poor thing," I coo, patting her back.

Summer laughs. "See you ladies, later."

"Bye!"

Ally takes pity on me and helps clean up then she leaves too.

On my way home, I excitedly plot out what I'm going to wear. For me, fashion started at a young age when I could

practically *see* the outfit in my head. When I couldn't find the clothes I needed, I made the pieces on my sewing machine and realized I had a knack for it.

As I grew up, I continuously won 'best dressed' at every school and workplace competition.

Although I'm good with my hands, I—strangely—had no desire to design clothes. I have much more fun dressing people in the latest trends than trying to get ahead of them.

I notice that there are no cars parked outside or in the driveway when I get home.

Yes! I have the house to myself.

The next two hours are filled with blissful preparations for the night. A long, hot shower eases the knots in my shoulders and back. Next, I haul out my tablet and follow a YouTube tutorial for a hairstyle I've wanted to try for ages.

The results are bomb.

I've got just the right amount of volume and thickness to rock the elegant half-out afro with sparkly combs along the side.

Next is makeup.

Some people wear tons of makeup and it barely looks like they have any on. I'm not that type of person. My skin is usually bare except for lipstick and eyeliner so when I glam up, I want everyone to *know*.

The dress is the last piece of my transformation.

It's a gorgeous Versace cracked-mirror motif. The tan material looks like *life* on my dark brown skin. I truly think warm tones were made for me.

The dress fits like a glove as I wiggle it over my hips.

My arms bend awkwardly when I try to zip it up.

No dice.

I stretch and twist myself into all kinds of angles, but the damn zipper is out of reach and boo for me.

I huff in frustration, annoyed that I'm starting to sweat from the effort. My makeup should hold up, but it'll mean touching up constantly at the event later.

The front door, blessedly, slams shut.

I screech at the top of my lungs. "Mom, dad! Can you help me?"

Footsteps thud up the stairs.

My entire body floods with ice.

I know instantly that it's *not* my mother—those footsteps are too heavy. And it's not my dad either.

Before I can blink, Bear steps into the room.

My pulse speeds up when I fall into those gorgeous blue eyes.

"Hey," my voice sounds strained. "I thought..."

There's no need to finish that sentence. It's pretty obvious what I assumed given the two names I called out were definitely not his.

Bear stands there in the doorway, giving me a slow, sweeping stare that starts from the top of my head to my toes. The muscles in his shoulders tense the lower he goes and I note the frustration in his eyes, the clenched set of his jaw and the overall harsh expression that—paired with his mussed hair and beard—make him look even more threatening.

Surly.

He looks surly.

And I can't imagine that there's a part of him that feels any tenderness for me after the divorce comment three days ago.

"You need some help, Cynth?" His voice comes out raspy and it does something to my center that I don't entirely like.

"No thank you." There. *My* voice is polite and formal.

Because I'm polite and formal.

Because hearing Bear's voice mutter 'Cynth' in that husky baritone does nothing to me or my pulse.

My eyes slide down to his hands.

They're huge. Like *massive*.

I wonder how they would feel on my skin?

No. No I don't wonder.

I don't care at all.

"I've got this," I say again, hoping he gets the hint.

He does and ducks out of the room.

I sigh in relief.

That was close.

Returning to the zipper problem with a vengeance, I nearly break my arms trying to reach the thing. There has to be a way for me to do this without calling my parents home or driving to the gala with my dress flapping in the back and flashing my lacy black bra at the paparazzi.

"Come on, come on," I murmur, one eye closed and my knees bent slightly as I tickle the edge of the zipper with the tip of my nail.

The door bursts open.

Energy charges through the air when I hear Bear's footsteps thumping toward me. I swear the makeup on my vanity starts jumping and rolling around with every step.

He stops behind me.

Not an inch of him is touching me yet I can still *feel* him. His presence. His eyes boring into me.

My stomach ties itself into knots.

I have to cross my legs to halt the sensation fluttering south.

Damn it. He's so freaking *intense*.

I can't even see his face.

I can't even...

But I'm already breathing hard and my head's spinning and I have to press both palms on the wall to keep my knees from buckling.

"Help me," I blurt, just to scramble back on top of this situation.

I can't let him believe he can just barge into my life and touch me.

I asked him.

This is an invitation.

"You look good," Bear says. And, somehow, there's a predatory note to that tone that makes me wonder exactly who is the one in command here.

The wall is cold against my palm, but Bear's voice is hotter than an open flame. "Where are you going?"

"Not that it's any of your business..." I gasp as I feel the zipper start to move.

It's a slow, torturous ascent.

ZZZZZZip.

He stops quarter way.

"But," I toss my head back, hearing the breathlessness in my voice but unable to stop it, "I'm going to a gala."

"Alone?"

"A-alone." I swallow past the lump in my throat.

What is *wrong* with me?

Suddenly, every inch of my skin is on fire and my body's wound so tight I'm about to shatter.

Bear steps closer to me. His scent tickles my nostrils. Woodsy with a hint of mint.

He smells so good.

I bite my bottom lip to keep from moaning.

My gaze seeks out anything I can latch onto in order to keep from falling into his spell, but all I get is a huge chunk of

grey wall and my dark fingers scrambling against the surface, coiling from a need that's so overpowering I can't even fight it.

“For which client?” he asks, reclaiming the zipper.

He's moved.

At least his head has.

First, his breath was on the back of my neck and now it's on the side.

Right above my screaming pulse.

I throw my hips back in search of...

Hell if I know.

I squeeze my eyes shut as a flood of sensations course through my veins and set them on fire.

Freaking insanity.

He's not even touching me.

He's not laying a finger on me and I'm already panting.

“Cynthia,” he breathes. The zipper moves up another quarter.

My heart is about to give out.

I'm about to die.

I'm dying.

There's a man zipping me up and breathing on me and that's what'll send me over.

Bear.

Murderer.

Bastard.

Can his voice get any growlier?

Zzzip.

There.

It's all the way up.

I can feel it.

But I don't move.

My erratic breathing is the only thing that pierces the silence.

Anyone listening in would think something far raunchier is happening.

And maybe it is.

Maybe this is him making love to me.

His head lowers just a little, just enough to cause his beard to brush my skin and I whimper.

No one's ever made me this sensitive before.

At least, not that I can remember.

And the fact that it's him...

That it's Bear...

"You need a driver?" he whispers.

Hot Prada. That voice. So close to my ear.

That smell.

Desire courses through my veins and pulls tight.

"A driver?" I repeat because my brain has decided it's going to take a backseat to my hormones all of a sudden.

"Wait. Let me walk that back." His fingers grip my chin and turn me to look at him. "I meant a date. Do you need a date?"

My eyes collide with striking, electric blue and I'm putty.

Jello.

Clay.

Every other item on earth that can be squelched and kneaded and molded into something new and dangerous.

He's touching me.

It feels so good. Those callouses are so rough.

What would they feel like on my stomach, on my legs, on my chest—

“Cynthia.” His lips twitch.

It drags me back to reality.

I see the merest hint of a smile on his face and it irritates me.

There I was, unraveling from his mere *presence*, and he was laughing at me?

I’m an idiot.

I fold my arms over my chest. “No thanks.”

“No?” He arches an eyebrow. Does he think he has me wrapped around his little finger just because my body gets hot and bothered at the mere whisper of him?

I search deep in my mind for the most immature thing I can say. Then I find it and I hurl it at him. “I’d rather go with my *boyfriend*.”

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I SEE right through that flimsy attempt at spearing me.

My lips twitch, but I force them into a flat line. If Cynth wants to play this game, I'll give her the reaction she's looking for.

My eyebrows pull together.

A stormy expression takes over my face.

I hope that's enough.

Maybe she'll see through it the way I can see through her.

She used to.

Before the accident.

Perhaps this'll be what sparks a memory.

"What are you talking about?" I ask gruffly. "What boyfriend?"

Her eyes dart back and forth as she makes it up on the fly. "Just someone."

I turn away, partially because I need to hide how much I want her and partially because I'm unable to stop myself from grinning completely. "I see."

"He's very handsome," Cynthia rubs it in with a voice that, I'm sure, wouldn't be so confident if she knew my thoughts. "He's very muscular. He's like a younger Idris Elba."

I growl. "Is he?"

“Yes.”

“What’s his name?” I grumble.

“None of your business.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll find him.” My voice sinks to a threatening whisper. “And I’ll make sure he never touches you again.”

Her jaw drops.

“I’ll make sure it hurts.” Anger glints in my eyes. At least I hope it does. “So tell him to watch out.”

“A-are you serious?”

I nod somberly.

She starts chewing on her bottom lip. “I didn’t know you were that kind of guy.”

“I’m not. Not unless the people I care for are involved.” I crack my knuckles loudly. “How dare he try and date my wife?” I keep my tone hard and hear a hint of *The Godfather* in my accent. It’s obvious I’m terrible at improv, but Cynthia is lapping all this up. “I’ll break all of his bones.” I add for good measure. “And throw them to the dogs.”

She starts to sweat. “Actually, I don’t think it’s that serious. I wouldn’t call him a boyfriend.” She’s rambling now. “More like a fling. Or a flirtation. It’s in the casual stage. We’re not really into labels—”

“This boyfriend of yours...” I cut her off because I don’t want her to admit the truth yet.

“W-what about him?”

“... does he know we’re married?” I pin her with a hard look.

She coughs. Squirms. “Um...”

“Does he know,” my voice drops and I step closer, “that we’re living together.”

“Technically, we’re just living under the same roof.”

“I wonder if he knows you like I do?” I whisper, turning fully to her as the heat in my body seeps into my voice.

Unable to help myself, I slant another appreciative look at Cynthia in that dress. The gown is a golden color that sets off her dark skin tone. It hugs every one of her curves. The tiny mirror fragments seem to collect the glow in her skin and reflect it back at the world. She’s twisted one side of her afro and left the other to frame her face in a sort of halo.

She’s breathtaking.

Gorgeous.

A freaking goddess.

And she’s mine.

Whether she remembers or not, she *is* mine.

Cynthia steps back, eyelashes fluttering. “He does know me.”

This game is enjoyable.

Not as enjoyable as me *unzipping* her from that dress, but it’s payback just the same.

“Does he?”

She sucks in a breath

“Does he know how to touch you,” I slide my thumb over her jaw and down to her pulse that’s hammering against my fingertips, “the way you want?”

She starts trembling.

My body draws close to her like a moth to a flame.

I can’t help it. I’m *addicted* to this woman. Have been since the moment I first locked eyes on her. That only got worse when, during dating, she put her foot down and set her boundaries.

No sex until marriage.

It was her rule and she didn’t break it, although we pushed the boundaries in every other way that we could.

It was torture.

It was cold showers and lonely nights in my room. It was resisting temptation with other girls who were willing to be used and discarded. It was frustration and pushing and pulling and waiting.

But I did it because I wanted her more than anyone else.

And when I took her that night on our honeymoon, I knew it was worth it.

I knew what bliss was. Hot breaths on my neck. Fingers raking down my back. Pleased moans and little whimpers of disbelief and ecstasy.

She was so freaking tight.

And innocent.

And adventurous.

Though I should have known that.

It's why I smiled earlier. Because this is one area where I have the upper hand.

I know what she likes.

I know where she likes it.

I know *how* she likes it.

And just because she's forgotten doesn't mean her body has.

"I don't like to share." My fingers clamp her chin firmly.

"I'm not a toy." Her nose flares.

"No, you're a woman. *My* woman." A bolt of heat tears through my body and my breath catches in my throat when I see her heavy-lidded gaze. "I don't want you with anybody else." The words burn with conviction. I'm not playing a part now. This is raw. Real. "Because I love you."

Her limbs tighten, but she doesn't back away. Instead, her eyes sear into me like she's trying to figure me out and her lips part with a breath.

The move draws my eyes to her mouth. Full, dark pink and shimmery.

It's an extremely sexy mouth.

Hell, everything about her is sexy. She's without question the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life and every guy at that gala tonight will either be scrambling to be with her or wishing they could.

The thought burns my chest with jealousy.

I pull her closer.

As I press in, Cynthia squeezes her eyes shut expectantly.

My hand cups her jaw.

I angle my head forward—

A loud ringing sound shatters the moment.

Her eyes burst open.

A rush of emotions play over her face—desire, embarrassment, confusion.

I want to capture her in my arms.

Keep her right here next to me.

But I hesitate to push.

The fight we had on the night she got into her accident trips through my mind.

Guilt follows it.

My moment of hesitation costs me.

Cynthia scrambles away and scoops up the cell phone. "Hello? Yes, this is Cynthia." She listens for a moment. "*What?*" Her voice thickens with distress. She darts a look at me and then back. "Can't you send a replacement? I can't drive myself at night." Another pause. "There are... health reasons. Plus I want to drink tonight." She presses her lips together. "If I was going to take a taxi, then I wouldn't have hired your services now, would I?" Her dark brows inch closer. "Fine. Have a good night."

“What happened?”

She wraps her arms around herself. “Nothing.”

“Cynth.”

She huffs. “The chauffeur service I hired double-booked. I’m out of a ride.”

“I’ll take you.” The offer tumbles out of me.

She slants me a dubious look. “No thanks.”

“You prefer to take a taxi?”

Her eyes roll to the ceiling. It’s clear she’s battling several thoughts at once—her attraction to me, her stubbornness, and her very real need for a driver.

I’m hoping her practical side wins out.

I am the best option, even if I am an infuriating one.

Sweetening the deal, I promise, “It’s not a date. It’s just a ride. I’ll wait outside until you’re finished.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

“You’ll wait outside for hours?”

“As long as it takes.” I shrug. “When you’re done, I’ll drive you back.” I can work from anywhere and the closer to her I am, the happier I’ll be. That’s just the way it works for me and my creativity.

Cynthia tilts her head upward and considers it. “Fine.” She wiggles a finger at me. “But I’m not sitting in the front seat. I’ll be in the back.”

“Deal.”

“No talking.”

I chuckle. “Got it.”

Cynthia marches past in a cloud of perfume and I pump a fist in victory.

There we go.

After grabbing my leather jacket, I head to the door.

The sky stretches over the horizon, swallowing the stars until they're barely visible. Silver light spreads across our path, ejected by the weak rays of the moon. A dog barks happily in the distance.

I open the back door for Cynthia and she slides in.

On the way to the gala, I steal peeks at her from the rearview mirror.

I'm thinking I *might* have pushed her too hard earlier. She's back in stubborn mode. She's got her eyes glued to her phone, but I can tell by the deep wrinkle in her forehead and the tight pressing of her lips that she's unhappy.

With me?

With herself?

I showed too much of my hand. Revealed too many of my cards.

She's countering now. Doing her best to cover her weaknesses so she's not as exposed to me as she was in her bedroom. She's going to make sure that never happens again.

I should have kissed her when I had the chance. Now, there will be even more obstacles before I can corner her again.

With a sigh, I slow down behind the line of vehicles winding around the hotel. The building is huge and bright red lights sweep the windows, a color that honors this month's theme of love.

Valentine's Day.

If I don't remember you by Valentine's Day, let's get a divorce.

This woman.

It's the month of love and I'm fighting for mine.

No matter how hard I have to try.

“Where should I drop you off?” I ask, noticing the valets working overtime and bouncing from one car to the next.

“I’m not sure.” She blinks rapidly.

“Didn’t Summer or Ally tell you?”

“They just said to give my name at the door, but I’m not sure which door...” She glances at the many activities ensuing on the lawn. “Have I been here before?”

“A few times.”

“For a gala?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Cynth,” I ask, a little urgency in my voice. A valet is heading our way.

Panic resounds in her voice. “I don’t... I’ve never been to one of these things before. Or... maybe I have but I don’t remember. I... I don’t remember.”

“Hey. Hey.” I make sure the park brake is up so the car won’t mow down anyone while I turn to her. “Cynth, look at me.”

She keeps staring into her lap, her fists clenched and her eyes wide.

“Cynth.” My voice rises firmly.

She glances up. Panic swirls in the depths of those dark brown eyes.

“No one expects you to be one hundred percent familiar with the memories you lost.” I wait until her breathing evens to continue. “We’ll figure out the entrance together, okay? I’ll park the car and I’ll walk you in.”

“Okay.” She squeaks.

Flicking my indicator, I pull out of the line of cars waiting for a valet and park the car myself. I’ve attended galas and movie premieres with Cynthia before, so I more-or-less know what to do.

My sneakers thump on concrete and I hurry to Cynthia's side of the car. Wrenching the door open, my heart quietly breaks when I see her gritting her teeth and bending over slightly.

I kneel in front of her. "Sweetie, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Do you have a headache? Would you rather go back home?"

"No." She shakes her head and then holds a hand over her face.

I pull her hand down. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't want anyone to see me like this."

I rub my thumb over the back of her knuckles. "Being strong all the time isn't believable and it's not necessary either. We all struggle with something."

"Yeah? What do you struggle with?" It's a genuine question as well as a desperate grab at a distraction.

So I decide to be honest. "I struggle with whether I'm doing all I can do with my business." My mind flashes to the night of the argument and I wince. "I struggle with the mistakes I made in the past and whether I can really get a second chance to do it right." Returning my eyes to her face, I whisper, "But I don't have to face those problems alone, Cynth. And you don't either. There's no shame in leaning on each other once in awhile."

She bobs her head, seeming to take courage from the words.

I offer my hand to help her out of the car.

She starts to reject it and then stops. Looks at me. Hesitantly, she places her hand in mine.

The touch is warm.

Her fingers are soft.

I close my hands over hers and help her out.

Because of the distance from the venue, we have a long walk ahead of us. I worry about Cynthia's feet in those heels, but she struts with confidence and I start to realize that the stroll is better for her health.

She seems much calmer when I lead her to the door and give her name to the attendant with the guest list.

"Oh, of course!" The woman in a black pantsuit gushes. "Right this way, Mr. and Mrs. West." She gestures to another attendant in a similar suit. "Photographs are this way."

"I'll wait in the car," I whisper in Cynthia's ear.

She nods, a smile plastered on her face.

Just as I turn around, the second attendant grabs my arm. "Sir, right this way."

"No, I'm not—"

"The photographers are waiting," he insists, clearly frazzled and out of patience. He shoves me ahead and I nearly bump into Cynthia's back.

She glances at me in surprise.

The attendant gestures to the photographers lined up behind iron barricades like chickens in a coop. They're all pressing ahead to snap photos of the dignitaries that arrive and stop to pose in front of a thick wall with the event's name and sponsors on it.

"Mr. and Mrs. West!" A voice calls.

I glance that way.

A camera light flashes in my eyes, nearly blinding me.

"Guess we're stuck."

I hug her waist and lean toward her ear. "Do you want me to make a run for it?"

"It might turn up in a tabloid piece."

I smile through gritted teeth. "This wasn't the agreement. I didn't even get dressed."

"Too late now," she whispers.

“That way. That way.” The attendant hisses. I notice him bending down beneath the barricades and gesturing wildly to us.

Even if I wanted to leave, it’s too late now. There’s another couple that’s waiting for this position on the carpet.

“Hug her,” the attendant whispers loudly, amidst the blinding camera lights. “Closer. Closer.”

I press my body flush against Cynthia’s.

She rests her hand on my arm and tilts her head toward mine, her eyelashes swooped low.

Snap.

Perfect shot.

We move down the carpet like a conveyer line.

“Do something else,” the attendant hisses.

“Like what?” I blurt, annoyance in my tone.

“I don’t know.”

Helpful, buddy.

“Mr. and Mrs. West!” The faceless photographers call to us from the blob of flashing lights.

“Do *something!*” The attendant urges again.

I narrow my eyes and start to shoot him another murderous look when I feel Cynthia turning in my arms.

“Don’t overthink this,” she whispers.

I barely have a moment to interpret the instruction before she grabs me by the jacket, hauls me down and gently touches her lips to mine.

CYNTHIA

I VAGUELY REGISTER the flicker of the camera taking shot after shot and the whistles from the paparazzi. And then it gets drowned out by my racing pulse as my lips collide with Bear's.

Oh.

Oh wow.

His mouth moves slowly over mine. A rough thumb grazes over my cheek and slips under my jaw to tilt my head up further.

His lips are softer than I imagined.

It shocks me.

No part of this big, intimidating man lends itself to the word 'soft'. And lately, he always seems to be scowling at me, his lips slashed into a thin, firm line.

But his kiss is surprisingly gentle.

As careful as it is confident.

I tremble when Bear changes the pace, increasing pressure and sealing his mouth to mine as if breaking away will mean losing our oxygen. And then his tongue sweeps over my bottom lip.

Just a smidge.

And I jump as if I've run into the naked end of a live wire.

It's the most tender kiss I've ever had.

My mouth opens, aching for more.

He obliges.

The moment our tongues collide, I'm devastated.

A dirty shaft of desire travels between my legs, humming its way up my chest and turning my skin into flames. Molten lava. Pure, exposed nerves, sensitive to every touch.

There's no fight in me.

No resistance.

I surrender.

White flags up.

Gun pointed down, jutting at half-mast.

I feel his fingers piercing my waist, gathering me possessively to his chest. Feel his warm breath on my mouth, fanning the flames that are burning me alive. Feel his heartbeat beneath my palm. It's roaring faster than mine.

I curl my fingers around the nape of his neck when I feel him start to ease away. It's a desperate, untamable reaction that surges through me and demands I hold him fast. Demands more.

I let my darker side take control under the license of spontaneity.

This is a moment without deeper meaning.

I kiss him harder.

His tongue clashes with mine, dancing to the rhythm of my frantic heartbeat. His intoxicating scent fills my senses and drowns me in pleasure.

I want more. My tongue on his skin and my hands in his pants.

Need it so much.

He must sense my thoughts because he makes a tight, raspy sound in his throat.

I trap that grunt in my heart and lock it away.

It's mine.

The seductive note belongs to me.

All of a sudden, I'm territorial.

I'm unnerved.

I'm coming apart at the seams and in desperate need of new underwear.

My legs are about to crack in two.

I need to stop before this goes further.

Before the world sees through me and my insatiable attraction for this man who claims to be my husband.

I wrench my body off his and send a strained smile at the attendant.

He scowls at me. "Please move on."

Embarrassment sears my cheeks and I know I've committed a faux pas by spending so much time on the carpet making out with Bear. I don't let it show and lift my head instead, walking just ahead of him.

Bear's eyes are on my back.

I feel it. Like a laser searing the top of my neck.

I step off the carpet and fix my expression into a carefully detached grin. "Well, that was... something." My eyes linger on his beard and go no higher. "Thanks for walking me in. See you later."

I try to make a run for it, but I'm stopped by a woman in a long white dress. She has dark hair fitted in waves and sultry brown eyes. In a word she's stunning.

"You two!" She chirps brightly. "That was the hottest kiss I've ever seen in my life."

"Uh, thanks." I wince.

Bear just folds his arms over his chest.

I wait for her to step aside.

She doesn't.

The brunette blinks expectantly at me. “Cynthia, don’t you remember me, darling?”

“O-of course I do,” I mumble.

She laughs. “Right? We had a ton of fun together at the fashion show in Peru. So much young talent.” Her chuckle sounds forced and I wonder if we were really friends or not. “Anyway, I was with the organizers and they were *so* taken by you two that they’d like you to be Cupid’s Couple tonight.”

“Cupid’s... what?” I scrunch my nose.

“Oh, you’ll see. You get extra perks and an opportunity to participate in a game where we donate to a charity of your choice. It’s a lot of fun.” She glances at Bear and interest glimmers in her expression. “Trust me.”

Hm. Something tells me I shouldn’t.

I keep that thought to myself.

“Are you interested?” Again, she’s looking at Bear and there’s an extra invitation behind her tone.

A stab of something that is definitely *not* jealousy invades my chest.

I step between the Brunette Barbie and Bear. “Thanks. It does sound like a good time.”

“Right.” Her smile dims a couple notches when her gaze returns to me. “Right this way.”

I follow her into the gala and nearly gasp from the splendor that unfurls before me.

It’s the classiest celebration of Valentine’s Day ever. There are no gaudy helium balloons. No chummy catch phrases. No naked babies with bows in their hands. Yet it’s very clear what the theme is and the evidence lives in subtle reminders like the color scheme and flower choices.

Brunette Barbie gestures to a raised podium surrounded by a gorgeous wooden trellis. Seated there are two other couples. They’re high profile players in the fashion industry. Giddiness eases through me at the mere thought of sitting with them.

Bear sets his hand on my back. And then I realize that giddiness has nothing on the butterflies that erupt when he touches me.

Caring and attentive, Bear murmurs, “Watch your step.”

“I got it,” I croak.

He either doesn’t hear or doesn’t listen. Carefully, Bear gathers my skirt for me and holds it up so I don’t trip. With his free hand, he keeps a lock on my fingers and remains attentive until I’ve safely mounted the platform.

I greet the other players seated around the dais, breathless from Bear’s touch. I’m hoping it just seems like I’m awestruck and nervous about the game.

A few minutes later, I notice Summer bouncing in on the arms of a man with tan skin and sleek black hair. She’s wearing a gorgeous Coco Chanel creation that fits her small, curvy body to the max.

She waves enthusiastically at me, freaking out on my behalf when she sees the people I’m seated beside.

I wave back.

Her date steers her to a table below and I lose sight of her but, a few minutes later, she texts me.

SUM: *I heard gossip about a super hot couple on the carpet tonight. Was that you?*

ME: *I’m freaking out, Sum.*

SUM: *Why?*

ME: *Bear’s an amazing kisser.*

SUM: *And the problem is?*

ME: *I want to kiss him again and I shouldn’t.*

My phone buzzes with her response but, at that moment, Bear leans over my shoulder. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.” I tuck the phone back into my clutch before he can see my texts.

His shrewd blue eyes take in every inch of my face. “You okay?”

“Never better.” I tuck my fingers under my chin. “What do you think the game is going to be?”

He shrugs. “Not sure.”

My gaze fastens on a brown smear right above his beard.

“What?” He immediately starts rubbing on his face. “Got your foundation on me again?”

“That happens a lot?”

“You like makeup and I like to kiss you when you have it on.” He speaks so calmly about it, but my heart takes off like a rocket.

“I see.”

“It’s a byproduct of dark foundation on white skin.” He doesn’t seem at all bothered. “Is it off?”

“No.”

He rubs briskly at the right cheek, but he’s far from the spot. “Now?”

“Wait a second.” I snap my clutch open and rummage through the contents. A lady’s purse is her secret weapon. She can store everything she needs and even some things she doesn’t in the folds and, if it’s heavy enough, it can also serve as a weapon.

I grab a small packet of fresh Kleenex and tent it over my pointer finger.

Bear leans forward without me having to ask.

His scent fills my nostrils again and my stomach clenches.

I fight past the instinct to crawl into his lap and stick my tongue down his throat again so he gets even more of my makeup on him. Instead, I force myself to just scrape off my makeup like a good little girl and plant my hands in my own lap.

“Thanks,” Bear says, low and rumbly.

He hasn't mentioned the kiss but, from the hungry way he's watching me, the man hasn't forgotten it.

Not even close.

"Oh come on you two." Lisa Verdenez, an acclaimed *Vogue* editor, swats a hand at us. "You've already been chosen. You don't have to keep selling your story."

"Selling what?" I whisper to Bear.

He just shrugs.

A few moments later, the host of the gala—not Brunette Barbie, but a woman who could be her sister—mounts the stairs to our little raised gazebo and beams at each of us.

"Welcome to our precious Cupid Couples." Her voice is soft, but the microphone in her hand amplifies it to the crowd.

A light smatter of applause follows.

"Valentine's Day is a couple weeks away, but we thought we could have some fun anyhow." She winks at me. "Have any of you heard of the Newlywed Game?"

Shock coats my throat. "W-what?"

"We ask you a few questions. Thank you, Lilac." The host accepts small, printed cards from the girl who invited us to become Cupid Couples. "You will write your answers on these tablets sponsored by Sumsing Electronics." There's another round of applause. "And your partner needs to guess the answer correctly to get a point. Simple enough, right?"

"Uh..." I flash panicked eyes at Bear.

There's no way we'll win this thing. The me he knows is not the me that's sitting beside him tonight. And I have absolutely *zero* idea about who Bear is.

I mean, I know that he's a producer and he DJs on the side. I know that he's grumpy and gruff, but he's also capable of cracking jokes and teasing me. I know he loves my mom's food.

That's about it.

I spent the past few weeks running from him, not trying to learn about him.

“Oh no!” The host points at my face. “Cynthia looks scared.”

“Can we exchange with another couple?” I ask.

She laughs. “No, no, no. You’re stuck now. Lilac, pass out the tablets.”

Lilac takes the stairs and hands each couple one tablet. When it’s our turn, she intentionally brushes her fingers over Bear’s. And again, that hot, ugly sensation crawls through my stomach.

I narrow my eyes, but she ignores me and swings her hips as she walks down the podium.

“Let’s begin!”

What happens next is a blood bath.

Each question exposes the true state of my relationship with Bear.

His favorite color? His favorite food? Sports team? Idea of a relaxing night?

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

Every answer I put on the tablet is the opposite of what comes out of his mouth.

Horror is my name.

Pathetic is my friend.

And ‘please kill me now’ is the prayer on my lips as everyone laughs at how painfully bad I am at this.

To make matters worse, Bear is a freaking animal.

Think LeBron James in an elementary school play-off.

He’s the only reason we’re still in the game.

The man is a mind-reader. Or a sorcerer.

I have no idea how he gets *all* the answers right. One after another. Things I’m sure I wouldn’t have shared with him,

things he shouldn't remember, tiny details that most guys don't pay attention to—Bear has it all.

I see a collective sigh of longing from the women in the room and my heart thunders.

You don't deserve him, they seem to say.

And, to be quite honest, I'm not feeling like I deserve much of anything right now.

By the time we get to the speed round, I'm done with this game and I just want to go home. But stomping off in a fit of embarrassment is not a good look. Besides, I'm never the type to quit once I've put my mind to something.

I'll get *one* question right if it kills me.

"These questions are a little deeper," the host—whose name is Sharon—quips.

Lisa Verdenez and her husband go first.

Then it's our turn.

"Cynthia, this is your last chance," Sharon says.

Everyone chuckles.

I cringe.

"Where did you meet Bear?"

I know this one! "At a party. He was the DJ."

Bear turns over his tablet and it's right there in bold.

Party. DJ.

Joy erupts inside me.

Yes! I finally got one right!

The room celebrates, hooting and cheering louder and longer than ever before.

I sit back, settling into my chair with a big grin on my face.

"Bear, last question." Sharon peers at him. "If Cynthia gets this right, you both win the game."

My competitive instincts kick in. Even though I've been a complete drag to our team, I'm still eyeing first prize. Since we came this far, we might as well go all the way.

"The first time you met Cynthia, what drew you to her?"

I think deeply and scribble something down.

"Bear?" Sharon tilts her head. "Your answer?"

He turns to me and our eyes lock.

Suddenly, I'm caught in his heated stare.

My heart lurches to my throat.

A thick emotion tightens in the air between us.

"I saw her from my booth and I couldn't take my eyes off her." His voice is low, intimate. As if I'm the only person in the room. "I walked over and I looked into her beautiful eyes and there was a spark in my chest. I couldn't sleep that night because I was thinking about her. I thought about her all the time, everyday." His gaze drops to my lips. "I chose her before she chose me and I'll choose her even when she doesn't."

'Awws' break out in the crowd.

My bottom lip trembles. "Bear..."

"Cynthia, what did you say?"

"Um," I turn my tablet around, "I said 'because I was hot'."

More laughter.

I don't join them.

Bear's still staring at me like he wants to tear my clothes off.

There's a lump in my throat the size of my fist.

I can't breathe without wanting to be close to him.

In the background, I hear Sharon calling my name.

Turns out, she's accepting my answer.

Bear and I have won the game.

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BEAR

SHARON, the host of the gala, has us pose for a flurry of pictures.

My hand on Cynth's waist and her arms around my neck.

Snap.

Cynthia's dark fingers clasped around a forkful of cake.
My mouth open to receive it.

Click.

My lips on her forehead and Cynth's eyes blissfully closed.

Shutter.

It should be exhausting and annoying because I hate being in front of the camera. But one thing keeps me quiet and obedient to Sharon's surprisingly bossy instructions.

It's Cynth.

After that kiss, she's been acting awkward and shy.

And I've been absolutely ravenous.

For her.

For her skin.

For her touch.

For her lips.

She sparked my appetite and it's even harder to show restraint when I *know* she's attracted to me and would like to

act on that connection.

Except she doesn't.

And a part of me knows she won't.

The game we played half an hour ago emphasized the disparity between us. I know her intimately. Cynthia might think reverting to the person she was three years ago sets her apart from the wife she was to me, but that's not the case.

She didn't change in the things that mattered.

Her kindness. Her honesty. Her confidence.

Those qualities remain the same.

They're still beautiful to me and I pay attention to beautiful things.

But as much as I know her, she doesn't know me.

I'm a stranger.

That came through loud and clear tonight.

It doesn't hurt as much as it frustrates me.

I'm her husband.

I love her.

But in her eyes, I'm just a random guy who was there when she woke up in the hospital.

It's hard to understand how important history and context are to a relationship, to a marriage, to a romance, until those things have been stripped away. All the events that build trust, that build laughter and connection—they're not there anymore.

They don't exist.

And trying to pretend they do because loved ones and a piece of paper are telling you what you should be thinking and feeling won't help.

Especially not with an independent woman like Cynthia.

Yeah, we won the game.

And yeah, we kissed and I'm pretty sure she wouldn't turn me back if I kissed her again.

But I feel slightly defeated.

For the first time since she woke from that coma, I see things from Cynthia's perspective and it is gutting.

"That's enough, Shar," Lilac says. She's the organizer of tonight's event, which is clear to me and to anyone who's paying attention, but it's her sister who's in the spotlight.

I sense a little competition between the two, but that could just be my imagination.

Sharon forces a laugh completely devoid of warmth. "Our winners must be hungry. Why don't you find your table?"

"I'll see where Summer and her date are," Cynthia murmurs, raising her head to try and find her friend in the packed room.

"Nonsense, you're sitting with us, dear."

"Yeah." Lilac places a hand on my arm. She's got slender fingers with neat French tips. I only know what French tips are because Cynthia's a huge fan of them and spends hours on YouTube watching different tutorials. "I'd love to get to know you more." Lilac's eyes slide to Cynthia as she smiles. "Both of you."

Sharon swats her sister's hand. "They can sit wherever they want, sis."

"Invitation's always open," Lilac whispers to me.

I watch her saunter away, wondering if we've met before. She keeps looking at me like she knows me, but I don't recall ever seeing her before tonight.

I glance back at Cynth and notice her spearing me with a dark look.

"What?" I ask, confused by the scowl on her face.

"Nothing." She scoffs. "I need a drink."

I snatch her hand. "You should eat something first."

“Who are you? My father?” She shakes me off, her eyebrows slanting over furious brown eyes. “Leave me alone.”

“Cynth.”

She stalks off, disappearing into the crowd.

I notice the way conversations stop and eyes follow her as she moves. The guys in the room are all calculating their best shot at getting her attention and though I want to blast them away, now isn't the best time to be acting jealous.

With a sigh, I send Cynthia a text.

ME: *I need some air.*

There's no reply, which could mean she didn't hear her phone vibrate or she's purposefully ignoring me.

Knowing her, it's the latter.

With a frustrated grunt, I tap my phone in my palm and head in the opposite direction.

I'm aiming for the balcony doors that bleed into a vast garden. I figure it'll be a great place to gather my thoughts for a minute. The fashion crowd is Cynth's kingdom, not mine. I'm not averse to socializing with a different group, but I've already caught a few guests giving me the stink eye for my motorcycle jacket, jeans and long beard. I probably look like a thug to them and I'm not in the mood to fix their assumptions.

Halfway to the door, I'm stopped by a familiar face. “Bear! Hey!”

“Summer.” A little of my anxiety and annoyance thaws.

She glances around. “Where's your other half?”

“Somewhere around here.” I glance at the crowd. “She went to get a drink.”

“Did she?”

I catch the intrigued note in her voice and fold my arms over my chest. “Did you plan this?”

“Cynthia getting a drink?” She snorts. “I don't think anyone can control that woman. And definitely not—”

“I meant what happened tonight. The game. The photographs.”

“Me? No.” She waves a hand.

“You gave the organizers both our names. ‘Mr. and Mrs. West’.

Summer grins. “Fine. I knew what was on the docket for tonight and I was *hoping* for the best.” She winks. “Why are you complaining? You got to show off how well you know you’re wife. Every lady in the crowd was salivating with jealousy over that last answer.” She chuckles. “And Cynth...”

“What about Cynth?” I lean forward.

“Let’s just say, she’s fighting a battle of her own when it comes to you, okay? I can’t reveal any more than that or I’ll be in violation of girl code.”

I sigh. Run a hand through my hair. “All this back and forth with her is driving me crazy.”

“They say marriage is never easy.”

“Especially when one of you has amnesia,” I add wryly.

“It’ll get better.” Summer grins. “Let me find our girl. She must be panicking right now.”

“Panicking about what?”

“Her feelings, silly.” Summer rolls her eyes as if it were obvious.

“Well, if you find her, tell her I’ll be in the garden.”

“Oh. Planning a moonlit stroll? How romantic.”

“More like finding a place I won’t stand out.”

Summer scrunches her nose. “The leather *is* a bit much. These are button-down events. How did Cynth let you out of the house like this?”

“Because I promised I wouldn’t come in.”

“Oh. My fault then.”

I narrow my eyes in her direction. “I’ll be outside.”

“I’ll send your wife out soon.”

I offer a thumbs-up as I head to the exits.

The air is warm and insects are buzzing loudly, competing with the music blaring from the gala. Flowers grow in spite of the harshly pruned environment. Colorful blooms tip their chins to the sky, fighting to see the stars past the cloudy haze that blurs them.

Pulling out my phone, I check my email and notice a new file from Bianca. It’s a sample with a beat that’s a little alternative, but I like it.

ME: *Great work, B.*

BIANCA: *Thought you’d like that.*

ME: *Now stop working on a Saturday night and go have fun.*

I glance over my shoulder.

Still no Cynth.

A sigh breaks free from my chest. I hope she’s not getting into trouble in there.

My phone buzzes.

At first, I think it’s Bianca or my parents, but when I see the name on screen a big smile crosses my face.

“Matt, hey, man. It’s been a minute.”

Matt is my cousin and one of the coolest guys I know. He’s good with his hands and owns a lumber company as well as a custom crib-making workshop.

It’s not a big deal until you realize that Matt didn’t have kids when he started that crib-making gig. And he’s also a giant man with a beard and an incredibly vast flannel shirt collection who seems more suited to wielding an ax than making baby furniture.

Even if we’re not super close, I do enjoy hearing from him and meeting up at family events.

“I wanted to call and check on you, Bear,” Matt says, his voice welcoming. “Should have called sooner.”

“Nah, man. I know you’re busy with your business and Amina’s working at that matchmaking place. What was it called again?”

“Make It Marriage,” Amina supplies from the background.

“Right, Make It Marriage.” I laugh. “Hey, A. You keeping my cousin in check?”

“It’s a tough job, but someone has to do it,” Amina says.

I grin. The moment I met Amina, I loved her for Matt. She’s sassy and vocal and confident where he’s chill and more prone to go with the flow. It’s a match that shouldn’t work on paper, but they’re perfect for each other in real life.

“Business must be picking up, A. I see Make It Marriage commercials everywhere these days.”

“We tend to go the hardest around Valentine’s Day. Lots of singles dread spending the time alone and apply in droves. It kind of sucks that we’re so busy though. Matt and I really wanted to come down and see you in person, but leaving my job now isn’t a good idea. Kayla, Venus and Tierra need all hands on deck.”

“Another time then,” I say.

“So how is she?” Matt asks quietly. “Cynthia.”

“She’s getting better. No memories yet but...” I kick at a small rock and watch it skitter into the bush. “We’re getting there.”

“If you need any advice on how to woo her all over again, I do that for a living. Feel free to call any time.”

“Thanks for the offer, A. I might take you up on that.”

“My wife is so sweet, isn’t she?”

I pretend to gag.

A smacking sound ensues and the giggles that erupt from Amina tells me my cousin must have planted a big fat kiss on

his wife.

“Dude, get a room,” I tease.

“Good idea.” Matt clears his throat. “We’ll let you go, Bear. Make sure you keep us updated. I don’t want to hear news from your mom when I’m just a phone call away.”

“Got it. You two have a good night.”

“Oh, we will,” Matt says in a low voice.

Amina squeals which means Matt has made his move.

The dial tone clicks.

I shake my head, still smiling ruefully at my cousin. Matt chased Amina for a while too. And, despite ardently resisting him at first, his persistence won her over.

Guess that determination and focus runs in our family.

Either that or we tend to be attracted to ladies who don’t fall at our feet.

My chin hits my chest.

I thought I’d found my happy ending just like them, but life had other plans.

I sigh ruefully.

“Mind if I join you?” A voice says.

I turn to find Lilac approaching. She’s wearing an all-white get-up with a plunging neckline and extra pieces of cloth attached to each sleeve that are so long they drape on the ground. It’s a little try-hard in my opinion, but to each his own.

“Hey,” I greet her, my gaze slipping past hers to the door.

Still no Cynthia yet.

Should I go in and find her?

Lilac smiles. “You waiting for someone?”

“Cynthia’s supposed to meet me out here.”

“Ah.” She sits on one of the stone benches close to where I’m standing. “You know,” her eyes tip to the sky, “even

though we've never met, it feels like I know you."

"Does it?" I keep my tone polite.

"Cynthia would *not* shut up about you on our trip to Peru." Lilac's lips curl into a smile. "Everywhere we went, she bought gifts for you. Took pictures and sent them to you. Every night, she talked so loudly to you."

"I remember." I snap my fingers. "That's where I saw you. You were in some of her photos."

"Yup. Girl in the back. Always in the back."

I squirm. This chick looks like she needs to talk, but I'm not the guy to do that. "Well, you did a great job with the party."

"Me?" Her eyes widen.

"Yeah. It was mostly your work, right? You seem to know where everything is and what everyone's supposed to do."

She rises slowly. "No one noticed."

"I try to be a little more observant than everyone else, especially when I'm in an environment where I don't fit."

"Are you kidding? Half the girls in that room would kill to have you."

My smile is uncomfortable. I don't do well with compliments, especially from a woman who's looking at me like I'm meat on a stick.

I'm a man and I find Lilac attractive, but that's where it ends for me.

There's no life in her eyes.

No joy in her smile.

No laughter that can boom through a room and make other people grin just by hearing it.

She's pretty but she's not Cynthia.

There's only one of her.

And that's all I need.

The music from the gala changes and rides the currents of the air until it's outside.

Lilac shrieks. "I love this song!" The next thing I know, she's leaping toward me and grabbing my hand. "Dance with me."

"No thanks."

"Come on." She wrestles her way into my arms, surprisingly strong for a woman that slim. "Don't be like that."

"Hey." I try to ease her back.

She clasps her arms around my neck and laughs. "Loosen up, Bear." In my ear, she whispers, "I can give you what she can't."

At that moment, Cynthia appears in my line of vision.

She's clutching an extra glass of champagne and her purse is tucked beneath a dark elbow. Her lips tighten at the sight of me and Lilac standing pressed together.

Horror stampedes through my chest.

I fling Lilac away and she stumbles.

The guilty flush on her cheeks makes it seem like we did something far worse. "Cynthia, I didn't see you there."

"You didn't see me?" Cynthia marches over, her eyes narrowed. "Somehow, I don't buy that."

"We were just dancing. It's not a big deal."

Cynth's fingers wrap around the champagne flutes and, for a second, I think she'll pour the liquor over Lilac's head.

Instead, she sucks in a deep breath and pastes a smile on her face. "Would you like a drink?"

"T-thanks." Lilac gives me a bewildered look before accepting.

"Cheers." Cynthia toasts with her.

Backing away, Lilac mumbles, "I think my sister might be looking for me."

I'm pretty certain she's not, but Lilac scrambles off. I catch her throwing the champagne into a bush as she goes.

Dragging my eyes back to Cynthia, I lift both hands. "I can explain."

"No need." That blasted fake smile is still on her face.

"Cynth—"

Her voice burns beneath the cheerful facade, "What you do, Bear, and who you *screw*," I wince and she downs the rest of her drink before adding, "is none of my damn business."

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CYNTHIA

I DO NOT MEAN those words. Not one. Still, I force a grin to my cheeks and remind myself that I've been pushing Bear away since the moment I woke up in that hospital bed. It's not fair or logical to expect he'd wait around for me to remember we're married.

I'm not an irrational person. I'm not one of those girls who demands a man pay attention to her after I've made it clear that I'm not interested. If he wants to flirt with Lilac, if he wants to kiss her, drag her into a storage closet to thrust all his pent-up frustrations into her, he has every right to do that.

I mean, not *every* right.

We are *technically* married.

At least according to the government.

But hey.

Married men cheat all the time for way worse reasons than this.

Bear's got a wife who doesn't want to live with him, doesn't want to give him a shot and won't sleep in the same bed with him. Would anyone blame him for stepping out on her?

My breathing gets thicker and thicker.

Suddenly, it's harder to keep the smile in place.

The grin keeps slipping.

But I'm fine.

Totally.

It's okay.

Lilac is a stunning woman. I would love to dress her. She would *rock* a Vera Wang ensemble.

See? I'm fine. This is fine.

I'm a big believer in women uplifting other women. Sure, stepping on a married man when you *just* heard him wax on about how he loves his wife is shady as hell, but...

The smile drops.

I pick it back up and paste it on again.

... but that's fine. Everyone has their own moral boundaries nowadays.

Female solidarity and all that.

The world is going to hell in a hand basket, but we girls are too busy fighting each other to make our voices heard. Jealousy is the enemy, not each other. The moment we get over that, we'll be able to band together and make some real change.

"Cynth. *Cynth.*" Bear's face comes into focus and he drops concerned eyes on my hand. "Babe, give me that. You're going to break this glass and hurt yourself." He pries the champagne flute from me and sets it on the bench.

Keep smiling, Cynthia. Ignore that blistering, heated rage in your chest. It doesn't mean what you think it means.

"Should we go back inside?" I ask brightly.

Bear's big hand wraps around my waist and pulls me forward.

I collide into a wall of muscles.

His scent fills me again and my stomach tightens, but not in the way it did when we kissed.

It's with fury.

Does he like Lilac? Is that what he's into? Did he pull her close like this too?

My hands press against his chest.

Shove.

I stumble back. Keep the smile up. "She's very pretty."

"Who?"

"Lilac."

Bear studies me.

"You think so too, right?" I press.

He doesn't answer. Just keeps blazing those dark eyes at me.

It's a stupid question.

Of course, she's pretty.

She also looks nothing like me. Lilac's a tall, elegant, willowy woman with long, flowing black hair and the dainty facial features seen on magazine covers—

Nope.

No thanks.

Not doing this.

I'm not hoisting my insecurities on Lilac. The world looked down on me for my big nose and my thick lips and my hair that no one could get a comb through, and I used to hate the people who were as effortlessly glamorous as her.

But it's not Lilac's fault.

Hating her won't make me love myself.

We're just different.

Neither of us is prettier or more attractive than the other.

But if that's what Bear's into...

I stop the thought.

I'm a girl power enthusiast. We ladies need to stick together. I'm not going to flip out. I don't have a right to. I *just* told him I have a boyfriend before coming to the gala so why can't he have a girlfriend?

Things between Bear and I are complicated and it would be unfair to—

“She’s pretty,” Bear says in a casual off-hand manner.

Screw it.

I hate Lilac with every breath in my lungs and every beat of my heart and I hope she dies a painful and fiery death.

“Is she?” My voice is tight and dangerous.

“But she’s not you.” He shrugs.

My heart taps out a crazed rhythm that must be Morse code for ‘please get this man naked’.

I ignore it. “You expect me to believe that?”

“I don’t *expect* you to do anything, Cynthia West.” He used my ‘married’ name again. “Trying to figure you out is like walking through a maze blindfold.” Bear has the audacity to chuckle. Freaking *chuckle*. “I’m not going to do that.”

“You were dancing with her.”

“She came on to me.”

“You liked it.”

“It was flattering.”

My lips press into a thin, cold smile. *I’m going to stab something*. “See?”

“But it did nothing for me.”

“Yeah right.”

“My heart rate only jumped when I saw you staring at us. Before that? Nothing.”

“So someone that gorgeous and tall and freakishly beautiful doesn’t rev your engines?”

“No.”

I snort in disbelief.

“You know what does?” He drops his voice to a hard whisper and his gaze lingers on my lips.

“What?”

“You do. Everything about you.”

Just like that, my body decides to betray me and ramps my internal lust meter up to ‘*Warning: Public Nudity Near*’.

A guy as gorgeous as Bear is *not* allowed to throw lyrics out so smoothly. Because now I’m imagining all the ways I can reward him for putting my tiny insecurities to rest.

“Don’t look at me like that, Cynth.”

My eyes flit to his. Goosebumps pop up on my skin when I hear that growly rasp.

“Not unless you want me to do something about it.” He steps closer until he’s practically on top of me.

“Something like what?” I ask weakly. A mouse tempting a lion. My heartbeat is running at a million miles a minute, making my head spin.

“Is this the part where I talk dirty to you?” he whispers, his lips brushing my ear. “Because if I go there, I won’t be able to stop.”

Don’t stop. “You think I’m scared?”

“I think you want to have your cake and eat it too.”

“No.”

“You’re playing with me.” The words escape hoarse and tortured. “You want shallow and we’ve already gone past that. I’ve already had all of you and I won’t settle for less.”

“I don’t remember—”

“*Some* part of you does.”

Yeah. My thighs. My lips. My loins.

Even if he is a stranger to my amnesia-brain, my body is one hundred percent on board.

“You’re looking for someone who isn’t here.” Guilt pricks me in the chest.

“She’s in there. I know it.” He runs a hand through his hair. “It doesn’t have to be a lot, Cynth. I’ll take the crumbs.”

My heart squeezes painfully. “I don’t even have that.”

His jaw clenches tight. For a moment, I’m afraid he’s going to walk away from me, but he stays. He pulls me closer. “Find them.”

Surprise jolts through me. He’s still fighting? He’s still here?

I don’t get it.

Am I worth all this?

He’s setting himself up for disappointment. I’m not the princess who gets swept off her feet in the fairytale. I’m the girl who finds it hard to trust other people. I’m stubborn and opinionated and I don’t like being wrong. Even if I am wrong half the time.

“I’m sorry,” I breathe out.

He closes his eyes. “I’m almost afraid to ask what you’re sorry for.”

“For saying you weren’t my type. Three years ago and in the hospital.”

His forehead rests against mine and he breathes out, “Oh Cynth.”

“I’m sorry that I didn’t give you a chance because you were white and I’m black. There’s a reason for that. You may not understand, but a long time ago, when I was a kid, most of my bullies were white and I—”

“You decided that all white people were like that. At least secretly.” His fingers squeeze my arms as if he’s trying to remain upright. “I remember.”

“You remember?”

“You told me that three years ago.”

“And what did you say when I did?”

Slowly, Bear lifts his head.

I choke on a breath as I’m trapped within that hot, needy look. Desperation grabs me by the throat and I squeeze my thighs together. I’m throbbing like a stubbed toe and I can’t contain it. No one has looked at me like that before.

“I said ‘I love you, Cynth. Just you. Only you. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen and it would be a damn shame if you missed out on all the ways I’m going to make your life better and make you feel loved because I don’t belong to your race’.”

My heart pounds. “Bear.”

“I love you, Cynth. That hasn’t changed.” His breath thickens. “That will never change.”

“You know I can’t say that back.” The guilt multiplies and it combines with my lust to make a painful, frantic collision of emotions.

“I’m not asking for all of it.”

“Even what you want is too much,” I counter.

“Give me what you have,” he breathes.

“All I have is this insane attraction to you.” My hands slide up his chest. “That I was totally unprepared for, by the way, given how grumpy and bossy you are.”

“I’m not bossy.”

“Check again, buster. You bark commands like a drill sergeant.”

His lips twitch.

“And that’s not even the worst part,” I frown. “The worst part is that it doesn’t matter if you’re glaring at me or staring softly at me. It doesn’t matter if we’re fighting or ignoring each other. The moment I think about you, it gets me going. The moment you so much as breathe in my direction, I want my hands on you.”

He presses my palm to his heart. My soft flesh molds against the hardness of his chest. “You feel that? You feel what you do to me?”

A gasp gets stuck in my throat. This tall, muscular man is practically having a heart attack right in front of me.

“You’re on my mind all the time, Cynth. You drive me crazy. It’s exhausting keeping my distance and waiting for you to remember what we are.”

“Then don’t.”

He narrows his eyes.

“It could be like,” I lick my lips, “a one-night stand.”

I can’t believe the words that just fell out of my lips.

Bear groans. A tight, frustrated sound that belongs to nature and dirt and animals that come out of hibernation ravenous and angry. It sparks heat over every inch of my skin, spreading further and further south.

I thought I knew what *‘need’* was, but I didn’t. Not even close.

Need is a man with burning blue eyes and a thick beard and a leather jacket. It’s six feet of pure muscle and restraint and devotion to a woman who can’t remember how to love him back.

The guilt is chewing me out and I don’t know how else to sate it than to offer my body. “Please, Bear.”

“I don’t—”

“Sorry to interrupt.”

We both whirl around at the sound of that sheepish voice. Summer plods over the grass, her dress sparkling in the moonlight and a gorgeous clutch in a death-squeeze between her brown hands.

She raises an arm in surrender. “Wow, that looked intense. I feel terrible for breaking that up. I really do, but Sharon has the giant cheque for the charity and they want to take pictures with the winner so...”

“Thanks,” Bear says in a low voice. “We’ll be right there.”

I’m going to assume he’s frowning by the way his voice sounds because I don’t have the courage to look directly at his face.

“I can tell them you guys are gone if you need some time alone,” Summer offers, nervously chewing on her bottom lip.

“No,” Bear says, his voice hard.

“Bear...”

He starts walking without glancing back or waiting for me.

Tears sting my eyes.

But, strangely, they’re not for me.

They’re for him.

I hurt him. It’s a bigger wound tonight. More painful than the other times that I’ve cut him.

Because this time it was intentional.

And I don’t know how to make it better.

As his big body disappears through the gala’s doors, I wilt against the bench. My hand knocks over the champagne flute resting on the edge of the wooden slats and it clatters to the grass.

I wince, preparing for the shatter of glass, but it doesn’t break. It falls gently on the leaves and bounces to a stop, buoyed by the tender green shoots that lift it above the dirt.

Summer ignores the glass and runs to me. “Cynth, you okay?”

“Yeah.” I blink rapidly to keep the tears from falling. A perfect outfit could be *ruined* by emotions. No one knows that better than a stylist.

Tilting my head back, I blink and blink until my tears are dissipated.

Summer picks up the champagne flute and sets it back on the bench. “Honey, what was that about?” Her voice is quiet

and filled with concern. “I wasn’t sure if you two were going to start ripping each other’s clothes off or start brawling.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Of course it is. Tell me why.”

“Because I want to remember him. Why can’t I remember him?”

Her free hand reaches for mine. “Cynthia, you suffered a trauma so severe, you damaged your brain. That’s not something anyone is blaming you for. I’m sure Bear knows that too. He’s just frustrated because you have the same face, but you’re not the same person.”

“He loves me. I feel it. And he wants me, but not like this. Not until I’m back. But this is me now.” I lift both hands. “This is what I know.”

“There’s no reason you have to force yourself to feel what you don’t.”

“That’s the thing. I’m not sure what I feel. How much of it is habit and how much of it is me?”

“I don’t know.” Summer gives me a sympathetic look.

I suck in a deep breath. “We...” I swallow, “we should head inside before they send someone else to look for me.”

“Hey.” Summer stops me before I take a step. Her brown eyes sear mine as if she’s searching for the truth behind all the lies. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“No.” The tears spill despite my best attempts to hold them back and I’m shaking hard.

Summer hooks her arm around my elbow. “I’ll text Bear and let him know that you’re not feeling well.”

I try to sop up the tears. “I... I can do it.”

“No way,” Summer insists. “Bear can handle on his own. Let’s go. I’m taking you home.”

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BEAR

MY EYES ARE BURNING from staring at the computer screen for days on end. Though my body's exhausted, I keep pushing it because I need to get this track right for the meeting with the execs.

The beat fills my headphones.

I narrow my eyes.

Tap my finger on the mouse.

Tweak some more.

Music streams through my ears and I go through it with a fine-tooth comb.

Just a little more...

I tighten the crescendo by isolating the strings and lowering them a few decibels.

The power of modern music production lies in one word—multi-tracking. It's a sophisticated process that involves recording files individually and compiling them into a mix. That way, I can easily manipulate individual instruments, samples or vocals without compromising the over-all sound.

It also means that I can fiddle with a million different layers of the song.

I think I've hit pretty close to that number.

"There," I murmur. The green files light up when I hover my mouse over them and drop them directly into place. I close

my tired eyes and bob my head as the music pours through my ears again.

Perfection.

There's something haunting and magnetic about the track. A part of that is due to Bianca and Colin's mad skills, but also because of the process we chose.

We went retro.

Twice the work and twice the reward.

Each instrument was recorded in real time. Colin, Bianca and I pooled the instruments we owned and blew them, tapped them, and got whatever sound out of them that we could. Very few layers came pre-packaged.

Original samples are leagues above generic tracks. The difference is akin to a photographer using a stock photo of a toaster versus their own. *Their* toaster—with its rust stains, scratches, and wrinkles—tells a different and more intriguing story. It's the same item, technically, but the 'real' toaster makes the shot unique.

That's what we've done over the past three days and I'm freaking proud of it. We broke our backs and put in the time to impress the execs with our style of symphonies.

Satisfied, I pop the space bar and music blares through the speakers.

Bianca sits up with a shriek.

Colin rolls to the ground.

"Where's the fire?" He springs to his feet.

"Fire's coming from there." I point to the speakers, a tired smile on my lips.

"Dude, Bear. What are you doing?"

Bianca scowls at Colin. "Did you fall asleep on me?"

"Sugar, your head rolled on my shoulder first." He sniffs his sleeve. "I think I have a little of your drool right there..."

"Ew! Ew!" Bianca starts flailing.

Colin dives out of the couch just in time to avoid head trauma from her kicking legs.

“I can’t believe I slept on your disgusting body.”

“Ladies line up for the privilege.”

“You wish.” She scoffs.

“You were handsy too.” Colin continues with a tired grin. “The next time we sleep together, let’s try to be naked, hm?”

“Shut up, Colin.” She shudders.

I press my fingers into fists. “This is it, guys. This is the song that’ll play in a major league film.”

“Man, aren’t you dead inside?” Colin scrunches his nose. “You’ve been working non-stop for three-days straight.”

“When do you sleep?” Bianca asks.

“I sleep,” I answer defensively. *For about two hours.*

“Okay.” She flips her dark hair over her shoulder. “Correction. *Where* do you sleep. You’re always here early and you’re the last to leave.”

Colin scowls. “Bear, don’t tell me you’re sleeping on this couch.”

“You’re *living* here?” Bianca’s eyes widen.

“What’s wrong with your in-laws’ place?”

Nothing.

There’s nothing wrong with that place.

Except for the fact that I’m under the same roof as my wife.

The gorgeous woman who drives me utterly insane.

You’d think after our charged conversation in the garden, Cynthia and I would have made some forward strides.

Nope.

That night, Cynthia took off with Summer and left me to face her hoity-toity friends alone. Try accepting a Valentine’s

Day check after winning a Valentine's Day couple's game without one half of the Valentine's Day couple.

Not my favorite moment.

I was rightfully pissed at her for running off.

You'd think she'd give me an apology? An explanation, at least?

Didn't get that either.

When I stomped up the stairs and knocked on her door later, Cynthia refused to let me in.

Just like that, my temper exploded.

And when I get mad, I don't get violent.

I get creative.

I decided to pull my head out of my butt crack and focus on something that always distracts me, no matter what's going on. Music.

It's a handy excuse for why I can't go home right now. The meeting with the execs is fast approaching and I need to throw everything I have at this project. Since I'm dragging my foot on other opportunities, this one has to go through.

At least that's what I told Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw.

Neither of them seemed to buy it, but it's not like they can tell me what to do.

"Dude, this couch is mad uncomfortable." Colin presses his palms into the lumpy futon. "And there's not any hot water running in that shower."

"I know," I grumble.

That was also a good thing. Just because I'm keeping my distance doesn't mean that I want Cynth any less. Her sultry gazes and longing looks from the gala are on a permanent loop in my mind and my body is constantly rearing to have her.

Cold showers barely cool me down.

I'm going crazy for that woman and she can't even find freaking crumbs for me.

It's exhausting.

"You look like someone ran you over with a tractor, Bear." Colin shakes his head. "And now you're dragging us along for the ride."

"I didn't tell you two to stay tonight."

"How are we supposed to abandon our fearless leader on the eve of a battle?"

I arch an eyebrow at Colin. "Dramatic."

"I come from a long line of rock stars who thrive on drama."

"Colin's right. You should sleep well tonight. You're delivering the presentation to the execs and right now, your eyes are shot and your beard is growing out."

"What she's saying is, you look like a druggie living under a bridge and no film production exec would trust you with their toothbrush, much less a huge contract like this."

"Thanks, Colin."

"The truth hurts, man."

"If you need a place," Bianca wrings her hands and nervously offers, "you could stay with me."

"It's alright." Checking my watch, I realize that it's after eleven o'clock. "Maybe I will get some rest in my own bed now that our track is complete."

"Great." Colin rises and grins wickedly at me. "Maybe Cynth can," he winks, "give you a little extra energy for tomorrow. You know? Pump you up."

"I'm going to punch you in the face, Colin."

"And I won't wait around for that to happen." He salutes and then winks at Bianca. "Night, my love. I'll think of you when I burn this shirt later."

"Screw you, Colin." Bianca flips him off.

The door slams shut behind him.

I yawn and cover my mouth with a hand. "Need a ride?"

“Ah, yeah. If you don’t mind.”

“Sure.” I grab my keys and jacket.

After locking up, Bianca follows me to the car and gets in.

We drive in silence for a while, but I feel her staring at my face.

“What’s up?” I ask, one hand on the wheel.

“Is everything with you and Cynthia okay?”

The question flies out of left field. Since I’ve known her, Bianca’s never asked about my personal life. Not once. She and Cynthia aren’t too close, which doesn’t surprise me given Cynthia is all about colors and cheerfulness and fashion, while Bianca prefers black, wears thick eyeliner and purple lipstick and says her favorite animals are ‘skulls’.

“Why do you ask?” My eyebrows squeeze together.

“Just wondering. Something seemed up with her when she stopped by the office. Colin mentioned she’d lost her memories, but it felt like... more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’d know more than me.”

I let out a breath. “We’re working through some things.”

“In other words, your marriage is falling apart.”

Her words make me defensive. “It’s complicated.”

“Love should be easy, Bear. Not complicated.”

“Humans are complicated. Life is complicated. And since love involves complicated humans with complicated lives, it’s bound to get complex too.”

“If it’s so complicated, why not give up?”

I rub my beard. “Because sticking to a few principles makes it simple.”

“What principles?”

I think of my parents. All my life, I’ve guided myself by doing the opposite of what they do. “For me?”

She nods.

“It’s putting others first even when I don’t feel like it. It’s staying loyal even when something shinier comes along.” I suck in a deep breath. “It’s sticking to the person you made a promise to, even if they break theirs first.”

“Sounds tiring.”

“It has its moments.”

She places her hand on top of mine. “It also sounds painful.”

“Nothing is happy and rosy forever. Not love and not marriage.”

“Maybe that’s true, but it’s certainly not what I want to believe.” She squeezes my hand. “You know you can talk to me if you ever need anything, right?”

“I know.” I stop in front of Bianca’s apartment.

“Thanks, Bear.” She climbs out and slams the door. Bending down to speak through the window, Bianca smiles. “You deserve good things, Bear. Don’t grind yourself to nothing over someone who can’t appreciate that.”

I give her a tight-lipped smile.

Bianca’s like a sister to me so I get her concern, but I’m not giving up on me and Cynth. I’m just... licking my wounds. Gaining the strength to go fight another round. A man can only take so much of getting kicked in the teeth before he withdraws.

I’m not made of steel.

I’m flesh and bone like everyone else.

Running a hand through my hair, I flick the indicator and drive.

The house is dark when I park outside.

Not even insects are belting out their throaty songs.

No dogs bark.

No wind rustling through the trees.

I let myself in, slipping my shoes off to keep my sneakers from making too much noise. I'm being pointlessly cautious because I doubt anyone will be downstairs and close enough to be disturbed.

But I'm wrong.

One person is very much alert and present in the kitchen.

Cynthia and I both grunt in surprise when our gazes collide.

"Bear," she jumps, "I thought you were a burglar."

"My bad," I say, staring at her. She's standing in front of the refrigerator, a satin bonnet wrapped around her head and no makeup on. Her long legs shoot out from one of my T-shirts.

If I know her—and I do—she's not wearing much under that.

My heartbeat picks up.

I wrestle my gaze off her bare legs, but it's too late. I'm fully awake now and greedily staring at her. The dark skin. The gorgeous lips. The slim shoulders. The full chest poking against fabric. She has no right to look that sexy in a damn T-shirt.

A storm of need clenches in my stomach and sends my body into a heat wave.

I want to put my mouth on her. I want to plant kisses across every line and curve of her body. Want to brand her with my tongue. Want to snatch her tiny waist, set her on that counter, and show her how badly I've been missing her.

My pants tighten until there's no room left.

Damn.

I don't get it. She drives me crazy for three days. Refuses to give in and give me a chance. Plays my heart like a freaking tennis match and I zing to attention at one glance.

"You've been working late," she says lightly.

“Yeah.” I start to brush past her.

“Want to split the last of the lemon meringue?”

That stops me in my tracks.

I turn to face her. “Mrs. B made lemon meringue pie?”

“A few days ago.” She arches an eyebrow.

“I never turn down Mrs. B’s lemon meringue.”

“Great.” Her smile is relieved and I wonder if she was nervous that I would walk away.

“You couldn’t sleep?” I move around her to grab two forks from the drawer.

“Not really.”

I’m instantly concerned. “Is it the headaches?” They’re a side effect of the meds from the hospital.

“I don’t think so.” She pokes her fork into the pie and perches against the counter as she swallows.

Silence descends on the kitchen. I watch her chew thoughtfully and she stares right back at me. It’s both painfully awkward and randomly comfortable. Makes no sense.

Just like Cynthia.

“I’m sorry for ditching you at the gala,” she blurts.

I freeze, the fork mid-way to my mouth.

“Summer caught me crying and kind of manhandled me into her car. She’s freakishly strong.”

My lips twitch. “Yeah.”

“And,” she chews on her bottom lip, vulnerability streaking through her eyes, “since you’ve been gone, I’ve been doing some thinking.”

“Thinking.”

“About why it’s so hard for me to trust you and why I can’t seem to remember anything.”

“And?” I turn away from her and reach for a glass at the top of the cupboard.

This feels like a moment.

A big one.

But my spike of adrenaline is starting to fall.

I’m crashing.

And I don’t want her to see that.

“And maybe I’ve been going about this the wrong way.” I hear her sigh. Loudly. “I keep seeing you and this other version of me. It’s almost like,” she rubs her forehead, “in my head, you were dating my sister or cousin or something. Like you don’t *actually* belong to me. Because of that, trying to start anything with you feels wrong or,” she stalls, “unnatural.”

“I see.”

My heart does a flip when Cynthia’s footsteps come up behind me.

In a quiet voice, she asks, “Is it really okay if all I have to offer is crumbs?”

My breath hitches and I turn around to find her standing close to me. The soft, overhead lights slash against her dark brown eyes and smooth skin.

She fiddles with the hem of her T-shirt. “Is it really okay, Bear?”

“Yes.” I squeeze out through my suddenly tight throat.

She stares at me long and hard.

My gaze flicks to her chest, to her lips and finally back to her eyes.

Exhaustion and desire fight inside me.

I wonder if I should kiss her.

Before I make up my mind, she takes a giant step back. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

She nods. “Alright. I’m going to bed.”

My brows furrow. That was abrupt, but trying to figure Cynthia out while my sleep-deprived brain is running on fumes is a recipe for disaster.

I grab my shoes and glance up to find Cynthia heading to the guest room.

To *my* room.

“Where are you going?” I ask, my eyes widening.

“I told you.” Her eyes linger on me and a small smile curves her lips. “To bed.”

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CYNTHIA

I THOUGHT we'd at least make out for a bit. See where things would go. I'm aware that Bear doesn't want to rush the physical side until I've fully regained my memories, but it feels unfair to make him wait. Especially now that I'm convinced about our marriage.

He's been so hungry for me. Every time he looks at me, it's part annoyance and part lust. It doesn't matter if we're having a quiet moment or if we're in the middle of a huge fight, the need is always there. Simmering in the background. A predator pacing quietly in a cage, eager to strike.

I thought he'd grab me, push me wide open and punish me for all the times I turned him away.

But he didn't.

His footsteps thudded the floor lightly.

The mattress creaked as his big body climbed under the blankets.

His warm hands snaked around my waist.

And...

Nothing.

He just fell asleep.

Light snoring pours from Bear's side of the bed.

I hike myself up on an elbow and look down at him.

Moonlight tiptoes over pale skin. Silky blonde hair. A broad forehead. A striking nose.

Mr. Gorgeous.

It's weird, being privy to this side of him. I've only ever seen Bear in motion. Every time we meet, he's striding somewhere, staring at me, arguing with me, swooping in to rescue me from broken glass or grumbling about how stubborn I am.

Rising.

Falling.

Movement.

A rumbling engine.

But right now, he's a lot less intimidating than when he's in a leather jacket and demanding my crumbs.

I trace my finger over his nose.

He's like a powerful sculpture trapped in time.

A sigh pushes out of me as I think about what led me here.

"You've been asking a lot of questions lately. About Bear," Mom says, early morning sunshine pouring around her face.

"I'm trying to figure him out."

"You want to remember him?"

I hesitate before nodding. "Yes."

"Why?"

Her question takes me by surprise. "Shouldn't you be jumping for joy? This is what you and dad wanted."

"Your father and I want you and Bear to heal."

"Bear needs healing?"

"Your mind might be broken." She taps her chest. "But his heart is broken too. And if you're just planning to break it some more, I'm not going to give you the tools to do that."

"I'm not going to break his heart, mom."

She studies me.

“I... I want to remember.”

Bear shifts and tightens his hold on me until I'm squeezed against his chest. His muscles flex beneath my hand, strong and sure. Even in sleep, he's oddly protective of me.

“I'm okay,” I whisper.

He doesn't respond, but his breathing deepens again.

Weird. Has he always been so connected to me? Was it like that for... for us?

My heart thumps wildly.

In the silence, I return to my conversation with mom.

“What's this?” I stare at the fuzzy old teddy bear.

“That's Mr. Bear.” Mom eyes me intently. “You've met.”

“I've met a teddy bear?” I ask dubiously.

“This isn't just any old bear. This is...”

“Ah!” I scream. My head pulses with an overwhelming feeling.

Comfort.

Loneliness.

Hazy impressions pour through my mind.

The pain knocks me back a step.

It's like a laser beam splitting my skull, tearing up the carpets and revealing the wooden floors beneath it.

“Cynthia!”

“I'm okay. I'm...” My hand presses my temple as the sensation recedes. “Mom, that thing... that teddy bear... it was important to me, wasn't it?”

“You remember?” Her eyes light up.

“I'm not sure how to explain it,” I admit. “When I looked at it, I felt... comforted. It was like a flash of something that belonged to the past. Something that belonged to me.”

“Oh my.”

“What does it mean? What is that thing?”

“Early on in your marriage, Bear was gone a lot. He had to meet with investors to earn capital for his studio. He bought this teddy bear for you.” She lifts the old bear. “And you would hug it when he was gone. You would feel safe because of it.”

I take the bear from her and wait for another memory to hit me.

Nothing comes.

Strangely, that’s not disappointing. The feelings and emotions they inspired still linger.

I remember something.

A feeling.

It was real.

And if that’s real then what I felt for Bear before the accident...

“Why didn’t you show me this a long time ago?” I croak.

“Because I didn’t want to destroy any light that was trying to flicker. I wanted to see a fire in you first.”

Mr. Bear is sitting snugly in my room upstairs. I’m hoping it will inspire other memories to come flowing back.

As the shadows thicken around us, my fingers tighten on Bear’s arm.

The real Bear.

Not a snugly stand-in.

I want to return.

I’m ready to start looking for the way back to being Mrs. West.

“I’ll remember you,” I promise in a quiet voice. My heart stirs with conviction. “I’ll put the broken pieces back together. I swear.” Leaning forward, I press a soft kiss to his forehead.

* * *

A HIGH-PITCHED ALARM WAKES ME UP.

My eyes bolt open.

Panic makes my heart thunder until I realize that the evil sound is coming from a phone on the nightstand.

Annoyance snakes through my veins as I roll over, grumbling, “Who would set an alarm for such an ungodly hour?”

I get halfway through the roll before something snaps me back.

Terror freezes my breath.

I glance down and find an arm around me, solid as a steel band.

Brawny. Tan. Peppered with hair.

I squeak before I remember that I’m safe.

That huge arm belongs to my huge husband.

I’m with Bear.

And this is a typical day for us.

Right. Typical.

Nothing about this is typical.

I’ve been waking up in my own bed for over two decades. And though I *technically* have been waking up to Bear since we married, I have no recollection of that. At all.

For me, our first kiss was on the red carpet at the gala.

For me, our first night in the same bed was yesterday.

And the first time we slept together...

Yeah, for me, that hasn’t happened yet.

Heat invades my cheeks.

In reality, I probably lost my virginity on my honeymoon.

I think.

Maybe?

Was it before then? Did I waver in my convictions early on while dating Bear?

I don't remember.

And I don't know who to ask. It's not like I can plod downstairs, plop in my mother's bed and demand to know if my husband popped my cherry in a hotel suite or in the back of his truck.

I shudder at the thought.

No. I can't tell anyone.

But that also makes the mystery more burdensome.

Did I lose my virginity in marriage as planned?

Gah! I don't know.

My choice to be celibate was a personal one and I took it seriously. It meant I rarely got asked on second dates and I was okay with that. Some guys expect a girl to open her legs after dessert. Some guys expect it by the second date. Most guys just plain expect it.

Not all of those guys were jerks, but even fairly decent men who *claimed* they were okay with waiting eventually revealed their true colors. When I didn't give in, those men bounced under a variety of creative excuses.

My brows crinkle. There's a great big chasm where the past three years should be, but if I know myself and if I stayed true to what I believed, then there's no way I put out while Bear and I were dating.

So why did he stay? What gave him such restraint?

I glance over his handsome face.

He's so damn attractive. He could have anyone he wanted.

I think about Lilac's constant flirting at the gala and my hands ball into fists. Some women would fling themselves to the dirt and roll over naked just to have him on top of them.

Why did he commit to *me*?

I want to ask, but he's sleeping so soundly...

My teeth chew into my bottom lip as my heart flails in his direction. Regret for hurting him and running from him sears me afresh. If he really waited for me back when we were dating and I made him wait *again* because of my amnesia—

I need to jump this man.

Pronto.

But how am I going to do that?

I'm not sure. My body might have experience, but in my head, I'm a virgin. It feels really darned exciting and scandalous to be in bed with a man, but this is nothing compared to what I've already done.

I'm a sexual fiend, aren't I?

But I don't *remember* how to do anything.

I run my eyes over Bear's giant body. His hands are *massive* and though I'm aware that hands are not always an indicator of what a man is working with, I felt him grinding into me during that kiss at the gala.

He's not a... play thing.

My eyes linger on the blanket covering his groin.

According to all my—ahem—late night research on the subject, it'll fit.

It'll... fit, right?

Should I call Summer and ask?

I moan softly and squeeze my eyes shut.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that Bear has already *taken* me in full.

That's great.

Right?

I'm a known woman.

Just because I've forgotten doesn't mean I'll be bad.

It's like riding a bike.

My heart thumps painfully. Oof. Bad example. I'm horrible at riding a bike. I desperately suck. Spring break my last year of college was my first time mounting a bike since childhood and I ran into a stop sign. My friends laughed at me. I got scraped elbows and knees.

It was awful.

Damn. I hope it's not like riding a bike.

Bear starts to roll over as if he's waking up.

My breath quickens as visions of him being disappointed with me in the middle of a romantic embrace fills my head. I skitter out of his strong arms and thump to the ground, dragging the blanket behind me.

The thud I make when I fall is way too loud.

My heart bucks wildly.

I freeze like an animal caught in the forest and wait to hear Bear's growly voice calling for me.

One beat passes.

Two.

Finally, I hear his breathing deepening again and I scramble to my feet.

I'm overthinking this.

A part of me knows that.

That first day in the hospital when I felt that spark between us, that night when he zipped me up for the gala and again when we kissed, I wasn't this panicked.

But I also had no intentions of getting naked with him back then.

Now, I do.

It's getting real.

And it's getting scary.

And I don't know if the Amnesia Me can compare to the Broken In and Experienced Me.

I nervously tiptoe out of the guest room and run into the absolute *last* person I want to see right now.

“Dad!” I hiss, freezing mid-prance.

“Cynthia.” Dad looks just as stunned as I do. He's wearing checkered pajama pants and a T-shirt that says ‘I'm An Accountant’ on the front. Thin spectacles fall to the tip of his nose as he eyes me.

My head whips to Bear's room, back to dad, back to Bear's room. “Dad!”

Real smooth, Cynthia.

He clears his throat and understanding seeps through his eyes.

Dad glances awkwardly away.

I smooth my T-shirt down and fiddle with my fingers. “Y-you're up early.”

“So are you.” He talks to the ceiling.

My heart is about to fling itself out of my chest. Can I just die right here? Can I turn into a puddle of horrified goo in front of my sleeping husband's room and the hallway where my father is trying not to think about what me tiptoeing out of said husband's room early in the morning means?

The words ‘we didn't do anything’ spring to the tip of my tongue.

I hold them back.

I'm my father's princess, but there are some things my dad doesn't need to know and, in this case, I'm pretty sure he'd agree with me.

“Coffee?” Dad offers to break the silence.

“Sure. Thanks.”

I follow him to the kitchen. He spies the empty pan of lemon meringue pie in the sink and slants me a scolding look.

“Your mother told you to leave some for Bear.”

“I did. We, uh, we ate the rest last night.”

“Good.”

“Yeah.”

He grabs a mug and drains the remainder of the coffee decanter into it.

“Thanks, dad,” I say quietly when he hands the cup to me.

I pour in a ton of sugar and cream.

Dad’s lips twitch. “Are you sure that’s still coffee?”

I stir the liquid, glad that he’s cracking jokes and the oppressive awkwardness is lifting. “It’s better than drinking black tar.”

He laughs. “Come on.”

I follow him through the living room. He pushes the sliding glass door for me and takes a seat in the whicker chairs placed around a small, glass table.

I fall into my own chair and spread the blanket over my legs. It’s a little chilly, but the view is worth it. The sun climbs past the hills, sunshine gripping the valleys like footholds as it pushes higher. Pink, gold and red streak the clouds.

It’s stunning.

I inhale deeply, glad for this moment to quiet my rushing thoughts. My heart starts to settle and it truly feels like a new chapter is starting for me.

“Cynthia.”

“Hm?” I look at dad.

He’s staring at the view, his eyes narrowed in that thoughtful way of his. “No one is rushing you to remember. No one is forcing you to be the person you were before the accident. I hope you know that. We’re on your side.”

“It feels like mom is on Bear’s side,” I mumble.

“Bear made you very happy.” He squints. “And to your mother, getting you back with him will mean securing your happiness.”

“You don’t agree?”

“I don’t think your happiness should come from other people.” He glances at me. His brown eyes are familiar.

I know him. I remember the shape of his eyes and the flare of his nose and the grey in his beard although there’s a lot more grey now.

Dad returns his gaze to the horizon. “Be sure the decisions you’re making are because you want to make them, not because it’s what you think we expect you to make.”

“Cryptic.”

“Are you truly ready to move forward?”

“I trust Bear almost as much as I trust myself, dad. I believe he’s earned that.”

Dad nods once.

I slide my fingers into the handle of the mug, a little more at peace. Dad’s words are a reminder, not a warning. They give me strength.

Amnesia virgin or no, I am who I am.

All I can do is take tiny steps forward just like everyone else, guided by the purpose in my heart. And right now, my purpose is to allow myself to fall in love with my husband.

That’s my decision.

And that’s my choice alone.

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BEAR

“GET NAKED.”

Two blessed words that every husband loves to hear.

Especially when their wife steps into the room wearing a sexy tank top and booty shorts.

My gaze trails Cynthia’s dark skin and the mischievous smirk on her lips.

Thick hair. Sparkling eyes. Legs for days.

Falling asleep last night is one of my biggest regrets. And that’s coming from a guy who went through an emo phase in *college*. In. College.

I’m chock full of regrets.

I can honestly say that my grueling work schedule is no excuse for me walking into a bedroom with Cynthia and *not* tearing her clothes off as soon as our backs hit the mattress. The stars were all freaking aligned.

First off, Cynthia invited herself into my bed. And I’m pretty sure I felt her kissing my forehead sometime during the night. Maybe she was hoping that would wake me up, and I sure as hell wish I had. If I wasn’t bone-dead weary, it would have.

Our kiss at the gala *ruined* me. I’d been a good little boy up until that point, full of patience and restraint. But since her lips locked on mine, I haven’t been able to look at her without remembering how good it feels to kiss her.

Second, she's softening up around me. Fantasizing about kissing her is one thing and acting on it is another, but there's no real way to Cynthia's heart unless she gives you access. And I saw her offering the keys yesterday. Not just to her body but to everything.

Third, *not* taking advantage of all that was on offer last night means I'm on edge this morning and even her most innocent of phrases is turning me on.

Which is why when she strolls into my bedroom and demands I take my clothes off, my mind jumps straight to the gutter.

"Right now?" I ask, arching an eyebrow. "I'm leaving in fifteen minutes, Cynth, but I guess..." I start unbuttoning my shirt eagerly. "Shut the door."

She gives me a strange look and doesn't move.

Confusion butts into my excitement and my fingers stall on my pants.

Come to think of it, this is out of character for her. Cynthia prefers long, passionate nights that last forever. Kisses that go on and on, changing slowly in pace from soft to ravenous and back again.

I'm happy to oblige a new fantasy. A quick, dirty romp should keep me sated until I get back and have the time to really love her right.

"No," she answers.

"Babe." I nervously rub the back of my neck and check my watch. There's stubbornness in her eyes and though that determination is making me hotter than lava, it fills me with conflict. "I can't give you anything longer."

Horrible words.

They taste like agony on my mouth, but I set my alarm to ring early today and I—somehow—missed the timer.

Now I'm way off schedule and it looks like I'll be late for my prep meeting with Colin and Bianca. We're gathering with a lawyer to ensure we've got all our ducks in a row. There's

nothing worse than going into a meeting with Hollywood execs blind. They can smell the blood.

I set my hand on her arms. “Why don’t I leave my clothes on and you take yours off?” The words escape on a growl.

A flash of heat sparks in her eyes. “Bear.”

“I’ll take care of you first.” That much, I can do in fifteen minutes.

Her nostrils flare and her voice is thick when she says, “That’s not what I mean.”

My eyebrows hike.

“I’m here to fix that.” She points at my T-shirt and blazer.

“What’s wrong with it?” I glance at my outfit. It’s comfortable. It’s clean. It’s not wrinkled at all.

“You’re not wearing that to your meeting with the execs.”

My jaw drops. “You want me to change?”

“I want you to take your clothes off.” She swats my hands, strides past me and throws my closet door open. “So I can pick something else out.”

I stand awkwardly. “Oh, I thought...”

She grins, although it’s a little shy. “I know what you thought.”

I smile back and gesture to my suitcases. “There’s stuff in there too.”

“They’ll probably need to be ironed. How much time did you say you had?”

“About fifteen minutes.”

“I don’t think it’ll work.”

“The stuff in the closet should be more usable. They’re what you bought for me anyway, so I’m sure you can find something you like in there.” My belt buckle jangles as I undo it.

“Mom told me about your bid for that new movie. I heard it’s a big deal.”

Something dark tremors through my chest. I push it back. “Yeah, it’s a huge opportunity.”

“Yesterday I watched a film you worked on.”

My hands stall in the middle of me hauling my shirt over my head. “You did?”

“The music was incredible. It made the emotional scenes hit much harder.” Plastic hangers zip over the steel rod as her fingers dance through fabric. “You’re really good.”

My chest puffs out at her praise.

Film and video game scores are so subtle they’re often overlooked. I’ve learned to be satisfied knowing my work never detracted from the over-all experience, but having someone acknowledge that the sound made the visuals better is the highest form of flattery.

“Thank you,” I breathe out.

“I’m just being honest. If you sucked, I would have told you that too.”

I laugh and it feels good to do that with her again. “I know.”

She whips out another button-down. “Your skills are insane, Bear. If these movie guys don’t book your studio, they’re stupid morons.”

“I think stupid and moron mean the same thing.”

“They’d deserve the redundancy.”

I laugh again, deep in my belly.

She laughs too. Cynthia’s chuckles are the goofy kind that less confident people would hide behind dainty giggles and feminine snickers. Not her. She opens her mouth and guffaws, bowling over and giving in to it completely.

“Hurry.” She shakes her head, still laughing a little. “I want you to try these on and you said you don’t have much

time.” Cynthia strides toward me and hands over the clothes.

“Thanks.” I accept them from her.

Her expression changes when she gets a good look at my naked chest.

Brown eyes widen. Appreciation sparks from deep inside her and damn if I don’t push my chest out like a rooster in front of a chicken coop. My ego inflates a little more when she lets out a breathy noise that makes every nerve stand to attention.

“I didn’t know you were so ripped,” she says thickly.

“Yeah?”

“I mean, I know you’re *big*, but I didn’t think, you know,” she gestures to my torso, “there’d be *abs*.”

Holy crap. If she keeps looking at me like that, there’s no way I’ll be able to keep myself from touching her. Screw my meeting with the lawyer. Screw the super important pitch with the movie execs.

It’s already taking a ridiculous amount of effort to ignore every carnal urge that’s begging me to get her as naked as I am.

But I can’t.

Not unless I blow off everyone who’s counting on me.

Damn me and my responsible nature.

Cynthia swallows hard and taps the clothes in my arms. “Put this on.”

“All of it?”

“All of it.” She turns stiffly and marches to the bed. When she flings herself on it, the mattress bounces and inspires visions of the two of us rolling on top of it. Naked. Have I mentioned I want her naked?

“Let’s go, Bear.” She waves a delicate hand.

I turn away from her because staring directly at Cynthia is messing up my head and it’s already going to be a challenge

trying to wrangle myself into these fitted pants.

My wife is a big believer in tailoring. ‘*A fifty dollar suit can look like a million bucks if it fits well*’ she always says. My tailor knows me and my parts just as well as she does. Although I don’t get this heated feeling when *he’s* staring at my naked body.

Hurrying to dress, I stuff the shirt into the pants and start buttoning.

Cynthia scrambles in front of me. “Let me help.”

“I’ve got it,” I say.

“No, it’ll go faster if we work together.”

She’s wrong.

Her buttoning me up makes me want to unbutton even more.

A shiver races up my spine when the tip of her nails scrapes my abdomen.

My hands still.

Cynthia stops too.

My blood pumps hotly through my veins.

She’s leaning toward me, her eyes closed and her lips curling up.

“What?” I croak.

“Your smell.” She sniffs again.

“My smell?”

“It’s making me feel something.”

Oh sweet mercy.

Our gazes lock. I see everything she’s thinking and it all starts and ends with us together.

I lean in slowly. Deliberately.

I’m so in love with this woman.

So freaking whipped.

I should be hurrying my way downstairs, jumping into my car and barreling across town to make it to the meeting with the lawyer. There isn't much time before I'll be facing a room full of hardened businessmen with intentions of tearing me apart.

Although common sense warns I shouldn't start anything with Cynthia, there's no stopping it.

The closet disappears. The walls. The suitcases.

When I take a deep breath, I'm filled with Cynthia and her sweet scent.

Damn it. I need this too much.

She wants it too or she wouldn't have said what she did. She wouldn't be looking at me the way she is.

I slide my fingers over the back of her neck. Tightly coiled hair brushes against my knuckles. It's so thick and yet it's soft on my skin.

"Bear." Her throat bobs as she swallows. Then she rises on her tiptoes to meet me halfway.

Desire courses through my body. Is she back? Do I actually have my wife back?

Finally, I think to myself.

Then our lips touch and she makes the softest whimper in the world. A gentle, desperate sound. She changes the angle to deepen the kiss and a groan pours out of my throat. Those soft lips taste like coffee and cinnamon.

Her fingers dig into my shirt.

Then her tongue flicks on mine.

A jolt of awareness sizzles right into my pants. Scrambles my brain. Makes my body shake.

We stand there for what feels like an hour, her fingers in my hair and my mouth battering hers.

Sweet. Savory.

Cynthia.

My hands explore the body that I've spent so long missing.

Holy crap. She's so soft.

Too much fabric.

There's too much clothes in the way of where my hands want to be.

My phone shrieks in the chaos.

I stop abruptly as I realize that the world still exists around me. For a second, I thought that we were somewhere else. Some other plane of reality where nothing else mattered.

She pulls back and sighs. "You have to go."

"I don't want to," I admit.

She chokes out a laugh. "I don't want you to either." Cynth playfully smacks my butt. "Except you need to keep your job. I'm not attracted to bums."

I laugh thickly. "Noted."

Rising on her toes, she gives me a quick peck and then pushes me. "We should have tried more clothes on but, luckily, you look amazing in that outfit. I wonder who picked that out?"

I wink. "Humble."

"Amnesia or not, I know fashion."

I tear myself away from her though it's the last thing I want to do and walk to the door. Turning back, I ask, "You free this evening?"

"Why?"

"I want to take you out on a date."

Her breath hitches and she blinks. "Y-yeah. I'd love that."

I grin.

She smiles back.

I don't want to leave.

Mrs. Bradshaw's voice echoes behind me. "Bear, you're still here? Weren't you supposed to be at the studio fifteen minutes ago?"

I wince and turn away from Cynthia. "I'm running a little behind."

"Go, go, go!" She shoos me. As I pass her by, she places a handkerchief in my hand.

I stop and stare at it. "What's this?"

"Just a little extra courage. It's infused with chamomile tea. In case you get nervous. You just..." She gestures lifting a napkin to her nose and sniffing. "It's not drugs, I swear. It's a natural remedy."

I blink rapidly, touched. "Thank you."

"Alright, now hit it."

"You got this, Bear." Mr. B gives me a thumbs-up. "Show them how it's done."

I nod and head to my car.

As I drive to 'the office', I think about Cynthia's family and how amazing they've been to me. Unlike my own parents, they're steady and consistent. They love without expecting anything in return. They don't just *say* they care about someone. They show it at every turn.

When I married Cynth, I didn't just gain a wife.

I gained a whole family.

And I want to keep being their family until the day I die.

Will they still accept you if they find out why Cynthia got into that accident?

My heart squeezes painfully.

I shove the thought to the dusty corner of my mind where it belongs and focus on business.

The meeting with the lawyer goes smoothly and when I'm in front of the execs, I ace every part of my presentation. It helps that they all seem amazed by the symphony.

“Mr. West,” Hugh Courtney, the head of the film studio, points me out before dismissing the meeting, “can I have a word?”

“Sure.” I slide my laptop bag over my shoulder.

The room empties and everyone gives me weird looks. Normally, the company head doesn’t demand an individual audience with a sound director. Not when he’s questioning two sound production companies at once.

“You’re a talented kid.” Courtney wags a fat finger. “This isn’t the first time I’ve heard your name rumbling through this industry. A lot of bigger names have wanted to work with you.”

The tightness in my throat returns with a vengeance. I stiffen. “Is there something you’re getting at?”

“This is the big leagues, but rumor has it *the* number one director in the world has been gunning for Bear West. I don’t know if I should be flattered that you’re working with me or be nervous that you could ditch at any point for something even better than this.”

“I’m not a flake.”

“And maybe you’re not a smart man either. Who would turn down an opportunity like the one you were offered?”

“If there’s a problem with my work, we can talk about it.” I press my hand on the table. “But I will not be discussing other offers with you.” My stare burns into his face. “You’re going to have to trust me.”

“Trust is earned, not given.” He studies me and then grins eerily. “But have it your way, West. We’re all entitled to our reasons.” His voice drops. “And our secrets.”

Uneasy, I leave his office and stumble into the hallway.

Sweat breaks out on my forehead.

Creepy as Courtney was, he’s right.

We all have our secrets.

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CYNTHIA

SUMMER'S APARTMENT is in an upper-class neighborhood not too far from where we work. I'm a little stunned because I thought she lived in a mansion. She has that effortless, high-class vibe that pairs well with Parisian chalets or Roman villas.

Instead, the apartment is spacious and modern. It features an open-concept layout with the foyer spilling into the living room and kitchen. The dining area is huge with a stunning mahogany table that seats twelve. The table sits regally in the sunshine pouring through floor-to-ceiling windows.

Ally tosses her flip-flops off and presses her dark feet into the hardwood floors. "Ah, I love that feeling. Your house is the bomb, Sum."

"Please. It's not that great." Despite her words, a pleased smile teases her face. Summer's tied her hair back into a bun. A filmy blouse and fitted jeans complete the look.

I follow her to the kitchen where she pours me a glass of wine. "So... we do this regularly?"

"Yes." Ally bobs her chin. "We gather once a week, when everyone's schedule is free and we chill."

"It's important that we take care of ourselves since it's our job to take care of others," Summer explains, pouring herself a glass too.

Ally bobs her head. She's wearing a gorgeous cashmere sweater over a light body-con dress. It's stunning and so

Valencio Martinez, I immediately want to nab it off her and stick it in my dresser.

“I don’t remember.”

Summer smiles at me. “We started Ditch Day about two years ago so it’s probably not a thing for you.”

“It was two and a half. I remember because I’d just broken up with my boyfriend and I was snapping at clients so bad that Summer almost fired me.” Ally takes a sip and laughs. “It was awful.”

“I didn’t pull you up for snapping at clients. I pulled you up because you paired plaid and checkered.” Summer lifts her wine, laughing so hard tears spill down her cheeks. “It was horrendous.”

Ally scrunches her nose. “Can we not bring that up. I’m still horrified that I did such a terrible thing.”

My laughter pours out of me easily. Before smoothing things over with Bear, I would have freaked out hearing others talk about memories that I don’t share. But right now, I’m in such a good mood that nothing can tear me down.

Not even my amnesia.

Summer leads us to her couch which is a giant, grey monstrosity that is so soft, I practically fade into the cushions. She tucks her feet under her body and stares at me.

“You look happy.”

“Do I?” I press my cheeks.

“Things with you and Bear have gotten better?”

“They got bad?” Ally asks, gasping slightly.

“You should have seen them at the party, Al. They were so intense. I didn’t know if I should get them a room or call the cops.”

“We’ve worked it out,” I admit.

“Girl, we want details!” Summer nudges me.

“Details of what?”

“It must have been like your first time all over again, right? Dish.”

“A lady never kisses and tells.”

“Boo!” Summer cups her mouth and yells.

“I think that’s confirmation.” Ally lifts a thumb. “Congrats. You’re back in touch with your happily ever after.”

“You sound bitter, Ally,” I tease.

“Of course I’m bitter. You have a hot, gorgeous husband who adores you. And then there’s me.” She waves her free hand. “Swiping through pictures of disappointing male anatomy when I just want a decent conversation.”

“The ugly side of dating apps,” Summer whispers to me.

“And then when I find a guy, we meet up, and have a half-decent conversation—”

“Define half-decent,” I say.

“He doesn’t mention his wife, his ‘side hustle’, or asks me to buy life insurance once.”

“High standards.”

“Anyway, the night ends and guess what? He can’t pay the tab.”

“No,” Summer gasps.

“Yes.” Ally wails. “The check comes out and he starts patting his pockets. So I ask if he’d like me to handle it. I don’t mind, you know? It’s a red flag for me because, like, why are you dating if you can’t afford to pay for a meal? But I always come prepared in case this very thing happens.”

“And what did he say?”

“He looked embarrassed and he started this condescending speech about how ‘women want equality so I should start with paying for the first date’. Can you believe that moron?”

I gasp. “The bastard.”

“I’m through with dating. I mean it.” Ally flails on the couch.

“She says this every few months.” Summer rolls her eyes.

Ally’s head whips up. “Cynthia does Bear have a brother?”

“What?”

“I’m not like you, girl. I don’t need a full year of him chasing me before I’m convinced to date outside of my race. I’m real easy to convince.”

My laughter is loud. “I think I heard that he has a cousin. Matt. But he’s married to this gorgeous matchmaker from Make It Marriage. I saw their pictures. They look deeply in love.”

“Ugh. Why are the good ones always taken?”

“Some bad ones are taken too, if that makes you feel better,” Summer says casually.

“Can someone please find me a man who isn’t an absolute jerk?”

“Don’t bother. It’s better to just use them for what they’re good for.” Summer sets her wine aside, her expression resigned. “A good lay and some attention. Beyond that, they’re useless.”

“I’m not cold like that. I need commitment.”

“Commitment is an illusion.” Summer narrows her eyes.

“I don’t agree,” I argue.

“Honey, you found yourself a unicorn.” Summer pats my shoulder. “I’m afraid they don’t make ‘em like Bear anymore. Men these days just want to play around. So it’s important to know the game and play them first.”

“But if you don’t expect more, why would anyone bother to treat you better?” I ask.

Summer tilts her head back. “If I’ve learned one thing from life, it’s that everyone has their dark sides.” She spears me with a look. “Everyone.”

“Not Bear.” Ally shakes her head and sips her wine.

“I agree. He’s been nothing but patient and honest with me.”

“I’m not saying it’s a big deal like murder or anything.” Summer shrugs. “I’m saying, from *my* experience, most men can’t be trusted. They’ve always got something to hide.”

A weird feeling drops in the middle of my stomach.

What is that?

Is it a flash of a memory or a bad reaction to the wine?

Ally grips my shoulder. “Hey, Cynth. You okay?”

“I’m fine.” I force a smile.

It must not be convincing because a worried expression falls on her face. “See, Summer! You went and planted doubts in her mind about her husband.” Ally hurls the accusation across the couch.

“I didn’t mean to.” Summer scoots toward me, her voice low. “You know Bear, Cynth. We already said he’s a unicorn. I wasn’t talking about him.”

“I know I just... I think I had a flash.”

“A hot flash?” Summer asks. “Should we turn the AC higher?”

“No, it’s... it’s like a hint of a memory.”

“You’re getting your memory back?” Ally shrieks. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because it just started happening recently. And it’s not anything fully formed. It’s mostly just a random feeling that’ll hit my chest. It doesn’t belong to the current moment, so I know it belongs to the past. Well, I sort of know.”

“Sort of?” Summer tilts her head.

“Give us an example.”

“Okay. This morning, I was buttoning Bear’s shirt and I smelled his cologne.” Heat invades my cheeks as I remember the steamy kisses that followed.

“Girl, what was that grin about?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head. “Anyway, it’s not his usual cologne. I think he uses it for special occasions. And when I got a whiff of it, I just felt like...”

“Like what?” Ally whispers, leaning forward.

“Licking him like ice cream.” I wince. “It was so intense. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the moment or some other, um, *experience* we’d had together that was coming back to my head and affecting my emotions.”

“You nasty girl.” Summer wags a finger.

I rub my forehead. “It’s so weird. I can’t control what’ll spark the flash, but it’s so faint that I can’t really determine if I’m just overthinking or making it up.”

“Faint or not, this is a good thing, right? It means you’re starting to remember.”

Ally folds her arms over her chest. “It also means that something has to prompt the memory.”

“True,” Summer murmurs.

“What did we say just now to make you flash?” Ally stares intently at me.

“I’m not sure if it was a flash.”

“Still.” She nudges me in the side.

“It was that part about people’s dark sides.”

Summer shudders. “That’s unsettling.”

“Like I said, it could be random.”

“Well I hope you get your memories back, girl.” Ally flings her arm around my shoulders. “I’m dying to know what happened the night you wrecked your truck.”

“Ally,” Summer warns.

“What?” She raises a brow. “I do.”

“Bear didn’t say what happened?” I wonder.

“He told the police you went to visit your parents.”

“I did?”

“But it’s not like he made that up,” Summer butts in. “You did call your mom a couple times, but the storm messed with the cell service. It didn’t go through.”

“What’s weird is that you left in the middle of one of the worst rain storms we’ve had this year. It was terrible out there. What was so important that you had to see your parents right away?”

“I-I don’t know.” Panic flickers on the edge of my vision. I strain to pick up the threads of my shattered memory, but it’s like a rope that keeps slipping out of my hand and leaves burn scars every time. “I don’t know.” My body starts shaking. “I don’t know.”

“Whoa. Whoa!” Summer pops out of the chair.

Ally drops to her knees in front of me, both hands on my shoulders. “Sweetie, Cynth. Calm down.”

“I think she’s having a panic attack.”

“I don’t know.” My heart is about to buck out of my chest. There’s a black hole where my memories should be.

This is wrong.

There’s something wrong with me.

I should know these things by now.

Why is it just a flash? Why is it not the full memory?

“Should we call 9-1-1?” Summer asks frantically.

“Or Bear,” Ally shrieks.

His name is enough to snap me out of my panic. “Bear...” I gasp.

Ally’s eyes fasten on me and she leans forward. “What?”

Summer’s got a cell phone plastered to her ear. “Yes, is Bear around? We need to speak to him. It’s about Cynth.”

“No,” I moan, pushing past my frantic feelings to speak. “No, Bear’s got a meeting. It’s...” I wince. “It’s important. Don’t... he’s got a meeting.”

“Okay, Cynth.” Ally blinks rapidly. “We’re going to leave Bear alone so he can focus on his meeting.” She snaps at Summer. “Hang up.”

“It’s too late,” Summer says.

I squeeze my eyes shut and take deep breaths. As I calm down, I start to feel extremely stupid.

Why did I freak out like that? Why do I keep breaking down?

I hate that.

I’m always so strong. Everyone turned to me when they needed answers, leadership, or someone to be brave enough to do that stupid, crazy dare first. I’m not the girl who curls up on the couch and struggles to breathe. I’m not that person.

“Bear sounded out of his mind with worry,” Summer says quietly. “He says he’ll be here soon.”

“Call him back. Tell him to focus on what he has to do.”

“Cynth...”

“Fine.” I scramble for my phone. “Then I’ll call him.”

Summer snatches the cell from me. “Look, now is *not* the time to pretend that everything’s okay. They’re not. You’re not freaking okay, Cynthia!”

Ally’s eyes dart to the ground.

Summer’s chest billows. “You scared me. You scared both of us. We’re not going to lie to Bear for you. And we’re not going to keep him from worrying if he has a reason to. So just shut up and catch your breath.”

I pin my lips shut.

Ally swats at Summer. “There was no need to be so harsh.”

“I need a minute.” Summer darts off.

I glance at Ally. “What did I do?”

“Nothing.” She squeezes my hand. “Summer had a younger brother who used to have panic attacks. He, uh, told

everyone he was okay and that he'd gotten better but, one day, her family found out just how much he was struggling."

"Oh no." I glance in the direction where Summer disappeared.

"She really hates when people pretend they've got it all together when they don't. It's harder to get help if you have to convince everyone that nothing is wrong. Her brother taught her that lesson and she's bottled up the pain inside. It doesn't normally come out until someone triggers it and then she kind of," Ally mimes a bomb going off, "explodes."

"I didn't know. I mean, I guess I did know, but I forgot. I feel awful."

"Don't feel awful. Feel better." Ally gives me a small smile. "I'll go talk to her."

"Should I...?"

"You stay here and rest."

My phone buzzes.

"It's Bear," I murmur.

She nods. "Go ahead and answer."

"Call me if you need me," I tell Ally.

"Same. We'll come running if you holler."

"I've got this."

She smiles and wanders off to Summer's room.

I answer my phone. "Hey. How was your meeting with the execs? What did they say?"

"Are you okay," he growls. "Summer told me what happened."

"I just had a small panic attack."

"Cynth."

"It's nothing major." I sit straight up and softly admit the truth. "I mean, it was a little scary and I'm not totally okay, but Summer and Ally were there to help me through it. You

shouldn't run here if you're in the middle of something important."

The sound of horns honking and a barrage of wind gusts through the cell phone. It sounds like he's speeding through traffic.

"Let me make this clear in case it wasn't before," Bear says gruffly, "there is *no* one more important to me than you. No one."

My heart flutters.

Suddenly, I hear tires screeching on tarmac.

Bear curses.

"What happened?"

"Someone cut in front of me and now I missed the light."

"Be careful."

"I am. I just..." He blows out a breath. "I want to get to you as soon as possible."

"Can I kiss you through the phone?" I wonder aloud.

Bear's end of the line goes silent.

"I'm really glad I have you, Bear. Thank you for sticking by my side even though it's been a struggle. I'll make it up to you from now on. I promise."

He lets loose a sigh.

"By the way," I think about the flash I had and Ally's cryptic words about what happened the night of the accident, "I have to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"The night when I ran my car into the ditch, I heard there was a bad storm."

His voice sounds tight. "There was."

"It doesn't make sense that I'd jump into my car and drive to my parents with the weather like that."

Everything stills.

I don't even hear him breathing.

“Bear?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you tell me what happened the night of the accident?”

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BEAR

CYNTHIA'S WORDS echo like warning bells. *'What happened the night of the accident?'*

Fear crashes into me, held in suspension by guilt.

It's all there.

The truth.

Scattered in my mind.

Angry tears. Rain pouring on dark cheeks. Puddles splashing around my feet. Headlights. An engine growling. Pain thrashing through my body when I jump aside. Tires rotating close to my head.

"Bear?" Her voice is soft, gentle. Nothing like it was that night.

"Uh..." My throat is full of gravel.

"Hey, Cynth. I'm sorry about that," Summer's voice whispers in the background.

"Bear, I'll call you back. I need to talk to Summer."

"Okay," I say hoarsely.

I'm saved. For now.

But if I don't come up with a decent response to that question, Cynthia will sniff out the truth in an instant.

And I can't have that.

Distressed, I pull to a stop in front of Summer's apartment.

It's late evening and stay-at-home moms are driving back in mini-vans, their children camped in the back seat. The sound of tinny laughter fills the air and my heart squeezes even more.

I pull my headphones over my ears and lose myself in music.

My refuge.

The phone buzzes and breaks me out of my trance.

It's Colin.

I answer hesitantly. "Hey, I was planning to call you." A ball of unease clogs my throat. "About the meeting, I don't think—"

"We did it!" Colin screams.

My jaw falls open. "We got it?"

"I just got off the phone with them. We're signing the papers tomorrow. They want to move fast. There's no time to waste."

"Courtney went with me?" I whisper. *Why? I thought he'd kick me out.*

"I knew you were going to kill this, Bear. I knew it!"

Bianca's shrieks join his. "Congratulations. We should all get together and celebrate."

"I'll treat you both to something fancy."

Colin snickers. "Careful how you say that, boss. I have expensive tastes."

"No, you don't. Your taste is as cheap as you are." Bianca roasts him.

I chuckle despite the rock that's still sitting on my chest. "I think celebrating is a great idea."

"How about tonight?" Bianca asks hopefully. "We can meet somewhere? Have celebratory drinks?"

"Another time. I already promised Cynthia I'd take her out tonight."

“Oh,” Bianca’s disappointment is obvious. “You can’t rearrange it?”

“Give up alone time with his smoking hot wife for us? You don’t know Bear. He and Cynth have a lot to catch up on.”

“What do you mean?”

“He has to teach her what she likes in the bedroom from the ground up.”

“Shut up, Colin.”

“You know I’m right.”

“Getting this contract is a big deal,” Bianca argues.

“I’ll take you out if you’re lonely, B,” Colin offers. “Since it means so much to you.”

“Not if we were the last two people on earth, Colin.”

My lips inch up.

I see the doorman nodding and waving to Cynthia and wrap up the call. “Guys, I’ll talk to you later.”

“No problem, boss. And don’t wear Cynthia out too much tonight.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“Women love it.”

“Cavewomen? Or blind women? They obviously haven’t seen your face or know what a gentleman looks like if they’re into you.”

As Bianca and Colin bicker, I end the call and climb out of the truck.

Cynthia’s smile is brilliant as she walks toward me.

I’m hit with a sudden breathlessness.

She’s stunning in a pair of skinny jeans that hug her curves so tight it’ll leave a man drooling. The sleek, dark skin of her back is exposed in a daring little top that hugs her neck and wraps around her waist. She’s flashing skin from her navel and most of her lower back.

It's pretty obvious she's without a bra.

A dirty vision simmers in my head—Cynth's chest in my hands as I pay them the attention they deserve and hear her throaty moans.

Heat sears the back of my neck and I wonder how I can have the audacity to want her like this when I'm keeping such a big secret from her.

Her grin gets even bigger when she sees me admiring her.

The rod of guilt embeds deeper into me.

Cynth bounces the rest of the way. "You should have texted to tell me you were downstairs."

"I didn't want to interrupt your time with Summer and Ally. Figured I'd give you a few minutes."

"Well, it's a good thing I glanced out the window and saw your car or you would have been waiting for a while. When the three of us get together, time flies."

"I know." I force a smile.

The expression must not be natural enough because her face flickers with worry. "Are you okay?"

I nod.

To my surprise, Cynthia steps into me and wraps her arms around my neck.

It's the last thing I expected her to do and I have to shift back to keep on my feet. My elbows hit the side of the car with a *thunk* as I catch my balance and straighten up quickly.

Cynthia's flush against me and, just like that, my body crackles with desire. I plant my hands on her waist to steady us both. My fingertips scrape soft skin. Dark exposed flesh that's beautifully displayed in that sexy top.

Cynthia closes her eyes and breathes deeply. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"What?" I croak.

"Earlier. On the phone."

My heartbeat picks up steam. *What happened that night?*

“You must have been panicked when you heard I was freaking out over my lost memories,” she adds, looking into my eyes.

“Oh.” My chest rises and falls. Sweat breaks out over my top lip. And though I should feel relieved, I’m even more tense. “Yeah. I was worried.”

“You’re so sweet, Bear.”

“And you’re pushing yourself too hard. You don’t have to remember everything at once.” *Please don’t.*

“Okay. I get it.”

“You need to be careful,” I scold her though I’m talking to myself. “Things can unravel at any moment and it won’t always end well.”

“I hear you. Calm down.” She places a hand on my arm.

My tongue darts out to wet my lip.

Her eyes are too beautiful.

She’s too beautiful.

We gaze into each other’s eyes for a long moment.

“I can’t believe I took so long to see it,” Cynthia whispers.

My heart’s back in my throat. “See what?”

“How wonderful you are.”

“I’m not all that.”

“You’re amazing.” The hands around my neck tighten. “I was in there with the girls and Ally was telling us all about her horrible dating experiences. And Summer’s so jaded she’s completely given up on love and then there’s me.” She sways lightly, sunlight in her eyes and glowing in her skin. “Who met someone that loved me. Someone who was right there by my side after a terrible accident.”

I swallow hard.

She leans in. “Someone who kept chasing me and loving me no matter how hard I pushed him away.” Her lips are soft on top of mine. “Someone who’d never lie to me.”

My heart is about to burst out of my chest.

The guilt is crushing.

I pull back. “We should go.”

“Why?” Cynthia’s mischievous smile warns me that this is only the start of her kisses and compliments. “I can’t love up on my husband in public? We’re married, you know. And it’s nobody’s business.”

“Still...” I inch her back.

Wariness flashes through her eyes. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

I glance at the ground, my throat bobbing.

“Oh no.” She covers her mouth. “Is it the interview? Did you tank it?” Her fingers rub my back. “Bear, it’s okay. I told you they were idiots. They probably wouldn’t know a genius if he slapped them in the face.” Her eyes sharpen. “Wait. Did they insult you or something?”

“No.”

“Should we get them back? Maybe slash a few of their car tires?”

I laugh despite myself. “Cynthia.”

“Maybe we should dress up in ski masks and egg their houses. That would be more fun.”

“And less likely to put us in jail.”

“Well, come on then.” She marches to the passenger side door and opens it. “Let’s go to the grocery store and buy a couple dozen eggs.”

A sigh gets stuck in my throat.

She would fight wars for me if I said the word. She’d throw herself in front of me if I was injured.

It’s there. It’s all over her face.

She's falling in love again.

What if she remembers? That love will turn to hatred.

The worry balls in my throat and makes it hard to speak.
“Cynth.”

“Yeah?”

I inhale sharply. Shake my head. “I have a better idea.”

“Which is?”

“We go on a date instead of vandalizing anyone's property.”

“That's a lot less exciting.”

“But it's legal.”

“Oh, you never know.” She winks naughtily. “I could think of a couple ways we could break the law together.”

I suck in a breath at that sultry look.

My pants are getting tighter and tighter.

Is there anything this woman does that *can't* draw a response from my body?

She grins and ducks into the car.

I calm myself down as best as I can and hop into the driver's side.

When I start driving, Cynthia turns and watches me intently.

I squirm. “What are you looking at?”

“You.” She sighs. “You're incredibly hot. Do you know that?”

My cheeks turn warm. “Hm.”

“I like making you blush.”

“I don't blush,” I respond, because I have a reputation to protect and I'll never admit it out loud.

Cynth squeals. “Yes, you do. You are right now.”

“Nope.” I rub my beard and glance in the mirror. There’s a red flush spreading beneath the bush on my face. Damn.

“It’s cute.” She runs her fingers down my cheek and over my scruff. “Reminds me that you’re human.”

She has no idea.

My body stirs again.

I can’t help how attracted I am to her. It’s killing me.

My phone rings.

“Want me to get that?” Cynthia offers.

“It’s in my pocket—”

“I got it.” She drops her hands on my jeans and starts fishing around.

My fingers tighten on the steering wheel.

She strokes me slightly and a harsh, tormented moan rumbles from my throat. The phone ringing covers the sound, though there’s nothing that can hide my physical reaction.

Cynthia doesn’t seem to notice and checks the screen. “It’s Matt. Answer?”

I nod because I’m pretty sure if I open my mouth it’ll be to order her to the backseat so I can focus on the road.

Cynth puts the phone on speaker. “Hello?”

“I’m Matt. Is Bear around?”

“Yes, he’s right here next to me.” She glances my way.

“Wait, you sound like... Cynthia?” Matt’s voice rings with happiness.

She falters. “Yes?”

“Amina!” Matt’s feet thump loudly. “Just a minute, Cynth, let me get my wife. She’ll kill me if she misses this chance to talk to you.”

Amina’s voice whispers softly in the background. “*Babe, I’m trying to prepare for a client.*”

“*It’s Cynth...*”

“*Really?*” In a louder voice, Amina shrieks, “Cynthia, is that you?”

“Uh... yes.”

“Girl, hi. I’m Amina, Matt’s wife. I’m not sure you’d remember me even without the... you know. We only met once or twice, but I *loved* your style.”

I watch Cynthia carefully, in case she gets another panic attack, but her mouth eases into a grin instead.

A breath of relief escapes me.

She’s good.

“Hey, Amina. I was just talking to my friends about you. I can’t believe I’m related to an actual matchmaker.”

“Girl, that is *nothing* compared to having a real-life personal stylist in the family. Venus, she’s one of my friends and she works at Make it Marriage with me, girl—she’s been nagging me to fly out to you and go shopping. We all want to be dressed by a professional.”

“You don’t need any help, Amina. You’re gorgeous.”

“So are you.”

“Ehem,” Matt clears his throat, “are you two going to talk about fashion and clothes all day?”

“I’ll sit in your lap if you hush up and let me talk to Cynthia.”

“Deal,” Matt says immediately.

I laugh.

Cynthia chuckles too.

“Let’s go, Cynth. I just bought us some time.” Amina laughs loudly. “I’m just kidding. But Cynth, we’ll definitely catch up.”

“Definitely,” Cynthia agrees.

Amina's voice sounds distant, which means she's probably walking away. "Back to the Valentine's Day workload."

Matt chuckles. "Okay, babe."

"What did you want to discuss, Matt?" I ask, flicking the indicator and taking a left.

His voice turns grave. "Did you hear the news? Your dad's getting married again."

"So?"

"You didn't know."

"Dad and I don't keep in touch. And even if we did, I don't want a wedding invitation."

Cynthia's eyes bore into me.

"I figured you should know anyway. You don't have to attend his wedding, but maybe you can fly down here and hang with us. After Make It Marriage lets my wife breathe, of course."

"I'll think about it."

"Great."

We chat a bit more then Matt hangs up.

Cynthia rests her chin on her hands. "What's up with you and your dad?"

I shrug. "Ever since he and mom divorced, he's been on this path of getting married and then breaking up a year or two later. I think he's not over mom and he's trying to replace her with all these younger women, but the more mom seems to be enjoying her single life, the more miserable dad gets."

"Is that why you cut him off?"

I shake my head. "My parents can't stand each other, and I get that. But when he started calling mom derogatory names, I told him he'd either respect her in my company or refrain from calling me. He decided to stop calling."

"Ouch."

“They’ve never been civil to each other. I had to tolerate it as a kid, but I won’t put up with that crap as an adult.”

Admiration shines in her eyes. “Your convictions are sexy.”

“That’s a weird turn-on.”

She laughs. “If your parents were such terrible examples, how did you come out so decent?”

“A lot of that was your dad.”

“No way.”

“While we were dating, I spent a lot of time learning from him.” My palm rubs the back of my neck. “I knew I didn’t want to be like my parents and I already had those intentions, but I didn’t have the tools. No one trained me on how to be a good husband. I had no clue how to make a woman happy or interpret her language.”

She nods and listens intently.

“But I got the tools.”

“And it shows.” She lifts one of my hands and kisses the back of it. “You’re a good man, Bear. And you’re an even better husband.”

Panic flares in my chest.

The guilt is back with a vengeance and it’s out for blood.

She wouldn’t say that if she knew the truth.

I take a shovel and bury that thought in the deepest corner of my mind where it will, hopefully, never resurface.

I’m not happy my wife got hurt.

I’m not happy she had to go to the hospital.

But Cynthia’s amnesia is a chance at starting over and as much as I want her to regain her memories, there’s one little secret that needs to remain buried forever.

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CYNTHIA

“THIS IS where you took me for our first date?” I glance around at the gilded furniture and fancy chandeliers. The restaurant is at the end of a dock, suspended over a sprawling lake. I already know the bottled water here is going to cost a kidney.

Bear’s lips twitch. “Yeah. I did.”

“The *first*?” I scrunch my nose. “Not the second or third or... the proposal?”

“The proposal was at your parents’ house.”

“Oh.”

“And the second was at a party.”

“Hm.” I grab the menu—which is made of *silk*—and peer at it with one eye open.

There are no prices on it.

Damn.

My heart thunders. “Are you sure you want to stay here?”

Bear’s dark blue eyes smolder. “You asked me that question back then too.”

“Probably because I could buy a designer gown for what this meal will cost.”

“I wanted to bring you here that night.” He presses pale fingers beneath his chin. “I wanted you to feel special.”

“And you wanted to impress me. Admit it.” I arch an eyebrow.

“Hell yeah.” Bear leans back, a grin on his face. “I learned that you should start how you mean to continue. You’d been turning me down for months. My intentions needed to be loud and clear. *‘This is how I’m going to take care of you. I’ll treat you like the queen that you are’*. I wanted to say something like that without actually,” he gestures with two fingers, “saying it.”

“I got the message?”

“I got a kiss when I dropped you home so...” His smile is dangerous.

My heart rate triples. Soft golden lights drip down his broad forehead, straight nose and that gorgeous beard. His jaw line is still pronounced even with all that hair on top of it. How is that possible?

“You weren’t looking at me like that three years ago though,” Bear whispers.

I gulp hard, hoping to calm my raging heartbeat with more oxygen. “Idiot.”

He chuckles. “If it makes you feel any better, you opened up to me much faster this time than you did back then.”

“Moron.”

He shakes his head and takes my hand. “Enough. Don’t talk about the woman I love that way.”

I forget how to breathe. “Are you for real?”

“You asked me that back then too.”

“This must really feel like *deja vu* to you.”

For a moment, something dark flickers over his expression. Then he blinks and it’s gone.

It happens so fast, I’m not sure if I imagined it.

“It’s a little different.”

“What about it?”

“We’re married now.” He lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug. “That night, I was so nervous, I was sweating buckets. I was afraid I’d say the wrong thing. You were everything I wanted and it would have killed me to come so far and mess up the first chance I got.”

“You obviously did something right because I went on a second and third date.”

“And a lot more.”

“I wish I could remember.” I sigh.

“No one is rushing you.” He squeezes my hand.

I squeeze back, but it’s half-hearted.

Sure, maybe Bear is okay with having a wife with a gutted memory, but I don’t want to live always second-guessing myself. I’m tired of moving around in this big, scary world with a hole blown through my past.

It’s a life of constant fear. Fear that someone will come up to me expecting me to know them. Fear that they’ll expect me to remember what I did or said. Fear that I’ll uncover a different person than the one I think I am.

Who knows the mistakes I made? The enemies I made? The little secrets I kept that I hoped no one found out?

Summer said that everyone has their dark side.

Everyone.

Well, ‘everyone’ includes me.

If someone accuses me of wrong-doing, how will I defend myself? On what truth will I stand?

My breathing thickens.

I squeeze my fingers into fists.

They say ignorance is bliss, but that person has *obviously* never had amnesia.

“Hey,” Bear’s thumb caresses my skin, “just keep breathing, Cynth. I’m right here.”

I pull air through my nose. “I’m okay.”

“You sure?” His thumb continues caressing me. Slow circles. Deliberate strokes.

I stare at our hands.

White on black. Steady on a frantic pulse.

Lust coils around my body. I keep feeling these incredibly strong bolts of desire whenever Bear so much as looks at me. And the more I crave him, the more I wonder about the physical part of our relationship.

Bear’s blue eyes land on me. “Spit it out.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Cynth.”

He caught me. “Fine.” I suck in a deep breath. “You said we kissed on the first date.” I squirm. “Did we really?”

“We did.”

“And we, uh,” my tongue dips out to moisten my lips, “anything more while we were dating?”

“You didn’t lose your virginity before marriage,” Bear says plainly as if he can read my thoughts.

My eyes widen. “That’s scary.”

“What is?”

“How well you know me.”

“I tend to observe what I love.”

“It’s intimidating. And unbalanced. I can’t return the favor.” I hang my head.

“You know me.”

“I forgot you.”

“And I’m not blaming you. No one is.”

I sigh. “I’ll try my best to remember.”

His face tightens for a minute before he relaxes. “Sure.”

“Even if I don’t,” I say firmly, “I’ll start learning again. I’ll study you like I studied fashion history in college. Give me a

few months. I'll crush the Newlywed Game like a boss. There's no way I'll be humiliated again."

His laughter makes me feel warm and gooey inside. "I believe that."

My pulse hammers in my throat. As I stare at him, I blurt, "You're gorgeous."

"Yeah?" His eyes, at half-mast, are weapons of mass destruction. "So are you."

My body begs for a taste.

Of what?

I'm not sure.

I don't remember what it was like to be with him. At least, not in my head.

But down south?

It's jumping at the bit to take his clothes off.

"The way I feel... right now, I'm sure I felt that before."

He arches an eyebrow.

"Did we really... did you say we waited because I can't remember?"

"No." His lips inch up and his stare turns a little softer. "You're worried you didn't keep your convictions?"

"It's kind of hard to believe I could resist you."

"I'm not going to lie." He chooses his words carefully. "Your celibacy came as a surprise. You were go-with-the-flow and up for any adventure. I liked that. It was a little harder to stay within the boundaries you demanded once I found out, but I liked that too."

"You did?"

"Your determination to keep your principles was one of the reasons I kept coming back. That meant a lot to me given the way I grew up."

"How did you grow up?"

“My mom cheated on my dad when I was a kid. My dad cheated on my mom right back. In college, I had a girlfriend that I was head-over-heels in love with.” His voice is calm and so is his expression. It’s as if that life is completely removed from him. “She cheated on me too and that’s when I started to think ‘ah, this is how it is. I’m just an idiot for expecting loyalty.’”

“I didn’t know. About your parents.” The words slip out naturally and I wince, realizing that I probably did. “I mean, I didn’t remember.”

His gentle look tells me I don’t have to clarify. “When I met you and the chemistry got hot and you still put your foot down and drew that line, it made me trust you. It made me want to protect you and those convictions too.”

“Protect me from what?”

“From yourself.” His eyes glimmer. “There were moments when my mouth was on you and you weren’t so convinced that waiting was the right call.”

My eyelashes flutter. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not sure if I should apologize or…”

He laughs.

“That must have been insanely tough.”

Bear nods. “It’s true, I didn’t jump for joy at the thought of not being able to have sex with you.”

Heat blares in my chest and I sheepishly stare at my plate.

“But I was so in love I would have waited ten years,” Bear says quietly.

“Without complaint?”

“I’m not a saint, Cynth.” His lips twitch.

I laugh. Press my elbow on the table. Lean forward. “Bear, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“Mm.” He nods at the waiter who brings out our food.

I wait until the server's gone before I finish my thought. "I think..."

"You think?" He stares intently at me.

My knees knock together beneath the table. "I think I like you." My tongue darts out to lick my lips and I nervously dive into my confession. "And I don't want to give you crumbs. You deserve more than crumbs." My eyes collide with his. "A lot more."

We sit there, staring at each other.

The tension gets thicker and thicker.

Suddenly, Bear gets up.

The chair scrapes the tile with a decided 'shriek'.

My heart lurches to my throat when I see the determined expression on his gorgeous face.

The air turns taut with tension.

The sensual kind.

The 'oh my gosh, this guy is going to tear me up in the best way' kind.

I tilt my head back to keep his stare.

My fingers nervously pluck at the cloth napkin.

Bear plants one hand on the back of my chair and the other presses hard against the table. Those giant hands look extra big and twice as dangerous next to the expensive china.

Eyes turning to flaming blue, he moves closer. Shadows dance across his handsome face. I notice his gaze dropping to my mouth just as his thick fingers lift from the table to grip my chin.

He speaks in a low, gravelly voice that makes me press my thighs together. "You want to get out of here?"

It's the sexiest question I've ever heard in my life, coming from the sexiest man I've ever seen in my life.

I nod wordlessly.

He takes my hand and helps me up.

The napkin flutters to the ground.

The food looks lonely and desolate. Our meal alone is worth way too much for us to pick up and leave after merely a few bites.

The fact that we're wasting money makes me tug his hand and draw him to a stop.

“Can we take those to go?” I whisper.

His smile is as full of affection as it is desire. “Yes.”

So we wait by the bar for our food to be packaged.

And Bear does *not* let that time go to waste.

As we face the rows of liquor, he stands close behind me and rubs my shoulders. My waist. My stomach. His hands are everywhere—in totally decent places. But the way he's making me feel is absolutely indecent.

And the moan that slips out of my throat when he starts breathing on my neck is indecent too.

My knees wobble.

My body's melting like wax.

He's right behind me.

His big hands—

His masculine scent—

It's unfair.

It's lethal.

When he does that.

That thing where he just stands behind me.

So close.

So, so close.

But not touching.

It's like the night of the Valentine's Day party when he zipped me into my dress.

Except we're in public.

And the faces I'm making is causing the bartender to look over with the sleaziest grin I've ever seen.

Another minute passes.

Bear's hands are on my back.

This halter top was *made* for that.

It's skin on skin.

No, it's torture is what it is.

I don't need to see Bear to know he's feeling exactly what I am.

Hot, uncontrollable desire.

I'm about to turn around and suggest we leave the food behind when a server brings the cartons. They're tied up nice and secure in a plastic bag.

That's a good thing because the moment we stumble outside, Bear opens the car, tosses the food in like it's a frisbee and then he's back on top of me.

Rough hands slide up my waist to gather at my back.

He pulls me into him.

I think he's going to kiss me, but he drops his head to my shoulders. I feel the fleeting touch of his mouth on my neck and almost faint.

His body is so hard.

His mouth is so hot.

"Kiss me," I demand.

"Not yet." His hands slide around me and spin me so I'm facing the window of the car.

My heart is bucking so hard it's about to vibrate right out of my chest.

I feel him lifting my tight curls and sucking on the back of my neck. Then the side. Then my ear.

It's impossible to see him properly in the reflection of the car.

It's just blonde hair and a pale forehead and then me.

A black woman who looks drunk or high or both.

I struggle to breathe.

My hand hooks behind me and grabs on to his neck.

I nearly combust when I hear his answering moan as our bodies press together.

"Oh damn," I grind out. "Bear."

Warm, wet heat engulfs me.

"We need to..." I groan low and long as he spins me around again. "We need to find... hotel..."

"Not home?" He arches an eyebrow.

"My parents are probably," I struggle to catch my breath, "they're probably waiting for you." My brain spins with information and desire. "They'll want to... talk."

"Good point." A silky blonde lock bounces against his forehead. His hair is disheveled, and it is totally unfair the way it just makes him look hotter.

Bear googles the nearest hotel and murmurs about this being his first time doing that and something about his confession sends me wild again.

It feels new and exciting for him.

And that makes me feel bold and powerful.

This is an experience we're having together.

Me and him.

Not the Pre-Amnesia me and Bear. Not the wife he used to know.

The woman I am today.

And I like that.

I love that.

On the drive, it's my turn to torture him. Hands on his legs and his hips and anywhere else I can safely put my palm without causing an accident.

"You're killing me," Bear growls, narrowly righting the car before it skitters off the road.

"Good." I ease over and nibble on the lobe of his ear. Pulling the fleshy part down with my teeth, I whisper, "That's the point."

His foot presses on the gas in response.

The hotel has tiny Valentine's Day decorations on the concierge desk.

A woman with a tan face and bright eyes asks us chirpily, "Would you like the honeymoon suite?"

I don't hear what Bear says. Not when his hands are rubbing my back again.

But the next thing I know, we're walking.

Boarding the elevator.

Desecrating the elevator.

There's a camera somewhere.

We probably shouldn't be...

Bear kisses me deeply.

His body presses hard against mine.

His hands...

Oh...

His tongue...

Oh. Okay. That's... yes.

The world spins.

The doors whir open.

He walks me backward.

My hands pull at my clothes.

Then we're falling on a bed filled with roses.

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BEAR

LOVE IS TERRIFYING and I learned as much three years ago when I caught a glimpse of a big afro, dark skin and dark brown eyes in a crowd of half-drunk partiers. A bright smile that could rival a disco ball. Laughter that could drag all the attention in a room.

Love is wicked.

All my life, I thought it asked for permission.

I thought it plodded up to a man, shook his hand and asked if he'd like to be introduced.

I thought it was stroking egos and long walks on the beach and musky nights getting sweaty and disheveled in a bed that creaked so hard my college roommate called the cops.

I thought that was love.

Then the real thing showed up.

And it wasn't so polite with me.

No. It barged into my heart, planted itself on the ground and informed me that I would never be the same.

It showed up.

Took up space.

Expanded until there was no room left.

Love demanded I have her.

Cynthia Bradshaw.

The woman with the confident smile and the eyes that snapped and crackled.

The woman who was not interested in dating outside of her race.

The woman who kept shutting me down left, right and center.

Blow after blow to the ego.

Frustration.

Lonely nights in bed, arms empty and head filled with fantasies.

Jealousy upon jealousy.

Why the hell was she so popular? Why the hell was she so charismatic and bright?

I hated sharing.

I still hate it.

But love didn't really give a damn.

It demanded I chase her.

It demanded I wait for her.

It demanded I grow and mature and become a better man for her.

I gave in because I wanted love and I wanted to love her.

It was a painfully easy surrender.

Hands up. Both arms.

Knees to the ground. Pressing into cold tiles.

Head bowed.

Reverence.

Love won over me and it was a freaking dictator.

Because I thought it was done.

I thought I couldn't fall any harder.

Break into any more pieces.

I thought it was stationary. Stagnant. Steady.

Everyone says that the flames burn out eventually and the hope is that, in marriage, it just simmers. You're lucky if there's even a flicker left. You're lucky if there's a damn wick.

Not for me.

Love fanned the flames into an inferno.

And now, in the darkness, I drag it out. Make the moment last for as long as possible. Thrusting. Releasing. So much effort that sweat beads on my forehead. I have to swat at the dark leg that tries to hook around my waist and pull me in. Speed me up.

No.

I'm going for a slow burn.

No mercy.

I'll torture love the way it dragged me around.

I spend an obscene amount of time sucking and licking and kissing, trying to find myself in the rebirth of heat and steel and flesh.

My brain goes hazy.

I've been here before. Here. In a bed with the woman who I pledged my life to. Her mouth on mine, kissing me senseless. Our clothes on the floor, scattered like the roses someone painstakingly arranged to make the moment special. To make it more romantic.

I've been here before, rolling on top, grinding against the softness of a body that shivers for me. My tongue prodding the seams of her lips, commanding access and those moans that vibrate like violin strings.

I know her better than she does.

What makes her weak.

There.

My hand right there.

Yes.

What makes her buck.

There.

Faster.

Harder.

Two fingers.

Yes.

My lips sucking, stroking.

Again.

Faster.

She nearly levitates.

I know it like a script I've seen before. Vaguely.

But it's different.

It's tighter and hotter and wilder.

I don't see the same woman.

It's her.

And it's not.

These hips are familiar as they shamelessly rub against me.
These hands are familiar as they rake my back and cling to my
shoulders. As they dive into my hair, squeezing frantically.

These whimpers are music I've created in the past,
matching the headiness of her pleas as she rocks in tandem.

It's her.

But, in the same breath, it's not.

I tease her and the sounds she makes are her own.

I scrape my beard against her chest and the choked gasps
are unique.

There are two versions.

The woman I married and the woman who forgot she
married me.

It's unexpected.

What she does to me.

And it makes me change up what I do to her.

Does she still like it when I—

She cries my name.

I see.

I see her.

And again when I change up positions.

She's screaming too hard. Too desperately.

It's her.

The woman in front of me is...

Not the one before.

She's the same and she's not.

I rise on my elbows as I watch Cynthia flutter. Watch the sweat slipping off her dark forehead to the white pillows. Watch her expression tighten in pleasure and dawn with surprise.

As if she didn't know.

As if this is her first time.

Her cheeks are flushed beneath her dark brown skin, dark eyes glittering with lust, chest rising and falling with every harsh breath.

I've never seen a sexier sight.

I lower my body over hers again. Even slower this time. Easy.

Like Sunday mornings and eggs over toast and old singers belting out the classics on the radio.

It's the most incredible feeling.

My chest expands in a heated way. Prickles of awareness and pleasure replace my skin.

I look at her.

And she's looking up at me.

I kiss her and then I pick up the pace.

She doesn't curse.

She never curses.

But it's new.

It's beautiful what she does.

The tears are different.

The way she gasps in my ear is different.

She falls apart again and I tumble in after her, diving headfirst into a pleasure that rocks my world and sends black spots over my vision.

Love is back to torment me.

Stronger. Fiercer.

It was never polite.

Freaking animal.

It's violent and rude.

And perfect.

So, so perfect.

Same package. Same methods. Same effect.

A slight change that's enough to kill me.

I surrender.

And maybe I pass out because, when love is finally through with me, I'm on my back and Cynthia is sprawled on top of me and I can't remember how we got here. I don't remember where the last of my energy went.

Maybe this gap in the memory is how she feels everyday.

"You okay?" I ask gruffly.

It was my full and noble intention to go easy on her tonight.

Not because I didn't want her, but because in her head, she's got a different age and experience. Amnesia stole her memories from her and I didn't want to overwhelm her with too much in case she needed that cushion to get used to me inside her again.

That plan blew up the moment I saw her naked.

I lost it.

A little.

Okay, a lot.

It wasn't my plan to hurt her and the thought that I might have overdone it sends a little tinge of regret through my veins. I tried to warm her up as much as I could, but there was still resistance and I enjoyed it too much to back off.

Cynthia rests her palm on my left pec. "I'm okay. I mean, I'm pretty sure I'll be hoarse for the next few days..."

I chuckle and her head bounces up and down on my chest.

"... but apart from that, nothing's hurting."

"Good." I blow out a breath.

Her eyes squint at me. "Is it always like that?"

I smile at the breathless awe in her voice. The part of me that's a little too close to a caveman bellows with pride. *Yeah, baby. You like that?*

"I know we've done this before, but I," she blinks rapidly, "it feels like—"

"The first time," I supply.

"Yeah."

"Me too," I admit.

"Really?"

I nod.

Her lips scrunch to the side. "I'm not sure if I should be flattered or offended."

"The first one." I kiss her forehead.

“You weren’t comparing me to what I was like before, were you?”

“Not too much,” I answer honestly.

She smacks my arm. “Don’t drag other women into this sacred bed, Bear.”

“Other women?”

“Yes.”

“Baby, they’re both you.”

“No. One is me and the other is a me I don’t remember.”

“Oh my—fine. I apologize for thinking of the other you when I’m with *you* you.”

“Good.” Her lips twitch and I realize she’s messing with me.

“Oh. You think that’s funny?” I tickle her side.

She bursts out laughing. “Bear, stop. Haha! Bear! I’m sorry. I couldn’t resist. Haha! Bear!”

I let her go when she claims I’m going to make her pee a little.

“I’ll be right back.” Cynth grabs a robe, shy as ever and disappears into the bathroom.

I smirk, watching her stride away with my elbows behind my head and my body amping up again.

She’s so damn beautiful.

That robe can’t hide the rocking body underneath.

The body that I just spent an exorbitant amount of time exploring.

Every inch of me is celebrating the fact that I’m now officially reacquainted with Cynthia’s curves.

It was a long time coming.

Those are my curves.

That’s my body.

My woman.

And I don't plan to let her go. Ever.

After Cynth uses the bathroom, she returns to my side. I wrap my arms around her, not minding that she's still wearing the robe. The moment I catch my breath, that slip of fabric is coming off again.

She sighs contentedly. "I like this. I like holding you like this."

Not as much as I do. "You like when I stroke your hair too."

"Me?" She blinks.

"Yup."

"I let you touch my hair?"

"It took a while before you trusted me with that." I glance into her eyes. "You taught me how to massage your scalp without messing up your 'fro. There's a certain angle and a specific motion." My laughter is soft. "I worked hard to perfect it. I could put you right to sleep if I wanted to."

"I'm so exhausted that I don't need any help in that department," she mumbles.

Silence falls, covering us in a warm blanket. The hum of the air conditioner kicks into gear. Through the penthouse balcony, I see the city sprawling out before us. Bright lights. Haunting sky scrapers. Velvet sky littered with stars.

Cynthia's fingers run absently over my abs, leaving a trail of goosebumps in her wake.

"Cynth."

"Mm-hmm?" Her reply is garbled as if she's not completely focused.

"What convinced you to finally trust me?"

"With touching my hair?" She warbles.

"That I was your husband." Curiosity tugs at me. "The night of the Valentine's Day party, you were insistent about

drawing the line. I thought I'd hit a brick wall so I left home. When I came back, you were open. There was a door for me to walk through. What changed?"

"Maybe I just missed sleeping with you," she jokes.

I don't laugh.

Cynth senses the seriousness in my demeanor. She glances up. "That was supposed to be funny."

"I'm laughing on the inside," I say.

She sighs. "I didn't mean that, Bear. It wasn't just a physical longing for me."

"What was it?"

Her teeth sink into her lush bottom lip. "I had a... flash."

Unease tightens my throat, so my words come out choked. "You had a memory?"

"Not exactly." She tilts her head. "It's more like an impression of emotions." She explains her mom showing her the teddy bear I bought for her and my eyes widen with horror when she admits to remembering something about that time. "It was just a feeling, but it was enough to convince me that I'd felt something for you. That you were important to me. And that maybe I should try to find those feelings again before I lost you."

My tone is bleak. "I see."

A part of me is glad that Cynthia is starting to remember. The past three years are filled with amazing experiences we shared, lessons we learned as a couple, and battles we won and lost—not only together but as individuals. The memories are precious to her and so their precious to me.

But I don't like the things that are triggering her 'flashes'.

There's a reason I tossed that bear to her mother.

And it's not a good one.

"I'm sorry." Cynth misinterprets my dark expression. "I know it's not a full memory and I really do wish I remembered

you, Bear.”

I shake my head though my heart is trembling. “No, I don’t care if you remember me or not.” Gently I reach up and take her hand. Bringing it down to my chest, I press my other hand over it. “It’s enough that you’re here with me.”

“Whoa. Your heart’s beating fast.”

“Is it?” I turn my hand around so my flesh is against my chest. The rapid flutter of my pulse hammers against my hand, whispering of guilt and anxiety.

Cynthia runs her fingers through my hair. “Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing. I guess... I’m more tired than I thought.” I lick my lips nervously.

She kisses me. “Or maybe you’re not tired at all.”

I run my hand over her back as her tongue slips into my mouth, a whirlwind of chaotic emotions storming in my chest at the same time.

If she remembers you, she’s never going to be the same.

But right now, she’s looking at me like she wants to lick every inch of my skin.

Right now, she’s reaching for her robe and slipping it off her shoulders.

Right now, she’s throwing her leg over mine and lining herself up perfectly for me.

“I like you, Bear,” she whispers against my lips.

My body hardens.

Guilt mixes with the heat.

You wouldn’t say that if you knew, Cynth.

“I’ll show you,” her hands slide down my chest and sends a shock of lust through my veins, “how much,” her fingers slip lower, rasping against rock-hard abs, “I like you.”

“Cynth,” I whisper and the sound of her name on my lips seems to bring out the animal in her.

Brings out the animal in me.

I don't deserve this.

I don't.

But all I can hear is the *thump-thump* of my heart and it drowns out the little voice that says '*she'll find out, Bear. It's only a matter of time.*'

"Cynth..." And then her hand connects.

And a bolt of electricity hits my heart.

And a moan of absolutely filthy pleasure slips past my lips.

I drag my hands up her body and clamp her hair, desperately holding on as pleasure overwhelms me again.

My wife is right.

This night is not over yet.

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CYNTHIA

THE BED IS empty and cold. Shadows play over the thick curtains that scrape the ground.

Where am I? This isn't the hotel.

A sharp, striking pain hits me.

I scream.

Isn't someone coming to help? Why am I alone?

I'm going to die.

And suddenly, Bear is there.

He's staring at me with tears in his eyes.

And I know he's done something wrong.

Or I have.

Or something's broken.

I push up. "Bear."

He shakes his head. Turns away from me.

"Bear!" I scream, but there's anger in my tone.

I blame him.

Fury.

It's heavy and untamable.

I hate him so much right now.

And then I'm running. Running down the stairs. It's more like I'm flying. My feet barely touch the ground.

A door opens.

Suddenly, I'm in a car and Bear's standing in front of it.

I hate him so much.

Tears fall down my face. Or is that rain?

The windshield is wet and it's impossible to see properly.

I set my foot on the gas pedal and drive, not stopping even when I hear a thunk—

“Cynthia!” Someone is shaking me.

My eyes burst open.

I gasp for breath, staring into a pair of dark blue eyes and a thick beard.

Bear hovers over me, his gaze wild and frantic. “Baby, are you okay?”

“W-what happened?”

“You were sleeping and then, suddenly, you started calling my name.” He drags me into his lap and hugs me. “Damn it, Cynth. You scared me.”

I cling to him, struggling to separate myself from the tangles of that dream.

My eyes dart back and forth.

The things I expect to see are in front of me.

The hotel balcony. The blinds pressed in the corner.

Wrinkled sheets. Damp pillows.

This is real.

But that dream felt so real too.

I cling to Bear's shoulders. Pale skin. Bounds of muscles that flex beneath my fingers. He smells like me, a little. And like passion—it's a musky scent that most people can't explain. They can't tell exactly what you did and how long

and how hard, but it's there and it's easy to know where it came from.

Bear's hands rub up and down my back. "It's okay, Cynth. It's okay."

I'm not having a panic attack.

At least, I don't think I am.

This is more intense than what I felt after the gala or in Summer's living room.

My heart is thudding hard in my chest, but it's not with fear.

It's like I'm standing on the cusps of a memory. A puzzle piece so close to snapping into place.

I reach for it, but it turns into ash in my hand. Wisps of smoke disappearing with the dawn.

I bury my head in Bear's neck and shove my hair out of my eyes. My heart keeps sending bursts of fear through my body. It's taking a while for the adrenaline to drain out of my system.

For a long moment, we stay like that.

Bear rocks me on his lap and I cling to him like a child with no direction.

I don't cry.

I'm too shocked and frightened to let the tears fall.

"It's okay," Bear whispers.

And finally, *finally* I believe it.

My shoulders relax and my breathing evens.

He must sense it too because he eases away from me and cups my cheek. "Cynth, you alright?"

"Y-yes. I just..." My throat bobs as I swallow.

"You don't have to talk about it," Bear says quietly, doing that thing where he knows my thoughts even before I have them.

“I want to,” I respond. “That way it won’t have any power.”

“You sure?”

I nod and turn slightly in his lap so I can look outside the balcony. It’s easier now that sunlight is pouring through the windows. Red and golds and pinks. A new day.

Darkness can’t touch me here.

Nightmares don’t claw at souls when the sun is out.

He strokes my arm, up to my elbow and then back down. “Take your time.”

“I…” My words tremble. “I was in a strange room. And I was alone.” My fingers dig into his bicep and I hold tight as a tremor hits me. “I think I was upset about something. And then you showed up and you were angry. I think…” I tilt my head. “I think I hated you.”

His eyes widen for a minute.

Then they return to normal, shuttered and impenetrable. “I see.”

I search his expression, hoping desperately that he isn’t hurt. I would be gutted if Bear got up the next day—after making love all night—and mumbled that he had a nightmare about hating me.

“It’s weird, right?” I whisper.

“It’s weird,” he agrees. His tone is clipped. Measured.

He *is* upset.

I chomp down on my bottom lip. “Bear.”

“Don’t worry about me. Keep going.”

I study his face. The way the sunlight falls over his troubled blue eyes. The flare of his nostrils. The tightening of his lips.

He’s trying so hard to be strong for me despite the fact that I’ve wrecked him.

Again.

Anger rises inside my chest, but it's aimed in my direction. After everything I've put this man through, after all the torture and the waiting and the running, we're *finally* on a good path. How dare my own subconscious try to tear that down? How dare my dreams paint such a horrible picture?

"No, it's fine. It won't serve either of us any good to talk about it." I start to rise out of his lap.

He bands his arms around me and in a deep voice growls, "I don't break that easily."

"I don't want to test that theory." My breath hits his cheek. "I'm happy, Bear. I'm really happy right now."

"So am I."

"It was just a dream."

"And it was frightening enough that you had a panic attack in your sleep." He grazes my cheek with his thumb. "Tell me. That way it won't have any power, right?"

He's right. "It was..." I glance outside again. "So real to me. I mean, I could feel the rain and my tears. And I remember holding the steering wheel so tightly."

"You were in a car?"

"Yes." I dip my chin. "And you were standing in front of it and I..." Shame and horror mix in my voice. "I think I ran you over."

His breath hitches and terror skips across his face.

Alarmed, I rotate my hips so I'm straddling him. "Bear..." Words fail me. The way my chest is cramping at his obvious apprehension steals my breath. "I... I don't know what that dream means and I don't care. All I know is what I feel for you. In here." I tap my chest. "I lo—" My tongue trips over the word when I realize I was about to say 'love' instead of 'like'. I hang my head. "This is so messed up."

Bear doesn't seem to notice. His hands clasp my thighs almost painfully. "You said it felt real."

"I didn't mean it," I lie.

He stares me down.

I start to squirm, afraid he can see through the facade.

It *did* feel real.

But I'm sure it wasn't. Why on earth would I hate Bear like that? Why on earth would I run anyone over with my car?

No way.

It had to be a concoction of my own mind.

"Nothing like that has ever happened in real life, right?" I sooth him in a low voice.

His eyes drag away from me and land on the ground. "R-right."

"So let's just forget it." I lean forward and kiss him long and slow, morning breath and all. My body melts into his and I tilt my head to deepen the kiss.

I nibble on his bottom lip until he starts to relax and starts kissing me back. Bear eases into the bed so he's lying down and I'm on top of him.

I stroke his cheek, mesmerized by how strong my feelings are for this man who was, only a few weeks ago, a stranger.

Last night unlocked everything that I'd been trying to hold back. It was like a tsunami. Tearing through me without my permission.

The new me only remembers spending a few weeks with him and already I can't imagine my life without him. How the past me resisted him for so long is a mystery.

His gruff voice interrupts my thoughts. "I'm never losing you again, Cynthia. I don't care what I have to do or who I have to become. You're never leaving my arms again."

It sounds more like a warning than a romantic declaration.

I wonder what that harsh edge in his voice means.

But I don't linger on it.

We're both unsettled and unnerved right now.

It's time to point that anxious energy into something more enjoyable.

"Are you going to keep talking or are you going to kiss me?" I whisper.

He eagerly lifts his head and captures my lips.

Suddenly, my cell phone rings.

His lips detach from mine with a disappointed moan. "That's probably your parents."

"You think?" I paw at his abs. "Can we ignore them? I want a little more time with you."

We give it a valiant effort for all of two minutes before Bear's phone starts ringing too.

One chirping phone is the definition of annoyance.

But two shrieking phones...

"Ugh." I moan and sit up, balancing one hand on his chest while the other reaches for my cell.

I check the screen.

"It *is* my mom."

"Told you." His eyes are still dark, still burning.

Still dangerous.

If we had continued, I wouldn't have been the one controlling the kiss.

A shiver runs down my spine.

He sits up, dragging my body along so I'm back in his lap, my knees pressed against his sides and my feet propped on the pillows.

A zing of heat travels up my spine. "What happens if I ignore her?"

"You live to regret it." He kisses me on the nose and tosses his head, indicating his phone.

I sigh and crawl off him to get his cell. My eyes track the screen. "Who's Director Jordan Kennedy?" I mumble, passing

the device over to him. “Is it someone from the movie company?”

Guilt screams through his eyes. “It’s nobody.”

“Nobody?”

“I mean yeah. It is someone from the movie company.” His words are too fast. Too breathless.

“Is something wrong?”

“You should answer your mom.” Bear skitters out of the bed, moving fast for someone that tall and built. “I’ll take this in the bathroom.”

“O-kay.”

I watch him haul on his black boxer briefs and sprint to the bathroom, the phone plastered to his ear as his long legs carry him away from me.

A second later, the door slams shut behind him.

My womanly intuition starts tingling.

Warning bells clang in my ear.

That was weird.

Director Jordan Kennedy.

I make a mental note to research that name later. While still sending confused looks at the bathroom, I answer mom’s call. “Hello?”

“Hey, honey. Your father and I noticed you didn’t come home last night.”

I shake my head. “Really, mom?”

“The doctor said you need to take your pills every night. It’s dangerous, Cynth.”

“Are you sure this concern is about the pills?” I chuckle.

“Maybe not.”

“Mom.” I laugh.

“You’re still our baby, you know. And we weren’t sure if you were with Bear or if something had happened.”

My eyes land on the panties peeking out from the end of the bed. *Something happened all right.*

“Since you weren’t answering my texts,” mom continues, “I figured I should call just to be safe.”

I stretch my legs out on the bed. “Am I really married, mom?”

“Honey, why would you say that? We showed you the wedding pictures and the marriage license. We even have videos of you at the ceremony.” A big sigh whooshes into my ears. “What will it take to convince you?”

“Maybe it would be easier to believe if my parents didn’t call me frantically when I stay out with my husband.”

Her laughter sounds relieved. “Oh honey, you know this is complicated.”

My eyes veer to the bathroom again.

“And did I hear correctly? Did you just call Bear your husband.”

“It’s what he is, isn’t he?”

“In the eyes of God and man,” mom says proudly.

“You don’t have to worry.” I cuddle into the pillows. “Bear took *very* good care of me last night.”

“I’m not going to read too much into that statement, but I will say that I’m very pleased you and Bear are on the right track again. That poor boy has been through so much with you. I’m hoping it can be smooth sailing from here on out.”

The dream flashes through my mind and fills me with trepidation. “Me too.”

“Will you be back for breakfast?”

“I’m not sure. I have to talk to Bear and see what he’s thinking. We’ll be home later today though.”

“Okay, baby. I love you.”

“Love you too, mom.”

I hang up and stare at the bathroom.

As the quiet settles around me, I hear Bear’s muffled voice through the bathroom door. It sounds like he’s arguing with someone.

My curiosity tugs at me.

I clasp my hands in my lap, trying to stay out of his business.

That doesn’t last long.

Grabbing my robe, I tie it around me as I tiptoe to the bathroom and press my ear against the door. Director Kennedy must be talking now because Bear’s gone extremely quiet. Either that or he knows I’m outside trying to eavesdrop.

“Okay, fine,” he spits. “See you then.”

My eyes widen as his footsteps thud.

He’s going to open the door!

I sprint like my life depends on it and dive into the bed with a ninja roll that would have made Bruce Lee proud. My robe is hiked up my legs and my hair probably looks like a hurricane blew through it, but at least I wasn’t caught spying on Bear.

He tries to smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “What did your mom want?”

“To check on me. Once I confirmed that I was with you, she didn’t seem to be all that concerned.”

“We should probably get back, huh?”

I nod and sit up.

The question about what Director Kennedy was talking to him about springs to my lips, but something tells me not to mention it. Bear is trying hard to act cheerful for my sake, which means that he doesn’t want to discuss work right now.

It’s hard to relate. When I’m stressed about a client, the first thing I want to do is complain to Summer and Ally, but

maybe men are different. Bear might want to keep his troubles close to the chest.

But he shouldn't have to.

“Hey.” I touch his arm when he draws close to me.

Apprehensive blue eyes meet my face.

“You would tell me if something was wrong, wouldn't you?”

“I would.”

“Promise?”

He hesitates.

“Bear.”

“I promise,” he finally says.

“Good.” I press my lips to his. “I don't want us to have secrets.”

His fingers rub my inner thigh and heat coils tightly in me.

“No secrets.” Bear murmurs, dragging me to the edge of the bed, his eyes hungry and dark. “I promise.”

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BEAR

I DRIVE CYNTHIA TO HER PARENTS' place and walk her all the way to the door. The sun shows no mercy as it beats down on our heads, scattering golden rays over the Bradshaw's well-mowed lawn and pebbled path.

"Tell your folks I said hi." I let her hand go.

"Bear," Cynthia turns around, "aren't you coming in?"

"I have to check on the pipes at our place," I say. Another lie.

It burns my tongue.

I'm pretty sure she can see steam rolling out of my mouth.

The deceit is piling up like bricks. Each block falls precariously. Uneasily.

I hate this.

I hate deceiving her, but I can't take any risks.

Her eyes widen. "Now?"

"Yeah. It's important." I don't bother smiling. If last night and this morning has taught me anything, it's that Cynthia can see through those forced grins. Rather than act cheerful, I'd rather keep my feelings close to the chest.

Her lips inch up. "You're running from dad, aren't you?"

"Uh..." I cough.

“He’s not going to rake you over the coals, Bear. We’re married. Everyone pretty much expects that we won’t be able to keep our hands off each other.”

“It’s still awkward.” I rub the back of my neck. If that’s the story she’s going with, I’ll pick it up and run with it.

“Coward,” she teases.

You have no idea. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“A few hours?” Her eyelashes flutter. “Will it take that long?”

“I’m heading straight to the studio after. We need to sign the contract with the production company. Make this job official.”

“Oh.” She pushes out her lips. “Do you have to?”

I grab her waist and pull her in.

Even though we exhausted each other this morning, my body’s already rising to attention.

This woman is a drug.

I just can’t get enough of her.

“Why are you pouting, baby?”

“I’m not.”

“You miss me already?”

She wraps her arms around my neck. “What if I am? Will you stay with me?”

“I want to.” I rest my nose against hers. *If I could stay in this sweet place with you, I would.*

And I’ll do everything in my power to make sure that I can.

Cynthia releases a breath and leans back. “Go. Before I change my mind and drag you inside.”

“Could you?”

She gives me a heated once-over that’s practically begging me to kiss her. “I don’t think I’d be successful.”

I laugh. “Not really.”

“Fine. I guess I have to let you go.” She scrunches her nose. “Have a good day.”

My chest warms and I hold her for a beat longer because she’s the sun and I’m ice and we shouldn’t work so well together, but we do.

I watch her walk inside and then head to my car. The contentedness that Cynthia’s presence brings drips away with every step.

My mouth hardens into a firm line.

I pick up my phone and text Director Kennedy.

ME: *On my way now.*

DIRECTOR: *I’ll be here.*

Wrapping my hands around the stick shift, I switch the car into gear and back out of the driveway.

The trip to the coffee shop only lasts about twenty minutes, but it takes me almost as much time to work up the courage to head inside.

I force myself out of the car.

Take a step.

Then another.

My first meeting with Director Kennedy was the start of the end for me. Cynthia’s amnesia pressed reset on the nightmare, but going back to see the man whose demands started it all feels like I’m playing with matches above a tank of gasoline.

The bells on the doors jangle cheerfully. Pop music filters from the speakers. Wide floor-to-ceiling windows let in tons of light. The decor is unapologetically cutesy with baby blue and pink everywhere. Colorful white polka dot wallpaper spreads beneath frames of unique ice cream flavors.

This is the absolute last place I’d expect a man as important as Director Kennedy to spend his free time.

“Bear!” A hand rises from a table in the middle of the parlor.

I glance that way and notice him sitting alone, going to war on an ice cream cone.

My heart tenses and an irrational anger surges inside me.

It’s not fair to blame him for what happened.

It’s my fault.

All mine.

But I still resent the fact that his introduction into my life was a domino effect that led to tragedy.

“Director.” My voice is as cold as the treat in his hand.

“Sit. Sit.”

“This can’t take long.” I check my watch. “I have somewhere to be.”

“Always so busy.” His brown eyes twinkle. Kennedy is a sprightly man in his late sixties. Wrinkles deepen around his mouth, eyes and cheeks. A backwards baseball cap crushes his thick silver hair. He’s wearing a faded T-shirt and jeans.

Anyone looking at him would never guess he’s worth billions and has several hit blockbusters under his belt along with a Cannes nod and plenty of Oscar nominations.

He keeps eating like he has all the time in the world.

A waitress walks up to our table. She’s looks tired and completely out of it as she hands me a menu and flatly says, “This is our Valentine’s Day special. Any red flavor is a dollar off.”

“Thanks.” I set the menu down.

She waddles back to her place behind the counter and zones out, staring at her phone.

“I hate Valentine’s Day.” Kennedy scowls at his ice cream. “It’s so pretentious.”

Really? This is what we’re discussing?

“Three hundred and sixty four days of the year, we give women crap. They take crap. It’s a crap fest.” He shakes his head. “But this one day, we’re expected to put the knives down, trade them for roses and act like we’re so in love. Everyone knows it’s fake, but if you don’t participate?” He rolls a finger over his neck. “It’s the freaking end of the world.”

“I’m sure you didn’t call me just to complain about Valentine’s Day.”

“Do you know how many people get a personal call from me, West?”

“I’m guessing it’s not much.” I lean back.

I’m willing to acknowledge the enormity of this moment. In the film industry, they call Kennedy the Midas of movies. He’s so inundated with screenplays that he could never run out of scripts. Production companies scramble at his feet to meet every one of his needs.

If Director Kennedy asks for a hundred million dollar budget, you better believe it’s there. No questions asked.

“What makes you so special?” He chomps the ice cream. It’s a wonder he doesn’t get brain freeze.

“I gave you my reasons.”

“Yeah and they were bull.” He takes a napkin from the dispenser and wipes his chin. “Very few people say no to me.” Lifting a pudgy finger, Kennedy pins me with a dark look. “Correction. *Nobody* says no to me.”

“I appreciated the offer.”

“You didn’t sound very appreciative over the phone this morning.”

That was because Cynthia had just told me about a dream.

Except it wasn’t a dream.

It was a fragmented vision of what happened the night of the accident.

With no context, I'm sure she might have written it off, but she's uncomfortably close to the truth and I don't like the feeling of being cornered.

Kennedy rolls his napkin into a ball. "I heard very disturbing news recently. Turns out, you're going to sign with another production studio."

"It's a nice gig." I lift my chin.

"It's *pennies* compared to what I was offering you. My name on your movie docket alone would open doors that you wouldn't even imagine."

"There are plenty of music directors who'd kill to work for you."

"And I chose one." He stabs a finger in my direction.

"I *told* you. There are reasons for me sticking close to the city."

"Yes." He inhales a breath. "I did some research on you and found out about your wife. Really tragic what happened to her."

I clench my fists. "You stay out of my business."

He chuckles. "I see you going very far, West. Farther than even you would imagine. The kind of doors that'll burst open for you will blow your mind."

"I've made myself clear." I rise steadily and step out of the booth. "I'm not working with you."

"I think you're running."

I freeze.

"That little excuse about your wife not wanting to leave her job and her friends—"

My muscles coil tighter and tighter.

"—I don't buy it. A real man leads without question. Your wife will go where you tell her to go and she'll do what you tell her to do."

"I tried that already, remember?"

“And it almost worked.” He rubs his chin. “Until the accident.”

My jaw clenches and I growl. “Watch it.”

“Is one measly woman worth giving up your entire future? Your legacy? What if you have kids and they ask why their father threw away an opportunity like this to—”

I whirl around and grab Director Kennedy by the collar.

His eyes widen.

“Don’t you *dare*,” I hiss, “talk about what you know nothing about. Letting you convince me three months ago is what started this mess in the first place. I am *not* going back.”

His eyes search mine and he starts to laugh, flashing big, white teeth. “You’re more afraid of her than anything, aren’t you?”

“I’m more afraid of *losing* her than anything.” I release him and step back. This man will never know what it is to love someone deeply and selflessly. To the point that you would give up your life for them. This man will never know what it is to look into his woman’s eyes and see total trust and peace there.

Our marriage was strained before the accident. Cynthia hadn’t been looking at me with peace for a long time. Now she is, and I won’t let anything jeopardize the trust she has in me.

“Don’t contact me again, Kennedy.”

“Now I’m intrigued, West.” His smile is dark. “I wonder how long you can keep that ‘devoted husband’ act up?”

It sounds like a threat and I narrowly avoid the urge to punch him in the face. A sure way to end up in jail and ruin your whole career? Physically assault the Midas of movies.

I know my place. Going toe-to-toe with a giant worked for David, but my Goliath won’t fall with a stone. My best bet is to avoid Kennedy and hope like crazy that he finds someone else to torment.

I slam the door and storm out of the cafe.

The bell jangles angrily before crashing back against the glass.

I slip into my car, rest my head on the steering wheel and breathe roughly through my mouth.

The adrenaline spike is making my ears pop.

Visions of an angry Cynthia and a rumbling car engine fill my head.

The night of the accident was a lesson and I tend to learn those fast. Even if Kennedy threw half his kingdom at me, I wouldn't take it. Some things are more important and almost losing my wife to a ditch is what brought that truth to my attention.

I gather myself and drive to the studio.

To my surprise, I notice Bianca standing outside and talking heatedly on her cell phone while two guys in suits hover nearby, watching her like she's a bug they want to crush.

Lawyers. If Hollywood execs pounce when they smell blood, it's only because they pounce on their cell phones and call their law-touting lackeys to do the dirty work. Lawyers showing up unannounced at a business is never a good sign.

I scramble out of the car. "Bianca, what's going on?"

"Oh my gosh, Bear. I was just about to call you."

I glance at the two men. "Who are they?"

"The building owners sent them. Apparently, we're in violation of some dusty code that's *completely made up*," she raises her voice so the lawyers can hear, "and they're saying we have to leave."

"Leave?" My eyes widen. "We just renewed our contract."

"Well, tell that to them."

The taller one with a ghoulish face stares at me. "You're Mr. Henry West?"

"That's me." I dip my chin.

“You were found in violation of the noise code. You need to leave the premises within thirty days. If you do not comply, you will be forcibly removed and all your equipment will be seized.”

“You can’t do that!” I growl.

“Bianca, did I hear Bear’s voice?” Colin flies out of the studio. “Oh.” He sneers at the lawyers. “I didn’t know you bastards were still here. Can you excuse us?”

“You’ve been made aware, Mr. West,” the lawyer says.

As they walk away, I yell, “We’re not done talking yet!”

Bianca wrings her hands together. “What do we do now?”

“Let me go after them and straighten this out.” I take a step.

Colin wrenches me back. “Forget them. We have a bigger problem.”

“What do you mean?” Bianca’s eyebrows fly all the way to the top of her forehead.

“We got a call from Hugh Courtney’s office. The movie’s production team had a change of heart.”

Bianca sticks a finger in her mouth and starts chewing on a nail. “Don’t tell me...”

“It’s bad news.”

“I can’t listen.” She covers her ears with both hands.

“They’re dropping out of the contract. Said they’d go with the other company.”

My heart plummets all the way to my toes.

Disappointment crashes into me.

Bianca rubs her face with both hands. “Why? Why would they suddenly change their minds? They were nothing but excited yesterday. In fact, they couldn’t stop raving about how awesome our track was. How could they just take it back in less than twenty-four hours?”

“I don’t know.” There’s a frown on Colin’s usually jovial face. “But they did.”

Bianca shakes her head. “What do we do?”

“The company’s not going to sink because we lost the movie.” I try to keep my tone level despite the anger simmering through my veins. “We’ve got plenty of opportunities.”

“But none that lucrative,” Colin mumbles.

“Damn. Who did we piss off?” Bianca moans. “Bad things keep happening. First, Bear turned down the offer from Kennedy and now we lose this—”

“Bianca.” Colin groans.

“No, it’s fine. She’s right. I did turn it down.”

“What do we do now?” She wails for the third time.

I let out a breath, a huge rock on my shoulders and despair tugging at me from all sides.

At that moment, my phone rings.

Bianca turns away and squeezes her eyes shut. “Don’t answer that. It could be more bad news.”

“Who is it?” Colin asks, peering over my shoulder.

Urgency makes my hand shake. “It’s my mother-in-law.” Tucking the phone to my ear, I ask, “Mrs. Bradshaw, is everything okay?”

“No, Bear.” Her voice is strained and it sounds like she’s been crying.

All my nerves tighten at once. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Cynthia.” A frantic pause. “She’s in the hospital.”

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CYNTHIA

EVERYONE IS OVERREACTING.

“Mom, for the millionth time, I’m *fine*. Stop making such a fuss.”

Mom pins me with burning brown eyes. “People who are fine don’t suddenly faint into their breakfast cereal, Cynthia Grace Bradshaw West.”

That’s a mouthful. “I see you tacked on Bear’s last name,” I tease her.

She continues staring me down, not a glimmer of a smile on her lips.

So much for lightening the mood.

“Fine.” I sigh and flounce back into the hospital bed that’s smack in the middle of the emergency room. “I’ll admit, I got a little light-headed in the middle of a conversation.”

“You did more than that. You blacked out.”

“It happens. You didn’t have to call Bear. He’s busy.”

I hate being an annoyance and I get the distinct feeling my insane number of medical emergencies is edging up to that territory.

Guilt spears me. Bear seemed so distracted when dropping me off this morning. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s backed up with work. He spent so much time in the hospital before I

woke up. And he's spending even more time at my side now that I have amnesia.

It's unfair to put all this pressure on him. Bear isn't a manager in a company with a trusty 401k and paid sick leave. He's an entrepreneur in an intensely competitive and cut-throat industry.

There's no safety net.

No bounce back.

He's the guy with his name on the dotted line.

He's the guy with all the responsibility.

If he doesn't work, work doesn't get done.

My heart throbs. "I really wanted to give him that time to focus without being bothered."

"Are you kidding?" Mom's eyes widen. "Bear would be appalled if I didn't call him. He's your husband."

My eyes drop to my hand. "I know."

The sunlight catches the giant diamond wrapped around my ring finger. It's gorgeous and exactly my style.

I love the way it sparkles whenever sunlight so much as glances in its direction. I love the way it fits so securely on my finger.

Sure, I still have no recollection of Bear slipping this ring on me and promising to protect and care for me all the days of my life, but I can imagine how that moment must have felt.

The love for each other. The joy in our hearts. The certainty that we'd found our forever.

He's kept his end of the bargain.

Even when I faltered in keeping mine.

Through sickness and health.

Bear was there.

Of course I'm wearing this ring.

Besides, it's stunning.

To me, jewelry is like makeup. More is more. Why blend in if you can blind someone with bling?

“He’s going to be happy,” mom says quietly, seeing where my eyes have gone.

“I didn’t do it for him.” That’s the truth. After our blissful night and an even more intense morning, I decided that I wanted the world to know I was his. I want to shout to the rooftops that I belong to an incredible man who loves me and takes care of me and treats me well all the time.

“It’ll be an incredible Valentine’s Day gift,” mom says, gesturing to a calendar on the wall. The holiday is coming up soon.

My lips spread wide.

Screw that.

With Bear, I have Valentine’s every day.

“I think it’s lovely.” Her dark hand touches mine.

The dividing curtains skid as someone pulls them back.

Dad walks in. His thin arms are crossed over his chest. He’s wearing a polo and khakis, both immaculately pressed because mom has ninja ironing skills. A deep wrinkle crosses his brown forehead and his eyes are locked on me.

Mom digs her slender fingers into the blanket. “Did the doctor find what was wrong?”

“Seems so.”

“Why isn’t he here then?” Mom’s gaze darts past dad. Her voice climbs in fear. “Is he planning to drag it out and leave us in torture?”

Dad places a calming hand on her shoulder. “I asked him if we could wait until Bear arrives. He called me and said he’d be here in five minutes.”

Five minutes? My eyes nearly pop out of my face. Bear always shows up much faster than expected whenever we call. Was he a speed racer in his youth? Does he ignore the stop signs? How is that even possible?

Dad glances at me. “Honey, how are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” I run a hand over my bun and wince at the dryness.

Rolling around in a hotel bed without a bonnet or a silk pillow case did my thick, 4c hair *no* favors. I’ll need an entire day to gently de-tangle, condition, and moisturize my curls so they pop back to life.

I check my watch. “Mom, I need to call Summer and warn her about this. My schedule—”

“Summer was my second call after Bear,” Mom informs me. “She said she’d take care of your clients and if you dare set foot in the store for the next week, you’re fired.”

I scrunch my nose. “Have I mentioned I love my boss?”

“Plenty of times.” She winks.

Just then, Bear storms into our tiny huddle. His large, muscular body fills up the entire space. The intensity in his eyes is a bit terrifying. Usually, his eyes are a silky shade of blue. Right now, they’re dark and heavy and liquid fire. The anxiety in them sears right through me.

I inch back in the bed. “Bear.”

“Are you okay?” His voice is a husky resonance that makes my heart hurt. “Damn, after the day I’ve had—Cynth, I can’t take it if something happens to you.”

My mouth goes dry. *Something’s wrong.*

I don’t doubt Bear’s love. He’s shown me, over the course of the past few weeks, where his priorities lie. But I’m not dying.

I’m totally fine.

A small fainting spell doesn’t warrant the brackets around his mouth or that slightly desperate sheen in his eyes.

Dad must sense the chaos too because he grips Bear by the arm. “Calm down, son. She’s okay. She’ll live.”

“What did the doctor say?” Bear asks, his tone still tight.

“I’ll go call him.”

“I’ll come with you.” Mom hurries behind dad. Which is intentional, I think.

Everyone can see that Bear’s slightly unhinged.

“Come here.” I pat the side of the bed.

He lumbers over and sits on the edge of it. “I’m sorry.” He runs a hand down his beard and the weariest expression I’ve ever seen crosses his face. “You scared me.”

“Why? I’m sure mom didn’t give you any details.” I rub his back.

“That call... reminded me of the one I got the night you almost...” His throat bobs. Rough fingertips scrape my cheek. I can’t breathe. Not with the way he’s staring at me. “I can lose everything, Cynth. I really can. But not you.”

“You’re not going to lose me.” I press his palm onto my cheek.

His smile is strained, as if he doesn’t believe me.

Something’s wrong.

“What’s going on?” I whisper, my eyes searching his.

“Nothing.” His gaze slips away. “I’m just stressed about you almost drowning in cereal.” The joke falls flat because there’s no joy in his expression.

“Bear,” I urge, thinking of his suspicious bathroom conversation with Director Jordan Kennedy, “there’s something you’re not telling me, isn’t there?”

He stares into my eyes again and I leave myself open to his inspection. Any piece of my heart he wants to take and pick up, shatter or nurture, he can do that. I’m giving him permission to have more. More than crumbs.

Bear starts to say something but chokes on it when his gaze drops to my ring.

Anguish slams on top of his worry.

He lowers his head.

“Bear?” I silently implore him.

“You’re wearing your ring.” He sounds emotional.

“Yeah.” I lift that hand and admire it. “I’m married, aren’t I?”

His voice is low, tormented. “Cynth, there’s something I have to—”

“Knock, knock.” The doctor steps in, dragging the curtain back and snatching what little privacy we have in this busy emergency room. “Mrs. West, I’ve got the results of your test right here.” He lifts the files.

I want to throw my pillow at him. Bear was just about to tell me something important and now the moment’s gone.

The doctor opens my file and tells us what I already knew. I’m totally fine—the head trauma is healing nicely. There’s no swelling. I’m not going to die tomorrow. As far as he can see.

But he does recommend I go see the psychiatrist.

That makes me groan.

The shrink and I met several times before I was released from the hospital and I despised both visits. There’s something about her that’s cold and clinical.

I always thought shrinks were warm. Or at least should give the appearance of caring.

This doctor missed that memo.

Time drags by while she asks me a whole bunch of questions. After her mechanical assessment where I feel more like a robot with bad symptoms than a human being, the psychiatrist walks outside to Bear and my parents.

“I think I might know what the problem is.” She taps my file in her palm and I wonder if all the papers are going to come flying out. Her thin lips press tightly together. “I checked the results of the tests from the neurosurgeon.”

“She’s perfectly fine,” mom blurts.

“Exactly. Therefore it’s not normal what’s happening with her.” Her eyebrow arches. “I recommended medication for her to take with the neurosurgeon’s prescription, which is a perfectly normal combination with someone suffering from her symptoms.”

“A patient with amnesia,” dad clarifies.

“A person with head trauma.” She slants him a sharp look for interrupting her and I immediately bristle. “However, for one in every ten million people with her condition, the two medicines work against each other and cause blockage of memory development.”

“So if I don’t take the medicine, I get more memories?” I wonder.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Oh.” I sigh in disappointment.

“We’re still in awe of the brain and *why* it chooses to do the things it does, but you’ve gone a very long time without regaining one memory and that is concerning. I’ll talk to your doctor, but I’ll also prescribe a different medication that won’t counteract the one he gave you.”

She discusses the details with us and then I’m dismissed.

Ugh.

Infuriating woman.

“I need to go wash my hands,” I tell mom.

“You want me to come with you?”

“No. I’d like a minute alone.” My eyes slide to Bear’s dark blues. “You don’t have to stay. I’ll go home with my parents.”

“No way. I’ll drive you.” His voice is firm. It doesn’t seem like it’s up for discussion.

I nod, suddenly feeling exhausted. “Okay.”

“I’ll see you at home, baby.” Mom hugs me.

Dad presses a kiss to my forehead. “Should I take the day off? We can watch movies like we did when you had a sick

day from school.”

“Dad, we haven’t done that since I was seven.”

“So?”

I shake my head. “You’re already late for work because of me.” My heart drags on the floor.

Why do I keep inconveniencing the people I love? When will this nightmare be over?

Dad smiles. “Okay, baby. See you at home.”

My parents go one way and I go the other.

Bear stays with the doctor, his gaze on me until I disappear around the bend.

Once I’m in the bathroom, I wash my hands and try to calm my breathing. The psychiatrist’s probing questions and thinly veiled disappointment in my inability to answer them sucked all the energy out of my body. It’s a stark reminder that, even though I *feel* normal, I’m not.

And it stinks.

This whole time, I didn’t feel handicapped.

Freaked out? Yeah.

Stubbornly ignoring facts because I don’t remember? Yeah.

But it didn’t really sink in that something was *wrong* with me until today. Until that lady gave me that icy stare and declared that I should be able to remember more by now.

Maybe it’s the pills’ fault.

But what if it’s mine?

What if I’m the problem?

I swallow past the lump in my throat and speak to my reflection in the mirror. “Get it together, Cynthia. You’re going to get your memories back. There’s nothing you can’t do.”

The dark-skinned woman in the mirror doesn’t look so convinced.

Dragging my feet, I leave the bathroom and return to the hallway where I left Bear. As I draw near, I hear the psychiatrist's soft voice as well as Bear's deep murmur.

It's coming from her office.

The door is partially open and, through the narrow space, I can see that the doctor is sitting behind her desk while Bear is standing in front of it.

Curiosity rises like a tidal wave.

Rather than make my presence known, I lean in to hear what they're saying.

"You're right," Bear is confessing, his voice cracked. "Something more did happen that night."

"You didn't tell the police?"

"It's not their business."

My heart starts beating wildly in my chest. *The night of the accident?*

What is this?

Is Bear keeping a secret from me?

"I'm having a hard time... not telling her." He sighs deeply. Runs a hand through his silky blonde hair. "I hate being dishonest. I'm already lying to her about so many things."

A gasp slips out of me.

I slap my mouth to quickly muffle the sound.

"Bear," the doctor's voice drops to a steely pitch, "your wife's psyche is *very* fragile right now. Letting her know too much of the truth won't be good for her. In fact, it can be destructive."

Both Bear and I suck in our breaths at the same time.

"I'm a doctor who cares only about the facts. And the fact is, your wife is in a very precarious mental state. If you push her too far, she will break. Do you understand?"

"I do," Bear says quietly.

“Do you have any more questions for me?”

“No.”

“Then could you excuse me? I have another patient in a few minutes.”

You mean another victim. I scowl in her direction.

Suddenly, I realize Bear is turning and he might catch me spying on them.

My pulse rising, I sprint away from the door and skid down the hallway. When I hear Bear’s footsteps, I bounce to my feet and paste a smile on my face. “Hey, I was looking for you.”

“I was talking to your doctor.”

“What did she say?”

His gaze drops to the ground. “Nothing much. Just to keep an eye on you.”

Dread pours through my veins.

That lie rolled off his tongue so easily.

How many other lies has he told? And what do they have to do with the night I got into the accident?

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BEAR

MY TROUBLES KEEP MULTIPLYING. I'm drowning in a sea of broken promises, lies and deceit. The helplessness is what bothers me. The unnerving realization that I'm cornered. There's nowhere to turn. No door that'll open. No escape.

It's a balancing act.

A trembling tightrope.

Too many balls to juggle.

One of them is bound to fall.

Or maybe I'll be the one falling and snapping my neck.

Frustration quickens my pulse.

I throw a wadded up note at the wall and it drops harmlessly to the floor. With a sigh, I walk over and pick it up so I can discard it in the trash.

This isn't my studio and I don't want to mess up Mr. B's home office simply because I'm pissed as hell.

I didn't return to work today. I decided to stay close by in case Cynth needed me. It was easy enough to make my calls from here.

What *wasn't* easy?

Getting those calls answered.

Courtney rejected my messages but, after hours of persistence and a few mild threats, I did *finally* get through to the building owner.

For all that effort, I might as well have run into a brick wall.

At least his vague explanations told me everything I needed to know. Someone else is pulling the strings. My guess? That someone is Director Kennedy.

What kind of nutcase am I dealing with? It's hard to believe a man as famous and influential as Director Kennedy would go to such lengths to crush a small studio like mine.

Is he really upset that I turned down his movie deal? Or is he just toying with me because he's rich and capable?

Even if I wanted to fight back, all I have are my suspicions. No proof. No answers.

I glance at the window overlooking the backyard. The sun's glorious arc has been playing out through that glass square all day. Right now, the sun hides behind thick clouds, spurting deep orange and red shards through the horizon.

I rub the bridge of my nose, feeling defeated.

What do I do? Is there any way to fix this before the rest of the industry hears about it and we're blackballed? How do I face Colin and Bianca when I'm the reason everything is going to hell?

A groan tears out of my throat.

I wish someone would walk up to me and hand me the answers.

"Is it that bad?" a familiar voice says.

I glance up and find Cynth leaning against the doorway. She's wearing a white tank top that looks crisp and bright against her dark skin. Loose grey sweatpants try and fail to hide her magnificent curves.

The scent of her hair fills my nostrils even though she's standing on the other side of the room. She must have washed her hair, which explains why she's been in the bathroom for the last six hours.

When that woman says she's busy for 'wash day' she means *I'm going to be in the bathroom for the rest of the day.*

No complaints from me. I learned to live around her schedule.

Plus I love the finished product. Cynthia's hair is soft and thick and billows like a cloud. The curls are tightly formed and so moisturized they gleam like stars.

"I heard all the sighs and groans and came to check if you were being stabbed."

I avoid her eyes. "I'm okay."

"You expect me to believe that?" She arches an eyebrow.

My voice falters. "We... didn't get the contract."

Horror lights up her eyes. "I thought..."

"Yeah. I know." I'd told her about the pitch last night and we'd celebrated by ordering wine and strawberries from the hotel kitchen. "The execs called this morning and said they'd changed their minds."

Her eyes bore into my face. "Bear, I'm so sorry."

I shake my head. Let out a deep breath. "I'll find a way to fix it."

"How?"

"No clue." I wish I could say differently.

I wish *every single* area of my life wasn't falling apart.

I wish I didn't have to lie to her.

Continuously.

But there's nothing I can do.

Helplessness.

I hate it.

Cynthia pads over to me. Her feet don't make a sound as they brush the floor. She rounds the desk and gestures to me.

"What?"

“Scoot back.”

I push my chair over the hardwood. She sits on my lap and wraps her arms around my neck. The flowery scent coming off her hair is even stronger now.

As tempting as it is, I know better than to push my face into her afro. Not only because she'll scold me for messing up her curls, but because I'll get her creams and butters all over my face.

Once, her products got into my eyes and stung me for five minutes straight. I don't need to get burned again to learn that lesson.

“You must be disappointed,” she murmurs.

“There's no time for that.”

“Isn't there?”

“I need another solution.”

“It won't come if you push yourself.” She kisses my neck. “Isn't that what you keep telling me? That I shouldn't force the memories to come back before they're ready?”

I visibly swallow. “Yes.”

She rubs her thumb over my lips. “Even so, amnesia is so frustrating. I wish I had a cheat sheet.” Those molten brown eyes lock on mine. “I'd rather know everything I'm missing now than slowly discover it later.”

My pulse quickens.

She leans closer until her lips are a breath away from mine. I can almost taste her. Heat sears through my jeans and salutes the beautiful view peeking out of that loose camisole.

She's not wearing a bra.

I have to fight the urge to reach out and run my fingers over her chest.

“Remember when you asked for crumbs, Bear?”

A muscle in my jaw ticks. I can't answer because lust is jumping out of me and I need to reel that in. Which is

something I can't do with Cynth teasing me like this.

“Remember?” Her fingertips drift over my shoulders, down my arms and against my abs. The heat of her touch hovers over the fabric of my T-shirt.

Her hands stop moving and I almost lurch forward to force a connection again. I'm enjoying her caresses too much. Way more than I deserve.

“Bear?” She coaxes when I don't respond.

My mouth is so dry, I doubt I still have a tongue. I swallow once, twice. It does nothing. If my heart thunders any louder, I swear lightening is going to show up out of nowhere.

She dips her head and her next words purr into my ear. Soft and silky. “I'll take the crumbs too.” She strokes my beard, her lips inching up. “I can handle it. So give me something. Anything. As long as it's the truth.”

“Where is this coming from?” My voice comes out gruffer than it needs to. It's a cover. It's the only freaking thing keeping me from throwing Cynthia on the desk, tearing her pants off and making her scream my name.

Her eyes flicker to my jeans that are making it's appreciation for this random seduction very clear. Delicate fingers follow the path in a slow, torturous exploration. “Does that really matter right now?”

No.

Hell no.

That's the absolute last thing that matters compared to where she's groping.

She squeezes and I buck.

“Bear,” Cynthia whispers, “I'll be so very happy if you tell me what I'm forgetting.”

Sweat beads on my neck.

Siren.

Witch.

I'm completely at her mercy.

Is there anything to do but surrender when she bats her eyes like that? When she touches me like that? When her lips press my neck like that?

Money? She can have everything in my bank account.

My properties? She can take all my land.

My studio? I'll sign the deed tomorrow.

As long as she never stops torturing me like this.

I groan softly as Cynthia flicks her tongue out and swirls it right above the pulse at my throat. "Do you want me to beg?"

I find my voice again, though it's shakier than I'd prefer. "What do you want to know?"

"What happened the night of the accident?"

Her words are like a bucket of ice over my head.

I hear the psychiatrist's warning loud and clear '*letting her know the truth can be destructive*'.

Damn.

Today, in the emergency room, I almost came clean.

Almost.

But now I've got Cynthia's health to think about.

She fainted today. She's unstable. If she passes out again around knives or while she's driving or if she hits her head on a hard surface while going down—

I flinch.

She can't know the truth.

I find the strength inside to nudge her off my lap.

The bastard in my jeans protests painfully, but some things are more important.

Like saving my wife's life.

Cynthia looks stunned and I cast about in my head for an explanation. "Babe, I would love to, but I can't right now. I

have..." My mind trips to the promise I made to Bianca yesterday. "I'm going out with Colin and Bianca."

Sure, we were supposed to go out to *celebrate*, but we can go out to mope. Misery loves company and all that.

"Really?" She gasps. "That's fantastic. I'll go get dressed."

"Wait. What?"

"Am I not invited?" She bats her thick eyelashes and pushes out her bottom lip.

And I swear to you, I have every intention of saying no, but the sentence that rumbles out of my throat is, "Of course you are."

She breaks out into a brilliant smile. "I was just thinking that my hair came out so well and nobody'll see it."

"Babe—" I struggle to walk the invitation back.

"Now what do I wear?" She skips out of the room, leaving me equally riled up and exhausted.

I push myself to my feet, wincing as the throbbing down south increases.

This woman is driving me freaking insane.

Why is she sniffing around for information about her accident again? Why is she choosing such a sexy weapon to hunt it out?

A frightening thought hits me.

Does she remember something?

The fear lingers and I observe Cynthia keenly as she meets me in the living room fully dressed for a night out.

Her hair's dry now and it expanded even more in these past few hours. Her chest is spilling out of a pink crop top. A sexy pair of jeans with rips on the knee and a long flowery blue jacket that goes all the way to the ground completes the outfit.

My body jerks to attention. "Cynth..." I blink rapidly, staring at her tits. "You look..."

“Ready?”

“Sexy.” I shake my head as I try to convey my thoughts. “But, uh, it’s just casual drinks with the guys.”

“Is this too overdressed?” She tilts her head.

It’s not that. She’s wearing too little and if I can’t drag my eyes from her top then no man in that bar will be able to either.

“You look amazing, babe.” I grip her arms and talk to the gorgeous chest popping out of her top. “But maybe change your shirt?”

“Oh.” She hauls it up. “Better?”

The collar drops right back again and exposes even more this time.

My pulse ticks to a frightening pace.

Desire skitters down my spine.

I lick my lips, wishing my tongue was licking something else. “N-no.” Dragging my gaze to hers, I growl hoarsely, “Change. Please.”

“Fine.” To my surprise, she holds my hand and leads me to her bedroom. She hasn’t moved her clothes to the guest room, so I get why she’s changing in here. But I don’t get what *I’m* doing here.

“This is what I wore when I was single.” Cynthia closes the door. “There’s so much I have to remember about being a wife, you know? It’s different than when you’re just dating around and don’t have to worry about anyone else.”

Heat compiles in my chest as I watch her tear her shirt off. “Mm-hm.”

She walks up to me. “Bear, can you unclasp my bra?”

“Cynth...”

“My arms are so tired.”

“What are you doing?” I ask gruffly.

She glances over her shoulder. “Changing.” She might as well have punctuated that statement with ‘*duh*’.

“No.” I fold my arms over my chest.

“Fine. I’ll do it myself.” She reaches behind her to take it off.

I see a smooth swath of dark brown skin and delicate shoulder muscles and I lose it.

Grabbing her arm, I whirl her around, my nostrils flaring. “I’ll take it off,” I warn. Then I haul her in and kiss her, my hands cupping her chest through the bra and my lips crushing hers. I back her up against the wall, pawing at her jeans and roughly stroking her tongue with my own.

She pushes me away before I can roll her jeans down, breathing hard. “Tell me first.”

I growl. “Tell you what?”

“The truth of that night.”

So this is it? This is what the act in my office and the stripping naked in front of me was for?

Anger sparks in my voice. “Stop playing games, Cynth.”

“Just tell me the truth and I’ll return the favor.” Her seductive expression almost kills me.

I growl darkly. “You first.”

“Fine.” Her words are harsher than I expected. “I know you’re lying to me.”

My eyes widen and my heart starts beating a mile a minute. “What?”

“I want to know what happened that night, Bear.”

I grit my teeth, caught between a rock and a hard place. Telling her the truth will upset her, but she knows I’m holding back. *Not* telling her could destroy us.

“I can’t believe that I drive my car during a storm that bad.” Cynthia’s eyes burn into me. “I’ve thought and thought about it and there’s something missing from the story. There has to be something you’re not saying.”

I pace to the window, my chest rising and falling violently.

There's no other choice.

Cautiously, I admit, "We had an argument."

Her voice turns strained. "About what?"

"Director Kennedy." I turn around. "I was offered an amazing job, but it meant packing up and leaving our family and friends for a year. You didn't want to go. I didn't want to leave without you. We kept fighting about it."

"That's why I got into the car and drove off that night," she whispers.

"The business was picking up. I'd been going on a lot of work trips. That's why I gave you the teddy bear. But you got tired of the long periods away. I promised to stop, but when I got this offer, I didn't want to let it go. I chose Director Kennedy's project over you. And I..." I blink rapidly. "I regret that."

"Oh Bear." She runs to me and hugs me tightly. "Is that the entire truth?"

My throat bobs. "Yes."

No.

No, it's not.

But the rest of it...

The rest of it will break her.

Her eyes beam. "Thank you." Cynthia kisses me soft and long. "Was that so hard?"

"No..." I run my hand across her cheek.

She slowly lowers her body. "Now let me show you how much I appreciate your honesty, Mr. West."

My heart thunders. "Cynth."

"Sh. No talking." Her fingers twine around my pants and the only sound that strikes the silence is when she pulls my zipper down.

CYNTHIA

“HE COULDN’T EVEN KEEP his story straight,” Bear explains later that night. We’re all squashed into a booth at a pub. Directly across from the jukebox too, which means he has to yell to be heard over the classics blasting the air. “One minute, it was a noise violation and the next it was a broken business clause.”

“As in we’re not allowed to run a business there?” asks Colin.

“I don’t even know.” Bear scowls. “And I don’t think he does either.”

“Of course not,” Bianca says firmly. She’s on Bear’s left, sandwiched between Colin and his date for the night, a preppy girl with blonde hair and a smile that belongs on a Colgate commercial. I’m not sure if Colin’s date talks English because she hasn’t said much all night.

“You act like you know everything.” Colin snorts.

Bianca glares at him, which is—honestly—a little scary because she looks like she could beat him to a pulp. Her style is Dracula meets the Adam’s Family, but I dig it. Black is always in. “He obviously traded us out for money.”

“He’s an idiot,” I agree.

“Oh, then he must be related to Colin.”

“Hey, my relatives are irresponsible partiers, but we’re not crooks.”

I laugh at Colin who winks at me.

He's got shaggy black hair, piercing eyes, and a smile that can convince a good girl to try the dark side. I find him absolutely ridiculous most of the time and funny about a quarter of the time. But underneath all that bluster, he seems loyal to Bear.

And I respect that.

Bear drops his arm around my shoulder as Bianca and Colin start to fight. That delicious, growly voice rumbles in my ear, "You shouldn't be drinking."

"I'm not." I grin up at him.

His blue eyes are two freaking gem stones plucked from the freaking sky.

Have. Mercy.

Can he be any hotter?

I've been in a permanent state of awe since we drove here. He makes a button down and jeans look like a magazine shoot. His thick blonde hair is brushed back to reveal more of that strong forehead and straight nose.

He looks like a Viking. A super ripped Viking who treats me like a queen and gives up job opportunities to make me happy and I can't believe that ring on his finger means he's married to me.

Bear switches his mug with mine. "You think I wouldn't recognize the taste of root beer?"

"Wups."

His scolding look sends shivers of pleasure up my spine.

Goodness, I love it when he scowls at me.

I love it when he smiles at me.

I love it when his hands tangle in my hair and he throws his head back and roars my name.

My core clenches.

I rub his thigh, surprised by this insane *need* to have my hands on him. Maybe I'm just going through the honeymoon phase again or maybe having the truth out in the open has turned me into a fiend, but I cannot stop feeling up my husband.

I'm obsessed.

Bear smirks. "You can't mix your meds with alcohol."

"I didn't drink too much." What he doesn't know is that I'm not taking my meds.

The doctor's suspicions that they're actually 'blocking' my memories made me curious. The last time I had a flash, I'd skipped the pills too. And yesterday, I had a dream about arguing with Bear, which turned out to be sort of true.

I'm hoping more memories will slip through now that I haven't touched the pills in a day and a half.

"Enough. I didn't come here to get depressed." Colin lifts his mug. "To Hugh Courtney getting run over!"

"Hear, hear!" His date lifts her mug.

Bear rolls his eyes.

Bianca scoffs.

Since I feel sorry for him, I join his toast too. "Here here."

We chill for a while longer, but it's clear that everyone is pretty bummed about losing the movie deal. Colin makes a valiant effort to crack his inappropriate jokes, but even those fail to rile the rest up.

Meanwhile, I keep stealing Bear's drinks and by the time the night wears down, I'm in desperate need of the bathroom.

"I'll take care of the bill," Bear tells me when I announce my intentions. "I'll be waiting at the bar when you come back."

"Okay, babe." I rise and stumble.

"Whoa." Bear catches my arm. "Can you make it?"

"I'll take her," Bianca grudgingly offers.

“Thanks, B.” Bear nods at her. Then to me, he growls, “Don’t give Bianca any trouble, you hear me?”

“You’re so cute.” I pat his beard. “Should I tell everyone where my mouth was today? Do you think they’d like to know?”

“Probably not, Cynth.” He flashes me a small smile and a wink that turns my insides to jello. Bear has a grin that makes a woman want to get up and write a speech about how gorgeous he is.

I’ve been holding back until now, but I don’t see any reason why I can’t grab his face and pop a kiss on his pink lips.

I start to reach for him, but Bianca grabs my hand and leads me out of the booth.

How rude.

We march to the bathroom and I do my business. When I’m done, she’s by the sink, one combat boot kicked up against the wall and the other planted on the ground.

I stumble to the sink. “You know, that lipstick isn’t doing much for your complexion. You’ve got warm tones. And it’s drowning you out.”

“I don’t care.” She rolls her eyes.

“Really?” I slur and push my hands under the faucet. Peering at her in the dim lights, I mumble, “You like Bear, don’t you?”

She stiffens until I’m scared she’s going to crack. “What?”

“I like him too.”

Her eyes skitter back and forth. “Whatever.”

“Do you know why I like him?”

“Hurry up and wash your hands so we can go.”

“Because he loves me,” I sing. “And he married me. And he always worries about me.”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it.”

“You keep watching him.” I wiggle a finger in her direction. “And he keeps watching me.” A sigh billows out of my chest. “Why do *you* like Bear?”

“That’s a stupid question.”

“If you say so.”

“I don’t like Bear!” She shrieks.

I jump. Stumble back with one eye closed. “There’s no need to yell.”

“Just because you don’t remember anything doesn’t mean you can waltz in here and start flinging accusations!”

Her screaming sobers me up. I blink rapidly. “B-Bianca, I’m sorry. Did I say,” I hiccup, “I didn’t mean—”

“Ever since Bear married you, he’s been losing everything. *Everything*. And you have the audacity to stand there,” her fingers lift to indicate my body, “judging everyone and acting like the world revolves around you. Acting like you *deserve* to have him falling at your feet. As if he’s your servant and you’re his master.”

“I don’t—”

“Three years ago, Bear came to us, so excited about this girl he met. Come to learn you dragged him through the mud and strung him along for *months*. And why did you keep pushing him away? Because he has a bad temper? Because he flirts with other women? Because he doesn’t have a job? No. You didn’t want him because he’s *white*.”

Tears sting my eyes.

“But he stuck by you and didn’t quit and put up with your *abuse* until you gave him a chance. Then you lost your memory and started treating him like crap *again*. And that *idiot* kept chasing you while you pushed him away.”

Her words hit me like bullets. “It’s not my fault that I lost my memory.”

“What did you just say?” Her nostrils flare. “It’s not your fault? *Not your fault?*” Bianca advances on me. “Bear gave up

an incredible opportunity with the biggest director in the world because you were too selfish to support him and his dreams. He lost his building today and he's about to lose his reputation. Because of you."

I shake my head. "No."

"Not once has he blamed you. The freaking *idiot*. Not once. Even when you couldn't get pregnant—" Her eyes widen as if she just said something she shouldn't have.

My body lurches back. "Pregnant?"

"Forget it." She stomps away.

My body tells me I should follow, but my brain is stuck in a loop. I glance back and forth, a strange, suffocating sensation descending on me. I take a deep breath and try to focus, but it feels like the walls are closing in.

You couldn't get pregnant.

I bite my lip hard enough to draw blood. The psychiatrist taught me the butterfly method today. She showed me how to give myself a hug and count back from ten and try to think about the good things so I don't get sucked into the darkness.

But my brain is too busy piecing the fragments of a memory together.

Bianca's words unlocked something. Something painful.

It's striking a giant, ugly chord in my heart and in my head. It's causing a gush of emotions to pour through my chest and fill my veins.

There's so much information.

Too much. It's all jumbling in my brain. Coming back at once.

I take another breath, but it's shallow and raspy, and I don't think it actually helps because my lungs are too tight to accept the oxygen.

My eyes sting with hot tears. I rub them to hold it back, but the act unleashes the very thing I'm trying to keep locked away.

“I lost the baby.” The memory blows through my mind. *“I don’t think I can do this, Bear.”*

I cry out. Try to draw air into my lungs. Try to get my brain to stop spitting the memories at me like darts.

I tell myself I’m going to be okay, but it doesn’t work.

Another scream slips out.

“Where were you? Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

Bear glances away. “I was with Director Kennedy.”

“What?” *Betrayal eases through my veins. “So while I was in pain, while I was passing out our baby in the bathroom toilet...”* I choke. *“You were at the job you swore you’d turned down? How could you do this to me?”*

“Cynth...”

“I needed you! I needed you and you weren’t there!”

Tears roll down my cheeks, mimicking the tears that fell down in the memory.

“Cynthia!”

I freeze at the sound of Bear’s voice. It’s followed by urgent footsteps and a pair of white sneakers.

My breath escapes on a harsh wheeze. I’m trembling too hard to answer.

Bear curses roughly and sits on the floor. He scoops me into his lap and holds me like a child, rubbing up and down my back. “It’s okay. It’s okay, baby. I’m here.”

But is he? Can I really trust him?

I speak in a small voice. “Bear.”

“Yeah.” He pulls my hair back. “I’m here, Cynth.”

“Tell me what happened that night.”

He stiffens. “Why?”

“Please.”

“We fought about Director Kennedy.”

“You swear that’s the truth?” I murmur.

His hand goes still. “That’s all that happened.”

The warmth of his body turns to ice and I sit up. “You’re lying to me.”

“Cynth...” Horror rises in his eyes.

“I remember being pregnant.” My heart thunders loud and fast. “I remember, Bear.”

He stands suddenly. “Come on. I’ll take you home.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” I swat his hand away.

“We’ll talk at home, okay? I promise.”

I follow him outside, but I don’t believe him. I don’t believe a word that comes out of his mouth.

Bianca and Colin and his date are gone. I don’t ask where they are. I don’t have the mental space to think about anything else right now.

I lost the baby.

I have the emotions again. They’re cradled in my heart like a drawer that’s been violently pried open. The terror of seeing the blood. The excruciating pain. The haunting fear. The realization that it was happening *again*.

Again?

How many times had I miscarried before?

How many tears had I shed?

My bottom lip starts quivering.

Bear parks in front of my parents’ house, but he doesn’t climb out. He just sits there, his hands on the wheel, his shoulders hunched over it.

I want to feel sorry for him. I do. But I’m so angry.

It’s like a monster in me.

Like a fire-breathing dragon.

“Tell me,” I say firmly, my voice crackling.

“How much do you remember?”

“Start from the top,” I speak coldly. “I’ll know if you’re lying and I swear, Bear, if you lie to me again, I will never forgive you.”

He runs a hand down his face. There are tears in his eyes. “I didn’t... just get you that teddy bear because I was gone a lot. We were expecting. But early on in that first pregnancy,” his voice cracks, “we lost the baby.”

“No.” My heart feels like it’s been ripped out of my chest and shredded.

“It was devastating and it was so difficult telling everyone. So the next—the next time we found out you were pregnant, we kept it to ourselves just in case.” He wipes his tears with the back of his hand. “We were hoping for the best.”

“And that night?”

“That night, I was out of the city. Director Kennedy invited me to the filming site to meet some actors and production managers. It was an incredible opportunity and I couldn’t say no.” He turns to me, desperation in his tone. “If I had known what would have happened that day, I’d never have left. I would have answered all your calls. I wouldn’t...” He runs a hand through his hair and blows out a frustrated breath. “I never would have let you go through that alone.”

“But you did. What happened when you came home?”

“The bathroom was a bloody mess. You were curled up on the floor, grieving and angry. You wanted to go to your parents, but you didn’t want me to drive you. I tried to stop you from leaving. It was raining hard and you were crying. You didn’t care. You almost ran me over tearing out of our driveway.”

“Then I drove into a ditch.”

“And your brain erased everything including me.” He swallows. “And the babies we lost.”

When he says *babies*, I start sobbing. It’s like a black hole swallowing me alive. I’ve never known such pain, such agony.

I've never felt this chasm of loss and sorrow.

Bear tries to reach over and hug me.

I push him back.

Shock leaks into his eyes. "Cynth."

"You lied to me. You looked me right in the eyes and you swore to only half the truth."

"I was trying to protect you."

"Maybe." I sniff and wipe the tears rolling down my cheeks. "But I can't trust someone who's dishonest with me." Reaching for the handle of the door, I push it open and step out. "Maybe we shouldn't see each other for a while."

"Cynth. Please."

"Stay away from me, Bear." And then I slam the car door firmly shut.

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BEAR

IT'S Valentine's Day today.

The day people present gifts to their loved ones—roses, chocolates, teddy bears. Extravagant displays that are supposed to represent their love.

It's the day women dig into the bottom of their drawers for the lingerie they haven't worn in a while. The day men trim their beards and order dinner from a fancy restaurant and whistle on the way home from work, their fingers clasping a store-bought bouquet.

It's the day of love.

But not for me.

I'm alone.

On the couch.

Surrounded by beer bottles and the stench of despair.

Hopelessness pervades the room, lingering in the shirt and pants I've been wearing since my wife looked me in the eyes and told me to stay away.

Yeah, I'm not in the mood to celebrate anything right now.

Three heavy thuds shudder my front door.

I peer through hazy eyes before deciding it isn't worth acknowledging and tossing my head back on the arm of the couch.

Chaos surrounds me. Though the plumbers finished fixing the pipes, they've yet to put the walls back up. How ironic. This house looks gorgeous and perfect on the outside, but the inside is so gutted, it's unlivable.

Just like me.

It's not like I'm complaining. I'm happy here. Got my privacy. Got my beer.

Most of my clothes are still at my in-laws. I haven't summoned the courage to go back and take them out. Haven't summoned the courage to answer Mr. and Mrs. B's phone calls. Or the phone calls from Bianca and Colin.

I've just been trying to numb the pain. I didn't realize the wounds from the accident were so fresh in me until Cynthia dragged them up again. Poked them with her elegant fingers. Caused them to gush afresh.

I know she's hurting.

I know I should have been there.

And those two certainties keep me drowning in warm beer and desperation.

"Bear, I can hear you in there." Colin's voice. Can't he take a freaking hike off a cliff?

I ignore his yelling and crack open a new beer. It frizzes and spills over onto my shirt. I slurp it up like the bum that I am because, really... who cares?

Suddenly, I hear glass shattering.

A curse flies out of my lips and I scramble to sit up. At that moment, a hand shoots through the hole that was made in the glass pane beside my door knob. It's too thick to be Colin's and I'm immediately on edge when I see that hand reaching confidently for my lock and twisting.

"What the hell?" I bellow, rising to my feet.

The door swings open.

I gasp in shock when I see Matt, standing backlit by the harsh afternoon sunlight.

I lift a hand to shade my eyes.

“Hey, cuz.” Matt lifts his chin.

Colin scrambles behind him. The moment he steps inside, he clips his nose. “Did something die in here?”

“Get out.” I fall back into the couch.

“That’s not going to happen, you punk.” Matt grabs the beer I was about to drink right out of my hands.

“Hey!” I protest.

He swats my foot and sits on the couch. His giant frame is broader than mine and the entire sofa sinks in when he takes his seat. As usual, he’s wearing a long-sleeved flannel shirt over a black T and jeans.

“What are you doing here?” I growl. “Aren’t you supposed to be making cribs?”

“I had a meeting with a client in your area.”

“On Valentine’s Day?”

“Amina’s swamped with work at Make It Marriage so I figured I’d see those folks and drive over real quick while I’m in your city. I didn’t expect to find you stewing your liver like a crazy person.” He shakes his head. “What’s going on with you, Bear?”

“Nothing,” I respond gruffly.

“B.S.” Matt scowls.

“You haven’t been answering any of our calls,” Colin jumps in. “We’re in crisis mode at the studio. Now is not the freaking time to lose it.”

I snarl at Colin. “Didn’t you get the hint when I didn’t answer my phone?”

“I’m worried, man.” There’s not a hint of cheerfulness in his expression. “You look like you’re about to do something stupid.”

“I’m fine.”

“Do you think anyone in this room buys that?” Matt gives me a pointed stare.

“Just go back to your perfect life, Matty, and leave me alone.”

He laughs aloud. “Perfect life?”

“Just get out of my face.”

“Amina and I have our rough times same as anyone else. If anyone tells you that marriage is perfect and easy, they’re damn liars.” He smacks my leg. “But you know what I *don’t* do when crap hits the fan? Run away.”

“I tried that,” I snap, my voice getting heated. “I tried the ‘chasing her until I bleed’ thing. It didn’t work.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because she never wants to see me again, dammit!” I scream. The words hurt like hell and I swipe the beer from Matt’s hands so I can take a swig and dull my nerves.

He snatches it back. “Did she say that?”

“Yeah.” I glare at my feet. “She broke up with me.” I bark out a humorless laugh. “Can I call it that? We’re married, so I guess we’re separated now or...” I rub my nose. “I don’t know.” I can’t bring myself to say the word ‘divorce’. “It’s over.”

“Maybe you can give her some time and talk to her,” Matt coaches.

“No, no.” I shake my head. “I give up.”

“Bear.”

“I’m sorry you wasted your time. Both of you.” My gaze sweeps to Colin.

He steps forward. “Look, man. I know you’re in a funk right now. Women troubles are the worst, but the world doesn’t stop turning when you and Cynthia fight. There’s a teeny problem with us losing our building—”

“Didn’t you hear me? I said get out!”

A shuttered look enters Colin's eyes. He's been my friend since high school, and I feel a little bad for yelling at him. But instead of apologizing, I look away.

Matt scowls at me. "You're being a real jerk right now, Bear."

"Say that when Amina tells you she doesn't want to see you anymore. Maybe you'll understand what it feels like."

"Pouting isn't going to solve anything."

"Get out, Matt."

"Have you called her?"

"Get the hell out of my house," I hiss.

Matt stands and glares at me. "You know what? Maybe Cynth was right to kick you to the curb. If this is how you fight for someone you love, I wouldn't put my trust in you either."

I scramble to my feet and swing at Matt. I'm buzzed and I miss him by a mile.

His lips curve up. "I wouldn't take you back if I was Cynthia."

"You better watch your mouth." I swing again.

Miss again.

Colin glances nervously at Matt. "Dude, you think you should be rubbing it in right now?"

"You're not going to accomplish anything by stinking up that couch, Bear. The only way things will get better is if you man up and *change* it. You've had your time to sulk." He gestures to the beer. "Now it's time to face reality. Your life is falling apart. What are you going to do about it?"

"Keep drinking until I forget." I sit back down.

Matt groans loudly. "Fine."

"She broke him." Colin points at me. "Cynthia broke him."

Matt's phone rings.

He groans. “I have to catch my flight soon.” His eyes narrow on me. “This isn’t what I expected, Bear.”

“Bye.” I wave him off.

“I wish I could stay here and babysit you.” He runs a hand through his hair and then takes something out of his pocket. “Here.”

“What is this?”

“Wedding invitation from your dad. He asked me to drop that off.”

“All of a sudden?”

“Maybe he’s had a change of heart. He sounded like he wanted you there.”

“No.” I toss the invitation. “He wants me to tell mom about it so he can rub it in her face.”

My parents are persistent when it comes to making each other miserable and using me as the messenger between them. I’m expecting a call from mom any day now. She’ll probably wax on about her new boyfriend in the hopes that I’ll tell dad about it.

Matt runs a hand over his face. “You’re going to make it through this. Cynthia loves you and you love her. Take the time you need and then put in the work. Wear your knees out begging if you have to. Don’t let her go.”

“It’s over, Matt.” I burp.

He scowls and then clasps Colin’s shoulder. “Take care of him for me?”

“I’ve been cleaning up this guy’s messes since eight grade.” Colin snorts.

“Try the other way around.”

Both men stare at me.

Matt points a finger in my direction. “Call me if you need anything. Now that the Valentine’s Day rush is almost over,

Amina can take some time off. We'll come up and visit you. Hopefully, we can see Cynth at the same time."

"I wouldn't count on it," I tell him flatly.

He lets out a sound that's part grunt and part sigh. "Take care, cuz."

When Matt leaves, Colin picks up a new beer can and sits beside me. "Bianca's acting weird. Know anything about that?"

"Nope."

"Figures." He shrugs as he drinks. "Whoa. Yuck. Why is this warm? How are you drinking this crap?"

"You're right." I grab my jacket and shrug it on. "I should go out for more beer."

"Dude—"

"I'll be right back," I lie. I have no intentions of going back home. Not with him there to spear me with those pitying looks. I know I've hit rock bottom when Colin of all people is feeling sorry for me.

My chest burns with guilt and pain, all stirred up by Matt.

That guy is too nosy for his own good.

As I walk, I feel a cool wind on my face.

Silence wraps around me like a cloak.

Cynth and I chose this neighborhood because it's in a good school district. We wanted to start a family as soon as possible, but life didn't work out that way.

I knew she was crushed with disappointment after the first loss and the second nearly killed her.

I didn't want her to go through that again.

I didn't want to lose her.

A bitter chuckle escapes me. "Did all that and look where I am. Rambling the streets and talking to myself."

My phone rings.

I ignore it as usual.

It could be Colin, wondering where I've gone.

Could be Matt making sure I haven't offed myself.

Could be Mr. B.

Could be Bianca.

Could be anybody.

Know who it won't be?

Cynthia.

I cringe as the pain hits me again. Slapping my chest, I try to pretend that I don't miss her and that every breath I take without her isn't agony.

I'm fine.

People move on from broken marriages all the time.

My parents did.

And it worked out just fine for both of them.

No, it didn't.

Stopping abruptly, I catch that whim and I dial my dad's phone.

He sounds surprised to hear from me. "Henry."

"Dad," I blurt out the words without a greeting, "do you still love mom after all these years?"

He goes extremely quiet.

I stick a hand into my pocket, waiting.

"You got my wedding invitation? To Dalia?"

"I thought it was Delilah."

"Same thing." Dad coughs.

"Yeah, I got it."

"And you call me asking if I still love your mother? Isn't it obvious?"

“You let her go. I just wanted to know if you regretted that.”

He breathes out thickly. “You know what your mother taught me, Bear?” Bitterness eases through his tone. “Love is a scam. I gave her everything and she threw it back in my face saying it wasn’t enough.”

The heat in my chest rises.

I can relate to that.

“After everything we’d been through, I was always the one who had to fight to get her back. I was always picking up the pieces. Your mother claimed I was overworking and not paying her attention. Said I wasn’t there for her when she needed me, but you know what I was doing, son? I was slaving at a job I *hated* to keep a roof over her head and food on the table.”

Same thing.

I was working to give us a better life. To give my *child* a better life.

Dad’s bitterness seeps into my chest and becomes my own.

“It kept torturing and torturing me,” Dad continues, “until one day, I realized the truth. You can put in zero effort and things won’t work out. You can put in lots of effort and they’ll still fall apart. So isn’t it better to love yourself more than you love anyone else? If you’re going to be devoted and pathetic, why not do it for you?” He chuckles. “That way you don’t get hurt. That way you’re the one hurting others.”

“Is that why you cheated on mom?”

“She gave up on us first.” He snorts. “And what was I supposed to do? Fight for her? After she slapped me in the face like that?”

“Thanks, dad. I think I have my answer.”

“Son, are you coming to the wedding?”

“I’ll come to the next one,” I say before hanging up.

As darkness falls over the city and the cold seeps into my jacket, I cling to the anger and the fear in my heart. I listen to the little voice that tells me I've lost Cynthia forever. That nothing I can do from this point on will matter. That I should just focus on myself and screw everything else.

That voice is loud and persuasive.

It sounds like me.

The darker sides of me.

I dial a different number and listen to it ring.

Once.

Twice.

It connects.

A familiar voice rasps, "I was waiting to hear from you."

"Director Kennedy," I scowl, "nice work getting Courtney to rescind the contract. I have to admit, I didn't think you'd go as far as to try and kick me out of my own studio."

"All's fair in love and war, they say." He doesn't sound apologetic in the least. "And I stopped myself short of ruining your reputation. I didn't want to come after your friends unless I had to. Your boy Colin has a lot of skeletons in his closet."

I clench my teeth. "Keep talking and you'll walk yourself out of a deal."

"Oh?"

"I've decided that I'm going to take the job."

"What changed your mind?"

"Does it matter?"

"No." He laughs. "Is this an official acceptance? You understand that, once you sign the contract, there's no backing out until filming wraps up in a year?"

"Yes." I pause. "When do we leave?"

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CYNTHIA

EVERYONE THINKS THEY KNOW PAIN. That they've held it in their hands and bled by it. That they've been speared and tortured and known by it. At certain low points in our lives, we all believe that *this* is the worst that can happen. This is the absolute *lowest* it can go.

I was like that.

Could it get any worse than running my car into a ditch and losing my memory? Than living in a state of constant fear, never knowing what or who I've been in the last three years. Could it sink any lower than my loved ones insisting my memories are only half the picture? That I'm wrong and that I've changed in a reference to time I don't recall?

The answer is yes.

It could get worse.

It did.

But in such a staggered manner.

Never all at once.

Never in one big gulp.

Each step of the way, it broke down more and more. Slightly. Then significantly.

Until there was nothing left inside me but pain and mourning.

How could I forget?

It's my biggest regret. My most tortured refrain.

My body made room for something smaller than me. Something bigger than me. Something that was me and yet was unique all to itself. A tiny entity that would have grown to be a doctor or a policeman or a singer if it had gone to full term.

My womb knew what it was like to hold and cradle a child.

Even if my arms never had that opportunity, I should have remembered.

I should have marked it somewhere in my heart, in my soul, in a place that never forgets.

Not for a moment.

But I didn't.

When my brain had an opportunity to rewrite the past, it chose to toss out everything. It chose to toss out my babies.

What kind of mother does that make me?

I wrestle with that question as weeks turn into months and I learn to hide the agony from everyone.

It's harder to fool some people than others, but I've got the tools to make up whatever story I want.

I'm a personal stylist.

I'm a connoisseur of fashion.

I'd even dare to call myself a wizard with her very own wand.

It amazes me when people don't respect how much power clothes and makeup have. It's all vanity, it's all quiet condescension and prejudice against those who care about their appearance...

Until it's time for a first date or a wedding day or a job interview they need to kill.

All of a sudden, people recognize the importance of dressing well, of clothes that can make or break a first

impression. Suddenly, fashion is a skill set as relevant as any other.

And I have the ability to manipulate it in spades.

But personal styling is more than something that I'm good at.

For me, fashion is my armor. It's what keeps Ally from nudging me out of the store on a random Tuesday, insisting I need to rest. It's what prevents Summer from ordering me to a mandatory vacation because she caught me crying in the break room. It keeps my parents from slanting me worried looks they think I can't see. And it keeps the world from looking at me with pity.

'Oh? You're that sad woman who had amnesia? Whose husband left you to go film a movie and never called, never texted, never sent a damn letter? You're that pathetic, broken-down soul who can only remember snatches of the past three years? Who forgot the trauma of losing a child?'

No, they don't see that.

They see class. Elegance. Power.

It's artfully curated.

Not a stitch out of place.

This morning, I choose my Alexander belted double-breasted leather midi dress. It blends modern sophistication with femininity. The light cream looks luxurious and eye-catching against my dark brown skin. The material is like butter on my fingertips.

I look like a boss.

Like I've got everything under control.

Makeup next.

I've gotten into the habit of wearing it everyday.

Lots of concealer for the dark spots under my eyes. No one should know that I still cry myself to sleep at night. That I still reach for Bear as if he's on the other side of the mattress. That I ache when I realize he's not there.

No one can know that I'm still struggling. That I still feel empty inside. That my eyes don't glitter anymore and my laughter doesn't come from my soul. It's a laugh track, a hollow rendition of true joy and happiness.

No one can know.

With a wave of my wand, I make my adjustments.

And like magic, like sorcery, the makeup hides the stress lines and the distress and the despair until I'm happy and I'm whole.

I slip into Prada because, really, today is a Prada kind of day.

Then I step outside of my bedroom.

Dad is around the kitchen table, glasses perched on the end of his nose and a tablet in his dark hands. Mom is zipping around the kitchen, frying bacon and flipping pancakes.

I dip my eyes to the mirror hanging on the wall and make sure my smile looks natural before I make my presence known. "Morning!"

"Morning, sweetie." Dad sets his tablet down.

I sashay over to him and press a kiss on his cheek. "It's a beautiful morning, isn't it?"

"Sure is." Dad pats my hand.

"You sure you want to eat breakfast with that pretty dress on?" Mom eyes my outfit and then her smile slowly wanes until she's frowning in disappointment. "You're not eating, are you?"

"I'm late for work."

"Honey, I woke up extra early to make this for you."

"Sorry, mom." I start to turn away.

Dad snatches my hand, his voice raspy and pleading. "Cynthia, sit. Please." The unspoken end of that statement sounds like this: *we're worried about you. You're scaring us.*

We don't understand how to reach you or how to help or how to fix you where you're broken.

My hackles rise.

I hate disappointing my parents. I really do.

But I hate the pity even more.

A big meal isn't going to fix this. Besides, food has lost its taste for me. It's not the meds. It's not mom's amazing cooking. It's just me. For some reason, my stomach's shrunk and it has been like that for a couple months.

"Sorry, dad. I really can't today." I shake him off.

His eyes widen.

Mom bites down on her bottom lip, visibly distressed.

I turn away from their frightened expressions and head outside.

The moment I'm alone, the grin falters. I put it back into place, making sure it beams brightly. It has to be better than what I presented to mom and dad this morning. They, obviously, saw right through me.

How long have they been seeing the truth?

I shudder and sit in my car for a moment before starting it. My heart thunders and I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Breathe, breathe."

When I've got myself together, I drive to the studio.

Ally is seated in the bean bag next to the window. Sunshine pours over her light brown skin and long curly hair. She's channeling Coco Chanel today and I'm dying over her square cut pants.

"Morning," I coo brightly.

"Hey." She gives me a head-to-toe scan. "Wow, girl."

"Right?" I do a slow spin for her appreciation.

She lets loose a giggle. "What's the occasion?"

"No reason. Just felt like dressing up."

She nods.

See? That's what I want.

Ally totally buys it.

"Had breakfast today?" She asks, following me as I climb the stairs to my office.

"Yes," I say confidently.

It's not like I *want* to lie, but Ally and Summer are worse than my parents. They're the main reasons I force myself to eat lunch lately. They watch me like prison guards and if they don't see me snacking on something during the day, they'll pounce and drag me to the nearest restaurant to stuff me with food.

"Here." She peels open a yogurt tube. "Have this anyway."

"I'm fine."

"Here." She stares me down.

I sigh and take it.

"By the way, Summer wants to see you in her office."

My eyes widen. "Why?"

She shrugs.

Nervously, I stride to Summer's office and knock on the door. The room is decorated luxuriously with pink wallpaper, delicate photographs and enough plants to make this place feel like a garden.

"Morning, Cynth." Summer whistles. "Girl, you look amazing."

"Thanks." I plump my afro.

"So I wanted to discuss something with you." She folds her dark hands over the desk.

I play with the strap of my purse. "Go on."

"In the past seven months, you've doubled your client load, organized a community fashion show—"

“Which was bomb by the way.” I praise myself a little because, hell, I deserve it. I worked hard on that show and it was even broadcasted on our local news channel.

“In more ways than one. We got such great exposure, we tripled our client acquisition and generated even more revenue for the business. We’re going to blow past our fourth quarter goals. On top of that you’ve also,” she lifts a folder, “arranged exclusivity contracts with several up-and-coming designers this year and the joint initiatives you’ve launched have taken off on social media.”

I shrug. “People like beautiful things. And I love helping new designers reach a bigger audience.” Leaning back comfortably, I shoot my practiced smile at Summer. This doesn’t feel like a scolding, so I’m allowing myself to relax. “It’s fulfilling.”

“Hm.” Summer thoughtfully closes her folder. “You’re working harder than ten employees, Cynth.”

“I told you, I take my appreciation in money and Prada.”

“Take it in mandatory vacation days.”

My jaw drops. “What?”

“I don’t want you to touch a single file in your office or see one client or post one photo on our social media for three days out of the week, starting now.”

I launch to my feet, horrified. “Summer!”

“Or…”

“Or?” I tilt my head.

“You go to the therapy sessions you’ve been dodging.”

I groan and flop back into my seat. “This is an ambush.”

“Your parents are worried. We’re *all* worried.”

“So you threaten me with my job? When I’m bleeding for the company?”

“Exactly.” Summer sets her hand on top of mine. “It’s a blood bath, Cynth. You’re trying to kill yourself slowly and I

won't let you." She folds her arms over her chest. "I can't."

"I'm not your brother, Summer," I say harshly.

She doesn't even flinch. "No. You know why?" Summer leans forward, tears in her eyes. "Because you're going to live. You're going to live, Cynth, and if I have to drag you to that shrink myself, I'll do that."

"Forget this."

"Where are you going?" Summer yells.

"I'm taking my mandatory vacation days." Snatching up my purse, I glare at her. "I'll start today."

Fury eats me alive and the moment I get in my car, I call the one person who always enters my mind in moments like this.

"Bianca," I bark into the phone, "I need a drink."

Twenty minutes later, I sit across from Bianca in the same booth at the same pub where she told me off in the bathroom. We've formed an unlikely friendship since that night, largely affected by her guilt over spilling the beans and my appreciation that at least *one* person was willing to tell me the truth.

"Why are you running from the shrink?" Bianca wraps her black-painted fingernails around the straw and bobs it up and down.

"I'm not running."

"I've never seen a bigger coward in my life."

I scowl at her.

Sometimes, Bianca's unvarnished 'tell it like it is' schtick can get annoying. "I'm not scared."

"Then go." She slides my cell phone closer to me. "Make the appointment."

"Fine. I will," I snap. "I'll go today if they have a slot."

She quirks an eyebrow in amusement.

I'm not too nervous about that declaration. I know these hospitals and I'm pretty sure they don't take last minute appointments.

Except I'm totally wrong.

Turns out, the doctor had a cancellation and I'm the lucky bastard who gets to fill in.

Damn it.

I grab my purse, annoyed at myself and Bianca. "Guess I've got to go to the hospital."

"Sure." She leans back and watches me as I stand. "By the way, I heard Bear is doing well over there."

My entire body goes stiff at the mention of his name.

Bianca folds her arms over her chest. "You always talk about how you love the truth. There it is. He's doing well on his own. Thought you should know."

"Good for him," I say stiffly.

But the words run circles through my mind and linger with me while I'm in the psych's office.

It's the same, cold, sour-faced woman who told Bear not to tell me the truth.

Over-all, I'm not a fan and my closed up body language makes it obvious.

"Do you still not remember your past?" The doctor asks, staring at me.

"Not everything. Only bits and pieces. It comes back to me randomly."

"That's normal." She makes a mark on her clipboard. "I don't remember what I had to eat last week." Her pen taps the clipboard. "Have you had trouble sleeping?"

"No." I rub the back of my neck and admit. "Okay, yes. I don't know what it is, but I feel empty and lost and it keeps getting worse every day."

"When you say for a while? How long does that mean?"

I shrug. “The past nine months.”

“Nine months.” Her pen stops tapping. “Isn’t that when Bear left you?”

I stiffen.

“Cynthia,” she lowers her voice, “I’m not going to coddle you and I don’t think you want to be coddled either. This all started with deceit, so let’s face it with the truth.”

“Go ahead.” I gesture woodenly to her.

“You have to settle within yourself. Be honest and fair with your condition and what you want, but also consider what Bear might need too. After that, make a decision.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is when it clicks.”

My nostrils flare. “He doesn’t want to see me.”

The pain hits me afresh. It’s so intense and so *present*, that I nearly bowl over.

Where did that come from?

Was that truth underneath the agony this whole time?

I miss Bear.

It was right there.

Right under my nose.

Tears prick the back of my eyes. “I told him it’s over. I blamed him.”

“For the loss you suffered?”

I nod. “The anger and pain needed an outlet. I chose him. But even after placing that target on him, I still felt the agony. I still hated myself.”

“Forgiveness is hard. Especially when we have to extend it inward.”

“It’s hard when we have to extend it outward too.”

“You’re talking about forgiving Bear?”

“And him forgiving me.”

She places her hand on mine and for the first time, warmth seeps through her eyes. “From what I saw, Bear would move mountains for you, but *you* were the one blocking it—sometimes unintentionally, sometimes not.”

“So what do I do?”

“When you’re ready, you’ll know.” She pats my hand. “And at that time, you can call me. My brother works at an airline and can get you a discount.”

I laugh. For real this time.

She smiles.

And in that moment, I get it.

“Can I get your brother’s number?”

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BEAR

DIRECTOR KENNEDY IS a freak of nature. Like a tsunami, he wades into a room and everyone is scattered. Somehow. Their thoughts, their lines, their expressions—they lose it for a moment. And then when he settles, they do too—pushing harder going farther and reaching deeper than they would have before.

Word on set is that everyone is secretly scared of him.

But not me.

Kennedy can't push me around and there's power in that.

I chose to be here.

I took this path of my own free will and though he might think he has a part to play in that, he doesn't.

Nine months ago, I was in a different head space but I wasn't stupid. If he wanted to keep playing dirty, I would have rolled up my sleeves and dragged him to the mud. He has a lot to lose and I had already lost everything. I could have burned myself if I'd wanted to take him down.

Instead, I took the opportunity he offered and chose it as an escape route.

Maybe it was the wrong decision.

Maybe it was the right one.

Nine months in and I'm still trying to figure out which is which.

“Dude!” Simon Cornel, the youngest light technician on set, glances around my cabin.

It’s not a lot of space but it’s one of the bigger-sized log houses. Almost as big as the actors’ cabins.

We’re filming up in the mountains where it’s so cold that if you breathe too long, it’ll turn to ice. Since Director Kennedy is well-known, he has to be extremely secretive with his projects. That means everyone on set—actors, assistants, managers, technicians—we all live in a self-contained village far from civilization.

The nearest town is like an hour away, but everything we need is right here. The production company bought a whole damn grocery store so we can pick up supplies without heading down the mountain. There’s also a fully stocked hospital with a general surgeon and a nurse, who mostly spend their time scrolling through their phones.

I’m grateful for their boredom.

So far, there haven’t been any massive emergencies. That might change when we break our isolation in a month and start filming with extras. I heard extras tend to get into all kinds of scraps their first time on set.

At least it’ll be easier to blend in with a crowd.

Right now, everyone knows everyone.

Even the movie stars mingle somewhat with the rest of us.

I met the two main actors a few days into filming. Despite being A-list professionals who’ve graced several magazine covers and starred in hit after hit, they were both incredibly humble and friendly—to the point they seemed desperate for conversation.

At first, I wondered how they could live with the isolation. They’re both far away from their mansions, hectic schedules and public appearances. They both have grueling work schedules and expectations even out here in the wilds. It stunned me that they’d agree to this.

After a few months, I realized that they weren't complaining. Mostly because they both deeply respect Director Kennedy's style.

As much as I secretly hate the man, I have to give credit where it's due. His success isn't a fluke. He's insanely creative and willing to inspire—or terrorize—his crew members into getting exactly what he needs. It doesn't matter if he's inhumane about it. Somehow, after he's through breaking someone down, they end up delivering the performance of their lives.

Thankfully, I'm never on the receiving end of those violent tirades. Before stepping foot in this town, I got myself a lawyer and put my own stipulations in the contract.

Director Kennedy is to stay out of my way.

Just as he's insanely good at directing, I'm an animal in the studio.

The music and sound is *my* territory. I don't need him breathing on my neck.

It's worked out. So far, he's kept his word. It makes me think that was his intention all along. Like he *knew* that once he got me on board, he wouldn't have to worry about the sound production at all.

Though that's flattering, it's also irritating.

I'm thinking I should have demanded more.

Still, I don't regret it. I have my stipulations on paper and I also have an out.

Just in case he messes up and starts acting like a lunatic with me. I'm not bound and gagged and forced to take it.

So far, I have no complaints.

I'm here.

I'll do my job.

But I don't want to be bothered with the set politics. That's why I've kept mostly to myself and stayed out of everyone's business.

It was working until I saw the others ragging on Simon. He was flirting with a girl the big dogs were pursuing. Out here, there's not much to do on your off-time except drink and sleep around. Since there's a finite amount of women to choose from, the guys have all started a competition for the most beautiful ladies.

It's spurred a lot of drama.

And the new kid in town inadvertently stepped into the middle of one.

I had to jump in and defend Simon before he got himself killed.

He's a nice guy, if a bit loud-mouthed and he reminds me of Colin for some reason. As much bluster as Colin tries to put up, he's got no real armor. He has more pain packed inside than anyone I've ever seen and the self-loathing that he tries so hard to hide makes him do stupid crap that most people would steer clear of.

But it's more than just similarities to my best friend that made me step in for Simon tonight.

I really can't stand seeing the helpless getting bullied.

It curdles my skin.

Simon's shiner glimmers on his dark skin. It would be hard to see except the soft overhead lights in the recessed ceiling reveal everything.

His jaw drops as he glances up. "Dude, you got a whole damn chandelier? For what?"

That question has an answer.

But I'm not going to share it with him.

"Get cleaned up in the bathroom," I say gruffly. "There's towels in the closet and warm water if you leave the tap running for a minute."

Simon doesn't seem to hear me. I stare at the kid. He's wearing a floppy knit cap under dark blue ear muffs. His jacket's still got a smattering of snow from where the other

technicians shoved him behind the trash cans. His khakis and shoes are worn and stained with grease.

He was an emergency replacement. The other technician's mother passed away and he had to fly back for the funeral. They scrambled for someone to fill his shoes and just plucked someone from town to fill the role.

Simon was the lucky winner.

"Did you hear me?" I bark.

Simon stalks past me and heads to the dining room area. The cabin has an open floor layout, which helps to make the small space not feel too cramped. There's one hallway that leads to the bedroom and the bathroom at the back.

Shoes tracking snow and mud all across the hardwood floors, Simon stops in front of the mahogany table and slides his finger across the wood. He shakes his head. "The furniture in the other cabins are all plastic and foldable crap you can get from the dollar store." He moves to the island counter next and pulls at a bar stool. "Dude, how did you get a place so nice?"

"I didn't," I admit.

"What?"

"I worked on it." My chin juts in the direction of the table. "I had the same type of crappy furniture as everyone else."

"This place must be fancier than the director's cabin." Simon runs to the cabinet and opens a cupboard. He whistles low under his breath and runs to the small stove and stainless steel refrigerator. "All we have is a mini-fridge and a cooler."

"So did I."

"No." His jaw goes slack. "No. You did *not* order all this too."

I just shrug.

"Dude, do you plan on living here for the rest of your life?" Simon doesn't give me a chance to answer. He flies back to the living room and exclaims over the entertainment center

and thick rug on the floor. “This place looks like it came straight out of a magazine.”

I rub the back of my neck because he hit the nail on the head. My sense of style is woefully lacking and I had to work hard, perusing every home decorating magazine and article I could find to bring this vision to life.

“It almost looks like a woman lives here.” He doubles back and arches an eyebrow. “Dude, are you living with someone?”

“It’s just me.”

“Really?” He wiggles his eyebrows. “I heard several women here are gunning for you.”

“You heard?” I tilt my head.

“For some reason, girls immediately friend-zone me on sight.” He scrunches his nose. “It’s annoying, but it has its quirks. I tend to find out about things.”

I lean against the wall, my arms folded over my chest. “And what did you find out about me?”

“You prefer to work alone, but when you do come out of your music studio you’re kind to everyone.” He counts off on his fingers. “You have some super disgusting secret about Director Kennedy and you’re holding it over his head so he leaves you alone. That’s why he treats you better than everyone else.”

I chuckle at that one.

“And,” Simon continues, “you wear a wedding ring, but you never talk about your wife. No one ever hears you calling her or texting her. This past Christmas, you didn’t even get a letter from her. The girls think you’re free reign, but when they try to get your attention, you shut them down. Like massively. So everyone thought you were gay. But then you turned down a guy too. Said you didn’t roll like that.”

I stiffen, my lips drawing into a thin line. “And what do you think?”

“Me?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “After hearing all that and seeing all this, what do you think is going on?” I don’t know why I’m torturing this poor guy. Maybe I’m desperate to see things from an outside perspective. Or maybe I’m just plain insane.

“I...” His Adam’s apple bobs. “You—this place, it feels haunted.”

“Haunted?”

“Yeah. Like you’re living with a ghost. I’m thinking...” He mulls it over. “Your wife died, but you can’t let her go, so you decorated this place for her and you wait for her.” He blinks rapidly. “Am I right?”

He’s wrong. But it’s close enough to the truth that it sears me.

I turn away. “You should go.”

Simone jumps. “Dude, I didn’t mean to say anything wrong.”

“You didn’t.” I rub the back of my head. “I’m just tired. When you’re finished cleaning yourself up, leave the towels in the basket and lock the door behind you.” Still unnerved, I march down the hallway.

“Bear?” Simon croaks. Then to himself, he mumbles, “Me and this big mouth. Why can’t I keep my thoughts to myself?”

I move into the bedroom.

The door slams shut behind me.

I flip on the light and the bedroom splays out before me. If Simon’s jaw dropped just from looking at how I arranged things outside, he would have fainted if he saw this room. The thick, fluffy comforter. Enough throw pillows to fill an ocean. Shaded lamp. Nightstand. Vanity dresser filled with natural hair products. Mirrors. Carpets. Office desk and chair.

I sigh loudly and sink into the mattress.

Pulling out my phone, I scroll through my contacts until I’m looking at Mr. B’s number.

My thumb smashes the screen.

It rings and rings.

Finally, it connects. "Hello."

"Mr. B, how is she?"

"She went to the psychiatrist last week."

I scramble up. "She did? What did she say?"

"Nothing much. Her mother and I didn't push. But we did see a difference. She was much lighter. Started writing in a journal more. I think she's coming to grips with what happened, slowly but surely."

My heart wrenches. One of the reasons I've been staying away is because Cynthia seemed to have found her own little coping method and I didn't want to get in the way of that.

But keeping my distance drove me crazy, so I pooled all my free time into building furniture for her, ordering what I couldn't make and turning this cabin into a home she'd be proud of.

Not that I dream of her living here much anymore.

In the beginning, I was hoping...

But as the months passed, that hope seeped out of me like a balloon impaled by a tree and hissing to a flat piece of plastic.

"How are you, Bear?" Mr. B coughs.

I groan. "You ask me that every week."

"You call every week. Can't I ask about you?"

"I'm fine."

"Honesty, son."

I sigh. "I miss Cynthia. It's hard for me to keep my distance. I want to see her, hear her voice, hold her. But I'm trying to be patient."

"It's hard isn't it? Loving someone more than you love yourself."

“Yeah.” I tried dad’s philosophy. Turns out, self-love and selfishness are two different things. I can’t hate myself and I can’t hate Cynthia either. For me, loving myself means taking care of my well-being *and* Cynthia’s.

The two go hand-in-hand.

It’s why I’ve been quietly sending money to her account every month. Why I pushed Bianca to stick close to her. Why I don’t call my dad for advice anymore.

His way of thinking is great for the lifestyle he lives, but I don’t want to keep getting married and getting divorced.

All I want is one woman.

The woman who can drive me crazy whether she’s in front of me or a thousand miles away.

My conversation with Mr. B ends quickly. We never talk for long, but we both know that I’ll be calling him again in a few days, right around this time.

After the call, I put on music and try to sleep. Insomnia hit me hard the past few months. I just can’t get my brain to quiet down.

That night, I get about two hours of sleep and I dream about what I always dream about. Cynthia. In the car in front of her parents’ house. Tears running down her face as she remembers the night things fell apart.

I wake up with a start in the middle of the dream.

There’s an urgent knock on the door.

Befuddled and exhausted, I push myself up and shrug into a jacket. It’s so freaking cold. I swear the sun doesn’t have as much strength out here.

Eyes still full of sleep and my heart still heavy, I roughly bark. “Who is it?”

“Open the door, Bear.”

My eyes widen.

I rub them briskly.

Am I still dreaming?

There's no way that voice is real.

“Bear!” The knocks continue. “Open this damn door!”

Shocked, I undo the locks and step back.

“Get these bags for me,” Cynthia says, pointing to her suitcases. Then she waltzes into the house and takes a seat in the sofa.

My wife is here.

And just like that, my world turns upside down.

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CYNTHIA

MY HEART IS POUNDING like a Congo drum in the hands of a child on a sugar rush. I swear I'm about to pass out right here in this sofa that is surprisingly stylish. In fact, this entire room looks elegantly and thoughtfully decorated.

It takes a lot out of me to keep from glancing around. I never would have guessed the inside of this place was so warm and cozy. From the outside, it looked like a rough, dilapidated log cabin with the most basic amenities. I doubted there'd be a working toilet and electricity.

So not my scene.

If I wasn't intent on being with Bear, I would have tucked my tail and ran far from this place.

I'm a girl who likes her modern conveniences.

But I love my husband even more.

I breathe in and out, watching as the air escapes in frost and struggling to keep my calm facade.

Bear turns and watches me intently.

Did he get *more* gorgeous in the months we spent apart?

His beard grew out. So did his blond hair.

So did his muscles.

I eye his pecs greedily.

Picture him raising those beefy arms over his head, hatchet in hand.

Imagine him slamming an ax into a wooden trunk.

A man's man.

My teeth fiddle with my bottom lip as heat courses through me.

With those thick, long pants and that jacket on, he kind of looks like Matt. Of course, his cousin has darker hair and tanner skin, but now they've got the same lumberjack, mountain man finish.

It's hot.

And it's beautiful.

And it's Bear.

I can't believe I'm sitting here in the same room with him after so long.

"Cynth," he croaks my name.

I almost lose my nerve and jump into his arms. But I've watched all the romantic movies and taken all my notes.

Phase one of the grand gesture is doing something crazy and unexpected.

According to my research, it requires a frantic race through the airport. Or a big flash mob dance number. Or a first kiss in the middle of a baseball field with all your friends and family watching.

I could have done the long-distance thing, but I needed more than a phone call or a text or a crying confession over the phone.

I needed something big.

Hence, I hopped on a plane, flagged a taxi, and hiked up a freaking *mountain* in the *ugliest* pair of hiking boots known to man just for this moment.

But there's a phase two to every grand gesture in a romantic movie.

It's the speech.

And I really want to make an impact.

It's for Bear's sake as well as my own. Everything I do, I do in style, baby.

I glance down and sneer.

Except for those darn hiking boots. They *so* don't go with my outfit.

Clearing my throat, I rise from the couch and stare into Bear's blue eyes. They're crinkling now. Around the edges. I can see his lips inching up through his beard.

My gosh, he's smiling.

It should be illegal for this man to smile at me like that.

How many girls in this remote village has he aimed that smile at?

I fan my face, feeling the air grow hot. "Stop looking at me like that, Bear. I have a speech."

"You have a speech?" He tosses my suitcase to the ground without breaking eye contact.

I'd scold him if I had it in me. Those are Louis Vuitton suitcases. They should be treated with care. Like dear pets.

But suddenly, I can't even think straight.

He's staring at me like he wants to eat me alive and I'm about to explode just standing three feet away.

"I wrote it down and everything." I reach for the crinkled paper in my pocket. It was a long flight and I had plenty of time to write, scratch lines through, and rephrase my words.

"I'm listening," he says, advancing on me like a panther.

I step back. "For a very long time, I thought something was wrong with me." I glance up and find him boring a hole into my face as he moves in. "Bear, are you listening?"

"Keep going."

"I can't focus when you look at me like that."

"Too bad."

"Sit in the couch and listen."

“Don’t wanna.”

“Bear!”

“Are you trying to start a fight when you just got here? Read the damn speech, Cynth.”

I stuff it back into my pocket. “Keep this up and I’ll give you the shortened version.”

“Perfect.” His hands slide around my waist.

My pulse accelerates until I can’t breathe.

“You said something was wrong with you?” Bear tilts his head, referring to my speech.

I stare up, straining my neck to meet his eyes. “It took a long, long time until I realized what the problem was.”

“Nine months to be exact.”

“Don’t interrupt me.” I lift my nose. “I’m trying to remember everything I wanted to say.”

He chuckles. “Go on.”

“So I had a problem.”

“Lots of ‘em.”

“Shut up.” I laugh.

His lips inch higher.

“But I realized that my biggest problem is not having you in my life.”

His eyes smolder and I wrap my arms around him, not only because I want to touch him but because I’m about to fall at his damn feet.

He’s just that magnificent.

“I’m sorry for pushing you away so much.”

He shakes his head. “I’m sorry for lying to you.”

“You had a good reason.”

“It was still deceitful. I broke your trust.” He kisses my palm. “I’m humbled that you’d offer it again. And I promise to

be much more protective of it, and of you, going forward.”

“I realized that I’m not the only one who’s hurting. You are too. And maybe I’ll never be fully healed, and maybe I’ll always grieve what we lost, but if I’m ever going to find my happiness, it’s because we’ll find it together.” My bottom lip trembles. “From this day on,” I whisper huskily, “I promise to make you the happiest man in the world, Henry ‘Bear’ West.” I close my eyes and bow my head. “End of speech.”

“That was nice.”

“Thank you.”

“Is this the part where I say ‘I do’?”

“This is the part where you kiss the bride.” I grab the back of his head and haul him down.

He smirks as our lips collide.

Then the smirk turns into a groan as I kiss him senseless.

The heat of his body seeps into me.

His scent is the same, a manly fragrance with just a hint of sandalwood and something that’s all Bear.

I love that smell.

These hands.

These lips.

It’s like coming home. Like chocolate fudge Sundays with extra whipped cream because it’s my cheat day and why the hell not. Like fresh Prada, straight out of the box with that leathery smell that can’t be explained.

It’s home.

My body fuses to his, drawn like magnets to steel. A tiny boat paddling all so desperately toward the lighthouse, towards the light.

His mouth is firm and hard.

Hard as the arms that wrap around me.

I throw off the kiss by smiling too broadly, but Bear just plants a quick peck on my cheek and rubs my jaw. “Damn, I missed you.”

“Couldn’t tell by the zero phone calls and texts you sent.”

“Modern communication works both ways, darling.”

“Touché.” I bounce on my heels and jump on him, anchoring my arms on his neck and wrapping my legs around his waist. The hiking boots clomp loudly together when I twine my ankles to keep myself up.

Bear’s hands press against my rear, helping to steady me. “I just talked to your dad last night and he didn’t say a word.”

“He’s on my side.”

“Dammit.”

I run my fingers through his hair. “I talked to the psychiatrist.”

“I heard.”

“Dad told you?”

He nods.

I sigh and let my fingers massage his scalp. Bear closes his eyes, clearly savoring the touch.

“She helped me sort out my feelings. All my guilt and pain over losing the babies was getting tangled up inside me. I aimed those negative emotions at you. That was unfair. To both of us. I did some research.” My fingers tighten around his neck. “The loss of a child that early in the pregnancy is nobody’s fault. Not mine. Not yours.”

“I still wish I could have been there.”

“And I wish I hadn’t tried to run you over. See? We both have our faults.”

He smiles.

I scrape his beard with my fingertips. “I found another perspective and it shifted everything. I could breathe again. And I could hope again. And I wanted you so much I thought

I'd die if I didn't see you." My gaze tears away from his and around the cabin. "It looks like you were keeping yourself busy."

"This place?"

I arch an eyebrow. "You didn't do all this by yourself. Which girl did you ask for advice?"

"Jealous?"

"I'm going to stab her with my Vera Wangs."

"You'd bloody your Veras for me?" His tone is playfully light.

"Be careful or you're next."

"There was no girl," he says, grinning. "It was all me."

I gasp. "You're kidding."

"Nope." His forehead rests against my hair. "I took care of everything with you in mind. I got this whole place set up and ready and I lived here knowing the only thing missing was you."

My heart melts like wax. "Bear."

There's a hint of sheepishness in his tone when he adds, "I did my best, but I'm sure I didn't get everything. If you need something, let me know."

"It's perfect. Besides, your contract is only for a few more months."

"I know you. You're going to want to adjust some things," he confidently predicts. "And I want you to know that you won't hurt my feelings. There's nothing you can ask for that I won't try and fulfill."

"Oh my go—have we exchanged enough apologies? Can we please get naked now?"

His laughter is rough and growly and musical.

And I swear my body levitates from the sound alone.

"I think a few more apologies are in order. You ignored my calls and made me wait nine months."

“Sir, *you* could have flown your sexy butt back home too.”

“And missed your little speech?” He kisses my neck and murmurs, “Nah.”

“Bear...” I moan, tilting my neck so he has more skin to suckle.

“One more apology.”

“How about a message?” I stare into his eyes. “Bianca and Colin send their regards.”

“Colin’s message was that tame?”

“No.” I scrunch my nose. “But I’m censoring him because I don’t need any help lusting after you. All the nasty things I’m going to do to you are one hundred percent me. You can count on it.”

Bear laughs. “I like the sound of that.” He kisses me again, a slow, sensual kiss that’s definitely meant to get my clothes off or drive me crazy.

Either way, I’m good.

He walks to the couch, still holding me and then he gently sets me on top of it. It surprises me, the tenderness he shows. This man has been without his wife for nine months. He has every right to be rough and barbaric right now.

Instead, he kneels in front of me and slides his rough palm underneath my coat. I’m wearing several layers right now. Maybe a lot more than I need.

But can you blame me?

The weather outside is absolutely insane.

“Cynth...” He calls my name so sweetly, so reverently. “Tell me I’m not dreaming.”

My eyes nearly roll back in my head from the sound of his deep voice alone.

“I’m right here.” I grab his free hand and press it over my chest, so he can feel the way my heart is beating for him.

“Nervous?” He arches an eyebrow.

“Excited.” I kiss him urgently.

He starts unbuttoning my coat while tipping me back in the couch. Then his hands slide under my dress. I swear, when Bear’s rough palm scrapes my heavy stockings instead of my dark skin, I wish I’d stripped naked before delivering the grand speech.

“Did I say it back?” I pant hard as he eases away from me so I can shrug out of my coat.

“Say what?” He grabs a handful of my dress and scrunches it up around my waist.

I moan impatiently.

There’s still two layers of tights and stockings before he can even get to my underwear. What was I thinking with all these clothes? I’m wrapped up like a governess in imperial Britain. Practically dragging in petticoats and long johns.

Bear doesn’t seem at all deterred as he stares at me and my seven layers of fabric.

His face is flush and a pulse throbs heavily in his neck. It’s almost as if the sight of all my underthings is just as exciting as the raciest lingerie set in the world. The man is starved.

Another jolt of regret hits me.

I’m going to wear him out everyday until I’ve made up for those long nights apart. I hope that bed is sturdy.

Speaking of...

I run my hand over Bear’s chest as he goes back to kissing my throat. “Babe, shouldn’t we take this to the bedroom?”

He pushes up on his amazingly buff forearms and I zone out on his next words because I’m too busy staring at his muscles and thanking God they belong to my husband.

When I tune back in, Bear is looking down at me with amusement.

“Sorry. What?”

“You ask me a question and then ignore me?” There’s a playful scolding somewhere in there, but he looks too sexy to commit to it and I fall a little more in love with him all at once.

I run my hand over his beard. “You’re taking too long to undress me.”

“You’re talking too much.”

“It was one question.” I peel my tights and he drags it off my feet.

One down.

A bajillion more to go.

Bear kisses my stomach and I arch my hips closer to him.

He pulls back, leaving me devastated and so full of desire I’m practically human goo.

“The bedroom is what I worked the hardest on.” His beard tickles my hand as I try to roll my other tights down around him. Since he’s talking, I might as well get the rest of my clothes off. “I don’t want us to destroy it before I have a chance to show you.”

“Smart thinking. I’ve got severe tunnel vision right now.”

“I do too.”

His mouth covers mine and between making out and stroking each other through the layers, we finally get the rest of my clothes off.

“Your turn.” My eyes twinkle.

Just as Bear’s in the middle of undressing, there’s a knock on the door.

“I’m not home,” Bear growls, freeing himself from his pants and climbing on top of me.

I groan softly when our bodies intertwine.

Pleasure fills my head like stars.

I dig my nails into Bear’s shoulders and muffle my cries in his chest.

“Bear?” The voice comes again.

We both glare in that direction.

“I will kill him,” I mumble.

Bear just shakes his head.

“Oh, is this open?” The interloper says.

Bear’s head whips up.

Everything moves in slow motion as the door creaks.

“No!” Bear barks.

“Ah!” I shriek.

But it’s too late.

The door swings wide and a young man stumbles inside,
catching me and my husband.

On top of each other.

Buck-naked.

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BEAR

AND THIS IS why we keep the damn door locked.

Simon turns around quickly, but I'm sure he's gotten an eyeful. Plenty more than he bargained for and a hell of a lot more than he deserves.

I can feel the steam coming off Cynthia's dark brown skin.

My eyes trace her gorgeous yet horrified face.

The only thing sexier than an angry Cynthia is a naked Cynthia.

Hot damn. She's stunning.

I wish I could scrub Simon out of this scene so I could get back to business.

Too bad.

It's not going to happen.

Cynthia pushes me off and grabs for her coat.

She's covering up that perfect, naked body. Swallowing my paradise whole in one of her Veras or Alexanders or whoever that coat was designed by.

Dammit.

I'm in love and I'm hungry and I haven't tasted her in months.

Simon's interruption could not have been at a worse time.

My fingers clench into fists.

I'm angry enough to commit murder.

Simon must know it too because he starts rambling with his back still facing us and his body letting in all the cold. "I'm so sorry. You must be Mrs. West. I thought you were a ghost but I guess you're not. I mean, I didn't see anything so you totally could be a ghost. I mean, ghosts moan too right? Not that I heard you moaning. Okay, I did. But I didn't think it was because you two were—"

"Simon," I growl.

"Yes, Mr. West."

"Get the hell out of here."

"Yes, sir. Sorry again, ma'am. I'm glad you're here. Mr. West was pining for you so badly that everyone was gossiping about him. We actually thought he was shooting for the other team if you get what I mean—"

"Simon!"

"Okay, bye." He skids away and slams the door shut behind him.

Cynthia laughs.

I run a hand through my messy hair. "You find this funny?"

"I either laugh or go out there and smack him with my purse."

"Nice point."

The mood is ruined now so I grab my pants and pull them up. "Want a tour?"

"Yes please."

I show her the bedroom and my chest swells with pride when she 'oohs' and 'ahs' over all the pretty things I painstakingly chose for her.

"Want to check out the studio next?"

"You want to show me the studio?" Her eyebrow arches. "Right now?"

Hell no. I'm already over the interruption from earlier. My mind's scrubbed that away like a bad tape and I'm completely back in caveman mode.

Pretty wife.

Naked wife.

Empty bed.

They're painfully simple calculations with dirty results.

But I'm not rushing her.

Cynth is more sensitive than I am sometimes, and though she can get adventurous, we've never had something like that happen before. She's probably embarrassed and self-conscious about it.

"I'm going at your pace," I say carefully.

"Okay, fine." She walks past me, her bare feet pressing hard against the cold floor.

I want to sweep her up in my arms. I know how cold the floor can get and, given all the clothes she was wearing earlier, she's not a fan of the weather up here.

But I don't touch her.

All Cynthia threw on over her body earlier was a coat. Which means that everything I want to touch and lick and stroke is, this time, wrapped up in one layer.

I'm only human.

Maybe another man would be able to resist temptation.

I'm not that guy.

My body throbs in protest at the thought of denying the connection. *You can handle that much.*

Yeah right.

I ignore that voice.

Cynthia's always been able to drive me wild. Even when we were dating, I'd push the lines as far as they could go because—as much as I respected her convictions—I couldn't

not touch her. When we got married, that desire for her only got worse.

It's almost instinctual.

Her skin on mine is enough to draw out my baser instincts.

If it isn't obvious yet, she's smoking hot.

So for now, I let my wife suffer with her bare feet on the floor to protect her from the beast in me.

To my surprise, I hear a click.

My eyes zip to hers and I realize she's locked the bedroom door.

My breath gets stuck in my throat when I notice her expression. It's dark and sexy and determined.

Every nerve in my body crackles with heat.

"Are you kidding me, Bear?" She's undoing the knot of her coat as she walks toward me. "I did not come all this way and wear those disgusting boots just to see your studio."

Saliva floods my mouth. She's got a line straight to my heart and she can pretty much wrap me around her finger.

I choke out a laugh. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"Now, where were we?"

"Somewhere around here..." My mouth is on hers and my hands are helping her shrug out of the coat before she blink. And finally, finally... I take my sweet, gorgeous, infuriating wife to bed.

CYNTHIA

LIVING with Bear in the mountains feels like a working honeymoon retreat. When we're not pawing at each other and doing absolutely obscene things all over his cabin, I'm at my desk video-calling with clients and marketing for the boutique and he's making magic in the studio.

Our life falls into a peaceful routine that starts and ends with us in each other's arms. The time in between, we work, cook together, watch movies and chat with our friends via video streaming.

Mom and dad call me everyday and they seem much more relaxed now that they see me genuinely smiling and happy.

Ally and Summer call once or twice a week. Summer claims I'm going to come back from the mountains with ideas for a winter line, but I'm pretty sure she won't like my thoughts on the cold.

The best part of living here is that I have more excuses to cuddle up with Bear close to a crackling fire while he works on a song and I scour designer catalogues to add to the boutique inventory.

The only real downside to living in the mountains is how lonely it gets. I'm a social butterfly and I crave interaction with the world, but a lot of the women out here were gunning for Bear before I showed up.

Now that it's clear he's married and blissfully in love with me, they're not so eager to hang out.

Bummer.

I was hoping to make some friends.

At least I have one.

Turns out, Simon is an annoying but loyal kid. He kept his mouth shut about what he walked in on and I applaud him for that. I'm sure it would have made for tasty gossip. Everyone out here seems a little starved for companionship.

Hence, why Bear was such a hot commodity.

Okay, that's not entirely true.

If I separate myself from Bear's roguish good looks and those dirty, dirty kisses he's always laying on me, the man is a ten. Objectively speaking, he's an eleven. But I'm striking one off because he can get a little too carried away with work.

That's why I'm packing up the cabin with Simon on our last day on set instead of with my husband.

Simon and I chat easily as we pack up.

At first, it was a little awkward to be around him since he's the only other guy apart from Bear who's seen *all* of me, but I put that tiny incident in a box, shoved it into the corner of my mind and it worked.

Whenever I needed a chill buddy and Bear was caught up at the studio, I'd call Simon. He'd show up and we'd play Uno or Jenga or a plethora of board games he owns. Sometimes, I'd teach him about the blessings of fashion. He's a surprisingly good student and I've always wanted a little brother so it works out.

"I can't believe you and Bear are leaving." He pouts.

"Dude, it's not the end of the world. We can still keep in touch."

"You're not going to do that," he accuses.

He's right. "But I'm going to make a valiant effort."

Simon laughs. "Just make sure to show me around when I'm in your city. I'll need a friend after I move."

“Deal.” I shake his hand.

Bear opens the door, his eyes wide and snow piled on his head. “Sorry I’m late. Kennedy wanted to have this stupid speech and he kept droning on.”

“Handy excuse.” I brush his hair out and snow falls to the ground.

He stares at me with that smoldering gaze that makes my breath hitch.

“Bear...”

He kisses me soundly.

A loud moan slips out of me which he swallows with his soft, hungry lips.

“Mm,” I murmur as his tongue scrapes over mine.

Simon clears his throat. “Guys, I’m still here.”

“Get out, Simon.”

“Bear.” I swat him. “He helped me pack up when you were too busy hanging with Kennedy.”

His blue eyes narrow. “I was not *hanging*. He is technically my boss.”

“Didn’t he manipulate your life and almost kick you out of your own studio?”

“And I will pay him back by using his name to build new connections and make a lot more money.”

“Then we take over the world!” I throw my hands up and laugh maniacally.

He wraps his arms around my waist. “That’s the plan.”

Simon shakes his head. “You guys are crazy. I’m glad to be rid of you.”

“Liar. He was just moaning about how much he’s going to miss us,” I tattle to Bear.

“I won’t miss him at all.”

“That hurts.” Simon frowns.

Bear chuckles. “Bring it in, man.”

The two men do that masculine hug-slash-back-slap thing.

After, Simon helps us lug our suitcases to the van waiting outside.

My luggage is a lot more than Bear’s. He teases me about over-packing on our way down the mountain and all the way to the airport. I get him back in the bathroom stall thousands of feet in the air.

When we touch down, mom, dad, Ally, Summer, Bianca and Colin are there to greet us. To my surprise, Amina and Matt are there too.

“Hi!” I wave brightly at the gorgeous matchmaker.

“Hey, girl!” She gives me a big hug and I smell her perfume.

“Are you wearing Chanel?” I sniff.

“I fell in love with the fragrance after you sent me that bottle for Christmas. I’m hooked, girl.”

My grin widens. My love for her is solidified.

“Do you...” She hesitates. “Remember?”

“No, I don’t,” I say simply.

But it doesn’t matter.

I’ve learned to enjoy the present and look forward to the future. The past can’t be changed anyway.

Matt and Bear greet each other warmly next.

Then everyone jumps in.

We have a huge group hug and separate into tiny clusters to chat.

Surrounded by my friends and family, I lift my face to the sun and smile in glee. The snow was beautiful, but I’m glad I can wear my afro out now when I leave the house. It is impossible to stuff a thick, voluminous hair into a warm knit cap or tuck it under earmuffs.

Mom and dad suggest we head to a restaurant and eat so we pile into separate cars and meet up at the nearest diner.

The hours fly by and I start to feel them.

Bear holds my hand and I rest my head on his shoulder, my eyes getting heavier and heavier. As much as I love seeing everyone, the long flight tuckered me out.

Bear suggests we leave, but that takes another half hour just to tell everyone goodbye. I hug Amina tightly since she and Matt will be driving back and wish them a safe drive. She makes me promise to visit her and Make It Marriage soon and I give her my word.

When I get back to the table, I see Dad clasping Bear's hand. "I'm proud of you, son. I appreciate you and the way you love my daughter. Thank you for always being there for her. Thank you for being worthy of her love."

My eyes mist with tears.

I wait a few minutes before I make my presence known and then approach Bear. He's fighting back tears of his own and I can't help but hug him tight.

"What is this for?" He hugs me back.

"Because," I glance up at him. "I don't like white guys."

His eyes widen.

"But I love you."

Bear shakes his head and stares into my eyes, his dark blues twinkling. "Heaven help me because I love you too." He kisses me softly. "You crazy, infuriating, beautiful woman."

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EPILOGUE

Bear

TWO WEEKS Later

“YOU’VE BEEN AT THE STUDIO A LOT,” CYNTH MENTIONS ONE day, her hands in her hair as she braids it. She’s experimenting with wigs and I just surprised her with a curly hair, Tina Turner inspired wig that earned me a whole lot of loving.

The wig is sitting on the vanity next to the others. The wigs took some getting used to, but every time she pulls one on, it feels like I’m looking at a different version of my wife.

I like her in anything because, no matter if she’s wearing a wig or not, if she’s wearing clothes or not, she’s always so damn confident.

“Need some help with that?” I ask, reaching for her hair.

She smacks me. “You need more practice before you can braid me.”

I chuckle and back off. “Okay.”

“And you still haven’t answered my question,” she says, meeting my eyes in the mirror.

This woman is too smart for her own good.

I rub the back of my neck. Valentine's Day is in two days. Around this time last year, Cynthia told me she never wanted to see me again. Which wrecked me. And I spent Valentine's Day alone and drunk.

Now, we're back together and more in love than we were before.

I want to surprise her with something special.

"Bear," she calls my name in that soft voice, her eyes narrowed.

I tip her chin back, pull her into me and press a long, heated kiss on her lips. As I expected, she moans and reaches for me, turning around so she can wrap her arms around my neck.

When I'm sure she's too dazed to speak, I pull back.

Cynthia's eyelashes flutter and her body sways like she's off-balance.

I caress her cheek. "Can you meet me tonight at the studio?"

"Is this for work or pleasure?" She murmurs. "Because I bought something."

My body zings with heat. "Wear it."

"I will." She winks.

I'm nervous all day as I wait for Cynthia.

Not even Colin's crude jokes or Bianca's pessimistic one-liners can get me down. When evening arrives, I prepare the room with flowers, candles and dim all the lights.

"Bear?" Cynthia's voice echoes from outside.

I greet her with a smile. "Hey, babe."

"What's all this?" Her eyes glimmer softly.

"I want to show you something."

"What?"

"Just watch." I pull the projector screen and press play.

A sultry song, heavy on the jazz and bass, fills the room. On the screen, videos of Cynth start to play.

“Wait. That’s me.” She gasps. “Were you secretly filming me?”

“Every time you came to the studio,” I whisper, amazed at how beautiful she is.

“Oh my gosh.” She bops her head to the song and tears fill her eyes.

When the video ends, I pull her into my lap. “What do you think?”

“I love it.” She gasps. “How did you fit that in between all the projects you’re doing?”

“I was inspired by you. I couldn’t get it out of my head. It’s called ‘Memories of Us’.”

“Play it again.”

I oblige her.

The song plays on loop while we drink wine and later when Cynthia reveals the gift she bought for me. I think she’s going to leave it there, but I’m wrong. She plays the song the next day too, while she’s driving to work. She plays it for Ally and Summer. She plays it for her mom and dad. She even calls Matt and Amina to play it over the phone for them.

Amina shrieks for five minutes about how romantic it is and I’m sure Matt hates my guts right now. He’ll just have to raise his Valentine’s Day game.

Because of the song, Cynth doesn’t expect anything when Valentine’s Day actually arrives.

Which is why I have to do something.

“We’re going out tonight?” Her eyes widen. “Bear, you’re spoiling me.”

“I enjoy it.” I kiss her hand.

“True.”

“And you enjoy dressing up,” I coax her.

“Also true. Alright, you’ve convinced me.”

I take her to a restaurant that’s packed with couples. Thankfully, I know the owner and we get a cozy spot in the corner that feels secluded enough to separate us from the rest.

In the middle of dessert, I gesture to the waiter.

He nods and walks off to carry out the arrangements I called and requested earlier today.

Suddenly, Cynthia’s head whips up.

Her eyes dart back and forth.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, knowing full well what got her attention.

She shakes her head. The big earrings bounce against dark cheeks. She’s wearing her hair out in an afro and a slinky red dress hugs her frame. It’s the sexiest outfit I’ve ever seen and I can’t wait to tear it off her tonight.

But first...

“Bear,” she gasps, “this is *our* song. This is...” She pauses and listens again. Excitement bursts from her gaze. “This is ‘*Memories of Us*!’”

I slide out of my seat and get on one knee in front of her.

She covers her mouth. “Bear.”

“I love you Cynthia West. You are everything to me and if I had to go back and do it all over again, I would. I’d walk that path a million times as long as it led me back to you.” I pull out the ring from my back pocket and present it to her. It’s expensive and it’s eye-catching and it’s elegant. Just like her.

She tears up. “Bear...”

“This is my gift to you. No matter what the future holds, whether it involves expanding our family or if it’s just the two of us, I’ll be incredibly happy as long as I have you.”

“Bear.” She grips me by the jaw and urges me to stand up. “I love you. And I always will. That’s my gift.”

I kiss her deeply, my hands holding her close. “And that’s my promise.”

* * *

Want an exclusive bonus scene featuring Bear and Cynthia? Join my mailing list [here](#) for your special epilogue (and future sneak peeks, cover reveals and deals).

Curious about Matt and Amina’s love story? If you’d like to read their full romance, you can grab *Be My Darling* [here](#).

Amina and Matt represented The Make It Marriage crew in this Valentine’s Day romance. I’m so glad Matt could show up for Bear and talk some sense into him. I hope you feel the same! **[If you liked this book please leave a review now.](#)**

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

WE EVOLVE EVERYDAY. The lessons we learn. The failures. The successes. The celebrations. The big reveals. For us, change doesn't happen overnight. It rolls out over the course of days, weeks and months.

But what if we forgot everything? What if we wiped out that growth in one fell swoop?

That was the question that popped into my head and Cynthia was the character I wanted to seek answers through.

Cynthia's witty and fun and confident. I thought she would be the star of the story. But then Bear showed up and took my breath away.

He was steadfast, devoted, and loyal. He held on when most sane people would have given up or even cursed Cynthia out.

Bear presented a different question. What is the difference between self-love and selfishness?

His parents wanted him to think only of himself because, for them, that is the highest expression of love. And yet Bear threw himself against the brick wall of Cynthia's stubbornness, not once but *twice* because he loved her just as much as he loved himself.

Though Cynthia and Bear battled deep personal tragedy and sickness, they found solace in each other and that is the true secret.

No matter what we go through and who we evolve and become, as long as we have moral principles and people who will ground us, we'll be okay in the end.

I hope you enjoyed *Be My Valentine Promise*. For access to Lev and Atlas's exclusive bonus scene (and future sneak peeks, cover reveals and deals), sign up to my newsletter [here](#).

Until the next whirlwind BWWM Romance.

~ Nia

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BE MY DARLING

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CHAPTER ONE

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CHAPTER ONE: BE MY DARLING

“I GIVE ‘EM THREE YEARS TOPS.”

My heart lurches.

I wrench my eyes away from the newly married couple on the dance floor. Twist my neck to level the drunken idiot my most withering *go to hell* stare.

“What?” A burly white guy tips his champagne flute to his smirking lips. “You think I’m giving them too much credit?”

“Excuse me?”

“Come on”—his eyes drop to the name card in front of my gold-rimmed plate with a perfectly proportioned meal of steak and vegetables—“Amina. We can be honest. It’s just you and me here at the Singles table.” He jerks his chin to the dance floor. “Our other colleagues are in the process of hooking up with each other or drinking off their loneliness.” He flutters his fingers in the direction of the open bar.

I scoff. *Unbelievable.*

“Do you have any idea how rude you’re being?”

His eyes meet mine. “No.” He leans his elbow on the table. “But I have a feeling you’re gonna tell me.”

“We’re at a wedding.”

“*Whaaat?* I had no idea.” Brown eyes widen. Flecks of amber and honey break up the soulful hue. “No wonder they

keep playing John Legend. I thought the playlist was super chill for a rave.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“Depends on your definition of humor.”

“I’m dying of laughter.”

He chuckles. “Please don’t die on my account.”

I study his pale cheeks and light brown eyebrows.

This guy isn’t drunk.

He’s just obnoxiously stupid.

“Fine.”

“Fine?” He smirks.

“I’ll bite. Why are you counting against them?”

He folds his arms over his chest. They’re massive arms. Covered in a solid navy dress-shirt. Long sleeves. Suspenders.

A basic white bro.

All that’s missing is a backwards baseball cap and a beer can.

“It’s not me that’s against them.” He points up. “There’s a higher power at work here.”

I snort. “You’re bringing religion into this?”

“Statistics.” He spreads his fingers. They’re big. Blunt. Like the rest of him. “Probability.”

“Wow.”

“Ever wonder why we throw huge parties, invite hundreds of people, and drop loads of cash just to sign a government document?”

“Because... capitalism?”

His laugh lights up his dark eyes.

My lips tremble in tandem.

I don’t know why I’m humoring him.

Seriously.

The guy is way too condescending to be worth my time.

But I lean forward anyway. “Why?”

“We’re minions.”

“Alright then.”

“We’re here to cancel all reasonable doubt.”

“Doubt?”

“Forever is a longtime.”

“It’s romantic.”

“It’s a prison sentence.” He cocks his head. “A ball and chain. They need validation from us to calm that niggling voice telling them to run as far as they can.”

“You’re a pessimist.”

“That or a genius.” He flashes a wide smile. There’s a dimple in his cheek, right under the corner of his bottom lip. A feature so adorable seems out of place on his ruggedly attractive face.

“You’re speaking your opinion as facts.”

“Doesn’t matter one way or the other. Evidence is on our side.”

“You’re saying I, by being here, am the villain of the story?”

“The villain is society. You’re just the minion.”

“Are you high?”

“Perceptive.”

“Then tell me,” I nod to the couple swaying on the dance floor. The groom has his arms wrapped around his new wife’s waist. The bride is pressed against him, her silk veil kissing his velvet tux.

Kishana and Corbin.

An adorable couple.

I matched them two years ago, back when I was working at Black Love Matters.com. They're the last of my long-term relationship clients to get married.

Only took them two years.

I couldn't be prouder. Evidence in the loads of napkins I blew through during their moving wedding ceremony.

“What are they—“ I point at Kishana and Corbin, “thinking right now?”

He taps his chin. Narrows his eyes. “*All my friends are here. What will they say if I back out now?*” He tips his head in my direction. *You?*

“*I can't wait to start the rest of my life with my soul mate'.*” I arch an eyebrow *top that?*

“If that version makes you feel better...”

“Neither of us can read minds. Unless you're about to tell me you have superpowers.”

He motions to his face. “My power is superhuman good looks.”

I throw my head back and laugh.

This guy's crazy.

There's no way he's serious.

No way.

“So,” he leans back, smug, “who are you here for? The bride or the groom?”

“Both.”

“You knew them as a couple?”

“*I made them a couple.*” *How's that?*

He nods, impressed. “So you are the villain.”

John Legend's crooning tries and fails to wash his garbage from my ears. “How many refills have you had?”

“Contrary to your assumptions, I'm neither drunk nor high. Crazy?” He winks. “Maybe a little. But that's a symptom of

boredom.”

“Too bad. I’m having a *great* time.”

“I’m going to believe that because I feel sorry for you.”

I grin. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re obnoxious?”

“Not so blatantly.”

“Hm.”

He shrugs. “I’m curious.”

“About why I’m still entertaining this conversation?” I take a sip of water. He’s blunt and cute—not my type, but still. The wedding just got a little more interesting.

He smiles. The dimple peeps out. “About your skills.”

“As a matchmaker?”

“Yeah.”

“So what?”

He raises a brow. “Care for a demonstration?”

“My time is expensive.”

“You think I can’t pay?”

I give him a once-over. His fingers are clean and trimmed, but they’re rough. Calloused. Could be because he’s a gym rat or because he does manual labor for a living.

Moving my gaze back to his eyes, I lift a shoulder. “Unlike some people, I don’t judge a person without getting to know him first.”

“Now when did I do that?”

I roll my eyes to the ceiling. “It’s like talking to a brick wall.”

“How about a dance with a brick wall?”

I snort. “Right now?”

He pushes away from the table. As he straightens, I realize that he’s much taller than I anticipated.

Much.

Definitely over six feet.

The guy's a bulky, painfully pale lumberjack—minus the crazy, unkempt beard and flannel.

“Yeah.”

“No thanks.”

“You scared?”

“Of course not.”

“I dare you.”

“What? You think this is third grade?”

“I triple-double dare you.”

Another laugh breaks free.

Ridiculous. “Can you keep up with me?”

“Only one way to find out.” He offers his hand to me. It's big. Covered with a fine sprinkling of light brown hair. When I set my fingers in his, the shock of my dark skin against his palm is overpowered by how much his hand dwarfs mine.

He wraps his fingers around my wrist. Yanks me toward the dance floor. Firm. And fast.

The DJ shifts to Aretha Franklin. Her heavy, raspy voice croons about love and forever.

Two words that were meant to be together.

That so often get torn apart.

Ugh.

I don't want to think like that.

Fairytales have substance. Like gossip, they're based at least partially on the truth.

The world's such a dark and ugly place. I breathe and move and take on each new day because I believe that love exists. Even if—as my dance partner so forebodingly pointed

out, no... as my own attempts have proven—it doesn't always last.

He wraps his arms around my waist. “What are you thinking?”

“That you've got two left feet?”

“Come on.” He makes a face. Rocks me to the right. “We haven't even started properly yet.”

“First impressions, bro.”

“Bro?” He arches an eyebrow.

“I never got a name.”

“So you went with Bro?”

“I can call you Jo. Mo. Bo. Which do you prefer?”

He chuckles. Spins me. “Matt.”

“Amina. But you knew...” something in the distance catches my eye—“that.”

Matt notices my expression. He turns, his gaze starting to move over his shoulder.

“No.” I grab his face. Hold it in my palm.

My heart thunders.

Unbidden, my eyes zip back to *him*. He's as handsome as ever, standing tall and proud in a navy, three-piece suit. Designer if I know him.

And I do know him.

At least I thought I did.

What the hell is Gavin doing here?

“Amina?” Matt mumbles.

My body tightens.

A knot winds tightly in my head.

An alarm screams in my brain. Loud and shrieking.

I'm not running away.

Not again.

As long as I don't think about the night he—

No.

I'm over it.

Done.

“Um,” I run my tongue over my top lip.

“What?”

I study Matt's face. Hesitate.

Not running might cause a fight.

Especially if I use a weapon like this.

“Amina?” Matt says again.

My eyes flit over his shoulder.

A heavy breath gets caught in my throat.

Gavin's staring right back at me, his eyes drilling into my head.

He saw.

He saw me and—

I suck in a deep breath. Glance desperately at Matt. “Kiss me.”

His eyes widen.

A figure moves toward us. A shadow in a navy blazer. Steady footsteps. Laser gaze.

My heart beats like crazy. “I dare you.”

“What?”

My eyes return to the edge of the crowd. Meet Gavin again.

His jaw cricks. Fingers tighten into fists.

Something painful explodes in my stomach.

Something toxic and ugly.

Panic.

I'm not ready.

I can't—

Big hands cradle my face. Fingers so pale they're almost translucent. Carrying the fragrance of something earthy and manly. Unfamiliar but not unpleasant.

The hands force my head away from Gavin.

Then I'm falling into a pair of light brown eyes.

Matt's eyes.

And those are Matt's lips.

Pink.

Pink lips.

I've never kissed someone with pink lips before.

What am I—?

I can't kiss some stranger.

Some white man I don't know.

This isn't...

My body slams against his as Matt pulls me close.

"You dared me," he growls.

And then he kisses me.

Want to enjoy the rest of Matt and Amina's romance? Grab *Be My Darling* [here](#).

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