



Billionaire
BOSS DADDY

LISA RYAN

BILLIONAIRE BOSS DADDY

AN AGE-GAP ENEMIES TO LOVERS
ROMANCE

LISA RYAN

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LESLIE

I didn't think it was possible to get paid and still feel like crying until I was holding my severance pay in my hands.

Two weeks' pay, just enough to make sure I would only get kicked out from my house in a month instead of the week after. It was enough to make me lose my mind but before I had time for that, my phone began to ring.

I lift the phone to my face, strands of my dark hair whipping around my face, pulled every which way by the little breeze. Mom with a heart emoji sat at the top of the screen.

"Hello, mom?" I answer, trying to keep my voice level even as my lips trembled. Across the street, a black and yellow taxi cab shone in the sun as it waited for the old lady in the back to step down.

"Leslie, where are you? You need to come to the hospital now. Brian's condition is getting worse. He has to stay back after this round of dialysis."

I stifle a gasp by pinching my thighs with my fingers, but inside, my heart lost rhythm. Not again? Is he going back into deep waters?

"What happened, he was getting better, how is he suddenly going in the opposite direction?" I cry, frustration eating its way into my bones. My fingers clenched into fists as I resisted the temptation to rub the back of my neck where it itched. Brian could *not* be going in for round two of those long nights where it seemed he could be gone at any minute, as we waited in tense fear praying desperately for him to pull through.

“We don’t know, a relapse maybe, just get here as soon as you can.”

“I will mum,” I reply, dropping the phone into my bag with numb, shaky hands and wondering how so many things could go wrong in one day. The taxi across the road was just moving away but I did not have the strength to flag it down. I wanted to fall to the ground and just forget about everything. My parents wouldn’t take the news of me losing my job well, along with Brian’s issues.

I sigh, muscles creaking as I grab my bag. I was just so tired of everything. I needed a job and I wasn’t sure how that was going to happen.

Another wan sigh escapes my lips as I make my way to the hospital, a thousand and one thoughts burning a hole through my head.

I got to the hospital and walk past the reception desk without really looking at where I’m going. The reception was always crowded but the hospital had so many potted plants and sofas that most times it was easy to find a place to perch or relax. As I did on days when my head wasn’t full of the weight of the world.

The elevator ride up is the same crappy experience, I stand at the far end, my back to the wall as I try to breathe and forget everything but they just kept coming back. I resolutely brush away the tears threatening to spill over. I had to be strong for Brian but how could I do it?

It’s all going to be alright, you just need to believe and keep your head up, my dad’s voice repeats in my head. His favorite mantra. I smile a little, if only it were so easy, dad.

I’ll get myself a drink, I decide. Must better to cry with a blueberry blast on my tongue.

I turn a corner to get to the vending machine and bump straight into the chest of a hulking man, water splashes between both of us, staining the front of my shirt but barely spilling on him. The wet wave spreads down my chest and I gasp at the iciness of the water.

“Watch it!” He roars, pushing me back before I have the time to react. The water sloshes out of the cup again and puddle around my feet. Getting into my shoe and chilling my feet as it runs between my toes.

“You almost ruined a ten thousand dollar suit,” he snaps, staring at me like he hadn’t just wet the front of my blouse and turned my shoe into a wetland. I see red at once. I turn a glare on him enhanced by the harsh fluorescent lighting from above.

“When two people bump into each other and one hits the other ruining the person’s blouse, usually an apology is in order, not a shout! Don’t you have any sense of decency?”

He stares right back at me open-mouthed, the surprise on his face dulls the edge of my anger. Dark brown eyes regard me calmly, under hooded brows that spark a sense of calm coiled danger. His lips, dark on top and pink beneath lengthen to a one-sided smile, above a strong sharp jawline that I was pretty sure could cut if it wanted to.

The smile turns my insides to mush, I try my best to hold on to my anger as my heart speeds up and tingles spread down my hands.

Who is this man? I think, a soft sigh escaping my slightly parted lips as his perfect dark, smooth skin fills my vision. Completed by a dark blue suit that looked like it was carved for his body.

“Fiery,” he says finally. His voice is low, and bassy, whipping a blaze of electricity down my spine. White teeth wink between those lips.

Get a hold of yourself, girl! I cry on the inside.

“What? No apology?” I ask, glaring at him. “You’re old enough to know the right thing to do and yet you refuse to do it? And don’t you dare speak to me in that tone!”

“I—”

He begins to speak but I’ve already had enough. Brian needs me, and my parents were waiting for me. I don’t have time for this, even though he was unbelievably hot.

I raise my hands and stop him halfway, walking past to the vending machine without another word. His open-mouthed stare was enough consolation for my wet blouse. I grab my blueberry blast, walking past his stunned frame once more without looking back.

It was a chore to keep my legs moving in a straight line and to stop myself from glancing back but I manage to do it.

Fine men were such a problem in the world, uhhh. They could confuse your entire being. I wouldn't mind him doing crazy things to me while I grabbed the edge of the bed or the sheets and screamed my lungs out in pleasure. Back arched and waist pinned down by his arms.

What!

What?

I shake, snatching my hand from my neck and glancing around self-consciously. I'd just lost my job and here I was thinking of a man. Very nice. Good going Leslie, good going.

Brian's room is down the next hall and as I get there, I stop by the side of the door, taking a deep breath, and trying to arrange my face into a cheerful smile. It wasn't the time to cry, it was time to be strong for everyone as a big cousin and the first child. I take a big gulp of my blueberry blast and grab the length of the cold door handle, and slip into the room.

Mom and Dad are not in the room, only Brian, lying on the bed, staring out of the lone window in the room at the far wall, sun streams in through the window in beams of bright yellow light, adding extra brightness to the fluorescents above. His bed is propped up and he is wrapped in several sheets.

I smile brightly. "Is this any way to greet your big sister you love with all your might?"

He turns to look at me, grinning widely.

"Leslie! When did you get here?" He asks, unwrapping himself from the sheets. I rush forward to help him, brushing the sheets aside and pulling him in for a big hug. He still smells of the woody mist I'd given him for Christmas. His hair tickles me a bit as I let go and ruffle it.

“Just now my fellow daredevil. I was just completing a dare where I had to walk across three streets blindfolded.”

His cheeks puff as he chuckles, round eyes narrowing.

“Result?”

“Got hit by a tiny pink bike with streamers and a little girl in the front screaming ‘yeah baby’.”

He howls, holding his stomach as he laughs.

“That’s nothing, I just completed a dare where I had to ride down the hospital stairs in a wheelchair.”

My eyes open in mock surprise and my hands cup his cheeks.

“Wild. Result?”

“Four broken ribs and a marriage request from Nurse Selene.”

I snort, shaking my head. “Nurse Selene wouldn’t look at you even if you were the last man on earth holding the last cup of water on earth, standing on the last piece of land on earth.”

“She wouldn’t because she wouldn’t exist.”

I pause, did I just get schooled by a fifteen-year-old? My mouth opens and closes as I try to come up with a fast reply.

“Ha! Bet you didn’t think about that, did you,” he says, adding insult to injury.

I roll my eyes. “I don’t like you, Brian the brain.”

“Likewise Leslie the older,” he replies.

I snuggle in beside him, slipping my arm around his shoulder. It felt good to just laugh with someone. To forget... right, I just thought about it. But at least for a while, I didn’t think about my unemployed situation.

“Where’s mom and dad?” I ask.

“With the doctors.”

I swallow, not wishing to ask the next question but knowing I had to.

“How bad is it?”

For a little while, he doesn't say anything, he locks his fingers together and I can feel his body trembling. I want to draw him closer but I knew if I did, he'd start bawling and cover his face up in embarrassment or wouldn't be able to stop crying and feel terrible afterward, even if there was no reason to. Men and boys could be so funny sometimes, when it came to tears and showing emotion.

After a long moment, he loosens his hands and raises his head.

“It's bad, I could tell by their postures. It's bad. We need to do a transplant, and even then they're not sure if it will work. The dialysis isn't enough anymore. It's just a placeholder while I'm added to the waitlist.”

A transplant!

Cold chills run down my body, and I can't help it any longer, I draw him close for me and him. A sob escapes him and then he loses it, tears streaking down his face. My hands shake as they hold him. I bite my lips furiously, trying to stop from crying and failing. The lines roll down my eyes, falling into his hair as he snuggles against me and cries.

We didn't have money for a transplant, he wasn't covered by any insurance. How would we make it? Where do we go from here?

“I'm scared, Leslie, I'm so scared.” His voice is so low that I almost miss it, and it breaks my heart. The sense of powerlessness hits me like a ton of bricks. I couldn't do anything.

I was supposed to protect him as his cousin turned big sister and yet, I could do nothing...

ADAM

I stare at the girl, my eyes watching her walking away. Her silky black hair swinging from side to side, as if following the curve of her body.

What was that all about?

I'd never had anyone talk to me like that for a very long time. Yet in the midst of my surprise and shock of being shut down like that, I couldn't help but admire the confidence. She strutted here and barged into me without looking at where she was going and then had the gall to preach to *me* about etiquette.

I could still see the glare in her eyes as she spoke.

"What, no apology?"

I should apologize when you almost ruined my suit? I shake my head, going back to the water dispenser to pour myself another cup. She had a mouth on her, that much was evident but there were better things to focus on, like her hazel eyes...

Hazel? How had I noticed that?

I take a sip of the water and hear the sound of rushed footsteps.

"Mr. Adam!" Someone cries out in a whiny voice, I continue drinking water, taking my time.

"Mr. Adam, oh thank God. Here you are, it's almost time for you to start, everyone is out there waiting for you," the

nasally voice repeats. I crush the disposable cup and put it in the bin, turning and arranging my tie.

Marvin, the studio assistant the news company attached to me, is standing next to me, breathing hard and sweating, doubling over to catch his breath.

“Okay Marvin, lead the way,” I reply simply with a grin that was just a momentary expansion of the lips. I still had to do the one thing that had brought me to the hospital in the first place.

Marvin nods and turns to lead the way, holding his itinerary in his hands, his tie flops on his chest and parts of his shirt are poking out above his belt. I cringe inwardly.

For some reason, I find myself looking at the corridor where the horrible mannered girl had passed through. Hazel eyes, and dark cherry lips on that dark skin. She looked great, I’d give her that.

“When two people bump into each other and one hits the other, ruining the person’s blouse, usually an apology is in order, not a shout!! Don’t you have any sense of decency?”

My lips thin, she looked great but had a hell of a lip on her.

Marvin falls into step next to me, his eyes glued to his itinerary, his voice wavering just beyond what you’d call speech. I sigh, shaking my head and turn with him to the other corridor.

“Go on Marvin, out with it!”

“Yes sir, ummh, you see, the hospital wants you to be front and center of everything going on, so they want a lot of photos, both with the nurses, doctors, the kids and ummh the other patients.”

I nod, it was understandable and publicity was one thing I needed, I could not shy away from it. Still, it didn’t mean I had to like it. I’d rather be spending the time with my daughter but with a deal like this; a deal that could change the world, sacrifices had to be made.

The fluorescent lights above wink down bright white light on the cream walls and large green potted plants that lined the hospital corridor. It wasn't much of a sacrifice, when I was on this side of the walls and not in the rooms inside but who was going to tell me that? Certainly not the raven haired, hazel eyed beauty from earlier.

"Where's my assistant?" I ask, sounding harsher than I had intended to be. Marvin squeaks. I glance at him, almost asking him to grow a spine but I couldn't care less about that.

"Right here," a deep voice answers as we are about to enter the elevator. We both turn and look at Marcus walking towards us, his hand in his pocket. Self-assured, efficient, meticulously groomed, and a long time friend that I could count on. He was the complete opposite of Marvin.

"Marcus, there you are, has everything been handled?" I ask as Marvin presses the elevator button and the doors slide open for all three of us to get in.

"Yes, Adam, she's good. She was just picked up from school and is heading home."

"How is she?"

"Talking about Princesses I assume. She's fine Adam, there's nothing to worry about—"

"Except I won't make it to dinner this evening because of all these events you have lined up. You know how I hate this and still you went along with it!" I growled, causing Marvin to squeak and almost drop his precious itinerary.

The doors close and we begin to move down, I have both hands in my pockets but they are balled into fists. If there was one thing in this world I hated, it was missing time with my daughter.

Marcus glances past me to Marvin. "Cover your ears," he orders. Marvin stares blankly at Marcus and then at me. Whatever he sees on my face must scare him so much that he raises both hands and plugs his ears with a finger each. Marcus nods in satisfaction.

“Adam, you can’t chase the specter of your non-existent parents forever. You’re already being a better father than yours ever was. You have to understand that Sarah is going to be spending a lot of time away from you living her life. Plus she’s a smart kid. She’ll be fine, you need to be fine too.”

I half turn, it was the kind of truth I needed to hear, but which I hated. Nobody was there for me, it didn’t matter that I could provide Sarah with anything she wanted in this world, if I wasn’t there for her.

“She can’t spend all these evenings with the guards either. Those are huge men in black suits who don’t know the first thing about what a girl needs—”

“Some of them are father’s themselves—”

I hold up a finger and Marcus falls silent.

“I need a nanny. Sarah needs a smiling happy face, a woman who is committed to her needs, one I can call directly to know what’s happening, and the guards need to focus on their jobs.”

The elevator dings open on the ground floor, we are conducting the interview just outside the hospital, where they’re going to present me with an award before we start the photo op.

Nurses and doctors move around in their scrubs, interspersed in a crowd of people coming and going. We walk into the midst of them, Marvin walking to the side of us with his fingers still covering his ears. I turn to him and he let his hands fall to his side.

“Run along,” Marcus says, with a quick nod, he moves away quickly.

We both watch him go.

“That man needs to grow a pair.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I reply, watching him weave and bob through the crowd.

“You know what to do?” I ask.

“Want me to set up interviews with potential candidates?”
He asks.

“Yes, exactly,” I reply as we follow Marvin toward the front door.

“Will this help you focus on today? Evans Energy needs this, your personal brand needs this. Everyone needs to be able to say, this is Adam Evans, C.E.O. of Evans energy. The more humanitarian and common man pleasing you are, the more inclined those suits in the government will be to let this deal go through.”

“Assuming I handle the Monica Rosso problem,” I cut in.

“She’s your Ex, Adam, you handle her. By whatever means necessary.”

I’m about to reply when I see her again, walking between two older people. Her mom and dad maybe. They are conversing in low voices as they go towards the exit. I zone out, staring at her. Telling myself it was nothing, that I was just glaring at the person who almost ruined such an important interview for me and *then* had the guts to try to school me.

She glances to the right as she moves and almost catches sight of me, I find myself looking away instead of catching her gaze.

What on earth?

“Are you listening, Adam?” Marcus asked.

“Yes, handle Monica Russo and all that.”

He snorts. “The news people are standing by the doors, let’s hurry up so you can go meet Sarah. It’ll be hard to get you focused on anything else.”

I grin and clap him on the back. “Good man.”

My attention is still on the girl though, her hair swings back into place as she looks ahead, covering her face up as my eyes skim down to her legs. Dark ebony skin sparkles in the sun as she puts one leg in front of the other, leaving my field of vision at the doors. My chest tingles and a bit of breath

escapes through my lips. There are so many things I'd like to do to her.

Focus!

We get to the doors and step out to do the interviews. As we stand waiting, I see her coming back. My back is to her and so I didn't bother turning.

"We're all set, Me Evans, you'll have to speak for five minutes about why you're giving back to the community and then the reporter will ask some questions, before the hospital administrator hands over the award," one of the news guys, wearing a blue vest over his white shirt and black jeans tells me, pushing curly hair out of his face as he speaks and pointing at his camera crew and the reporter all set up a short distance away.

I nod, half focused on what is going on while I keep an eye out for her.

She walks past, her cologne smelling of lilac breezes and sultry coconut nectar. I catch a noseful of it and glance back, enough to catch the side of her face, as she goes by. Those lips of hers reaffirming their softness in my head. Whispering words in my ear as she comes in for a kiss.

I push away the thoughts, shaking my head. I hadn't been with anybody for a long time. Too much drama. It wasn't going to change now. I only needed Sarah in my life.

LESLIE

I need a drink, scratch that, I need *several* drinks. Thinking about everything that's going on is giving me a headache. There are only two people in the world that I could call to feel better.

Amy and Alex, my friends from high school. They are always ready. I call them while I'm getting ready in my apartment. I'm on the second floor and my window has a pretty nice view over the top of the next building. Flashing lights at night. It was perfect.

Sometimes I turn off the lights in the apartment and just stare at the lights outside, sitting on the sofa with a glass of wine or grape juice on the Brownwood side stool that held my green cactus shaped glow lamp. My feet cozy in the thick cotton rug I borrowed (stole) from my parent's house, I just sit still, breathing and feeling alive.

Alex picks up on the first ring.

"Hey girl, don't tell me you had the same thought I was having?" She asks.

I laugh, already knowing this was going to be an epic night.

"If you were thinking about drinking until we needed to support each other while Amy picked up our wallets and other stuff, then yes!"

"I was just exactly thinking of that!" She replies, laughing too.

“I do not like that plan,” Amy says from the back, her voice sounding stressed.

I grin, being the designated mother of the group had to be hard.

“I love you Amy baby, you know that right? Nobody loves you like I love you. If they say they do then they’re liars.”

I put down the blush, and stare at my face in the mirror, blowing an imaginary kiss. I was keeping all my thoughts surface level and I knew it. I flip my hair and take a long breath. Mom and dad told me to take my mind off of everything for now and relax a bit and that’s what I’m planning to do.

“I know a few people that love me more,” Amy replies making both I and Alex gasp.

“Switch this call to video!” I cry, picking my phone up from the pink table and sticking it on my phone holder. Behind me, my bedsheet that had random pictures of dogs and cats — Alex hated it so much. Who hates dogs and cats? Alex, that’s who —smiling back at me, made me grin.

Alex switches to video and I hold my hands on my chest in mock surprise and shock, staring at the two of them. Amy starts laughing and shakes her head. Her blonde bob shaking, her eyes closed, little freckles dotting the space below them.

“I’ve never felt so betrayed in my life.”

“You tell her girl!” Alex cuts in, pursing her lips and giving Amy the bad eyes. She has a brush in her hands and looked to be in the process of fixing her edges.

“I’m so sorry,” Amy cries, “I didn’t mean it like that.” She had tears coming out from the sides of her eyes from laughing too much. I just stare at her, trying to keep the serious betrayed vibe going even though the corners of my lips are shaking, the smile difficult to contain.

“I love you Leslie, you know this and I know nobody loves me more than you do. Nobody in this whole world. It’s just you and Alex, I promise.”

“It better just be the two of us,” I reply, rolling my eyes theatrically.

“So where are we going tonight?” Alex asks as a notification pops up on my screen. I’d subscribed to a job posting site earlier and it looked like something had already come up.

“You two come up with ideas,” I say distractedly as I begin to look through the job application. It wasn’t much to look at, a nanny job posting with an interview at an unspecified location that paid an annual salary of two hundred thousand dollars. My eyes nearly pop out of their socket, and I quickly open Google to check the highest annual salaries.

“What’s got you so googley eyed and excited?” Alex asks from the other side while I check through the application to know where I had to submit my details.

“Oh I’m just looking through an application,” I reply, still distracted and clicking on the button that said apply.

“A job application? That’s good, yeah?” Amy asks, leaning into the screen like she could see the application from where she was.

“Oh yeah, it’s good I guess, it’s a nanny application but get this, it pays two hundred thousand dollars annually.”

Alex gasps, and then leans in too. “I don’t know if that’s good or bad, I’m just gasping.”

I glare at her, while Amy rolls her eyes. I quickly send out an email, with my cover letter and resume. The email message is very simple and straight to the point. I don’t expect to get picked because this looked like it was an application for nannies that had a lot of experience but if the recruiter has a bit of humor on him then; “I’m the one for the job, hire me” was bound to get his attention. I wouldn’t know unless I tried.

“According to Google, that’s about seventy thousand dollars more than the highest paid nanny jobs and the interview is tomorrow night if your application is accepted.”

“Girl, accepted or not, you better find that address and put yourself among the people going to that house. You never

know what could happen.”

“You can’t do that,” Amy retorted. “Let’s just make sure your application is good.”

“Too bad. I already submitted it.”

They both look at me like I’m crazy and I grin at their reactions, blowing them a kiss.

“I know my situation is dicey and I might get kicked out soon but I need both of you to loosen up. I can’t get pegged back and sad. I’m going to focus on trying to get a good job soon, before I get kicked out at least, but to do that I need to be motivated and happy which means you both have to be motivated and happy.”

“Okay. Okay, motivated and happy, we can do that, yeah?” Amy asks Alex.

“What are you looking at me for?” Alex replies, glaring.

“Can you both just focus!”

They both look back with sweet smiles at the same time and I facepalm, shaking my head.

“Here goes the valley of despond,” I sigh, pulling my hair behind my ears as a notification pops up on my phone.

It was an address, along with a message.

You’ve been selected, you’ll be interviewed by Adam Evans, and the position is a babysitter for his daughter, Sarah. Needless to say, dress your best and come to impress. Thank you.

I stare at it with wide eyes round as saucapans, my hands shaking, a small bubbly sound escaping my throat.

I was selected! I was... I didn’t... my brain is going crazy in disbelief. A warm fuzziness, the type you get with a sudden and complete victory, suffusing my bones. I could hardly believe it and yet it was true. The message was right there on my screen.

“What?”

“What’s going on?” Alex asks.

“Tell us!” They both cry out at the same time, getting even closer to their phones. I just keep staring at the message in disbelief.

“Guys, who is Adam Evans?” I ask, my voice breaking

“Adam Evans?”

“That’s the billionaire guy, the one with the Evans energy whatever thing. He’s like a recluse and all but he’s got mad money, silly money—”

“What does this have to do with anything?” Amy cuts in before Alex can finish.

“I’ve been selected to interview for the position to babysit his daughter, Sarah.”

There is a stunned silence for a full minute and then the screaming begins in earnest, everyone is shouting their heads off.

“You got an interview with a billionaire, do you know what this means?” Alex shouts from the other side.

“Please tell me?” I reply, laughing more than I had any right to.

“It means, we have to make sure you look good,” they both chorus at the same time. I have to take the phone far away from my ears to protect my hearing.

“And I’ve got to make sure I get the job,” I reply, knowing this was probably a good chance for me to save my house and maybe start putting money away for Brian.

Bring on the interview.



I GET to the address on the mail sent back to me and find myself standing in front of an estate. The taxi is not allowed in, so I stand in front of a set of large black gates, engraved with a stylized E in the middle and a coms just beside it. The

fence stretched in both directions and all around me surrounding the drive are huge trees. I stand with my hands clasped to the strap of my small black purse. Staring above the gate at the blue skies beyond it. It was a beautiful day, I hoped that was a sign.

Sign or not, my heart beats faster in my chest as I wait, never mind the fact that Alex and Amy had prepped me up and had me looking extra presentable in a knee length sundress they said would look warm and friendly. It looked too friendly in my opinion.

The gate slips open and I find a caddy waiting for me on the other side. White and blue, it stands beside a little security post where a large man in black glasses nods to me, indicating it. I find someone else seated in the caddy. Not quite as large but intimidating nonetheless.

I nod my thanks, staring around, there were more trees and the house sits at the end of a long drive.

“Can I see the contents of your purse?” The man in the caddy asks, he had a huge handlebar mustache, and brown hair that was flaky white at the sides. Hard eyes stare at me, eyes that had no business being above the warm smile he tried to put on.

“Oh yes,” I reply and opened the purse. It was just my phone. He nods and we begin the drive. It was a quiet drive and the only instruction he gives me is to ensure that I don’t move around a lot. I nod, that wasn’t going to be a problem.

The building I stand before at the end of the drive is a three story monstrosity with four rows of windows, on every level, on either side of the large circular front area.

The doors themselves were large dark wood doors with aged brass doorknobs, and by the side, on the whitish plaster was a doorbell. There is a guard waiting for me at the top of the short flight of steps to get to the door so I don’t need to bother pressing it.

He opens the door—heaves it more and leads me into a stunning anteroom with a twinkling golden chandelier at the

top and a large staircase spiraling up. Tiles that looked like each of them could pay for my entire life lined the floor. Vases stood on half pillar perches and everything was cast in the golden glow of the chandelier above.

“Heavens above,” I whisper.

The guard grins. “Same thing I said the first time I came here. You get used to it after a while.”

Oh yeah, totally, you get used to it after a while. We’re both just working here if I get hired friend. It’s not like we belong.

I smile, a nice non committing smile. My legs refuse to move freely, I was drawn into myself. Anything I broke here could cost my parent’s house or something.

“You’ll want to go straight ahead and get into the last door on your right,” he tells me pointing me in the direction he means and I nod, but before I can tell him that I had a bit of problems distinguishing my right from my left, he is gone.

“Right!” I muttered, taking a single hesitant step on the jet black tiles.

“*‘Straight ahead and get to the last door on my right.’* Seems easy enough, yes?”

I began walking, looking at both sides of the corridor and hoping I would immediately know which door was on the right or left. I got to the end of the corridor and found myself looking at two identical locked doors, a mirror hangs on the wall and below it, is a green vase that looks like it had cracked and been put back together—we learned about this in school but I couldn’t remember what it was called anymore.

I stare at both doors, not knowing which one to open. Finally I take the door that seems like it was right to me, and push it open. I’m expecting it to be hard but it swings open easily, my foot catches the carpet.

I squawk, stumbling inside. I lose my balance and fall, landing face first against the crotch of whoever was seated in the middle of the room.

ADAM

I 'd never been attacked in this way before, at least I don't think so.

One moment I'm sitting on my own, watching the videos of the applicants that Marcus had prepared for me and the next moment pain is slicing up from my crotch as the door opens and someone lands on my lap. The air rushes out of me and my eyes bulge, my hands come up involuntarily to grab the head of whoever it was to lift them up.

I look down in surprise and found the girl from the hospital staring up at me, piercing hazel eyes lined with black eye liner. Her fruity scent hits my nose and confuses my brain.

My chest heaves and I feel my shaft tingle in response to her face and where she was. Fire builds in my chest and races through my body. The next second she is pushing away from me and trying to arrange her sundress that followed the curve of her dark skin.

"I'm so sorry," she cries out but I'm too stunned to speak, my heart is still racing and my shaft has begun to harden in my pants. I could not help it. I stare at her, mouth slightly open. She doesn't look at me, couldn't look at me as she rushes to try and get out of the room, stretching a hand to the doorknob and tripping again. Falling away from me this time, her sundress rises up to her thighs.

My goodness, look at that!

"Wait," I manage to mutter, getting up from the chair and helping her stand, her hand in mine sends a thrill through me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. She could not look at me, and I didn’t mind. She might have seen the look in my eyes. A look of pure need. My brain keeps seeing the sundress riding high up on her dark exquisite thighs. Another jerk in my pants tells me it was time to think of something else. Those Hazel eyes tell me to go on and suddenly my briefs seemed too tight. I gulp. *This isn’t good.*

“I’m here for the interview, I was one of those selected,” she replies, finally looking at me and that was when she sees my face clearly, not painted by the colors of the big screen. She gasps, biting her lip. *She remembered.*

“You,” she says in a small voice, hands forming into fists.

“Yes,” I reply and let go of her hand. “Me.”

“The other applicants are waiting in the door across the corridor,” I tell her, pointing across the corridor.

“Thank you,” she replies, rushing out before I can say anything else, I watch her go, her figure imprinted in my brain, that sundress my number one enemy.

When the door closes, I release a breath I didn’t know I was holding, a bout of cold chills spreading across my chest.

“Wow,” I mutter, still standing there. The image of her sundress just below the curve of her butt still in my head. Those thighs, and that little beauty mark on the left one. I saw myself running my hand on her soft thighs as she lay on my bed wearing nothing but little black panties as I placed delicate kisses on her thighs that made her body shake.

I could not sit, the bulge in my pants was getting painful but I could not stop seeing those hazel eyes stare at me from the bed, cherry lips smiling as her tongue slid out to lick her lips. Her legs spread apart as she waited for me. Arms spread to welcome me into her arms, pert nipples standing and ready.

A thrill passes through my entire body, my shaft hard in my pants. I bent to that body in my head, kissing her neck, my hands playing with the soft swell of her breasts. She moans my name, her eyes closed. My finger tracing lines around her nipples as my lips go lower.

Someone knocks and I jerk, almost tripping on the same place she'd tripped on but grabbing onto the wall to steady myself. My eyes readjust to the present. It was hard to get that image out of my head. I sigh, trying my best to breathe out and steady my voice, realizing I'd been standing in the same place all this time.

"Who is it?" I ask, and there is no answer on the other side, the doors slid open though, with less force than before. I find myself face to face with her again. Hazel eyes glaring at me. Cherry lips pursed.

I want to kiss those lips so badly; I think and then chase the thought away, swallowing a little. If only she knew the things she was doing to me. Two chance meetings. I had to make sure the next few were the last. I could not have this kind of distraction. Not at this time. Certainly not.

"I dropped my purse, and I don't know the way to the bathroom," she mutters. I look down and realize it was the purse I'd almost tripped on. Her black purse. It lay on the ground like a forgotten relic. Just in front of my feet.

I'm about to get it when she bends to get it herself and I found her in front of me again, standing still and trying not to move, all the while wondering how she could have such an effect on me.

"Last door in the opposite corridor, you should find a bathroom there."

"What is it with you people and the last doors?" She asks, rolling her eyes as she turns to go without so much as a thank you, I stare at her go, dumbfounded, trying to forget everything that just happened and failing.

I'm still standing there after she leaves, when Marcus entered.

"You ready for them?" He asks, glancing at the screen where one of the woman's files is displayed. I rouse myself from the daydream, rubbing my face with my hand and finding little droplets of sweat on there.

“Yeah. I’m ready, You can take point, I’d just love to sit with them and see if there’s any that I can relate with or any that I like off the bat. If I can’t identify any then we’ll go with whatever scores you allocate.”

“Makes sense. So we begin then?” He asks.

I almost nod but I needed a few minutes still, maybe to find Sarah and talk to her for a bit while I clear my head totally. It wouldn’t do to come face to face with that girl again while my mind was like this.

“Thirty minutes. Serve snacks and tell them the wait will be short. I’ll be with Sarah.”

“Noted,” he replies and then leaves the room, closing the door behind him. I sigh, and go back to the chair, picking up the remote control and turning off the screen. I leave the room, locking the door with a soft click and walk down the corridor to the flight of steps that led to the second floor. A guard by the door nods and I raised a hand to him as I pass. He’s been with me for five years, Henry, one of the most efficient of the lot.

I go up the stairs, a smile on my face, I never let Sarah see me serious or blank faced. I always smile around her and let loose, allowing myself to be free and happy. My parents never did that, they never could relax or be happy. It was always fights whenever they managed to be around. Being with Sarah and seeing how happy I was around her showed me just how much my parents had deprived themselves.

Sarah’s room door stands open, I stare at the open door, fighting down a strong sense of panic, an itch starting at the back of my neck. It was just an open door, it didn’t mean anything.

I walk into the room, the bright pink colors hitting me at once. She had fairy princesses on the wall, glowing butterflies and stars lined the ceiling along with her doll houses and dolls. Her name is carved in sparkly paint at the foot of the bed. The curtains are open letting in bright sunlight. I could tell she wasn’t in the room nor in her closet. Where was she?

I walk gingerly, trying not to step on any dolls or toys.

“Sarah, darling? Where are you?” I call out, but there is no answer.

The itch at the back of my neck gets worse, and I leave the room without watching my steps, crunching a doll on my way out. Her not being in her room was nothing serious except there were so many people in the house today, all these women, could one of them have different plans?

My heart is racing as I get out of the room, but I keep my steps slow and in control, you never lose your head in things like this, when you lose your head then you lose the plot.

Where could she be? The garden? The pool? She couldn't get in there. Library?

I stand just outside her door, thinking. I knew there were no guards on her because I'd asked them to let her be after the tantrum from yesterday. She hated the guards and wanted to spend time with me but it was almost impossible with everything going on.

Evans Energy stood at the forefront of the new technology development but we still had to know how safe it was and keep our position ahead of all the other energy giants who wanted to jump ahead of us or try to get the government not to give approval.

Monica Rosso and her large investment was critical to moving everything forward. If only we could pin her down, but Paris, Montreal and Monte Carlo in just two weeks. The woman was as slippery as an eel.

I hated that I couldn't grant Sarah's wishes and spend more time with her but every hour away from the deal was time lost, time that could allow the vultures to get to us.

Maybe I'd take her on an outing one of these days when I find the time. She'd love the theme park. First I had to find her though. I rush down the stairs, my hands forced to swing at their normal pace and my lips thinned to a line to stop them from shaking. The itch was getting unbearable at the back of my neck but I don't scratch it. Instead I let it take all the

nervous energy from all the other parts of my body as I rush down the stairs, hoping against hope that Henry has seen her.

“Henry,” I call when I got to the bottom of the stairs, taking care to keep my voice level and my eyes impassive. Almost fifteen minutes have already gone and I’d told Marcus to be ready in thirty.

“Yes sir,” he answers at once.

“Have you seen Sarah?” I ask, desperation ringing in the edges of my tone. I could not hear her voice anywhere, playing or reciting or doing anything of the sort.

“I just began my shift sir,” he replies, eyes alert with concern.

My hands tremble, despite my efforts to keep it steady. I turn around, wondering where to check. *What if my fears were true and someone had taken her, working with one of the newer guards?*

My throat feels dry, and guilt injects black poison into my blood. If I’d been too busy to know she was taken then how different was I from my parents?

Calm down, get it together! Yes, calm down. I just needed to check the rooms she could be in first.

“Henry, get another guard with you, check the library, and the garden—”

The sound of delighted laughter comes to us from the end of the corridor.

“Sarah!” I cry, and begin to run, calm control be damned.

LESLIE

I rushed to the bathroom, my eyes on the ground all the way, in case I saw someone and died of embarrassment. *Of all the things that could happen and of all the people it could happen with, why that, and why him?*

I still see my face landing squarely against his crotch and my cheeks burn as I got into the bathroom, hoping against hope I could stop the rush of my heart.

As if landing face first on his crotch wasn't awful enough, I had to trip again and bare my entire backside to him. What on earth was my problem?

I lean on the bathroom door, trying my best to breathe, my eyes closed and my legs close to buckling below me. The way he stared at me. The calmness in those eyes, even in his surprise. It had my heart beating even faster.

I couldn't take it back and I couldn't ever face him again, I'd turn into a spluttering tap, unable to make any concise words.

I ball my hands in fists, finding one of them creeping up as I bite my nails. How could I have dropped the ball so hard?

Thoughts begin to run through my head unbidden, thoughts of how he'd held my head up, his big hands framing my face as I knelt before him, almost like...

I gasp a little, feeling a tingle in my body.

God's above, did the man have to be so fine!

I could barely breathe or think with him and then falling like that the second time, I involuntarily check my dress, pulling it down. How could I flash him like that? How could any of the things that happened in that room happen?

His eyes locked on mine in my head as his large arms wrap my smaller ones in them, I imagine holding on to them, grabbing them hard as he thrusts into me. The rest of me getting hot along with my cheeks. Suddenly the fabric of my underwear is pressing uncomfortably against me, causing my flesh to tingle, my knees knocked against each other.

His voice, low and bossy, called out to me. “Wait,” he says and this time he doesn’t just help me up but draws me to him. I can barely breathe as he holds me, eyes looking into mine — glaring into mine.

I couldn’t catch a breath, and it was the one thing I needed.

“Please forget all about it,” I beg myself in a low voice only to think of the strong woodsy scent wafting from him, spicy and tangy. I begin to slowly fall down the door. I came here for something completely different and now I was finding myself attracted to the man I’d embarrassed myself in front of, not just once, but *twice*.

I walk to the mirror, turning on the tap below and washing my hands as I stare at myself in the mirror.

Get it together, Leslie. He can’t be having the same effect on you all the time.

As if to call me a liar, my thighs rub together again. I ignore it. Staring at my eyes in the mirror and trying to flatten away any emotion from my face. I still had an interview to get through.

I was just done with my hands when I hear quiet sobs behind me and notice for the first time, that there was someone in the bathroom. The sobs are so quiet and tiny I could have come and gone without noticing them at all.

“Is someone there?” I ask, taking a hesitant step forward.

“No,” a little voice replies and I forget all about the man as I grin, it was a little girl from the sound of her voice.

“Okay, well since no one is here, who is crying then, do you know?” I ask, keeping my voice light and standing by the side of the door leading to the toilet itself. I didn’t want to scare her but I could not leave her here.

“I don’t know, no one’s here. I’m hiding so no one will find me, especially not the wicked nanny. So no one’s here.”

Adam Evans’ daughter? Here? With me? Which sad sob would lose their job when he found out she was missing?

“Why do you think nannies are evil?” I ask, leaning against the wall now and folding my hands. The little girl obviously didn’t want a nanny but if Adam Evans was too busy and her mom was unavailable then there was nothing that could be done.

“I don’t know, I just want to spend time with daddy.”

“Okay love, I understand. Will you come out just for a moment, then we can talk to daddy together so he spends time with you. I’m sure they might be worried looking for you?”

“You promise to talk to daddy?” She asks, sniffing on the inside.

“I promise, I’ll talk to daddy and if he doesn’t agree to our wishes then he’s not invited to your next tea party or the one after that, deal?”

“Deal,” she replies from the inside, laughing and clapping.

“Do you need help coming out?” I ask.

“No. Daddy says I’m big and strong,” she replies and I can’t stop the laughter from coming.

“Well, daddy is right about that.”

She opens the doors and walked out. I smile, going down so we are on the same level. She was a pretty girl, with dimples on the side of her cheeks and long full brows, a pink scrunchie held her hair in a single ponytail and she wore a pink dress.

“My goodness, you’re not only big and strong, you’re also a beautiful princess,” I tell her and she laughs, nodding, her

dimples going deeper.

“Do you want to give me a hug and tell me your name since we’re now partners?”

“My name is Sarah, I have stardust on my name at my bed.”

“You do? That’s so cool. My name is Leslie, high five as partners?”

I hold my hand up and she gives me a high five and we hug.

“Are you my new nanny, Leslie?” She asks.

“I wanted to be but you think nannies are wicked and I don’t want to be wicked. I want to be your friend. Should we be friends?”

She grins, nodding eagerly. “We will be friends and you’ll come to my tea parties with daddy,” she proclaims, lifting a little pink wand I’d not noticed earlier and we both begin to laugh.

The doors burst open as we laugh.

“Daddy,” Sarah yells happily, letting go of me and running to her father.

He’s Adam Evans? I think with a groan, wishing the ground would open up and swallow me, how deep was my embarrassment going to go? All of what happened with my potential employer and a billionaire. *Please kill me.*

“Hey Princess, how are you doing?” He asks her. Lifting her up to his chest and showering her with kisses.

I stood, hanging my bag on my shoulder and staring at them. It was easy to see how much he loved her, how delicately he held her. I’d give anything in this world to be held the same way by my father again, riding on his lap as he pretended to be a plane, old memories that I had to dig really hard to get to, but that meant the world to me.

“Fine daddy,” she replies, laughing at all his kisses and giving him kisses in return.

“I made a new friend, Sarah, she’s going to come to our tea parties. She says you’ll come too.” She turns to point at me before looking back at him.

“Did she now?” He asks in a quiet voice and for some reason, hearing that voice put dread firmly in my mind. I shake a little as he turns those hard brown eyes at me over her head.

“Yes daddy,” she replies.

“Okay, Princess, we’re going to have one big party, but first, you’ll have to follow Henry while I talk to our friend, okay?”

I swallow, I was in trouble and I did not know why. He hands her over to Henry who cradles her and they both walk out of the bathroom, I find myself unable to breathe as they leave, his gaze did not move or change, he just kept looking at me, his jaws working while I tried not to melt in front of him, my heart skipping several beats.

“I just want to know what on earth gave you the right to think you could just take my daughter or talk to her?” He asks in that same voice. I find myself flinching— but I’d done nothing wrong. I found her here.

“Take your daughter?” I’m surprised at the strength of my voice when everything inside me is blinking lights from combined embarrassment and fear.

“You will no longer be considered for this position. I can’t have someone who sneaks around even before the interviews have been conducted to get an advantage—”

“Oh that’s just B.S. and you know it. You directed me to this bathroom yourself after—” I swallow, and skip past it. “— After what happened. I was just trying to—”

“No one asked for your help!” He snaps and I see red at once.

He couldn’t shout at me just because he was a billionaire, who the hell did he think he was? What gave him the right? I’d had my fill of men trying to ride over everyone else.

“I came here for a job, not to get disrespected,” I retort. “If you don’t want to consider me for the job that’s fine but don’t you dare raise your voice at me,” I reply icily and walk out without listening to anything else he has to say. My eyes are burning, I’d done nothing to deserve being cut out and on top of that spoken to in that tone. It was the same as the first time we had met. All the money had gotten to his head.

I make it to the large double doors and stand there. There is no way I’d be able to draw them open.

“Let me help you with that,” someone says warmly from behind me and I turn to find Henry, the guard that came in with Adam coming down the stairs. I wipe the tears away from both eyes and put a smile on my face.

“Thank you,” I reply, genuinely grateful.

He opens the door, nodding to me. “My pleasure. Have a nice day.”

I smile ruefully at that, it being the worst possible day I could ever have. Maybe I’d go drinking with the girls, and put it out of my mind.

The door closes behind me and I stand on the outside, taking a moment to allow myself to recharge. My phone begins to ring in my bag and I take it out, there’s no name to the caller but I slid to answer anyway.

“Hi baby girl,” the voice says on the other end and I feel my blood go cold.

ADAM

W *hat is wrong with me?*

A question that most times didn't have an answer and as I stare at the closed door of the bathroom I knew it still didn't have an answer this time. I turn to look at the mirror on my right. She was gone again and like the last time my mind is still on her.

It was for the best though, I could not have myself thinking about her all the time when I needed to get this deal done. I'd said it so many times and still I could not get her eyes out of my head.

I should leave the bathroom and start the interviews, if only I could focus, I would. I'd checked her name in the files, Leslie Davies. It was a name that suited her. It rolled off the tongue.

Really? You have an interview to conduct. Remember that? It rolls off the tongue too, interview.

I glare at the bathroom mirror, hoping the glare got to the voice in my head and then I take the door handle and walk out of the door. I find Marcus talking with Henry as I get out.

He glances in my direction when he sees me.

"I just saw one of the potential nannies leave the compound, if looks could cook stone then hers certainly would have. Anything I should know?" He asks.

I wave my hand indifferently. "I found her with Sarah and I don't know how Sarah got to be with her but I'd been

looking for her and I was cross so I disqualified her.”

“That’s fine then, she’s a feisty one. I made sure to keep my distance when I saw that look on her face.”

“Agreed,” I reply, laughing and trying to get the image of her thighs out of my head.

“Can we begin now?”

I nod.



NONE of the interviews stick with me and I find myself flipping through the files again the next day as I sit in my office at the top floor of the Evans Energy Towers.

Scratch that, one person *had* made an impression but I could not hire a nanny for my daughter because she made me lose my mind any time I saw her.

I scan the pictures and the ratings that Marcus included, based on his comments, it seemed like they all had about the same impressions on him. Their scores were close, separated by ones and twos. Basically any body I picked would be pretty much the same, it didn’t matter in the least bit.

I spin the chair around to face the city behind me, thinking again of Leslie Davies. I’d been trying my hardest not to do so all morning but it wasn’t working, leaving me more and more frustrated.

Well think of something else, you could finally get to meet Monica Rosso today after all her globe trotting. I charge myself and nod, a black pen held between my hands as I thought about it. Today could turn out to be a big day.

The door opens and Marcus comes striding in.

“She’s in town!” He announces. I drop the pen on the table, standing at once.

“Well, what are we still doing here then, we should be wherever she is!” I reply, picking up my phone and striding to

the door. He grins as he holds the door open.

“I have the chopper ready, she’s on the other side of town. I heard she’s going to be here for only three hours and then jet off again.”

I grit my teeth. It was tight but it should be enough time for us to make it.

“That woman does more environmental pollution than half of the entire U.S. combined.”

“You have a jet too, Adam,” Marcus points out.

“I haven’t used it in a full year,” I retort.

“Congratulations,” he says dryly and I snort a laugh. We get to the chopper and climb in, flying over the city and moving toward where Monica was.

“She’s looking through some impressionist paintings from one artist. I heard he sells the pieces for twenty-four million a pop sometimes. I should get into this painting thing.”

“You couldn’t paint an outline of your own finger on a canvas, Marcus. You just make sure we get her or I might buy these paintings out of spite.”

“Rich people flex is always so bitter,” he replies, rolling his eyes.

“Says the only personal assistant in history worth well over a hundred million.” I look out of the chopper window, staring at the city below and somehow my thoughts go to the fact that Leslie was somewhere down there, I truly could not get her out of my head.

We land and make our way down the building we had landed in, getting into a waiting Mercedes that begins speeding towards the art gallery Monica was in. You could say whatever you wanted about Marcus but he was extremely efficient. We got to the gallery and walk inside, it was a large converted warehouse. This painter really did draw in the big bucks.

The moment we enter I knew Monica was here. She has a sing song voice that somehow manages not to be loud and fills

an entire room at the same time. Everywhere she enters, she takes control, there was just no other way. It was the way it worked. Plain and simple.

“Yep, she’s here alright.”

Marcus laughs, looking too giddy.

“Getting cold feet?” He asks.

“You know, you enjoy my relationship problems too much for someone who calls himself my friend.”

We walk down a central path separated by a line of red and gold dividers with paintings lining both walls, sometimes placed in pairs. Each of the paintings has their own lighting arrangement and there is no central lighting, making the middle walkway a bit darker with pools of light around the individual paintings.

“I just think the drama in your life keeps you more alive, you know. There she is!” He nods towards the far right where she was conversing with an impossibly slim man who was wearing a black turtleneck tucked into black fitted trousers. I stare, remembering times spent together. There was a time in my life when I was sure I’d end up with Monica Rosso. A time when I was really happy.

She laughs again, a full filling laugh that made your heart flutter no matter who you were. Her red hair was in ringlets falling to her shoulder and she had dark red lip gloss on, it brought her pearly white skin to life and she turned as she laughed, her eyes locking on to mine with a gasp she covered well.

“Adam Evans,” she calls. A few gasps go around the room as several people, including the painter himself, turn to look at me.

“Monica, it’s been too long,” I say, spreading my arms.

“Not long enough,” Marcus whispers under his breath and I couldn’t agree more.

We get to her and her smile, the most pasted on smile you could ever see, does not falter as she gives me an air peck on

both cheeks and a light hug.

“We’ve been trying to get you in one place long enough to fly to you,” I tell her.

“Yes, well, you know how it is, there’s so much to do and so little time. Meet Ernesto, he’s the owner of this impressive art gallery,” she indicates the gallery all around her.

“Pleasure to meet you Ernesto.” I nod to the man who nods back so graciously, I wonder if he was not born in the wrong area.

“Walk with me Monica.” I put out my elbow so she could twine her hand in it. She looks at it for a second then gives Ernesto her apologies, promising she’d be back and make sure I get a painting before putting her hand in mine. I nod once more to Ernesto as we walk away.

“He seems nice,” I begin. Marcus walks just behind us and I think I hear a snicker from him.

“Why don’t we go straight to the point, Adam, you want my family to support you and your crazy invention that could change the world. Our support would bring the banks and with your gallivanting across the front pages as a philanthropist, it should be a done deal then.”

“Well said,” I replied dryly.

“Well, there’s that but what’s in it for me then? Why should I do this for you Adam? You left me because of some baseless accusations and got nobody pregnant. She bore your child and tossed off to wherever and I got nothing. So why should I do this?”

Behind us, Marcus whistles. I turn a glare at him that shuts him up immediately.

“Those accusations were not baseless Monica. You made a fool out of me. I had a ring ready and you were sleeping around.”

“Careless flings Adam, we’ve all done it.”

“I thought they were baseless?” I ask, already tired of the charade. It broke me into several pieces all these years ago and

I wasn't ready to revisit any of it. I'd healed and I wanted to remain healed.

"Adam, why must you be like this, I've remained single, waiting for you," she whispers in a voice that sang to the soul.

"You've not been waiting for me, Monica, you'd barely acknowledged I existed since I left you. I sent you messages when I was deep in my feelings and they were never returned."

"I was hurting too," she retorts. "My life had been upended."

My free hand forms a fist, I was getting tired of this back and forth.

"Is there something you want Monica? Let's stop this game."

She smiles sweetly and I knew there was trouble.

"I want you honey, give me that and you can have all the money you want."



I GET to the house later on, sore mentally from the hounding that Marcus had put me through all day. To him it was a simple matter of accepting Monica who still looked like the ultimate catch and closing the deal. I'd told him to go home when I was tired of hearing Monica's name.

Life could never be straightforward, it took any chance it got to frustrate you out of your mind.

I was home though, and so I put it out of my mind. Home meant me and Sarah fun time. Work and hard decisions could wait.

I got into Sarah's room and her scream at the sight of me is fit to tear my ears off.

"Daddy, you're in time for tea!" She cries, running into my arms. I pepper her with kisses, all the aches in my head and

my muscles retreating.

“Am I? I better grab a chair,” I reply as I set her on the floor.

“Where’s Leslie?” She asks.

I cough, swallowing down the wrong hole.

“Leslie?” I ask, trying to be sure I heard right.

“Yes, she’s going to come to tea. I like Leslie, I want her to be my nanny.”

What in the world!

“Princess, I thought you didn’t like the nanny idea?”

“I don’t like other nannies, only Leslie, she can be my nanny. Then you and her can come for tea,” she grins, holding up one of her tea cups.

Of course, that’s the one she wants. The one person who would make life the most difficult for me. Great going.

LESLIE

I had my girls with me, and thank goodness because I didn't know what I would have done if they were not with me at this moment. There was no way I could have faced it alone.

“Run it by me again, what did he say?” Alex asks, she's sitting to my left, while Amy sat to my right and between us, We weren't drinking yet but the drinking was going to come.

“Well, yesterday I was standing in front of Adam Evans' house after the most terrible few moments of my professional experience as a nanny, and I got a call, I answered the call and the first thing I heard was 'Hi baby girl.' I would know that voice anywhere. I knew it was him the moment I heard it and I took the phone from my ears. My head was spinning, I didn't want to hear anymore but I heard something that sounded like I'm back in town.”

“That prick, there's no way he'd come back here,” Amy growls. The passing bartender does a double take, she smiles at him and waves him on.

“You've still got a restraining order against him, he can't come near you,” Alex adds after the bartender moves on.

I'd told myself that thousands of times since yesterday, and still it didn't make me feel good or safe, I just felt more scared. Questions were running through my head.

What was he doing in town? Why did he call me? And what could I do?

“You know Chad is only powerful when there’s someone weaker than him—”

“We’re all weaker than him!” I cut in before Amy could finish. I didn’t want to go crazy thinking about it on top of the days running by but I couldn’t help it.

Alex rubs my back, tucking my hair behind my ears. “I promise you’ll be fine Les, don’t sweat it. Let’s drink and curse Adam Evans for not knowing the talent that was in front of him.”

“Hear hear!” Amy cries and we both stare at her until she goes bright red up to her hair roots.

“You can’t drink to save your life and you’re shouting the loudest!”

“Someone has to carry you and Leslie out of here.”

I shake my head, laughing in spite of myself. I could always trust my girls to make me laugh.

“Let’s drink,” I tell them, rolling my waist on the long black stools we were sitting on. They had just enough fluff on it to be soft but not too annoying. Behind us, the club was already lit, predominantly blue strobe lights bouncing along with the preppy happy dance music blaring and people lost their minds dancing. Alex and I were going to end up there before the night was done.

Amy hails the bartender again.

“By the way, how’s our boy Brian?” Alex asks.

“He’s good, he keeps sending me his crazy memes. I don’t know where he sees the things. Half of them I can never speak of again.”

My phone rings.

“You better not look at that phone,” Alex warns me but I’m already turning it around and pressing the ‘accept’ button. She snatches the phone from my hands.

“There will be no looking at phones tonight!”

The phone is out of my reach before I can snatch it. I look at Amy who shrugs.

“I’m going to have to agree with her on that one,” she replies.

I glare at her. “Ugh, where’s the mother in you when I need it.”

Alex grins victoriously, raising the phone up and sticking her tongue out at me, then she turns the phone around, staring at the text.

“Hey, don’t look at the text!” I call out as I grab the phone from her. She doesn’t put up a fight and when I glanced at the screen I see why. The breath hooks in my throat. It was a message from Adam Evans.

“Dinner tonight? To discuss terms?” I read the words disbelievingly. Amy grabs the phone from me and stares at the text too.

We all stare at each other, all of us not speaking.

“To discuss terms?” Alex repeats finally.

“...Text your address so you can get picked up by the driver,” Amy finishes.

“I got the job?” I ask, still unable to fathom how this was possible. Still not coming to terms with it.

I got the job!

I actually got the job!

My heart is beating fast but this was a drum of triumph, sweet, sweet victory. My body warms with it. I couldn’t believe it. Two hundred thousand a year, and I was to discuss it this evening. I wouldn’t be losing my apartment. No, I would be keeping it and I would be comfortable adding to that. A single text was changing my evening.

Amy and Alex look at each other and then at me then their faces break into huge grins. The next moment they’re both screaming at the tops of their voices and have me up and dancing to the music.

“Wait, wait wait, we still have to send him the text, we have to send him the address!” Alex reminds us and then we are all grabbing at the phone. Amy gets to it first and proceeds to send him the address.

“How did this happen?” I asked, unable to stop myself from dancing.

Alex catches me. “We don’t want you sweating or drinking. You have to attend a dinner with a billionaire you know.”

“Yes, yes,” I reply, and quickly sit down, all of me was vibing to the music though, I didn’t want to sit but then I realized this was dinner with Adam Evans. I didn’t even understand what was going on between us, he made me so angry and hot at the same time, but if he was giving me two hundred thousand dollars, I could deal with one dinner to discuss terms. It sounded so badass; *discuss terms*.

The girls hyped me up till a sleek Mercedes pulls up to the curb outside the club and the driver texts me.

I step outside to see Henry, the guard standing outside. He holds the door of the car open. I hug Alex and Amy as I get in, blasted by cool air from the Mercedes air conditioning and lean back to rest on the plush leather seats. Henry gets in with me and taps the front seat to tell the driver to start moving.

“We meet again,” he says with a smile and I open my eyes to smile at him.

“Yes, we do, I’m surprised to be here, I’ll tell you that.”

“I feel the same way every single day,” he replies and the rest of the ride goes by in companionable silence till we get to the mansion.

Adam is waiting for me at a little garden at the top of the house where a table has been set up with crisp white linens, gorgeous cutlery and an array of drinks and food.

He stands as we arrive, dressed in another one of those ten thousand dollar suits, but my, my, did he look immaculate. A blue shirt and black tie had never looked so good on anybody.

He nods to Henry who leaves closing the doors, leaving me alone with him.

Those eyes of his are on me and I didn't know if I could breathe. My breath stops just before my nostrils as his eyes travel over my body and mine remain on his.

Please say something or I'll melt right here; I think.

“Miss Davies, first of all, can I just apologize for the way the last time we saw each other went. I'd been afraid to see that my daughter was not in her room and I was still upset when I found her with you and that influenced my outburst a little.”

I nodded, his deep voice and the breeze coming from around us were doing things to my body. I rub my hands together, goosebumps forming on my arms.

“Is it too cold?” He asks.

“Oh no, it's alright,” I reply quickly, too quickly.

He walks over, his woodsy scent wafting through my nostrils as he pulls out a chair for me to sit. I sit down, thinking only about placing one leg in front of the other so I didn't somehow fall on my face.

“You look beautiful, please relax, let's talk about the parameters of the contract. Wine?”

I can only nod again then I realize he had told me to relax, and that I looked beautiful. Red suffuses my cheeks and I squeak a little, covering it up with a cough.

“Yes, wine is good.”

He pours for both of us before taking his seat.

His eyes are still on me. Every second they spent on me has my entire body going crazy, my legs rub together. I didn't have any underwear on and I find myself thinking of him hiking my dress up.

I'm finding it hard to breathe and I take a sip of my drink to calm myself but it goes down the wrong hole and I start

coughing uncontrollably, the wine spills down the front of my dress.

“Are you okay?” He asks, standing up to come to me. I try to get up quickly and almost trip over the chair but he grabs my hands and draws me to him and I find myself in his arms.

My entire body goes rigid, his muscles wrap around me, I can't breathe, my eyes stare at him, my head at his chest, hearing his heartbeat. The heat of his body joins mine. I couldn't not resist it. I wanted him and I could see the same need in his eyes. His hands slide down my dress towards my ass and a small moan escapes my lips when his hands wrap around my ass and the other hand raises my chin up.

My whole being wanted it. My body was aching for it. My eyes are held spellbound by him as he leans down and his lips met mine, pliant, and soft. My brain booms in colors of pink and purple, his hand is on my ass, drawing me closer, as my arms wrap around his neck. My eyes close and yet I could see him clearly. A warmth washes over my being. A tingle races down my arms and my legs.

He directs me backward and in one fluid motion, the hand on my ass is pushing the white cloth and the food off of the table. His other hand cups my face and my ears, I moan again.

My soul; that was all, there was no other rational thought. His other hand slides up my thighs slowly and I throw my head back, moaning into the night as he hikes my dress up past my waist.

He leans forward, kissing my neck, his soft wet tongue draws lines of hot fire on my neck. Then he bites my ear softly and I can feel my body dripping.

“Do you want this,” he whispers.

“Yes,” I reply, hanging on to him, my hand in his shirt, the other one sliding to his pants where the hard length of his shaft was poking through.

A finger rolls through my wet dripping middle as he kisses me again and zips down, taking out his shaft and balancing me on the table.

“Yes,” I moan, my hands holding the table hard, my bottom lip between my teeth as he rubs the head of his shaft around my lips before sliding in.

I gasp, hanging on to the table.

“Good girl,” he whispers in my ears, holding on to me as he slides in again. Pleasure climbs up in waves from my waist and my eyes are wide orbs as he hits all the pleasure spots. His shaft buries deep, sweeping against the walls of my vagina. He takes it slow, one thrust after the other.

I hold on to the table, eyes half lidded as I moan, he has a hand on my neck, lifting it up so my eyes are on his face as he thrusts in and out of me, and then he begins to move faster. I scream his name, holding on to the table as best as I can, my eyes close and my lips tremble. He holds me tight as he increases the pace till he’s hitting my G-spot continually.

“Please don’t stop, just like that,” I beg and he keeps going, thrusting just right, my brain is spiraling.

Sounds escape my throat, not quite words, in between moans and ‘yes’. I grab his hands as the pleasure floods my brain and then I’m coming. My body is shaking and my eyes fling open as he thrusts into me repeatedly. I came in a flood, holding on to him and try to breathe.

He turns me around, thrusting my ass out and spanking my left cheek.

I moan to his touch, my hair falling on my face.

“There’s a good girl,” he whispers.

“Yes, I am,” I reply— moan more like— as he slides in again for another round. My eyes close and pleasure spikes through my brain.

ADAM

I can't stop the flow of images. My hands grab her hair and draw it back slightly as I pound her ass. Shaft buried deep as she screams my name. She is so wet, I slide in and out, a hand spanking her cheek. Her gown rides around her waist now.

"Just like that baby," I tell her, thrusting deeper and faster, her moans spurring me on.

Her hands hold open her ass cheeks as I thrust into her. The table shakes with the force of my thrusts and her ass against my waist slaps like wet flip-flops. Sweat rolls down my back and my face.

More images, more action, she kneels before me, her lips, those cherry lips I couldn't get enough of, kisses the length of my shaft. I groan, holding her hair, the wet hot roughness of her tongue drawing down to the base of the shaft. She comes back up, kissing the head before taking the length of me in her mouth. My eyes were bulging and my hand was deep in her hair.

Both of her hands held my waist as she gulps down on all of me. She was magical, my groans of pleasure fills the night and when I came, I am holding on to her for dear life.

We're both breathing hard as she pushes me to the chair and straddles me, her lips join with mine as she rides my dick, her waist moving from side to side. My hands clutch her ass, our lips mold together. Our tongues meet each other. All of me is deep inside her. Our moans rise together. Our bodies are wet

and slick. It was magical, my body felt like a twin of hers, moving along with hers, the rhythms syncing. Our lips unable to separate from each other.

I couldn't tell when we made it into my room but we did and now she's sleeping beside me. She is warm and I was happy but my head is burning with guilt.

She was supposed to be my daughter's nanny and here we were, it was just the first night and I'd already slept with her!

How on earth can I make this right? How can I forget the feeling of thrusting into her and hearing her scream my name?

What's worse was that I wanted more. My shaft is hard, resting against her back. I couldn't help it. But... I knew it was wrong. I'd have to see her care for my child every day. You don't have sex with your nanny.

Pretty sure there's an unspoken rule about that somewhere out there.

I'd broken that rule and now Leslie was planted firmly in my head. The need for her wasn't waning, it was only getting stronger. I had other things to think of, my company's future for one and the condition that Monica had given me. If I accepted, how could I face both of them being in the same house? So many questions are burning through my brain but the one thing I know for certain is that Leslie was big trouble for me. She was breaking the orderliness of my life just by existing.

Maybe, leave all these thoughts for now and wait till the morning?

It made sense and I decided I'd prefer that instead. I snuggle closer to Leslie and she shakes a little, a small smile forming on her face as she shifted backward to spoon even better.

After a deep comfortable sleep, morning comes and along with that, the realization that I could not let what was about to happen go on. Sarah always came bounding into my room in the mornings. It was only a matter of time before she saw or heard something she wasn't supposed to.

Besides, continuing with Leslie would bring all sorts of complications I needed to avoid. *What if one of us caught feelings for the other person? What would happen if Marcus started asking questions? Plus was I even ready for any sort of relationship with another woman? Sexually or romantically?*

These were very solid reasons for why I needed to stay away from her and the more I thought about it, the more I saw reason. I just needed to wait for her to wake up and tell her how it was.



I SIT BY THE WINDOW, making corrections and looking at the new sketches sent to me by the engineers when she started to stretch in the bed. Stirring and turning around. I turn slightly, staring at the dark brown curve of her back as it glows in the sun. Her skin pops under the golden rays from the outside.

The blanket barely covers her ass and when she stretches, her back curving, her waist turned towards me. A bolt of electricity sweeps through my chest. This woman was doing so many things to my head. Her hair kisses her shoulders, and when she turns around, her eyes catch the sun, glowing like the rest of her skin, a hazel so bold you couldn't help but stare.

She smiles at me and I almost lose my resolve.

Would it be so bad to sleep with your nanny. Plus who said she had to be the nanny? She could just be the woman you liked to have around you who just happened to take care of your child too. No! That's dumb.

I stare at her, more confused than I'd been in a long time. I wanted so much to smile back, to stand and walk to her and tell her I had a great time but then what about Sarah? What about Monica? I still needed those billions and I couldn't complicate things too much.

"Good morning," her morning voice is soft and airy.

"Good morning," I reply, my voice harsher than I wanted it to be.

She notices and the smile slowly drains away from her face.

Fool! I curse myself, but my path is already decided. I get to the bed and sit down by the edge. Close to her. She sits up and draws her legs up, using the bedsheet to cover her bare breasts. Shame, I was enjoying looking at them. *Focus!*

The tone of my voice does not let up and I stare at her as I speak, removing any emotion from my face. This had to be done with surgical precision. The cut has to be clean.

“What happened yesterday shouldn’t have happened. Sarah is already taken with you. She loves you. I shouldn’t have complicated things like that—”

“You?” She asks, her hazel eyes burning into mine. The challenge is implied. “What makes you think you were the one who complicated things?” She dares me with those eyes to say it was the other way.

“It shouldn’t have happened plain and simple, Leslie,” I reply without inflection.

“But it did and I know you can’t deny the heat whenever we are close to each other, Adam. So what are you trying to do?”

I grit my teeth. “You’re Sarah’s nanny, don’t make this any harder than it has to be. You cannot be with me in that way.”

“For some reason, you didn’t think about this yesterday when you were tearing my dress off of my body?” Her voice cracks at the end but she keeps her eyes steady, hands folded across her knees. “So what? You’re going to fire me now because of what happened?”

“I’m not going to fire you, but we are not going to see each other again as best as we can manage. You’re going to take care of Sarah. Anything you need, you can communicate it to me through Henry. You’ll leave whenever I’m supposed to be back home and you’ll make sure you don’t stray into places where you know I’ll be in the mornings when you come.”

“Oh, so it’s like a prison sentence?” She’s still staring at me, but I can see the ways the edges of her lips tremble.

“You can think about it however you want Leslie, but that’s the way it’s going to be. There’s no other way this would work. I didn’t use you last night, I was attracted to you and it happened but it can never happen again.”

“Okay,” she replies and then gets up from the bed, leaving the bedsheet behind.

Wait what? That’s it? Weren’t her lips trembling just now or was I just imagining things?

“Do you have something I can wear?” She asks, all business like.

“I can have Henry get something for you,” I tell her, staring at her, unable to get my eyes to stay on her face.

“Thank you, I’ll be out of your way soon and I’ll stick to the requirements you set, if you want it like this then you can have it your way!” Her lips are set in a thin line, and her hands are folded below her breasts. The image burns in my head, I open my mouth but no words came, the breath is stuck in my throat. Before I can get anything out, she turns around, and walks to the bathroom, her pert ass bouncing as she goes.

My throat was dry. What just happened?

I stare, unable to do anything else. My lips working and my eyes still seeing after images of her standing there, cast in golden brown by the sun, her hands folded below her breasts and her eyes gleaming at me.

Did I just make a mistake? What was this confusion that she caused every time?

I can’t stop thinking of her even as she leaves and till I was in the office and listening to Marcus give me the rundown of the day’s activities.

I zone in for a while but then I’d remember the way she had looked at me and the magic of the last night.

She didn’t say anything more to me after she came out from the bathroom, dressed in the clothes Henry got for her. Nothing till she finished toweling up and dressing. Nothing till she left the room, asking Henry to drop her off.

I was the one trying to cut her off but it felt like I was the one who got cut off!

I growl at the thought, my hands forming into fists, I'd been semi-hard all day, and even now with my fists formed, the first image in my head was her on that table, my hand gripping her hair and her voice screaming out my name.

I couldn't get her out of my head. I just couldn't!

Someone clicks repeatedly in front of my face and I jerk, coming out of the daze to find Marcus clicking his thumbs and looking at me with his eyebrows raised.

"I don't think I've ever seen you lost in thought, what's going on?"

I shake my head. "Nothing much man, just thoughts, a lot of thoughts."

"Well you better be thinking of Monica," he retorts, glancing sideways at me.

I should be thinking of the business but all I could think about is Leslie.

LESLIE

“G irl, did you or did you not get a job that pays two hundred thousand dollars? Two hundred thousand dollars a year! You did that! We celebrate that, not the man’s stupidity, yes?” Alex asks, sitting on my sofa and playing with my cactus lamp.

I grin from where I’m standing, my nightgown hanging loosely from the tops of my arms. She wanted us to go out and I couldn’t agree more. We deserved to celebrate even if Adam was acting like the fool.

Still... some things I could not get out of my head. The feel of his muscles as they moved on my body, the way his tongue rolled on my nipples. I turn back to the mirror, rubbing on red lipstick. My phone lies on the table as we wait for Amy’s call.

“It’s not like Amy to take so long, what’s going on?” I ask, while I dab with a cloth and make sure the lipstick is perfect.

“Maybe she’s out with Ryan, having some down and dirty with him.”

I pause and turn, mouth hanging open.

“No, she’s back with Ryan? How come I didn’t know this?” I ask, getting up and going to the sofa. This was premium information. Information I didn’t know.

“Scoot over. You both are keeping things from me now?” I ask, glaring at her.

“No, no, he came back with flowers just this afternoon. She was dealing with it when you called me. That’s why she couldn’t say anything. She went with him to his house. I’m guessing they made up.”

“She took him back,” I palm my forehead. “The fool broke up with her because he was too happy and he didn’t trust it.”

“Maybe he trusts it now,” Alex replies with a shrug.

I glare at her again and then pinch her arm. She screams and tries to get off the sofa but I catch her and keep pinching her.

“And when were you going to tell me this, you wicked friend,” I growl, pinching her everywhere and tickling her.

She screams, trying to get away, laughing and crying at the same time.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I promise,” she cries, wriggling so much I could not keep it up.

“So I’m back to being the only single one,” I muse, pulling at non-existent beards as I say this.

“The third wheel squared,” she replies, sticking her tongue out at me. I grab at her but this time she wiggles away and laughs as she stands by the window.

There is a knock on the door.

“I just hope you both are not burning that house down?” Amy calls from the outside.

“Fool, I own the house,” I call back.

“And so?”

I open the door and she spreads out her arms, holding a bottle of wine.

I hug her so that I can grab the wine from her.

“Hey! It was for you to celebrate your new job.”

“Guilty conscience for not telling me Ryan was back in your life, yes?” I ask, giving her a small shove with my shoulder.

“That just happened this afternoon. I swear Alex passes out information better than CNN.”

Alex flicks her hair and raises her shoulder.

“Please don’t compare me to fake news.”

“And please stop your terrible Donald Trump impression,” I reply, going to the kitchen island and taking out three glasses.

“I thought we were going out?” Amy asks as she sees me getting ready to open the wine.

“We celebrate from this moment. I’m a high earner you know, I ball with the stars. Plus I want to go see Brian so I’m not too sure about going out.”

My phone chimes as I pour the wine into glasses for the three of us.

We all share a toast.

“To a new job!”

“To bedding billionaires!” Alex says.

“To putting Alex in a psych ward,” Amy adds.

I snort as I go over to the vanity mirror to get my phone. I pick it up and slide it open to see a series of pictures. It was Alex standing by the window wearing the clothes she currently wore and me by the vanity mirror. As I stand staring at the pictures, another one comes through. One of me holding my phone as I was doing now. Chills fill my entire being. My heart skips several beats. A message drops below the pictures.

‘I’m outside, baby girl, and I’m coming up right now, long time no see.’

Chad was here. Chad was here and he was coming up right now. I don’t know when the phone drops from my hand but it does before I can see the next text.

Both girls look up at me when the phone lands on the floor.

“What’s wrong?” Amy asks.

“Chad is downstairs!”

They both look at me like I was speaking in a strange language, their eyes widening at the same time.

“Chad? What’s he doing here?” Amy asks, her eyes scanning the entire room, shaking as it did.

“He’s not coming up here, is he?” She cries. Still shaking uncontrollably. Alex just looks back at me, not moving at all.

“What do we do? If he comes up here then we’re doomed.”

I look at the door, it was locked, surely there was no way he would gain access through the doors. The lights shine on the outside of our building and the glow from my cactus lamp casts Amy in green on the right side.

“Who can we call?” Alex asks. Amy was freaking all the way out and I didn’t want to acknowledge it but I was also freaking out. I put my hand in my pocket, pinching my thighs, and trying to breathe.

The only name that comes to my mind was the man that made me feel like I was being tugged in several different directions at once.

Surely you’re not thinking of Adam Evans at a time like this, woman? My mind growls at me.

“Can’t we call Ryan or David?” I asked. “They are the only ones that can help us now.”

Amy gasped. “No way, I just made up with him and you want him to take a beating from your psychotic ex-boyfriend?”

“Better him than us, isn’t it?” Alex mutters and the very next moment a bang sounds on the door. We all scream at the same time. Amy and Alex rush towards me. They all hide behind me like I could do anything. My chest is rising and falling so fast I was sure I’d have a heart attack. I could barely breathe.

He was on the other side. Chad was back and on the other side. Could I not escape him?

“Open up for me, baby girl, I came all this way to be with you and you don’t want to see me?” His voice is cracking,

sounding like he's not had enough sleep and was hung up on something.

Amy points with shaky hands, her face going white.

"You tell your deranged boyfriend to leave this instant!"

I glare at her and shake her off.

"Why don't you tell him yourself since you're so hot!" I snap as another bang sounds on the door.

"If you break my door, you're going to pay for it, Chad. I don't want to see you, leave!" I scream, surprised at the sound of my own voice. It barely shook. Alex nods in agreement.

"You tell him!" She mutters.

He bangs on the door again, this time harder. The door bends forward before falling back into place.

"Nothing is going to stop me from seeing you today, sweetheart!" He screams, laughing as he does so.

"He's gone mad. He's gone completely mad!" Amy cries.

"Yes, thank you so much for your contribution, Amy," Alex rolls her eyes. Gaining confidence from Amy's fear.

"She doesn't want you here! Don't forget that restraining order," She shouts at Chad.

"Huh!" Amy gasps in triumph and we all turn to her.

A smile curves the corners of her face as she hits her hand on her head like why didn't I think about this before.

"You know we can call the police?" She asks and we all look at each other like how could we be so foolish.

"Of course, the police. Why didn't we think of that!"

I was stupidly thinking of Adam Evans just because I could not get the feel of him out of my head when the solution was right there from the beginning. So foolish.

"How on earth did I forget our friendly neighborhood cops!"

“Less stupidity bromancing, more police calling!” Amy cries as she rushes to grab a phone and starts to dial, her breaths heavy and loud.

The door booms again as Chad barreled into it.

“Why are you being like this? I just want to talk.” He growls, and then laughs. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shout. I’m just so excited to see you. I can’t believe you’re not excited to see me too. I’m sober Lessie, I promise!”

“Hello?” Amy cries into the phone and Chad barreled against the door again. We shriek as it cracks open.

Everyone in the room gasps, as Chad falls into the room. Pitching forward. Amy screams, dropping the phone and running to me at the same time as Alex grabs my hand.

“We’re so fucked!” She whispers and I knew it was true. There was nowhere to run to. Chad stands up, bits of wood hanging onto his hair. His jaw is bleeding. He acts like it’s nothing. Grinning at me and rubbing his nose with one hand.

“Something wrong with the door, it won’t open,” he says and points at it on the ground like he was surprised to find it there.

“You pushed it down yourself!” Amy snaps, finally finding her backbone. “And how can you break into a room with three women in it. Don’t you know that you’re going to make them scared. What’s wrong with you Chad, you were never like this before, I’m ashamed —”

I and Alex look at each other as Amy steps forward, getting into her stride, wagging her finger, her blonde head bobbing up and down true to its name.

“Go Amy,” I whisper.

“—of you and you should be ashamed of yourself. I thought you were a nice guy. We all did, when you were dating Leslie at first, you were so nice to her. You were nice to all of us. What happened to you? This is not you at all—”

She takes several steps forward, her fingers right in Chad’s face.

“If you take one more step, I’ll bite your hand off, woman!”

Amy simpers in fear and rushes back to stand beside us.

“Well, it was worth a try,” Alex mutters.

I take a deep breath, there was no need to involve my friends in all of this. I was the one who made the mistake of dating this human garbage in the first place. That made him my mess to clean up. My fingers curl into fists and I take a deep breath to steady myself before shaking both of them off.

“Let’s take this outside if you want to, Chad. Please don’t include my friends. They didn’t do anything to you.”

He grins at me and grabs my hand.

“So you agree you did something to me, Lessie!”

I flinch in pain, as fiery darts shoot up my arm.

“You’re hurting me Chad!” I cry.

“It’s only fair, Lessie. You’re coming with me.”

ADAM

Marcus and I sit in the office and pretend that I'm working. Looking over the files from the proposal I would send to Monica Rosso. But all the while I'm thinking about how the last meeting with Leslie Davies went. The way she turned it all on me like she was the wine that wanted nothing to do with me.

Marcus sits across from me, his legs on the table and a filer in his hands as he trims his nails. His focus was the same as if he was crossing the Grand Canyon on a high wire.

"You know, all of this is by the way if you don't accept the deal that Monica Rosso has given you and if you do accept it then she's just going to ask how much. She's just waiting for you to say so."

I glance at him, rolling my eyes and going back to the papers.

"Let's talk about this like two rational adults. What's keeping you Adam? That woman is hotter than two hundred of the finest women in the world, probably."

"Probably?" I ask, grinning.

He shrugs. "I mean, I don't know, the list might include Latinos. Everyone knows that Latino women are on another level."

"You're not helping, Marcus!" I reply and lean back on my chair, running my eyes. We'd been poring over numbers the

whole day, no time to focus on my invention or check on anything else.

“It’s a no-brainer, Adam, she’s beautiful, she has old money. You’re handsome, intelligent, and you have new money. It’s like a match made in heaven. Like a Hallmark movie.”

If I and Monica were a hallmark movie, what about me and Leslie? I think, then realize what I was thinking of. I couldn’t stop it. The next moment I start thinking of her hands on me and the feel of her breasts. I let out an uncomfortable breath, feeling a stirring in my pants. I cannot be thinking about this now but those eyes of hers. They stared at me sultrily.

“Just like that,” she whispers in my ear, shaking my entire body.

“Is she that revolting?” Marcus asks, breaking away from the fantasy. I shrug, cleaning my face again.

“You loved her once and it wasn’t a by the wayside love. It was that real type, man, you can’t hate her so much now? I just don’t see it.”

I turn my chair away from him, looking again at the city and trying not to think about it.

“Tell me something else, Marcus. I’m tired of hearing about Monica Russo for now. Let’s talk about something else.”

Marcus lifts his legs from the table and sits up.

“There’s some funny business going on in Fynefield. It’s one of the towns you’re donating to.”

“I don’t care,” I reply. “How about the contract for the nanny?”

Marcus splutters, coughing as he tries to regain himself.

“Adam, it’s a fifty million dollar donation, what do you mean you don’t care? It looks like the mayor hyped up the issues in the town to fleece you.”

I turn around in my chair. “That’s a problem for him and the authorities isn’t it? How’s it my problem?”

“It’s your money!”

I sigh. “Marcus, I can spend fifty million dollars every day for one year and it won’t be half of my net worth.”

He rolls his eyes and sits back, folding his arms. “Rich people,” he mutters. “You won’t care then that the engineers are about three million dollars above budget.”

He looks up at me. “Where’s the extra three million coming from?”

“Oh you suddenly care about your money now cause your employees are spending a few extra dollars?” Marcus asks, raising a single eyebrow.

“Evan’s corp is the number one company in America for salaries, we were voted best company to work for in the past five years and our buildings are the most employee friendly. It’s not about employees. It’s about business. Find the reasons why we are overspending.”

I stand from the chair, staring out the window.

“Now, what are you saying about the nanny contract?” I ask, trying to keep my voice flat and passive.

“Henry is supposed to take the contract over to her apartment. He’s going over there today and she’s going to be starting as early as tomorrow so you don’t need to worry about that. It’s being handled.”

A thought occurs to me. There was no reason for me to still be in the office. Plus even if I told her I didn’t want to see her as much as I could, I’ve not been able to focus since the last time. Plus didn’t it make sense to know where your employees lived?

Or you’re just acting like a fifteen year old and pining after this woman like she isn’t your child’s nanny.

“Has he gone yet?” I ask, still keeping my voice flat and my hands clasped behind my back.

“No. I still have the contract with me.”

It was almost enough to make me grin. It seemed the universe wanted it to happen then.

When did you start believing in the universe, Adam?

“Let me guess, you want us to go deliver the contract to her ourselves, yes? Cause that’s the way you’re looking right now.”

I turn at once. “The way I’m looking?”

“You have that gleam in your eyes you only get from Sarah related subjects. I know you’re not going to leave this to chance. Especially with the way you reportedly treated her. So let’s be on our way so you can focus.”

I grin, almost nervously. He was so close and yet so far. Yes, I wanted everything to go well for Sarah, but that didn’t mean it was the reason I was going there.

I pick up my phone from the desk and turn off the laptop, arranging the desk.

“Okay, diviner of truth, let’s go.”

He snorts as he gets to his feet, also arranging his suit.

“So are you really going to let fifty large go down the drain?”

“The man’s using it to help people Marcus, who are we to complain about how he uses it. In my opinion, it’s his cup of tea because everyone’s going to say Adam Evans pledges this amount to develop the metropolis and secure jobs in the area. If it doesn’t happen, the questions are going to come to the mayor and the town leaders.”

Marcus nods. “I knew there was a catch. You ain’t just throwing the money away, plus it’s a three town metropolis yeah. It’s not just one mayor.”

I point at him, tscking twice to show him he’d hit the money.

“Smart, smart.”

“I didn’t make a fortune from being dumb.”

“You get it from being dumber. I’ll go get the contract from my office.”

“Let’s not go in the official cars. Let’s go in something else,” I reply, standing in front of the elevators as he begins to walk to his office. The space outside the offices always seemed too bright and impersonal to me but Marcus assured me it was best that way. Our logo blazed on the white plaster and glass walls. Fluorescents shone from above. Everything either white or glass. The other floors had little bits of Evan’s history placed around. Inventions put in wall alcoves with plaques beside them that explained what they were. Colorful walls with greetings on them.

Decor to make you feel calm and zen. Here on the executive level, there was nothing of that warmth. Just severe efficiency. The only thing we’d added were water dispensers outside meeting rooms. According to Marcus, when we finished tearing into our competitors and buying them out for half of what they were worth, they’d definitely need a drink. He was right of course.

I grin at the thought before I realize he’d said something and left while I’d been standing there.

What was it he said?

Something about having several cars parked here that I never used and added to their wage bill for maintenance?

I shrugged. He’d handle it whatever it was.

The elevator doors open and I ride down to the car area, standing at the back and trying to come up with some kind of simulation of how the meeting with Leslie was going to go. What do I say to her? I told her I didn’t want to talk to her or see her and now I was going to give her the contract myself? It would make me look like the fool.

Maybe I could say something like if you wanted something done right then you needed to do it yourself? That made sense, but not in this situation. It still sounded foolish. I groan and put it out of my mind. I could wing it. No problem.

I get down to the car park and find one of the divers waiting for me. Clean shaven with broad shoulders and a birthmark just beside his ear.

“Sir,” he greets me and I nod to him.

“What’s your name?”

“Wayne, sir.”

“Alright Wayne, I hear I have some cars here I haven’t used in a while?” I ask and he nods at once. Smiling as he leads me toward the far end. Our feet click on the concrete floor as we walk.

“You’ve developed a serious collection of abandoned cars sir. We love to call them Adam’s abandoned fleet. Us drivers that is.”

We got to the end where there is reserved parking and more than a few cars lined up. I gasp, I’d forgotten some of these. I loved them back in the days when I still drove myself.

“All of these are parked here? Why doesn’t someone just take them back to my compound?” I asked.

“Well, you never told us what to do with them sir. So we just left them here.”

“It’s alright, I’ll take the Rolls Royce. Deliver all the others to my house, thank you.”

He nods again and walks off while I got in the Rolls and sit behind the steering, putting my hands on the wheel and enjoying the feeling of being behind once again. It had been so long. Too long.

Marcus joins me after a while, getting in and raising the file.

“Alright, let’s go.”

We got there after what was not a relatively long ride. We both step out of the car looking at the neighborhood. It wasn’t so bad. The apartments were five-story rises and all of them were in the shadow of massive advertising hoardings.

“That’s going to bring down the value like crazy,” I point out to Marcus.

“You need to stop worrying about that and start worrying about how many times they’ll key your car before we come down from her house,” Marcus replies, grinning. I look across the street and see a group of guys, standing around the entrance to one of the buildings, eyes glaring straight at us.

“I wish a bitch would,” I say, loud enough for them to hear.

Marcus grins even wider. “Okay,” he replies as we walk up together. We are halfway up the stairs when we hear a scream from the second floor.

“You’re hurting me Chad!”

“It’s only fair, baby girl. You’re coming with me.”

Marcus and I look at each other.

That’s definitely her voice, no doubt about it.

I was running before I was even done with the thought.

LESLIE

As soon as he grabs me, I hear footsteps barging up the stairs and the next second my eyes go wide. I could not have predicted this if I tried.

Adam Evans came hurtling through the doors and Chad turns in surprise. His face morphing from calm triumph to complete surprise. He lets go of me to try and orient himself for the tackle that is coming but it was already too late.

Adam crashes into him in full force. His body smashing into Chad's and lifting him off the ground. Chad screams with the force of the impact. His body lifts into the air as Adam's arms wrap around him as he is tackled to the ground.

He hits the ground with a fierce thud. His back arching from the ground and the breath and spit pulled out of his lips.

I still haven't recovered. I watched with wide-eyed wonder as Adam stands from the ground.

Where on earth did he come from?

His assistant or something stands in the doorway, holding a set of papers and looking at the scene with something like a smirk on his face.

Amy and Alex had the same identical bewildered expressions on their faces and they stare in complete confusion. Amy's white face regaining a bit of its color and her mouth hanging open.

"What's going on?" Alex mutters.

“Adam!” I whisper.

“Adam?” They both exclaim, turning from me to the standing man who was readjusting his tie.

Of course, ten thousand dollar suits! I roll my eyes in disgust, but then my arms smart and I wince in pain. He’d just saved me from Chad but the man didn’t look beaten at all. He stands, glaring at Adam.

Were they about to duke it out in my house?

What was this sudden care about what happened to me? And what was he doing in my house? I thought he didn’t want to see me again. Now he’s here with his assistant and fighting for me? I could take any help but his!

Girl, stop lying to yourself.

My hands close into fists. I wasn’t lying to myself. I wanted them both out of my house. They didn’t deserve to be here, not after how they’d each treated me.

“Who in the hell are you?” Chad spits, and I cringe. *Not in my house.*

“Adam Evans, you have the singular pleasure of being pummeled by a billionaire today. Enjoy it. It’s probably the last time you’ll be this close to so much money in your life,” the assistant replies from the doors.

These people were so full of themselves.

Chad growls and goes in for the punch, rushing it, put off by the assistant. Adam dodges it easily and has Chad spread out and lying on the floor with a single punch.

Cue another wide-eyed stare. It was just one punch but I could feel the impact in my bones. The same way I was sure the girls felt it too. We could only stare. Chad was out cold. I didn’t think he would ever be getting up from that.

Adam holds his shoulder and flexes his arm.

“Maybe I hit him too hard,” he mutters, turning to Marcus.

“No, you used just the right amount!” Marcus replies like a weird version of a cheerleader.

“Are you okay, Leslie?” He asks as I recover from my shock. All hell broke loose in my head. I saw large red signs. The nerve of this man. Never mind the fact he’d just saved me. The nerve of him.

“You barge into my house unannounced after the way you kicked me out of yours and you think you have the right to ask me if I’m okay? You don’t have the right to be here!”

“Preach,” Alex shouts from the back, clicking her thumb and forefingers.

“Maybe we don’t need to get into it now. He just saved us from your psycho ex.”

I glare at Amy. “I’d prefer it the other way round, maybe my psycho ex should have saved me from him. You can’t show up here like that in the name of whatever. What do you want, Adam?”

He stands there stunned. His assistant is just as stunned behind him. His brown eyes stare at my hazel ones. There was something in those eyes. Something I knew well. Pain and longing. But was I seeing them there or was I telling myself I wanted to see them there?

This man was the devil. He’d looked at me point blank and told me he wanted to see me as little as possible. How could I be seeing pain and longing in those eyes of his. It was just what I wanted to see because I wanted to fall into his arms again.

His assistant clears his throat from the back.

“Ummh, we came to give you the contract to sign. We didn’t mean to barge in. You’ll forgive our manners, please. Ummh. And forgive us for whatever happened at the house. Please, look at the contract favorably. Sarah had taken a real shine to you and Adam here would dearly love for you to come on as a nanny. We’ll not cause any further issues. Can I drop this here, with you?” He asks, holding out the contract and standing just beside Adam.

“Now, that’s the way a man speaks respectfully,” Alex calls coming forward to collect the contract.

“We’ll make sure she signs it,” she says as she takes it. Both Adam and his assistant nod. My hands are folded across my chest and I’m still glaring at him. My emotions were topsy turvy but I couldn’t let him see. I couldn’t let him know that my heart was breaking at that look on his face and that real or imagined I wanted him to hold me again and kiss me like I was the only girl in the universe.

“Leslie,” he starts in a small voice, sounding as strained as I’d ever heard him sound. “It’s probably not safe here. Won’t you come with us. We’ll find a place for you. It’s better than staying here where he already has access to and your door is broken down.”

“If you’re worried about my safety, you can take him with you. I’ve got parents, I’ll stay with them or stay with one of my friends here,” I answer. “I’ve gotten your contract, please I’d like you to leave.”

What is wrong with you, woman? Aren’t you being too harsh?

He nods again, turning to his assistant. “Please, clean that up, Marcus.” he tells him, pointing in the general direction of Chad and leaving at once without waiting for an answer.

Marcus smiles as he leaves, sketching a bow to us all.

“Please bear with him. He becomes very invested in matters concerning his daughter. Actually in just about anything. Plus he knows about abuse firsthand and wouldn’t stand by to watch another woman get abused too. Forgive him if he overstepped, Miss Leslie. He’s really excited to have you on board and caring for his daughter. You have no idea. It’s even distracting him from work. I’ll leave you to it and handle the gentleman on the ground.”

I’m distracting him from work? He’d seen someone in his life get abused. Who? His mother?

There was so much to think about. So much more insight to Adam than I’d learned after meeting him so many times in just a few sentences.

“Thank you, please tell him we are grateful,” Alex replies.

“You seem to know so much about him,” Amy adds.

“I’m not just his assistant. I’m his friend. We’ve been friends since high school,” he replies with a long look of remembered memories in his eyes. “I’ll make sure he knows how grateful you are. The driver will be here in ten minutes. I’ll just be outside. In case he becomes groggy, call for me.” He leaves after speaking.

I just stand there, those words still repeating constantly in my head. Over and over again.

Forgive him if he overstepped, Miss Leslie. He’s really excited to have you on board and caring for his daughter. You have no idea. It’s even distracting him from work.

Could it be? Has he been thinking about me all this while, just like I’ve been thinking about him? Unable to help myself. Was it the same for him?

“He’s out cold,” Alex whispers to Amy as I came out of my thoughts to find them standing over Chad and prodding him with their feet.

“What in heaven’s name are you two doing?” I growl and they both jerk back, turning around with guilty looks on their faces.

“Nothing!” Alex replies quickly.

“Don’t you think you were being a little bit harsh on him though? I get that he’s been a fool but he just saved you, it didn’t seem right to me.”

Amy stares at me fiercely, the set of her feet telling me she wasn’t going to back down.

I look from her to Alex who shrugs.

“I admit you were a little, only a little bit rude but the fact that he saved us today doesn’t excuse the way he treated you before. If anything, you need to show him early on you’re not a pushover.”

“See!” I hold my palm out to Alex and look at Amy.

She shakes her head. “It still doesn’t excuse the rudeness. The least you could do is sign that contract and hand it over to his assistant when the man comes back. As a way of thanking him. He has his faults but he’s keen on you working for him.”

I sigh. It was so much to think about.



HOURS LATER, I’m in the house, the contract still in my room and still unsigned. Marcus had come back with Henry and they had both hauled Chad away.

We all sit on the sofa, the cactus lamp and the lights from outside the only source of any light in the room. We are sitting in silence and I think about Brian. I needed to go see him, and I was trying to shake off the feeling that I was putting him in danger by being obstinate. At least if I got this job, there was a chance that I could help.

“I just don’t know, I know I’m about to lose my house and everything but would I be treated right? I can’t just accept this job you know. The house I’m on the verge of losing is no longer safe as long as Chad is around in the first place.”

“I still think you should take the job,” Amy answers. She’s sitting at the other end of the couch, close to the Cactus glow lamp. Alex sits in the middle with me on the other side. My feet are on the plush rug, it’s the only thing making me feel a little bit good.

“I agree with Amy too, Leslie. Take the job. You can avoid him as much as you can. He also wants you to avoid him so there’s no problem.”

I didn’t have an answer. The contract sat on the bed, I stare at it. There was only one thing to do. Sign it. I needed the job.

My phone rings before I can move.

I pick up the phone, it was an unknown number. I put the phone to my ears. Answering the call.

“Hello.”

“Hello, it’s Adam Evans,” a deep voice comes from the other end. All of a sudden I could not breathe again. How did he always have the strange ability to do that to me?

“Adam—” It’s the only word I can mutter. Both Alex and Amy sit up when they hear the name.

“I just called to apologize for barging into your house. It wasn’t meant to be like that. I came to give you the contract because Henry was held up and I wanted you to start at once. Once I heard your scream though, I rushed up to help.”

I listen quietly. The voice of his assistant in my head again. I couldn’t get those words out of my head or the fantasy that he’d been thinking of me. There was no need to keep being rude too, he’d apologized for this afternoon already.

“It’s not a problem, Adam. I’m also sorry for speaking to you the way I did.”

Amy gives me a thumbs up, beaming at me like a proud mother.

“You know, I still don’t want to overstep but you know your house is no longer safe. We can have a room prepared for you at the house. No need for you to move back and forth. I think it’s a perfect arrangement. Think about it when you can.”

“Alright, thank you Adam, I’ll think about it. I promise.”

“Okay,” he says and ends the call.

I look at Alex and Amy.

“He’s offering me a room in the mansion.”

“Take it,” they both reply at the same time.

ADAM

She is inside playing with Sarah. It didn't take anything for me to go into the room. I should be making the move to join them but for some reason I could not.

It's been three days since she moved into the house. Three days that I've kept my distance while trying to work on several other things at once. I heard them playing and laughing so much in the last three days that I felt so excluded.

Sarah doesn't even call out for me anymore. It just showed I had made a good hire but still... I wanted my daughter to miss me and maybe she did and I was just the one here making myself suffer. I sigh again, looking down the hall to where Sarah's room is, longing to go.

All it took was a careless guard belting out my name in surprise after seeing me here and then I'd be able to go be with them. There was no careless security guard though and it was just my longing.

I walk away, I didn't know how to recover from what happened at her apartment.

She'd spoken to me like I was just anybody. Like just the day before she didn't tell me that there was a strong attraction between us and try to talk me out of cutting off before cutting it off herself. Was it that easy to forget feelings?

Feelings man?

Surely not? Listen to yourself Adam! Don't put yourself in that situation. What feelings? You're just attracted to her, plain

and simple. You can acknowledge that at least.

I grip the banister and then keep walking down the stairs. I needed to be in my office and away from all of this. The work was never-ending. It could distract me for the rest of my life.

I got into my home office, and close the door behind me. It had no windows or other outlets. An air conditioner above regulated the temperature. Usually, I lock it to ensure there is no disturbance but I just close it this time. Unlike the office at Evan's Energy Towers. The office here i set up so I could monitor the news. Monitors lined the wall opposite the door, all serving different functions. The stock market on some, the news on others. Company activities, progress and all.

A single table sits before the setup. Black top with mahogany legs. Same as the chair. It was a half moon table custom made with top of the line locks. The drawers contained all my most important documents. The entire room was fireproof, soundproof and more like an in house bunker.

I sit on the chair and prop my legs up on the table, telling myself not to think about Leslie anymore and just get to work.

For a long time that's exactly what I do and it works, until there is a knock on the door and it opens without a squeak.

"Yes?" I turn and find myself face to face with Leslie. Her flowing black hair is held together in a single ponytail and a pink scrunchie that I recognize. Her hazel eyes look at me with concern and those cherry lips extended in a smile. Getting to my chest at once. Breathing was suddenly too hard for me to fathom.

"Yes," I say again and this time it sounds strained, like it took a lot to get that out of me and it did. I wanted to grab her and eat her up.

"I heard them saying you've been in your office all day and haven't eaten, so I brought some food for you, a peace offering. I know I'm the reason you haven't seen your daughter in three days and I can't bear it." she tells me in a voice that makes my head swoon at once as she begins to walk

forward, her short blue skirt allowing her legs to flow perfectly as she walks. I could not think of anything else.

You better do!

“Thank you,” I’m able to mutter and she smiles, opening the dish. The things those hazel eyes of hers did to me. I was barely breathing.

She looks at me as I don’t move, perching on the table.

“You don’t like it?” She asks.

“I do,” I reply and take a fork from the tray to take a taste of the food.

“Do you want something else, the kitchen is filled to the brim with supplies, I could make you something else. What do you want?”

The words leave my lips before I can even breathe.

“You,” I whisper. She pauses for a long second. Neither of us moves. The silence is so loud that I could hear my heartbeat in my ears.

What is wrong with me?

She stands from the table and begins to turn towards the door.

“You asked not to see me again after the last time, isn’t that why we’re in this situation in the first place?”

She heads towards the doors. I look at her go. I was losing her. I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t lose her. I reach out and grab her hand, pulling her back at the same time I was standing. She gasps as I touch her and I feel the same thing she does. My body comes alive, and a fire burns in my chest.

What are you doing to me, Leslie?

“I want you so badly, I can barely breathe,” I whisper in her ear as I draw her to my chest. I hear the little flow of breath rushing out of her. My hand is on her hair, taking out the scrunchie, letting her hair fall down behind her. The other hand raises her chin up.

I can hear both our heartbeats. I lean down. “I’m sorry, Leslie,” I mutter and kiss her cheeks. She shivers at my touch as I kiss her ears this time.

“Can we try again?”

I wasn't sure what we were trying but I knew I didn't understand all of what was happening to me and keeping her away wasn't going to work anymore.

“Yes,” she whispers breathily as she wraps her arms around me. “Yes, please,” she mutters again

Her voice doing crazy things to my head.

I kiss her neck, leaving hot wet marks as I go and then I kiss her lips and it’s like an explosion of magic. My entire being energized. The world bleeding away. Me and her. Just the two of us. We were the entire universe.

Her lips hold mine, joining with mine, a soft strawberry tang from her lip gloss filling my tongue. I wanted more of her.

I spin her around and prop her on the table, gently spreading her legs open and slotting myself into the space, bending her back until her arms could support her weight. Her head is thrown back and my lips leave marks all over her neck as I unbutton her shirt, taking off each button as I kiss her. She moans to my kisses.

“Adam,” she calls throatily, her hands rubbing my head and my back, leaving lines of fire as they go. All the buttons are undone and I pull the shirt off her. Her dark skin makes me lose my mind. My lips drop to the soft mound of her breasts. Her nipples are puckered and her whole body responds to my kisses. My tongue slowly rolls around it. Her hands grab me tight.

Yes my love, I'm right here. I'm right here.

My brain is overloaded with sensory information and my shaft is hard in my pants, begging for release.

“Yes,” she mutters, as I play on the nipple. My teeth gently close around it. My other hand massaging the second one. I

kiss a part down the middle of her chest and she gasps. My hands are down to her short skirt and I drew them off as she cries out my name again.

“You want more,” I ask and she nods, her hand over my head as I bend down, drawing her waist out as I kiss her belly button and then her thighs. Her legs are spread open before me and the chair behind me is pushed back.

I kiss her inner thigh and then the other one, drawing my tongue in soft circles on them.

“Please stop teasing me,” she cries.

I lean forward and kiss her lips, separating them with a finger and then running my tongue from bottom to top in a slow casual motion. She moans my name and I do it again. Slow and deliberate. Then I do it again and kiss her clit, using my tongue to caress it and then begin to flick my tongue back and forth around it. My lips close against it. I kiss and I spit. Licking up and down and going in a tight circle. My hands hold her waist and her hands hold my head as she screams her pleasure.

She pushes my head in, and I use one finger to massage her clit as my tongue dives into her vagina, going round and round at the entrance, targeting the knot of nerves there.

“Don’t stop! Just like that!” She cries and so I keep on. Going as fast as I can. Her hands mush my face in. I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t care. I kept on.

“Don’t stop,” she cries, frantically this time. Her waist shakes, her body trembles. “Please don’t stop, I’m coming.”

Yes, love! Come for me.

I hold her down tight as she shakes and screams, glossing my lips, my tongue still working overtime as she breathes hard, crumbling to the table.

“Oh my God,” she screams. Her legs still shaking with tiny jumping muscles. I begin to kiss up from her waist again, using my hands to unbuckle my belt and kissing until I’d got to her lips. We share a kiss together. Our eyes burning with intense need.

My shaft is out and she leans forward, grabbing it and jerking it off in preparation. Pure passion burns up from my waist. A breath escapes my lips into hers.

“You want all of that, don’t you?”

“Yes daddy,” she answers, her voice singing through my skull.

I take the shaft in my hand and rub the head on her wet lips, rolling it up and down at the entrance to her vagina. She moans, her breath hot on my face.

I kiss her again as I slide in and she screams.

“Oh my goodness, yes,” she cries, a hand wrapped around my neck as I thrust into her. My shaft sliding in and out. My senses on fire. Passion pushing me forward. I wanted more of her. More and more.

She moans as she holds me and I thrust faster and faster. Hitting deep. Her fingers drag through my back, peeling off bits of skin as they go. Sweat wraps both of us in a shroud as our bodies begin to move in tandem. Her waist coming forward and my shaft pushing deep at the same time.

We were both moaning, my hand grabbing her neck, two fingers and a thumb applying pressure, till she was coming and then I was coming and we collapse together on the table. Breathing hard and grinning at each other as we kiss each other.

“That was magic,” she tells me, breathing hard as she speaks. Rubbing off sweat from her face that the air-conditioning had already begun drying off.

“Maybe there’s more magic to be had,” I reply, holding her hand in mine. She draws it towards her. Taking my middle finger. Kissing it.

“Looks good to bite,” she whispers.

“Does it now?”

“Yes.” Her tongue wraps around it and then her teeth close around the finger. A zing of pain moves up my hands. Not

enough to make me wince but enough to get my body active again.

“You like?” She asks, winking and I grin. It was about to be a long night.

LESLIE

I wake up in his room again. The last time I'd woken up here, it didn't go so well for me. The room was still dark but I could hear feet padding across the room, sheets covered me and my body was still a tapestry of aches. I couldn't remember when we slept last night. It was one after the other.

Thinking about it makes me bite my lips, a smile perching on my face.

Magical didn't begin to cover how awesome the night had been. It didn't even come close.

I wished it would never end but now I was paying for it with the aches all over my body. It was totally worth it though. I snuggle deeper into the sheets, wishing morning would not come but it was coming and that meant I needed to help Sarah get ready for school.

The bed depresses slightly and I can feel Adam join me again, the sheets came up at the back as he snuggles close to me, wrapping his hands around my waist and spooning. Kissing the back of my neck.

"Are you awake?" He asks, his voice soft. The kiss making my body zing.

"I'm awake," I whisper and turn around in bed, he shifts back a bit to give me room and then I face him. Our heads were the only parts of our bodies over the sheet.

“Good morning,” I greet him with a smile and he leans forward and kisses my forehead and my lips.

“Good morning love,” he replies and I knew then that I was in trouble. I was falling so hard and there was nothing to break my fall. If he pulled a stunt like last time, I wouldn’t be able to pretend or even survive this time.

“How was your night?” I ask. Kissing him too, snuggling closer to him as we faced each other. We were both naked under the sheets and I could feel his morning wood against my stomach, making it hard for me to draw in breath.

Not this morning! I have to go get Sarah ready, but my goodness, how I wanted it!

“Oh, it was excellent. I slept beside this extremely beautiful woman and I could not believe it. I kept waking up to check if she was still there and you wouldn’t guess it?”

“Tell me?” I reply, grinning.

“She’s still here. She’s real, not an imaginary bubble.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, mermaid man, but I’m leaving. I have to go to work.”

“Work?” He asks. Raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, believe it or not, I work for your daughter, not you and my mistress has to be ready for school.”

I slide out of the bed, taking the sheets with me and smiling more than my facial muscles can take.

How am I this happy? I’m so happy. My goodness.

“Are you sure you can’t stay for just a little while?” He groans from the bed, staring at me. His naked body imprinting itself in my thoughts. Muscles body with a light sheen of sweat, there was nothing on him. His morning wood goes up and down, poking the air. His large arms flex with his palms under his head and a smile on his face like he knew what he was doing and he did.

I wanted to taste all of that but I’d be late. My mouth feels dry and my hands tighten around the sheet as I hold it up. I

could see myself sitting on him. His shaft hitting all the pleasure spots on my insides while my nails drew lines down his chest and I moaned his name.

Quit with that! I groan on the inside, my nipples already puckering, I swallow and turn away.

“I can’t stay. Don’t think all of that is going to tempt me because it has no effect whatsoever on me. Out here thinking you’re hot shit.”

“Ouch,” he replies and I grin where he couldn’t see.

“This is how to tempt someone,” I tell him and let the sheet drop. Watching him, making sure my eyes were on him and he couldn’t take his eyes off me as I walk into the bathroom. He gets up from the bed as I close the door on his face before he can get in, laughing in pure pleasure.

“Are you going to come back?” He asks, still on the other side of the door.

“You want me to?” I ask, barely breathing, still smiling and unable to stop.

“I won’t go to work, I’ll stay home today,” he replies.

“Really?”

“Yeah, let’s spend time together.”

He wanted to spend time together? My mind feels as if it would split. I try to control my voice as I reply. I wanted to be cautious but it was so hard, I was being swept off my feet and it was happening so easily.

“Okay, I’ll just finish up with Sarah and I’ll be back.”



WHEN I CAME BACK after Sarah is in school, I find him in his room, working on something on his laptop and fully clothed this time.

“Hey, I’m back,” I tell him, holding my breath and wondering if he still wanted me around.

“Took you long enough,” he replies without turning and I grin.

“I’m still going to leave. I have to go see my brother in the hospital.”

He turns then and watches me sit on the bed. I was back in my clothes after wearing his to go get Sarah ready. I didn’t bring them back though, they were mine now.

“How many places are you going today?” He asks.

I shrug, laughing. “I haven’t seen him in a while. He needs me. More than you.”

“Lies. Tell me about him.”

My heart almost goes out of sync. *He wanted to know about me? About my brother. Was this really happening? I still could not believe that he felt the same way as me. I wouldn’t believe it till I heard it from his lips but what is this?*

“You want to know about my brother?” I ask hesitantly.

He laughs at the look on my face and stands from the chair and moves over to the bed, his massive height towering over me as I sat. He sits beside me, our bodies touching.

“Is it so unbelievable I’d want to know more about you?” He asks. His voice soft.

I smile and shake my head, I wasn’t sure my lips would work at that time.

“Alright then, I’m listening,” he replies and puts a hand around my waist.

Someone wake me up!

“First off, he’s not really my brother.”

“He’s not?”

“Yeah, he’s my cousin. My parents took him in after both of his parents died in a car accident. It was so long ago. I was young then too. He’s always been my little brother since then though. We’ve practically grown up as brother and sister. The kidney issues are not new too. It’s like it’s messing with us. He

was getting better. In fact he got so much better and we were all happy and now he's like this again. They are going to put us on a waitlist to get a transplant soon but it makes me so scared any time I think about it. Mom and dad are doing their best and I'm trying to do the same. I have to show up for him even if it's the only thing I can do."

"Your family sounds supportive, I like to hear of those, it makes me happy, a bit sad but happy. What do you mean by they are going to? Have they not already?"

I don't want to tell him this, plus what he'd just said now about supportive families. I remembered what his assistant had said the other day when Chad tried to assault me at my house.

I look away, wondering what I was going to say.

"Liliane? Why aren't you saying anything?" He asked.

I didn't want to make it seem like I was asking him for the money. I knew he could have it in an instant, and if I told him then... Are you going to let your pride stand in the way of potentially getting treatment for your brother?

My heart skips at that.

"We can't afford the payment, we can't be placed on the list because none of us are covered by insurance and so we can't make the payments."

"None of you have any insurance?" he asks, suddenly alert. "What if something happened to you?"

I grin, a little bit confused about what to say.

"I don't know, but we're still alive, are we not?"

"And you've been working all these odd jobs all these while? At bars and restaurants and the like? Anything could happen."

"Well, it's not like I had a choice. It's the hand I was dealt, I can't complain."

I should have stopped but I didn't. Something made me tell him of all the times I'd worked at all those places. All the things that happened. It was always hard since dad lost his job

long ago but the only people who knew even a tiny bit of what I went through were Amy and Alex and here I was telling him everything about how much I'd struggled to get to where I was in life.

He nods at the end, saying nothing else.

“How about you? Would you tell me about yourself? What did you mean by *you love to see a family that supports each other?*” I ask.

For a long moment, he doesn't say a word, and I wait, giving him time but noticing that his arm wrapped around me has begun to shake a little.

Was it that bad? I think, and see that he noticed that I'd noticed. He takes his arm away, folding it in front of him. It hurt me more than I could believe it would have. That arm was comfort. *Why didn't he trust me to comfort him in the same way?*

“I'm sorry, Leslie. I want to tell you but those memories are too, too fresh. No matter how long ago they were.”

I nod, understanding. I didn't want to rush him. He could take his time. I was ready to tell, whenever he was ready to tell too, that worked for me.

Still, it hurt me too much.

“Alright, time to go see Brian,” I tell him, my voice cracking no matter how hard I tried to keep it steady.

“Alright,” he replies and raises a hand to my cheeks. A soft whoosh of breath escapes my lips as he turns me to face him and places a kiss on my lips.

“I'm really happy this morning, Leslie, I can't begin to explain to you how happy I am. It's like I don't have a single care in the world. I want this, Leslie. It may not seem so but I do. I don't know about you but I'd like to explore these things I'm feeling. I hope you understand I'm not trying to or going to push you away anymore.”

Is this real? I ask myself for the hundredth time as his lips close around mine again. His hand caresses my cheeks and

softly presses against my ear lobe with his thumb and forefinger.

A soft moan escapes my lips straight to his and then he breaks the kiss, giving me a peck on my cheeks.

“You’ve got to go see Brian and I’ve got an annoying workday to get through before I can come back to you and Sarah. Godspeed to both of us.”

“Godspeed indeed,” I reply with a laugh. “Although, mine is going to be a fun time. Brian and my girls. The perfect day. I might not even come back.”

He rolls his eyes.

Adam Evans, the billionaire energy enthusiast rolled his eyes! The world could end now. I’ve seen all there is to see. There is nothing left.

“How are you getting around? You could take one of the cars. I got them delivered from the office to the house. Take any of them you like. Keep it if you want.”

Err what? Is this man giving me a car on a whim?

“I can keep it?” I reply slowly, the shock is showing on my face, with my open lips and wide eyes, no matter how I tried to hide it.

“Yeah, so pick well,” he replies with a wink and then stands to go to the bathroom.

“Billionaires!” I mutter under my breath but I can’t stop smiling. That happy feeling when someone you know you were falling for admitted the very same thing. The world around me was turning into a beautiful pink painting. Everything glowed. Everything was beautiful.

ADAM

On the way to the office, I'm grinning. That's never a good sign, but did I care? Not one bit.

The car rolls past the streets and I spend time looking at the projections for increase in production and yield for opening new factories in the southwest. The numbers were looking good and it's put me in an even better mood. I'm humming to myself, nothing could break the good feeling rushing through my veins right now.

We're getting to the office when I get a call and pick up my phone to see that Marcus is calling.

"Marcus, what's up?" I drop the smile and assume a straight face before the mirth gets into my voice.

"Oh, nothing much. Monica Rosso is going to be in our offices today, so I assume we are going to close the deal today, yeah? You know, a kiss and a playful slap somewhere or the other. Do you follow?"

Today? She's coming today of all days. What happened to her playing hard to get and visiting all the cities of Europe in one week?

"I didn't know she was still in the city," I reply hesitantly. My brain rushes in so many different directions. It wasn't like Leslie and I were dating or anything like that. We enjoyed each other's company. We liked each other and we've had sex a couple of times but we're both adults. Did that mean anything?

“How’s that important? What’s important is that she’s coming to us. She’s no longer waiting for us to get to her. I’m sure she’s gotten tired of playing the waiting game. This just shows how much she wants you, man. I’m sure you’re on your way. We can discuss next steps this morning. I’ll prepare the files and include the amount we’re asking from her too. Is that okay?”

I sigh quietly. Life never allowed you to have easy or happy days. Never wanted you to have those ‘walk in the park’ situations. It should be an easy choice. A simple choice.

It didn’t feel that way though. Something beautiful might be about to begin between Leslie and me. And if I got with Monica then I’d be giving up whatever beauty I would have had with Leslie and getting back to a relationship that I knew is toxic. Toxic to both parties in fact.

There goes the happy ‘take-it-easy’ mood I had left the house in. Marcus and Monica.

I get to the office and take the elevator, after saying hi to Wayne who helped me park. My office is warm and smells faintly of lavender blossoms. Whoever picked this scent needed a raise.

A coffee sits on my desk and I take a sip and then a gulp. Rubbing my hands and settling on my desk. I prop open my computer to check if Marcus sent in the projections and sure enough, he had. The man was too efficient.

I began to look through it when there’s a knock on the other side and he comes in, his pad in his hands and a determined look on his face.

“How are you doing, Adam?”

I shrug, taking another sip of my coffee.

“I’m sitting here thinking that whoever made me this coffee and put this scent in needs a raise,” I reply.

“That should be Letisha. Done. She’ll receive her raise from this week.”

I raised the mug to him and take another sip.

He sits on the other side and drops the pad on the table, his eyes brimming with eagerness as he rubs his hands too.

“So, today is the day. One small step for man, one big jump, I think, for humanity.”

“What are you on about?”

“The deal, Marcus, we close the deal today.” He spreads his arms out, grinning from ear to ear. “She’s on her way to the office right now. Her assistant. The latest, texted me.”

“What, she fired another of those?” I ask, grateful to find an avenue to change the subject and taking another sip of my coffee to cover up the fact that I jerked when he mentioned she was on her way.

Everything is happening so fast. Give me a moment to breathe, dammit!

“That’s seven in the last year. They don’t even last a month. This last one lasted three months though. She seems tough and I hear she doesn’t smile. Not for anything. Monica loves it. Try to include her in the conversation. Let me check my files for her name.”

“If she doesn’t smile and keeps a serious face, how do you intend I include her in the conversation, Marcus?” I asked.

“Oh you know, say random slapstick stuff to her. How’s the weather? Did you catch the Pistons game? Did you see how Real Madrid dominated Barcelona?”

I stared at him, confusion written on my forehead.

“First of all, who cares about the pistons, second, what are those last two? Are those soccer teams from Europe? Again, who cares?”

“Exactly!” He replies with a smug grin on his face. “Just try it and trust me. Whatever happens, we close this deal today. *Today.*”

“You’re more invested in it than I am.” I take a last sip of coffee and set down the mug. *Thank you Letisha.*

Then I found myself staring at the messages on my phone from when Leslie dropped Sarah off at school. She's taken the Lamborghini Aventador and she took so many pictures. A young people thing. They always took more pictures than necessary.

I stare at them, laughing, zoning out of whatever Marcus is saying and just grinning as I scroll from picture to picture. Sarah gives me victory signs and poses with Leslie. There was even a video of the two of them dancing and wishing me a good day at work. They fit so well together. Instantly they'd connected and now we're the best of friends. Somehow it felt like Sarah didn't need me anymore.

Look at me getting jealous all over again.

I scroll to the next one, Sarah smiling with dimples on both sides of her cheeks as she shows me the carrots in her lunch. Princesses have to eat healthy too, Leslie captioned the video.

"You know, someday Sarah's going to grow up and not need your sappy sorry ass anymore and I don't know what you're going to do then, probably take up skateboarding or something."

I jerk back to the present. The words then register in my head and I glare at Marcus who's standing over me.

"The moment you stopped answering, I knew you'd gone back to Sarah."

"She's the most important thing in my life."

"Agreed," he replies, then bends and wraps an arm around my shoulders, pointing at my laptop screen where the projections, along with Monica's money pumped in, were displayed.

"See that though, that is the second most important thing in your life. That is what will enable you to keep giving your babies Lamborghini Aventadors to drive."

I snicker, shaking my head. "Why did that sound salty?"

"Cause I want one too, it's only fair."

"Buy one then, Marcus, you have the money."

His pad dings before he can reply.

“She’s here,” he tells me and my heart begins to beat a little faster.

“Let’s get this deal done and dusted!” He tells me, patting my shoulders before going to fetch them.

I’m not so sure about that, Marcus. I’m not so sure I want to throw away whatever is developing between me and Leslie for this. I need those billions but I also need happiness.



MONICA GLIDED, no, *breezed* into the office. She never seemed to just walk like the rest of us normal human beings. That would be too mundane for her tastes.

Her red hair and red lip gloss stands out against her tanned white skin, her dress a black number that accentuated every inch of her curves. She looked divine. There really was no other word that could be used to describe Monica, apart from divine.

I stood from my chair, a smile on my face to cover up a soft wince. She always brought on those feelings. Memories of times we spent and the way I felt in those days. I could never go past them completely, no matter how much I tried.

Her secretary walks in behind her and Marcus was right. The woman looked like she’d never smiled a day in her life. Tall and rail thin, she carried her figure well, wearing high waisted jeans and stilettos.

Marcus walks in behind them, a smile pasted on his face.

“Monica,” I greet her warmly, leaving my side of the table to come over to her side and envelop her in a hug. Her scent fills my nostrils, like warm musky chocolate, inviting you to take a bite. One bite that wouldn’t hurt, one bite that could lead to another. I let go quickly.

“Adam, it’s been too long since we saw each other at the art gallery,” she replies, holding my hands so I can’t let go.

Looking down at her gave me a view of her very ample breasts and I could not turn away.

“I thought you’d left the city, you know, back to your tour of Europe?”

“Oh, no, silly. I have business in the states. I can’t leave till it’s finished now, can I?”

“I suppose not,” I reply and pull myself free, turning away from those breasts of hers, walking back to my side of the table and taking a seat as she and her assistant sat.

“I see you have a new assistant,” I say next, not sure of how to continue but to ask that. I look at the woman and nod. She nods back to me. Her expression never changing.

“Three months old this one is. I think we might have found a good working relationship.”

“Bubbly to plain?” I ask without thinking about it and Marcus’ mouth opens.

To my credit, the woman’s face breaks in a small smile and Monica notices, gasping.

“That’s the first time anyone has gotten a smile from her. You’re incredible, Adam.”

“I am, it’s true,” I reply, without breaking face.

Monica grins at my reply and shakes her head. “So, have you thought about what we talked about? I’ve been sleeping and waking up looking for your text and nothing. I had to come by myself to check if you were still alive and well.”

“Oh, I’m alive and well, Monica. I just have a lot going on.”

She tuts softly and turns to her assistant. “Men! He followed me around Europe and ran after me like a pup with a wagging tail when I got to the city. Even buying one of Ernesto’s paintings just to please me and now he wants to act like it’s not something he’s thinking of at the moment.”

The assistant nods sympathetically. “Men,” she says knowingly and both of them turn to me. I glance at Marcus

and then back to them both.

What in the creepy abandoned American town was that?

“Ummh. Yeah,” I reply, the only thing I can think to say.

“Why are you hesitating? I know that’s what you’re doing, Adam. Aren’t you happy to get your idea over the line? You know I don’t care about the amount you want to use. My family’s trust right now is, how much is it?” She turns to the assistant.

“One hundred and five billion dollars,” she replies coolly.

Marcus whistles in appreciation.

“Gives me a headache, that number,” she says with a grin. “All of that is yours, Adam. I don’t give one fig about it. You know it’s all mine. My brother tossed off and died. It’s just my mom and me now and she’s hounding me for a kid to inherit the family fortune. I’d just sooner as leave it to Gigi—”

“Your chihuahua?” Marcus asks, eyes popping at the back.

“Of course,” Monica replies, sitting back in her chair with a weary sigh.

“Gigi has always been there for me. Unlike some other people.”

“Adam, what’s the holdup? I don’t even want you totally to myself. I know you’re a different man now. You’ll have your flings here and there but can’t you do all of that and still come home to me. An open relationship, the kids are calling it. I don’t mind that.”

Marcus nods at the back, giving me the double thumbs up.

Why was I hesitating? It made so much sense. There was no reason to stay and think about it for so long. An open relationship. I could still be with Leslie, it wasn’t like any of us kidded ourselves that it could go past where it was. We were both adults having fun.

This again? You know it’s just an excuse. Ask yourself if you don’t want it to get far then if you can answer yes without blinking, go ahead!

I couldn't do that.

It was a novel. I didn't remember liking someone this much since Monica who sat in front of me now. I'd been fighting it and was still fighting it even now. I didn't want to admit to myself how much. Seeing her playing with Sarah, seeing how much peace I felt when she lay beside me. The way I slept so peacefully till morning. Didn't it all make sense to see where this was going?

It made sense not to do anything that could ruin it. Monica sleeping beside me just didn't sound right and somehow I already knew that if I began messing around with Monica then it would be the end of Leslie and me. She was that kind of girl. She didn't take nonsense. She didn't care who you were. I knew that already.

"I'm sorry, I need a drink of water," I mutter and stand in a rush, leaving the office before any of them can think to reply or say anything.

I stand at the far end of the corridor. I'd gone past so many water dispensers but I needed to be far away.

Adam, you're throwing away one hundred and five billion dollars!

The crazy thing was I didn't feel any regret. I really was about to reject Monica that I'd been chasing for months. I was about to reject an open check to her family fortune, and her arms and I didn't mind. My company's future, thousands of jobs for Americans. Free and affordable energy for homes? All of that, gone? For Leslie? I'm about to throw it all away.

One hundred and five billion dollars?

All the dreams of the engineers and scientists working on my idea that was now ninety-nine percent complete. All of that? For Leslie.

One hundred and five billion dollars, all of it going to who? Gigi the chihuahua?

I take a drink of water, trying to breathe.

What are you doing to me, Leslie!

“Adam, what the hell is going on?” Marcus asks when he finds me, I’d just taken a gulp of water and loosened my tie.

“You look like shit!” He folds his hands across his chest.

“Thank you for the visual assessment.”

“What’s going on man? Everything is a cinch. She wants you. An open relationship, all the models you want, for as long as you shall live. She just wants you and you accept her, you get one hundred and five billion dollars, Marcus, one hundred and five billion dollars. What else could a man need?”

Real love? A family?

Those were the things Leslie was offering, were they not? A family, an actual family of my own. Me, Leslie and Sarah. The family I always dreamed and hoped for. Always wanted. And love, the type Monica couldn’t give me. Those looks. Those looks that told you that you were the only thing that mattered in the world. Kisses in the mornings and happy easy fun. Wasn’t that all a man needed?

“Adam, what’s the holdup? We’re about to lose one hundred and five billion to Gigi, and no disrespect to her, may she live long, but she’s a chihuahua!”

“Is that so bad, I haven’t seen any chihuahua charities you know, it feels like they’re being marginalized.”

Marcus glares, “This is serious man!”

He stares for a while then he gasps, pointing.

“You weren’t looking at Sarah, earlier were you? It wasn’t Sarah, it’s that nanny. Lavender. I know she smells of lavender, I’ve passed beside her before. It’s why you were happy this morning. You’re sleeping with the nanny.”

“Damn you and your detective brain,” I mutter.

“Oh Adam, you want to throw it all away for her? This is the wrong time to go foolish for pussy.”

“Don’t do that, don’t refer to her with disrespect.”

“Adam, we’ve been chasing this goal all our lives. Forget the fact that we finally just got the idea. When you began the

company, what was the ideal? Clean and affordable energy for all Americans. Energy, the one thing that propels a civilization. You told me that. You said you wanted to bring an end to the age of stagnation. Have you forgotten all of that?”

“I haven’t forgotten, Marcus, and I’ll still do it. I’ll just have to find another way.”

“There’s no other way, and you better stop thinking with your dick before you lose everything.” With that he walks away, leaving me by the dispenser.

LESLIE

The previous week was one of the best of my life. Every day was spent with Adam and Sarah and outings with my friends.

I'm making dinner while I think about it. I wanted to make something nice for both of us so we could all stay in Sarah's room and eat it together while we caught up with each other. Adam's duties were keeping him away from home for long but he stayed back as best as he could. It made Marcus, his assistant, frosty towards me but I didn't mind. It showed the man was diligent enough that he wouldn't let Adam slack more than he should.

The last time I'd gone to see Brian, I'd taken the Lamborghini. First, I had dropped Sarah off at school, making sure to take a lot of pictures to send to Adam. Then I went to pick up the girls. They were at Amy's place and Ryan was with them. We were all going to see Brian, and Ryan was coming along because we'd not gotten the chance to meet him again since. Alex and I were going to give him the business.

I get to Amy's house and park outside, when I step out of the car and I hear a few whistles. I grin.

"Yep, this is definitely the good life," I say to myself as I ring the bell under Amy's house number. Number five.

"Hey, Leslie?"

"Who else fool!" I reply, laughing.

“So rude,” she replies and clicks the door open. I push the door and enter the waiting area downstairs. They had two large ferns and an old gray sofa that needed changing. I walk to the elevator and make my way to the second floor.

Alex was waiting for me at the door.

“Girl, you better not be the one who parked a Lamborghini outside because I’m going to go crazy.”

“Is there anyone else fly enough to park a Lamborghini in this building but me?” I ask.

“Girl what?” She screams and rushes at me. “You did not park a Lamborghini. Y’all, Ryan and Amy, y’all ride in your whatever it is you drive. Is it a Picanto? I can’t remember. I’m riding in the Lambo with Leslie! Don’t you like need a different kind of license to drive that stuff?” She asks, still hugging me and lifting me up.

Amy stands by the door.

“Please get inside the house, I have neighbors,” she cries.

“It’s a white neighborhood, they scream in hushed tones,” Alex replies with a whisper and I roll my eyes.

Amy closes the door when I get in then she looks at me seriously.

“Leslie, you’re going to let me drive that like for five minutes, yes?”

“Are you kidding? We’re all going to take turns,” Alex replies and then they both begin to laugh and tell me where we’re driving it too.

“Wait? I’ve got a question,” Amy asks and we all quiet down to listen.

“Okay?” Alex asks.

“When are you getting a black card, you know, one of those ones that will allow us to enter stores like Givenchy or Yves Saint Laurent?”

Alex nods enthusiastically and gives her a high five.

“Yes, when?” She asks.

“In forty-five years you fools, I’m selling off this Lamborghini to pay Brian’s medical bills.”

“Why don’t you just ask Adam?” Amy asks and Alex nods, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m not going to just start asking for stuff because I’m sleeping with him.”

“I’m sorry, Adam Evans, the billionaire?” Ryan asks.

We all turn at the same time to look at him and he wilts under the force of our looks.

“I’m sorry, I’ll just sit here and disappear.”

“Oh yeah, I totally forgot that Amy’s boyfriend is here,” Alex says. “He’s grown a bit taller too and he’s been working out. Come see.”

Ryan goes red at once, looking at Amy for help but she just grins and stands back for us to look at him.

“Well, don’t be shy, stand up so she can take a look,” Alex urges him, clapping her hands.

He stands up and raises his hands. His shirt tight around his huge biceps.

“Woah,” I say before I can stop it.

He’s dressed in a white tee and black cargo pants. His dirty blond hair is neatly combed. He looks like a better, more controlled version of the Ryan I knew from the last time. It’s cool to see that he’s matured a lot. Amy deserved that, she didn’t need the same issues from before anymore.

“Way to go Ryan, so you broke Amy’s heart so you could hit the gym.”

“It’s not like that,” he mutters, falling over his words.

“It’s okay, I’m just messing with you. I’m glad you’re back to your senses. Don’t you dare make her cry again. I’ll sic Henry on you if you try it.”

“Who’s Henry?” He asks.

“One of Adam’s guards, he has arms the size of tree trunks and he smiles nicely but he’s a savage. He’d break your bones in two. He lifted Chad up like the man was a rag doll. He didn’t even grunt. He just smiled while doing it,” Alex replies, miming broken bones and smiling sweetly.

Ryan swallows. “Sounds like a nice guy.”

“Alright, let’s get this party started! Brian’s been waiting I’m sure.” Amy says from the back.

“Yep, let’s go. Me and you in the Lambo right now. Let’s go meet our baby brother.”

“Are you guys sure it’s alright for me to come?” Ryan asks, looking at Amy.

She bobs her head. “Of course, it’s alright. You’ll fit right in. There’s no problem. We’ll do all the talking, you just need to be nice.”

I point at her and nod. “What she said.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

All through the ride, Alex can’t stop screaming and dancing. Making videos while I drive and playing the music at the highest volume possible. We vibe till we got to the hospital, only to find out that Amy and Ryan got there before us.

“Girl, how slow were you driving that thing?” Alex asks, pursing her lips and giving me a disgusted stare.

“Excuse you, you were the one asking me to be careful.”

“Be careful though. There was a *‘though’* in the sentence.”

Amy grins, and took both our hands. “Come on, sometimes the Picanto is just faster, it’s no biggie.”

Ryan grins but one look from both of us has him raising his hands in surrender.

We all crowd the elevator, chatting and laughing on our way to Brian’s room. We ask Ryan to help us get some cranberry juice. When we got to Brian’s room, he was staring out the window, again.

We crowd the door, none of us opening it, just watching him through the glass.

“Does he always stare into space like that?” Amy asks.

“Most of the time, yes. If he’s not using his phone.”

“Damn, that’s tough. Let’s see if he turns.”

We wait, hoping he’ll turn when Ryan arrives with the drinks.

“Is this the room, why are you guys just standing outside then?” He asks, grabbing the doorknob and sliding the door open with the drinks and snacks in one big bag, clutched to his chest.

“Oh help me God, I’m going to murder him!” I cry as Brian turns.

“Leslie!” He calls, a grin splitting his face into two.

I turn to him and give him a big smile back.

“Hey big guy, what’s going on!” I walk into the room, punching Ryan on the shoulder. It hurts me more than it hurts him and I glare at him even more.

Brian pops up on the bed and gives me a hug.

“Don’t forget us,” Alex calls from the back, getting in with Amy and adding themselves to our hug until it becomes one big mighty hug. We crush each other for almost five minutes till Brian begs to be set free.

“Please, let me go. I’m all hugged out!”

Finally Amy and Alex let go.

“What crazy daredevil stuff have you been up to lately?” Alex asks, punching the air beside his face repeatedly.

Brian shrugs. “You know me, I’ve just been taking it easy, trying to stay under the radar and all.”

“What? The greatest daredevil since Evel Knievel is going under the radar? I can’t take this sort of heartbreak.”

Brian snorts, “And what of you? What have you done?”

Alex and I look at each other and then sit back on the bed.

“Well...” Alex begins dramatically.

“If you must know...” I continue, both of us touching our hair and cleaning off imaginary dirt from our shoulders with suave looks on our faces as we sit on the bed.

“What?” Brian asks curiously.

“Should I tell him?” I ask.

“No, no. Let me do the honors,” Alex replies, holding out her hand to Ryan who was setting out the snacks on the little table. He takes her hand and helps her stand. Even giving it a little kiss and bowing.

Way to pass the vibe check, Ryan!

“Well, if you must know, we drove here in a Lambo.”

“Pull up in a monster, automobile gangsta—” Alex begins.

“With a bad b that came from Sri Lanka,” I finish along with Amy and Brian.

“You’re kidding?” He asks.

I show him the car keys.

“You’re not kidding!”

“I’m not,” I reply as Amy passed out cranberry juice boxes to everyone.

“It’s a celebratory moment right now,” she says. “We’re toasting to the new Lambo!”

“This is going to give me so many perks with nurse Selene,” Brian says with a laugh as he gets his juice box.

“You better hurry, your fool sister is about to sell off the Lambo to help pay your medical bills.”

“What?”

I open my juice box, piercing it with a straw and grinning as I raise the box for a group cheers. They all join me with Brian giving me the nasty eyes.

“Here’s to family, cause that’s what you all are. Except Ryan, he’s on probation.”

“Cheers!” We chorus, laughing and drinking. I sit on the chair, checking the time to make sure it wasn’t time to get Sarah from school and partaking in our conversation and games. Brian was as happy as he could be. The girls always had a way of making him so happy. Ryan was forming a strong bond too. The man was holding his own against Amy and Alex, that wasn’t easy to do.

I sip my juice quietly.

There’s suddenly so much to be thankful for in my life and I don’t know how it all happened so fast.

Adam’s words from this morning ring in my head. I could never forget them.

I’m really happy this morning, Leslie, I can’t begin to explain to you how happy I am. It’s like I don’t have a single care in the world. I want this, Leslie. It may not seem so but I do. I don’t know about you but I’d like to explore these things I feel. I hope you understand that I’m not trying to or going to push you away anymore.

Inject straight into my bloodstream.

My phone begins to ring, and I search my bag for it, checking everywhere but not finding it.

“Are you going to get that?” Alex asks.

“I’m still trying to find my phone!” I reply, checking everywhere until I find myself in the kitchen, gasping at the smell of my meat almost burning.

I rushed to the cooker and turned it off.

Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to send all the chefs off on an early rest day! Especially as you can’t stop replaying all your happy memories from the week.

I grin as I got two mittens and got the meat off the stove. Keeping it to one side and cleaning my hands.

The phone continues to ring shrilly where I'd propped it on and after I cleaned my hands on my apron. Red apron like most of the utensils. Whoever put this kitchen together was a stickler for color codes. It wasn't bad though, it would be the perfect kitchen for a vlog.

I pick up the phone.

It was my mom.

"Mom, what's happening?"

"It's Brian, Leslie! He's gone over the edge. They have to make the transplant happen right now. They are rushing him to the operating room soon. Preparing him as we speak."

What? What?

My ears begin to ring and a cold tingling feeling rushes down my spine.

Emergency room? He'd gotten worse? When did this happen? Both times I saw him this week, he was okay. How on earth did this happen?

"Leslie, are you there?"

"Yes Mom, I'm still here," I reply, my voice low, I couldn't come up with more. My lips are trembling and my hands are shaking. I try to pinch my thighs several times to keep my cool but it wasn't working.

Operation. They are going to tear him open. Oh goodness.

The mental image almost splits my brain into two. I gasp, holding a hand to cover my trembling lips and trying to stop the bile from rising. Everything around me is getting a little fuzzy.

Am I supposed to be breathing this fast?

"Come as fast as you can, Leslie. Your dad is coming too. He's getting here. I'm all alone and I'm scared Leslie," she tells me and it doesn't help one bit.

He's going to be cut open!

My eyes were wide and the phone drops from my hands, I try to snatch at it, my heart jumping in my chest.

I missed!

It clatters against the ground, the sound so loud that I close my ears with my hands.

What's happening?

Little fingers of black coiling fear are seeping into my chest, bringing along with them whips of pain that coiled around me. The fuzziness around me grows. I'm breathing too fast. Too fast. Pinching myself didn't make it stop, pinching myself just made the pain across my chest worse.

I need to call someone. Adam!

I reach for my phone, trying to bend to it. For one long moment, it seems like all the blood was flowing up to my brain.

Breathe slow, breathe slow! I tried to urge myself but it isn't working. My phone was cracked but the screen still worked, I manage to dial Adam. I was on the floor and I couldn't remember how I got there. I was breathing so fast now that each breath was a large gulp and a spreading blot of darkness formed at the edges of my vision.

“Leslie, hello, are you okay? Why are you panting?”

“Brian, they've, they—” *what was I about to say? Operation? Yes—* “Operation. I can't breathe Adam.”

Maybe I should just close my eyes. It made sense. Just close my eyes. I... someone screams from far away.

“Leslie, Leslie, are you there? I'm coming. Where are you?” The voice asks.

I thought I had answered but I might not have. The pain was too much, I close my eyes and darkness comes.

ADAM

“I think she fainted,” I tell Marcus as I grab my laptop from the table and close it, putting it into my bag.

“Who fainted?” He asks, looking at me from his side of the table, his feet still up.

“Who do you think I was talking to just now?” I ask, still zipping the bag up. My heart pounding in my chest.

How did Brian’s condition worsen so suddenly? He’d been doing well all this time.

“I’d have hoped above all things you were talking to Monica but we both know it wasn’t her,” he replies as he drags his legs down from the table, sighing as he goes.

I glare at him while I pack everything I needed to get, forcing myself to take it easy and not rush then forget something like car keys.

“Leslie fainted,” I reply, enunciating every word to make sure he understood the importance of what was going on.

“And we are talking about the projections for our southwest production plants and how to increase the yields.”

“Later,” I reply, gritting my teeth. He’s really pissing me off.

Leslie please be fine. I’m on my way, I’ll be there soon!

I storm out of the office and Marcus scrambles to get up, chasing after me.

“Adam, why don’t you have the guards help her out. There’s Henry, what’s he doing? He’s right there. Wouldn’t he get her to the hospital faster than you? We have important work to do here.”

“I’ve already told Henry to make sure he gets her to the hospital. We’re going straight there.”

The look I give him was one that called for silence but he ignores it as we walk past the logo on the wall, our feet making dull clicking sounds on the floor. Almost everyone had left the building after the end of the work day. My hands are itching and I feel like running but I kept it together.

She’ll be fine, she’ll be fine, I repeat over and over to myself.

She’s strong. I grin at that, she’s indeed strong. She’d make it out of this.

“And why can’t Henry stay with her or her family while we work? Monica was gracious enough to give you more time to think about your decision. Why are you doing this, why are you throwing it all away?”

My hand tightens on my back as I got to the elevator. The man has been yapping in my ear all week. Only the fact that we went back to day one kept him in a job.

“Someone fainted Marcus and you’re still on this?” I could not look at him, I’d punch him in the face if I did. I looked straight ahead instead. Almost bouncing with the need for the elevator to go faster than it was going. Who knew how precious every single second we had was. Henry kept me posted with messages dinging on my phone.

We’ve left the house boss, we’re on our way to the hospital now.

“Don’t you see what’s going on Adam, all week you’ve been coming later and later to work. Before this week you’ve never been late in twenty-plus years—”

Shut up!

“—but I’ve been coming to get you from home for the entire week.—”

Shut up!

“—Not even the birth of your daughter made you come late. I don’t know what this girl has done to you but you have to snap out of it.—”

Shut up!

“—You’re going to lose everything. Everything we worked so hard to build! You’re already losing the plot. It’s not too late to turn it around!”

Shut up!

I turn to him, seething, my hands held in fists so tight, I was sure a vein would pop somewhere.

“When did you become so heartless?” I ask turning away as the elevator opens and I rush out, I didn’t mind who saw me running anymore. I needed to get to the car.

“I’m not heartless, I’m protecting your assets and mine. We have a chance to be the future. Something that could put your fortune in the four hundred billion mark. The first human to ever get there. It could put me in a couple of billions too. Set my family up for life. All the people working for us would see massive changes in fortune and you’re just throwing it all away!”

The tight reign I held on to my anger cracked and fell away and a growl escaped my lips. I was moving before I realized it.

I turn and slam him against the wall, my fist clutching his shirt and holding him up against the wall.

His eyes are wide and his arms held up by the side, his pad falls to the ground and cracks.

“I’ve heard all of this more than five times since the start of the week. Repeat it one more time and you’re gone, understood?”

“Understood,” he replies, staring at me in disbelief.

“Send me the invoice for your pad, I’m sorry,” I tell him and let him go.

What did I just do?

“I’m sorry, Marcus. You’re here to tell me the truth. Just maybe wait till we can see that she’s okay. Is that fair?”

“Fair enough,” he replies coldly, arranging his suit.

I nod and we’re on the move again.

I’m coming, Leslie.



WE GET to the hospital and I get out of the car, rushing up to the room where Henry told me she was. I knew this was the same hospital where her family was and I’d go find them, but first I just needed to make sure she was fine.

I find Henry on the fourth floor, with Marcus tagging silently behind him. This floor had rooms with slightly cream-colored walls and lots of leafy plants like the waiting room downstairs. A faint fruity scent hung in the air.

Henry stands outside her door waiting. It was the same hospital I’d come to before so there was an uproar when a few people noticed that it was me running through the corridors.

“Is she okay?” I ask Henry and he nods at once.

“She’s fine, boss, the doctor says she’s stable. It was just shocking, I think. I have her phone.”

Whew. I could breathe now.

He reaches into his pocket and takes out the phone. I nod to him, tapping him on the shoulder.

“Thank you Henry, thank you.” I tell him and look past him through the cut out in the door to see her lying on the bed peacefully. She wasn’t awake yet and her eyes are closed. Her chest rising and falling gently. I open the door and walk into the room, closing it behind me before Marcus can think about entering. It didn’t seem right to have him in here too.

I walk over to the bed, looking at the small plastic table beside it and the little lamp that looked like a flower petal. She'd love to wake up and see that. I drop both our phones on the table and settle beside her on the bed. It depresses and creaks but holds our weight.

She looks so peaceful as she sleeps. Her chest rising and falling softly. The strands of her hair blowing out and falling down. I move them after, taking care not to brush against her skin too much.

She's so beautiful. So beautiful and at peace.

I was smiling and did not notice. I lean forward and place a kiss on her cheek, and another one on her forehead.

I didn't care about whatever Marcus said, I'd find a way to get everyone settled but I can't give up Leslie.

"I'll protect you from here on out. You and anyone dear to you. I won't let you go," I whisper, leaning forward and taking her hand, twinning my fingers in hers and holding on to her. I didn't want to leave even to find Brian and her family.

Her phone still looked like it was working, I could call her friends. I reach for it, still holding on to her and not wanting to move.

I get the phone and get it open, going to her phone book I search for Amy. I find an "Amy baby" and call it.

"Hey Leslie, how are you? Done cooking?"

"This is Adam Evans," I reply simply.

"Oh—"

"Please come to the hospital where Brian's at. Leslie fainted and Brian is about to go into surgery. I need you and Alex to come stay with her. Be on your way at once. I'll text you her room number. Just tell the guard outside you're her friend. She's stable so you don't need to worry. Get here as fast as you can."

"Ummh, what—"

I cut the call and send her the number, then put the phone on silent so her calls won't disturb the line. People couldn't just control themselves and you couldn't blame them. We all do crazy things for people we love.

Does that mean I love her then? I had put my hands on my friend, something I'd never done, because of her.

It was a scary thought. No matter how much I wanted it and I realized that I did want it. I wanted to love and be loved back. No matter how much I wanted that though, it scared me too much.

I leave the room after another kiss.

"Henry, her friends will be here soon. Please let them in so they can be with her." I half glance at Marcus standing behind me. "Let no one else in," I reply and he nods.

I leave without looking at Marcus and he tags behind me.

"Is she okay?" He asks.

"She's fine. I'll have to go find her family now and make sure I sign off on Brian's bills and then I can see the doctor to ask what caused the fainting spell."

He walks beside me in silence for a while as we turn a corner to get to the elevator.

"Am I supposed to keep silent or can I say something now?" I look at him, his pad still in his hands even if it was cracked. He's clutching it like it was a lifeline.

I sigh and nod. "What now?"

He stops walking, and so I stop with him, raising an eyebrow.

"You're running around for her. I'm not against falling in love, Adam, but at the wrong time. Very wrong timing. You really want to do this plus forty? With so many people counting on you?"

"I'm letting life take me somewhere I don't think I've been to in years and didn't think I would ever be. I wouldn't call it falling in love, Marcus, but I'm not going to give it up for

Monica and her toxic ways. We'll find another way to make the app work."

It's exactly what he called it. It's falling in love and you know it! Maybe it's time to stop being scared too.

"You know there's no other way, you said so yourself not so long ago."

I shrugged and begin to walk again.

"Think about it Adam, you might fight and break up in three months, six months, three years, or six years, is that worth throwing away immortality for?"

I stop, my heart takes a hit. He's hit the spot this time. It always happens doesn't it? Love never lasts forever these days. One moment you are so in love and then the next moment the two of you are fighting like you never loved each other.

Is this what's making me so scared? Am I afraid I won't be able to find myself once that time comes?

My hands close into fists again but I can't let him see. I stuck them deep in my pockets but I was too late.

"You're already thinking about it, aren't you?" He asks, walking up to me, reanimated.

I wouldn't be able to bear it. If I fell now, and I am falling so deep, I wouldn't get back up again. There is just one more round left in me. No more. I might even lose sight of the company.

"Marcus, please let me get through today with my head still attached to my head. Yes, I've thought about it. You know me. I've thought about everything. Just give me time. I'm under a lot of stress at the moment."

He raises his hands. "Alright, I've said enough. I'll go wait for you in the car. Don't forget the prize, Adam. She's still going to be there if you're in an open relationship with Monica and if not, there are others like her who will make you feel loved."

"Thank you, Marcus," I reply and start to walk ahead again. I'm feeling rattled now.

Leslie. What are you doing to me, woman? Why am I so afraid? Does any of it matter if we're still going to pull apart in the end? Why commit just to get hurt at a later date? Does it make any sense?

I keep my head straight but I feel like slouching under the weight of so many questions.

Hours later, sitting in the doctor's office after seeing Leslie's parents and paying for her brother's medical bills, the questions still plague me. They were such nice people, it would be easy to lose myself. To give in to love and start the timer. They'd been held back filling so many forms but they should be on their way soon. I could not wait though, I'd to see the doctor and confirm that it really was nothing serious so I could rest and not have that with all the other questions.

The doctor sits on the other side of me, his office is small, a hole in the wall that he filled with warm things. There were pictures of his family everywhere on the wall. A wife and two daughters. Model athletes from the looks of it. They were posing with lot of medals and cups. Swimming and volleyball. He stood in some of the pictures, grinning and raising his hands in victory.

The portraits on his desk are just him and his wife. There is a cupboard at one end of the office and some of the cups his daughters had won, sat on display there. I smile at it and some of the pictures. Maybe Sarah would go the way of sports too or she'd become a nerd like her dad. Whatever she chose as long as she was as happy as Doctor Rajesh's kids seemed to be.

His name plaque is black and gold and someone had stuck a kitty sticker on one end.

"What are their names?" I ask him.

He looks up at the portraits and smiles without thinking about it. His beard, black at the edges and white as they extended down, rises and falls as he speaks.

"Parvati and Aditi, the most energetic duo you'll find anywhere. Sometimes I can't keep up with them."

I smile along with him. “You have a beautiful family, I’d love a family of my own someday.”

“Well, Mr Evans, if the lady you’ve come to stand in for is with you then you might just get your wish. She’s pregnant.

She’s pregnant!

LESLIE

My eyes snap open, and I blink. My head is blissfully empty. I stare at the ceiling, warm and snug in blankets, tempted to turn over even.

I sigh in contentment. The sheets at Adam's house were always so soft.

Wait? Sheets? Wasn't I cooking just now? How did I get to the bed? What's going on?

Yep, there's definitely no knife in my hands! But just now?

My heart zings and I abandon the thought, turning to the side in bed and someone gasps.

"You're awake?"

It sounded like Alex. *Alex here? In my room? At Adam's house?*

I jerk up and stare at her. She looks surprised for a moment and then she snickers.

"What on earth is that? You look like you've gone ghost sightseeing and gotten a rude awakening."

I roll my eyes. "Normal people say you look like you've seen a ghost," I reply and fell back to the bed. *Yep. It's her. She's here and I'm on the bed, not cooking. Something happened then.*

She comes to the bed and sits beside me.

“Aren’t you going to ask why I’m at Adam’s house? If you can call this monstrosity a house like us regular folk live in that is.”

I shake my head, wincing at the effort. I shouldn’t have.

“Nope, I’ll just wait for you to tell me. I can’t stress my head. It’s feeling very strange.”

“Maybe that’s because you fainted!”

My eyes pop and I stare at her, sitting up again and propping myself on the headboard.

“I faint?”

“Yes, you were all *‘Oh my goodness I’m fainting’* yada yada yada and Adam was all, *‘I’ll be your knight in shining armor mi armor’*. See what I did there? And he got you to the hospital and paid for Brian’s surgery and it was successful and now everyone’s all *‘Hail Adam.’*”

She followed all of this up with a visual representation but I’m finding it hard to keep up.

Brian’s operation? Adam paid? Then Adam met my parents? Brian’s operation was successful too! He’d met my entire family?

I don’t know where to start, what to face first, I just stare at her with too wide eyes, trying to process all the information. She’d drawn the curtains and light streamed in from the outside, it looked like a sunny day. *How many days have passed? One or two?*

There are flowers on the table by the window, lush red roses along with a light fruity scent.

Alex follows my gaze to the flowers.

“He dropped those off this morning, watered them himself,” she tells me and then she walks to the table and picks up a card. “These rugs are so thick. I could bury my feet in them forever.”

He left me flowers? I smile, they are so pretty.

Alex comes back to the bed, jumping on the other side large enough to still allow people to sleep comfortably.

“Everything in this house is ostentatious. I just learned that from Henry by the way. Ostentatious. It means something about it being extra.”

Oh lord, Alex!

I take the card from her.

“Give me that, Miss Ostentatious.”

She grins, rolling over to wrap her hands around me, her face snuggling into the pillow beside mine, a sigh of comfort leaving her lips.

The message on the card is simple;

Get well soon love, I can't wait to see you smiling when I tell you how much I missed you.

The smile on my lips widen and my hands grab the bedsheets, rosy happiness making my heart beat faster.

“No need to blush so hard,” Alex calls from the side breaking the charm of the moment.

I growl at her.

“What are you doing here?”

“Taking care of my friend, of course,” she replies giving me a kiss on my cheeks.

“And ruining my moments too,” I add, pulling off the sheets to sit up better.

“Where’s Sarah? Is she okay and Brian? My parents?”

“They are all fine. Brian’s at the hospital, recuperating. Your parents are with him. They came this morning but you weren’t up yet. Sarah’s okay. Her dad had to take her to school today. I’ll text him. He’ll be home soon, I’m sure he’ll want to see you. Maybe he’ll take you to the hospital himself.”

I nod. Still trying to process the fact that Brian’s operation was done and he was okay.

“Thanks for staying with me, Alex. I would have woken up and been so confused.”

“Oh well, someone had to look out for you, you know. Make sure you don’t go crazy and lose the plot. Adam just texted, he’s on his way.”

I nod simply and then lay back down on the bed. There really was no reason to get up. *Everything was okay, better than it was before even. Brian wouldn’t need any more dialysis. He got the operation. He’s fine now.*

I snuggle closer to Alex and she puts her arms around me again. I did feel a little woozy. Laying back for a while didn’t sound so bad. It sounded great in fact.

“I can’t believe I got a billionaire on my list of contacts and we are texting stuff like ‘she’s an idiot but she’s our idiot.’”

“What?” I growl and she bursts into laughter, rolling away from me before I can cause her grievous bodily harm. It was still on my list of things to do though.

“You and who is texting that I’m your idiot?” I ask, glaring at her but she just shuts her eyes and smiles.

“You can’t hurt me when my eyes are closed,” she whispers. She’s right though, I couldn’t hurt her at all, I didn’t want to move an inch. It was a strange feeling to realize I had no more problems at this point in my life. None at all. Brian is fine. Which means my parents are fine. My house issues are sorted, I’m comfortable money wise. Everything is suddenly okay.

I smile and breathe out in satisfaction, letting myself drift off to sleep. After a while I feel Alex coming close again and I hug her as I sleep.



ADAM GOT HOME while I was still asleep and he brought balloons with him, tying them around the room before he’s even woke me up.

He softly taps me once he's done, taking a chair to sit by my bedside and holding one hand as he taps me.

I wake up and find him smiling down at me with Alex gone.

"Hey," he says softly.

"Hey," I reply, smiling. The fruity scent is still in the air and with the roses at the edge of my vision, I remember his note that I had stashed under my pillow.

"I got you some balloons. I hear it's good for recovering people."

I laugh at that, nodding in agreement. There were pink and purple balloons, the types Sarah would love. They bob along the ceiling, swaying in the wind with streamers of the same pink and purple running down them.

"They are really beautiful," I reply and he leans forward, placing a kiss on my hand.

I can't deny it anymore, I love this man. It isn't a word I use lightly, not since my experiences with Chad but Adam makes me feel so special. Special in ways that no one ever did before.

"How are you feeling? Alex told me you were a bit light-headed when you woke up?"

"I'm fine now, Adam. Thank you. For Brian and for taking care of me I mean. I wake up to find out his bills have been handled and the operation successful. I can't wait to go see him once I'm strong enough to be up and about."

"We'll go see him together—"

I love you, Adam, it's probably too soon for me to be telling you this but it's crazy how you find ways to prioritize me all the time.

"—but first, there's something I need to tell you."

"There is? What is it?" I ask. Curious. I sit up on the bed, while he takes a breath.

“The doctor at the hospital confirmed you’re pregnant, Leslie.”

It hits me from out of left field.

Did he just say pregnant? As in me? I’m pregnant.

“The doctor at the hospital?” I repeat, my brain noisily repeating the word, *pregnant* over and over again.

“Yes, when you fainted, we took you to the hospital and the doctor at the hospital confirmed you’re pregnant.”

I stare at him then at my belly.

I’m pregnant.

“I’m sure you may have had thoughts about when you want to start a family and when is an acceptable age to get pregnant. Leslie I want to have a family of my own. You asked about me, that’s the one thing that I’ve yearned for in my life. I want to have a family of my own. You came into my life and completed it along with Sarah. This child would bind us in more ways than one. The woman I love and my two daughters.”

He looked so earnest, so into the vision that I could see it too.

“How do you know it’s a girl?” I ask quietly, freeing one hand to caress his jaw.

How on earth did I find a man like Adam Evans? It beat any explanation. All that icing and coldness but what waited inside was so warm. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and never let go.

“I mean, I— The doctor had two daughters,” he replies, scratching his neck.

I snort, breaking into a laugh then keeping a poker face, clearing my throat twice.

“Are you not going to join me on the bed? We’re having a baby you know. We could at least act like we care for each other.”

He eyes me and I can't hold the poker face any longer, laughing as I make room and he joins me on the bed, wrapping his arm around my shoulder. I settle against his chest. My heart rate slows and a peculiar feeling of calm blissfulness envelops me.

He's warm, I'm warm, life is warm. Everything just made sense. A baby too. Baby girl or boy. A beautiful sister or brother for Sarah.

Sister or brother?

It sounded right. Sister or brother.

“So, that means we're keeping it, yes?”

“We're keeping it,” I reply and lean up to kiss him. He kisses me back and with my eyes closed, I savor every single moment of it. His eyes stare into mine after the kiss, brown eyes you could get lost in. All his feelings riding in those eyes now for me to see. No longer closed off or hidden.

It feels like the right time for me to say it. There was no need to think and overthink things anymore. He makes my heart race and flutter, and he puts me first all the time. What more was there to want from someone you loved? I stare into those brown eyes and my confidence is bolstered, I lean in closer and give him another short kiss, diving in head first, my heart racing.

“I love you, Adam Evans.”

ADAM

We are both in the back, walking together through the amusement park with our hands held and watching Brian and Sarah walk together ahead of us, looking at the different rides and trying to decide which games to pick.

They'd hit it off together after Brian came to stay at the house and now he was like an elder brother and Sarah loved every minute she spent with him. Going to his room to spend her time and inviting him over for her tea parties.

My family was growing larger by the day.

"I mean if it was me and I suddenly had an elder brother out of the blue when there was no hope for one at first, I'd probably abandon the nanny that I loved so much too."

I snicker, laughing at her.

"Jealousy doesn't suit you, you know!"

She gives me the nasty eyes. "Who said anything about being jealous, I'm just analyzing the situation like anyone in my place would do."

"Oh you don't say, anyone in your place would do this same brand of analysis. What is your place exactly?"

People move all around us, laughing and talking with their family or special others. The stalls are filled too and sweet savory smells are coming from them. I'm surprised Sarah hadn't asked to stop at any of them yet but up ahead it looked like they were stopping at a cotton candy stall.

“My place is the disgraced nanny who lost her charge to a younger, more fun version of a human being.”

“Aren’t we being a little too extra now?” I reply, patting her arm that was wrapped around mine.

“No, never. We’re just calling it how we see it.”

“I see,” I reply sarcastically and she slaps my arm.

Up ahead, Brian and Sarah wait for us, but he’s already ordered and the cotton candy seller rolled it up in his machine.

More people recognize me than I thought would and I regularly have to shake hands and greet them once in a while, some thanking me for this or that.

It felt good to be recognized for helping people and Leslie beamed as she held me and listened to all the people speaking. The day around us was calm too with blue skies and few specs of white and absolutely no clouds anywhere.

“You’re a regular goody two shoes aren’t you?” Leslie teases me as we get to the stall to pay and Leslie takes a bite out of Brian’s candy.

“Are you not a little too old for candy?” Brian growls at her.

I turn away quickly before she sees my grin and accuses me of ganging up against her.

“Imagine Nurse Selene saw you here eating cotton candy too?” Leslie shoots back. A technical knockout.

She’s got you there, big guy.

“Who’s Nurse Selene?” Sarah asks and Leslie’s face brightens into a glow. She was about to commit a crime.

“Don’t you dare!” Brian warns, his face reddening. The threat coming along with pleading in his eyes.

I tighten my hand around Leslie to get her to stop but she’s already on her haunches and whispering into Sarah’s ears.

“The wicked witch!” Brian cries as Sarah’s eyes widen and she grins, covering her mouth with her little hands. Dimples

form on both cheeks as she laughs.

“What did she tell you?” Brian demands.

“Did you have to?” I ask Leslie as she straightens with a smug smile on her face.

She leans in and kisses me on the cheek. “Don’t get on my bad side, mister, it’s a warning.”

Sarah is whispering into Brian’s ears and his expression changes from embarrassment to glee, and then I’m the only one left out.

“Wait. What did she tell you?” I ask but everyone ignores me, Leslie drags me forward and the other two run ahead, acting like I didn’t say anything.

“What did you tell her?” I demand. Leslie shrugs and points out the Ferris wheel in the distance.

“It’s been a long time since I rode on one of those, let’s all get on it yeah?”

You’re not distracting me, woman!

“As long as you tell me what you told her. We’re getting on it. How does everyone know and I don’t know?”

Leslie beamed. *Oh no, here goes the pronouncement that will change my life for the worse.*

“You wanted a family, didn’t you? You’ve got one now. This is how it works; all of us know things that you don’t know but we all love you and give you gifts for Christmas and New year’s. The two go together. Secrets and gifts. You can’t have one without the other.”

“And am I also allowed secrets?” I ask.

She stops and drags me back, making sure I’m facing her, her face lost every trace of warmth as she stares me down, never mind she was the shorter one.

“Adam Evans, if you ever keep anything from me, I will have your hide. Do you understand?”

Where’s all this menace coming from?

“Yes ma’am,” I whisper.

She smiles sweetly, all the menace gone in a click. “Great, let’s go ride the Ferris wheel, love.”

She’s crazy!

I find myself thinking of when she told me she loved me. The way I couldn’t breathe at that moment. My throat caught and the words were stuck inside. I didn’t think I could get it out. My heart was beating fast. She said it. She said she loved me, how do you continue breathing after that?

I manage to get the words out but only just. Her grin at the look of shock on my face was the best part of all of it.

“You’ve begun companies, gone round the world and given speeches. You’re world famous and a sign of hope to so many people and here you are, stumped cause a woman says she loves you?” She had asked.

I grinned, after the fact, managing to get the words out of my mouth too.

“I love you too, Leslie Davies. I don’t know how it happened but I’m happy that it happened.”

I had kissed her and held her hands tight.

“What are you thinking about?” Leslie asks and I take a breath, coming back to the present and looking out for Sarah and Brian.

“Just the time you told me you loved me for the first time,” I reply, and she grins, leaning up to share a kiss with me.

“What do you say we pick this up later when we’re both alone?”

“Oh, I like that plan,” I reply, and drew her even closer. Everyone else had disappeared, I didn’t care about any of them. Just her.

“Only if you follow me to this annoying function though. That’s my only condition.”

“Are we doing conditions now?” She asks, eyeing me.

“It would seem so,” I reply and place a kiss on her forehead.

“Following you to functions is so formal, be careful. You might just tell the world you love me so much.”

I laugh and take her hands again to get us walking down the path. The smell of crispy chicken hits my nostrils.

“The world deserves to know anyway. They should know how great you are.”

She leans into me, trying to unbalance me and when I push back a little, she almost stumbles.

I snort, trying not to laugh.

“Laugh it out, Adam Evans,” she growls and I wrap her in a hug, lifting her from the ground and carrying her along.

“The best mode of transportation,” I tell her.

“No complaints,” she replies, smiling up at me and wrapping her arms around my neck.



WE GET HOME and after making sure that Brian and Sarah were settled, we both retire to my bedroom with a bottle of wine and two glasses.

“In my line of work, every night is a night of celebration,” I tell her as I fill both glasses.

“Oh really?” She answers, lounging on the bed, balancing her head on her palm, her arm braced by a pillow between it and her ribs and her elbow against the bed. “And what line of work is that?”

She rubs both legs together, long lean legs that glint a bit in the soft lighting of the room. She’d changed into a little nightie now and a shower cap over her dark flowing hair.

“Being a parent,” I reply. A thrill passing through me.

It is still just like it was the first time. The way she can turn me on at any time.

She rubs her legs again, feet sliding against each other. I walk forward on legs that are a little unsteady. Unable to stop myself from licking my lips and my eyes from staring with longing in them.

I want you, right now.

I twirl my wine in the glass then clink it with her before taking a long sip.

“So what do you say about a bath, a hot shower?”

“Hot in more ways than one,” I reply with a wink and she laughs, her hand sliding up and brushing against the underside of her breasts.

Those hazel eyes, those damned hazel eyes. They could get me at any time.

“I want it, I want it now,” I reply, putting my hand on her shoulder and massaging softly, forward and back. She breathes in and then out softly, her eyes closed.

“You need to get out of those clothes, I’ll be waiting for you in the bathroom,” she tells me, standing up, and taking a sip of her juice. Then she takes my hands, kissing each of them before biting down softly on the last one.

“I’ll be waiting,” she whispers again in my ear, standing on tiptoes.

I turn to watch her go. Her ass sways from left to right in her little nightie.

Damn! This woman!

I’m pulling off articles of clothing as fast as I can. Removing my shirt and faded jeans trousers and throwing them anywhere I’m facing at the time I drag them off my body.

I rush to the bathroom, she is already behind the glass of the shower and it has begun to steam. I rush past, to the door. Standing there and staring in.

She stands under the water and it rains down on her, rolling down her wet hair that clings to her neck and down the arch of her back, her dark skin is perfect, same with the curve of her ass and her legs.

Best the stars or whoever made her mine.

I step inside the shower and she turns, her eyes catching mine. Hazel beauty holding me bound.

“You decided to join me then,” she replies, showers of hot water falling against my skin and making me gasp.

“I did,” I reply and watch her walk past the arch of the water and push me in. I suck in a breath as all of me is drenched in hot but not scalding water. She pushed me up against the wall. My arm wraps around her and my hand slaps and squeezes an ass cheek, making her squeak.

She bites her lips as she reaches up to place a kiss on my lips, my shaft rubbing between her legs, already being lubricated by juices that were sending my brain into overdrive.

Baby girl, you're playing a dangerous game.

She begins to reach down, running her hands to my chest as she kisses down from my neck to my chest going lower and lower. Every kiss sends a spike of adrenaline racing through me and adds more heat to the already burning fire inside.

I'm gone, I'm definitely gone.

My hand in her hair now and my shaft is hard as a rock when she gets to her knees.

“You're going to take care of daddy,” I whisper and she nods, kissing my thighs with her hands rubbing the length of my shaft.

“I only want to please you,” she replies in a voice like pure seduction.

She holds my shaft steady and then she leans in and kissed it, my hand grabbing her hair.

She kisses it and then wraps her lips around it.

My soul!

I lean back into the glass as her hand plays against the base and strokes up, her mouth taking in half of it. Her lips rub hot and wet, her tongue rolls around the length of it. Spearing the head, rolling around the base and setting off the nerves there. Her other hand fondles my balls.

“Just like that, baby girl,” I say as I hold her hair. Hot water splashes against me, as I try to breathe, my weight supported by the glass as she begins to feel throat, pushing the length of me into her mouth and out again, going in and out, in and out. Gagging on the length of me. Saliva streams down her jaws as she gags and I hold her hair in a vice grip, pushing her in and out.

My brain is overloaded, I could not think. I could barely breathe.

“Look at me baby girl,” I growl in a hoarse voice and she looks up, her hair held up by my hands and her mouth gagging on my shaft.

Heavens above, heavens above; I repeat over and over again. She doesn't stop to breathe, she just keeps going and the pleasure shoots up from my waist in waves that take over my body. Her hands are on my balls, not letting me breathe from either angle.

“I'm coming,” I growl and she keeps at it till I came into her mouth, she licks me off and the cum drips down her lips as she continues to lick the shaft. Slapping it against the side of her face and looking up at me with a grin as she kisses it.

My chest rises and falls quickly, my breath coming in quick gasps.

What a trip!

My shaft keeps jumping in her hands.

“It looks like you're ready to go for hours,” she says as she slowly stands, a hand still on my shaft and another rubbing her pussy lips softly.

“Cause I'm ready to go.”

You don't need to ask me twice—

LESLIE

He grabs my waist and turns me around, forcing a gasp from my lips.

“Put your hands against the glass, my love,” he orders as he rubs the tip of his shaft on my clit, rolling it between my lips and on the entrance of my vagina.

I moan.

I wanted him deep inside me. Filling me completely. I wanted him to take complete and total control.

“You want me to fill you up,” he asks, slapping my ass cheek and drawing it out. His dick slides up and down, making my body ache.

“Yes daddy, please fill me up daddy,” I cry.

“Say no more,” he whispers and his hands guide his shaft, rubbing against my clit and sliding down and into my vagina.

Oh yes, goodness yes!

I gasp as he buries himself deep into me.

“Good girls get taken care of,” he tells me as he pushes in and out. Taking it slow first, settling. Pushing himself deep and burying himself there for a while as I moan before coming up again.

Then he begins to move. His thighs slapping against my ass, the sound like wet flip flops as he thrusts into me, moving fast. My hands are against the glass and I moan every other

second, as his shaft hits every single pleasure spot on the inside and he slaps my ass cheek repeatedly.

I wanted more and more.

“Don’t stop, please don’t stop!” I moan, hanging onto the glass for dear life as he thrusts in and out, not slowing down. His shaft and waist slam into me and his hands hold my waist steady so I don’t move and shake.

“I’m not going to stop, baby,” he growls as he keeps on and I am pushed against the glass, my breasts pressing against it as he continued to thrust into me. Pleasure makes my body turn into a trembling unsure blob.

“I’m coming,” I whisper, barely able to get the words out.

“Come for me, come for me my love,” he urges as my cries grow and then I came in a wave of juices as he keeps splashing through. I couldn’t even get myself up. My hands reach back to push him out. Trembling and shaking, grinning as widely as I’d ever grinned in my life.

All my muscles tremble as I fall to the floor and look at him, he was still rock hard. Ready to go.

“Help,” I tell him.

He laughs with me as he stretched a hand and helps me get up, I fall into his arms, his shaft between my feet.

“That’s a good girl,” he whispers as he begins to guide it in.

“Adam,” I moan. A whimper escaping my lips.

He smacks my ass, “My name?” He asks as he lifts me in his strong arms. My arms and legs wrap around him.

“Daddy,” I cry.

“Good girl,” he replies kissing my neck as he puts me against the glass to thrust into me.

Only my arms and legs wrapped around him keep me up as he thrust in and out of me.

“I love you so much baby,” he keeps saying over and over again as he pounds my vagina with his powerful thrusts, my nails dig into the flesh of his back.

There is no escape. “Yes, yes, yes, yes,” I keep crying over and over again, wanting more still, needing more.

Holding on to him tight until I’m coming again.

Next thing I know, he’s hitting me from the back again, arms behind me and his arm passing between them and my back and gripping them so I was bent back.

“You trust me?” He whispers in my ear, biting my earlobe and I nod my reply. His finger slides down and into my asshole.

“Oh,” I whisper, my asshole winking open and shutting around his finger as it’s pushed in and out while he thrusts into me. The pleasure doubles, no triples. It rushes through me. Rushes of electricity bang all over my body. Sparks set up all around me.

Then as his finger slides out, his shaft begins to slide in, taking it slow.

Oh my God!

“Can I?”

“Yes please,” I mutter.

He slides in, slow and steady, and I moan all the way until he’s in. My entire body shakes as he begins to go in slow and then out, one hand around the front of my thighs, rubbing my clit as he rolls in and out of me.

“Adam,” I moan, trying to breathe, moving like I was possessed and he’d possessed me.

“I’m coming babe,” he growls, picking up the pace till he comes into my ass, his body gripping mine as he does.

He slides out of my gaping hole, and I turn, hanging on to him as he brushes my hair and kisses my forehead. Cum slides down my legs as he holds me.

“You need to be stopped,” I say into his chest, laughing as he does. His laugh is deep and booming. He lifts me up, holding and kissing me.

“The evening has just begun my love. The night is so young, it’s not even born yet.”

I snicker, kissing him and rubbing his hair, my legs wrap around him again.

“It’s that young, isn’t it,” I reply.

“You know it,” he says, holding me tight.

“Let’s go six for six then.” I laugh at the way his eyes go wide. All was alright with the world. It was perfect.



ALL THROUGH THE NEXT DAY, Adam does not let me get far away from him, we stay together, getting Sarah ready for school and making sure Brian is ready too. He’d resumed school again and Adam enrolled him at Sarah’s school, so now they both went together. A big brother and a little sister. Brian called it Leslie and Brian reversed it.

I am just overjoyed that he is finally able to live his life and make friends and just be a regular teenager for once. Although when you’re dropped off in the kinds of cars he was being dropped off in, regular might not be the right word.

It’s almost evening and I got my gown ready for the function, hanging it by the dresser while I wait for Adam to finish with work. He’s in the room, typing and listening to correspondence from his men on the ground at the southwest sites where they were going to put up new plants.

Every little while he glances at me and I throw him a wink as I chat with Alex and Amy, and we plan a dinner for everyone. Alex and her boyfriend, Amy and Ryan, my parents, Brian, Sarah and Adam. All of us together to just have fun and eat good food.

I always thought Leslie was the unserious one but look at her with two kids, and one more on the way, she's well into old age and not even thirty yet. Alex sends the message.

I shake my head, laughing silently at the message.

Funny, I always thought you were the unserious one, Alex. Amy replies.

And here I am thinking all three of us were unserious with our lives and we'd get it together as a unit after a joint decision? I send it back.

Yeah, you're definitely the dumb one. Alex.

Agreed. Amy.

I glare at the screen.

Those little devilish corns.

You two are little devilish corns. I tag Amy's message as I send it. Nodding in satisfaction.

Wtf is a devilish corn? Alex asks as Adam stands and stretches, coming over.

Got to go! I type out quickly and open my arms, he reaches for me and we both fall back with his weight but I wrap my arms around him, rubbing his back and caressing his hair.

"Being Adam Evans is hard, I know love," I tell him in a soft cooing voice.

He lays in my arms quietly for a moment, two of us side by side and my face above his. Then he lets go and we move apart for a bit, our noses still touching as we face each other.

"A while ago, you asked me about myself and I didn't say anything. Would you like to know now?" He asks, sounding soft, almost hesitant.

I try not to show my excitement on my face. I'm waiting for the moment when he trusts me enough to tell me and it was that moment now.

I nod simply, speaking would betray me. My heart skips in my chest, I wait tensely for him to begin.

“I never had a real home to begin with. I had my parents with me but I was still always alone. Alone all the time. My mother drank herself to stupor—” he stops, eyes still holding on to mine but his lips are not moving anymore. I reach for him and take his hands in mine. He smiles. I couldn’t help but grin in return, I loved to see him smile. It was so strange to see it the first time having known only frowns and stern looks from him but smiles brightened up his face so much.

“The reason why she drank was because her husband was never home. He was either out on the road or sleeping with one of several women he was having affairs with. When he came home, that was always worse because when he came home you knew there would trouble to be had. He’d complain about every single thing and it would lead to his belt in his hands and she would be on the floor. He always beat her. He never cared. He’d send me up to his room while he beat the shit out of her and she couldn’t keep him out of the house. No matter how much she tried. It was the same loveless cycle over and over again. I was completely ignored or otherwise she hated me, as the son that kept her stuck in the marriage.”

The what that kept her what? My ears were bleeding from listening and my eyes watered up as I held him tight.

I’d known a bit of this when Marcus helped us get Chad out of my apartment the day he had broken in but not the full thing.

“She was being abused and still she hated *you*?” I ask in a soft voice.

He nods, a rueful smile on his face. “I don’t know if that woman tried to kill me but I’m pretty sure she hated me and I couldn’t help but love her. With all the hate and the pain and the forced whoopings for no reason at all once my father left, I didn’t hate her. I still loved her.”

I could see it in his eyes still, the way he loved her. The glint of tears as he tried to remain calm and not show the extent of the pain. I held him and listened.

He took a deep breath and began again, his eyes blinking for just a moment.

“She always took it out on me, whenever he hit her, I knew there would be hell to pay for me for witnessing it happen or for being alive. I just wanted her to care. I knew he didn’t care. He didn’t ask if I was alive even. I just wanted her to know I was on her side. I hated to see her being hurt. It never happened and slowly I began to hate her too.”

Oh Adam.

A single tear drops from his eye close to the bed and a small snuffle escapes his throat.

“I don’t think I’ve ever told this to anyone, apart from Marcus and not as much. Anyway, she died. I don’t know what cosmic fate decided to take her before my dad but she died in a shooting. She stood at an intersection when two rival gangs found themselves at the same place and a stray bullet found her. She died on the spot. It left me alone and unloved. My dad hardly came back. There’d be some money to look after myself sometimes, but by the time I’d be up, he would be gone. That was my life to I finished high school and decided for myself to go to college knowing there’d be no help from my dad.”

My heart breaks in my chest with every word. I thought I had had a difficult life but I could never have survived what he had gone through, I held him tighter, wondering at the amount of tenacity that made him come from that to this.

“You’re awesome Adam, how could you move from that to this? I can’t. The strength of character it must have taken.”

He grins, coming forward to kiss me, another tear dropping from his eyes but they looked clearer. He’d put all of that behind him as he should.

“I think we all come through so much adversity. We’re all doing our best. It’s not easy for any one of us.”

Where’s the sage wisdom coming from?

“Hail the Dalai Lama,” I reply and he snorts.

“I want a family so badly because I never really had one before, no gifts on Christmas. No holidays, none of that. I

can't tell you how awesome it is to practically have two kids and a third on the way. I hope they give me cool gifts."

He sounds almost giddy. Eyes misty and wistful.

"You'll get your gifts, the craziest things you can imagine. Once Brian gave me a hairball for no particular reason than he thought it made sense."

"A hairball?" Adam sputters, laughing and sitting up.

"It's almost time isn't it?"

"Yep, our first event together."

"I can't wait."

ADAM

We are both ready in a few minutes and I stand for a moment to appreciate the work of art that was Leslie. She wore a dark blue gown that hugged her figure, rolling around her curves to just the top of her knees. Down the right side was a little transparent line that went from her thighs up to the top of the dress.

She looked stunning, completing the dress with heels and a small clutch.

Maybe we shouldn't go anymore and I should just spend my time getting her out of that dress.

“You look—” I shake my head, my hands spread out. Images of me getting her out of that dress interrupt my thoughts.

She arches her eyebrows, laughing.

“—Magical, magnificent, beautiful, wonderful. There are not enough words to describe it. None of them are enough,” I finish, walking to her and wrapping my arms around her as she stands in front of the mirror. I can already feel a stirring down there.

This event could not start and end sooner.

She holds onto my hand, looking at herself in the mirror.

“Nah, you're right. I do look magnificent, beautiful, and all the other things you said.” She pats her hair down and raised her chin.

“It is known,” I reply and take her hand. “Shall we?”

“Let’s go.”

We ride together in the back of one of the bigger jeeps, soundproof with a slot to talk to the driver.

This was a move there was no coming back from and I knew it. It would show Monica and Marcus I’d made my choice and I chose Leslie. This was also a statement to the public, the first time I appeared at an event with anyone since Monica all those years ago.

My heart beats a little quicker. It could be a lot for someone to be thrust into this for the first time. All the cameras and the people shouting questions at you and shoving microphones in your face along with the questions.

She’ll be able to stand all of it though. That’s no problem for her.

When we arrive at the venue, it’s already packed, there are reporters and cameras. Lights flashing everywhere.

“Are you ready to face all of that?” I ask, looking outside with the door still closed.

She looks out of the window and takes a deep breath, shaking her head and leaning back on the seat. Closing her eyes.

“It’s not that hard, just keep your chin up and don’t look at any of them. Eyes on the door,” I tell her.

She nods, and I put a finger on her chin lifting it up to look her in the eyes.

Those hazel eyes looked beautiful, I could get lost in them forever.

“You’ll be fine my love, it’s nothing. I’ll hold your hand through the whole thing,” I tell her.

She nods and takes my hand. “I’m ready.”

She’ll be fine, you’re with her; I tell myself and open the door. The cameras begin to flash at once, all of them turn to me and the reporters swarm forward. I hold Leslie, and her

hands tighten around mine as we walk up the red carpeted stairs. The large doors of the hall look far away, lights dazzling from within and music from the inside.

Questions are shouted at us from every angle. Leslie flinches with each question and flash of the cameras, tightening her hands around me.

“You’re okay. There’s no problem,” I tell her under my breath, walking and holding her without stopping. To her credit, she carries herself well, walking with her shoulder and her chin up.

“This is a big event, Adam.”

“Quite big. Everyone’s going to be here,” I tell her. “Including Marcus.”

“Marcus?” she asks, “Your assistant.”

I nod. “We’ve not been seeing eye to eye for a little while. A little matter causing friction between us.”

We get to the top of the stairs, all the questions and shouts left behind us and the ballroom opening in front of us. A man and a woman stand at the entrance of the hall, smiling graciously at anyone who came up. The lady is dressed in a flowing red gown that swept the floor and the man in a nice red and black tux. Their smiles beam with pearly white teeth.

“Me Adam Evans, welcome. We’ve been expecting you,” the woman says, ushering me forward through the right.

“And his plus one, you look beautiful tonight miss,” the man tells Leslie. She beams at the compliment.

“Thank you,” we both reply as we go through the right door into the hall.

“Woah,” Leslie mutters, staring at the hall and whistling in appreciation.

“Welcome to the rest of our lives,” I tell her with a grin.

It all looked wonderful but I was sure she still had her mind on what I’d just said. I’m going to tell her anyway. So there’s no problem, at all. I’d already decided it was time to let

Marcus know my decision. It was also time to let her know what was going on and the way the stakes were. If only I could focus on that and leave off staring at the way her curves made sensual melody in that gown. Speaking to me.

I put my hands in my pockets, tightening them to fists to try and stop the boner that was on its way.

She smirks at me, winking and batting her eyes. “I hope the rest of our lives will include other activities,” she replies and a thrill shoots down my entire body. My shaft pressing against my suit uncomfortably.

Why are you a thorn in my flesh woman. Do you want me bared to the world?

My fists form tighter in my pocket and I smile to hide the need filling my brain. The hall is brightly lit and her dress shines under the lights of all those chandeliers winking down at us. Tables set at regular intervals in the ballrooms sat six guests each. We had our table close to the middle as per my request. I didn't want to be at the front. I never wanted to be at the front for these things.

“What happened between you and Marcus?” She finally asks as we are halfway to our seats. I knew it was coming. I was prepared for it.

“Let's get to our seats first?”

She nods. As we go, I stop a few times to greet some familiar faces. Each of them eyes Leslie and I know they're wondering who she is but I don't bother making introductions. Social etiquette be damned. They were all a pack of vultures, ripping off each other, taking over companies of friends and families, gossiping about who and who's skeleton. I wanted no part of it and I'd stayed away from it and I'd keep Leslie far away from it too.

We get to our table and I pull the chair out for her to sit then sat beside her, after getting two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter and then downing them in a single gulp.

She watched me with her jaws stuck open.

“What are you doing, Adam?” She whispers furiously but I take a small bottle of apple juice from my pocket.

“You can’t have the champagne but I got some apple juice for you,” I tell her and if it was possible, her eyes go wider.

“You did what, you crazy man?” She’s grinning and clapping her hands silently for me as she says it.

I turn almost all of it in the flute and handed it over to her.

She takes the glass and takes a sip from it.

“It’s great, you’re better,” she tells me, blowing a kiss.

At your service my love.

“What’s this for?” She gestures around the entire ballroom.

“A fundraising. Some governor’s wife with an initiative or something.”

She snorts. “You really don’t care about what happens, you don’t even try to know.”

Oh you don’t know the half of it.

“The only thing I know is I have to get out my checkbook and write out an amount. That’s all.”

She laughs. “Rich people flex.”

Someone takes the stage and begins to talk about projects that an organization underwent.

“So, Marcus,” I start and she nods, taking another sip of her champagne and leaning back on her chair.

“He felt like you were bad for business and especially the deal I’d been working on for months. The condition was that I had to back together with my ex, Monica in order to gain access to her family fortune. It’s a deal that would have made me so rich that I can’t articulate how much money we would have made and jobs we would have created. I still can do it though but—”

“You’re with me and not Monica.”

I grin and raise my glass to her and she raises hers back so we take a sip at the same time.

Always looking so in control, no matter if she was freaking out inside.

“So I guess this explains Marcus’ frostiness towards me. I guess I’m also making him lose some good money in addition to making sure the deal can’t go through.”

“Astute observation, Sherlock Holmes,” I reply, dropping my champagne flute to clap along with other guests.

At the table just ahead of us, a lady wore her hair in a silver blonde canopy that half obscured my view of the stage. No matter how long I stared, I could not understand the hair.

“Well, I’m not going to give up my place.”

I blurt out a laugh before I can stop myself and the blonde canopy haired woman turns to look at me. She does a double take in shock before staring at Leslie up and down, calling her friends to come see.

You should call them to come look at you; I think at once.

“Nobody is or was going to make you give up your place. I plan to tell Marcus that my decision is final. This is the first of many public appearances for us. Monica is a done deal.”

Leslie looks up and takes another sip of her drink to cover a cough.

“Careful what you wish for,” she replies and I stare at her in confusion. “Marcus and a lady are heading right for us, Adam. Here’s your chance to tell him and mine to melt into the floor.”

I turn and my face loses a little bit of color. It wasn’t just some lady. The fool had gone and brought Monica and they were heading right for our table.

LESLIE

That's Monica Rosso? And she's heading right for this table? Someone save me now!

She looked so good too, same age as Adam but it looked like they both didn't age. Her red fiery hair fell to her shoulder in ringlets and she paired it with red matte lipstick that really made her skin pop. She wore a black straight gown that begun to flay just past the curve of her ass.

She looks good. Correction, she looks beyond good. She looks extra perfect.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine," Adam tells me just as they arrive.

Did he see this woman? She wouldn't take losing to me well.

"Adam, you're here?" Her voice hits me, a sing-songy voice of control that makes me uncomfortable almost at once. I swallow and clear my throat a little, trying to regain some of my composure.

Adam turns to her, his face passive.

"They always invite me to these things. You know it. I thought you'd be all the way at the front?" He replies, his eyes sliding to Marcus who was looking everywhere but at him.

"Oh yeah, I rejected my ticket but then Marcus invited me so I came as his plus one." They both take the other empty seats, relaxing and getting glasses of champagne for each other.

“Adam, I’ve not still heard from you, you know, I put a proposal in front of you and I know you’re a man that moves fast so you can imagine my surprise that you’re not taking any sort of action. I asked Marcus what was happening but he had no answer till the last time he met me.”

She’s formal and buisness like, but I see the glint in her eyes. Those eyes look like they were up to some mischief. They are about to do something crazy. I could already see it and I brace myself for impact, stretching a hand under the table to rub on Adam’s thighs.

“I’m hoping we can come to some sort of arrangement, Monica. We can always partner together to be part of something that can change the world.”

“So Marcus is right?” She asks, her eyes looking at me pointedly and back to him. The moment those eyes turn to me, I see that the venom in them is enough to poison me ten thousand times over. I sit up straighter, refusing to be intimidated.

“Marcus is right about what?” Adam asks, his words clipped, his tone dangerous.

“Oh crib that wild dog nature of yours,” Monica says, waving a hand in his direction. “However mad you get, it wouldn’t change the fact that you got with a bimbo.” She glares at me again. She’s dragging me through the mud.

Now she’s gone and done it. I was acting all nice and being quiet. She took the first blow, there was no need to be nice anymore.

“At least I’m not eighty eight soon to be nine four by the end of this function,” I hiss back at her. Her lips fly open as a blush spreads over her face.

“Ghetto, Adam. Can you see it now? She’s a ghetto gold digger!”

Fucking Marius!

“Better than you who ratted all of me out to the opposition parties and for what?” Adam glares at him, waiting.

“I was doing that to help you,” Marius protests.

“I don’t need help, Marius, I’m happy where I am. I’m happy with Leslie. She makes me happy all the time. I can’t give this up for the toxic understanding that we had between each other Monica. We’re both forty plus, we deserve real love and real happiness.”

Marius looks at Monica, who stares at him and then from Adam to me and back to Adam.

“It was a last ditch effort to convince you again and it didn’t work. You’ll enjoy losing almost all your fortune. If you’re not careful, you’ll lose it all. You’re acting like you’re sixteen. You don’t want my help then fine but be careful what you wish for. Stop playing with yourself,” Monica snaps, standing up.

Heaven’s above, the dripping condescension in her voice.

Marcus takes another sip of his drink, sitting quietly without saying a word.

“Thanks for the advice, I’ll try to remember that I’m not sixteen and act like that every day to come. Thanks for the great advice, honestly.”

I stifle a laugh, my throat burning with the need to laugh out my chest.

She glares at him and then at me before turning to Marcus. “Do it!”

“You know, I always saw Marcus as the proactive one. Even all those years ago. He’s the most serious one among you both and the sex was crazy.”

Sex, with Marcus? Plot twist.

Adam pauses and glares at him but the man looks right back and shrugs his shoulders.

“I wouldn’t put it past you, Monica. You’ll be fine and we’ll be fine too. And the one that has broken the trust of his friend and has been lying all this years should know he’s not welcome back at the office.”

Monica laughs like Adam is stupid.

“Make the call, Marcus, lets go,” she commands, and just like that, they’re gone.

“What just happened?” I ask Adam, my voice low as we watch them. Both of them walk out of the hall with faces that could chew Thunderclouds.

“What happened is that I lost a best friend who had apparently slept with someone I thought I wanted to be with and I’ve also finally gotten rid of that other toxic someone and I can be happy and free.”

Concise summary.

“I see,” I reply simply and sip my champagne-apple juice. “I’m sorry, Adam. I know it stings to find out that your friend has been lying to your face. I’m really sorry.”

He shakes his head. “It’s fine. There’s no problem at all. Right now, I’m just glad to be out here with you and have everything cleared. I’ll feel the sting of his betrayal later but I’ll survive. He can get with Monica if he wants.”

I nod, glancing over at the stage and noticing the lady with a blonde canopy again. *What in the world?*

“So are we staying here till the end of this?”

“Only till I donate, then we can go.”

My gown is starting to feel a little tight. I try to relax on the chair again but it doesn’t quite work.

I stretch my hand for Adam again and hold it under the table, taking my breathing slow.

Make the call. What on earth could that mean? How was he so calm after hearing that?

“Adam aren’t you afraid that Marcus and Monica are going to try something?”

“What can they do?” He asks with a little snicker, shaking his head.

“What I’m afraid of is these people taking too much time and not giving me the chance to get you out of that gown.”

My body tingles at once, my heart beating faster.

Just like that, he could make me want to lose everything called clothing on my body.

“Maybe you should hurry so you don’t lose the chance,” I reply, my hand leaves his and starts to rub up his thighs.

“We could just get up and leave!” He says after a harsh intake of breath. I rub upward to feel the swell of his shaft.

Goodness. I want it in my hands, and inside me, pushing through my body.

“We could just get up and leave,” I reply, my eyes burning with fervor. He wanted to get me out of the gown, I wanted him to get me out of the gown and to be fast about it too.

He grabs my hand, his grip hard and he turns to look at the doors. I can feel my nipples pressing against the fabric of the dress. I suck in a breath, wetness between my legs, and then I look at him again, imagining his lips between my legs and his tongue taking charge.

Just as he’s about to get up, someone else approaches us. A young dude with black hair that he kept scattered or partly combed and gray eyes. His black suit and shirt fit his slim frame perfectly.

“Mr Adam,” he calls and Adam turns.

I smiled up at the man, he looked about my age, maybe he was the one talking about the donations. He smiles back, giving me a small nod of the head.

“Yes? The same,” Adam replies.

“My family just wants to thank you for helping out when our house collapsed. If you hadn’t sent the relief and the team, my dad have still been buried and dead. He’s in town. He says thank you.”

I look at Adam who smiles warmly at the man and stretches his hands for a handshake.

“I’m happy we could save him. How’s he and what’s going on that he’s in town?”

He’s really something, Adam. So many people owed their lives to him. Brian too. Hell, me too. Who knows what Chad would have done to me? My special human. Mine.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know yet. He just asked me to come along with him. He’s in his hotel room, doesn’t have the strength to attend but I wanted to come and thank you personally.”

“No problem then, I’m happy to see you. You both stay safe. It’s nothing at all. Greet the old man for me,” he replies with a laugh and then shakes the young man’s hand again as he walks away.

“Look at you being a regular do-gooder,” I tease and he shrugs, grinning.

“It’s the least I can do,” he replies.

“Has anyone told you that you grin and smile a lot these days?”

“Had anyone told you that you’re somehow still in your dress?”

He pinches my inner thighs as he says this and I jerk, breath going out of me.

“Get me out of it, daddy,” I whisper to him, holding onto his hand like it was the only thing keeping me on the ground.

He stands and I get up with him, I can feel a little bit of juiciness flowing down my legs. My eyes are studiously kept above the faces of all the people in the room. I could not bear to look them in the face.

Adam leads me past the room and through a small side door. The moment the door closes, he relaxes and takes a breath and then pins me against the wall.

“We’re free,” he whispers in my ears.

A shiver runs down me as his hands curl around my back and grab my ass.

“We are,” I manage to mutter as he closes the distance between us. I’m breathing out. Just waiting for his lips, waiting for his touch.

He kisses me as he holds my ass tightly, his lips hot as they close around mine. His kiss is fleeting, leaving me wanting more.

Please don’t tease me.

His eyes run over my entire body.

“You’re so hot,” he says as he kisses me again.

I know—

I squeak as he turns me over and has me pinned against the door, his body flat against mine as he kisses the back of my ears and flicks his tongue on my earlobes.

“Adam,” I whisper, my right hand finding a way to feel his shaft through his pants.

“Oh goodness,” I moan as he puts distance between us and then slaps my ass.

“We’re in a corridor, someone could come at any time,” he tells me, his hands moving into the gown, making it ride upwards.

“We really shouldn’t be doing this here, we could get caught,” he continues saying even as his hands keep going up. I’m breathing harder and harder and until his fingers reach my pussy lips. I suck in a breath and moan.

My eyes widen, my brain going into overdrive. Sweat rolls down my forehead. His fingers roll around my lips, wetness dripping on him.

I moan his name, he grabs my right hand from his crotch and presses it against my back.

“Don’t move baby girl!”

My soul. I can’t breathe.

The hands roll into my vagina. Round and up, thrusting up inside me. Fingering me.

“Adam, they could catch us at any moment,” I cry but he just comes closer and kisses my neck again.

“You want to take this to the car, let’s see how high the dress can go,” he asks.

“Yes please,” the words barely forming between my moans.

He turns me around so fast, I get dizzy, then he reaches forward and puts his finger in my mouth, twirling it around my tongue and kissing me afterward.

“Let’s get to the car then.”

I can’t breathe sir!

He takes my hand again and we begin to walk to the car while he calls his driver to come over to this side. As we go, we saw a few workers and waiters going to where we were.

“Close.”

“That’s the hotness of it.”

This man is dangerous for my health.

My heart is racing, it was the hotness of it. I’d never done anything like that in my life. My hair is in disarray and I wanted more.

We get into the car and the moment the doors close, we were on each other again, he unzips his pants, getting the hard length of his shaft out.

I straddle him, unzipping a little and getting the gown to ride up to my waist. I kiss him, holding on to him, going crazy with need. Breathing hard, our tongues are on each other, our lips crushing against the other.

The length of his shaft is between my legs and my juices are rubbing against it.

He puts a hand below there and gets his shaft up, leading it inside me.

I gasp as it goes inside. Grabbing his shoulder and sitting back down slowly, the full length of it is inside me and hitting

past my G spot.

“Yes,” I cry as I begin to bounce on it. His hands are on both sides of my waist, helping me to go up and down, I hold on to him, my hands wrapped around his neck as he picks up the pace. His shaft is sliding and hitting my G spot with every thrust.

“Like that, don’t stop,” I moan, my eyes are closed and my bottom lip is between my teeth as I bounce on his shaft. He holds me, keeping the pace steady.

I moan his name over and over again, leaning forward to bite into his shoulder as he keeps going, slapping my ass and spreading the ass cheeks as I bounce on him.

Then he begins to move his waist along to the bounce of my ass, thrusting upwards as I came down on the shaft. My eyes are wide, I hold on to him for dear life, moaning and sweating. Both our bodies slick inside our clothes.

“Please keep going. Don’t stop, keep going,” I beg as I moan and he doesn’t stop. He keeps going until I’m a screaming, bouncing mass of hair and wetness.

“I’m coming!” I cry and he smacks my ass again, a hand sliding up to hold my neck.

“Come for me baby girl, come for me.”

His other hand continues to guide my waist, still thrusting into me.

The hand holding my neck from the back makes me arch, my chest thrown forward. My hand back and my ass clapping downward.

“Adam,” I cry as I came in a wave. He continues to thrust into me while I’m a shaking, moaning mess. He holds me tight and finally I collapse against him, trying to breathe, shaking the whole while.

“There’s a good girl,” he whispers to me as I fall against his chest, caressing my hair, another hand rubbing against my back. I smile without thinking, my hand on his chest as I listen to his heartbeat.

“I love you, baby,” he tells me, kissing the top of my forehead.

“I love you too,” I reply, turning and looking up at him, he leans his head on the headrest and his eyes are closed.

His shaft is still sheathed inside me but it seemed the right place for it. I get my breathing under control listening to the rhythm of his heart and dozing off.

ADAM

We are still in bed when I get the message that the board of directors were gathering at the company and there was a hostile takeover on the cards.

Marcus and Monica were coming for my company.

I sit up in bed, startling Leslie as I got up and rushed to get dressed. There was no time to waste. There was no time at all.

They are coming for my life's work. My hard work that I suffered to build. That's what the 'Do it' was about. That's what they are planning.

“What’s going on?”

I grab a shirt and tie and hastily put them on. My mind running ahead of me.

They can't do this! But they are doing it. I should have known yesterday when I saw the young man!

“What’s going on, Adam?” Leslie asks again, sitting beside the bed and watching me struggle to get into my clothes.

“Marcus and Monica are planning a hostile takeover! They’re at the company right now.”

“What? Right now!” She jumps from the bed and comes over, helping me with the tie and handing my trousers to me.

“That son of a bitch. He’s been your friend for so long and he’s the one trying to take your company from you? Unbelievable!”

I kiss her on my way out. My heart is beating so fast now that I can barely form rational thoughts. Fear makes my muscles watery.

I can't lose the company. Lose it and I lose my life's ambition and work. What sort of a father would I be then? What sort of man would I be and how will I treat the woman I loved? Would I walk around all day and night with regrets?

“Adam!” Leslie calls behind me and I turn, seeing her holding my phone up and rushing to me.

She hands me the phone just as I'm about to step out the door, wrapping her nightgown tighter around her.

“Be strong, Adam, you can squash this. We're all with you. Every single one of us. We believe in you.”

Her eyes hold only complete certainty. Belief that I could and *would* do it. I stare at those eyes I knew so well now and a fire lights on the inside.

I'm not losing my company and I'm not losing myself before my family is even complete.

I nod and smile. “Of course. Am I even sacred?”

She kisses me and then pushes me along. “Never, love. Now get going. I love you.”

“I love you too,” I reply and rush out. Sitting in the car alone and with my thoughts, thinking of how I'd convince the board not to go through with this, my hands became sweaty again and the fear comes back in a crippling wave.

What if I got there too late? What if Marcus and Monica had moved so fast that they were already done? Usually I woke up much earlier and I was at the company before the crack of dawn sometimes. If I had to choose between the company I built from the ground up for the last twenty years and my new family, what would I choose?

The car speeds through the streets of the city, people going about their lives on the outside. The buildings behind and around them seeming eternal, even the shift fronts and signboards that changed all the time looked so solid but

everything had changed. Everything was flimsy. If I wasn't careful, my twenty-year building was about to become one of the many solids that never really were.

I try to cast the thought away from my mind as the car stops in front of my building. It was a sunny day and I have to squint a little. Already there is a small contingent of reporters that security was not letting get past a man-made wall they'd put up.

I couldn't tell how things were from here but it looked like there was still a chance, like I still had hope. I rush up the stairs, believing.

Please let me not be late. Help me. Repeating over and over in my head even if I did not know who I was asking for help.

I got to the top of the stairs and find the doors closed and a single large and hulking security guard standing in front of the doors barring my way in.

I wasn't a small man by any standards. I was huge and yet this man dwarfed me. I gritted my teeth.

Nobody dwarfs me. I am Adam Evans.

"What are you doing?" I ask him in a calm voice of command and that puts him off. The question itself as much as the way I had asked it.

"Guarding the doors," he replies.

I can already hear camera shutters clicking and tabloid newspapers running with the headline; *Adam Evans barred from own company as Evans energy is subject to hostile takeover.*

How is my mind being my own enemy?

"From what?" I ask him and he stops short again, not saying a word, I stare at him with a raised eyebrow.

"From what, young man, that is the question I asked you."

"From you sir," he replies hastily. "I'm sorry but you can't get in under any circumstance. Not even to grab your things

from the inside. I'm to stand here until everyone in there comes out."

They'd planned this so well. They'd gotten everyone here without my knowledge and managed to keep it a secret from me and now they were going to take everything from me. If I could scream, I would have.

I need to get into that office. I don't know how but it has to happen.

"Son, inside there are people that are trying to steal my company from me. They want to take everything from me. Everything I've worked for for the last twenty years. Now, I have no quarrel with you, you're just doing your job but if you stand there, you're going to cost me my life and that's going to be on you."

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry sir, I can't let you get in. I'm sorry."

I stand back in frustration. The camera shutters are still clicking away, a constant throb in my ears. For the love of God, I needed to come up with a solution and fast. I needed a way to get in or I'd lose it all.

"Daddy?" Someone shouts.

Is that Sarah? I look back down and the number of reporters down there has increased. They are going to break through soon and then I'd have a problem but that wasn't the only scene. Another one of our Mercedes had arrived and I stare in amazement as Sarah, Brian and Leslie get out, Alex and Henry with them. All of them making their way up the stairs.

"Sarah? You guys? What are you doing here?" I ask them, spreading my arms for Sarah and lifting her up with kisses as she giggles and wraps her arms around me. My worries no matter how great they are, fade away with her in my arms.

"We're not going to stay idle while you lose something you've worked for your entire life you know. We came to support you," Lelsie tells me, placing a kiss on my cheeks.

“And kick some ass. Mostly kick some ass in fact. I’d like to stick my first in Marcus’ lying mouth. I knew he was a snake. I called it from the beginning, didn’t I?”

Brian rolls his eyes at Alex and Leslie shake their heads but I grin and it helps me calm down.

Am I really worried about losing a company when all these people are surrounding me? Before now I had no one. Just me and Sarah but now look and this isn’t even all of them. There’s Amy, there’s Leslie’s parents, Ryan. We were planning a cookout! I had friends now, scratch that, a family. The family I thought hadn’t begun was well and truly in order.

“Thanks guys,” I tell them with a grin. I remember what Leslie had said about me smiling more and more these days.

I was smiling more these days. I’m happy. That’s why. A lot of things to be thankful for. Things I couldn’t be thankful for before.

“Don’t tell us thanks until the job is done, why are you standing outside your own company, let’s go in,” Leslie says, pointing towards the door.

“Look at that guy, he’s built like four rocks. He says I can’t get in. They planned for everything.”

“We can take him,” Alex says smashing her first into her palm. “I say we rush him all at once.”

Heaven’s no. I’m not entirely sure we’d succeed.

“I say you don’t. Please,” the guard replies.

“See, he’s scared. Who’s with me?” She puts her hand in the middle for a huddle that Sarah joins from my shoulders.

“Sarah’s the only real one,” she mutters.

“Deshaun?” Henry says as he came up the stairs and the guard catches sight of him.

“Henry, what are you doing here?”

We all stop to stare.

“I work for Mr. Evans. He’s the one that got me the money to pay for your hip replacement surgery.”

“Oh,” Deshaun says simply, staring at me.

“Thank you sir, you saved my life,” he tells me and then stands aside. “I had no idea. I’d have let you go through long ago.”

I couldn’t believe it. Just like that. Something I’d forgotten so long ago.

“I’m still going to punch you in the stomach when this is over,” Alex growls at him as we speed past. I give him a nod and tap on the shoulder.

“Let’s go,” Leslie urges. We rush into the building with Henry behind us. People stop to stare as we run but none of us slows down.

There was still a chance to save the company.

We all crowd into the elevators as it begins to move up.

“They better be careful in that conference because I’m going to throw hands if anyone tries to stop us,” Alex tells everyone, doing half air punches.

“We have Henry for that,” Brian replies.

“Sush, little man,” she shoots back. I wanted to think of what I could say but with everything going on, I couldn’t and I left it anyway.

“Are you good?” Leslie asks. Her arm is around me, softly rubbing against my back.

“I thought if I lost this company, I could lose the plot and maybe end up losing you people by becoming something like my father but now, I can see that isn’t the case. I’m much more relaxed, I can’t let Marcus win but I’m not scared anymore.”

“That’s good cause I knew you were scared at home trying to act tough. Ol’ scaredy cat C.E.O.”

I snort, shaking my head as the elevator opens on the floor where the conference room was and we begin rushing towards the room. There was another guard stationed there but the look

on our faces must have made him freeze because he let us pass. All that stands between us is the glass door of the conference room and another guard.

“Do you know who this is? Let us through!” Leslie demands.

“I’m sorry but I have strict—”

Brian kicks him right between the legs.

We all stare at him with identical shocked expressions as the guard crumbles to the ground and Brian holds the door open.

“He says it’s okay,” he tells us, pointing at the guard.

Alex bursts out in laughter. Clapping her hands and giving him a high five.

“Good going!—” She applauds.

“That is not okay!” Leslie cuts in and then glares at her.

“—but that is not okay,” Alex finishes but gives him a thumbs up and a high five.

I step into the office in the midst of all that chaos. Everyone standing, acting like naughty children who had been caught doing something they were not supposed to be doing.

“What’s going on here?” I ask.

They all look at me, no one says a word and then Monica stands at the other end of the table.

“You’ve worked tirelessly for this company, Adam, but you’ve lost your way and your drive. It’s time for you to pass on the reins to someone else and focus on being in love since it’s what was denied to you as a child.”

I let it wash over me, water under the bridge.

“Pass on the reins to who? You who hasn’t worked a day in her life? Gigi the chihuahua? Or my scared little assistant hiding behind your skirts who’s frankly, the worst of the three?”

LESLIE

I have to bite my lips to keep from laughing but Alex snickers loud enough for everyone to hear then stage whispers to Brian.

“He’s the one that’s behind her skirts right now, their weird dude with sideways teeth.”

“I hope the board is not seriously giving thought to sanctioning this deal. I’ll always put the company first in everything I do. Same with my family. Those are the two most important things to me and I’m committed to them both with my life.”

“What’s this about you not closing a deal with Monica Rosso to move our latest invention that we commissioned the building of two plants in the southwest about then, and I hear it’s because you were too busy chasing after that woman beside you now.”

The old man who spoke points at me with grubby red and white fingers, I shift a little to the side, trying my best not to glare.

“Did they tell you the condition Monica Russo stipulated before she turned over the funds to us or were they thinking they could run all of this and keep me from getting to the conference room to stop them?”

Marcus stands from his chair.

“All of this doesn’t matter anymore. The board was about to sign the contract and sell the company. We put together an

offer you're not going to top. There's nothing to say anymore —”

“Except you should get your teeth fixed!” Alex cuts in, looking sideways.

Adam takes advantage of the second pause.

“Then let me offer the board the same deal with the same terms as what we would have moving forward with the new contract.”

“And how are you going to do that?” Marcus snaps.

“No one's speaking to you, you don't matter Marcus!” Adam faces him squarely for almost a full minute, as if daring him to speak before turning back to the board.

“It's simple, I'm bringing you all the loaning power that Monica's trust brings you because I'm still bringing Monica to the table.”

We all look at him like he was crazy, how did he expect to bring her back to the table?

What is he planning? I wouldn't go along with any crazy arrangement.

“Monica, aren't you tired of being the rich heiress who hasn't really done anything? Don't you want to make a difference. Do something that will get you remembered after you're gone and respected while alive. This is that opportunity. I'll name you as one of the leading inventors beside me. Let's give the Russo name the respect it deserves, what do you say?”

He stares at her intently, not letting her look away and I can see that she is already being swayed, the thoughts and visions running through her mind. The magazine journals with her face as an inventor and master investor and not just the woman who runs around buying this and that and thriving on the work of those before her.

It was a done deal, Adam had done it in a single masterful stroke, I stare at him, appreciating the fastness of his thought process.

“Don’t listen to him. He’s the one who left you before, can you believe anything he says to you?” Marcus tells her, trying to turn her to him.

“Should I believe you who’s still struggling to top two minutes, twenty years later?”

“Oh!” Alex and I cry at the same time and then wish to disappear when all those eyes turn to us.

Seriously, were these people made of wood? That was a sick burn, even Adam was smiling. However, old Adam might not have been since he was physically unable to be happy.

“Alright, Adam, I’ll trust you. You say we can make a difference. Let’s make a difference then. You have a deal.”

Adam nods to her and I pump my fist beside my thighs.

“And the board?” Adam asks.

“I’m always with Adam, there’s no question there. I’ll pick him up at any time over any other option. The bid Marcus brought before us was one filled with what we can now see are lies about the growing incompetency of Adam. He has never been incompetent and he would never be incompetent. He’s the only one fit to run this company. Always was and always will be.”

The man who spoke was on the right and when I look at him, I discovered that seated just behind him was the young man at the function.

Another one of the people that Adam helped in the past coming to his rescue. You couldn’t make it up.

The other members of the board nod in agreement and I love the look on Marcus’ face when he sees that it was all crashing down. He looks at Monica who doesn’t even spare him a glance, and then the members of the board and finally at Adam.

Adam stares back at him.

“You ate at my table and could have kept eating at my table for as long as you wanted but you were too greedy to be

satisfied with yours. Henry, please escort him out of the building.”

“Put him in the same place you put Chad. They belong together,” Alex adds.

We needed saving from Alex too. I knew this part with my life.

Adam looks at me and I beam back at him.

“You did it.”

“I did it,” he replies, his smile widening. “My family, my company and my dream for clean and affordable energy are all safe.”

“In one swoop too. Someone’s good at what he does.”

“Ugh, kiss already if that’s what you both want to do but spare us another second,” Alex cries.

“Seconded,” Brian adds, then takes Sarah’s hand. “Come on, let’s leave them and their barf interactions.”

Adam looks at them go, and then places a kiss on my lips, I kiss him back just as fondly.

“Well done, I’ll leave you with your board now,” I tell him.

“Thank you.”

I notice now that it was a really bright day with the sun streaming in and just like the time when the realization hit me before, I saw that we both had no worries in life at this time. Everything worked out well for both him and me and we still had our family together. I squeeze his arms as I let him go. When he got home, another round of celebrations would begin.



I’D BEEN in the house for a couple of days, making sure all the arrangements were set and ready. Alex handled the food and Amy helped her out. We were using the backyard close to the

pool and the table was all set. Alex had gone to pick up the balloons and was supposed to get back thirty minutes ago.

“Where’s Alex,” I ask Amy as I make sure all the chairs were properly placed. The back of the house had a large open space beyond the pool. Lush and green. Sprinklers kept it watered most of the time. We’d set the chairs at the edge of the green field, close to the pool.

Before the pool and in the shadow of the house, the backyard with the little gnome statuettes was where we set the food and drinks table with small blue plastic cups for the drinks. A huge high-backed black chair sat to one side and there was already a stockpile of gifts that had come from Adam himself.

Sarah was running around in her pink elf dress, her wand with streamers on it flying behind her while Brian helped Henry clean the last of the table.

It was so much preparation like you wouldn’t believe.

“She’s coming, she says she’s coming,” Amy replies, shrugging her shoulders.

If I get that girl, I’ll probably strangle her.

“Here’s a chair, Leslie, sit for a moment, rest,” Ryan tells me, placing a chair behind me.

“Thank you,” I say and sit. My stomach is bulging in front of me, and the little one inside is kicking a little, making me wince. My hand rubs my belly as I take deep breaths, closing them for a bit and then opening them again.

Adam’s flight was already in the air by now. He’d spent many of the last few months taxing around the states, his big dream finally coming together. All that was good and fine but he still deserved shoulder punches for leaving me alone so much of the time. Even with Alex and Amy close by, it wasn’t enough.

My phone begins to ring, and I answer it without even checking.

“Hello,”

“Hey, I’m back, I’m back. There was a little problem when one of the balloons popped—”

“What?” I scream, sitting up.

“Don’t worry, I got it under control! I got a new one. It’s all good.”

“Where are you Alex? I think the guests are starting to arrive.”

“I’m right outside the street, Adam’s large boxy SUV won’t move faster than snail speed.”

“Adam is in front of you?” I ask, excited and standing up from the chair before she even answers to head back inside the house.

“Oh yeah, he’s here. It’s time to party like it’s 1425 and before you ask, I don’t know how they partied then.”

I roll my eyes. Alex could never change.

A while later, when all the guests have arrived and the music is blaring, I stand in the circle of Adam’s arms with my parents and friends around me as Brian and Sarah prepared to pop the balloon to reveal the baby’s gender.

His body is warm and it felt safe, it always felt safe. My finger glinted with my engagement ring as I tried to direct them on placement so the wrong balloon didn’t get popped, and while all of that is going on, the only thing I could think of was how happy and blessed I was. Just happy and blessed. Every single day.

“You sure you’re okay standing?” Adam asks for the hundredth time.

“I’m fine,” I reply with a smile. “You ready to see that it’s a boy?”

“Oh I know it’s a girl and the bet is still on. If I’m right, you’ll change all the diapers for the first three months.”

“You need to worry about yourself and those smelly diapers hunny, ‘cause I know I’m right,” I reply. Pinching his arm out of spite.

Brian and Sarah begin their act. Sarah casting spells with her magic wand and beating Brian and his sword backward from the field of grass towards the pool and the balloons while they fought.

“Say your last words,” Sarah cries as they got close to the bathroom, her voice high and sassy and then she casts the final spell.

Brian falls backward and his sword splits the pink balloon and it bursts with a pop, pink ribbons falling out and fireworks going up in the sky at the same time. “It’s a girl” was blazed in large pink letters in the air and everyone begins to cheer at once.

“Girl!” Adam roars, pumping his arms victoriously. Then he turns around, remembering me. I could not be angry. I laugh and clapped along with him, hugging him, holding him tight.

“We’re going to have a baby girl, my love,” he tells me, voice cracking.

“She’ll be beautiful and perfect, just like Sarah,” I reply, kissing his neck and burying my face there. My baby was happy inside, as I was, warmth spreading all over my body.

“I love you, Leslie,” he tells me as he kisses me.

“I love you, Adam,” I reply, and the baby kicks to confirm it was true.

The End

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SNEAK PEEK OF BOSS'S FAKE FIANCEE

Never fake date a silver fox... especially when he's your boss.

TAKE IT FROM ME, never bang your boss, don't agree to fake date him, and damn sure don't get pregnant.

MY SMOKING hot boss is too high and mighty with a massive ego and an even bigger... wallet.

HE REFUSES to notice my talent at work until he needs a favor.

BE his fake date for 2 weeks so he can prove a point to his family.

THAT'S my chance to knock him down a couple of notches.

I WAS DOING SO WELL KEEPING my heart protected.

UNTIL HE UNEXPECTEDLY SWOOPS IN as the hero I didn't know I needed.

SUDDENLY MY HATE turns to hunger.

NEXT THING I KNOW, I'm waking up next to my frenemy with benefits after a hot mind-blowing night.

THE REST SHOULD BE HISTORY.

EXCEPT THINGS HAVE GOTTEN a little complicated.

I NOW HAVE to explain this growing baby bump to my co-workers.

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CHAPTER ONE – OWAIN

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FUCK THIS. I do not have time for this. What is this boring guy even talking about? "...so, then we can use this pre-launch as a way to get some PR from the local papers..." Even his voice is monotone. I curl my hands into tight fists, my knuckles tense and white, what the hell is all of this? "My marketing team is supposed to be special." Uh oh. Keeping my anger in check, clearly hasn't worked. It's shooting off my tongue, spaying accusatory bullets all around the room. The worst thing is I can't stop now. "This is the dullest presentation I have ever listened to in my life, and this is my business. My company, so I'm already excited about the products. But if you can't get me all fired up, then how the hell are you supposed to get customers fired up?" My father's marketing team is something else. No wonder he's so successful. Fuck, I need that! "Where is the creative thinking? Where is the excitement? What are you all doing?" I scrape my chair back, the sound echoing through the now silent room. I shake my head as crushing disappointment sets in... "Wait." Who is that? Oh... her. The blonde with a big mouth. Always talking and never saying anything. I can't even remember why I hired her. Maybe because she's hot, but that shouldn't be my criteria. "That's just one idea," she insists. "One idea from Dan, who seems to be the only member of the team you respect. The only one you'll listen to anyways. What about the

rest of us?" I narrow my eyes at her. "You trying to tell me you have something better?" "I'm trying to tell you that we might all have better ideas, but you never bother to listen to us." She narrows her eyes right back at me, refusing to back down. "But you just listen to Dan and that's the end of it. There's never any time for anyone else." She's getting right under my skin. "Come on then, let's hear it. You say you have good ideas? Put your money where your mouth is." "I don't have a whole presentation like Dan, because when I have put stuff together in the past you didn't give it a chance." Ha! Backing down. This feels like a victory, and I really need a God damn victory right now. I don't know who else I'm supposed to take my frustration out on. "So, you don't have any ideas. Just as I thought." "You're going to walk out on that remark?" Ooh, I guess not now. "The way you behave is totally sexist sometimes. This isn't the way to run a company." Too much. Too far. I won't stand for that. "Everyone else, get out of here. Back to your desks, and for the love of God, come back to me with some better ideas. I don't want to deal with any more wasted time." I don't take my eyes off of Raven as she flicks her ashy blonde hair over her shoulder defiantly. She knows she isn't to go. Good, we're gonna have this out now before she pulls any of that shit again. Sexist, how dare she? I'm definitely not a sexist man. I'll take good ideas off anyone. Maybe she has tried to show me ideas in the past, but if they had failed to capture my attention, that was her fault not mine. I don't know why it seems to take an age to get everyone else out of here, I get the impression a couple of them are pointedly being slow in the hope that they can lap up some gossip. Not a chance. No way I'm going to give them anything to go on. Let them come up with their own bull shit. I have enough to worry about. Raven remains completely unfazed as we wait forever. No nervousness, no fear. That's what really gets to me. I keep expecting her strong stance to falter or her eyes to move off of mine, but she doesn't flinch. Not even once. Fine, she wants to challenge me? So be it. I can play that fucking game. "Right." I jut my chin out. "So, you want to explain what the hell that was all about?" "Me calling you out?" She cocked a brow. "If that's what you want to call it, fine." "I think it's time someone calls you out on the way you run things,

because it's crazy. You really do only listen to Dan's ideas, and his are always the worst ones..." "Well, at least we agree on something. His idea was shitty as fuck today. But you are the one who stood up and acted like you had a million ideas to throw at me. But you don't." My one shoulder shrug should send her running, but it doesn't. How embarrassing is this for her? Can't she see she's humiliating herself? "No, of course I don't. Because I have wasted more than enough time trying to get the attention of Mr. Baker." "You have it now." I edge closer to her. "You have my eyes and ears on you. But it turns out you don't have anything to say. Only accusations of sexism without anything to back it up." "Oh, I can back it up," she snaps back. "But you'd probably fire me for it. Not all of us have rich fathers to hand us everything on a silver platter. Some of us actually need our jobs." My teeth grit together. This is the worst shit someone can throw at me. Assuming I only have the life I have because of my dad. I know he's wealthy, I know I came from privilege, but this business hasn't been born out of that. I started it from nothing, I gave it my all, I brought it up to what it is today, and still feel like I have to prove myself every single God damn day. I could really explode with this. Seriously, I could lose my mind. It takes every scrap of self-control I have not to make this any worse than it already is. Although I don't yell, I can't stop myself from getting in her personal space. Big mistake. Her citrusy scent floods my nostrils which sparkles weird zinging electricity in the air. I won't react though, I refuse to. "Look, I think this company is at the stage now where we need to start taking risks with the marketing," Raven continues, slightly diffusing the tension. "It's time to get the press to come to us, rather than reaching out to them all the time. It's time to go viral." I scoff. "So, you want to do a stupid online thing?" "We are a tech company, aren't we?" She smirks. "I know you don't use social media much, but I really think you should. It's the fastest way of getting all eyes on you. For free. And if you do it right, you'll end up with tons more business in an instant." I have to admit, it sounds a bit more exciting than Dan's rubbish. I can't let her know that though. The moment I back down, she wins. "What sort of stunt? You need to give me more than that to go on." "I don't know yet..." she admits.

“The electric car in space, the energy drink’s new moon, the fast food restaurant logo you can see from space. That sort of thing.” “I thought you said this would be free. It’s starting to sound pricier by the minute.” “You get the right campaign; it will be worth it. Trust me.” She’s smug. I need to bring her down a peg or two. “Fine,” I snap, shocking the pair of us. “Come to me Monday morning with a complete idea. If it’s a decent one, I’ll do it.” “You’ll...” Raven steps away from me with wide, surprised eyes. “You’ll do it? Just like that?” “I’ll do it,” I confirm. “I wouldn’t want any of my staff members feeling unheard, and I certainly wouldn’t want to be seen as sexist.” My God, she doesn’t even look embarrassed that she had said that. I won’t allow her to stick by that, I refuse. “So, if you have a full presentation of a decent idea by then, we can make it happen.” I can almost feel the nervous excitement rolling off her in waves. She isn’t going to back down, is she? I keep thinking she’s going to back down. Raven is one fiery, determined woman. Well, fine, whatever. I didn’t actually believe she would be able to pull anything half decent by Monday. “Monday morning, first thing,” she promises. “I’m going to blow you away. You’ll never want to listen to Dan’s crappy ideas again.” Raven doesn’t take her eyes off me as she gathers up her things, almost as if she thinks I’ll give her whiplash by quickly changing my mind. I’ve said it, I’m nothing if not a man of my word. “I guess I’ll see you Monday then.” “You will, Boss.” I think that’s the first genuine smile I’ve ever seen her give me. “You are not going to regret this.” “I already might be,” I mutter to myself as she slides out the room. As soon as Raven exits the room, the whole energy changes. The intense heat zaps away, leaving me a little lost. I’m sure I have lots of stuff to do before the end of the day, but truly I can’t think of a single freaking one. What the hell was that? I shake my head, unable to stop myself from smiling just a little bit. I don’t know what dangerous game Raven thinks she’s playing, but she won’t win. I never lose. Hell, either way I win, right? Either I’m right and she doesn’t know what she’s talking about, or I get a decent PR campaign, which will be the first time in a while. Ring, ring... Ring, ring... I groan. Only one person would bother calling my personal cell phone in the middle of the work day because he has very little respect for

the hours I need to work. I really can't be dealing with him, but I know from experience if I don't answer, he will only call over and over. "Dad, hi." "Owain, are you finished in the office yet? You need to come home for dinner." Home. My parent's house hasn't been 'home' to me for years. I moved out sixteen years ago, just after my twentieth birthday. But whatever, I guess we don't need to argue semantics. "I'm not done yet, but..." "Well, come as soon as you can," he interjects, blowing right over my answer. "Your mother has a wonderful meal organized. Tom and Katie are already here, and they have some great news, and they want us all together to hear it." Oh great. Tom and Katie, the golden couple. The golden girlfriend for the golden child. Of course, they have great news to share, and we all have to be there for it. Why? Because Tom is perfect. He always was, the good kid at school with the best grades, the one who never stayed out too late or went to parties, the guy destined for greatness. Then, to add to it, he was the one who joined Dad's company, in my mind that was taking the easy route, whereas I had dared to venture out on my own. That was going to be rammed down my throat tonight for sure. "Fine, whatever," I sigh. All the anger bubbling within me ebbing away and sliding into disappointment. "I'll be there as soon as I can, okay? I just need to finish up here." I cut him off before he could respond with some sarcastic comment. If I'm going to face that tonight, there's no point now. "Fuck," I hiss. "This is going to be a shit show." Going alone, I was sure to be faced with a ton of questions about my love life as well. Yay, I can't wait...

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CHAPTER TWO - RAVEN

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“OKAY, so a PR stunt. I need to find a decent PR stunt.”

My heart thunders so hard against my rib cage, I fear it might burst free. But with excitement, right? Not nerves. Well, maybe a little bit of nerves because obviously this is all super unexpected, but mostly I'm just happy that I can finally make Mr. Baker see that I'm worth it. I *will* make that grumpy ass man smile.

I swing around in my desk chair before reaching down for my binder filled with previous ideas I had almost turned into presentations in the past, wondering which one to pick.

Obviously, I can't go for something as dramatic and expensive as the electric car in space, that had only been a suggestion, but I do need it to be right.

“To be fair to Owain,” I mutter to myself as I flick through my ideas. “He isn't the only sexist pig in this place. Dan loves being the only one in the spotlight as well.”

It felt good to knock him off his pedestal for once. I freaking loved it when Owain called him out for being so boring because I was bored as all hell as well. Dan *is* a dull man who gets duller by the day.

I bet he's not boring tonight though, I bet he's raging. I chuckle to myself. He'll have to hold on to that anger all

weekend, and even Monday morning because I won't be at my desk to hear him rant. I'll be in Owain's office, knocking him off his feet.

I pull out some of my most promising ideas from my binder and lay them out in front of me so I can really take a look at them and try and work out how best to present them.

Knock, knock.

I whip around and stare at my front door, wondering who the hell is here. I'm not expecting anyone, and I don't answer the door if I don't know who's on the other side.

"Raven, open up, will you?" My pulse slows down once I realize it's only Cara, my bestie. "It's only me, not some crazy serial killer. I know that's what you're worried about."

I shove all my work to the side for a minute while I let her in. "I don't think you're a serial killer," I chuckle as I throw my arms around her and embrace like I haven't seen each other in months, rather than just a few days. "More than you might want to sell me something."

She pushes her way in and drops her bag on the floor before shooting me a critical look. "Why are you still in your sweat pants?"

"Erm..." I glance down at my scruffy clothing. "Because I'm at the computer..."

"No way." She tuts and shakes her head. "You are not wasting a weekend working, and especially not tonight. Not when you promised to come out with me."

"I did? I don't remember that."

"For our double date, remember? You're going to hang out with Vinnie's friend, while also scoping him out for me, letting me know what you think of him before I get in too deep."

I groan, agony ripping through my body. "Oh my God, I totally forgot."

"That doesn't mean you're getting out of it, Raven. I need you tonight. I like Vinnie a lot, but that means I might be missing his red flags. You have to tell me."

I throw my hands in the air to surrender. “Okay, alright, you don’t need to guilt trip me. I’m going to come, I just forgot in all my excitement because some good stuff is happening at work.”

“Tell me all about it while you get dressed. A nice dress,” Cara adds, throwing a pointed look at my sweats. “I want to hear it, I do, but I don’t want to be late. Vinnie has been sending me sexy texts all day and I can’t wait to see him.”

“Urgh, really?” I cringe. “Please tell me I won’t have to watch you and your new beau sucking face all night? While trying to make awkward small talk with...”

“Taylor. And don’t worry. You’ll like him a lot. He’s a cool guy, really interesting. I really see you guys hitting it off.” She nudges me and smirks. “That’ll be romantic, won’t it? Falling in love on a blind date. A good story for your kids.”

I roll my eyes. “Only marginally better than meeting on a dating app, I guess.”

“Hey! Me and Vinnie met on a dating app, don’t forget.”

Oops. “I didn’t mean any offence by it. You know what I mean.”

“If you stopped watching so many sappy movies, then you wouldn’t have this wild, romantic notion of how love is supposed to be. You might let more guys in then.”

I grab a couple of dresses out of my wardrobe, which Cara immediately shoots down with a frown. I guess I’m going to have to try and match her a little. She’s in something super tight fitting and sexy though. It’s blood red and shows off her legs for days.

I don’t think I have anything like that.

“Just because I want a bit of romance, Cara, doesn’t mean I’m asking for too much.”

Although I can spit that out as much as I want, like it’s a mantra or something, doesn’t make it true. I really think I might be asking for too much, because I haven’t had anything *like* the sort of romance I’d like.

But I'm only twenty-six years old. I don't think I'm expected to have it all figured out yet. Am I?

"That one." Cara grabs for a little black dress I was just about to discard. "Come on, you look hot in that one. Taylor will absolutely love it."

I stifle a sigh. There's no point in showing my disdain for the night because it won't change a thing. Cara will get me out on this double date regardless. If she wants me to wear this, then so be it. Tonight wasn't about me anyway.

"Okay fine." I snatch the dress back. "But I can't promise I'll have a good time."

"You will," Cara insists with a laugh. "I have a really good feeling about you and Taylor. He's a self-employed carpenter with a nice smile, and being friends with Vinnie works in his favor as well." She sighs dreamily. I honestly don't think I've ever seen Cara this giddy over a guy before. It's weird. Nice, but weird. "Vinnie is amazing. I hope you think so too."

"Oh, I'm sure I will." I struggle to get the dress over my head. This is definitely a tighter dress than I would have chosen for myself. "But if any red flags pop up, you'll be the first to know."

I check out my reflection in the mirror with a frown. I'm definitely going to have to do something with my hair to make this work for me. A messy bun is fine for sweat pants and working at home, not so much with this dress, but I suppose it'll be fine. Who knows, it might even end up being a whole lot of fun.



I SHUFFLE my dress down as it rides up my thighs, making me more uncomfortable than I already am. Cara promised that I wouldn't have to witness her public displays of affection with Vinnie all night long, but of course that's exactly what was happening.

I haven't even had much of a chance to get to know Vinnie, I don't know how I'm supposed to make any kind of judgement on him. I shouldn't be here, but it was too late to skip out.

"...your boss sounds like a right douche bag!" Taylor throws his head back and laughs. "This is why I work for myself, because I wouldn't be able to stand someone like that, looking down on me and making me feel like shit all the time."

"Huh, yeah." I can't force a laugh out, and I don't know why. "Well, I'm going to show him that I'm not to be treated that way. I have a plan."

"Seems, unnecessary though, don't you think?" He cocks his head to one side curiously. "To have to prove yourself to someone who hired you in the first place. Don't you think you should just walk in with the respect? I don't get it."

He's rubbing me the wrong way. He knows nothing about me and my life, yet he thinks he gets to have an opinion? I'm allowed to think what I want about Mr. Baker because I deal with him all the time. But Taylor... no way.

I catch a glimpse of Cara smiling my way for the first time in hours. I need to keep the peace. I grit my teeth together and change the subject rapidly.

"Let's not talk about work anymore. Why don't you tell me more about what you do in your free time?"

"Oh well, I do have a soft spot for vintage cars..."

I smile and nod at all the right moments, wanting to scream at Cara. I *know* she thinks my desire for romance is stupid and unrealistic, but so was this.

I could be working on my presentation right now, getting it right. I still need to work out just what PR stunt will blow Owain away and *really* put me on the map.

"Taylor, come with me to get some drinks from the bar." All of a sudden, Cara reaches across the table and takes his hand. I have to admit that I'm relieved for a moment of peace.

“We’ll leave Raven and Vinnie to get to know one another a little better.”

Oh God, I’m up. It’s time.

I straighten up and clasp my hands together, needing Vinnie to see how serious I am. Already I can tell he isn’t sure how this is going to go. I’m protective of Cara and I want to ensure he only wants what’s best for her, but I’m not a monster.

Mostly because Cara has way more romantic experiences than me. I’m sure she knows what she’s looking for much better than I ever could.

“So, Vinnie.” I cough awkwardly once we’re alone. “How are things going? You know, with Cara? You seem to have a really great connection.”

Urgh, I feel like her mom. This is dumb.

“Oh yeah, I like her a lot.” His face lights up and a joyful pinkness stains his cheeks. He really does like Cara. I can see it radiating through him. “I think she’s amazing. I know we haven’t been dating for that long, but I like the way she’s so passionate and fun loving. I love the essence of her, she’s like sunshine.”

Raven

I CAN’T HELP but melt. “Yeah, she does have a really great warmth about her, doesn’t she?”

Vinnie laughs. “I just can’t believe she likes me. I don’t feel anywhere near good enough for her. But she really seems to.”

Holy shit, my chest constricts with jealousy. I want someone to look at me that way. Maybe I do need to start considering dating apps if this is the sort of romance that can come out of it. I just can’t picture myself setting up a page and messaging total strangers to see if there is any kind of connection to be found through a screen. But maybe with Cara’s help...

Not yet, I tell myself decisively. Let's get through this presentation first.

By the time Cara and Taylor join us once more, Vinnie and I have fallen into a natural, joyous conversation. This only makes it more obvious that there isn't a scrap of anything resembling a connection between me and Taylor. We can't even talk without it feeling weird.

I didn't come into this tonight expecting there to be a spark, but I still felt disappointed. Why can't I ever have a spark?

I suppose it'll come someday. I just need to be ready when it does.

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