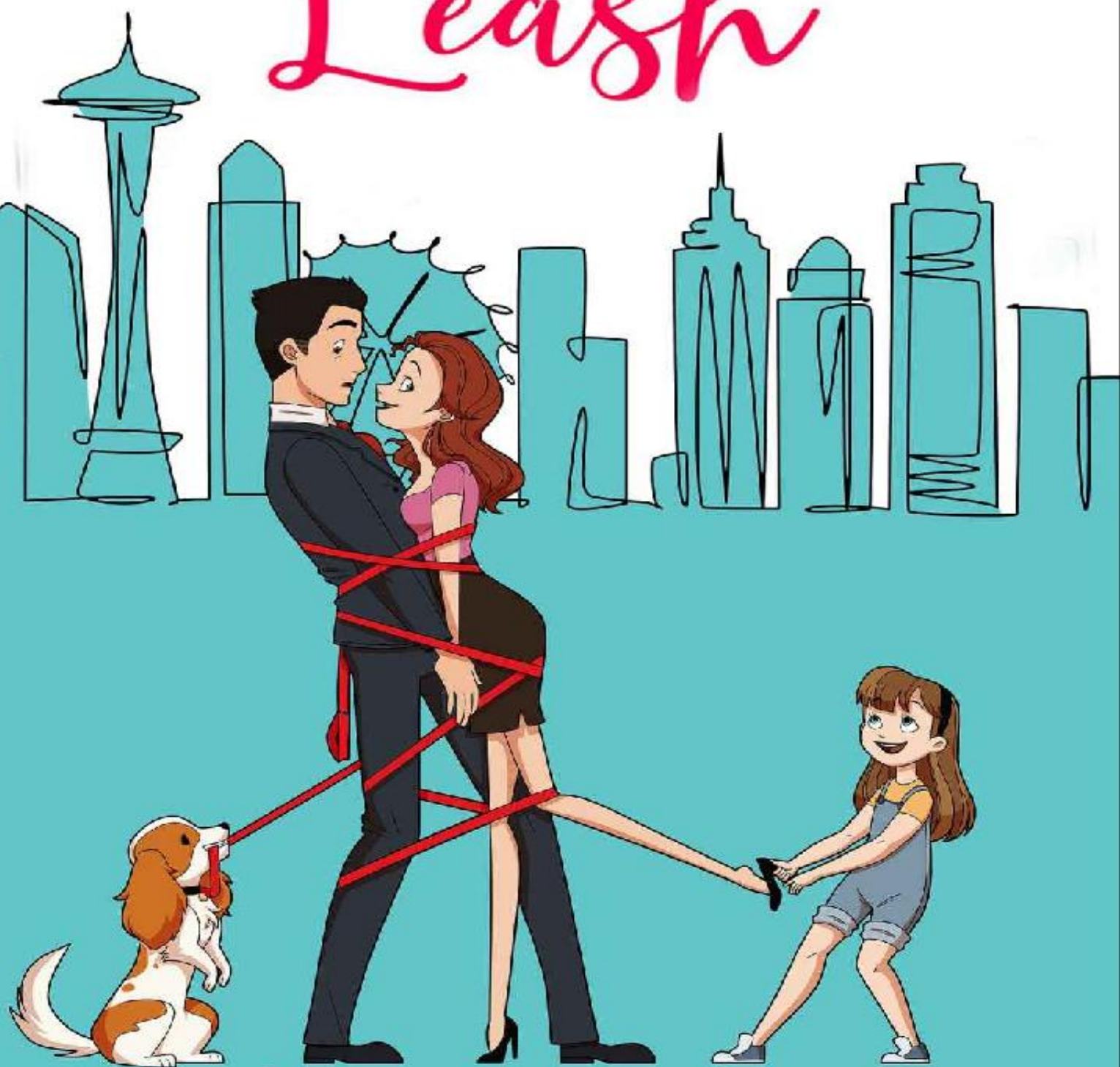


Boss On A Leash



Kara Hart

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ALI

I hate Valentine's Day.

For the month of February, I've sworn off candy hearts, Hershey's kisses, and red roses. Above all else, I'm *done* with men. For all of 2021.

Seriously.

Fun fact about Valentine's Day: The Romans used this wonderful little holiday as an excuse to whip women and sacrifice cute kittens. In 2021, men are still at their shenanigans. At least romance books are readily available. I haven't sworn those off. Yet...

When I first arrived to my Seattle home, I thought everything would come prepackaged in a nice bow. The apartment I found to lease wasn't charming, but it was quaint and very affordable. Meeting interesting people seemed to happen every weekend. I was within blocks of some of the best food, coffee, and beer in the country. I *really* thought I found my place.

But then I met Jack in the line to get my first pumpkin spiced latte of the season. It was a cold winter, much colder than last year's, I was told. And despite the outside heaters, I was freezing my butt off. Jack was a gentleman. He offered me his coat.

I must've waited thirty-minutes for that over-flavored cup of coffee. It would've been worth it if I got there five minutes earlier. Instead, he asked me out.

Before I knew it, I was going on dates. He was sleeping over. We were... *well*, some things are better left unsaid. We were

having fun.

When the first burst of endorphins hit, it felt like heaven. But when the tide rolled back, unanswered questions came into play. Arguments started. The smallest disagreements turned into major blow ups. I don't even know what we were fighting so much about, but we deserved an Oscar for our performances.

We just blew up...

Another fun fact: People have been living in Seattle for over 4,000 years. No joke. But they've only been getting pumpkin spiced lattes for a few decades. I'm not sure if my trouble with men is related, but I wouldn't doubt it. Weirder things have happened.

I'm not proud of our split, but these things happen. People break up all the time. I've always thought it's how you handle those splits that defines your personality, rather than the number of heartbreaks you rack up. Still, it's not very comforting knowing you're heading into your mid-twenties, alone.

To top it off, my friends back in Chicago are all getting married. I'd rather not think about that now...

I moved to this gorgeous city to teach kids, not to date assholes, so when I wake up to the sound of my phone blowing up next to my ear, I jump to look at what it says.

Shadow Park Valley Day. Subject: Teaching Application

There are a lot of great schools in the city. I applied to them all. I also got rejected. They gave their reasoning, usually being that the staff was too full. Now, it's February, and I'm at my wits end. If I don't find something soon, I'll have to go back to waiting tables.

Above all else, there is one school I want to teach at. Shadow Park Valley Day. It's the most prestigious school, and it's right outside the city in Sammamish, Washington. It's only the most beautiful area outside of the city. Not only do they have the newest books, lesson plans, and computers, they pay their staff an arm and a leg.

Sometimes, I take my bike and ride around the neighborhoods there, fantasizing about what my life could be like someday. The forest surrounds the homes, and the air is quiet. Someday, I'll get there. That's what I keep telling myself.

I've been a substitute for the district since the beginning of the year. I know I'm getting a little ahead of myself, but I hope to teach there one day. Full time. Lord knows, I would give that job my all.

I adjust my eyes to the glowing phone display. With my email pulled open, I read the words as if they were from some holy scripture. My hands are shaking the screen, but I somehow feel okay about this. If I don't get the job, I can always stay part time at the other schools. It's not the holy grail, but I've lived poor my entire life.

Rain lightly patters against my windowpane, but the sun is peeking over the clouds. There is still some time until we hit that beautiful spring season, but this week has been gorgeous. Today is the kind of day that pulls you outside for a nice walk. However, as I read the email, I feel my calm pulled out from underneath my feet like a rug.

I read my sentence aloud. "Thank you so much for your application, Ali Greenwald. We are sorry to inform you that we are booked for the fall of 2021 and Spring of 2022, but we will retain your application for the next school season. All the luck in the world, Dr. Jordan Berman PHD."

The school is perfect, so this is a blow. But just like all my past blows, I've gotten back on my feet. That includes my time with Jack.

Devastated as I am, there are other teaching positions. I have high hopes for my future. But the more time that passes, the more my brain searches for some extra dopamine. Instagram, Facebook, Tinder...

Oh, my.

There's nothing for me in the modern dating world. I filter through hundreds of threads, reposts, and like-counts, until I return to my dreaded email account. It's just a reality – I won't

be teaching at the charming red-brick private school of my dreams.

That's okay. I've saved some money in case I have a really bad month. It's not much, but it'll have to do. I'll come in whenever they need me to, and I'll keep my eyes peeled for something better.

Must. Stay. Positive.

I hit the arrow to the next message. It's not the opportunity of a lifetime, but it catches my eye. Last week, I was feeling pretty lonely, so I went searching for a dog online. I downloaded an app that gave regular updates on breeders in the area. It had a no-puppy-mill promise, so I signed up.

On any other normal day, I would hit the spam button and banish it to the Google dungeons. Ever since I moved, however, those normal days haven't existed. It would be pretty nice to have some life in this house.

I keep scrolling until I see a picture. It's the most beautiful King Charles Cavalier puppy I've ever seen.

Something comes over me. It's something like the combination of endorphins and expectations. It's hard to explain, but it's similar to the feeling of hope.

She's adorable. She's fluffy. I can tell she's going to be so much fun. A small bundle of love that will give me more than any man in the greater Seattle area. I keep reading and feel my heart grow fonder.

"A beautiful King Charles with a heart of gold," I whisper.

She's precious. I'm tearing up, I'm that excited.

Jumping on the opportunity, I dial the phone number listed at the bottom of the spammed ad. I recognize the area code. 253. The seller must be somewhere in Tacoma. It's a far drive from the city, but I feel like going on an adventure.

A rough voice answers the phone. "Yello?"

"Um, yeah, I just got an email about a puppy," I say.

"Yeah? Okie."

Clearing my throat, I push through the shaky introduction. “Well, I might want to adopt it...”

I’m still staring at the amber dog’s picture, and I have to admit, I’ve put more stock on this creature than any of my job applications. That being said, animals are a sore spot for me. I fall in love with just about every dog I see.

This one is special. We’re connected. I just know it.

The man on the other end of the line clears his throat so hard it sounds like his lungs give out for a minute. “Name?”

My heart rushes. Must buy dog! “Ali Greenwald,” I say.

“Not your name. The mutt. We’ve got a few dogs up for adoption, believe it or not,” he responds.

“Oh, uh.”

I scroll through the email until I see the name. “Ragamuffin.”

When it registers, I feel my heart pop out of my chest. My eyes fill with those candy hearts I swore I’d stay away from. My body turns to mush.

She’s so sweet...

The man clicks his tongue, and I hear the sound of fingers fumbling through sheets of paper. “Popular dog,” he grunts.

I’m holding my breath, waiting for some sign of good news.

And then a realization must hit him because his breath catches. “Actually, you know what? I just got a call about her yesterday. Businessman offered me double for her.”

Double? For a dog? Bullshit.

I nearly scream. “Who?”

The man chuckles, enjoying my suffering. “Well, I’m not at liberty to give you the names of other potential customers.”

My arm suddenly feels tired from holding the phone. “Oh. Right,” I mutter.

If this isn’t going to happen, there’s no use in forcing it. Another opportunity will come my way. Just like the teaching

job. Just like all the men in my life. Just like every stupid Valentine's Day holiday.

Another opportunity will come my way.

Wait a second. *No*. That's not how life works.

You have to grab it by the balls and take action. Whoever this *business man* may be is unimportant. I'm going to beat him there and give this puppy a new home.

I use my jaw to keep the phone level. "Hold on a sec."

Jumping out of bed, I reach under the dresser and pull out an old wooden jewelry case my mother gave me when I was younger. I open it and rest my eyes on the soft sight of money. By buying this dog, I'm digging into most of my savings. Doing that would be stupid, right? After all, missing out on a pet isn't something that ends someone's life.

What can I say? I've got my heart set on this cutie-patootie. Yes, I'm *that* lonely.

I count the bills. One. Two. Three. All the way to one-thousand.

After taking a deep breath, I weigh the pros and cons.

Pro: Dogs are loyal. They're smart, but not too independent to get rid of you. Cons: I'll have to train it. It might suck to clean its pee out of the carpet. I might not make rent this month...

Who am I kidding? I'd spend all my money to get this dog. There's no stopping me.

I break the silence with a negotiation. "Look, I've had a shit year," I say. "If I give you one hundred dollars more than the other guy, will you sell me her?"

A moment of silence catches me off guard, but I've got the money balled up inside my fist like it's a drug deal gone wrong.

"That depends," he says. "How fast can you get here?"

I check my watch. It's still early. If I leave now, I'll miss rush hour, but I can't spare a moment longer.

“Give me thirty,” I say.

MARC

I'm in such a fucking rush.

I've got a rental property that needs a plumber, a meeting in an hour that I'm going to be late to, and to make matters worse, my kid is doing all she can to get on my nerves because of a simple mistake I made a few days ago. It shouldn't be the end of the world, but trust me, it's damn close.

Okay, maybe I screwed up. I spent too many days in the office. I missed her school play. In the matter of a day, I became the terrible dad people hate to watch in movies.

It happens.

A good father admits when he's wrong. An even better father makes it up to their kid. I told my daughter I'd get her a kitten to cheer her up, and these eight year olds are tricky. She's old enough to remember my promises now. She makes sure I keep them too. Now I have to get her a pet. A dog is a better choice for a family.

At the gas station, she's got me spun around her finger, tugging on my jacket pocket, begging for one of those festive bags of candy hearts.

"No, sweetie," I say. "Another time. We have to get that puppy."

I glance out the window, watching as a vintage 1967 Chevy station wagon rolls behind my car. The bumper sticker catches my eyes: *I'm a teacher. What's your superpower?*

It's been a ruthless year for business. And I mean *ruthless*. Between the multi-million dollar magazine deals, rentals, and other strong investments, I'd say my superpower is turning a dollar into ten billion.

Sammy twists her mouth and pouts, but I'm doing my best to ignore it. I spoil her enough as it is, and she doesn't realize she's about to get a new dog.

It's not a cat. She better cheer up, regardless.

Nodding at the gas station clerk, I put forty on the table and give an awkward smile. "Give me thirty on pump number nine."

Samantha yanks on the fabric of my new suit. "Dad..."

A pathetic sigh falls from my mouth. "And I'll take a couple bags of those candy hearts," I say.

I have all the money in the world. I own over thirty percent of the magazine business, a dying relic that surprisingly still makes a ton of ad revenue. Stuff that should amount to some real power. Yet, this little eight year old girl controls me.

Where did I go wrong?

The young, starry-eyed, pimply clerk stares back at me. "Be mine, Valentine."

I'm halfway to Tacoma. Get me out of here. "Just give me the gas and candy, please."

As he bags the candy and hands me a receipt, I lift my eyes and stare past him, through the glass. Back to that station wagon. Normally, I don't focus on the peripheral. I've got meetings on the mind, and everything is a delicate balance.

It's not the car that keeps me staring. It's who's inside it.

The door opens, lights reflecting off the chipped brown paint. A woman's heel hits the ground. A long leg leads to the inside of the car where a slim figure with a set of heart shaped hips sits, poised to pounce. She's wearing a skirt short enough to show off the tops of her thighs, but it's not an intentional, vain sort of way. No, this is someone who is different from any

other woman I usually associate with. Someone who doesn't concern herself with the bullshit.

She's perfect...

I need to find out more.

Entranced, I take my receipt and head for the exit. Shoulders hunched, eyes wide, and breath heavy, I force my body through the door.

Samantha taps my hand. Her mouth is full of candy. "Thank you, dad."

"What?" I ask, stunned. "Oh, yeah. Sure thing, kiddo."

As the entrance jingle resounds like wedding bells over my head, the clerk calls out to me. I'm barely even listening. "Thank you, sir!"

I'm in love...

Bending forward, she slides her card into the machine. An error message comes up on the screen. I watch as her muscles tighten with irritation, and my eyes drop to her ass, staring as those creamy thighs form a perfect line to my cock.

I'm not always a maniac. But it's almost Valentine's Day, and I'm feeling a little... lonely. And despite the fact that I'll probably never marry, I'm entertaining the idea of doing it a different way.

Starting over and living a normal life in a smaller, cozier house. Vacations to San Diego. Family dinners. Celebrating her tenure at whatever university she works for. All the stuff I've sort've botched to get a firm financial hold on my life.

Seeing this woman makes me wonder if I'm even living.

Samantha fidgets, jumping to get my attention. Grabbing my keys, she unlocks my Mercedes. "Dad, I'll race you to the car."

I'm practically floating. "Anything you say, sweetie."

Another error message flashes on the pump's screen, increasing her irritation. She slides the card again, growing

more and more frantic as a series of error signs flash. I'm close enough to read the screen. Declined.

She doesn't have the funds to pay for it, but I've got my hand in my pocket, fingers sliding around my leather wallet. I feel the metallic edges of my card, and before I know it, I'm acting bolder than I ought to around a woman I don't even know.

I have all the best intentions in the world as I slide my card into the slot before she can destroy it with her heels. A pleasant green light flashes back at me. A soft perfume flows through my nostrils, and I sniff extra hard to feel the unexpected hit of endorphins.

"Regular or diesel," I ask.

Her auburn hair whips near my face as she turns to see which intruder reached near her neck. The smell of her, perfect. I don't want to think I'm some asshole who doesn't understand a woman's boundaries, so I take a step back and awkwardly loosen my tie.

Though they are covered by a thick set of lenses, her eyes are a warm, golden brown, making the sun look pathetic in comparison. Her eyebrows are thick, unkempt, but strangely reminiscent of some calm I felt a lifetime ago but forgot about. Her clothes are nothing fantastic or memorable, but they fit her well, to the T. I probably look like a crazy person, gawking, but she's absolutely gorgeous.

Those thick brows crease with confusion. "Regular."

I press the button and nod, drumming up all the excuses I could use to get her number. Turning, I see my daughter in the front seat, bouncing to the radio. Could I use her as my wingman? No, that would be wrong. My money and status? That usually works, but I don't have a clue where I am or where she's from. Not to mention, billionaire CEO isn't the most loved job in the world, especially in the Pacific northwest. These days, it's better to avoid the discussion.

"1967 Chevy Nova Station Wagon," I say. "My parents had one when I was growing up. I'd kill to ride in one again."

Wrong choice of words, but I can't take it back.

Stunned, she glances at the car. To my horror, I watch her upper lip roll up with distaste. “Uh, yeah. It was on sale,” she mutters and starts to dig into her purse. “Look, if you need me to pay you for the gas, I’ve got the cash.”

This isn’t going the way I planned.

Returning the wallet to my back pocket, I slide the edge of my finger across a few bills. If she knew how much cash I had on hand at all times, she’d probably freak. Then again, things haven’t been going my way. If she knew who I was, she might react differently.

“I’m good on the money,” I say.

She narrows her eyes, appearing more confused than even before. I’ve never been so dumbfounded by someone’s looks like this, but I’m struggling to say something, anything that sounds coherent.

Her lips purse, tongue making a whistling noise that seems to mimic the descent of my masculinity. “So... I have somewhere to be.”

I suck in a quick breath and go for the kill. “Look, I’m just going to come out and say it. I’d like to ask you out if that isn’t too weird.”

Her eyes light up, a good sign. For a moment, it seems like she’s going to say yes. But then I see that tiny curl form at the edge of her lips. It’s the kind of look that inspires self-doubt and shame in a man.

“Here?” she exclaims, giggling. “You are *not* doing this here. Are you asking me for my number?”

I was, but forget it. Keep the change.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t laugh,” she says. “But I’ve made an oath to myself. No men for a while.”

Oh. She’s one of *those* girls. If I took her on date, she’d probably eat me alive.

What if I want that to happen?

Taking a few steps back, it feels like there's a world of distance between us. Suddenly, I realize how dumb I look. I shouldn't sacrifice my pride for any woman. I've got a daughter to make happy.

Bowing my head, I feel the shame drip into my subconscious, little by little. Once it sets in, I don't feel as bad about this mis-spark.

I chuckle. "You know, you're right. This was weird. My apologies."

"Wait," she says.

I freeze, wondering what an obscenity might sound rolling off her perfect tongue. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not face rejection twice in one night."

Brushing her bangs from her eyes, she smirks. I wish she didn't look so cute when she did it, but of course, she looks perfect. "I don't give random strangers my number," she says, nodding at the bag of candy in my hands. "At least until that candy goes out of style."

I start to wave. "I get it. Have a good ni—"

"But..."

My heart's rhythmic beating picks up.

She continues. "I believe in fate."

I fill in the blanks with the many possibilities:

And I'm in love with you.

And I'm in love with your best friend.

And I'm here to kill you.

Hopefully, it's the first one.

"If we happen to see each other again, you can ask me for my number," she says. "Don't worry. Next time, I won't laugh."

Oof. This hurts, but I've been through worse. The good thing is we're far outside of the city for anyone to recognize me. Judging by her current outfit, she's never read any of my

magazines either. Any embarrassment I thought I might face now looks negligible.

I'm not one to stick around for rejection. Sensing that I've missed this opportunity in a pretty big way, I let out another laugh and nod. "All right. It's a deal," I say, putting out my hand.

She takes it, shaking. Standing there, awkward, as I break down like an overloaded machine.

I clutch her hand until she pulls away. Snapping out of my dumb trance, I clear my throat and purse my lips before heading toward my car. "Well, goodnight."

"Goodnight, stranger."

When I'm back in my Mercedes, I twist the keys and feel the smooth turbines kick in. I've never thought of myself as strange, but that's exactly what I am. A man with all the money in the world, a wonderful daughter, and houses in three different continents should feel more alive than the other man. But I don't. I'm more alone than I've ever been.

That's the problem.

As I watch her Chevy fart out a large plume of dark smoke before she disappears onto the highway, I feel my heart sink a few inches. Seattle isn't that far away, but it's practically another world. With hundreds of thousands of residents, I seriously doubt I'll run into her again. It's probably a good thing, but my head can't square with it.

Turning the keys, we sit in silence. I take a minute to decompress. Samantha eyes me, giggling. "Daddy's in love."

I can't stop thinking about that woman.

"Am not."

My cheeks turn hot. Am I blushing?

Samantha lobs a candy heart against my chest. It bounces, and I catch it in my hand. "Puppy Love."

I chuckle. Of course. That must be the universe's way of telling me to get a move on for my daughter's sake.

After I get this dog for Samantha, I'm going to think about that woman some more. A lot more. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to get her out of my head.

I'll take her offer.

I'll find her.

One thing is for certain. The meeting I had later is definitely going to be rescheduled.

ALI

Business suit. *Check.*

German sports car. *Check.*

Metal credit card. *Check.*

Tall. Handsome. Deep voice. He sure had it all, the total package.

Was this my prince charming?

No - I made a strong vow of celibacy. I'm not breaking it.

Once I'm on the highway, I'm driving too fast to think about anything other than the Cavalier King Charles, my Ragamuffin. I'm trying to shrug off that awkward interaction. Besides, a guy like that is out of my league. Everything added up to suggest he has enough money to feel persuasive enough to ask a girl out after paying for her gas. Although that is *somewhat* of a turn-on for someone as poor and in need of a full-time position as myself, it felt a little too forward.

Okay, I shouldn't have laughed in his face. That was a little rude. The proposal took me by surprise, but I'm not one to break promises I made to myself. Our deal still remains.

If we come into contact at a later date, I'll give him my number. If not, oh well.

I pass under a green sign. 405 Tacoma: Five miles. I'm so close, I can already feel the puppy's fluff.

I turn on my blinker, but I see two glowing lights speeding toward me. Turning into the lane, I brace the wheel as a car

jerks into the other lane. It's speeding up, engine roaring. I watch its bright lights grow in intensity as it comes up to my side.

The windows have a dark tint, but I can make out two figures. One looks petite, womanly. The other looks like a man. The shadows adjust their heads to look at me. The woman waves.

It's a Mercedes. Not just any Mercedes either. The license plate reads: "MRMNYBG."

What is this? Some kind of joke? It's the same guy from the gas station, and it looks like he wants to race me.

A memory juts through my mind, one that's a little unsettling to recall. I hear the animal breeder's voice come through my phone. "*Businessman offered me double for her.*"

Is this the same businessman he was talking about?

"Oh, you bastard." I narrow my eyes and focus on the road. "You want a race? Fine. I'll give you a race."

I put the pedal to the metal, heels digging down deep. The tarmac rushes past us, each mile marker pushing us further into the distance. I'm steadily watching the speedometer rise to eighty-five. It hits ninety, and I start sweating. He's got a german engine in that thing. I don't know what I'm thinking, racing him in a Chevrolet.

With no traffic ahead, I'm feeling confident. I get the car to ninety-five, but it's an old beast. This is the fastest speed I might be able to hit. To make matters worse, the engine is making a popping noise that sounds all too much like gunshots. That can't be good...

A short plume of smoke rises from the hood, and the smell of burning comes inside from the vents. "Oh, crap."

Without a moment to spare, the Mercedes shoots in front of me, the sound of its engine carrying him even faster toward the finish line. I watch as he rounds the corner with a slight skid.

My heart falters. All my excitement hangs in the past. I don't doubt he'll get the sale. Why not? He's the best man.

He won.

Face hot with embarrassment and rage, I force my foot off the gas and allow it to roll pathetically toward the freeway exit. The engine gets me to the breeder's house before sputtering out completely.

Just as I begin to step out of the loyal piece of junk, I see the man's black suit enter the building. The door swings behind him, and every negative emotion drives through me. This is an all out war. I'm getting that dog, dammit!

After taking off my heels, I run and grab the door before it shuts. I bang it open with my elbows, and suddenly I'm flying inside to the sight of the man from the black Mercedes.

What. The. Hell.

"I'm here," I yell as my face hits the floorboards. "Ouch."

To my mortification, two men are staring at me. The breeder *and* the bastard. They're not just staring. They're exchanging money.

Cheeks glued to the floor, I sigh. "I'm here."

The breeder raises a brow and scratches his cheeks. They jiggle like strawberry Jello under the red neon dog sign fixed on the window. A clock behind him ticks loudly. It's been about forty-five minutes since my inquiring phone call. I know what he's about to say.

"You're a little late."

Avoiding eye contact with the big-boss-bastard, I stand and brush myself off. Looking foolish is kind of my forte, something I'm used to, but today is for conquering my dreams. I bite the inside of my cheek and focus on the confidence I had earlier in the day.

I slam the money onto the table and balance my weight, huffing a few breaths. "I've got a thousand dollars."

I follow the breeder's eyes to the businessman's smirk. It takes all of me not to scream.

"Looks like we put down the same amount," the man says.

His grin is devilishly handsome, which is why I feel a deep need to best him. I reach into my purse and pull out another bill. “Eleven hundred.”

The businessman laughs softly. “Make it an even twelve.”

Heart racing, I search for more money. There’s another hundred in there, bringing the total to his. I grab my coin purse and drop a few silver dollars. “Um. Just one-second.”

He pulls out his metal showoff credit card, tapping it twice against the cash register for good measure. “Whatever she offers, I’ll pay double.”

I’m astounded. Never in my life have I been treated in such an embarrassing manner. “Oh, you are just rotten,” I mutter, slightly hoping he didn’t hear it through my long sigh.

He feigns surprise. “I’m just doing someone a favor. Don’t get mad at me. You’re the one who owes me something.”

“Owes you what?”

He shrugs. “I thought we had a deal. If we run into each other again, you’d give me your number.”

No fucking way. “On another day,” I growl. “This doesn’t count.”

His teeth are whiter than last winter’s snow. “Sure. Rewrite the rules when it suits you,” he says.

My face tightens. I’ve lost this fight, but I’m not going to leave without getting a word in. “Is this a game to you?”

“Excuse me?”

“A guy like you must’ve known where I was headed,” I say.

He narrows his eyes. “Are you accusing me of stalking you?”

I purse my lips and stare into his eyes. His warm and dreamy, bedroom eyes. “Maybe I am.”

Taking a breath, I linger in the scent of his cologne. It smells expensive. Everything about him reeks of money.

“This is ludicrous,” he responds.

And he's right. It's really stupid. The more I accuse him of following me, the more I want it to happen. But I made an oath to myself because I know how men like him are. And if he takes that dog, I'll never forgive him.

"It must be easy knowing you can buy your way out of any bad situation," I say.

That's when I hear a noise. It's a small thump that brings my eyes to what's been behind him the whole time, holding onto the back of his pants. It's a small child. "Dad? Are we still getting Ragamuffin?"

My heart...

This is a cruel joke. I can't take a dog away from a little girl.

The breeder chuckles to himself, shaking his head. "I'll go grab her while you two hash this out. If any of you draw blood, there's a mop in the back."

The cold-hearted-daddy-bastard tightens his tie. His smirk is practically tattooed on his mouth. "What if we end up kissing?"

"The nerve on you," I gasp.

"Daddy," his daughter moans, "be nice."

He bends and kisses his daughter's head. "Sweetie, this is grown up stuff. We're just playing around."

"Urg."

The bossy jerk steps toward me, placing his hands out to show me he's disarming himself. My eyes focus on his fingers. Ringless.

He lowers his voice and angles his eye at his daughter. "Look, if the dog was for me, I'd hand it over to you. But I can't let her down again. She's had a really hard year."

Hm. So he let her down. Maybe I was right. He *is* a bastard.

Obviously I'm not going to steal the girl's dog. After seeing her dad's ringless finger, I feel like I need to back off a little bit. Their story could be more tragic than I can handle.

I clear my throat. “It’s for her?”

The little girl twists under his legs and squints, giggling. “Everything is for her,” he says.

It’s the kind of thing a man says when he’s trying to earn brownie points. However, it’s apparent that the girl loves him, and he promised her a dog. It would kill her to find out she’s not getting the cutest puppy alive.

Ready to admit defeat, I bend over and whisper to the girl. “Don’t worry, kid. You’re going to get the dog. I was just giving your dad a hard time.”

The little girl stares back at me, wide-eyed and silent for a second, before blurting out, “It’s okay, I give him a hard time, too.”

We both share a laugh, and I give her a fist bump for good measure. No, I didn’t end up with the dog of my dreams, but one girl gets to be happy. I’m grateful it’s her.

As for her father, my annoyance is still at a nine. My attraction is at about a four. It’s time for me to head out.

The sounds of barking filter through the back as the backdoor opens. The breeder is holding a King Charles in one hand, but his other is getting dragged forward by a very big, slobbery, and stinky St. Bernard. “I brought out another fan favorite, in case one of you is interested.”

Sensing the dog barreling toward me, I try to brace myself for an incoming wet kiss. Its feet slam against the tile like horse hooves. When I turn, the dog is already in the air. Its paws connect against my breasts, knocking me onto my ass.

The breeder’s eyes shoot open. “Rowdy, bad boy!”

I get a lot more than a kiss. Slobbering all over my face, the dog breathes rapidly, sniffing and *humping* the air above my head. This is me grabbing life by its balls. Unfortunately, it’s literal rather than the figurative example I was hoping for. My face feels like it’s on fire, and my biceps throb as I try to push the old dog off me. It’s heavier than I anticipated, and I think I’m losing.

After what feels like minutes, the breeder gets a hold on his leash and yanks him back. “Rowdy, what do you think you’re doing? She’s a human being, not someone you can breed.”

Oh. God...

Mr. Father-of-the-Century stands over the mess, peering down as the dog bucks back, barking. “See? It’s not so bad. He likes you already.”

The breeder chuckles. “Sorry ‘bout that. He’s not fixed.”

Whatever chance I had of turning this around has gone out the window. Before I was molested by that ogre of a dog, I was going to wish them well and leave. Now, I’m forced to do a walk of shame to the door.

The breeder is still staring at me. “Well, do you want him?”

I’m shaking. My money is on the table.

“I... I...” I don’t know what to say.

“He’s old, but he’s loyal,” the breeder says. “I’ll give him to you for two hundred.”

Glancing at the exit, so I can run for the hills, I nod my head. “S-S-Sure...”

I avoid eye contact with Mr. Moneybags as the breeder hands me the leash and a set of papers. “All right,” he says. “Rowdy is an old dog. Stubborn, too. Here’s what you have to do every morning...”

I’m not listening. I’m staring at Rowdy’s dripping-wet-lips, horrified by the outcome of this trip.

I’m not going home empty-handed. I’m going home full-handed. I have a new dog. His name is Rowdy. He may not be young or the cutest thing in the world, but he’s my dog.

Cocking my chin with pride, I sign some forms and head for the exit. Mr. Shark Tank is staring at me. I can feel it. When my hands hit the push bar, I open the door. However, I don’t step out just yet.

“Wait,” he says. “How can I find a way to run into you again?”

I turn, calmly breathing to take the red out of my face. “I live in Seattle, over in the Ballard District,” I say.

He chuckles and scratches the back of his head. “Me too.”

Biting the inside of my lip, I feel the urge to smile. Holding it back seems like the better choice, so I bounce on my heel and nod once. “Well, maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah. Maybe at Golden Gardens,” he says.

I just want to get home. “What?”

“The off-leash trail over by the water,” he says.

“Oh. Right. Yeah, maybe,” I say. “Well... Bye.”

“Bye, stranger.”

I step out into the warm sunny day with a pretty strong understanding that I won’t be going to the Golden Gardens. I’ll find a different dog park, one in Belltown or Capitol Hill, or another state entirely.

LATER, AS I’M NEARING HOME, I PULL OFF THE FREEWAY AND turn off the bubbling engine. I stare at Rowdy’s massive body as he snores.

I round the corner and turn into a side street that leads to my boring apartment complex. “We’re almost there, buddy,” I call out.

I hear Rowdy’s tail thumping against the seat.

Just as I pull into the parking garage, I get a phone call. It’s not one of my contacts, but the number looks vaguely familiar. Not wanting to interrupt the network, I slam on the break before I’m underground. Rowdy’s pretty freaked out.

Hesitant, I answer the phone. “Hello?”

A nasally voice responds, tone squashed by the crap cell service. “Hello, Ali Greenwald?”

I push the phone between my cheek and shoulder, staring into the rearview mirror as I back up. I make it about a foot before a car turns behind me. “Uh, yeah. Sorry if the phone gets fuzzy, I’m just pulling into my garage. Who’s this?” I ask.

“This is Dr. Jordan Berman,” the voice says.

I’m so flustered and out of my element, the name isn’t ringing a bell. “Who?”

Something gets Rowdy’s attention. He darts up, nose pressed against the window.

Dr. Jordan Berman clears his throat. “The dean over at Shadow Park Valley Day.”

It’s such a rich school the principals call themselves dean. “Oh, right. Yeah, hiya-hey, how are you?”

“Well, not too good, if I’m being frank. One of our teachers quit.”

Quit? This could be the moment I’ve been waiting for. I’m stretching my mouth, attempting to reply, but I’m not sure what the right thing to say is. I’m still a little hurt about getting rejected the first time. Granted, I’ll do anything to get this job, including forgetting all about that.

The car behind me honks. I turn, motioning for the person to just hang on one-second, but of course, that brings a series of honks that swell like a crescendo. “Oh, Jeeze.”

Dr. Berman breaks through my awkward shell. “Listen, the reason I called is because we need an English teacher to fill out the rest of the year.”

The man in the car steps out, yelling something awful in the background. Rowdy starts to growl, low.

The dean of my dream school keeps talking. “I know it’s not much of a heads up. We called a few other applicants, but it appears they were snatched up by that Baelith Academy,” he asks.

I start to ease off my car break as the man taps on the glass. Rowdy bucks and roars, pounding against my window.

“Is this a bad time?” he asks

“Oh! No better time than now. I’m available,” I shout.

“Okay, astounding,” he says. “Can you send me a copy of your lesson plan and be here on Monday?”

What day is it again? Oh, yeah. Saturday. That gives me two days to come up with a lesson plan that might fit. I’ve got a lot of work ahead of me.

“Sounds great, Dr. Berman. Thank you for the opportunity. You won’t regret it.”

Famous last words.

MARC

To get to my office, I have to cross over the bridge, usually through Redmond, but sometimes Mercer Island has less traffic. If I happen to miss traffic, which is just about never, I can make it to downtown in less than forty-five minutes. If I hit it, I'm screwed. Each minute gets shoved aside to make room for the next. By the time I'm done with work, it's already nightfall.

It's not the easiest trek in the world, and I hate to make it twice. So when I get a call from Sammy's principal that tells me she's in trouble for *fighting*, I'm more than livid. In fact, I can't even comprehend it.

When I walk into the school, I'm pretty fucking pissed off. My daughter can be a handful, but there's no way she did anything to instigate anything bad. She wouldn't hurt a fly.

The Dean, Dr. Jordan Berman, meets me near his office. Sammy is sitting inside. A fearful look hangs in her eyes.

Before I greet the man in charge, I give my daughter some faith. "It's going to be okay, sweetie. You don't have to worry."

Seeing her face brighten after a hard beginning brings a smile to my face. But her smile quickly turns into a frown, and I can tell she needs to get everything off her chest fast. This was not her crime. "Daddy, a boy pushed me and now he's telling everyone I pushed him, but I didn't push him. I promise."

Dr. Berman's hand falls by the wayside as I nod past him. "I'm late for a meeting," I say. "Let's get down to business. Tell me

what you think my daughter did, and I'll give you a thousand reasons why you're wrong."

Judging by the flinch of muscles near his jaw, I've hit a nerve. Nevertheless, he sits behind his desk, reeling in that last stitch of confidence with a quick sip of coffee. In my home, we offer guests a cup as soon as they walk through the door. They do things differently around here.

"Before I start, I want to say that no one is passing judgment. That's not what Shadow Park Valley Day does with accusations like this. We're simply collecting information and sorting it through the proper channels."

"Sorting information to use against my daughter," I say. "Without any sort of representation. Do you realize I could have your ass in court for this if you're wrong?"

The man opens his mouth.

"But I didn't do anything," Sammy interrupts.

Before the Dean can get another word in, I speak. "Where's the other kid?"

Dr. Berman leans back in his leather chair. "We're taking cases one at a time."

He must know he doesn't have any power in this negotiation because he's using police terminology like he's a detective. Next, he'll tell us they're bringing in a forensic team to analyze the other girl's tissue sample or DNA.

When you donate close to a hundred thousand dollars to the school, you buy your way into receiving special treatment. Sammy's safe. Thing is, I'm not too keen on the kids here, and the new leadership just plain sucks. Most of them are spoiled little bastards, young and old. I want Sammy to grow up with a better understanding of the world.

In a way, I want her to grow up less like me.

"Is the other girl hurt?" I ask.

Berman taps his fingers against his desk, rhythmically before answering. "She attacked an older boy in her class who has

been held back a year. We were told by two reputable sources that Sammy pushed him over.”

Sammy’s getting worked up. The more this Berman guy talks, the more she squirms in her chair. She has stayed silent this whole time, but eventually something gives. “He pushed me, daddy,” Sammy yells.

“The boy was older than her?” I ask.

“Well, yes.”

“What did the teacher say?”

Dr. Berman coughs, nervously. “She was facing the white board at the time.”

“Jesus. This is a new low,” I say, standing.

Even if it’s protocol, Berman must know how wrong this sounds. He’s cautiously waving his hands, trying to calm my nerves with gentle motions, but I’m not a child. It’s not working. I’m a man with lawyers who’d kill for a lawsuit like this.

“Mr. Wylan. Please, sit down. We know how hard it’s been for you, and I’m sorry if you’ve lost a little control,” he says. “But we are just stating the facts as we received them.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, I feel my heart turn to flames. There’s a lot you can say to me about my kid before I react. You can tell me she’s not studying hard enough, or that she isn’t sharing her toys with the other children. But when you imply I’m doing a bad job at parenting by saying I’m losing control, I’m going to lose my shit.

He doesn’t know what we’ve had to go through to make this work. No one does.

My eyes are glued to his. If humans still lived amongst the wilderness, I’d lunge at him and tear his face off. “What did you say?” I ask.

“We just want to make sure everything is working at home.”

I got Sammy when she was two years old. I say “got,” but what I really mean is the authorities put her in my hand. They

asked me one thing that night. “Are you ready to be a better man?”

It wasn't a good night. Most nights weren't back then, but this day was particularly bad. It was winter, sometime around Christmas because I still remember the lights around the houses glowing behind the firetrucks near my sister's house. At the time, I didn't have any presents under my tree. She was my gift.

Turns out, I was readier to be a better man than I thought. But the thing about parenting is that it never really stops. You're chasing goal post after goal post, floundering through PTA meetings and neighborhood get-togethers that seem to pop up monthly. Raising a little girl on your own is tough. It's even harder when the kid isn't your own.

She still doesn't know. I've tried to tell her, but she doesn't want to talk about it. It's either that she still doesn't understand or she knows all too well. I feel like I dodged a bullet today, but really, it's just another reminder that there's a lot more to do to be that better man I keep saying I've become. A dog isn't going to cut it. I need more ammunition.

I take my little darling's hand, and I smell the watermelon kids shampoo as I kiss the top of her head. “C'mon, baby. We're going home,” I say.

She peers up at me, a warm smile shaping her face. “I'm not in trouble?”

I stare at the bald man. “No. We're free to go.”

The dean stands. “Mr. Wylan, you can't just leave. We have strict guidelines the kids and their parents agree to follow. There's still four periods left in Sammy's day.”

Nice. I don't give a shit.

Ignoring Dr. Berman's stammering protests, I push the door open. Back in grade school, I was sent to the principal's office on a weekly basis. The difference is I was a bad kid. I know my child is good.

Stepping into the hall, I look forward and see a shadow approaching the entrance. It grows bigger, forming the shape

of a woman. Usually, I'd ignore something as mundane as this, but as the front doors give way to sunlight, I recognize the mouth, the nose, the glasses that magnify those beautiful almond-shaped eyes.

It's her. The woman from the gas station.

What in God's name is she doing here? Is she *following* me? She's going to shame me forever.

I turn back around, racing through Dr. Berman's office. He nearly falls over trying to stop me. "Mr. Wylan? Sir, what on Earth are you doing?"

Shit. What *am* I doing?

"Well. We're going to talk about this," I say, shutting the door. "And I mean, we're going to *really* talk and hash it out. As far as I'm concerned, this could take hours."

I'm trying to pass the time.

The woman's shadow is growing bigger near the office door.

"But—"

There's a thin knock. For a second, I pause and eye the door as if she might try the handle. Instead, she knocks harder, three more times. "Dr. Berman? It's Ali Greenwald. You told me to show up today for the job."

Ali Greenwald.

It's a pretty name, far more decent than Marc Wylan.

Sensing something is off with me, Dr. Berman shares a worried glance. "Ali, yes. You're a little late."

I watch her shadow thin out as she bounces on the balls of her feet. "I'm really sorry. I'm not used to the traffic yet," she says.

A fake apology shows how nervous she is. She really wants this job. I don't blame her. It's a good school. Great location. If you teach here, you're pretty much a shoe in for the community. There's a nature of competition between us, but I admire that type of boldness in a woman. It's attractive.

“Oh, that’s all right,” he says, eyeing me. “Just give me two-seconds to finish this report up, and I’ll be right with you.”

“Don’t mind me. I’ll just be sitting on the bench in the hall,” she says.

He turns to me, shaking his head. “Do you know the woman out there, or something?”

Last night, I thought there may be something *magical* about that girl. It was a split second happening, a feeling and a flash of insight. Some experiences turn a man’s brain to mush, but Ali electrified me, inside and out.

Well, it lasted for a second. And then that dog tried humping her. Now, *that* was pretty funny.

The question is, how do I get out of this room without her seeing me?

Before he opens the door, I see an old hat on the coat rack. Pushing Sammy behind me, I take it and put it on as Dr. Berman shows me out. I mask my voice by making it an octave deeper. “Rest assured, we will be talking about this again.”

Befuddled, Dr. Berman calls out, “Mr. Wylan! Mr. Wylan?”

I almost forget I’m still holding Sammy’s hand tight. “Daddy, where are we going?”

“We’re going to find you a new school, baby.”

But just as we get to the door, I hear her voice. “Mr. Ragamuffin?”

I stop.

She follows up. “I that you?”

Crap.

ALI

I don't believe it. Three chance meetings in a row.

What are the odds?

Dr. Berman sighs. "You two know each other?"

Slowly, I nod. My lips form a tickled smile. This run-in is totally crazy, but it also feels natural. We've got a feud. That's our connection. It's... cute.

"A little bit, yeah," I say.

Third time's a charm.

As I narrow my eyes at him, he grows flustered. The businessman shuffles his fingers around his tie like he's suffocating under pressure. "I've never met this woman before in my life," he says.

Liar. Liar.

His daughter seems to think otherwise. She tugs on his suit jacket to get his attention. "Yes, we have, daddy. We saw her getting Ragamuffin."

I kneel down and wink, pushing my fist out for a small bump to anger the pops. To my satisfaction, she enthusiastically pounds my knuckles and makes a big explosion noise.

"That's right," I say, angling my eyes up at her big-wig father. "How is she, by the way?"

The man's lip flares. "How's Rowdy?"

Over the last two days, my St. Bernard has eaten through one of my middle school photo albums, urinated on three of my pillows, and torn up my dream diary. Rowdy acts like a tyrant. That's how he is. But he's learning because I'm a great teacher.

"He has never been better," I lie.

"That's great," he says, smile glowing.

We laugh, pretending to be excited for each other when, in reality, this is all out war. I thought the battle was over. Turns out, it's just beginning.

Dr. Berman's shoulders hunch as he pathetically twists and turns to keep up with our conversation. After a while, he gives up to slouch in the doorway of his office.

"What are you doing in Sammamish?" I ask. "I thought you lived in Ballard?"

Marc nods and purses his lips. Lowering his voice, he hisses, "Now who's the one following who?"

I blink a few times. "Excuse me?"

"This is my school. You're following me," he says, frowning his brow before glancing awkwardly at his kid. "And my daughter, Sammy."

His school. Right.

"Oh jeez. And why do you think I'm doing that?" I ask.

His eyes shift. "I don't know. Probably has something to do with that dog," he says.

Sammy moans, "Dad, you're being a weirdo again. I thought we were going home."

"Home?" I ask, checking my watch. "But there's still so much school left in your day."

He runs taps his heel. "You done? I have an appointment I need to get to."

I picture Ragamuffin's sweet face. I see her small tongue lick across her wet nose and soft mouth, sliding away with a yawn.

But then I remember which dog I ended up with, Mr. Slobberbutt, and wince. “Almost,” I say.

“Great,” he groans.

I take a step forward, facing him. Lowering my voice to a whisper, I say, “You know what I think?”

He takes a step, too. “I’d love to hear your thoughts.”

“I think you’re desperate for my number,” I say.

A look of hilarity pushes his lips open, and a hearty laugh follows. “Do you know who I am?”

I don’t know the man’s identity yet. From what I can gather, he’s rich, and he wants to use it to his advantage. Well, he’s seen the cobwebs on the inside of my purse. He knows I’ve got bills to pay.

Who cares if people know him? Certainly not me.

“I think we’ve got a pretty good idea of one another,” I say.

We’re standing so close to each other, I can smell his cologne again. It’s something foreign and alluring. Like a mixture of spice and fresh saltwater air. It takes me back to my youth, to days without worry or pain. For a brief moment, I imagine myself falling into his arms. What would that feel like? Probably pretty good...

“I don’t need your number,” he says.

I swallow. My lips are only an inch or so away from his, and I can feel his heartbeat send ripples through the air. “Yeah? Prove it.”

He bends his neck a notch. “Fine,” he says. “Even though I qualify to get your number from you, according to the rules, I’ll resist the hardest urge of my life.”

Licking the edge of my bottom lip, I laugh. “I’m sure you will.”

It’s a new game. Who can hold out the longest?

I glance at the bulge near his zipper. I’m not someone whose mind is constantly in the gutter, but I do wonder, does he feel

what I feel? “How long can you last?” I ask.

He swallows, and his eyes dart to the top of my dress before he blinks and pretends he wasn't just looking at my breasts.

His thin lips move into a quick smile. “All year. You?”

I nod. “My entire life.”

“Well, then. I've met my match.”

“How about we up the stakes a little?”

“What did you have in mind?”

Defeated, Dr. Berman throws his hands in the air and shuts the door to his office. “You know where to find me if you want a job.”

I almost forgot he was there.

“If I break, I'll walk Ragamuffin three times a week as punishment,” I say.

He grins, nodding along. “Oh, punishment and a date. Nice.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“All right. If I break, I'll take care of Rowdy,” he says.

I shake my head. “No way. If you break, you have to give me Ragamuffin.”

His expression drops. “My daughter's dog? You're cruel.”

I shrug. “Don't ask me for my number,” I say. “Be a good father.”

There's a part of me that enjoys this. Flirting and acting loose. That's not what I'm used to doing. Growing up, I was reserved. I stuck my head in books, and I kept away from boys. In a way, I preferred the fantasy over the reality. But all of that is starting to change. Ever since I swore off men, I've really enjoyed my time in the real world.

Well, except for the part where he stole my dog. But what is our fighting *really* about?

His pupils dart left and right as his brain figures out the easiest way to lose.

I'm trying to figure out the same thing, but it's not working.

The school bell interrupts his thoughts. "C'mon, Sammy-Pie."

"Dad," Sammy says, pulling back her hand. "I don't want to go home. I want to stay here with Ms. Greenwald."

He cocks a brow. "You'd rather stay here than play Animal Crossing?"

Assuming that game is a rare treat, it's not surprising to see her look of hesitance. Most kids don't want to go to every class, but if I have any say, they'll end up really enjoying this year. That's my goal, anyway.

"I like Miss Greenwald more. Rowdy will protect me from mean boys," she says.

That must be why Mr. Bling came to pick his daughter up from school early. Although this is my first full-time position, I've been working around kids for a few years now. They're pretty easy to figure out if you just listen.

My attention is on Sammy. "Are boys picking on you?"

She looks down. "A little."

Now, her father is looking at me like I might be able to help. "Not anymore, okay? I'm going to keep an eye out," I say.

She nods, but I can tell she feels anxiety about the whole thing.

"Well, she's very nice, but daddy has a lot of meetings he had to reschedule to make this work, and this is the only time he could pick you up," he says.

"I'll walk home," she says.

His eyes dart open. "Fat chance, kiddo."

I walk over and take her hand. "Don't worry about it. I'll take her home."

His face comes undone. "Really?"

"Yeah," I say. "We're friends, right?"

"Y-Yeah," he stammers. "Sure."

Kneeling down to her level, I whisper, “Why don’t you go to lunch, while I finish up with your dad? I’ll meet you on the playground.”

Her face lights up with energy. “Yes! We can swing, Ali.”

“That sounds so fun,” I tell her.

When she’s gone, I turn on my adult voice. “If someone’s messing with her, it’s no joke.”

Marc scratches the back of his head, eyes angled toward Sammy’s last known position. “She’s had a pretty hard year. Her teacher quit today, too. For both our sakes, I’m trying not to worry.”

I don’t want to pry. In this day and age, parenting is next to impossible. There’s so much information coming at us, it can be really hard to know how to act in every situation. I know we’ve got our little feud, but some things demand more attention.

Some people need an extra hand. Why not me?

“I’m taking over for Ms. Hamel. I’m going to put the word out to the other teachers,” I say. “Even if it’s nothing, it’s good to keep an eye on her.”

“You’d do that for her?” he asks.

“Of course,” I say. “She’s just a young girl. And she’s so cute with Ragamuffin.”

He chuckles, and magically, it feels like we’re drifting toward one another. His eyes are nearly shimmering. “You should’ve seen her playing with that dog yesterday,” he says. “Cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

It only stings a teeny-tiny bit. “So precious,” I say.

It’s in this moment that I realize he’s hurting. Not all the time. The scars are probably thin compared to the rest of us. But he’s still human. The more I see, the more I feel like we could understand each other. There’s still a hell of a disconnect.

He glances at the door, balancing on the side of his boot. “I should probably go. These meetings take forever sometimes”

he says.

“Go do your meetings,” I tell him.

Hesitant to move toward the exits, his body tenses, wound up like a rubber band. “And you’re sure you’re good to take him to my house,” he says, knowing full well what the answer is.

“She’s in good hands,” I say.

“Thanks Ali,” he says. “I owe you one.”

What game can we play next?

MARC

When I leave Sammy's school, I'm less than a gallon from an empty gas tank and thirty-three text messages deep into my day. My top management leader, Sandra, is frantic. I'm stuck in traffic. None of us are having a good time, but I'm particularly annoyed. I keep replaying the last hour and a half of my life over like an instant replay vid.

What did she say again?

Oh, yeah. "We're friends."

That one hurt. Then again, all is fair in love and war.

She thinks she's winning.

Okay, she's winning.

But it's not just her I'm thinking about. I'm thinking a lot about Sammy's well-being. Growing up for me was pretty hard. I'm from Brooklyn, and I wasn't one of those rich transplants either. Kids didn't think twice to pick on a guy from a scrappy neighborhood. It defined what this world could be for some, ruthless.

There was an alternative route. I saw that some people were rewarded with different opportunities. After what happened to Sammy took hold of both our lives, I wanted her to be one of those people who didn't have to worry. So far, I've done okay. But this school bully worries me. I can't supervise her every hour of the day. For the first time in a very long while, I feel out of control.

I hate feeling like this...

Another text comes in from my photographer and good friend from University, Brian. He's got the most boring name in the world, but he manages to bring the party every step of the way. Without him, I don't know where I'd be today.

“Where you at, brother? I've got fifty thirsty execs, but there's only enough Coors Light to last us another hour. Now, I know you told me to call you only if there was an emergency. But I'd say it's nearing fuckin' panic time.”

Clenching the phone, I almost toss it out the window. I've always hated the board of directors, the executive class. I got rich by besting them. When I was young, I had a plan. I was going to put my head down and work as much as I could for the worst people, and earn their money.

I kept with it for a long time, actually. Then some other things happened, other projects and the like. More and more, I fell into that chaotic rhythm of work. Eventually, I won the opportunity to own my first company. And then I had an even better idea. I was going to buy all of the failing magazine companies in the country, the small ones that were dying, and I was going to resuscitate them. Shine them up and make them feel new.

I gathered them all up in my basket, and I started to believe I could do anything. It was really easy, just like shopping.

Look at me now.

Rather than text, I order another case of beer, and I return Brian's message with a call. “Got another thirty pack coming your way,” I say.

“That's all you got?” he asks.

Leaning my head out the window, I act like a physicist and try to calculate the exact moves to get this traffic moving again. I'm only a few miles from my exit. If everyone just slowed down and went the suggested speed limit, we wouldn't be in this problem.

I'm turning into my father.

A few cars start honking behind me. It triggers everyone's nerves. Pretty soon, the entire freeway is blowing their horns

like a school band. “Damn this traffic. You think they’ll need more than thirty beers?” I shout.

“You know how these guys act. They’re animals. Most importantly, they’re your animals. They’re out for blood, and I think you’re first on their list,” he says.

“How can you tell?” I ask.

“I can see it in their eyes. Pupils are fucking pins, dead sharp,” he says. “Not to mention, they keep mentioning your new Seattle venture.”

“Right. The Seattle merger,” I say. “The reason I moved here to begin with.”

About a year ago, I bought a magazine that targeted a niche demographic. Turns out, it doesn’t make money, so the investors started getting antsy. They want a strong return, which they’ll get. They’re just too stupid to realize one magazine can’t sink one hundred.

There’s a part of me that gets it. Poor sales figures make them and the company look bad. But I can’t ditch the project. I want to stay here, not return to New York. There might be a way to turn it around. I just need a few weeks to think it over.

When the shareholders asked to have a meeting, it was obvious they were going in for the attack. I decided to have a party instead. A big get-together with as much booze as possible. Maybe it’s a good thing I’m showing up so late.

“On second thought, I think I should order some more cases of that beer,” I say.

Brian laughs with me. “IPA’s would get them drunker.”

These shareholder types don’t know culture. They don’t care about what’s good. They’re not critics. All they care about is profit. To them, a Coors party is fun. It’s the stuff college kids drink to feel buzzed on the cheap.

To be honest, it is fun. Up to a point.

Anxious, my stomach flutters. I don’t usually get nervous about meetings. These executive types are just pawns with

dollar signs, as far as I'm concerned. But my plan to win them over is less than thought out.

I inch forward, pushing closer and closer to the freeway exit. "Do you think it's a problem I don't have a model lined up for the cover?"

Or a stylist, makeup artist, lighting tech. I don't have anyone lined up for anything.

"Uh yeah, I think it's more of a problem you don't have an idea what the project is," he says.

"Momma Bear," I say.

"Momma Bear," he repeats with a big sigh.

Momma Bear is a magazine for new mothers with a side of adventure. Billed as the anti-housewife magazine, it did well for a few years in the late nineties. That was the time Generation-X started packing up their bags and moving into homes. The 2000s took over, and Y2K shook the nation. *Momma Bear* didn't stand a chance.

No one read *Momma Bear* to begin with, but I needed an excuse to leave New York City. I couldn't handle where my life was taking me, and I could tell Sammy wanted a change of pace from the fast-paced lifestyle of the Big Apple. We tried Brooklyn over Manhattan, but we bailed after a year. *Momma Bear* was our ticket out, but I've shoved it so far back on the shelf, it might've lost its audience.

It's costing us an arm and a leg. The expenditures are alarming, to say the least. I'm paying rent on a warehouse that should be staffed. Only, there's no fucking staff to fill that room because *Momma Bear* is trash.

The problem is that we need *Momma Bear* as a hedge. It offsets the tax burden on my already high salary. My accountant says I don't spend enough. I tell him there's nothing to buy. I've bought it all. I already own three houses, two of which are just fucking sitting there, collecting dust. I have the most expensive Mercedes on the market. I spend out the ass for Sammy's school.

The shareholders share concern about some negative press effecting the stock prices. I can ease that fear, but I need to keep the shitty magazine. I better find a good reason.

“I’ll figure it out,” I say. “Just give me ten minutes. I’ll return with a master plan.”

“You always do,” he says.

When I hang up the phone, the car in front of me finally inches up far enough to allow me to pass through. I speed around the corner and glance up at the Space Needle in the distance. Today’s going to be fine, I think.

I park in the first space I get and take the elevator up six flights. When I hear the booming voices of aging men bleed through the mirrored doors, I put on a sly smile and cool eyes. It’s a look I perfected about fifteen years ago, when I was just starting out.

The door opens to cheers. Brian tosses me a drink all the way from the other side of the room. I catch it perfectly, and he joins me.

“Come up with anything?” he whispers.

“Nothing,” I mutter. “We are one hundred percent fucked.”

“Lucky us,” Brian mutters. “In this scenario, am I the top or the—”

Someone shouts. Jim, a shareholder I couldn’t care less about appears in front of me with a wild smile that demands conversation. “There he is! Sharpshooter.”

Sharpshooter? Not sure what that means, but I go with it, tossing down some beer before mentally preparing myself to get slammed around the office by a bunch of too-old-to-party men.

“He always looks like a winner, doesn’t he?” Brian asks the room.

Jim takes hold of the space between my neck and shoulder, pinching right down on the nerve. “Damn straight, he’s a winner. Otherwise, why would we be here?” he growls, teeth gnashing.

His spit flies everywhere.

The truth is, I lose all the time. In some ways, it's better to *look* like a winner than actually be one.

For a while, the meeting goes as planned. They drink for a while as Sandra gives a bolstered earnings report showing the longevity of all the company's combined. The message is: believe in me. I won't let you down. If you don't believe in me, believe in my team. They're working around the clock to save the day.

Unfortunately, the shareholders are not as stupid as they let on. They may not know a damn thing about culture, but they know money. They came to talk about the Seattle project.

Jim is staring right through me. "Are you done?" he asks.

Shit.

"Sure. I can be done," I mutter.

Jim is older, but he's a tough son of a bitch that does most of the talking. Within the hour, he steers the conversation from the drinks to a cold inquiry on our individual expense reports. This is only the halfway point, too.

He collects the loose sheets of paper and calmly reorganizes them. "Says here you're spending thousands every month on this office, as well as the one in Manhattan," he says.

I want to say it's for my daughter because the only way I can be a good father is to honor her wishes. Kids respond well to that. Old men like Jim aren't so easy to please. They want to own the world, and even that isn't enough for them.

I'm staring at Jim's bewildered face, wondering how a man's nose could grow to get so big. "Is that all?"

He closes his folder and gives a smile pleasant enough to distract from the real inquiry taking shape. "We need to know what your plan is here," he says. "Otherwise, you're going bye-bye, and we'll sell all the other loser catalogues. Do you understand me?"

Bye-bye? Is the threat really that big? Doesn't really matter if it is or isn't. If they feel it necessary, they could kick me from

the company. They used to be easier to please.

My brain scrambles to steer this meeting back to where it should be. “I’ve got a plan for Momma Bear,” I say.

Jim raises a brow. “Oh?”

I start nodding, making eye contact with my photographer and friend, Brian. “Isn’t that right?”

His eyes widen, and he nearly drops his beer bottle, but he manages to give my life a decent save. “Oh, yeah. He was just telling me on the phone, actually. Something to do with school.”

Jim leans back, apparently pleased. His smile teases for more. “Hm. Explain it then, Marc,” he says.

Feeling my forehead start to sweat, I chuckle. “Oh, yes. Well, it’s pretty simple.”

I’m so screwed.

My day was hijacked by Sammy’s school. If I had the morning to decompress, I might have brought a better opening, but I didn’t. All I have in my quiver is my quick thinking, and I’m starting to wonder if it’s better to scrap it altogether.

I can’t do that. The board would throw me under a few dozen school busses before letting out the drivers to get a few swift kicks in. What I can do is lie and hope the project falls apart due to natural causes. If I extend the job long enough, they’ll probably beg me to can it.

Time to work my magic.

The shareholders’ are drunk enough to follow me on one of my idea-spitting sessions, so I just say the first thing that comes to mind.

Filter through the topics: What is Momma Bear Magazine? Nurturing. Individuality. Oh, god.

In reality, it’s just a way to get women to buy more hiking equipment, makeup with earth tones, and natural tampons. Is there any way to make it more... cutting edge? The answer is a resounding no.

“Teachers,” I say.

I watch every man’s expression fall, one by one. “Teachers,” Jim mutters.

I’m losing them. Quick, think of something fast. “Dogs, too,” I say.

Jim’s mouth closes, but I can tell it’s because he’s too confused to respond.

“Dogs,” Brian says. “Gotta love those guys.”

Quick, Marc...

Pulling from my memory, I focus on what this magazine could be if it was actually good. What is it about? Seattle. Women. Some kind of nostalgic freedom, a rebelliousness that’s at the heart of this country.

And then it hits me. A workable scenario. It’s not the idea of the century, but it’ll work.

“Teachers,” I repeat. “They’re our nation’s great heroes.”

Jim’s grey mustache twitches. “You’re already losing me.”

Clearing my throat, I run up to the front of the conference room and grab a tripod with a white board attached. Quickly, I start drawing a scene from memory. First, a station wagon at a gas pump. “Here’s our cover model, traveling across the city after a long day at work. She’s tired. She’s hungry.” I say, noticing Jim starting to open his mouth. “And she doesn’t need Jim over here to tell her what to do.”

Brian laughs, and surprisingly, the room follows. Even Jim chuckles once I come to his side and squeeze *his* shoulder. “She makes this long drive every single day, and she’s running on empty. Traffic is abysmal. Her dog is at home, waiting for their next big adventure together, as well as his dinner. To make matters worse, her card doesn’t work at the pump. Declined.”

“I’m listening,” Jim says.

“A new suburban market is piling up in droves. They’re older, they’re more self-conscious, and they’re a hell of a lot poorer

too.”

“So what you’re saying is, what?”

“What I’m saying is we get a jump on something new and corner this market.”

Truth is, I have no idea where I’m going with this. I’m just spitballing ideas. This will never make it to the cutting room floor. But if this falls flat today, I’m going to be the laughing stock of the board room, and the door has my name on it. Must keep Jim entertained.

“This woman has given her all to help a few children in the classroom. Why? Because that’s what she wants to do with her life,” I say. “She’s not a rebel. She’s entirely normal.”

“I thought this magazine was about the Seattle counter-culture,” Jim growls.

A smirk forms on my face. “It is, Jim. That’s the point,” I say.

And even though Jim’s scowling, he’s going to be pleasantly surprised. If there’s anything I enjoy, it’s when a good idea takes me on a journey.

I make my way around the room, glancing over at Brian only to make sure I’m not going with the dumbest idea of my life. “She’s everything we should idolize,” I say. “But she’s been pushed aside like a...a...”

I’m starting to lose track, so I try to recall everything that night. She wasn’t traveling from her job. She was driving all the way to Tacoma to pick up a dog. Why? So that it could keep her company.

She’s not a rebel. She’s not a hero either. She’s just a good person that’s willing to put in the effort to make changes to her life.

That’s when I realize just how much she’s juggling. My days are broken down by meetings and worries of traffic and other inconveniences, but her days are a full sacrifice. Maybe I’ve been giving her a harder time than she deserves.

“She’s been pushed aside like a litter of cats,” I say.

Brian tenses up. Bad analogy?

I keep going before I lose them completely. “Look, I’m here to sell you an idea. But at the end of the day, this is a magazine for skeptical individuals who don’t like buying a lot of products.”

Jim cracks his neck and lowers his voice. He looks tired. “But that’s what we’re in the business of selling, Marc,” he says. “You’re good at this. Don’t make me explain the business to you.”

Brian meanders to the bar to get a few drinks. The situation is a little tense. I’ve got a feeling the magazine is going to get canned, and I’m not sure if I’ll be next. Placing the drinks on the table, Brian scratches his temples and nods.

“This isn’t bad, actually,” Brian says.

Actually? Did he really have to use that word?

I glare, and he redirects his thoughts with a jump to the white board. “She’s young and beautiful, works her butt off, and all she owns is a crappy station wagon. It’s not just that she’s been pushed aside. That’s not the story. The system has taken advantage of her, and now she’s ready to fight back with a new look. Activism is very popular these days among the youth.”

Brian usually keeps his mouth shut during these meetings. I’m not sure if this is helping or hurting my case. It sounds really fucking stupid.

Jim is staring at the board, eyes creased. He must know it’s a terrible idea, and now he’s coming up with the easiest plan to get rid of me. “Well, I think this is the dumbest idea you’ve ever had, Marc.”

The other old men in the room agree.

In a calm daze, I slump in my chair. My salary isn’t necessary to survive, but this has been my life project. If I can say something to get them to rethink terminating this project, I’ll do it. “Look, Jim I—”

Jim cuts me off. “But I’m not someone who likes to give up,” he says, standing. “Now, I’ve invested in the company for ten

years, and I've seen our profits nearly quadruple over the last eight financial quarters.”

Walking over to my side, he throws his crab-like fist around my shoulder and pinches down again, ruining what's left of my nerves.

He continues his little speech. “This teacher thing sounds silly to an old man like me, but what do I know? I don't care what you try, as long as you get the advertisers on board and make it sexy.”

“Sexy,” I say.

“Hot,” he says. “The first issue needs a good model. A trailblazer.”

Trailblazer? Man, this guy is full of these nicknames.

But I know exactly what he wants. Her name is Ali.

I'm not allowed to have her number. It's... *against the rules*.

“Jim. You're in luck,” I say. “I've got just the girl.”

It just may take some finagling to get her to show up.

He raises a brow and gives an award-winning smile. “Well, I'd love to meet her. Bring her to the Valentine's Day unveiling,” he says.

Uh, what? “Unveiling.”

Jim checks his phone, exuding confidence. “The announcement party,” he exclaims.

“Fundraiser,” Brian whispers.

Jim continues. “I got an email from your team leader Sandra about it. Big Momma Bear Extravaganza. Her words. Not mine.”

Dammit, Sandra. She could have let me know about this. Now, I'm going to have to think of a way to shit-can this *Momma Bear* magazine, *and* find a way to avoid this party. It's going to take up all my energy. There aren't enough beta blockers in the world...

Sometimes, I wonder if I should just quit.

“Of course,” I say, smile returning. “The party.”

Jim winks. “You’ve got hearts in your eyes,” he says. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

No, that’s just my capillaries bursting from stress.

I take a deep breath.

I’m so fucked.

ALI

The first day teaching is always difficult. A handful of riled-up kids would be hard for any individual to handle. The thing about coming into an abandoned classroom, it's like a tribe. They've already established a code, and I have to come in as an outsider.

Well, I've got a secret weapon. Make them laugh.

I walk into a class of laughing monkeys and hyenas, knowing the change of leadership is going to make them a little crazy. Luckily, the transition team the dean assembled did a pretty good job at making me feel welcome. Still, I have no doubt a few of the kids are setting up artillery units with spit wads and paper bombs. I have to quickly make my defense.

Setting my lesson folder against my new desk, I remain quiet. A few of the students tell the others to hush as soon as I step in front of the class.

A moment of silence for the queen...

A devious smile forms on my face. "I... farted," I say.

Believe it or not, this is part of my lesson plan.

The kids don't know how to handle it. Suddenly, they're looking at each other in disbelief, unsure whether to lob bombs at me or burst out screaming. A few more seconds pass before the first student succumbs to heavy laughter.

The rest fall like dominos.

Sure, my plan of attack is a little different from most teachers. Some use discipline. Others use a mixture of persuasion tactics

and bribery with candy or an easy grade. For me, it's better to throw myself at the whim of the people, the populace that the dean and staff regard as developing.

I know how they tick. Farting is the holy grail of funny. It's an icebreaker that allows the craziest kids to decompress. It also allows me to see who's the meanie of the bunch.

Thank God, Marc isn't here.

One kid stands on his chair and points. "Girls don't do that!"

His name is Xander. He's the boy who accused Sammy of pushing him. Dr. Berman warned me there could be trouble, but I'm going to protect her.

"Actually, we all fart," I say.

Most of the classmates twist and respond with glee. "Ew! Do not."

I walk through the row of desks, and all the kids go wild like I'm parting the Red Sea. I'm sniffing, playing the part well. It's absolutely ridiculous, and even I'm feeling the urge to crack up.

Pausing, I feign surprise. "On second thought. You may be right, Xander."

He leans back, proud. "See. Girls don't fart."

I start to meander through the room, until I get to Xander's desk. Then I make a horrified expression, the craziest I've ever looked. "Wait a second. I smell something. It was you," I exclaim.

Xander shoots out of his desk like a rocket. "No," he pleads. "It wasn't me."

His friends gang around him, plugging their nose. I don't want to shame the kid, so I back off. It's a ridiculous entrance, but there's a lesson embedded in the hilarity to be respectful.

"Okay, guys. Settle down. It's a joke," I announce.

We're talking about kids here. I have a little room to maneuver here.

Returning to the white board, I write my name in big, cute lettering. "I'm Mrs. Greenwald. I'm your teacher."

Ironically, Xander politely raises his hand. I call on him. "Is Ms. Hamel coming back?"

Making a sad face, I shake my head. "No, but she told me personally that you guys were the best class in the school. Is that true?"

I focus on Sammy and wink. She smiles, pushing her tongue through her teeth. "Yes," she says. "We won the spelling bee against the class next door."

She's so cute.

After the fart joke, clears the room, I get on to the real lesson plan. Science and biology. We're making volcanos today. Why? Because it's awesome. Besides, I think I need something lighthearted and fun to get my mind off of Marc.

I like him.

But he's also a little annoying.

The point is, I'm not sure how long I'll last.

During recess, I watch over Sammy and Xander. She swings for ten minutes before playing with the other girls. Xander, however, doesn't seem to have many friends. He tries to join a group of boys near the slide, but after an exchange of words, he's dismissed. He walks away, staring at the ground, only to look back at Sammy.

When he looks at her, it's remorseful. It's like he's asking her to rescue him. What can she do? Sammy doesn't want to be ostracized from the group of girls, so she turns away.

But there's a moment where she looks up again. They lock eyes.

I don't know what's going on, but I do know that kids can be super complicated. Getting to the bottom of this is going to take some time. For now, she's safe. And in less than an hour, I'm going to take her back to her dad.

Her hot, rich father...

By the time class is over, I can't stop going over the pros and cons of becoming friends with Marc inside my head. He's funny. He's doing something right with his finances to be living in the town of Sammamish, clearly. At the end of the day, he seems to be a really good father.

So – What are the cons?

After Sammy's inside my car, I grill her for some inside information. "Does your dad work a lot?" I ask.

What does he do for a living?

Does he make good money?

How big is his... *okay*. Those are things I'm wondering to myself.

Sammy sits, digging all four fingers into a bag of candy valentines. Within seconds, her mouth is already full. "He's always doing weird stuff," she says.

I slow down at the stop sign. Their home isn't that far away from school, and I selfishly want more time to find out more about Marc. "Oh yeah? Like what?"

She crunches a candy heart with her cute front teeth. "Like, he wears gorilla masks and acts all weird."

I think I know what she means. "Does he put on funny masks to cheer you up?"

She nods, eyes beaming. "Yeah. I get sad sometimes about mom, but daddy has been really nice lately. He got me Ragamuffin and everything."

Suddenly, I don't feel the urge to continue digging. It feels a little too invasive. Still, I can't stop my brain from quietly wondering about their family as we pull into the long driveway.

Was there a painful and messy divorce? Maybe Marc isn't as nice as he seems.

I step outside, falling into a state of nostalgia as I peer up at the unused basketball hoop. The house itself is two stories and very cute, like something right out of a movie. Growing up

without much money, I always wanted to live in a house like this one. Ours was a two-bedroom, so it wasn't the worst it could have been. But it wasn't *this* glamorous.

It even has a white-picket fence.

We're far away from the Christmas holidays, but as Marc opens the door to greet us, I envision a massive green tree that reaches the vaulted ceilings, ceiling stereos playing jolly music, and a wall of presents for Sammy. Ragamuffin is sitting on the couch, tongue out, tail wagging.

It's a brief picture, one that I immediately push out of my head. It's not real, I tell myself. They put that stuff in movies because it puts a feeling of hope inside of the audience. It's like a mirage. When you see the thing in person, it's not the same.

"Daddy!" Sammy yells, snapping me back to reality.

Marc returns the sentiment, swinging out his arms for a giant hug. "Sammy!" he exclaims.

"You made it home early," she says. "Finally."

"It's taken daddy a long time to get used to the traffic here," he says.

It's a really cute image, but it's interrupted by the long-eared dog of my dreams. Ragamuffin runs in from the other room, barking like she's the queen of this house, and then she rolls onto her back for a warm belly rub. There's bits of foam stuck in her teeth, and when I follow a trail past Marc, I see a torn up couch. I'm still a little bitter about the dog, but it looks like she's a misbehavior.

I point. "I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but your couch..."

Door open, Marc moves to the side. "Hey, Ms. Greenwald," he says. "A couch can be replaced. A dog... *well*, I'm not quite there, yet."

As soon as I'm inside, I realize he's actually living in the fantasy inside my head. His living room looks like it's been ripped straight out of a magazine cover. A fireplace unravels

into parallel red brick, and a velvet bench rests near a curtained window. Two wooden tables overflow with succulents and books on white shelves.

The man is handsome, as he always was, but now it seems, in hindsight, that he only dressed like this for me. He wears a jean jacket, jeans, and black Nike shoes. His short, dark hair looks freshly combed. Everything about his life is surreal.

“Would you like some wine?” he asks, looking at me expectantly, but I’m lost. My entire body is frozen.

“Yes, please.”

Like a zombie, I lumber into the kitchen to find a long marble island, so clean I could run my tongue across it and feel safe. Every type of pot and pan hangs from the ceiling, and brand new appliances heat up something that smells absolutely scrumptious. This room is almost as big as my bedroom.

To the left of the island is a wide, square dining area, and to the right is a family room. It’s lined with bookshelves of all kinds, and reading through the titles, I realize they’re original classics. Hundreds of them. Maybe even thousands. Most of them are in great condition.

A warmth spreads throughout my body. “Oh, wow,” I whisper.

I sense Marc walking up behind me. “Are you hungry? I’ve got some handmade lasagna in the oven. Shouldn’t take more than fifteen minutes.”

Great Expectations. Wuthering Heights. Tropic of Cancer. A whole collection of Jane Austin. I can’t believe my eyes. I’m in heaven.

I don’t turn around or respond. I’m transfixed by this little Garden of Eden he lives in, but he seems rather bored. Reaching my hand out, I brush a book binding with my finger and feel the indent from the gold lettering. For me, this is a bit emotional, akin to going to Disneyland for the first time.

I can’t even think straight. “Food sounds good,” I mumble.

He hands me a glass of red wine, winking.

It's getting late. I keep forgetting I have a new dog, and I'm sure he's hungry. Here's to hoping he hasn't urinated all over my stuff. "Cheers," I say.

Clinking his glass against mine, we both take a sip before I return to his book collection.

Marc's shadow grows behind me, until he's positioned against my hip. For a brief moment, I brace for his touch and forget about my responsibilities. But when he reaches his arm above me, I realize he's pulling a specific book from its place. It's *Pride & Prejudice*, an obvious choice, but I can't help but profess my love for the eternal romance novel.

"If you want, you can spend some time in here, while I finish up in the kitchen," he says, practically pushing the book into my hands.

I look up from the book to his deep-seated eyes. "You mean it?"

His upper lip curls into a curious smile. "You look like I'm offering you the world."

This is a lot to offer. I don't want to come off as too poor and uneducated, especially when I'm teaching his daughter the ins and outs of the English language. However, the more I'm in his presence, the harder it becomes to speak. When I finally find the right words, I'm sure he thinks I'm a lunatic.

"I mean, you kind of are offering me the world. This place is incredible," I say.

He looks uninterested. A tiny bit distracted, too. "I hired an interior decorator. The books are mainly for display purposes, but Sammy seems to enjoy them."

That's why he owns the books? To look cool?

I laugh because all of this is a little too much to understand for someone like me, and I'm a little frustrated by his lack of enthusiasm. "I'm not sure you know what treasures you're sitting on," I say.

"My bids were for first edition copies," he says. "If they're fakes, I'm going to write an angry email."

I open the book and check it out. The year is printed in charcoal. It's signed, London 1816. "My God," I mutter. "This must have cost a fortune."

Leaning over my shoulder, he points to the publisher name. John Murray. It's a real copy. "You don't want to know how much I spent."

I quickly close its pages and lean on my toes to put it back on the top shelf. "You're right. It'll probably just piss me off. I've never owned an original anything."

He stops me from returning it to its rightful corner, briefly bringing his hand to the small of my back. "Well, I'd like to hear your expert opinion," he says. "What do you think? Is it fake?"

Careful not to run my finger over the pencil signature from the publisher, I hold the book closer to my face. The aroma is ancient but familiar. "It's pretty neat," I admit. "Definitely real. Not a fake."

Positioning his waist close to mine, he leans and grabs the edge of the book, gliding his hand over mine. "What should we do with it?"

I give him my answer without flinching. "Keep it. Forever."

Gently, he closes its cover. I turn to hand him the book, but to my surprise, he shakes his head and closes my hand around both ends. "Why don't you keep it instead?"

"You're... serious?"

He nods, appearing more cheeky than he was just a few moments ago. "I tend to lose things," he says, shrugging into the kitchen to check on the food. A delicious smell emanates from the oven. "And you seem to care more about it than I do. So why not hand it over to someone who cares?"

I don't enjoy receiving gifts. In fact, it makes me feel a little on-the-spot. This is a really expensive book, rarer than most diamonds. I can't accept it without returning some type of favor. "Maybe I could read it to Sammy," I blurt out.

He lowers his voice and eyes me. “Speaking of Sammy, how were things today? Anything from that Xander kid?”

I remember how rejected he looked on the playground, and how Sammy looked back at him like there were words needed to be said between the two. Realizing I’m gripping the old book too tight, I put it down and take a deep breath.

I zig-zag through Marc, pausing at the marble kitchen island. “Well, I think something is going on between them,” I say.

Although he chuckles, I can sense some anger forming. His face solidifies, and the cute smile soon melts into a distasteful frown. “My daughter’s eight. She believes in cooties, not holding hands.”

“Actually, kids display awareness of attraction at a really early age,” I say. “Your daughter might have her first crush.”

Shutting his eyes, he groans. “This is not a conversation I thought I’d ever have,” he says, face pained. “She’s my little angel.”

I lean against the island, noticing a world of space between us. “I think I agree with her,” I say. “Boys have cooties. They’re very intent on spreading them.”

He narrows his eyes and meanders to the side of the island, occupying himself with the silverware. I catch those eyes lower, before they rise to meet my own. “Is that some kind of jab at me?”

“It’s just a trend I’ve noticed,” I say.

In the living room, Sammy quietly plays with her dolls. “Just keep an eye on those two,” he says. “For a little while longer, at least. She’s acting quieter than her usual safe.”

Taking another sip of wine, I feel a sense of urgency overtake my buzz. “Quit worrying. She’s my priority,” I say.

There’s some space between us, but we’re both looking at Sammy.

When his smile returns, I know we’re still good. Over the last few days, our rapport has grown into something like a feud.

I'm not sure if there's any way to stop it, but a little bit of lasagna never hurts. Maybe we'll finally break bread.

"Stay for food," he says.

"I don't know, Marc," I mutter. "I've got Rowdy and twenty-seven sheets of homework to grade."

He frowns. "It'll just be less than an hour."

"Why do you want me to stay so bad?" I finally ask.

Glancing at the carpet, he scratches the back of his neck and sighs. "I know it's weird, but I think it would be good for Sammy to have a role model in her life."

It's sweet to see he cares about his girl, but that's a lot of responsibility to put on me. Not to mention, it's a little out-of-the-blue. It reminds me that there's something more to their family. "You keep saying things like that," I say.

He blinks a few times. "Did I?"

I lower my voice, just in case Sammy can hear us. "Did something... happen to her?"

His throat tightens, and his mouth hangs open. He's about to speak when the oven alarm cuts into the conversation. "Oh, shit," he whispers. "I better check on that."

I glance down, heart beating rapidly. "Right," I say. "You go right ahead."

I'm not here to dig into their personal life, but I also don't think it's fair to ask me to be anyone's role model. At the end of the day, I'm just a normal woman who has dedicated her time to teaching children. I have a life.

He pops his head out from the kitchen. A plume of smoke follows, which he expertly ducks underneath. "You know, I could pay you," he says.

Goodbye, life. Hello, money.

I step into the room with my listening cap on. "I might be interested," I say.

Upon, opening the oven again, he pushes his head forward to smell the incredible carb-heaven. “It wouldn’t be a tutor job,” he says. “You could do everything you would otherwise normally do. You would just do it here instead. With Sammy.”

My house is probably trashed. “I have a dog now, remember?”

“Bring him here,” he says.

“He’ll pee on the carpet.”

He sets the glass baking dish on the island. “You’re making excuses.”

The heat immediately fogs up my glasses.

Clearing my throat, I really give it a second thought. Right now, Rowdy is slobbering all over my apartment. Coming home to that beast is going to be a nightmare and a half. Dinners are a challenge with such a big dog, and my apartment is too small to feel like he has any freedom. It’s almost cruel to keep him there.

Would this job be a good thing? It would make a massive difference.

There’s still a part of me that worries about jumping into anything fast. What does Marc really want? And is he using this job as a means to get it?

I’m a little tense. I didn’t expect to receive two job offers in one week. Judging by the size and location of his house, he can afford to be generous. I’m just not that used to winning.

“That sounds nice,” I say.

He winks, and a flash of electricity rushes through me. “It was just a thought,” he says. “We can talk about a price tomorrow or something. I’m starving.”

Am I smiling too big?

Not at all phased by any of this, he leads me to the table and gets to serving. Sammy runs over and politely sits, her feet dangling above the carpet.

Marc hands her a piece of lasagna on a spatula. “Here you are, lovely,” he says.

“Thank you, daddy,” she says.

Marc turns to me next. He looks into my eyes and grins. “And here you are, lovely.”

“Thank you,” I mutter. “M-M-Marc.”

Feeling my cheeks start to burn, I quickly make my way to the seat next to Sammy.

Marc sits down and motions to start. “Come on, guys. Eat. You don’t have to wait for me.”

Their family is open and free. It’s comforting in so many ways. Growing up, I never had that sense of freedom. Everything had a ritual attached to it, and if you didn’t follow the rules, people were bound to get angry. Sometimes those feuds lasted all night.

I cut my fork into the rich, melted cheese, so soft it melts through like butter. The pasta sheet gives way to meat sauce, bits of basil, and other fragrant spices. As soon as I take a bite, I lower in my seat because the flavor is out-of-this-world, delicious.

“You cooked this yourself?” I ask.

He chuckles, taking a sip of red wine for good measure. “I dabble in the art of cooking.”

Not going to lie, that’s pretty attractive...

Eyes wide, I lean back and look around the dining area. At the other end of the room is a grand piano. Is he going to play us some Bach for some dessert?

“What don’t you do?” I ask.

“Well, I hardly ever find the time to relax,” he says.

I laugh. “Ha-ha. Very funny.”

Sammy is looking at us like we’re crazy. “I usually help him,” she states.

I edge my voice into a whisper. “I bet you do most of the work,” I say.

“I do,” she whispers back.

Even though Marc is open, his protective side is still there. Watching me interact with his daughter, he takes another sip and quietly starts to eat.

Taking the moment to get to know her, I ignore Marc's watchful eye. "Your dad gave me a book," I say.

Sammy chomps. A bit of meat sauce falls down her chin. "He needs to read more than you do."

Marc puffs out his cheeks, pretending to be outraged. Handing her a napkin, he says, "Well, maybe I'd read if you cleaned your face more often."

When Sammy smiles, her tiny nose scrunches in the cutest way. Her dad is a jerk, but I'm really glad she's in my class.

She twists as he cleans her face. "Daaad," she whines.

"Oh relax. You're fine," he says.

They're great together. A real team. But she's sitting closer to me, and she keeps looking at me to guide the conversation. He might be right. She needs someone in her life who won't tell her she's fine. In all honesty, she needs a mother.

That's not going to be me. Nope. Definitely not.

After she's cleaned up, she raises her hand. "Ms. Greenwald, I have a question," she says.

He's lucky she's a quiet, good natured kid. I really enjoy spending time with her. "Yes, Sammy. Ask away."

She twists her fingers into her hair. "Well, I don't know if I should ask."

"Why not?" I ask.

She twists and turns in her seat. Maybe she's going to talk about Xander, but she's too afraid to do it in front of her dad. "I feel weird."

I give a glance to Marc, who looks concerned. "Oh, honey. You don't need to feel weird around me. In fact, you can ask me anything you want," I say.

"Really?" she asks.

“Anything,” I reiterate.

She holds her breath. And then she just shouts it out. “Did you really fart earlier?”

Oh, no.

My mouth drops, along with my heart, and I struggle to find the right words to say. I’ve got my eyes on Marc. He’s going to think I’m so gross.

He raises a brow. “Ms. Greenwald,” he says, feigning shock. “Is this true?”

My cheeks are burning with embarrassment. “Um, it was just a little joke I made,” I say. “For the kids.”

“She farted,” Sammy yells, giggling.

All of the nice stuff I said about Sammy – forget about it. She knows exactly what she’s doing.

When I first arrived to their expensive home, I thought it would be a one off trip. I’ve stayed here for over an hour. I’m a little tipsy from the wine, but I’m feeling really good. And for once, I feel like I belong somewhere.

I’ve looked into his eyes for almost as much time.

What am I doing?

“Farting aside,” he says, “I’d like to ask you something a little lighter than our conversation earlier.”

I swallow, trying to act normal. He’s already given me a book, and though he’s alarmingly handsome, I’m a little out of my element. “Yes?”

Hesitating for a brief moment, he looks at the chandelier above the dinner table and seems to think of the right phrasing. After a few seconds, he frowns and just goes for it. “Valentine’s Day is coming up.”

My expectations get crushed. It’s not the job offer I was expecting.

I swore off handsome men for Valentine’s Day. Doesn’t that count for anything?

Doing my best to act pleasant, I sit up straight and shovel the rest of my food into my mouth. “It is,” I mumble.

Gently placing his fork on his plate, he angles his body to get through my inquisitive glare. “My company is having a holiday party.”

There’s no food left on my plate. I’m full, and I *hate* holiday parties. Time go home.

Clearing my throat, I push out my chair and quickly raise a napkin to shield my flustered expression. “Oh, that’s nice,” I say.

He stands with me, perhaps more rattled by my response than I am by his. “Well, I’d like to ask you if you’d be my guest of honor.”

What is this, the Netherfield Ball from *Pride and Prejudice*?

I back toward the door, anxious to get home. “I’ll... I’ll think about it,” I respond.

“Dad, what’s Ms. Greenwald doing?” Sammy asks.

Marc goes back to looking at me like I’m a crazy woman. “I’m not sure, sweetie...”

I know it looks rude to leave so fast, but I can’t help but harken back to my initial feelings I had arriving in Seattle. I met a guy just like this one. Was he as rich? No, but that’s not what I’m looking for. The charm is what gets me every time.

My ex came off as a family man. He was the opposite of my expectations. I don’t know Marc that well, but I made an oath to myself. No more men. Not for a while.

In the meantime, we can be friends.

I leave the book behind with me.

MARC

Valentine's Day party? Did I really have to phrase it like that? It's an unveiling, not a holiday themed celebration.

Of course, I choked under pressure. Assuming she'd say no to something so formal, I dressed it up in a cheap silk dress. She still said no.

I'm not going. Not without Ali, my guest of honor. And even if she decides to go with me, is it even worth dealing with her anger over this stupid, minuscule lie? I have to find a way out.

I spend the day locked in my office, brainstorming with Brian. In reality, I'm avoiding any real conversation with my team leader, Sandra. That doesn't stop her from interrupting with some pretty annoying news.

"Jim called earlier," Sandra says.

This is the seventh call today, not counting my cell.

Although I'm not fully cognizant of my actions, I can feel my teeth grinding. "You had to schedule that party. You just *had* to do it, didn't you?"

She glances at Brian and bites her tongue. "I told you about the party a month ago," she says. "You chose to forget."

"Ever think I might have my own plans?" I ask, knowing full well I sound like a douchebag.

She gives me one stare before the guilt starts to sink in.

It's quite possible she did tell me, that I really did forget. Ever since Ali walked into my life, I can't stop my head from

spinning with confusing emotions. I'm not sure if I like her or if I'm just enthralled with the idea of another life. A different kind of life. Right now, I feel like I'm pulling in two different directions, and if I don't stop, I'm not sure where this will end up.

I crack my neck and shake my head. "Why is Jim so obsessed with this party thing?"

Sandra juts out her hip, hand planted with enough annoyance to send me flying through the windows behind my desk. "He just wants to make sure the Valentine's Day party is still happening."

"What does he need, a physical invitation?" Brian asks.

The guy is richer than I am. He's probably penciling the party in between the spa treatments and hair restoration appointments. Nevertheless, a man like him can fart and convince a crowd that it actually smells good. So far, he's been a good ally in the boardroom, despite his larger than life personality sometimes getting in the way. And right now, I need him more than he needs me.

Leaning against my mahogany desk, exhausted by the cast of characters within this business, I ruminate. It's a wonder how so many people found themselves with so much money. And it's a miracle I've managed to deal with all of them, individually.

"He's a real pain in my ass," I mutter.

Sandra twists her lips, balancing on one heel. "They all are," she sings.

I shut my eyes, wincing from a headache that has just started to take shape. "Just tell him it's on, and that I'll bring the cover girl. We'll get the staff to craft a whole spread on her life. Jim will be pleased."

There's a ten percent chance I show up, a five percent chance I'll take Ali home with me, and a two percent chance this magazine will even happen.

She lights up like a bulb and takes out a notepad and pen, "All right. Let me just pen this in real quick," she mutters before

glancing up again.

“What is it now, Sandra?” I ask.

“Did the model agree to the shoot, or are you just trying to get me out of the room, as usual?” she asks.

I frown. Although it was my suggestion, it’s bizarre to hear her call Ali a model. That’s not really her job. At all. She’s a clear ten, but if she was a model, I wouldn’t give her the time of day.

As I grow older, I find myself more and more drawn to honesty. Ali has that spunk I crave, a body that makes sparks fly, and a mind that exudes intelligence and humor. She has a realness that reminds me that life can be new again, if you just will it to happen. She’s so much more than a model.

“Sandra, how long have you known me?” I ask. “Am I the type of person to keep this from someone?”

Sandra raises a brow. “Sure. If you want to get in their panties.”

Brad chuckles. I punch his arm.

“That’s not very nice,” I mutter.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” she says.

Have I told Ali about the job? Well... not exactly. Sensing her readiness to run, I offered a job I thought she’d like better. I’m not sure if she’s still available.

“Um. Well...”

To my dismay, Sandra resumes writing in her notepad. “I’m going to take that as a no, so I won’t schedule the studio rental today.”

“You don’t believe in me,” I joke.

Her lips tighten to the side. “This is 2021, Marc. If you want to stay in business, you can’t keep pulling these sorts of stunts.”

“That’s news to me,” Brian says.

Sandra rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “Ask her on a date. It’s not that hard.”

She walks out of the room and closes the door, effectively shutting my mouth for me. Not going to lie, it's a little embarrassing.

Brian uses his chair to roll across the room. "She told you off."

"Shut up," I say.

Wondering if Jim has texted me, I check my phone. I've got another few missed calls. The guy is relentless. Ali is the complete opposite.

Brian waves his hand in front of my catatonic expression. "You there?"

I blink a few times, returning back to the room.

Brows rising, he smirks. "What happened last night? Did you guys..."

He's elbowing me in the ribcage.

"Real mature," I say.

He finishes his laughter with a swift swig from his water bottle. "I'm just playing. I know you didn't get laid. You have all the money in the world, but you, my friend, are terrible with women."

The truth is I'm not really listening to him. I'm thinking about last night, replaying everything in my head, and wondering what I did wrong. Maybe I offered her too much. Money is an intimidating thing. Or maybe she sees right through me.

She seemed to be enjoying herself at dinner. It was a pleasant conversation up until I mentioned her dog. That's when things got weird. And then there was the job offer. She left the book behind her. I didn't even get a chance to talk to her about the modeling opportunity. Can't wait to hear what she has to say about that.

"Of course, I spoke to her," I say.

Brian leans into my vision. "And you said what, goodbye?"

I bite the inside of my cheek. "I offered her one of my books before dinner," I say. "And then I offered her a job."

His eyes thrust open with surprise. “Did you buy her a house, too?”

Standing, I make my way toward the southeast wall of my office. I stare at the hazy outline of Mount Rainier. When I first moved here, its presence didn’t make it to my awareness. But over the past few months, I’ve come to this spot to look out at the fuzzy white mountain that guards the city, and inspiration almost always finds a way to relax my mind.

This time, however, feels different. It’s like a bad omen, a warning to slow down before I spin out of control. I’ve always been a person who goes after the next thing I can get my hands on. It’s been crucial to my survival and subsequent rise to the top of the publication world.

Who gives a shit? Not me.

I don’t care about this business anymore. At least, not in the same sense as I used to. Money. Things. My enormous paychecks are paying the bills, but they’re giving my brain a deficit I need to escape from. Eventually, I’ll need to retire. I have an obligation to give Sammy what she deserves, and hopefully Ali allows me a real first date.

“I offered her a job,” I say.

Brian’s eyebrows are fixed. “Right. The modeling job.”

“I offered her a different job,” I say. “One more suited to her talents.”

Peering out to the hallway, I see Sandra stop. She turns and looks like her mind is stuck before rushing back inside my office. “A different job,” she repeats.

She’s sharp. That’s why I hired her. Sometimes, it gets me into trouble.

For a second, I hold my real feelings back. Allowing my wild ideas to linger for a few days is a much safer plan. Then again, if they tell Jim, they’ll be out of jobs too. For once, I’m not stuck with the burden of deciding my next move. I can just do it.

I suck in a breath of fresh air, closing my eyes to briefly envision myself on Mount Rainier. My legs are crossed, and I'm starting to feel my inner Zen give me the confidence and creativity needed to face these people honestly. Whatever that means.

"The magazine isn't going to happen," I say.

It's a declaration. A big fuck you to the board.

They don't seem too impressed.

"Oh, I get it. You're acting like an idiot now," Sandra groans.

Brian stands, mouth shaped like a sad rainbow. "I'm with Sandra, man. I rescheduled shoots for this. Unlike you, I have bills to pay."

He's on salary.

I meander through the two, getting my checkbook out from the top drawer of my desk. "How many zeros do you two need to keep your mouths shut?" I ask.

Brian exhales. "You're really not going through with *Momma Bear*?"

The name makes me cringe.

Chuckling, I sign two checks and write a number with a lot of zeros. "If this isn't enough for your time, I'll get you another one in three months. Just keep your lips sealed."

They're all accomplices now.

Sandra's eyes fall on the number. "I just want to get this straight. You're giving us ten grand to help you get laid?"

"It's for Sammy," I say. "She needs a good role model in her life."

My team leader twitches. "That's a good answer. I don't buy it."

"Then rent it out until you can afford it. My daughter adores Ali," I say. "But she's been very adamant about keeping me in the friend-zone."

"There are better ways to impress a woman," Sandra groans.

I realize how pathetic I look, but they don't understand. There are rules to this thing, and now I'm caught in a web of promises I won't be able to keep. Everyone wants to steal a piece of me. Everyone, except Ali.

"I have to be very careful about this whole thing," I say. "I'm not allowed to call her."

Brian quickly pockets the check before I can take it back. "Are you ten years old?"

He's right. The game we're playing is stupid and childish. But she seems really adamant about staying away from potential boyfriends. What else can I do? She makes the rules, not me.

Sandra interrupts before I can respond. Eyes wide, she plants her hands around the edge of my desk. "Well, you'll have to tell her about the idea," Sandra says.

I glance at Brian. He's keeping his mouth shut.

Sandra's confidence solidifies, and she crosses her arms. "You have to, Marc."

Exhaling, I give a grin that immediately falls short. "I was hoping I didn't have to," I admit.

Frustrated, Sandra gives up arguing. "Fine. We'll do it your way. But when this thing falls apart and she's running out that door at the party, don't come running to me for help," she says, stopping a moment to catch her breath. "Oh, and since you're keen on being a hopeless sap for the rest of your life, the best way to get her in bed is to get to know her. You know, listen to her problems. Take her to the dog park. Let her play with your new dog."

Oh, right. I bought a dog.

It's not a bad idea. "Noted," I say.

I watch as Sandra disappears down the hall.

I'm stuck with Brian again. Fun.

Grabbing my bag, I tuck in my chair and nod toward the door. "I'm going home. I've got a dog, a wild daughter, and a couple thousand problems to fix."

Brian beats me to the exit. “Not yet,” he says. “Come on. You faced Sandra. Now you have to face me, your best friend. You like this girl?”

I deflate, mimicking Julius Cesar’s betrayal. “Et tu, Brute?”

It doesn’t make him laugh.

“Maybe you should let this thing go,” he says.

I frown and push my weight against the door, but he gets his arm in between the exit in the nick of time. “You know how much I want you and Sammy to have a better life,” he says. “She deserves a mother. A good one.”

There’s a but coming. “But?”

He takes his arm away. I could run, but it’s better to face whatever it is he has to say. Relaxing, I take a step back and motion for him to continue his little advice column.

“I just want to make sure you’re not rushing into anything,” he says.

I think back to the night I took Sammy to buy her first dog. We’ve had such a hard time moving around, flying from city to city, and searching for a home that the look of excitement on her face took me by surprise. It’s almost like I woke up the night I saw Ali. For years, I acted like a business zombie, and now that I’m aware of all the crap I need to change, I’m seeing how big a job that might become.

My sister died, but she left me a gift. Regardless, it hurt like hell. It changed the course of my life, too.

Since then, I’ve dealt with the loss by remembering her image and living up to the standard she’d want for her daughter. It’s been difficult, but I’m learning to take the hard moments in stride because Sammy is the best thing to have ever happened to this world. I will not let my sister down. I can’t afford to let that happen.

“Trust me. This one time, put aside those doubts,” I say.

“You’re a wild card, Marc.”

I scratch my head. “Nah,” I mutter. “I’m putting those days behind me. I just want to put everything in my life together. Maybe this is a miscalculation, but I think I want to see it through.”

His face relaxes. His lips twitch, preparing a smile. “You really like this girl, don’t you?”

It’s too early to think about that. I just want to keep seeing her.

“Let’s put it this way. I’m willing to risk my ass for this,” I say.

He tilts his head back, eyes narrowed. “You like her.”

Either my cheeks are turning red or my whole face is on fire. “You don’t think I’m in over my head?” I ask.

A deep bubble of laughter escapes him. “You’re definitely in over your head. But that’s all right. I’m going to save you.”

“My hero,” I joke. “And how are you going to do that?”

He moves away from the door, smug. “Give me a couple days. You’ll see.”

ALI

An hour before class starts, I smuggle my slobber-stained St. Bernard into Marymoor dog park. It's just a few short blocks from Shadow Park Valley Day School. With over forty-four acres of farm land at our disposal, the other dogs have space to run around and explore. This place is a doggy Disneyland. I don't think Rowdy will be any trouble for me. He's quite happy.

Today, I carry forward with a bit more optimism than usual. As the day unfolds with an orange sherbet sunrise, a warm breeze evaporates the fog, and for once, Rowdy is behaving like an angel. It's something in the air, I guess. Everything feels like it's coming together, even if I left things with Marc unfinished.

To welcome me into the school, one of the other teachers, Amanda, has decided to join me on my morning walk. Attempting to stay in the present, I focus on the beautiful landscape and realize I've got the whole year ahead of me. If something is going to happen between Marc and I, nature will let it happen.

I meet Amanda at the end of a sawdust trail that hugs the green grass. She's got her own dog. Her own well-behaved handsome beast of a Rottweiler. As soon as Rowdy sees her, his ears perk up, his mouth fizzes with gooey saliva, and he lets out a bark the size of a Buick.

Holding the leash tight, I give it a gentle tug. Then I give Amanda a quick hug, watching to see if Rowdy sneaks a nip. The store owner was right, he's not a bad dog. He's just a little

clunky and awkward. Everyone judges him, but he's a good boy.

"Thanks for meeting me," I say.

"Of course. Did you catch the sunrise?"

It's still going strong. I give an excited nod.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" she asks.

I admire the area and feel blessed to start over in such a positive way. When I first arrived in Seattle, it was a little overwhelming. I found myself occupying my time in line for the Space Needle, or reading books in the park near Pike's Place Market. Tourist stuff. But what I've started to realize is that a city is defined by its inhabitants, but what *surrounds* it gives it some much needed character. On the outside of Seattle is a wide variety wildlife, nature, and picturesque views that can change your entire day. Who knows, maybe I'll become one of those nature girls someday.

"I love it here," I admit. "It's like a dream."

"You're new in town. Someday, it'll feel like a nightmare," she jokes.

At least, I *think* it's a joke.

I met Amanda a few days ago when I was first getting adjusted at school. Dean Berman introduced us, and we immediately hit off. She's got a loud personality, the opposite of my award-winning awkward demeanor.

It's a newer school, but its reputation has been built up like the Great Wall of China. It's an impenetrable fortress of wealth, status, and power. Amanda has a reputation, too. She's rich, wears expensive clothes, has her own gaggle of minions, and has some pretty foul taste in men after getting d. That's just me being honest.

A new teacher like me shouldn't get accepted into a private school like Valley Day. But Amanda gets me. I understand her. We've got enough determination to see us through the finish line. We're also the youngest among the staff. If we want to survive, we better stick together and keep our alliance strong.

As we talk and catch up, I can't help but notice the light reflect off her dog's amber fur. "Wow, she's a pretty girl," I say.

She bends and brushes her back. "This is Luna," she says. "Go ahead and pet her. She won't hurt a fly."

I reach and let her sniff the back of my hand. When she gets a good whiff, her tail starts to wag, and her tongue whips near my face. "Hi, sweetie," I whisper.

My dog shows off by urinating near my new shoes. "This hunk of meat is Rowdy," I mutter.

Amanda angles her head. "This is good ol' plan b?"

I told her all about the story of Ragamuffin, leaving out most of the key details to be safe. Marc seems to be well known around here, so I haven't mentioned his name to anyone. It's my little secret. Something tells me it's coming.

I contain my laughter. "The dog I wanted to get turned out to be a little demon, so Rowdy's growing obedience is a pleasant surprise."

Rowdy farts. It's time to start walking.

"So, I saw you talking to someone in the hall the other day," she says, eyes lighting up. "Want to tell me what that was about?"

It's gossip time for her. For me, it's time to find out more about the situation surrounding Marc. What does he do for a living? What's the story surrounding Sammy? These are key details I need to know if anything is going to happen between us.

Pretending I don't know what she's talking about, I furrow my brow. "Who, Dean Berman?"

She frowns. "Don't play dumb with me. The guy in the black suit who looks at you with puppy dog eyes. Marc Wylan."

I laugh, but my head is starting to wander back to the dinner I had with Marc and Sammy. It was nice. And then I ruined it by storming out. I don't even know if he still wants me after school with his daughter. Does he still want me at all?

Amanda leads her broad-shouldered Rottweiler ahead of us, while Rowdy tries to sneak a sniff of her butt. “Oh, come on,” she teases. “I know this is your first week, but you can open up to me. I’m one of the good guys.”

I suck in my lower lip and laugh, allowing the embarrassment to roll out of me. “You know the guy?” I ask.

Tilting her head back, her eyes bug out. “You could say that again.”

“Wife?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “A lot of women were wondering about his situation, so they did some digging. No wife.”

Jeeze. The women around here are real marriage sleuths. Normally, I’d be against that sort of thing, but I find myself storing that bit of info with pleasure.

A flurry of emotions run through me, but I lock my lips and keep them to myself. For a few moments, I just walk, going over all the possibilities in my head. He could be a scientist working on the next vaccine to cure all diseases. Or maybe he’s a doctor. Of course, my mind quickly moves the opposite way. Is it possible he’s some weird, wealthy, powerful, and mad control freak who wants to take over the world with force?

Amanda can’t wait to blurt out the answer. “Dude. You know how the area skyrocketed in value last year?”

Actually, I didn’t know that. I’m not usually using my free time to study the housing market. “Yeah, of course. So crazy,” I say.

“It was because of that guy,” she says.

Rowdy plants his nose in the grass, smelling something he likes. He starts to pull on the leash, but he responds when I flick my wrist and tighten the lead. I follow his movements as he veers off path ever-so-slightly.

“What do you mean?”

She laughs, smug. “He’s worth like a billion dollars.”

Rowdy's pulling me, but the world has come to a grinding halt. Only able to blink, I try to process what she just told me. "A billion?"

She nods her head slowly, eyes two round bulbs with rolling dollar signs in the center.

I knew he was rich, but I never thought he was *that* rich. Bezos, Zuckerberg, and... Marc? My bank account is at a whopping thirty-seven-fifty. It almost seems impossible I could even brush against someone with that much wealth.

Amanda is loving this, but I don't date men for their money. I date them because a clear connection sets off a spark inside the mechanics of my beating heart. Just because Marc has wealth, doesn't make him a saint. For all I know, he could be some evil genius.

I bite my lip. "Do I even want to ask you what he does for a living?"

"He owns some magazines," she says, shrugging.

"Like... Playboy?" I ask.

She rolls her eyes. "You wish."

I really don't. "I'm just curious. We had a decent conversation the other day."

She raises a brow, causing me to blush. "You think he's interested?"

"He offered me a job," I say.

"Not a bad start."

"And then he asked me out to his company holiday party."

Her smile turns into a wavy set of lips. "A little tacky."

"Thing is, on paper, it makes sense to go out with him. He's rich, funny, and he's sweet with his daughter," I say.

Amanda nods along. "Perfect, perfect."

"He's handsome, makes me laugh, and has offered me gifts," I say.

Amanda blinks. "What's the problem, again?"

Once the filter has popped, I can't stop talking. "He's just so nice to me," I say. "And I want to be nice to him, but we got in one stupid fight about a cute dog that led to us making an impossible bet."

"A bet?"

"It's a long story," I say.

As we walk, the silence is deafening. We come to the same realization at the same time.

"Sounds like you're the problem," she says.

It's hard to hear, but she's right. There's something I need to settle with myself. A deep fear that the person I fall for will leave me forever. "I got burned by someone a few months ago," I admit.

She flattens her mouth. "I hear ya," she says. "But I still think you should go for it. There just aren't that many good men out there."

"Maybe that's why I'm taking my time."

We round the corner to find the path continues around a shimmering lake. Rowdy's nose is picking up on something, so we stop to let him sniff it out.

A breeze rushes by us, and Amanda does a little twirl. "Who needs men when you have a view like this, right?"

There's something to say about getting outside first thing in the morning. It restores your spirit. But all that new energy can leave faster than it started.

We get to the hill, headed toward the lake near the bottom. I hear a familiar bark echo across the park, causing me to turn my head. Out of nowhere, the cutest puppy with soft bronzed patches runs right past me, catching me and Amanda off-guard. I'd recognize those floppy ears anywhere.

"Ragamuffin," I whisper.

"Rag of what?"

The tiny puppy turns and instantly locks eyes with Rowdy. Eyes narrowed, the two dogs stare each other down. Rowdy

drops his paws and digs into the grass.

She barks.

He barks louder.

It's a standoff, and I'm scared of who might draw first.

Oh, no.

Marc comes into clear view, teeth whiter than his stupid dog's ivory fangs. He must've got a new haircut, or maybe it's his five-o'clock shadow that gives him a serious hot-dad vibe. He's paying attention to his daughter Sammy, kissing the top of her head before she runs toward a group of ducks near the water.

Before Marc can turn to see the chaos build, Rowdy drives forward with all his might, pulling the leash so tight and with so much force, my heels start to dig within the grass. Soon, he's dragging me forward. It's slow at first, but then Marc makes a crucial mistake. He sees me, and he waves.

My dog turns into a bulbous jerk again.

Barking, his pull turns into a full-on run. I let go of the leash to protect myself. Fate has other plans for me, however. The leash whips round my ankle, twisting into a knot.

"Be a good boy," I scream.

When a dog feels the primal impulse to pounce, nothing can stop them. In this case, the urge is strong, and his heavy heels bring up mud and bits of dirt onto my dress. His barks make him look like he's a natural born killer. It feels as though I'm being spat on, and though I'm locked in shock, I can feel my anger rising inside my chest.

The expression on Marc's face is priceless. I'm sure mine is even worse. Rowdy is pulling me toward him, and it doesn't look like I can stop him now. I'm getting closer and closer, until it's too late.

Oh, shit.

I smack right into him, laying him flat on the ground like a linebacker at the Super Bowl. Thick earthy chunks of mud

slide down Marc's suit. Rowdy's licking his face, but I'm on top of him. Not *just* on top of him. My legs are twisted around his torso, my arms are clamped around his neck, and my groin is crushing his dick.

This is not where I thought I'd be this Wednesday morning.

Ragamuffin barks and circles around, bouncing near Rowdy's sniffing nose. She gives him a kiss and bends her butt up to him.

"Your dog might be developing a crush on mine," he groans.

"I, uh..."

Cat got my tongue.

His eyes are deep and wondrous, honest, with a dark streak. And when the light hits the surface, I can count every ridge that makes up the iris. Something tells me he's felt pain because his eyes are filled with a deep longing for someone to see the real him.

He's nothing like me. I'm normal and boring. He's rich, handsome, and everything else great. In any case, normal comes with a caveat. In the end, we're all varying degrees of crazy.

With my hand flat against his beating heart, I feel a little out-of-my element. It's in this moment I wonder why I've been running from him for so long. Why I've sworn off men for so long. What is in my head that won't allow me to trust?

My heart is racing with excitement and fear, panic at embarrassing myself around someone who feels so put together. I'm a teacher, but I feel like a schoolgirl around him. I think I want him to touch me, to coil his fingers around my waist.

Then again, I've felt these feelings for other people before him. Just last month, I was still receiving texts from another guy. I'm a woman who used to get wrapped up in people, especially if that man acted like *the one*. You never know what you're going to get with a person, and taking that next step can be the scariest thing you can do.

Worrying I might fall into his persuasive eyes forever, I try to spring up quickly. Except, it's not as easy to untangle myself than I thought. Tightly wound around him, I fall back against him for a second time.

"Rowdy," I groan. "He's got us all tangled up."

I look away, but I feel his eyes staring at me, drinking in every part of me.

Choking on my breath, I give an awkward smile. When he doesn't return it, everything feels heavy. It also feels good. Really good.

Can he see the worry in my eyes?

"Here," he says, reaching for Rowdy's collar. "I'll help you."

"Wait," I say.

I didn't expect to stop him, but I push my hand around his wrist and tangle my fingers through his. My heart is still pounding as he pulls me closer. I can't believe this is happening, in front of so many people.

Our lips touch, and my eyes close. I feel my knees getting weak.

There's no use hiding it, though, not when it's easy for me to take my other hand and place it on his chest.

No men until Valentine's Day. That was my rule.

"Guess we both lost the bet," he says.

Oops.

Amanda walks up and clears her throat loudly. "Guys, I hate to interrupt your little mud wrestling competition, but class starts in less than twenty minutes. You might want to get changed."

Sammy points at her dad, laughing harder than ever before, which is saying something. "Daddy made a mess with Ms. Greenwald."

Sammy, no...

Marc undoes the leash, but there's no undoing what just happened. I broke an oath to myself by kissing Marc's sweet

lips.

I'm covered in mud, and I'm mortified. Not only did I not bring a change of clothes, but everyone is staring at us like we're indecent. I recognize some of the gawking faces from the school drop-off zone. This sucks.

Backing away from the situation, I look for an exit. I take Rowdy's leash from Marc, who lets go of my hand and braces himself against a nearby tree. Motioning for Amanda to follow, I head to the changing station near the entrance.

Marc wipes a glob of mud from his cheek and gives a shallow wave. "See you after school?"

I stop and turn, heart resuming its excited rhythm. "Only if you're waiting for me."

The more I try to run from this, the more entangled I'll get. There's no stopping this now.

All bets are off.

"Deal," he says.

ALI

Only if you're waiting for me?

What on Earth was I thinking?

The kiss, that was nice. The rest of it, horrendous.

With my day starting out with a splash, I grab a spare dress from Amanda, wipe off my face, and barely make it to class. Despite going through the motions with relative ease, I can't stop thinking about that kiss. It wasn't a simple kiss. It was intense, and it unlocked a deeper part of me. It also broke my free-fall.

Everything adds up into this package of obviousness, and now I can't stop beating myself up for acting so childish.

After a brutal timed math test, I give the kids a little break. They're pretty burnt out from a month of so many changes, so, despite my deep hatred for these Hallmark holidays, I'm offering a truce to St. Valentine.

That's right. I'm opening my mailbox for candy hearts, sweet suckers, and vows of adoration. But this comes with a warning. If he does me wrong, there won't be anything he can do.

I'll be gone.

"Okay, my little sweeties," I announce. "Tomorrow is Valentine's Day. Do you know what that means?"

Sammy darts up her hand. "Cooties!"

Damn straight, girl.

I bend forward, hands fastened to the patchwork skirt Amanda lent me. “No, silly. Cooties are not allowed. You hear that, boys?”

She giggles, fingers pressed to her face.

Someone else raises their hand, a young boy in the front row. “Candy,” he says.

“Yes, candy,” I say. “And?”

A girl near the back raises her hand. “A cute little mailbox with a bird on the top, with hearts that go all around the sky!”

I’ve got them riffing now. “Yes, Susie. Someone else take a shot.”

“Cupid with his bow,” someone shouts. “Naked!”

The entire class bursts out in uncontrollable laughter. A few of the boys exaggerate and fall out of their chairs.

“Okay, guys,” I say. “Simmer down. Back in your seats. Those are all good answers.”

Xander timidly raises his hand.

“Yes, Xander,” I say. “Do you want to share what Valentine’s Day is to you?”

Gentle, he lowers his arm. “A nice letter for a nice girl.”

Somehow, I think I know who that nice girl is.

Sammy twists in her seat, and eventually she raises her hand. “Ms. Greenwald. What if you don’t want any letters?”

Crap.

“We want everyone to be able to give and receive a letter,” I say. “So that other children don’t feel left out.”

Sammy stares at her desk. “Well, I don’t want any letters. I don’t want to go to Valentine’s Day.”

It’s like I’m staring into a mirror, except my reflection is a seven year old girl. I take a deep breath. “If you don’t want to participate, then you don’t have to. But feel free to write your own message to your classmates if you want to. You can just make a letterbox for yourself.”

Sammy looks in her peripheral before nodding. “Okay.”

After class, Sammy waits for me at the door. I pack my things and do a double-check to see if I left anything behind. The first thing I see is Sammy’s letterbox. It’s underneath her desk, and the corner is bent as if someone stepped on it.

I head toward her. “Ready to go?”

She nods, eyes facing the hallway.

“You want to grab your letterbox before you go?” I ask.

She stares at the ground, shaking her head.

I sigh, wondering what I should do. On one hand, this is what kids go through. On the other, maybe it’s something deeper. Is this because I kissed her dad?

“Sammy, I thought we were friends. What’s wrong?” I ask.

Without wanting to open up, she just shuts down. It’s like a light goes off. The door is shut, and I’ve been denied access.

She whips her hair over her shoulder. “We are friends. Can you take me home now?”

I come to her side. “Okay. Let’s go.”

The second car ride to Marc’s house is one met with a very uncomfortable silence. I keep grasping for topics to bring us closer, but she doesn’t seem at all interested in engaging. Rounding the corner into their neighborhood, I head toward the source of my newly felt butterflies. Still, I worry about losing a connection with his daughter.

Everything just feels a little off.

Pulling in their driveway, the garage door rolls open. Marc is holding Ragamuffin, stroking the pet’s long ears. A tight shirt hugs his chiseled torso, and his black slacks are tight in all the right areas. I try to focus my eyes on something else, but my pupils dart to him like a magnet.

This is the perfect picture. The single dad so many women find themselves daydreaming about. I have him right in front of me, but I’ve spent so much time pushing him away.

He gives a friendly wave and a wink, and I suddenly hear my voice again. *Only if you're waiting for me.* Ugh.

I wish I had never said that. It's so obvious that I want him now. I wish we could have a do-over. There's no *bet* anymore. Nothing to get in the way. Everything is out in the open, so what's stopping either of us from pouncing on top of each other?

I park the car and open Sammy's door, biting my tongue as she runs into the house without saying a word to Marc. He watches her and laughs like he expects this kind of behavior.

"She's not too thrilled about Valentine's Day," I say.

There's like six feet between us. I think of running again. Running away from what I'm feeling. But I can't run now.

He nods. "She's like his every year," he tells me. "You want to come inside, or..."

The sound of my heart resounds in my ears. "I don't want to run again, if that's what you mean."

Marc's award winning smile invites me to take the necessary steps toward him, but the hug I give him is awkward, and he seems a little tense.

"Do you need to talk to Sammy?" I ask. "I can wait outside."

"Trust me. It's not worth pressing right now," he says.

Nodding along, I look at him with affection, but am still somewhat hesitant.

When I enter his house for a second time, an air of comfortability starts to sink in. I've been here before. It's less foreign. But in the back of my mind is the fact that I still haven't gotten to know him. All that quickly gets erased when my nose detects a delicious scent.

"Mm, what is that?" I ask.

"My peace offering."

I follow him through the kitchen, and once again, my eyes is drawn to the bookshelf in the family room. Those books are some of my all time favorites. Sammy would probably love

them. It doesn't seem like I'm going to start my job today. Is this job thing even real?

Clearly, I can see why any girl might hate this Hallmark holiday of high expectations surrounding love. It's stressful, unnecessary, and if you don't find someone to share it with, it feels downright evil. Then again, she's a little young to care about it this much. "Does she hate other holidays?" I ask.

"Queen Samantha?" he asks.

Covering my mouth, I laugh and peer out to the living room to see if she heard.

"Don't worry. She can't hear us. She's in her room, far down the hall," he says, pausing for a moment to search for two oven gloves.

"She likes the other holidays," he mutters. "This one is a sore subject."

I look away, biting my top lip. "Any reason? I was hoping I could start to get to know her."

Marc eyes me for a moment, considering my question. He goes to one of the cabinets, rummaging for something. "She had a bad experience one time."

It sounds like he's avoiding something.

"Should I talk to her?" I ask.

Shoulders bending, he shuts the cabinet. "I've got it."

It's not forceful, but it doesn't need to be. I get the point. Whatever Sammy is going through is a little bigger than some crush. Whatever it is, Marc doesn't seem ready to talk to me about it.

Avoiding conflict, my eyes follow the scent toward the oven, where a timer sits. Five minutes and counting. That gives me time to stand in the exotic room, to close my eyes and breathe in the ancient book smell. As soon as I do, a wave of nostalgia washes over me. When I was a girl, I invested so much time in these stories that I thought I might actually become one of the characters.

Everything changed after I finished my studies and attended University. I was taught to act with practicality. Finding a job was the goal, and to do that, I had to specialize my time. I couldn't spend my hours fantasizing about stories with unrealistic outcomes.

My own story is changing. As unrealistic as this is, I'm in the house of a billionaire, and I'm pretty sure he's into me. This is something that might happen in one of his books, not real life.

The kitchen sits like a void in the space behind me. There, in the glowing domain, Marc presents a plate of brittle chocolate. I can see why he uses this as a peace offering.

"Sea salt chocolate with peanut butter filling?"

Am I drooling?

My arms reach for a piece on their own. "There's always something with you," I say.

He sets the plate on the counter. As soon as I take a bite, I melt onto the floor.

"That bad?" he asks, taking a bite himself.

"You're a genius," I say.

He smiles, clearly happy with himself. "I *am* a genius, aren't I?"

Peering up at him, he seems about ten times hotter than I last saw him. It's like the chocolate and the peanut butter has molded into my attraction towards him, making him feel almost irresistible.

"Why on Earth are you in the magazine business when you could be a chef?" I ask.

A horned smirk reminds me that I'm not supposed to know what he does yet. I haven't asked him, but Amanda made sure to give me the tip. "Who told you I was in the magazine business?"

It's better to be honest than to hold information back. "Amanda," I say. "She told me after Rowdy crashed into you."

Guess I'm not being totally honest.

He chuckles, stuffing another piece of chocolate in his mouth. The urge to stick my neck out and kiss his lips grows stronger. “Oh, yeah?” he asks.

I gulp and shut my eyes when the sound comes out louder than intended. “Yeah.”

His smirk disappears as soon as he nods toward a section of the house I’ve yet to enter. “You want to see my set up?”

“Sure,” I say, not sure what I’m agreeing to.

A long hallway divides the front room from the open living area. I peek at the second door on the right and see Sammy in bed, sleeping. Marc gives a smile and pushes his forefinger against his lips.

Rustling his fingers inside his pockets, he takes out a single key and unlocks the door. I’m a little weirded out, but after seeing rows of expensive camera equipment, it makes sense why he keeps the room locked.

“Most of these are vintage. Got them in art school in the nineties,” he says.

I was just a little girl in the nineties. The *late* nineties. “You went to art school?”

I’m a little shocked. Artists aren’t supposed to become billionaires. They’re supposed to rail against the system and live in poverty, drinking absinthe.

“Is that impossible to believe a suit like me was once a wide-eyed photography major with huge dreams?”

A camera resting on a tripod sits in the center of the room, pointed at a yellow backdrop. I walk up to it. The camera looks like it was made in a different generation, and I instantly think of how much it cost.

“A little bit,” I mutter.

Leaned against the back wall are stacks of photographs. As I near them, I see they’re of Sammy. In one, she is just a baby. A woman kisses her. Stepping closer and seeing it in more detail, I have no doubt the woman is her mother. She’s beautiful. I look away before Marc catches me.

He meanders past me, reaching down into a different stack. Searching through the many layers, he finds the one he wants. "Take a gander," he says, handing me the picture.

At first, I don't recognize the person in the shot. It's a young man with long and wavy brown hair. He looks like he might be in his early twenties. Maybe younger. He's wearing tattered baggy pants with an oversized tank top. A dunce hat rests on his head. The laughter from his friends in the foreground provides the warmth. But it's really his optimistic eyes that carry the shot. Everyone is looking at him.

I look up at him. "What is this?"

"This was my first shoot," he says. "I was eighteen."

I hold the photo up near his face and squint, biting my tongue. "Hm. You look different."

"I'm old and nearing my forties," he says.

I lean against the doorframe. He's like thirty-five. In any case, he looks young and in shape. "Fishing for compliments, I see."

Laughing, he pushes closer. "I like it when you compliment me."

Pulse driving to an unstoppable rhythm, I drop the photograph. I don't break eye contact. If this is a new game we're playing, I think I like it. "You haven't complimented me, yet."

His eyes start to drift close. "Every time I see you, you look stunning."

Mine follow suit. There's no more talking. His hands glide around my waist, locking behind my back. I tighten my hold on the frame to keep myself from losing it. His body presses against mine.

I slide my arms around his neck and feel my smile get the best of me. "Took you long enough," I say.

He nudges his forehead against mine, lips forming over mine for a second kiss. He tastes so good, and the feeling is so natural that it makes me crave him more. I kiss him a third time before it makes sense to stop.

When it ends, I clear my throat and step away. I feel a blush coming on, so I follow up by rounding the room. “That was much nicer than earlier at the dog park,” I say.

“I think we both won the award for most awkward kiss in the world,” he says.

I’m trying not to bite the edge of my lip off. “Yeah, but it’s fitting, given the circumstances of our first encounter.”

“Right. Our stupid bet,” he says. “You were always destined to lose.”

Wait. What?

I suspend my tongue against my mouth. “Did you just say what I think you said?”

He brings himself forward, so close that his thigh brushes against mine. Throat tight with emotion, I breathe, but it just feels like fire. And as I bring my eyelids down, I feel the flames of desire burn.

This is so bad. He could take me right now, and I wouldn’t stop him.

Cocking my head, I breathe him in and open my lips. Cologne and chocolate. It changes something inside me.

His lips meet mine, rounding out our total to an even number.

“You smell like a good night,” I say.

To my surprise, I don’t hear his laughter. When I reopen my eyes, I hear the click of a camera. A bright flash of light shoots throughout the room. Before I lose sight, I see Sammy with one of Marc’s many cameras.

“Cheese!” she exclaims.

MARC

“Sammy!” I exclaim.

I’m more surprised than angry at her intrusion.

My daughter tucks the camera into its respective place, but she’s out of the room in less than a second. She’s agitated, and in an unforgiving mood. Just because she’s a kid doesn’t mean she packs a light punch.

Sensing a big blow-up coming on, I follow her to the room and sit on the edge of the bed. She’s already under her covers, pretending she’s asleep.

I glide my hand over her back, and sigh when she flinches. “You aren’t very happy with me, are you?”

Cold, uncomfortable silence.

“Talk to me,” I say.

She puffs out, sighs, and faces me, defiant. “I don’t want to.”

I know what’s wrong, but I can’t be the one to coax it out of her. If she wants to talk, she knows I’m here. “Okay,” I say. “I’ll let you sleep then.”

As I stand, I witness Ali’s shadow disappear down the hall. I pause and turn off the light, leaving her favorite Hello Kitty light on. “Oh, and be nice to Ali,” I tell her. “She really likes you, and I think she brings a good energy into this home. You and I both need that, don’t you think?”

The response I get is not the one I expected. “She’s not mom.”

Tense, my tongue digs into the roof of my mouth. “Your mom was a very special woman. Tomorrow morning, we’ll celebrate her.”

“Promise?”

I twist my pinky with hers and kiss her. “Pinky swear.”

“Goodnight, dad,” she says.

“Goodnight, sweetie.”

I take a few seconds to adjust. I don’t want Ali to see me stressed. Before Sammy came into my life, back when I was living the bachelor life, raising a kid seemed unfathomable to me. Learning to deal with my situation has made me stronger, but there are moments where I feel like breaking down. Ali doesn’t know this, but today is one of those days.

Exiting the room, I find Ali on the couch in the living room. Rowdy is sleeping near her feet, snoring. I get the hint that this is her favorite spot in the house, so I plop down next to her, our heads still angled awkwardly towards each other but our bodies perpendicular.

“You good?” Ali asks.

“Yeah,” I say, suddenly anxious to get this conversation going. I’ve been meaning to bring it up ever since she arrived. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sure,” she says, curiously examining my face.

My sister’s death doesn’t need to be re-litigated, but I owe it to Ali to be honest about what Sammy went through years ago. It hasn’t been a walk in the park. In fact, there are moments where it feels damn near impossible. Our family is open, but complex. I haven’t met too many people who empathize. Everyone usually just wants to move on from the subject.

My sister was an addict. She wasn’t always on substances, but she was *most* of the time. The addiction worked in cycles. One year, she’s clean. Totally healthy. The next, she’s on the street, looking for her next fix. Hiding out in houses that didn’t belong to her. Hanging out with people who didn’t care about her or her happiness.

In the world I come from, people judge you for your family. Something I learned at a very young age was that people make things up to push a narrative. To destroy someone's character. My sister was a good person, but she was hung out to dry by her community. And the fact is, I just wasn't as available as I should have been. I chose a different path.

It still doesn't feel worth it.

Staring at the ceiling, I try to find the right words. "It's not easy to say."

She turns to face me. "Look, Marc," she says, "if this is too much, I can go home."

But something takes over, pushing the fear out of me. I take her hand, and I squeeze. Maybe it's a release from the pressure of holding in the truth. I haven't been with too many women I felt like I could talk to, but Ali doesn't hold grudges. Not for that long, anyway. She's just got some walls I need to break down. We all do. That won't be hard.

"What if I don't want to see you go?" I ask.

Peering down at our intertwined fingers, a soft smile caresses her face. She lowers our hands to her lap and squeezes back harder. "Then I won't go."

"You've got class tomorrow," I say. "You sure?"

She glances at her slumbering dog. "It's good that your house is closer," she says, rounding off her words with a click from her tongue. "I'm sure."

A smile betrays my stoic exterior. This came together easier than I thought. The only difficulty now is my growing appreciation for her.

When I'm near her, my stomach flutters. Her perfume is familiar now, a comfort of our home. With every breath, I try to get closer to her. This never used to happen. I was always so confident. What is happening to me? I'm melting for a girl I hardly know. I've heard this happens, from time to time.

"So," she says, fingers coiled against mine, "tell me what's on your mind."

My excitement drops a few bars.

This is such a downer conversation. I'd rather save it for a rainy day. Suddenly, I hear my team leader Sandra's voice. *You have to tell her.* I'm used to avoiding that voice. Of course, it's right. I need to tell her everything.

I open my hand and straighten my back against the couch. "It's about Sammy," I say.

"I figured."

My jaw already feels stiff. I breathe like I'm about to jump off the tallest building. "I should just come out and say it. She's not my daughter," I say. Realizing how misleading that sounds, I follow it up with, "Biologically."

Ali follows my words. Her lips part as soon as I'm finished, confusion taking over. "You adopted her," she says. It feels more like a question than a statement.

The room feels hot. My heart pounds against my sternum. Sweat is building on my forehead. Why is this so fucking hard?

I recall that night, bitterly. It was a celebratory night that ended in tragedy.

"Years ago, I was at my first company's party. Big celebration with streamers, as much champagne as the employees could drink, and fireworks that shot off the roof. Illegal, of course. But we didn't care. We were a small company that grew the size of the world in a matter of hours. We were celebrating our first billion." I frown, so she can get a sense it's not something I think back on with pride.

The corners of her eyes tilt. I'm ruining the night by telling her this, but my feelings come second to my daughter.

I keep talking. "The party lasted hours, we were all pretty drunk. Some of us went out to the plaza to take a group picture. And then I got a phone call," I say, pausing. "It was my sister. She was in trouble again. There was always something going on with her. This time, she needed some money for something she claimed was going to make her feel

better. Medicine. I knew it was drugs, so I told her off in the harshest way possible.”

I take another pause. How much do I want to reveal to her? Do I want to tell her I screamed into the receiver and told her to never fucking talk to me again?

Reflecting on those moments makes me hate myself. Friends told me they would’ve reacted similarly. It was twelve years of addiction, then a kid, and then the bailouts from jail started to really stack. But you can’t just throw away family. My parents weren’t in the picture anymore. Not for her. It was just me. In the end, I couldn’t keep my temper down. Not even for my little sister.

When I start back up, I’m pretty numb. “She asked me again. Maybe ten more times. I kept denying her. It was the first time I ever really ended on a *no*.”

I laugh, stunned. Not because it’s funny. It comes out of frustration and disbelief. That happened so long ago, but it feels like fucking yesterday.

The heaviness doesn’t always hit me. I’ve recanted this story so many times it’s become something of a fiction. Sometimes, it feels like it never really happened. But there are moments of real emotion that hit me randomly. That’s when I’m taken back.

With more care in her eyes than I deserve, she slides her hand across my bicep. “It’s okay,” she says.

“The next day, they found her. Someone tipped off the cops. She got her money, and then she left her daughter behind,” I say. “Two days later, I picked her up. That was Valentine’s Day.”

Without pausing, she slides her arms around me, her mouth near my neck. Her breath is hot against my skin, and she smells so unbelievably good. This is supposed to be a hard admission, but she’s making it so much easier.

She pulls back and says, “I’m so sorry, Marc. I didn’t know.”

“I don’t often tell people that story,” I say.

“I want to help you in any way I can,” she states.

Seeing the empathy shine in her eyes just makes me feel worse. “That’s the thing. I don’t need help,” I say. “I just need you to know that, sometimes, it’s not so easy. There’s real shit in this family. It’s not a Disney movie.”

“I expect you to be real, Marc. You can’t pick your family,” she says. “And you’re doing all you can for Sammy. She’s your daughter now.”

I feel like Ali understands. I can trust her. This feeling, it’s new to me. It reminds me there are people out there who aren’t focused on the bullshit. It’s still okay to be human.

She shakes her head, looking a hell of a lot more poised than I thought she’d be. This is the kind of stuff that scares people away. “It’s not the end of your story,” she says. “It’s just another chapter. For all of us.”

I raise a brow. “Us...”

Out of nowhere, she swivels her butt and twists to lay her back against half of my chest. Gazing up at me, she exhales. “My dad,” she says. “He had many hard moments. I found him drunk in every place imaginable. At the bar, the bushes in the front yard, underneath the car in our garage...”

She bursts out laughing. I respond with a tight chuckle before drawing it back in. It’s not funny, but it feels good to have someone this understanding by my side.

Our eyes lock.

She breaks the silence with another warm smile. “You’re not going to scare me off, Marc,” she says. “Believe it or not, I’m real. I’ve lived some things too. Maybe, we just have to take that next step into the unknown. You know, do what makes us feel good. Maybe we should step into something so unimaginable it changes us forever.”

Her chest is pumping. I can’t stop staring at her, imagining what it might feel like to have her. All of her.

I close my eyes and fold my hands around her waist, bringing my head forward. Our foreheads meet, and our noses do a

dance before I close my lips around hers. The taste of her mouth is intoxicating, and my heart pounds hard against my ribcage as my tongue moves back in anticipation of another move.

I pull her closer.

My hands drag up the side of her ribs, muscles tightening in response. Her fingers graze my jaw and cup the side of my neck. I hold her body tight to mine as I inhale her kiss.

She gives a quick laugh and clears her throat. “You’re a pleasant surprise, Marc Wylan.”

“I’m going to try and keep it that way,” I say.

We kiss again, this time slower. Much sweeter. I caress the back of her head and feel the urge to push forward. But I don’t.

On any other night, I’d take this further. But tonight isn’t that night.

There’s a list of things I’d rather do than damper the mood, but this was much needed. I’ve been working on *normal* ever since we arrived here. And Ali is deeper than I ever imagined. She’s a reservoir of love and understanding, vulnerability and kindness. But the main thing is that she understands us. A lot more than I ever believed she could.

We spend the night wrapped around each other, sharing the couch in many positions, talking and laughing as we listen to old records and half-watch classic movies. We get a little intoxicated. A few beers lead to a few more.

Rounding two in the morning, we both start to drift in and out of sleep. Empty bottles cover the kitchen table. I carry her into one of the guest rooms and relegate myself to the door. Before I can say goodnight, she’s already past out, snoring.

She’s so cute.

She could really be the one.

But all I can think about is how much she’s going to hate me after this party.

No, this is never going to last. It never does.

ALI

“This is your hotel wake-up call! Wakey-wakey, eggs and bakey!”

My eyes peel open, dry as sandpaper. The back of my throat feels raw, like I’ve been screaming. Is that pounding feeling in my head real or imaginary?

“I’m awake,” I groan.

It’s not convincing.

The sound of Sammy’s high-pitched voice punctures the stillness of my dreams. Before I can react, she’s launched herself on top of me. I scream in surprise, bolting out of the covers.

Marc stands in the hall, sporting a tangled mat of hair and maroon bathrobe, silk. He waves, smile resembling a winding river. *Woof*. “Morning.”

“Do you hate mornings as much as I do?” I ask.

“You have no idea,” he says.

Sammy lets out a high-pitched squeal and cowers under the covers as he walks into the room. “Apologies for the brutal assault. She’s crazy in the morning.”

“I am not crazy,” Sammy yells.

Sammy fights back with a kick. Marc catches her foot, but the second one comes in too fast. Her heel connects against his crotch.

“Aghh!”

Before this moment, I had never seen a man's eyes bug out of his head. It's an interesting thing to witness.

Marc stumbles, pushing his entire body against the doorway. "Sammy, you're in big trouble," he squeaks.

"No, I'm not," she giggles, just a huge bubble of laughter and chaotic energy.

She runs right through his legs into the kitchen. My ears perk as I hear her feet clap against the tile. And then I hear one big bark. Rowdy screams for his life before bolting into the guest room and onto my bed.

His paws hit my chest with a thud. "Some wake-up call, huh?"

Rowdy's tail sinks under his butt.

Last night was emotionally intense. But if this start is any indication as to how this day might go, today's going to be, *well*, rowdy.

Nearly back to his old self, Marc stands and exhales. "That's not what I wanted you to see first thing in the morning," he says.

I recall my ex-boyfriend's room. There were piles of clothes stacked like piles of wood. From the floor to the ceiling. He insisted on keeping a framed picture of him kissing the model from his favorite magazine, *Daily Sport*. Whenever I felt the energy to make some coffee in the kitchen, the sink was full of dirty dishes.

I'm *so* glad that's over.

"I've seen worse," I mutter.

Waving my yawn away, I head through the door. He doesn't have to reach for a kiss. Standing on my tippy-toes, I just give it to him. A simple peck on the lips.

"Got a spare toothbrush?" I ask.

He moves at an angle and points to his room. "Use my bathroom. Top drawer, second row. I set a towel out if you want to shower. Sorry I don't have a change of clothes."

"No problem."

I check the time. We still have a few hours until we have to get going to school. The sizzling scent of bacon snaps me away from my responsibilities.

“I’m making breakfast, by the way. Coffee’s percolating,” he says, charming wink included.

I breathe, nostrils widening to take in more scrumptious scents. “I’ll be out in ten,” I say.

When I step into his room, I make a conscious effort not to be too nosy. Granted, there’s not really much to see. It’s immaculate. The bed is made. The floor looks like it was just cleaned. How is there no dust on the top of the TV?

He can’t be the perfect man. That guy doesn’t really exist. As I push the sliding door to his bathroom open, I hope I’m wrong. Can I call a bathroom sexy? Well, his sure is.

This bathroom is nicer than the one I’ve been using in the hall, that’s for sure. The toilet is one of those European bidets. Dare I try it?

After drying off, I use a very effective blow dryer to give my hair some much needed shine and volume. I gather all my things, a small makeup kit, my favorite mascara, and other beauty products I carry around but hardly ever use. Leaning against the sink, I look at my reflection and smile. I feel ready for anything, but I’m really thinking about Marc now.

What makes him tick? What does he like? What does he even do for fun, anyway?

These are questions I’m asking myself as I brush mascara across my eyelashes. Some added contour, something I usually skip over. Adding some lipstick, I kiss at the mirror and almost immediately blush. It’s been a long time since I felt like I had to act sexy. It’s going to take some getting used to.

Gold hoops add a little spice. A green emerald necklace gives me some mystery. Heart stockings bring the perfect amount of sparkle to accentuate my dress. The more things I add, the more confident I feel.

Shooting a glance at the locked bathroom door, I lower the towel. Right to the floor. I let it linger around my ankles before

taking another step back to see *me*. All of me.

When I stare at my body, I don't necessary feel sexy. I've gotten a little thick around the edges, but mostly, I'm my usual, average self. At first glance, I feel like running and hiding in a different outfit. Guys don't want the usual. They want the shiny version.

I suck in my stomach and turn, accenting my butt by bending at an angle. I actually start to get into it, feeling myself out. Feeling really sexy. I'm bent in the most uncomfortable position imaginable, but if this is what men want, I'm going to do it.

Standing for a moment, I dim the lights. I imagine Marc entering the room, his hands bringing his warmth across my skin. I smile as his hand grasps my hip, pushing me against his pelvis, twisting his fingers against mine. I see his eyes, and can't resist him.

A quick knock comes from the hallway. "Ali, your plate of food is coming up next," Marc calls out. "Five minutes."

Anxious and shocked to my core, I slip, ass landing right on the tile floor. The pain reverberates through up my spine. "Almost ready," I croak.

"Take your time."

Ouch. My beautiful ass.

Quick check in the mirror. Another kiss to make myself feel more confident. Deep breath. I throw my clothes on and get the hell out of his perfect bathroom.

My heels hit the tile, and all eyes turn to me.

Marc's eyes go big, and he stammers through his words. A perfectly cracked egg dangles between two fingers. The yolk plops in the center of the pan. "Wow... You look absolutely stunning."

The shiny version.

"Just a little makeup for Valentine's Day," I say. "Nothing too special."

Downplay it to look even shinier.

He blinks three times. "I'm about to get down on one knee," he jokes.

I look down and blush. "Thank you."

Sitting at the table, Sammy eats her breakfast. She's wearing a red corduroy overall dress with a matching beret. She looks adorable. Hopefully her mood stays in the green.

Glancing at the bacon grease stains on his white undershirt, he grabs a wet towel and starts to nudge at it. "I didn't know everyone was dressing up today."

Sammy zooms past me to her room. "Backpack!"

I lower my voice. "How is she?" I ask

He looks back, a little uneasy as he hands me a cup of coffee and hot plate of eggs, bacon, and toast. "So far, so good," he says. "It can change at any moment, though. If she acts out, send her outside for a few minutes. That usually does the trick. I had a talk with her this morning. She knows not to act up."

Blowing the steam off the top of my coffee mug, I hang my lips over the edge and impatiently sip. I burn my tongue, but it's worth it. The coffee is really good. Glancing at the bag, I see expensive packaging, gold lettering punched in from a vintage typewriter. The name is foreign and hard to pronounce.

"In any case, I'm keeping it low pressure. It's a half-day. We're going to watch a Peanuts cartoon, while we give out our letters."

Marc scrunches his nose. "Charlie Brown?"

Charlie Brown was one of my favorite cartoons growing up. Don't ask why. "Hey, what's wrong with good ol' Charlie?" I ask.

"What year is it again?"

"Okay, cool guy. What would you suggest we watch?" I ask.

"The Sandlot," he says. "That was my favorite movie growing up."

It makes me laugh a little because I totally forgot about that movie. “What a reference.”

“The nerd got his kiss at the end,” he says. “I always loved that.”

I squint, balancing my tongue between my front teeth. He was pretty nerdy in the picture he showed me yesterday, but it’s hard to picture him that way now. “Didn’t he pretend to drown in order to get that kiss?”

He smirks. “Not a terrible plan.”

“Does that mean you’re aching for a kiss from me?” I ask.

“Only if I can keep living to see you walk through that door today,” he says.

Another date tonight? It comes out of the blue. Of course, I was hoping he’d ask. It is Valentine’s Day, after all.

He comes up close, bringing his kissable lips to me, and I get a whiff of his cologne. Coupled with the rich aroma of food and coffee, this feels like heaven. He kisses me, and it doesn’t even feel out of place. It just feels right. So right, I can hardly believe it.

“Mm,” he moans.

“That was nice. I think I’ll keep you alive,” I joke.

I open my eyes and see his handsome face. He just shaved, and his smile is as bright as the morning sun outside the window. Not wanting to be rude, I turn back to my huge plate of food.

I take a bite of eggs, digging my fork into the heart of the yolk. The yellow liquid spreads across the plate, covering the edge of artisan toast.

Marc watches me as I take a bite of bread. It’s incredible, as always. The bacon tastes even better. “Good?” he asks.

With half of my plate already eaten, I’m trying not to inhale the rest of my food. “I’m telling you. Quit the magazine business. Become a chef,” I say, mouth full.

“I enjoy food too much. If it became my job, I’d end up hating it,” he says.

Food, money, and a great family. *Fuck*. This is such a dangerous combination of things.

I shrug. “Weird. I love my job,” I say.

He chuckles and moves as Sammy rudely pushes between us. “You’re a better person than I am. One kid feels like enough.”

Hm.

I don’t dwell on that statement for too long, but it makes me wonder if Sammy is the end of his fatherly journey. I’m not a terribly organized person, but I’ve got a pretty workable map of the future in my back pocket. I’ve always imagined I’d be a mother of my own child someday.

Obviously, this isn’t the right time to think about it. This is basically our first date. It’s not a good time to be thinking about a marriage proposal either, but it’s come into my head a few times.

Sammy must sense my thoughts because she interrupts the silence with another bombastic announcement. “Lords and Ladies. Gentlemen and gentlewomen. Hearie, hearie!”

Rowdy peeks his head out of the room before ducking back inside.

Marc interrupts. “Okay, we get it. On with the announcement.”

Sammy narrows her eyes and glares at her father. “I have an announcement,” she says. “Today is a special day. May your hearts be merry and full of chocolate!”

Smiling big, she looks back at her father who affectionately kisses the top of her head. She’s coping much better than yesterday, which is good. Sometimes, a good night’s sleep is all one needs. This holiday is such a menace to so many women, it’s a wonder how we’re still finding ways to get through it. But we are. And no matter what happens between Marc and I, I’ll always love Sammy.

“Are you ready to go to school with Ms. Greenwald?” Marc asks.

Sammy looks up at her father. Her excitement is starting to fade, and a noticeable worry has set in. “You’re not coming, daddy?”

Marc glances at me first before his daughter, a little bummed. He kneels to her level and exhales. “Sweetie, you know daddy would love to come to school with you. Especially today,” he says. “But they don’t let grown-ups in the building.”

“Yeah, they do. Erica’s mom came to class once,” she says.

“That was Dr. Seuss day,” Marc says. “She read Green Eggs and Ham, remember? I was there, too.”

I come in with the necessary back up. “The rules are so strict there. They only let little girls in with magical powers,” I say, lowering my voice to a whisper. “Daddies don’t have powers. But little daughters do.”

Marc’s looking at me, inquisitively. I shrug and drag my lips down, just rolling with the idea. I’m not a mom. I’ve never changed a diaper. But I do pretty well around my students.

Leave all the diaper changing for the men.

“We do?” Sammy asks.

I nod. “That’s right. But we have to learn how to control our magic before we use it to help the greater good.”

Sammy takes my hand and jumps. “Will you teach me, Ms. Greenwald? Please?”

Chuckling, I lead her toward the front door.

Marc makes sure she has her backpack on before heading out the door. Sammy pounces toward the sidewalk. But before I can run ahead with Sammy, he takes my hand and pulls me close.

“You’re amazing,” he says. “And I don’t mean that in a scare you off sort of way. It was just a nice night.”

“And morning,” I say. “And this afternoon will be fun. Got anything planned?”

He pushes his lips out, hiding a smile. “I guess you’ll find out in a few hours.”

“No fair,” I say. “The suspense is killing me.”

Rowdy pushes across my leg and sits on my feet, happy that Sammy isn't tormenting him. “Take care of him, will you?” I ask.

Marc looks down at the old mutt and gives a look. “Can I just leave him here with Ragamuffin?”

A sharp whine resounds behind us. We both glance inside the hall. Ragamuffin is in the corner. She starts growling, showing her sharp canines. She looks like an absolute monster.

A cute monster.

“On second thought, I think I'll bring Rowdy to the office,” he says. “The staff will love him. Farts and all.”

Marc always finds a way to make me laugh, but my endorphins are helping every step of the way. There is just something uplifting about his smile, and his wholesome eyes keep me grounded. I keep forgetting who this man is, what he does for a living, and how nice his life is. Our past history aside, he's just someone who makes me happy.

Sometimes, falling for someone is as simple as that.

“I'll see you later,” I say.

He pulls me in for a quick kiss. I turn my head to look for Sammy, and he's already back in to kiss my cheek. One, two, three kisses.

Sammy is nearing the stop sign at the end of the block. “Last one there is a rotten egg!”

He keeps pulling me in for kisses.

“Marc, I have to get to your daughter,” I grunt. “You heard her. If I don't get there fast, I'll be a rotten egg.”

He lets go, placing his hands in the air near his chest. “We don't want that.”

Backing away from the door, I grin. Then, I run ahead and catch up with Sammy. Today is going to be a great day.

I just know it.

MARC

Today is going to be the hardest day of my life. I just know it. Why? Because I'm the idiot who is head-over-heels for a woman I still don't entirely know.

It's crazy.

Fucking insane.

A massive risk.

I have a rule with women. If she makes your world feel like it's about to fall apart, she's worth taking a second look at. Sometimes, that can lead to some disastrous outcomes. I'm more optimistic about my chances with this one.

Problem is, I've put all my chips on her. And tonight is a special night. After Sammy goes to sleep, I'm taking her on an adventure. Somewhere that will hopefully remind her just how special she is.

As I drive across town, I narrowly miss traffic. Rowdy butts his head through the middle of my Mercedes. Hair is flying everywhere, his drool is getting all over the leather upholstery, and he kind of stinks. Agreeing to watching him was another stupid idea.

I'm just loopy for this woman. But in the twenty or so years of dating women of all kinds, that dizzying, exciting feeling always went away. This feels different. If I have to ruin my car with a big stinky dog, I'll do it for her.

I pull us into the parking garage. From the back, Rowdy jumps into the front seat and places a paw on my chest. He issues a

soft whine.

“Treat?” I ask.

Digging through the center compartment, I find a bag of treats I bought for Ragamuffin, the bane of my existence. This dog is at least well behaved. Who would’ve thought?

“All right. Outside, and you eat,” I say.

Stepping out of the car, I come to the side door with his leash and treat in hand. I open the door and leash him up before teasing him with a tantalizing treat.

“You hungry?”

Rowdy’s entire body lights up, tail wagging and smacking the ground. He lifts his head, licks my hand, and sinks his mouth over my entire hand. When he pulls back, the only thing that’s still there is a layer of slime.

“I didn’t say you could eat my whole hand,” I tell him, shaking some of the dog saliva onto the concrete.

Ali’s dog stares at me lovingly, always breathing like he’s just ran a mile. I can’t stay mad at something so cute. I can, however, hand-sanitize before I get through those doors and have to shake some hands.

Inside my building, I’m seeing funny looks, questionable expressions, and what I first assume are mean comments about my hair. They’re not. They’re about Rowdy. He looks like a total beast, but he’s a pretty nice dog at his core.

“Be nice,” I shout. “He’s only a dog.”

Laughter echoes across the first floor. I step into an open elevator and lean against the wall, looking out through the glass as we rise over the city. There are two other women here, some staffers I can’t remember the names of. As soon as they see Rowdy, their hearts melt, and my moment of peace is over.

I recognize the tall blonde to my right. Brian once tried to date her. It ended with him groveling. Ten voicemails later, she told him to *F-off*.

“Oh, my gosh,” she coos. “He is so stinkin’ cute. When did you get him?”

“The dog’s not mine,” I say.

The other woman is a shorter brunette. I’ve never seen her in my life. “What a good boy,” she says, bending to pet the back of Rowdy’s head.

“Does he do any tricks?” Blonde asks.

Yeah. If he’s hungry enough, he can make your whole hand disappear.

I glance at the women in the elevator. “Like I said, he’s not mine.”

Disappointed faces. I’m used to seeing them around here.

The bell above rings as I reach my floor. When the door opens, I see Brian sitting in his office, throwing a tennis ball at the wall. However, Sandra is like a hawk. She swoops in my direct line, ready to intercept me with more work than I care to do on a holiday.

All I want to do is sit and think about Ali. If I can’t do that, then I want to talk about her to everyone in the room. It’s weird and maybe a little pathetic, but I can’t change how I feel.

“You’re late,” she says.

I keep walking, eyes on Brian’s office. “Oh, yeah?”

Her eyes drop to Rowdy. “Another dog?”

How many times am I going to have to tell people? “It’s not my dog.”

“You know, women won’t sleep with you just because you have a dog,” she says.

Repeat after me. “It’s not my dog.”

She’s keeps up with me. “You have voicemails,” she says.

I’m so close to Brian’s office. “That’s nice,” I say.

Gaining ground, Brian looks up and waves. Rowdy does the exact opposite. Finding something delicious smelling on the

floor, he digs his nose into the carpet and starts to paw.

Panting, Sandra grabs the back of my jacket. “You know, you should bring your dog more often. It really gives us a chance to go over the important stuff.”

“Let me guess. Jim called. He wants to make sure the big unveiling is still on,” I say.

She’s not impressed by my forecasting skills. “Is the model coming or not, Marc?”

I hear another door shut behind me. Cocking my head, I see Brian. A camera hangs around his neck. His hands are fastened to his hips.

“Where have you been? It’s been a full week since I’ve had any work,” Brian says.

It’s a full on assault.

My heart starts to pound. “Ali wants to come to the unveiling, yeah.”

Sandra looks at me like I just sprouted an extra head. “And this is a problem, why?”

With my two confidants surrounding me, I make my way through the hall until I get to my office. “I didn’t say it was a problem. Did I?”

It’s a problem. A big problem.

“You’re acting weird again,” Sandra says.

“What else is new?” Brian responds.

I meander around the chairs and sit in my own little office throne. Leaning back, I breathe in the stale office air and imagine I’m smelling Ali’s perfume while I touch her waist and hold her thighs for dear life.

“We need to talk party details,” Sandra says.

Maybe I’ll make a mood board of all the things I’d like to do to Ali instead.

Unable to read my thoughts, Sandra continues. “I’ve got a big shipment of balloons, confetti, streamers, sprinkles, sprinklers,

sprinklers that sprinkle sprinkles...”

Sandra goes on and on, but I’m not listening to a word of it. She’s been in charge of handling nearly everything for the last six years. I trust her. There’s no way she’s going to do this poorly. Problem is, I don’t want to go. I think I understand Sammy now.

Sandra claps, startling me. “C’mon, Marc. Wake up. Are you even listening?”

“The most beautiful legs,” I whisper, dreaming of Ali’s smooth calves and taut skin.

Sandra snaps in front of my face and addresses Brian when I don’t respond. “He’s practically catatonic.”

“He’s certifiable,” Brian says. “Send him to the institution.”

I’ve got hearts in my eyes, wings on my back, and a stack of love quivers to shoot with my bow. “I’m fine,” I say.

I’m not fine. I’m fucked. Ali wants to go to the party, but it’s a bad idea. Jim will only hound her to death. Worst of all, she’ll find out I intended on using her for the five-page spread. It wouldn’t be such a big deal if she was my wife. But she’s someone I just started seeing. I’ve got a feeling she’s going to flip.

Brian places the back of his hand against my forehead. “Temperature is elevated. He’s in love,” he says.

“Or he’s sick,” Sandra says. “That would explain his poor decision making.”

They’re both standing over me, looking down at me like I’m some mental patient. I stand and break up their little council. “I’m not insane, and I’m not sick,” I announce.

Hearie, hearie.

I continue. “I am just a little freaked out,” I admit. “And I’d rather not have to entertain a party of over eight hundred guests. It feels like Christmas just happened.”

Rowdy barks so loud everyone in the office turns to look at the window. I wave and give an awkward smile.

Sandra leans on one heel. “You cannot skip out on this. Not this time,” she says.

“Why not?”

“Jim isn’t concerned about the magazine. He’s concerned about the entire company,” she says. “Sales are down. Not to mention, an economic downturn is coming, and we’ve done nothing to prepare for it. You need to make this right, or everyone in this building is shit out of luck.”

Bullshit. Sales are down this quarter. They’ll be up the next. People still need to be entertained in a recession, and our magazines fulfill that need. At any rate, this doesn’t even matter. I have all the money I’ll ever need. Staying in Jim’s good eyes is important, but it also feels like a vanity project.

I take a deep breath and ask her what I’ve wanted to ask everyone here for so long. “What is the point?”

Her lips hover her open mouth. “You’re asking me what the point of keeping a three billion dollar publication company solvent is,” she says, dumbfounded.

I straighten my back and crack my neck, leaning into my stupid question. “Who cares,” I mouth.

Maybe I should’ve went to school with Sammy, after all. I’m misbehaving and need a timeout.

Sandra throws up her hands before stampeding toward the door. “I’m done,” she says.

I lean against the wall and give my best puppy-dog eyes. That usually does the trick, though none of my superpowers seem to be working today. “Sandra...”

She holds it open, waving Brian and I out. “Seriously,” she says, pointing directly at the center of my forehead. “If you don’t help me get this thing set up today, I’m done. I’ll quit.”

She’s even mad at Brian. “Same to you, you weasel,” she growls.

“Hey, what did I do?” he asks.

“You’re friends with this moron,” she growls. “Now, here’s a list of last minute items that I desperately need you to grab at the store.”

I’m an errands boy now. Awesome.

Without wanting to anger her, I clear my face and turn serious. These people depend on me. If I can’t do this for myself, I’ll do it for my staff.

“I’ll get it done,” I say.

She shakes her head. “The shit I put up with around here.”

I nudge Rowdy forward with my boot. “Don’t forget to say bye to Rowdy,” I say.

Sandra bends to scratch Rowdy’s massive chin before leaving. “He’s such a good boy,” Sandra says. “Better than the one you bought your daughter.”

Brian and I exit the room, headed to the elevator. Everyone is looking at us. I wonder how much they heard.

I frown. “Have a good day, Sandra.”

As the elevator door closes, the last thing I see are her eyes rolling in the back of her head. She has a good reason to be mad at me. All of my motivation has been sucked out of me.

I can feel Brian’s eyes weighing on me. “Shamed,” he says.

“Come again?”

“We were shamed,” he repeats.

I shrug. He squeezes my shoulder and pats me hard enough to push me against the glass wall. “What was that for?” I ask.

Leaning forward, he presses a button. The elevator stops, loudly screeching and moving inches in both directions.

“Sandra’s right, man. You’re not acting like yourself. So, let’s talk.”

“I’ll pay you to forget about this,” I say.

He shakes his head. “No can do.”

I look out at the vast expanse of Seattle. Mount Ranier sits in the distance, laughing in my face. I feel myself lower against the glass barrier, sighing. "I'm so screwed."

He leans against the other side, a bit too smug for his own good. "We tried to warn you."

"You told me you'd help me. Some help you were," I mutter.

"I've still got time," he says. "I might have to save your ass tomorrow."

"What's your grand plan?" I ask.

He doesn't answer because there is no grand plan. In most cases, I was the idea maker. I'm not relying on Brian to get me out of a bind.

After a few seconds of hanging in silence, he slumps down and sits with me. We're two thirty-five year old guys, pathetically groveling into their forties. It's not the best sight in the world, but you have to admire our tenacity.

"I'm sorry, bro," he says. "This shit... this shit's hard. You were there when Karen tore my heart out."

Karen, his ex-girlfriend. They were together for nine years.

"We broke up a week before our tenth anniversary." He laughs, a little angry. A little embarrassed. "Shit is really hard sometimes."

With the stress of tomorrow's party coming to a climax, I rub my palms across my face and groan. "I should have told her," I mutter. "Why'd I lie?"

"Because you're an idiot. All of us guys are idiots," he says.

"Does it get any better?"

He shakes his head. "No," he says. "But there comes a time when all idiots learn how to act with grace."

I laugh. "I'm just going to have to suck it up and bring that grace to the table tomorrow, aren't I?"

Standing, he hits the button to get the elevator moving again. Then, he offers a hand. "You don't have anything better

planned?”

As the elevator reaches the lobby, I pull two tickets out of my jacket pocket. “I may be a certifiably insane idiot, but it’s Valentine’s Day, and I do still know how to show a lady a good time.”

The golden doors open, and Brian tries to snatch the tickets from my hand. I pull them back just in time. “What are they?”

“Swan Lake,” I say.

“Movie was decent,” he says.

“That’s Black Swan,” I correct him.

“What’s the difference?”

I step out into the lobby, headed for the front doors. “Look, the story doesn’t matter. What matters is she’s going to the opera with me, and we have the best seats in the house.”

Rowdy’s excited to be outside. His tail is slapping the doormat.

“See? You didn’t need my help, after all,” he says.

“Yeah. I’ll take a rain check, though.”

“I got you, bro,” he says. “Got anything else planned for the evening?”

“I thought I could take her over to Candy Cane Lane,” I say. It’s a fun motel couples use for sex. It’s a little forward, but I’ve opened up to Ali. There’s no other barriers to burn down. I want her so fucking bad.

He nods, smiling. “A jaunt in the city of Seattle filled with romance, sophistication, and... *shit*, I’m having trouble thinking of a third word.”

“Romance?”

He claps his hands and skips forward. “More romance!”

Without Sandra bossing me around, I can think a little clearer. The air is smoggy, but that even feels cleaner than pacing around my office all day. I look up at my window and groan.

I begin to walk with Rowdy and Brian to a busy intersection. Hailing a cab, I wait with them as the driver argues with another guy, presumably about a fare.

As we wait, I anxiously look back at the building one last time. I've got a new idea. I'm going to do everything I can to distract her attention away from the party. No matter what.

We are not going.

Now that I'm out of the office and I've dealt with Sandra, I'm going to finally give Brian a job. Then, I'm going to get the Hell out of here.

As he gets into the cab, I lean into the door and hand him the list of party supplies to buy. "Well, thanks for the talk. I look forward to your help," I say, tapping the top of the car three times.

He tries to break out of the cab, but I shut the door on him. I watch him roll the window down with sad, puppy-dog eyes. "You're leaving?"

"You said you needed extra work," I say. "Well, I need to get ready for my date."

"You bastard," he mutters.

I chuckle and signal to the driver to take off. "I'll see you at the party, Brian."

ALI

I replay the last twenty-four hours over and over in my head, coming up with more and more reasons not to check my phone. Of course, when I do, the first words on the screen say:

I miss you.

But you need to stop staring at your phone during class.

P.S. After you take Sammy home, head over to Westlake Center. On the way home, pick up something nice to wear at Saks fifth Avenue. Send me the bill. My treat.

MY THROAT TIGHTENS, AND MY PULSE SENDS A RUSH OF happiness through my heart. Something nice? I haven't bought anything nice in years. Just being honest – I'm not sure I even have any savings in my bank account.

Going against his advice, I check my account. I've got five hundred dollars. My credit has a line for three hundred. I think it should be enough, and then he'll pay me back.

Then again, that puts me in a little bind. I don't want to lean on him for money, even if he has it readily available. He still hasn't paid me for driving miss Sammy.

Amanda's voice snaps me out of my thoughts. "Everything cool, girl?"

For Valentine's Day, Dean Berman decided it would be more fun to combine classes and move everyone into the gym. It's a

big event where the kids can run around and have fun. For them, it's a day off. We're tasked to maintain an impossibly healthy balance of sugar levels. It's total chaos.

I was most concerned about Sammy. Just as Marc tried to warn me, she turned on me halfway through the day. Something triggered her, sending her into a crying fit of emotion. Amanda and I tried everything. But after her tears dried up, she refused to acknowledge us.

That's when I sent her outside. Five minute timeout. No ifs ands or buts.

Most kids cry. Some even take a swing at you. But when Sammy looked at me, it was with eyes of betrayal. Guess who was waiting to see if she was okay? Xander.

More and more, I'm starting to see that Sammy is the troublemaker. If that's true, I'll have to bring it up to Marc. He's going to be so hurt.

The ancient school projector shines cartoons on the wall. Charlie Brown tries kicking the football, only for Lucy to pull it out from under him. No one is watching this crap. I should just be honest; *I'm* not even watching it. They didn't have a copy of The Sandlot.

I fake a yawn. "I'm just a little tired of watching Charlie biff it so many times."

For the tenth time this hour, I check my phone. Sammy's five minutes are almost over. Ten minutes until we're out of school.

She doesn't look too impressed with my lie. "What's with your phone? You're not usually so tech-centric."

I don't even try to cover my ass. "It's Marc," I say.

"Talk."

Excited about a possible date night, I smile. "I got a text telling me to go to Saks Fifth Avenue and buy a dress. He instructed me to pick out the one that speaks to my heart most."

She's looking at me like I'm Charlie Brown.

“What?” I ask.

“You’re going to buy the most expensive dress they have, right?”

I’m a little taken back. “I wasn’t really thinking about it,” I say.

“A guy tells you to buy a dress for him, and you’re not fantasizing about a McQueen?”

“Mc-*what*?”

Suddenly, I’m thinking fast food.

She huffs. “Never mind. Look, what you need to do is go inside, head straight for the nearest sales associate, and then you tell them you’re looking for a Mattox.”

“I thought you said I was looking for a Mc-whatever.”

“Alexander McQueen,” she says. “But if they don’t have that, get an Aidan Mattox.”

I should be writing this down. Fashion isn’t my strong suit. Most of the time, I’m a t-shirt and skirt kind of woman.

When the bell rings, I feel my stomach jolt. I’ve got strict orders from Dean Berman to stay and clean up. However, Amanda isn’t allowing me to help out. She’s pushing me toward the doors on two heavy feet, telling me to have the time of my life.

“Don’t forget to wear a rubber!” she exclaims.

“Bye, Amanda,” I growl.

Turning away from the closing doors, I feel a light tap against my thigh. I look down. Sammy’s tears have dried, and she looks considerably better than an hour ago. Still, as much as I want to try out this new giddy feeling all the way to Saks, she’s going through a lot, and I need to be there for her.

“Are we still friends?” she asks.

I take her hand. “I’ll always be your friend, Sammy. You don’t have to worry about that.”

We walk in silence to my station wagon. Once inside, I start the engine and brace as I seek to bridge the divide.

Leaning back against the seat, I sigh. "I'm sorry for sending you outside earlier," I say. "I wanted to help, but I didn't know how. Do you understand?"

She nods. "I was being bad."

I shake my head. "No," I say. "You weren't being bad. You're not a bad person, Sammy."

When I was a little girl, I was often misunderstood. I was quiet, but my curiosity tended to get the best of me. Sometimes, I would push the limits by running off to the side of the playground. I would follow the space underneath the chainlink fence to the neighboring yards. That's when I felt free to really explore.

Of course, I'd always get caught. My teacher would grab me by the back of my neck, and tell me to apologize. Just like Sammy, I remember crying. The difference was my mom got to pick me up from school afterward.

I feel close to Marc. How far our connection will go, I can't be sure. I'm not a fortune teller, but I do believe in good things. If there is fate, we will follow its path. I hope Sammy can learn to trust me along the way.

I'm a little emotional about this. "I need you to be honest with me," I say. "Because I'm about to be honest with you."

She looks up at me. "Okay," she says.

I'm not sure she understands where I'm going with this.

Peering out at the lake, I decide how I want to phrase it. It's a little awkward talking to a daughter that's not my own. Then again, things with Marc are escalating faster than I ever expected. "I really like your family, Sammy," I say. "And I just don't want anything to get in the way of our friendship. You're important to me."

She grins before reaching for her bag of candy. "Is this about you kissing my dad?"

Ouch. Almost forgot she found us kissing in the photo room.

I let out a deflated chuckle. “Right,” I mutter.

She tosses a candy heart into the air, narrowly missing it. It goes flying into a crevice of my station wagon. “A lot of girls like my daddy,” she says.

Her words hit me right in the chest. “They do?”

She nods. “None of them are my mom.”

I shut my mouth and let a brief silence wash over us. She turns to look out the window, and once again, I feel the divide.

“I’m just your teacher, but I can also be your friend,” I say. “And I want you to know that I’m not like the other girls.”

I hope that last part is true.

“I’m going to stick around,” I add.

She looks up at me with earnest eyes. “Promise?”

“I promise,” I say, hoping I’m not jumping the gun on this. It’s still such a new thing. “As long as you promise to stop picking on Xander. He’s a nice boy who just wants to be your friend. Don’t worry. I’m keeping this between us. But if you hurt him again, I’ll have to tell Dean Berman and your father.”

She seems to take this in, thinking about it as an adult might. “Okay,” she says. “I promise.”

With a little of the awkwardness out of the way, I reverse out of that lot and head toward Marc’s forest mansion. As I drive up to their garage, the outline of a tall brunette in a short, tight skirt opens the front door.

I stop the station wagon. “Yay! More friends,” Sammy says.

The woman marches forward. “Hello. Ms. Greenwald?”

I wave, getting out of the car, but I’m a little confused. “Hi. Uh. Hello. What’s this?”

Sammy runs forward. “Hi, Sandra!”

Sandra bends to hug Sammy, and I’m starting to wonder what’s going on. How do they know each other so well that they’re on a hugging basis? “My favorite little girl in the world,” she cries.

“I missed you,” Sammy shouts.

Her smile lights up the entire porch. So much love here to drive me out of my mind.

Am I jealous of the insta-love? Maybe a little.

After a few hugs, Sammy runs into the house to set down her things. The girl gives me a delicate handshake. “I’m Sandra,” she says.

“Okay. Explain to me who you are?”

The thing is, I’m not normally a possessive person. But I’m staring a hole through this woman’s face. Even if it’s completely irrational, I want her to leave. Now.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she says with a pompous smirk. “I’m not here to steal your thunder.”

I feel a release. “You’re not?”

She looks back at the house and takes my hand. I nearly pull away, but a stretch limousine turns into the driveway. Oh, crap. Is this someone from Marc’s office?

My legs feel weak. “What’s going on?”

Sandra laughs and pulls me toward the vehicle. “I’m here to make you look and feel like a queen.”

MARC

I've run across town five different ways, and I'm still nowhere near ready for our date. On the back burner are five missed calls from Brian, hundreds of texts I refuse to even look at, and Jim makes up about half of them. They can wait until tomorrow. Tonight, I'm off the books.

I'm not thinking about anything except Ali Greenwald. The evening has to be perfect because *she's* perfect.

Sandra insisted on meeting her. Of course, I put my foot down, but these women have a subtle control over me. Not to mention, Sandra knows how women tick. The choice between Sandra telling Ali everything and Sandra showing Ali the world was an easy one to make. Even if she spills the beans about *Momma Bear*, it's going to be okay.

Everything is going to be just fine...

Who am I kidding? I'm freaked. Everything is at stake, and it's only solidified as I drive further away from the city. My phone lights up. It's a local tailor, a guy I'd trust with my life. My suit is ready to pick up.

I could send someone to pick it up for me, but I'm particular. If something is wrong with the hem, I don't trust a staffer to spot it.

"Be there in five," I tell them.

I put the pedal to the metal, but it still takes me an hour to get through the traffic. Smashing through a yellow light, I skid to a stop, pay the parking meter, and jump through the doors.

Bruno, an older Hungarian man with the taste of a mafioso, greets me like a family member. “Mr. Wylan,” he announces. “Are you ready to look like a million bucks?”

“Can you make it a couple billion?” I ask.

He laughs with his chest, not his throat. “Please, sit down.”

He plops out a chair and goes to work, picking out my undershirt, boots, and socks. I’m usually so calm, but Bruno must sense I’ve been a little off all day because he’s not as talkative as usual. When he brings out the rest of the suit, my eyes love it. But I’m so fucking stressed about this party thing that I can’t seem to find where I left my smile.

Bruno whips me with a small cloth. “What’s the matter? You no like the suit?”

I stand in front of the mirror, adjusting my collar. Bruno always makes it right. “The suit is perfect,” I say.

“So what the matter?” he asks, English choppy.

“Eh, it’s just work crap,” I lie.

His laughter is like a bowl of potatoes. It fills you up and leaves you wanting more at the same time. “It is woman?”

I return his laughter, face turning red. “It is woman,” I say. “Beautiful woman. Heart of gold.”

He hits me again with the towel. “Why you talking to me like that?” he jokes.

“Because my brain is broken, Hugo. That’s how she makes me feel, at least.” I admit. “I’m a broken person.”

His laughter carries across the room. “You’re in love,” he says. “Get ready. Vroom, Vroom!”

As we share a last laugh, my phone vibrates again. Thinking it’s Sandra or the sitter I hired to watch Sammy, I check the screen. The call goes to voicemail, I see the name Jim.

Fan-fucking-tastic. This is just what I need.

“Sorry, Hugo,” I say. “I need to listen to this.”

He tosses the towel across his shoulders and rubs his hands together loudly. “No problem. I be in back. You call for me when ready.”

“Sure thing.”

I listen to the voicemail with distaste in my mouth. I’ve got less than an hour until I need to get back to the house. Am I ever going to get to relax?

“Marc. I wouldn’t be avoiding me if I were you. Call me back. It’s important.”

Jim isn’t his usual spunky, raucous self. His tone is serious. Maybe this *is* important. I weigh the pros and cons of returning his call, but I don’t get to a decision. Jim is standing on the sidewalk outside, staring at his phone. If he turns to his left, he’ll see the store. I’m the guy right next to the mannequin.

Sensing movement, I duck and throw myself behind the display, attempting to line my arms and legs with the fiberglass. I have to suck in my waist a bit. The mannequin’s arm falls off, but I manage to catch it in time.

Jim comes up to the glass, squinting to get a better look inside the store. My chest gently rises an inch, but I clench it before I exhale.

My heart pounds. Can he see me?

I’m losing oxygen.

Help?

Finally, he leaves.

Bruno returns to find me posing behind the mannequin. “Marc?”

Careful not to move too fast, I turn my head. “You did a fine job, Bruno. I’ll take the suit.”

ALI

I stare at Sandra.

Sandra stares back at me and flattens her lips into a quick smile.

“Explain who you are again?” I ask.

“You know the idiot you’re dating?” she asks. “I’m the lucky woman who gets to be his team leader.”

I glance down at the thin lights that wrap around the floor of the limousine. “Oh. I thought I was doing this alone.”

“Yeah, about that. He didn’t really want me to come,” she says. “I sort’ve forced myself into the situation.”

I lean back, eyeing a bottle of champagne sitting in a fresh bucket of ice. “Why?”

She leans forward and interlocks her hands. “Because I know what he likes.”

What if I just want to go home? “Oh.”

“Not like that,” she assures me. “I just know he views you as someone special.”

My smile starts to return. “Special? Are you sure you’re talking about the right person? We’ve only hung out for a few days.”

She stares at me. “You like him, don’t you?”

I think about our kiss. It’s only been hours, but it feels like it just happened. “Well, yeah.”

“A lot?” she asks.

My shoulders relax. “I think he’s a pretty special person, too.”

“Did he tell you about Sammy?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah. I tried to talk to her today about it, but she doesn’t seem to want to open up about it.”

“Word of advice,” she says, “don’t mention it around her. Other women in the past have tried to bridge the gap, but it always backfires.”

Oh, no. Please tell me the red flags aren’t going to start piling up right when I start to feel butterflies for him... “Seriously?”

She pats my leg to my discomfort. “You’re fine,” she says. “I’m just warning you. Sammy is the head of the house.”

It’s obvious Sammy holds the reins. But the way she’s saying it makes me think she’s going to demand my head.

“I’m not trying to scare you off,” she says.

I exhale. “Not going to lie, it feels a little like that.”

“Well, his mind is currently in the clouds when I need him on the ground,” she says. “That’s why I’m here. To make sure you keep him grounded.”

I start to tense up again. “Is there something I should know?”

Sandra takes the champagne bottle I’ve been eyeing and slides down the window an inch. Taking aim, she nudges the tip of the bottle out. The cork flies and hits a street sign.

Pouring a glass, she says, “The party tomorrow,” she says. “I want you to make sure everything goes without a hitch.”

Oh, right. The party. I almost forgot.

I take a big sip, feeling the bubbles fizzle on my tongue.

Actually, I’m a little excited to go to this party. I still haven’t seen Marc’s office. Bet he has a really nice view. Maybe some office sex? It’ll be nice to meet his co-workers, too.

“I can’t wait to meet Marc’s friends,” I say.

“Marc doesn’t have friends,” she says. “That’s exactly why I’m here. To make sure this works.”

“What kind of party is this again?” I ask.

The limousine stops at our destination. The driver opens our door, escorting us out. Sandra keeps talking.

“Look, this is your first rodeo, so let me tell you something. This party was the shareholders’ idea. They’re taking a big step back, and they’re looking at Marc’s portfolio to see how much they’re currently worth,” she says.

“Okay.”

I follow her through the mall doors. A flood of perfume, new clothes, and other wild scents flood my nose. It’s been a long time since I went shopping for anything major. I’m already a little nervous, and Sandra is making it worse.

“So, this party is about money?” I ask.

She looks at me and sighs as we hit the rising escalator. “Whether Marc wants to believe this or not, it’s always about the money,” she says.

“I see.”

Saks Fifth Avenue used to be a beacon just out of reach. I spent my time shopping in all the regular stores. I’m not trying to stay twenty-one forever, but the clothes on the outside wings are so much cheaper.

This place is a league above what I’m used to. As we enter the store, the employees greet us. At first, they feel a little clingy, but then I realize they know Sandra by name. “I made a call earlier. I’d like to see if the chosen option fits.”

She chose for me? Okay, now I’m a little pissed.

I spent all day thinking about what our date might end up like. I had some ideas. A fancy restaurant, maybe a walk somewhere nice. Amanda had diamonds in her eyes, but I’m not that hard to please. Our last night together was so incredible. I could live with a repeat of that.

This dress might come off tonight. I want to be in charge of it. All of it.

I cut in. “Marc texted me saying to pick out my favorite,” she says.

Sandra is so unimpressed that she nearly sinks a foot in height. “He used those exact words?”

I throw up my arms. “Does it matter?”

The sales clerk is a young woman close to my age. She looks back and forth between us. “Should I wait?”

“Dammit, Marc,” she whispers to herself. Then she answers me. “We have a budget, and you don’t have much time.”

Thanks, mom.

Coming to terms with this idea of a hijacked date, I look away from her. If I turn back, I might end up killing her.

“Fine.” I blow out hot air. “Show me the dress.”

Sandra nods to the salesclerk who quickly heads to the back to fish out the dress of *Sandra’s* dreams. Not wanting to stick around Sandra for much longer, I maneuver around her, heading toward a sales rack in the corner. If she’s not going to let me pick for myself, I’ll leave and fantasize.

Of course, there’s no getting past her. She follows me with her eyes everywhere I go. With my back turned, I haphazardly go through the dresses. I must be shoving them aside pretty hard because a new salesclerk comes up behind me, even after seeing me come in on Sandra’s leash.

“Yes?” I nearly scream.

The clerk is a man, older, with a grey mustache and half a head of hair. He darts his head back as if I almost yelled it right off. “Need help finding anything in particular, ma’am?”

I push out my cheeks with air and make a loud popping noise. For all intents and purposes, I’m speaking to this man. That doesn’t diminish the fact that Sandra is very focused on me.

“Yeah, I’d like to find a dress,” I say.

I see Sandra start to raise a finger. “We’ve already been helped. Thank you.”

The salesclerk is caught in a bind. On one hand, Sandra is a reoccurring customer. There’s a lot of value in that promise. Then again, who knows how much I might buy out of spite?

I throw my purse to my front, rummaging through it to find my wallet. Pulling out a debit card, I blow some dust off the edges and place it in his hands. “Don’t listen to her. I’m a paying customer, and I sure as hell have money to spend,” I grunt like an ogre.

This isn’t pretty, I know. But it may be necessary to establish some dominance. Ask me later.

With the clerk’s manager staring at him from across the room, he gives a posh smile and narrows his eyes. “Tell us what you’d like, ma’am.”

“Oh, that’s just great,” Sandra cackles.

I widen my eyes, grinning like a nut, totally primal. “Hm. Let’s see.”

Hanging behind a few returned items is a brand new dress, dark red with a black trim. It’s minimal, but not understated. Classic might be the right word to use, something Brigitte Bardot might wear to a French restaurant. “It’s beautiful,” I whisper.

The clerk points. “Ah yes, the Alexander McQueen. A wonderful choice,” he says.

It’s go time.

That’s a name I know. McQueen. If Amanda saw me now, she’d be really proud of me.

I can feel Sandra frowning behind me. Maybe it’s not much to her, but it is everything to me. “I want this one,” I say.

Sandra tilts her head to look at it. “It’s pretty, but it’s much too gaudy. Marc will roll his eyes at something like this.”

Bitch. This is my night.

I reach for the dress. The price tag bends into view. It’s not that expensive. “I want it,” I say, reaching for the hanger. “And

I'm going to pay for it myself."

She looks at me like she's trying to figure out a complex physics equation.

I keep going. "So, if you want to buy the dress you have on hold for me, go ahead. But I won't wear it."

Her clerk walks out from the back, her smile as bright as the sun. The dress itself isn't ugly. It's chic, definitely in fashion, especially if you're a girl boss business woman. That's not me. I'm a humble, normal person. It doesn't matter if I'm with Marc for the next sixty years, I'm not going to change.

Presenting the dress to us, the clerk asks, "Have we decided on anything else?"

Sandra's jaw catches as she grinds her teeth to the side.

I point to my dress of choice. "I'll take the McQueen," I say, tossing my card onto the counter. Behind the glass is a very *intricate* lingerie set. Fuck it. Let's go the extra mile. "I want that lingerie set, too. Charge it all on my card."

And bring me my pumpkin spiced latte while you're at it, bitch.

I see the tag. It's over three thousand dollars. The overdraft fees are going to kill me. That's okay. Marc can make it up to me later.

Sandra grimaces. "I'll get the driver."

Damn straight.

ALI

Being rich is an attitude. It's not about what you wear, how you talk, or what car you drive. It's knowing how to manage those valuable expectations. But ultimately, it's about rubbing it in the face of your opponent. If you can't handle that, stay out of the way.

Sitting in the limousine while wearing my spite purchase and feeling extra fabulous, I glance in the driver's rearview mirror. Containing my excitement is hard, even around Sandra. I'm not accustomed to looking this pretty, and I'm suddenly glad to have brought my makeup kit with me.

"You look very beautiful," she says. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," I say.

"Just be careful you don't get your expectations up too high," she says.

I take a deep breath, choosing to look the other way instead of reacting. She's just trying to get under my skin. I don't have to be rich to know Sandra is a micromanaging bitch.

Tomorrow might be about winning over Marc's shareholders. However, he invited me on his own accord. Despite what Sandra suggests, I think he wanted me there with him to keep him company and maybe even show me off to his friends. Nevertheless, I'm going to win those shareholders over faster than I won Marc over. We'll see what she says then.

The limousine pulls up to a tall building downtown. Sandra gets out without a word. As I pop open a new bottle of champagne, I see Marc's warm smile behind the tinted glass.

He tries to say hello to his team leader, but she darts right through him.

Ducking inside the limo, he stops like he just hit a wall. “Holy shit,” he says. “You look breathtaking.”

I smile, but I feel a little off.

“Everything okay?” he asks.

He’s wearing a really nice European suit, probably something hand-stitched by someone local. Not only did he get a new haircut, but he’s wearing a new fragrance of cologne. It’s even better than the last one.

When I look back at Sandra entering the building, it’s hard not to roll my eyes. “Your team leader is a real class act,” I say.

I hate to start things off this way. Hours ago, I was in a good mood, but she really put a damper on my expectations.

He gets into the limousine, face overcome with annoyance. “Fucking Sandra,” he whispers, glancing at the street, flinching like he might run back out and grab her.

“She’s just so controlling,” I say.

The driver closes the door and walks to the other side.

“What happened?” Marc asks.

Recalling throwing a rack of dresses to the side of the store, I cringe. “I don’t want you to think I’m ungrateful for everything you’ve done,” I say.

Marc squints. “Come on, you know I don’t care about that shit. Take whatever you want. Leave me high and dry. It doesn’t matter to me.”

“You say that, but...”

His mouth hangs open. “But what?”

Time to rip off the small bandaid. “But when we got to Saks, Sandra already had a dress picked out for me by the company. I sort’ve figured you were behind the move.”

He turns sour as this all starts to set in. It looks like an honest reaction. “Dammit,” he says, leaning against the seat, stiff. “I

told her to send you a driver because I didn't want us to be late to the function. I didn't think she'd tag along."

"Late for the what?" I ask.

"For our reservation," he says. "But I never once told her to pick out a dress for you."

"She was very concerned about the shareholders," I add. "I guess she wanted a dress that would work for an office party. I was thinking more about tonight."

"Okay, now I'm mad," he says. "If you needed a specific dress, I would've given you my card and told you."

"There's one more thing," I add. "I might've bought it with my own money."

He pulls his arm away from mine and grabs his cell, furiously dialing a number. "We're not going to the party."

"Marc," I say. "It's fine. I want to go. "

"I don't think it's a good idea," he says.

He says it like he never wanted to go in the first place.

However, before he makes a scene and destroys tomorrow's party, I lean forward and hit the end button. At first, he's a little confused, but when his eyes meet mine, he puts it in his pocket.

And before he can speak, I thrust my lips upon him. It's a long moment of breathless anticipation, him finally forming his hands around my waist, and me staring into his eyes. I push my body up to meet his in the kiss, savoring his perfect mouth, relishing the feel of his firm, powerful tongue, his lips molding to my own. He pulls away slightly and cups the back of my head with one hand.

He brings his hand around my back, sliding over my ass. It feels so good to be touched and held, I'm not sure why I ever denied him. "My staffers need to be disciplined, Ali," he says.

I tap his nose with mine. "Maybe I'd rather the discipline come my way."

With those words, he scoops me up, pushing me higher into his lap. We're kissing and breathing so fast and hard, I wonder if he has plans to skip out on dinner. "Ali. You didn't tell me you were such a dirty girl."

His fingers move up and down the zipper of my dress, teasing me. "Yeah? Who did you think I was?"

He lowers the zipper an inch. "A sweet girl."

I close my eyes and taste his lips. Then his tongue. I breathe him in and feel a warmth swelling between my legs, a pleasure that seeks to be released.

I shake my head. "I'm as bad as they come."

One more inch of zipper comes down. He's enjoying this. I am too.

"I want to get to know you, Ali," he says. "All of you."

When the limousine stops, and I see a massive line leading to the other side of the parking lot, it's a cue we should get to the reservation instead of fucking like bunnies in the limousine.

I'm both pleased and sad we have special plans tonight, all at once.

Tapping his chest with my palm, I lean back and take a deep breath. "Whatever you have planned tonight, I'm sure will be incredible," I say.

With eyes half-closed, he stares longingly. "Yeah. Right."

I'm laughing a little at our situation, but when my heels hit the pavement, and Marc runs to help me stand, it's clear this isn't the old run of the mill date night. We're at Arpège, a high class french restaurant that's been the talk of the town for years. It's one of those places you see on the travel channel, but I never thought I'd actually get a reservation.

Marc zips me back up a couple of inches before taking my hand. "You know of this place?" he asks.

I both shake and nod my head at once. "Arpège," I whisper.

He looks pretty damn pleased with himself. "That's right."

I point to the endless line that loops around the side of the building, ending in a zig-zag through the parking lot. “Do we get to skip the line?”

Without another word, he leads me to the entrance of the restaurant. “Wylan. Two,” he shouts over heavy, raucous laughter.

The hostess doesn’t flinch. She appears ready for us. “Right this way, Mr. Wylan.”

I look up at him like he’s some kind of celebrity, like an actor or something. This is the ultimate privilege. “Not too bad, right?” he asks.

“This is... incredible,” I mutter.

He leads me through a maze of seating options and pushes open the entrance doors. The interior is a blast from the past. Through a heavy glass door, and down a corridor. After some time, I start to wonder where they heck we’re even going. This building is bigger than I thought.

“Just wait,” he says. “There’s more.”

More? How on Earth is that possible?

The hostess rounds a corner, leading us right into the kitchen. Stopping to open the freezer, she doesn’t seem to be paying any attention to us anymore. “Marc, what’s going on?”

The waitress motions toward the inside of the freezer. “Your table awaits,” she says.

I squint among the bright lights and heavy chill. “She can’t be serious,” I say.

Marc steps inside the freezer, offering me his hand. “In the mood for something different?” he asks.

Um, well, I didn’t think we’d be eating inside a freezer. This is... new.

The hostess closes the freezer door.

“Let’s hope you know what you’re doing,” I mutter.

“I thought you’d trust me by now,” he says.

I take his hand. “You haven’t let me down, yet.”

He blows hot air between our hands, but I’m surprised when the cold disappears entirely. At the other end of the freezer, the light shifts. That’s when I realize it’s not a freezer at all, but a narrow corridor leading to a secret section of the restaurant. It’s a secret path to an even more secret area!

Resembling a French courtyard, the center is open to the night sky’s seductive moon. There are a variety of flowers, plants in large pots, and vines that wrap around every inch of scaffolding. A rather large oven sits in the corner, metal rods blazing and creating a tall tower of smoke as its chef governs over it.

Last, but not least, a man comes out and sits in the corner, lightly playing a mandolin. Without even sitting down, this is the most romantic setting I’ve ever been in.

The hostess waves us to our seats, where a bottle of wine rests next to two full glasses. It’s not a standard table. Rather, it’s cut in half between the chef and the guests.

“Please, sit down. Our chef has been instructed to serve you with the utmost care,” the hostess says.

“Is that so, Maestro?” Marc asks.

The chef bows and throws a slab of meat onto a burner of butter. He tosses a carrot into the air, catching it onto the blade. Then, tossing the knife behind his back, he grabs a slice of bread. Placing it atop the blazing meat, he bakes it slowly.

I clap among Marc’s pleased laughter. While we watch him cook each meal, we get the chance to talk. Marc scoots his seat closer to me, placing his hands around my thigh. He’s especially touchy tonight, and I love it.

The chef serves a plate of caramelized asparagus with raisins. Yum.

Marc raises his glass of wine. “I want to say a little something.”

I hold my wine glass near my lips, falling deeper and deeper into the moment. The hazy glow of the courtyard, sweet with

the smell of food and love, really sweeps me off my feet. All I want to do is have him hold me here all night.

He tilts his glass near mine. "I used to think I'd be alone forever," he starts.

"Boo," I chant.

He chuckles, but he's being serious. "Ever since I met you, I've been wondering about a lot of things. I've had to take a step back and reevaluate what I want my life to be," he says. "I'm thankful you came into my life, Ali. I see you with Sammy, and I know she can be a handful, but you really know how to talk to her."

"Sometimes," I say. "I tried to get her to open up earlier, but I think she's a little angry with me."

He places his free hand on my arm and slides down to meet my palm. Teasing my fingers around his, I listen to what he's saying and really soak it up. "Ali, are you listening to me?" he asks. "I really like you."

I tap my glass against his, sighing with great relief. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me," I say.

For me, these are bold words to tell a man. It's still hard for me to say it, too. But the point is that I do feel strongly for him. No, I can't predict the future, but this is starting to feel like something that can't be ruined. At any rate, it would have to be something pretty big.

We kiss, drink, and eat more food. Each dish is better than the last. Once we're finished, we're both a little tipsy and laughing at every word.

"Remember when we first met?" I ask.

He chuckles. "Ragamuffin vs. Rowdy. If you hadn't pulled over for gas, you would've won the King Charles."

I frown, but then I remember his face when he saw me on the freeway next to him. He was so shocked. "You were acting like a Formula-One racer on the freeway to the breeder," I say, cackling.

"I whooped your butt, and you know it."

I wink. “My station wagon did an okay job at keeping up with your Mercedes.”

He nods, stuffing his nose into his wine glass. His lips are stained red, but it’s cute. His positive drunken swagger is more endearing than it should be.

“In any case, you lucked out. Ragamuffin is crazy. Rowdy is a sweetheart,” he says.

I stick out my tongue. His eyes are focused on my mouth.

“Fate is crazy sometimes,” he breathes.

“Truly,” I say.

He leans forward, taking both hands into his. “I know you hate Valentine’s Day,” he says.

I take a sip of wine. “The worst of the holidays.”

“Usually, when someone doesn’t like something, it’s because they’ve had a bad experience,” he says. “So, for tonight, we’re going to do things a little differently.”

“There’s more?” I ask.

He grins. “Well, I did hire a sitter...”

This is already so romantic. He’s pulling out all the stops tonight. “What do you have in mind?” I ask.

He motions to my plate. The only thing that’s left is the oil. “You’ve got a little taste of the food and wine. Once we’re done with our glasses, a little entertainment will be necessary. Two tickets to the Opera. Swan Lake. Row M, center orchestra. Best fucking seats in the house,” he says.

My face tightens with more excitement than I can take. I don’t know a thing about the opera, but I’ve always wanted to go.

Marc gives me a look before I inhale the rest of my wine. I’m tipsy and ready to be showered with love.

The chef responds for me. “You are one lucky lady.”

Unable to contain my excitement, I bubble over. Before I can stand, Marc sweeps me off my feet. “Are you ready?” he asks.

I can't even answer him. Before I know it, he's running through the exit, through the loud and disorderly crowd in the lobby, to the parking lot. When we get to the limousine, he sets me down and kisses me. I'm leaning against the car door, behaving like I love him.

Maybe I do.

One thing is for certain. I think I'm beginning to love Valentine's Day...

MARC

We're having the time of our life.

What first started off as a sabotaged date with Ali, turned into one hell of a night. She could have gone off on me for what Sandra did. Instead, she was honest about her feelings and played no games. The dinner went off without a hitch.

That's part of the problem...

Every day I seem to fall further and further into Ali's spell. Some days, it's her eyes. At night, I find myself staring at her lips, endlessly drinking her in. She has a wonderful heart, and her style is off the charts. I knew she'd be a good choice for the shoot. Jim's going to fucking love her.

I'm lying to myself if I think this is really going to work. Something that starts with so much tension can't be resolved with ease. She's been calm about everything so far, but the competitive woman I met at the dog breeder's home a week ago must be simmering underneath the surface, waiting for one fuck up on my behalf. What's she going to say or do tomorrow when she finds out?

I can't let that happen...

She's never been to an opera before, so the excitement waters down my anxieties about tomorrow. A variety cast of characters are chatting it up in the lobby. Among men other wealthy debutants, trillionaire tech bozo Zach Rochester stands in the corner with some yes-men that laugh at every joke he tells. It's pathetic, and I steer her in the other direction, despite her obvious curiosity.

We get a few more drinks. Then we get a few more. By the time the show starts, I'm walking funny. The first piano notes ring out with the orchestra, and the show begins.

Ali leans against me, angling out of her chair to kiss my cheek. "Happy Valentine's Day. This was really thoughtful," she whispers.

I kiss her back. "Happy Valentine's Day, Ali."

Halfway through the show, my phone starts to buzz. The sound alerts everyone in the first twenty rows, but the only eyes I'm worried about are Ali's eyes. She glares at Jim's flashing name like he's a side-chick I hid from her.

Silencing my phone, I whisper, "It's one of the shareholders."

She redirects her sight toward the dancer on stage. "Well, you better answer it," she says.

Searching for a quick escape, I glance at the aisle and begin to stand. But then I see the face of an angered old man with a mustache in the shape of Tallahassee, Florida. It's Jim. He's actually calling me in the middle of the show.

I jump back into my seat. "I'll deal with it later."

"You sure?" she asks.

I nod. "I don't want to ruin the night."

Redirecting her attention to the action on stage, she watches in horror as the dancer falls to the floor, apparently signifying some kind of death or something. I don't know. I'm hardly looking at the opera. My left eye is bent to the side, watching as Jim turns his head.

He sees me, so I pretend not to see him. It's easy, and I'll keep up with until the end if I have to.

A crescendo of noise swells around me. The actors are getting more and more tense. One character grabs a gun. Another does the same and calls for a dual. One woman is shouting on center stage, tears painted down her cheek.

Jim shakes his head, calling out to me, "Marc. Psst."

I squeeze Ali's hand, smile, and pretend not to hear.

“Don’t you ignore me,” he says, voice louder.

Someone hushes him, but it only makes him repeat himself.

The orchestra frantically builds to a climax. The two actors on stage face in opposite directions, beginning a march to the opposite ends of the stage. The horns scream, and the drums boom.

The man on the right opens fire.

The music stops.

Bright red petals fall from the sky, and a beautiful overture starts. Ali’s eyes are full of tears. And then, to my complete satisfaction, the room lights return. The play is over.

Thank God.

Ali dots her eyes with a handkerchief. “You didn’t tell me it was going to be such a sad story.”

Truth is, I picked this opera at random. Pretty sure it was a reimagined version, too. In any case, it was pretty good. “It was a story about love.”

“That man died in the end, so she could transform,” she says, eyes watering again. “Call me old fashioned, but I’m used to romantic happy endings.”

Jim calls out to me a third time. “Marc! Hold up for a second.”

Ali briefly pauses against my weight. “Who is that?”

“It’s no one,” I say, pulling her hand. “Just someone who wants to steal my attention away from you.”

She takes this at face value, probably because Jim looks more rugged than most men. And once we’re out in the fresh air, she’s laughing again.

I know that I need to come clean about the unveiling party, but these moments mean so much to me. Ruining this is not the move.

She throws her arms around my neck. “Thank you for everything.”

I’ll tell her everything tomorrow.

Right after I take her to bed with me.

ALI

I'm a little tipsy. A little out of control. But I've never felt better in my life.

Not when I was living in Chicago. Not when I was younger and more carefree.

Marc has shown me a side of him I never knew existed. A part of him that's shared with only a few people in his life. He shared his hardest moments with me, and I helped him realize they were his greatest triumphs. It was important learning about his history, but most important is where his heart aligns.

He's not a liar like the other men. He's completely honest.

I trust him.

And that's why, as the driver speeds us around in the limousine, I decide that it's time to fully let go of my hesitance and give him everything. Every inch of skin hidden underneath this dress.

Crawling on his lap, I check the clock. It's only nine, and I don't have class tomorrow...

"This was the best night," I say.

"But wait," he says, imitating those old commercials that were always on late night TV. "There's more."

I straddle him, pinning his hands above his head. "How could there be more?"

"There's always more with me," he says.

"Does that get you into trouble?"

He grins. “Always.”

The driver veers into the right lane, exiting the freeway without a moment to lose. I don’t recognize the exit, so I imagine it must be something pretty cool. I lift my head and glance as a row of neon lights appear. It’s one of those themed hotels, the kind I’ve that spells out *S-E-X*. I’ve stayed away from these places for good reason.

Tonight, there’s no good reason. I’m here for him. And even though it’s the cheesiest, sleaziest, slobberiest spot a man could take a woman, it feels like the perfect place to be.

The driver pulls into the parking lot. I’ve got my eyes fixed on the neon red and white sign. “Candy Cane Lane,” I whisper, lips arched. “What would Sammy think if she knew her dad came here?”

He pushes forward, reaching just far enough to grab the bottle of champagne. He holds it to my lips, and I take a sip. “That reminds me. I need to call the sitter. Hold tight, okay?”

“Of course,” I say.

He grabs his phone, looking remorseful. “I promise, it’ll just take a few seconds. Just... stay there. Keep acting sexy.”

Keep acting sexy? Don’t mind if I do.

I lean back against the leather seat, feeling like a doll in a cabbage patch. My dress is starting to get to me, so I reach to unzip the back. The zipper is stuck.

Marc’s got his trigger finger on the dial. He smiles as soon as a voice responds. “Everything good over there? How’s my Sammy?”

The sitter must have replied with something that seems positive because Marc is laughing pretty hard.

Meanwhile, I’m overheated, still trying to get out of this dress. For the life of me, I can’t get out. With one leg propped in the air, I jerk my wrist to get the zipper down. It’s just enough force to send my head flying back against the window. It’s not loud enough to excite Marc, but it definitely stuns me for a couple of seconds.

Marc turns toward the window. “Well, she’ll just have to get over it. Tell Sammy I’ll be home tomorrow,” he says, completely ignoring the fact that my lingerie is now showing.

I blow my bangs out of my eyes and wait for Marc to be done. Another minute passes. He’s chatting up that sitter, giving her a checklist the size of Texas. What do I have to do to get his attention?

“Okay, fine. If Sammy’s not going to leave you alone, I’ll talk to her. Put her on the phone,” he says.

With the back of my dress unzipped, I can breathe easier. I push it down. All the way onto the floor, completely exposing my red lingerie. My dress looks like a dead animal on the floor. Is this sexy?

Suddenly, I feel very cold. My nipples are hard enough to cut diamonds, and my butt is covered in goosebumps. This isn’t like me. I’ve never felt all that comfortable in my own skin, but Marc makes me want to take leaps. Ever since I met him, I’ve dove head first into a lot new territory.

This is the shiny version of Ali Greenwald. The new version men can’t get enough of. Sexy, curvy, and unafraid to say what she wants to say. To do the things she wants to do. She’s the woman every man wants.

I cough to get his attention. It doesn’t work very well, though.

“Sammy, sweetie. We talked about this. Daddy has some business to take care of tonight,” he says.

As the words fall from his lips, he turns. The red lingerie is like a painted bullseye to men, and his eyes behave no different. He starts to lower the phone, despite Sammy’s voice echoing out from the receiver.

If we want this to work, there are sacrifices we’ll have to make. I never imagined I would fall for someone fifteen years older than me. I never thought he’d come with a child. Some women might have a hard time accepting their man isn’t one-hundred percent focused on them. But without Sammy in the picture, I wouldn’t have seen that other side. He’d just be a man who tried too hard to get my number.

“Sammy, I love you. But daddy needs to go now,” he says. He pauses for the sitter’s response. “It’s okay, Stacey, but I have to turn off my phone now. I’ll send you money for a pizza. Yeah. Okay. Thanks for everything.”

I lower into the seat, kicking away the dress in a surprisingly sexy way. “Sorry about that. I told her not to call, but I guess Sammy wanted to order someth—”

I drape my finger against his lips. “Let’s not talk about that right now.”

His focus drifts from my chest down to my thighs. He takes one deep breath as he brings his focus down to my panties, to the garters that fasten around my waist and thighs. I’m like a pretty gift-wrapped package, and it’s all for him.

He powers off his cell phone, throwing it behind him. It sounds like the screen just cracked in half, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

My heart is racing, palms are sweating, and every muscle is tensely pulsing to an unshakable rhythm. I’m freaking out. The difference is I’m not acting on fear anymore. I’m acting a different way entirely, and it feels so fucking good.

I open my thighs, ignoring the flurry of self-doubt that briefly enters my mind. “You okay?” I ask, knowing full well I have his time for the rest of the night. “Do you need to go home or something?”

He doesn’t speak with his mouth. Those dark brown eyes are doing all the talking. And I can’t wait any longer. Neither can he.

Staring, he brings his hand around the back of my head, and he just pulls me into him. His lips find mine, his tongue coaxing my mouth open, pushing deeper inside.

Pulling back, I bite the sugary taste off the bottom of my lip and glance at the tinted barrier separating us from the driver. “Can he...?”

“Can he see us? No.” He kisses me. “Hear us? Feel the vehicle shaking? Probably.”

One more kiss before he wraps his entire body over mine, pinning me against the seat so hard it nearly takes my breath away. “You want to get a room instead?” he asks.

The room probably has one of those heart-shaped beds with windows plastered across every inch of wall. It sounds like a whole lot of fun, but our relationship has been about managing expectations. He has met every single one with astonishing grace. This is what we’ve both been waiting for since the day we met. I am not waiting a minute longer.

“Fuck the motel room,” I say. “And fuck me, too. Hard.”

He looks like he didn’t expect me to be so blunt. I’m surprised by the things I’m saying and doing, though maybe I shouldn’t be. Every inch of my body is buzzing with a concentrated ache that matches a flicker of heat blossoming deep inside me.

Gliding my hand down his chest, I feel every ridge of muscle, every masculine hair and distinct vibration of his heartbeat beneath my fingertips. I bend up and kiss his neck, tenderly sucking the spot below his ear, where the lobe meets the skin. His whole body trembles.

Angled underneath him with my heels tapping against the glass, I push my thighs around his waist, gently thrusting back. A throbbing pulse forms in my throat, bringing more warmth to my cheeks. I can feel his cock, hard and ready to go near the center of his slacks. I was hoping he was big enough to handle me, but as he dry humps my pelvis, I feel something so much bigger.

Focused on his body, I run my fingers over the taut, muscular skin. He jerks when I touch him, abs clenching as he shuts his eyes. Then his hand glides around my breasts. We’re touching and rolling in this narrow enclosure inside the limousine, and I’ve hit my elbow against the driver’s window divider at least twelve times. I must resemble a human pretzel in my sheer fuck-me-now fury. I whisper in his ear, sending him into another bout of twitching.

A heaving moan comes from deep in my chest. We’re both on the edge. He kisses me, and I just go for it.

I reach out and I touch something hard. It's feels thick. Definitely something... cold? It's his belt buckle.

"Here, let me help you," he says, undoing the metal button from the notch.

The button pops, and the zipper seems to slide down without my help. I bite the side of my tongue, watching his body lower in the mirror of the limo. He takes my hand and guides it against his pelvis. There has been a lot of misunderstandings between us, but there is no confusing this.

And once he has my hand around his cock, I see him for what he really is. A total monster.

It's not a joke. His cock is *monstrously* huge. It is rock hard and pulsing to the beat of our lust. From its upward slope to its crease between his balls, to its underside, the whole thing grows before my very eyes like a science experiment. A hot science experiment...

Bad analogy.

My grip is firm. I feel him shudder as beads of pre-cum drift from his crown, all the way down his shaft. Using my index finger, I stop the outflow and drag the wet, glistening lubricant around his member.

Thrusting into my hand, he groans and touches my side, sending another jolt of heat through my body and setting my lower belly aflame. Our breathing increases as we lose ourselves in each other. My own desire is increased, folding into the foreground as I bring the fingers of his other hand to my breast.

Light and soft with his touch, his palm brushes against my lips. It only takes one single upward movement to find my clit. He circles around the hood before bringing his index finger down to glide through my wetness and feel my excitement. As soon as he pulls away, my clit buzzes. I grind my pelvis to ride out the feeling.

"You're wet," he says.

I smile. "Who would've thought a nice teacher could behave so badly?"

He issues a quick laugh. “I had a feeling you were dirty.”

I squint and stroke down. He’s so fucking hard. “Yeah? Is that why you’re pulling out all the stops tonight? Because you wanted to play a little with the dirty girl?”

This is so wrong. But I’m so turned on I have to pretend to turn away. His breath tickles my ear as he comes back down.

“Yep,” he says. “Staged this whole thing just to get laid. Pretty good plan, right?”

I shrug as I coil my thighs around his waist, locking him in place. “Pretty good,” I say. “But you haven’t asked me my plan yet.”

This time, his eyes narrow. “Let me guess. Take all my money and run. It’s a good plan, albeit overdone.”

“I’m glad you think that. Because that wasn’t my plan.”

He lifts up. “Hm...”

I’ve got him by the balls, literally. I pull him back down. “I plan on getting the money through the kid.”

He chuckles. “You’re both going to take off running, aren’t you?”

Teasing a finger against his chest, I nod.

In one swift move, he lifts my legs around his neck. “Gives me a lot of free time.”

My laughter quickly ceases as he teases a finger around my clit, slowly swiveling down, around the outer edges of my lips. He kisses my pelvis, right above an awkward patch of razor burn. I moan and close my eyes, dying from the anticipation.

“Mm,” he growls.

There’s no need to run off with his money. With his head buried between my legs, I think I like my options here better. This is bliss.

He pushes one finger inside me, bending. I groan, reaching down to hold his hand. My hips push against him.

“This is what I want. Forever,” he says.

“Yes,” I moan.

What does he really think about me? Does he love me? Forever isn't a word I take lightly. I've had people say it to me before. Months down the road, they're telling me they can't fathom staying with anyone forever. The typical bullshit.

“Do you mean it?” I ask.

Looking up, he kisses my pussy. Endlessly, teasing me. Then, working his tongue across my clit, he takes his mouth away from me and says, “If there's one thing you can say about me, it's that I'm honest.”

My smile returns, and my eyes close. I'm spinning as his finger teases its way past my lips, carrying his expert tongue along with it. I rejected love because the love I felt didn't feel so good anymore. This is so different. He is everything I've been waiting for in a man.

Drunk from this feeling he gives me, as well as the feeling *his tongue* gives me, I know just what I want. I want his mouth. I want his cock. And, of course, I want a little tiny piece of his heart.

A gentle motion rocks my hips back and forth. He slides in another finger, disappearing down to the knuckle. Arching them against my g-spot, he makes me rise and dig my heels against the glass. My endorphins take over, and I just let myself go until his whole mouth is fastened around my pussy, sucking both my clit and lips, while he slides in and out with his fingers.

This is a professional pussy eater. I'm a little afraid of what comes next.

While I'm absorbing the new feelings he's given me, a third finger presents itself. When he slides it in with ease, I find myself panting and saying the most unthinkable things.

“More,” I moan. “Eat this pussy. Come on. Harder.”

It's crazy. So crazy that it's right.

I draw my fingers into the back of his hair and move him in gentle motions. I'm so close to losing it that my lower half

feels like it's floating on an electrified lake of ecstasy. When he pushes deeper, I nearly melt.

"Don't stop," I grunt. "Never stop."

"You're so beautiful," he grunts.

"Yes."

"So fucking gorgeous."

"Mm... Fuck," I grunt.

His tongue is exploring. Oh, God. Is it moving lower? What's he doing? His tongue is officially on my asshole.

This feels... *incredible*?

"Come for me," he whispers.

My pleasure is building. I'm shaking, and I can't stop it. I'm going to lose control. As my legs spread like a butterfly, I feel my pulse slip into a wave of pleasure, like it's trying to leap from my heart to my pussy. My legs grip for a second, then my knees buckle, and it's like I'm floating away.

I can't speak. I can only feel the pleasure soak as he rises to meet me with a sweet kiss.

More endorphins envelope me. My body kicks forward and back, but Marc has me in his grip, and he's staring into my eyes like he's some kind of hero. Well, he's my hero. I don't want to lose this. I can't.

It's too much. I adore him now. Every insecurity comes out, and they all seem so heightened. But then a second wave hits me. It's so strong, it knocks my jaw open and lays me down, flat.

And for a while, I'm just floating. I'm thinking about the life we could have together. Everything is possible when we're working at this. It's not the first time I've felt this way, but it's hopefully the first time it really sticks.

When I come back to Earth, Marc brings his arm around my back. I can taste myself on his lips and tongue as we kiss. I've never been more turned on in my life.

I can't look away. It's just not an option now.

Feeling insatiable, I drop to the floor. My hair is matted and wild, but I don't care. I reach out, brushing my hand against his leg, slowly curving it up toward his dick. As I lower over his pelvis, I'm so close to him, and all I want to do is please him now.

I take hold of his shaft. The skin at his base so hard and unyielding. Having it right in front of my mouth is a bit unnerving. But I am determined, using my hand to pump up and down.

He jolts, moaning, as I cradle his shaft with one hand and cup his balls with my other. I stroke him, softly. More pre-cum glides down my hand, like a thin liquid tickling the skin of my palm. Watching him, I lower my tongue and lick it off. In an earthquake of pure desire, he pushes into my fist and moans loudly. I can tell he's enjoying this as much as I am.

"Suck it," he moans.

I close my eyes and feel his warmth pulse against my lips. His hands curl around the back of my head. One travels down to feel my curves, my ass, and my pussy until he has both hands around me. I'm so wet I can feel my pleasure escape me.

I'm on my knees, serving my man as he leans back and relaxes. I never do this, but here I am, breaking all my rules. I look up. He's in a daze. The moans are never-ending.

He spans me lightly.

My eyes dart open. "Mr. Wylan," I breathe.

With his cock in my hand, he shifts in his seat and blushes. "Sorry. Too much?"

It stings in the best way possible, evolving into a deep need. It's like a hunger, a fuel that won't burn out. I need his cock inside me. This isn't enough.

Shaking my head, I drop back down and take him in my mouth. "If you're going to spank me, you'll need to do it harder," I say.

His eyes widen, but the impulse to be naughty is in the air. I push up my ass, so he can get a better view. He feels my pussy with his hand, cock bouncing at the much-too-drawn-out thought of *finally* getting to fuck me. Tonight, he gets the full treatment. All of me and more. And if he's a good boy, he'll get this for the rest of his life.

He spans me again, and this time, the sound is like a gasp. I reach behind to feel his handprint. The sting turns urges me onto his lap. He places his hand over mine. "You're so fucking perfect," he says.

Kissing the taste of my pussy off his lips, I feel him pulling his shirt over his head. I slide my hands up his muscular back, feeling every delicious ridge of man-candy. It's amazing he doesn't work out. He's got those natural genetics, I guess.

I want to take this to the next level.

"Wait," I say.

"No good?"

Feeling his rock-hard abs again, I shudder. "I've changed my mind. I want you in that bed," I say, leaning over to grab my dress.

I want him everywhere. On the floor, in the shower, on the balcony...

I put on my dress as best I can, but I look like a ravaged wench. Behind Marc, a neon Jessica Rabbit shows some leg. I'm not sure looks matter at a place like this.

He kicks the door open. "Let's go," he says.

We're running through the cold night toward the wall of neon candy canes, cupids, and heart-shaped arrows. As he gets the key from the lobby, I wait outside the window, shivering from the cold and the pleasure. The entire time I'm staring at Marc through the window and thinking about how lucky I am.

His hair is insane, and he's a little wet around the lips. But he's the hottest, most loving father I've ever met. Somehow, money never changed him. It's a miracle.

Our room is on the second floor, so we run up the stairs, kick open the door, and get to kissing again. He pushes me against the doorframe, grinding his pelvis against mine. I get his pants and shirt off, and he practically rips this expensive dress in half. His hands form around my breasts, and he hungrily kisses my neck.

Lips against mine, he spins and backs me into the room. I nearly trip on my dress as I walk backward. My ankles hit the bed frame. I fall onto the mattress, legs spread. He feels my body and strokes his cock. We're both seething with desire.

"How do you want me?" I ask, breathless.

His chest rises. "Is that a trick question?"

I turn on all fours. For good measure, I wag my ass, spreading just enough so he can see my pussy. He gives me his hand, and then he gives me the ride of his life.

Hand around my shoulder, legs positioned around mine, Marc mounts me. I had my fantasies about Marc Wylan, and with one solid thrust, he shows me he's interested in fulfilling every single one. Our bodies smacking together, my own screams of pleasure falling into the background as Marc starts fucking me with passion.

I close my eyes, surrendering to the sensations. All at once, I'm hit with the strangest excitement. Releasing every bit of emotion, I rock my hips back and forth and give in to his touch. I feel like I'm floating, but I soon recognize the feeling as finally being grounded. I'm just not used to it.

This is bliss. Everything with Marc so far has been. The only thing getting in the way is our hesitance to allow someone new in. We're both a little guilty of that. We're both unlearning a lot, but as long as we stay this close, nothing can stop this.

As he catches his breath, I drop to the mattress and roll on my back. He teases my stomach with a finger and smooths out the tingling of my nerves with a solid kiss. Moving up, he scales my body like a snake, driving in deep as soon as he finds my lips.

Marc Wylan is a determined man. As far as I know, he has spent his entire life looking for the next thing to satisfy him. I hope I'm the last.

Correction: I'm going to be the last. Because I love him.

I love Marc Wylan.

"Fuck, I'm coming," I moan.

It hits me like a brick wall. Suddenly, I'm unraveling. Everything he does feels perfectly timed to create another explosive moment. There is nothing he can do to me that will make me stop loving him.

I bite into my bottom lip to keep it from trembling, holding on to the tingling euphoria. "Oh, yeah, baby, I'm about to come," he moans.

My nails dig into his skin as I come up for air. "Come with me."

"Fuck..."

Marc doesn't slow down, even when I've caught my breath. After about 10 more thrusts, I feel his cock swell and bob erratically. He's losing control, carrying a shocked expression that lasts. When I feel him explode, it's inside me, and it's everything I thought it might be.

But thank God I'm on the pill, or this might get messy.

Wave after wave of orgasm, we come together. And even when we're both back to baseline, we're going again. A second time is necessary. A third time is to seal the deal and make things official. But our fourth time is just absurdly hot.

When the clock hits four in the morning, we're exhausted, sweaty, and there isn't a spot in the motel room that hasn't been touched. The maid is not going to have a great time cleaning this place up later.

Marc brushes my bangs from my eyes. "Your body... Your gorgeous face..." He leans down to kiss me once more. "You are so perfect. So out of this world. How did I get so lucky?"

I hope he hasn't gone soft on me. At the very least, his dick is still harder than a brick wall. "We both did," I say. "We're perfect for each other."

He curls his fingers around mine. "Let's promise to never leave this," he says.

I kiss his knuckles. His chest. Lastly, his lips are begging for me. "I promise."

"I promise."

I'm sure of one thing, and one thing only.

I am in love with Marc Wylan. I couldn't run even if I wanted to.

MARC

I wake up feeling like I died and went to heaven.

Ali's body is spooned against me, her hips and curves so form-fitting and perfectly aligned that I have to actively fight the urge to reach out and cup her right breast in my hand. I do it anyway.

"Good morning, beautiful," I murmur as she stirs in my arms.

I want to tell her to stay in bed. I want to take her in my arms and make love to her. But there are a thousand reasons why I can't.

I check my phone. The number of missed calls is almost at triple digits. Sandra, Brian, and Jim are like the trifecta of annoying assholes.

I haven't thought about Jim, the office, or that stupid fucking party for many blissful hours. Spending time with Ali makes me realize what life could be if I just didn't have to deal with the bullshit. Today, however, is when everything comes together. The moment of truth.

Maybe I can avoid it...

There's no way I can avoid it.

Ali turns, nudging her eyes with the back of her hand. "Morning, baby," she says, giving me a sweet kiss. "Sorry. Morning breath."

I kiss her again, this time with some tongue. "You can't gross me out, Ali Greenwald," I say, holding her chin. "Even if you are a farter."

Her face turns hot and red like coals. “Your daughter is a dirty liar.”

Laughing and feeling a little sticky, I practically leap toward the shower. “Jump in with me,” I say.

Groaning, she rolls out of bed. “I guess I could use some hot water.”

She’s still wearing the same lingerie. Ali never really has to try to look hot. She could probably go without showers for weeks and still be the most attractive woman on the planet. The great thing is she doesn’t know it. It gives her the humility that rounds out her personality.

In the shower, I’m too tempted not to touch her. We fuck against the tile wall. We fuck on the ground. We fuck on the toilet. We fuck against the door. You better believe we fuck on the sink counter. By the time our checkout time hits, that entire bathroom is destroyed.

It’s the best sex I’ve ever had, which is why I’m so... *fucked*. Directly after we both came for the last time, she kissed my chest and sighed a breath of relief. Then she whispered, “I’m so excited to spend tonight with you at that party. I have a dress at home that I picked out. It might not be as flashy as the McQueen, but you’ll still be able to show me off.”

She still wants to go?

My brain replaces that dopamine and oxytocin with a fresh batch of cortisol and epinephrine. The immediate hit of stress nearly knocks me on my ass in the parking lot. As the driver waits near the open door, it feels more like a funeral than a time of celebration.

“Can you drop me off at my place? I’ll need to get Rowdy first,” she says.

I smile, but I’m a mess. “Anything you want.”

I just want Ali, alone. None of the other shit. At this point, I’d sacrifice everything for her. Except, if I do that, Sammy and I won’t be able to stay here. I’ll have to sell *Momma Bear*, and it’ll be *Back to Manhattan*, starring Marc and Sammy.

Inside the limo, she leans against my chest. I hold her, kissing the top of her head and breathing in her scent. If she hated Valentine's Day and thought all men were bastards before, she's never going to forgive me for this. I keep wondering how much longer I have before the guillotine arrives.

I used her image to stay solvent. Am I a fucking idiot?

As I pull into my driveway, the answer to that question is glaringly obvious. Ragamuffin is up against the window, barking her lungs out at the sight of me. Rowdy comes out of nowhere, too. Amidst the forgotten chaos of coming back to the real world, Sammy opens the door. She drops to her knees and mimics the dogs' incessant noises.

"Ruff!" she barks. "Ruff, ruff!"

Behind her, the house looks worse than the bathroom in our hotel room. Another brand new couch is completely ruined. A lamp lay broken on the floor. The rug has some kind of liquid collecting near the center in a small pool. I really don't want to know what that liquid is.

I'm not pleased, but I know how to put on my good dad outfit. "Very nice, sweetie," I say. "Where is Stacey?"

Stacey, the babysitter, steps into the hallway. She's covered in some kind of thick paste. It looks like peanut butter, but I'm a little too scared to walk in and check. "Mr. Wylan," she says with an expression of shock. "I am so sorry."

I take a step inside as Sammy zooms right past me. She screams and flies from room to room, dogs at her heels. She's like the Pied Piper of puppies.

My boots crunch on a piece of some glass. "I don't understand what happened. When you called, everything sounded fine."

She's shaking. "Everything was," she cries. "And then Sammy went to find Ragamuffin."

As soon as I make eye contact with the little dog, it makes a whining noise and backs into the corner of the room. "She did all of this?"

Attempting to avoid persecution, Rowdy comes to my side. He nudges his head against my leg. Nice try. In my book, he's guilty too.

She nods. "Yes. The other dog was fine," she says. "Please, don't sue me. I don't have a lot of money."

I plug my nose as my shoe smudges against a pile of dog poop.

It's really bad. There are broken items on counters that look way too high for that little fluff-ball to get on. But then I see the low bar stool that Sammy sits on to eat breakfast. It acts as a perfect stepladder to my chair, which sits tall and near the table.

"Did Ragamuffin jump onto the counter using these chairs?" I ask.

"I've never seen a King Charles do something like that before," she says.

"She's... unique."

"She's a demon," she cries. "I can't stay another night here. I just can't."

Shit, shit, shit!

I was already stressed about tonight. Now, I'm at a complete loss. Ali's not going to let this party thing go. Then again, this is a pretty good excuse.

I feel a smile forming.

"I'm sorry," she repeats.

"Stacey, it's fine," I say. "The dog is clearly unhinged. I understand where you're coming from."

She takes a few steps forward, avoiding a rotting slice of pizza. "You... do?"

"I should've warned you," I say, leading her to the front door. "When I bought her, she was so sweet."

She walks down the front steps. "You should get her checked out, Mr. Wylan. Something could be going on with her," she

says.

She needs anger management for dogs. “I’ll do that,” I say.

Shuffling her out to her car, I pull out my wallet and count a few hundred dollars. Sensing that Ragamuffin might’ve left some unforeseen emotional scars, I flick through a few more bills. “Here. For the damages,” I say.

She looks at the money. “But the dog destroyed your house.”

I put the cash into her hands. “I have worse to worry about. Take the money. Buy something nice,” I say. “Or, better yet, invest it.”

Just watch what you buy. You never know when the thing you bought will come around to bite you in the ass.

After she leaves, I come around the side of the limousine with Rowdy. He jumps in, slobbering all over her. “That’s my good boy.”

I’m the *bad boy* about to ruin all the fun. Hope this works.

I put on my best frown, sighing as loud as I can.

Ali’s eyes dart to mine. “What’s wrong?”

Throwing my arms up, I look back at the house. “Ragamuffin destroyed everything. The front room, the stuff on all the counters, the kitchen...”

She goes to jump out of the vehicle. “The book?”

I scratch the back of my head, a little worried myself. It would suck to lose those relics. Plus, Ali really seems to enjoy them. I was looking forward to the day when she could read them to Sammy.

“I haven’t checked. Point is, the babysitter wasn’t too thrilled. She bolted,” I say.

“Okay,” she says, waiting for more of an explanation.

“She’s been our sitter ever since we moved in,” I say.

Truth is, it doesn’t matter who watches Sammy. I get my sitters from a dependable agency. Only the best get through those doors.

“What are you trying to say?” she asks.

I deflate. “I don’t think I can go to this office party tonight. Not that it’s going to be any fun.”

She twists her mouth and falls against the seat. Rowdy puts a paw on her shoulder. “Not now, Rowdy.”

I hate seeing her get sad, but this is for her own good. Meeting Jim isn’t a noteworthy experience; it fucking sucks. I’m sparing her the pain and torment of meeting him when he’s drunk.

“It’s just hard to get a sitter so fast,” I say.

“You got one last night,” she says. “Anyway, don’t rich people go through agencies?”

She’s onto me. “Yeah, but the place is wrecked. I’ll need to hire a maid, too.”

Nodding, she takes it in. I feel like she’s about to give up when her eyes flash with sudden excitement. It’s like a light goes off in her head. She checks her phone for the time and smiles. “We have eight hours.”

“Seven,” I say. In reality, it’s about seven and a quarter, but who’s counting?

“You hire the cleaners,” she says.

“It could take days to clean,” I say.

She holds out her hands, telling me not to worry. Of course, I take them and squeeze because I’m a slave to the feeling she gives me now. “What’s wrong?” she asks. “Is it something to do with last night? You didn’t have fun with me?”

Her eyes glow. Every time I look at her, I see another piece of her that I can’t turn away from. It’s just a reminder of what is important. “I just don’t want to lose you,” I say.

She stops. Embarrassingly enough, my hands are trembling. I close my eyes and repeat the words. “I don’t want to lose you.”

I wasn’t expecting to come out and say it, but there it is. That’s why I’m giving white lie after white lie. It’s why I can’t stop

pushing her away from coming to that party. I'm not a man who hears the word *no* that often. Under no circumstances can I lose her.

She looks at me with a mixture of empathy and confusion. "Marc, you're not going to lose me," she says, reaching out to brush my cheek. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

I swallow and feel her one last time. Breathe her in one last time. But I'll remember these moments forever. Even if she leaves for good, they'll be tattooed to the front of my brain.

"Yeah," I say. "Just a little stressed."

She leans forward to kiss me. It's the best kiss in the world, slow and meaningful. "Look," she says, "I'm going to ask my friend if she can take Sammy for the night. She's got a few kids of her own, and they're near enough to her age that it won't be a problem."

I'm staring at the only person I've ever loved, knowing I won't have her tomorrow. What a fucked up predicament. "Who is it?" I ask.

"Amanda, the teacher you met," she says.

"The woman who watched us collide," I correct her.

She bursts out laughing. "Aw. I miss that."

It feels like I'm blushing. I hope it's not too bad. "Me too."

"So, can I call her?" she asks.

I'm nodding, but my brain is screaming *no*.

"Definitely."

HOURS LATER, ALI'S TEACHER FRIEND AMANDA ARRIVES TO pick up my daughter. The first thing she says to me is, "You look like shit."

I shake her hand, head bent with confusion. "Why does everyone say that about me?" I ask. It's supposed to be a joke,

I think. I hold out my hand and introduce myself. “I’m Marc Wylan.”

She laughs and smacks my arm a few times as if we’ve been buddies for years. “I know who you are. You’re dating my friend.”

It’s weird I was single for so long. I’m not a promiscuous type of person. For a while, I thought I’d never find someone worth locking down. The word *dating* makes me feel pretty fucking good, but it’s not exclusive enough. I want the whole thing. “Dating. Is that what she called it?”

She shrugs. “More or less.”

This woman is something else. “Okay, well, forgive me for looking like shit.”

“It’s just that I know that look,” she says. “You’re worried about something.”

“There’s no look,” I say.

She narrows her eyes. “There’s a look.”

Of course, I start to worry she can see right through me. She knows I’m full of shit. She’s probably trying to find reasons to put a target on my back. I deserve it.

“We had a big night,” I say. “Plus, my house is pretty messed up, so I’m just trying to deal with this right now. Sue me for feeling a little tired.”

She meanders up the first few steps of my porch before sitting down. “What’s really wrong?” she asks.

I try to find Mount Ranier in the horizon, but I’m not high enough in the sky, and the fog is too dense. It doesn’t make sense to spill my guts to her friend, but I have some time until I need to pick up Ali. She’s got a very give-no-fucks attitude, so maybe she’ll end up giving me some sagely advice.

“I’ve got a lot of stuff to take care of,” I say.

“Ali related stuff?”

“Work related stuff. I got myself in a pretzel of bullshit,” I say.

She nods. “As one does. You own Momma Bear Magazine, right?”

“Yeah, among other publications,” I say. That ownership meant something to me at one point. “Why?”

“I never understood what happened to it. You guys got some real good interviews,” she says.

I look her up and down. Her clothes look like they’ve been assembled at one of those outlet stores on the way out of Washington. It’s not a diss at her. She’s just our prime readership base. “You were our target demographic,” I say. “Let me guess. You bought the dollar organic soap.”

Laughing, she pats her thigh with force. “Every freakin’ month. I ordered so many patchouli bars, my house smelled like Woodstock ‘69.”

That’s pretty funny. It’s even funnier that she still smells like patchouli. I guess people don’t really change. It’s a slow evolution until you find that special someone, the person to end the torment of habit. “The shareholders want to can it for good,” I say. “They say it never generated enough money, and they’re unsure I can get the advertisers on board.”

“I guess money rules the planet, right?”

I chuckle. “You’re asking me?”

“You see, this is part of your problem,” she says. “You’re used to swimming against the tide. It’s probably how you made it big in the first place. You’ve got lucky this far, but keep trying to fight it, and someday you’re bound to get caught.”

I grin. “By the Momma Bear?”

“You laugh now, but you know I’m right.”

Listening to my inner voice is what got me here in the first place. Everyone tried to warn me about my big, dumb brain. I should probably listen to her.

“Problem is, I’m tired of swimming. Period.”

She looks at me like I’m crazy. “You’re a billionaire. Just quit your job and live a real life.”

“It’s not the simple. People depend on me to pay their bills. I could quit, but then thousands would be out of jobs,” I tell her.

“Good point,” she says. “Never thought about that.”

It’s an unsolvable problem. Besides the obvious motives, one major motive being greed, that’s the sole reason why so many CEO’s stay with the ship.

“So what’re you going to do?” she asks.

I raise a brow. “About Mamma Bear?”

“Sure. It’s a simple equation,” she says. “If they’re trying to cancel it, how are you going to revive it? You need a plan.”

The answer is not to use Ali without asking. It’s a little too late now.

I shrug. “That’s what I can’t figure out.”

She snaps her fingers. It was a trick question. “Wrong,” she says. “You move on.”

Sammy comes to the front door. “Move on, daddy.”

Amanda stands on her soapbox, and my daughter jumps up and down to get as high up as her. “Who cares what the investors think? Do whatever you want.”

“They’ll pull me from the company,” I say.

As if the solution is obvious, she gives a laugh. “Duh, dude,” she says. “Isn’t that what you want? It’s the opposite of quitting. They’ll hire someone else. Everyone will keep their jobs.”

“Except me,” I say.

“Except you.”

I’m a little stunned. The idea of quitting was just entertainment. A fantasy, if anything. I wouldn’t know what to do with myself without those meetings, without arguing with Sandra, or without being forced to go over the photographs with Brian when the photos themselves look like they’re from a JC Penny catalogue. The lack of stress might end up killing me.

Sarcasm aside, she makes a good point. I don't need them. The shareholders can kick me out, prop up whatever publishing-tyrant that will do their bidding. Meanwhile, I'll be taking trips to the beaches around the world with my daughter and my brand new wife, Ali Greenwald.

That's right. She's wife material. That's how serious this is.

Amanda bends to greet Sammy. There's purple food dye smeared across her face. "Hello, Sammy. You look very pretty today."

She shows it off by angling her face higher. "I'm getting ready for the Easter bunny," she exclaims.

"That's coming up, ain't it?" she asks.

My daughter has the luxury of moving onto the next holiday in her head. For me, I'm stuck in a bed of candy hearts like it's Groundhog's Day, and I've got the worst sugar hangover I can remember.

By the time I get to Ali's house, I'm feeling pretty nervous. The talk with her friend eased my fears for a while. However, it seems to have led to an even bigger can of neurotic tendencies.

Ali steps inside the limousine wearing a classy dress that hugs the thighs just right and accentuates every curve on her body. It's the look of a ten. The shareholders are going to love her. I'm biting my nails to the bone, forehead creased like a lunatic, and I'm sure I've got guilty written all over my face with a permanent marker. If not now, definitely later, when I have to face Jim.

This has gotten so out of hand.

"Jesus," I whisper.

"It's not Easter yet," she jokes. "You don't have to worry about Jesus."

I shake my head. "No, it's just that you're just so fucking beautiful."

The joy of seeing me again shines across her face. "There's my handsome man."

I love this. I love her. If all this works out, I'm going to marry her. I'll call my diamond dealer as soon as tonight's fireworks fade.

Getting comfortable, she sits to my side, but quickly gravitates to her favorite spot against my lap. For her, nothing has changed. There's nothing to worry about. It's just a fun party that will bring us together. Then we can go home, fuck, and talk about our wildest hopes and dreams.

I briefly close my eyes, and try to feel that way, breathing in the scent of her shampoo. I wrap my arm around her, bringing her even closer to me. I don't want to lose her. "You're my girl," I whisper.

It's a desperate attempt to hold onto everything as it is, but she doesn't see it that way. And by the time we get to my office in downtown, she's straddling and kissing me again. We're insatiable together. It's like that leash tied us up at the dog park and never let go.

The driver opens the door. With my guilt pressuring me to give him more than my usual forty percent, I give him a much deserved tip. Not sure if he heard or saw me stuffing my face in Ali's pussy, but he must've felt the shocks shaking.

I stick a full stack of hundreds in his hand and stumble toward the door with Ali. Looking back, I see the driver pump his fist with a big smile on his face. It's a moment I'd love to take in, but Jim is in the lobby, and he's got the happiest look on his face as someone talks his ear off. He looks up, and his expression just drops.

I make a quick note to wire the driver another check.

Seeing Jim makes my heart sink, but I knew this was going to happen. You can't avoid a man with that much money. Eventually, he'll hire your family to rat you out. Sammy is pretty easy to bribe, too.

"Fuck me," I whisper.

Ali takes it as a command, rather than a statement every great man makes when he's, indeed, absolutely fucked. "Mm," Ali moans. "Maybe in the upstairs bathroom later?"

What have I done? I've created a monster. I once loved her spontaneous cooky teacher vibe, but little did I know it would add to the mayhem of the night.

As we enter the lobby, I sense the eyes, though I avoid it by looking at my new boots. The camera flashes come next, providing that quick hit of warmth. For Ali, it's new, exciting and fun. She digs her nose into my neck, laughing. We both run from the fake paparazzi pit Sandra hired to give it that much more edge.

"So exciting," Ali says. "The return of Mama Bear."

I take a millisecond to look at her. "You did not read Mama Bear."

"My chiropractor always had the latest copy," she says.

"I'm surprised he didn't try to rip the pages from its spine," I mutter. "Come on. Elevator to the upstairs extravaganza just opened. We can make it if we run."

These events are just another way to funnel in more donors. More investors can sign on to the project, which gives us more money to do whatever the fuck we want. It used to be cool to me. I'd live for these events. Networking was a dream come true.

I look at the inside of this building now as more of an obstacle course than a workplace. I have to figure out the best way to get upstairs to the main party without Jim getting a word in.

First, we dodge the cameras. Then, we smash through the elevator doors right before they close. I hear Jim shout my name, even see his mustached mouth turn to the side, but I manage to get away in the nick of time.

The upstairs is harder to navigate. The main bosses are Sandra and Brian, but Jim will be out for revenge in a couple of minutes. Mark my words, he'll comb through the cubicles, overturn chairs, and bark my name like a faithful watch hound. There's no avoiding this.

Unless...

If I time our movements just right, I can manage to hit all three targets at different intervals *without* the others catching it. I'll need to separate from Ali as soon as Jim makes eye contact with me. That way, he'll get a look at her from the bar. He'll want to talk to her, which at that point, we'll have already discussed all of the no-no's I've been freaking out about for days. If I'm successful, I will have pulled off the most complicated heist in the history of dating.

Suddenly, I'm feeling more confident.

As the elevator doors open, my staff proves me right. I'm met with a loud applause, and I give a few humble head turns and waves. There are pictures Brian shot hanging on the walls like they're great works of art. The main focus is a brown station wagon with decaying stickers near an abandoned gas station with strategically placed prop tumbleweeds scattered around the nearby desert. There's even a dog, but it's a Labrador. The replica is never the same, I guess.

I think I know what they're trying to recreate, but it was nothing like how it went down. Luckily, they did a bad enough job at recreating the submitted idea that Ali doesn't seem to notice the connection to our chance meeting. She simply points at the station wagon. "Hey, it looks like the piece of crap I left in your driveway."

It's just a test run. They still need the model, the content – her story. But they're never going to get it. And when everyone finds out, I'm either going to lose my job or lose the woman of my fucking dreams. Who knows? Maybe I'll lose both.

I push through the wild crowd, unable to focus. The party is bumping. People are already far too drunk. I quickly pull her toward a waitress with some champagne flutes. "A toast to you," I say, handing her a glass.

She scrunches her nose in that cute way again. "To us."

I look into her eyes and drink the whole glass. It tastes more refreshing than water, so I grab another and knock it back as soon as Ali turns away.

So far, so good. But I can't count on things to roll through in the smoothest way. Things are bound to go wrong. Lines have been made, but paths are crossing. I could end up with the trifecta of a conversation with Brian, Jim, and Sandra talking Ali's ear off. I can only imagine what they'd say about me.

Sandra and Brian are positioned at opposite ends. They never could stand each other, so they avoid taking the same path. It's perfect.

I make eye contact with Brian first, but Sandra takes the opportunity to smash through his line of attack. Brian deflates and cuts in the opposite direction, successfully avoiding my hyper-managerial team leader.

Ali looks at her with contempt. I return my team leader's very business-oriented look on me with a head nod. "Sup."

"Sup?"

I shrug. "Yeah. Sup."

Her face sags. "Don't patronize me with bullshit small talk, Marc," she says. "I've been working twenty-four-seven to give you what you need."

I grab another flute of champagne, trying to relax as best I can. "I wasn't aware I needed this."

"Yeah, well, Jim has called looking for you over—"

Not wanting to listen to this rehearsed speech inside Sandra's head, I cut her off. "Yeah, I know. He's called me something like fifty times. I'm just not in the mood to deal with it, Sandra. The thought of it almost makes me sick."

At work, I'm not as honest as I can be. I used to think it might cost me to share my true feelings on the business. Amanda helped clear that gap. Ever since I had that little talk with Ali's teacher friend, I've felt able to remove myself from the business drama. Then again, I'm still here.

"You're not in the mood?" Sandra asks.

And then, to my shock, Ali gets defensive. "Do you have to repeat everything he says?"

Sandra looks between both of us. She's malfunctioning like a broken computer. No one stands up to my team leader, except me.

Sandra has had an easy time calming my outbursts in the past. That's part of why I hired her. Now, I just need her to shut up and leave me alone for the night.

Thank God, for Ali.

Sandra shoots her head forward like a chicken. "Excuse me?"

Ali faces Sandra with the tenacity of a WWE fighter. "You've been eyeing my man ever since he walked in the room. He's doing everything you want. What else could you possibly ask him to do?"

Unsure if I should butt in, I try to take Ali's hand. She flings it away. "No. I'm tired of this woman always coming after you when you gave her everything and more."

This could get heated if I don't intervene. "Sandra, Ali's right. I'm here, at the party I dreaded going to. Can you just find it within your heart to relax? We'll talk in a few days when *Mama Bear* is thrown in the shit-can with the rest of my moronic ideas."

Sandra huffs. She puffs. And then she tries to blow my house down. "I was there for you when all that shit went down seven years ago. I was there when the company almost went bankrupt in 2009. And I was there when you stopped caring about your employees," she says, turning to face Ali. "Be careful. I've seen women come and go. In the end, all men are unfaithful."

"Please leave," Ali growls.

Some people look in her direction, then back at me. I give a funny and confused face, act like I'm too stupid to understand my team leader's outburst, and then I slowly deflate onto the floor as a pile of skin. That was pretty awful. Apart from Sandra being a total tyrant, she's been pretty faithful to me. There's no time to ruminate over this, though. Ali is worked up.

“I’m sorry about that,” I mutter. “Sometimes she can be a real —”

“Bitch?”

I laugh. “I was going to say stickler.”

Ali leans into me, kissing so long I almost forget what just happened. “I like Bitch better,” she whispers.

“Cut her a little slack. She’s been faithful to the company for twelve years now,” I say.

“Faithful, my ass,” she says. “She’s spreading lies about you, Marc Wylan.”

There’s a sliver of doubt that hangs in her eyes now. It kills me, but I’m not going to blame Sandra any more than I already have. She’s right. This is my doing, and I need to take care of it. Eventually, things will smooth over.

Brian catches eyes with me. He resumes course.

I drop my gaze and stare at Ali’s curves. A rush of pleasure goes straight to my cock. “Speaking of faithful people and asses, I wanted to introduce you to our in-house photographer.”

As soon as I finish the speech, Brian is there, and he’s got a glazed look in his eyes. “Buddy,” he says, bringing it in for a hug.

He squeezes so tight it pushes the air out of me. Then he starts forcibly rocking me by the shoulder. “Buddy,” he repeats with a scary grin.

“Brian,” I say. “My best friend in the entire world.”

He’s staring in my eyes harder than Ali has been all night. “You know, I gotta say, I took the finest cab ride downtown the other day. But when I got there, I didn’t have enough money to pay the driver.”

This is about to blow up in my face, isn’t it? “That must’ve been really annoying,” I say.

He bends forward, laughing. It goes on far too long, rising like the crescendos in that opera, Swan Lake. Ali starts to mimic

his laughter, and I wonder if it's out of fear for her life.

After what feels like minutes, he smacks my chest and cools off. "Well, you know, we ended up settling it down in Capitol Hill. Twenty minutes from my house."

"Hm. After rush hour? You didn't try Uber?"

His grin fades. "I use Lyft, and I don't store my card on my phone," he grunts, mouth far too close for my liking. "I walked the whole way home."

He's mad at me. I get that. This party, however, was not my idea. Not to mention, I had too much on my plate. I had to send him away. If this were any other time, he'd understand. He'll get over it.

I use the last of my charm to sway the conversation. "Insane," I say. "By the way, I love the shots. You really captured a new vibe with this one. It's adventurous, rebellious, and it even has this mystical flair. I'm obsessed."

Those are adjectives that come to mind when I think of the desert. In reality, his photographs look like a Levi's metro station ad.

He can't deny that ego boost. All artists admire their work. "You really think it's mystical?"

I adjust my face. "Well, it's just a little spice," I lie. "At least, that's what came to my mind."

He continues as if I never spoke. "Because I totally thought it was mystical. I mean, check out that purple mountain we used for the backdrop."

"Catch me smoking some patchouli up there," I say.

Chuckling, he takes a step back, dancing to his own rhythm. "Vision quest, baby," he chants.

Ali and I laugh. "He's really funny," she whispers in my ear. "You should promote him."

He takes her hand, lips rounding over her knuckles for a thick kiss. Jealousy burns through my stomach. "Love this woman, by the way."

“Ah, forgive me,” I say. “I didn’t introduce you.”

“We were interrupted by Sandra,” Ali says.

Brian rolls his eyes. “We’ve learned how to deal with that one,” he says. “Give her a glass of chardonnay, and she’s set.”

“Anyway, I’m glad you came. Everyone’s been dying to meet you,” he says.

Ali touches her clavicle. “Really? Me?”

“Of course,” Brian lies. “You’re like a celebrity around here.”

I’d really like to kiss her, to feel her ride my cock up and down. This party is a drag. Sandra is gone, and Jim is nowhere in sight. It feels like I already won. Can’t we leave?

“A celebrity. Wow, did you hear that, Marc. You have some competition.”

Move on over, Brian.

The compliments are seemingly never-ending. “You are wonderful, hot, and the fact that you’re on board with all this is fucking killer,” Brian adds.

It’s the one thing I wish he didn’t add.

“Of course I’m on board,” she says. “He was acting like this party was going to be the worst thing in the world. Other than Sandra, I’m having a blast. In fact, I think you’ll find out I’m a pretty supportive woman.”

Ali is taking to Brian’s good natured spirit, but she doesn’t realize he’s a scorpio. He can be really twisted, even while bearing a calm smile. “The original idea Marc gave was good. Don’t get me wrong. I just thought adding a little extra to it would really perfect it.”

She bounces. “Oh! What was your original idea? I want to hear it.”

I start to pull her away. “I’m getting thirsty. Are you getting thirsty?”

“I’m okay,” Ali says with a big smile.

I force a tongue against my bottom lip. If I push hard enough, I might not be able to talk again.

At this moment, the elevator door rings a bell. To my horror, I watch the doors open. Jim is sporting the look of an off-duty cop on the prowl for a local bounty. It doesn't take long for him to find us. He starts marching in our direction.

Brian doesn't realize what he's doing. He's about to betray me to my face. The image of Brutus killing Julius Caesar springs to mind. It was a bad idea to push him into that cab.

"The original idea was simple. We needed a new push. Think nostalgic," he says.

"Like the eighties?" she asks.

My eyes are facing Jim as he maneuvers through a rambunctiously dense crowd. "Eighties are chic," I say. "Sixties inspire a sense of freedom. Revolution, a change. Yada-yada. We wanted something that conveyed something that reflects the times."

"I like it," she says.

My mouth is drier than the time I smoked pot before Biology 101 in college. I didn't smoke anything in years, so it must be stress. Regardless, Jim is getting closer, and I need an excuse. The outside bar is perfect. There's a crowd of people that part like the Red Sea to Moses. I can only hope they'll close the gap behind us.

"Brian, it was delightful," I say. "Now, I'd like to get drunk."

He holds up his vodka-soda. "Cheers, old friend."

Sandra is gone. Brian's ego is satisfied. I've soared through every conversation with flying colors, but there's still one mega-boss left: Big Jim.

"I'm really not that thirsty," Ali says.

"I know, but I can't stand and talk about business for this long. It turns my brain into Jell-O," I say.

She shrugs and pushes her smile to the side. "I don't know – I think it's kind of exciting."

“I’m acting picky again, aren’t I?” I ask.

“I mean, I get your point. It’s boring for you. But I’ve never been to an event like this. Everything is so important, so bright, and flashy.”

“Yeah, you know how when you go camping the moths fly directly into the fire?” I ask.

She touches my arm. “Oh, stop it. This isn’t that bad.”

Goosebumps rise across my skin. My dick is firm and pushing against my pants. I want her so fucking bad, it hurts.

I pull her toward the alcohol and flash two fingers at the bartender. They’ve been trained to know what drink I order, but when he hands me two old fashioned’s made with Jim Beam, I frown. Without making a scene, I tip the guy a hundred, and hand Ali her drink.

She takes one sip before setting it down. “You okay?” she asks.

Jim has spotted me again. It’s unclear whether or not he ever lost me in the first place.

“Me? I’m fine,” I say.

She rubs my arm. It feels so good, but I can tell she knows something is up. “You sure? You were pretty worked up earlier.”

“Maybe it was our talk with Sandra,” I say. “The talk with Brian was nice.”

“Well, cheer up. We don’t have to stay very much longer,” she says.

That steals my attention away from Jim’s body pushing through the forest of people. “You sure?”

She bites her bottom lip and lays her hands on my chest, rubbing the whole way down. “I’d like to try out your photo room again,” she says.

My lips curl into a smile. “What did you have in mind?”

She slowly forms her mouth around mine. It melts through my fear and anxiety like Xanax. “Something raw and tantric,” she says. “Something just for us.”

I try to swallow, but I end up just coughing up my whiskey. “Yes, please. Let’s go. Now.”

But I sense what’s coming. The storm. Everything always gets quiet, calm, and sexy before a storm.

With fire in his eyes, Jim kicks the door open. As if it were instinct, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cigar. He doesn’t even light it. It just sits, bent between two crowns. “Marc!”

I look away, knowing it’s a futile move.

“Don’t think you can avoid me now,” he shouts.

Ali steps forward. “Who is that?”

“A shareholder I’d rather not talk to,” I say.

She squints her eyes. “He looks really familiar.”

“That’s because he’s got the face of an asshole,” I say. “It’s really common in America.”

Sticking out her tongue and making a goofy face to me, she says, “Ha-ha. But he really does. Jeeze. It’s like right on the back of my mind.”

My heart starts pounding again. I hear the driving rhythm in my ears. “I’m going to go deal with him for a second. You good to wait here?”

She shakes her head. “I’d rather be with you, to be honest.”

My throat closes. “Trust me. You don’t want to meet this guy.”

She looks at me sharply. “I can handle myself, Marc Wylan,” she says.

There’s no getting out of this now. Jim’s going to lay it on me, and I’m going to lose the only woman I’ve ever loved. I never wanted to save this stupid magazine. It was a job I needed to take on, thrust upon me by the leaders of my staff. What a cruel world.

Jim's scratchy voice pokes through his massive mustache. "Marc fucking Wylan, man of mystery. What gives me the honor?"

I suck in my cheeks, trying not to get mad or panic. First thing's first, I change the subject by introducing Ali. I'm hoping he's taken in by her beauty enough to not dwell on business affairs. "This is Ali Greenwald," I say. "My girlfriend."

I feel Ali's eyes turn toward mine. She nudges my chin. "Girlfriend?"

It's a little embarrassing litigating this whole thing at an office party. Nevertheless, it's something that gets Jim's attention.

He cries out with laughter. "You mean, you didn't know?"

"This is a first for Marc," she says. "Usually, he asks for permission."

My cheeks are hot, but I'd rather this be at my expense than hers.

I pat his arm and give him the usual bullshit line every CEO gives at the unveiling events. "Anyway, I'm glad we talked. The future is always bright when we can think and act boldly," I say.

He grabs my suit jacket. "Not so fast."

I gulp.

Ali's looking at me curiously. "What's gotten into you?"

Jim's starting to win. The goal posts are turning on me. But then Jim does something very stupid. "Honey, do you mind if we talk business for a few moments?"

Her head rocks forward and back like a bobblehead. "Uh..."

It gives me a chance to play hero. "Whatever you have to say, you can say around her."

Except, Jim doesn't give a shit about heroes and villains. He told me once the whole dichotomy between the two was a made up fantasy to keep everyone bickering. Maybe he's right,

but it doesn't change the fact that he's pretty damn good at playing a villain.

"Three old fashioned. Glenlivet Distilled," he says.

I raise my voice. "Jim."

Ali stops me from overreacting. "No. It's fine. I'll get the ape his drink," she says.

Jim doesn't even flinch.

This is going better than I thought. He's drunk. In about two minutes, people will demand I grab him a cab. I'll look like a fucking hero all the way back to my photo room.

My heart pounds against my chest. Adrenaline surging, I clench my molars and take a thousand deep breaths. It's been years since I've felt like I was winning. Tonight could be my lucky night.

"You've seen my phone calls," he says.

I nod. "It's only been a few days," I argue, spinning to show him the work my staff has made for the team. "We've been setting this up. It's all for you."

He cracks his neck and bites down harder on his cigar. "I didn't need all of this. I needed you to call me back."

Narrowing my eyes, I pat him on the shoulder. This time, I'm the one squeezing his muscle. He doesn't squirm nearly hard enough, but it's something. "I don't work for you." I point to my name on the side of the building. "See that? That's my name."

"We are the ones propping you up," he growls. "Don't tempt me. I will shut you down."

People are starting to look. I can hear the faint tones of guests whispering.

"Then shut me down," I say. "You think I need this place? I have a couple of billion. It may not be as much as you own, but it's enough."

He wobbles. Suddenly, he doesn't have much to say. I've found the keys to his control, and it's throwing him for a loop.

I look at him as if he was under a microscope. “You okay, Jim?”

He sucks in a macho laugh, turning to face the crowd of gathered people with a slick smile. “Am I okay?”

I wave to the people watching gleefully. “It’s all right. Nothing to see here. Just a little too much fun at the party,” I say.

I look over at Ali. She’s got three drinks in her hands. I motion to her to set one down. It’s safe now, I think.

Jim catches my motion and scoffs. When Ali returns empty-handed, he’s fuming.

I make eye contact with another guest that looks vaguely familiar. “If you’ll excuse us, we have other people we need to talk to.”

Jim raises his brow. “Wait, a second,” he says. “I’m not through with you. I want to talk to the model.”

Ali leans forward, flattered. “Oh, I’m not a model. I’m just a teacher, but thank you.”

I try to pull her away. That was our moment to leave. After one compliment, she’s ready to talk the idiot’s ear off.

His movements are unstable, and his speech is slurred. “Oh, I’m sure you’re a fine teacher,” he says, grinning far too wide for my liking.

“We have to go,” she says.

Jim grabs her hand. “Before you do, I need to say one thing to your himbo here.”

Himbo. Nice.

“All good. We’re just going to make our way to the elevator,” I say, words dropping like broken piano keys.

“If you would’ve just called me back, I could’ve told you the news,” he says to me.

“What news?” Ali asks.

“Look, honey, I didn’t want to hurt your feelings tonight,” he says. “But your man has left me no choice.”

She scrunches her face. “Why would my feelings be hurt?”

He sucks in a tired, drunk breath.

It doesn't matter what I do. I can't stop someone from speaking. He's about to spill the beans on my elaborately stupid plan to save my own ass at the expense of her. I didn't see it that way at the time, but I wasn't in love with Ali back then.

I was arrogant. My ego was bigger than Brian's.

“Because we went with a different woman,” he says.

Ali looks at me. “Okay, now I'm lost.”

Jim chuckles. “Jesus, Marc. Do you tell his lady anything?”

I don't have to look at Ali to know that her eyes are on fire. This is worse than if Brian shouted it out on the rooftops.

“What's going on, Marc?” she asks.

Facing her, I'm reminded of the first time we met. Only, this time, I'm Ragamuffin, and Jim is Rowdy. She's going to side with him, and I'll be left with the assholes in this building. I'll still be the same man I was before I met her. That doesn't seem good enough.

Any hint of a good time falls from my face. “It was just a stupid plan,” I say. “A horrible idea.”

She taps her heel. “Tell me.”

Here it goes. “I sort of, kind of told the shareholders you'd help out with the magazine.”

“Help out,” she repeats. “What the hell does that even mean, Marc? Just tell me the truth.”

I exhale, lowering my head for her to decapitate me. “I made up a story to keep this stupid company going,” I say. “At the time, it seemed like a good idea. We just met. You were inspiring.”

She slides her head to the left. “I don't believe this.”

There's no use in stopping, so I keep going. “I told them you had agreed to model. I said we could use you for the first issue

of Momma Bear.”

“You gave them our story,” she says. “The gas station. My car...”

Ready to come to terms with the reality that this is probably ending, I nod. “Yeah. I guess I did.”

I didn’t realize my stupidity until recently. That doesn’t score me any brownie points. It just makes me look worse.

“This whole thing,” Jim waves, “is about you.”

She looks disgusted with me. “Is that why you showed me your photography room?” she asks.

“No, that was a coinci—”

“And when were you going to tell me?”

I feel claustrophobic, like the walls are closing in on me. My instinct is to do what she did on the night of our first dinner, run. Knowing my lung capacity, I wouldn’t get too far.

“So you staged this whole thing,” she says.

“It was more of a half-assed thing that evolved after people in my staff took it to the next level,” I say.

She gravitates away from me. Her hand trembles as she brings her hands above her head. “Staged this whole thing just to get laid,” she shouts. “Pretty good plan, right?”

Fuck.

I know the words she’s referencing. They’re mine. Those are the stupid fucking words I used last night. Right before I ate her pussy. It was a joke. One particularly real joke.

Well, you know what they say: *You are what you eat*. I’m an ass and a total pussy.

She tunnels right through me, carrying a storm throughout the lobby, until she’s finally outside. The two glass doors swing shut so hard I brace for them to crash. “Ali,” I cry out.

But I know there’s no stopping her.

There’s no winning. The final bosses are just too strong. No matter what, they always win. That’s how this game goes. I

have all the money I could ever dreamed of, but I'm the biggest loser in the world.

"Well, that's over," I mutter.

I'm so heart broken I can't even feel. The weight is heavy, but it's like I'm not even there. Did the last week even happen?

Jim watches her leave, pleased as a wolf. "She's something else. You lucked out for a few days."

"Yeah," I say. "Glad I came tonight."

I pull out my phone to text the babysitter. *Any chance you can stay the night? Ali left, and there's a lot I need to take care of here. I'm sorry, but I'll triple your pay.*

She can read between the lines. Ali dumped my ass. I need to spend some quality time in my office with a bottle of Glenlivet.

Amanda returns my text, enthused.

Absolutely!

I turn toward my office, but Jim grabs me by the shoulder. He pulls me in with a tight squeeze. He reeks like bourbon. "I don't know what's gotten into you. I was trying to give you a chance with this magazine fiasco. Maybe that gave you some stress. I can't claim to understand the mind of modern day CEO's. They act like a bunch of children," he says.

"What are you trying to say?" I ask.

He pats my shoulder. "From here on out, use your telephone."

ALI

I kept my phone off the entire night, but it wasn't enough to keep him from texting me. "*Please call me. I need to explain.*"

Men always need to explain when they're caught. But I didn't leave to hear an explanation. He still has money and notoriety, things he so clearly valued over me. When the seasons change, he'll be fine. I'm not sure if I will, though.

If this were a book, it would be called *Beauty & the Bastard*.

Unfortunately, It's not a fictional story. It's a tiny window into my life. And though I've hit another rough patch, I refuse to be bitter about it. I'm going to keep my pride in a little box near my bed, in tact for the next season of heartbreak. Maybe that one will go a little better.

I'm not mad at him for what he did. The idea was idiotic, and I'm not sure it would have worked, even if I agreed to the shoot. *Mama Bear* sucked. That's why no one read it. It doesn't matter if you hire Angelina Jolie for the job. People still won't shell out the ten dollars to see some half-naked, plaid-shirt-wearing lady straddling a gas pump. It's been done to hell and back.

No, I'm not mad at him for acting like a dumb puppy dog. I'm mad at him for lying. Not only did he lie, he did it right to my face. Maybe it's petty. I go back and forth on that. Some girls are far too forgiving. I guess I'm somewhere in between.

When I wake up, the morning light filters in through my broken window panes. Scrapped lesson plans line the walkway

inside. There's an ancient Burger King bag scrunched up on the sofa. A bra hangs from my door knob. I guess I've spent so much time with Marc I forgot I used to live like this.

It's not depressing, I tell myself. It is what it is. Back to the basics.

After throwing away the BK bag, and some other embarrassing food purchases, I sit on the couch and reach for the backpack that contains my laptop. My hand swipes through air. I left my laptop at Marc's place.

Okay, that's fine. I have some grading to do, so I get up and dig through my desk drawers in the corner of the room. Of course, they're empty, spare a few loose sheets and colored grading pens. My school papers are at Marc's house. I left them inside my favorite room, the one with all the beautiful books. Even my dog is still there. What will happen to my beloved station wagon...?

My entire life is at Marc's house. I thought I'd have more time. But I don't want to see him again. It's too embarrassing to think about what happened. Using my image to bolster his own is a new low. But I'll need to find a way to get my things back.

The one thing I do have is my TV. It's a small twenty-some inch screen with a stick that streams all sorts of crap. Wanting to veg out, I scroll through the countless choices of entertainment. I can't focus on the titles. They all feel weirdly related to my life.

There's *Marc & Me*, a tearjerker romance about a couple who falls in love and gets an iguana. Next, there's *My Pal Sammy*, an animated, children's movie. Next on the list is *Rich Bitch*. That would've been me if I had no self-esteem.

I turn the TV off. I can't watch any of this stuff. These programs are supposed to help people escape from their lives, but clearly I need to move to a different country or something.

As I sit on my couch, surrounded by the disaster that is my life, I start to slip. I grab my phone, turning it on for the first

time in eight hours. The screen lights up with a flurry of messages.

Please hear me out. I know I'm stupid. I know I'm arrogant. But it's not what you think. Call me.

There are so much more. After a certain point, I wonder if he even went to bed at all last night. Finally, at the end of the long string of groveling texts, he admits defeat.

Maybe it's better this way. You were always too good for me.

The worst part of this is my lack of motivation. I'm not sure if I want him to give up so easily. When he first asked me out, he tried everything, including gifting me a book I could have exchanged for my own castle in the English countryside. I acted like I was too good for him. It was a cheap opportunity to feel better about myself.

I'm not better than anyone. I'm just a woman who had her heartbroken.

Marc's last text message leaves a hole. I start to remember how he was with Sammy. Careful and nurturing, always looking out for her since her mother died. He's been the faithful watchdog I wish I had growing up. And that's what makes this so hard. If anything, Marc deserves better.

We rode our relationship nice and slow. Everything was falling into place. The sex was great too. Marc was a real pleaser.

I sigh and head to my bed, my old source of comfort. Falling against the mattress, I calm down. It's going to be okay. This is life. It's just time to move on.

As soon as I close my eyes, my phone vibrates across my bedside table. Groaning, I hit the ignore button and turn to the other side. It goes off again.

Annoyed I can't even sleep in peace, I fling the covers up and pick up the phone. It's actually not who I expected. It's a text from Amanda.

Are you and my dad fighting?

I've never met Amanda's dad. Amanda didn't send this text message. I figure it's one cute little girl from Sammamish,

Washington. Sammy.

I didn't expect Amanda to stay the night. I wonder where Marc slept. The urge to text him seeps in, but I ignore it.

My first thought is that Marc is using his daughter to get me back. Of course, that's a wild assumption. I've got it in my head that everything is a weird elaborate game for Marc. But iff there's something he was honest about, it was his love for Sammy.

I stare at my phone, resisting the urge to respond. But when it goes off a second time, I feel really inclined to reply.

Will you still read to me?

It cracks my heart in half.

I was looking forward to spending more time with Sammy. But after Marc and I broke up in the most public way possible, I'm not sure it's wise to step foot in that house again.

But when she calls, I don't resist the urge to answer. I put my ear to that receiver, and I feel regret start to trickle in. "Ms. Greenwald?"

"Hi, Sammy. How did you get this number?" I ask.

"The phone," she says. "Rowdy misses you."

I'm sure he does.

She's eight years old. She's not supposed to know how to use the latest smartphone. "Does Amanda know you did that?"

I hear her run and shut a door. "No," she says. "Please don't tell her, Ms. Greenwald."

I sigh. "I won't tell her if you promise you'll stop stealing. It's not a good thing to do," I say.

"I know," she whispers. "But I didn't want to wait until Monday."

Collecting my thoughts before I speak, I nibble on the edge of my lip. "Look, Sammy," I mutter. "Life is complicated. Sometimes you like someone. Then they do something to make you mad."

“Like Xander,” she says. “He made me mad, so I pushed him.”

“Right. Like Xander.”

As soon as I say the words, I nearly drop the phone. That’s not what I meant. It’s also a stunning admission I didn’t expect to hear. Now that I think about it, she has had a couple of very intense temper tantrums. She was learning through me, and I failed her.

“Is it like that? Did you push my daddy?” she asks.

This isn’t how I wanted the conversation to run, so I steer it back to what she just told me. “Sammy, you know you can’t push Xander.”

“He said I’d give him cooties.”

Being an adult is a weird thing. We think we act differently, that our judgments and actions are more adjusted and even noble than a child’s version of the same. In the end, we’re not too far from each other.

“You can’t push someone just because you didn’t like what they said to you, Sammy.”

“Why? My dad did something stupid, and you made him sad,” she says.

“Did Amanda tell you that?” I ask.

“She said you didn’t make him sad, but I know my dad. It’s Sunday. He always takes me to the park on Sundays, but today, he didn’t. So you had to have hurt his feelings.”

Great problem solving skills. She must’ve learned them in my class.

Without knowing what else to say, I take a deep breath and feel the need to tell her the truth. “I liked your dad a lot,” I say. “Like, *a lot a lot.*”

“But you didn’t like me?” she asks.

“No, Sammy. I love you. You’re one of the most amazing girls I’ve ever met,” I say. “It’s just that, I’m in a weird place right now. I didn’t expect a lot of things to happen that did, and...”

I'm just rambling and hoping an eight year old girl can understand where I'm coming from. I don't even know where I'm coming from.

Sammy finishes my thoughts for me. "And now you're all alone?"

My sinuses swell as tears threaten to start dropping like bombs. I'm trying to be strong here, but it's really hard. "Yes, Sammy. I'm all alone," I whisper.

"Can we still be friends?" she asks.

Muting the phone, I cry. I can't help it.

I unmute the call. "Always," I say.

I got a window into their life, and it was wonderful. Truly everything I've ever imagined a family could be. But sometimes you have to let things go, even if it feels impossible.

The grief hits me in waves, each one harder than the last. "I have to go now, Sammy," I say.

"My daddy likes you a lot, by the way. He bought you a ring."

What?

"Amanda said I couldn't go in daddy's room, but I snuck and found it," she says.

That must be for someone else. Marc was into me, but he doesn't strike me as the type of guy to propose within a week of meeting. Then again, he's a guy that takes big risks for big rewards. Maybe he thought I was a prize worth taking a chance to keep.

That makes me feel kind of sorry for him. It's stupid. If I forgave him, it could open me up to more hurt. That's why I'm not forgiving him.

"My daddy doesn't like anyone," she says, giggling. "You're the only one."

Shit.

Did Marc really buy me a ring? I hope not. That would make this really hard to let go. Am I really that shallow? No. It's not about the stupid ring. It's about Marc taking the next step to propose.

Well, he ruined that. Not me.

"That's sweet of you to say."

"I didn't say it," she mutters. "He did."

"He told you I was the only one?" I ask.

"Yes, and he said you were wife material," she proudly declares.

Sammy is manipulative. If she's trying to get us back together, she knows exactly what she's doing. Soon, she'll be back to telling her dad I farted in class. I bet she can't wait for that.

At the very least, I need to get my bag, my car, and my dog from their house. After that, I can spend the rest of the year counting my blessings. If fate brings us together, so be it. But I'm not going to stay at their place long enough to find out right away.

"Is he home now?" I ask.

"No, he's still at work. He's always at work."

Another potential problem I've narrowly avoided.

From Sammy's end, there's a sharp knock on the door that turns into a swift pounding. "Open this door right now, Sammy. This is the third time you have stolen my phone."

Oh, jeez.

I hear them wrestle for control over the phone. Amanda grunts and exhales into the receiver. "Who is this?" she asks.

"Guess who?"

"Ali G," she says. "I'm really sorry about this. It's been a bit of a nightmare."

Sammy is screaming in the background. I picture her running around the room with Rowdy and Ragamuffin nipping at her heels, and it makes me laugh out loud.

“Something funny?” she asks.

“Just thinking about a good memory,” I say.

“Well, lucky you. It’s been a bit of a nightmare here.”

Visiting that house was a little chaotic at times, but it was never that bad. “Sammy giving you a hard time?”

“She keeps saying she misses you,” she says.

“Yeah. She told me that too.”

“Whatever happened last night, I don’t need to know the details. I just want to make one thing clear,” she says.

“Go ahead. I need some sagely advice.”

“You guys are perfect for each other,” she says.

“That’s not the advice I expected to hear,” I say.

“The truth hurts,” she says. “But it’s still the truth.”

“We are officially done,” I say.

“Everyone says that. I’ve told my ex-husband we’re done at least ten times, but I still keep calling him up for the d—”

“I get it,” I say. “And I thank you for your honesty. But right now, can we please just stop talking about this? I need some time.”

“I’m officially backing off.”

Feeling the stress of the day start to creep in, I rub my temples. “I’m assuming he’s not there, right? I still need to grab my things.”

“He hasn’t called or texted. He’s probably sleeping through a wicked hangover,” she says. “Your best bet is to leave now.”

It’s ten in the morning. If he slept anywhere, it was probably in his office. I hope. He mentioned once that he spend nights over there sometimes.

I’m just grabbing my things, not staying for dinner. It’s going to be fine. Maybe I’ll get one last look at his First Edition copy of *Pride and Prejudice*.

“I’ll be right over.”

MARC

The morning after the unveiling party, I wake up in my office chair. Drool runs down my chin, drying in the warm rays of the sun. The sight of Mount Ranier gives me a headache that makes me pray for a lobotomy. I reach for a glass of tepid water that's sitting on my desk. It tastes like heaven.

A familiar voice makes the pain swell. "Feeling okay?"

It's Sandra. She's a total ass-rider, but she's always been somewhat of an ally. Without her skills, I wouldn't have this job. In a way, I'm grateful for her micromanagement, even if she helped ruin last night. I'm not looking forward to hearing what she has to say about the party.

I manage to swivel my chair to face her, but it feels next to impossible. "I feel like shit."

"Just so you know, last night you texted me ten times in a row, freaking out," she says. "Lord only knows how much you texted Ali."

Texting a woman you like twice in a row is against the rules, but ten? That's a punishable offense. I don't even remember doing it. After Ali stormed out of the party, I grabbed the biggest bottle of dark alcohol, and walked straight into my office. There wasn't a chance in hell for me. Sometimes, giving up feels so good. It never feels the same the day after.

"Do you still have that dunce cap I wore at the Christmas office party a few years back?" I ask.

"Unfortunately, it flew into the fire pit and almost burned down the entire AirBnB," she says.

If I recall the events correctly, Brian ate some magic mushrooms and went on a solo vision quest. He seemed to be the only one having a good time the next day. “That’s the last time we partied in Joshua Tree,” I say.

“Memories,” Sandra says, stiff as a board.

“I miss those days,” I say.

“Well, I don’t,” she says. “And I didn’t come in here to reminisce.”

I laugh, anticipating the shit storm she’s about to drop in my lap. “Of course you didn’t,” I say. “Okay, on with the show then.”

She drops a folder onto my desk. “I came to tell you that *Mama Bear* is officially cancelled.”

I nod. “Figured as much.”

“Since you’re not capable of caring about our safety within the company, I reached out to Jim personally,” she says.

I widen my eyes. “And?”

She raises her chin. “We can all breathe a little easier with me at the wheel,” she says.

“He’s letting us stay?” I ask.

She loosens up enough to share a smile for once. “Yes,” she says. “We are staying in Seattle.”

“Even though most of those shareholders live in New York?” I ask.

“As long as we fly them over first class, they can handle the six hour flight,” she says.

This is incredible news. It means Sammy can stay at her new school and keep the friends she’s already made. It also means I’m going to be near the woman I lost it all with. It’s not going to be easy seeing her at school meetings, or at the park, or flirting with some hot stud who Dean Berman hires out of spite for me.

No, this is not incredible news for me. I have to get her back. I'm just not sure what the best method is for doing that.

I stand. "This is perfect," I say. "The entire staff can keep their jobs. We can find another acquisition to take on. The world is our oyster."

The excitement on Sandra's face is so palpable it makes me feel bad. And falling into the old habit of working obsessively isn't going to make me feel any better. It's just a habit, something I've grown accustomed to doing when the going gets really tough. I'm not saying it out loud, but I feel like absolute shit.

I loved Ali. She was my person, but we needed more time. Now, there's no going back.

I don't want this job. I just want her in my family.

"I have an idea," I say.

Sandra drops her smile. "Then you should shut your mouth fast and throw it in the trash," she says. "Your ideas suck. You need to have less of them."

Clearly, she's right. Everyone I love ends up running for the hills, or they die. That's why I think this idea in particular is a decent one. If everyone is so repulsed by me, it might be better if I just live in the hills instead. When you're unwanted, it's better to stand to the side.

"Just hear me out," I say.

"I'm done hearing you out, Marc. There's nothing I would rather do less than to hear you out."

She's going to want to hear this, so I don't let her stop me. "I want you and Brian to be partners. And I want to step down. You take over. Brian gets thirty percent. I don't know. We'll figure out."

I'm just spitting things out before my headache takes over and stops me from driving home later.

She stands, unable to accept it. "Marc..."

“I’m serious, Sandra. I’m done,” I say with a tone that lets her know how serious I am. “I think I’ve been done for a long time.”

She doesn’t know what to say, so I keep going. “It’s a much overdo gift,” I say. “You’ve been propping up the company for years. You were my secretary. Then, you quickly excelled to be the best team leader I’ve ever hired. Now you’re at the very top, and you’re going to roll in the money. Take the gift.”

She blushes. “This is... too much.”

“Sandra, I don’t want it. It’s toxic for me. Besides, I need to see my daughter more,” I say, turning to stare at Mount Ranier. I’ve always wanted to hike something like that mountain. I’ve just never had the chance to find that adventure. Maybe that Mama Bear idea is rubbing off on me. How much is a bulk order of patchouli soap again?

Sandra is tearing up.

“There’s a lot I need to take care of,” I say. “Just promise me one thing.”

The tears finally spill over. She paces the room, fanning her face. “Anything,” she says. “Keep talking. Don’t mind me.”

“Don’t ever talk badly about Ali again,” I say. “And if you see her again, treat her with the utmost respect and kindness. Apologize.”

“I will,” she says.

“Promise me.”

She furrows her brows. “She’s not your girlfri—”

“Promise.”

She bends her neck. “I promise,” she says. “That was... wrong of me.”

“You were taking out your frustration with me on her,” I say.

“You’re a bastard sometimes,” she says.

“I’m sure she’d agree with you.”

I've never been good at consoling people when they cry, but this is kinda nice. Brian will make a stink about the thirty percent thing, but thirty percent of a billion is still three hundred million dollars. "You deserve it," I say, standing. "As for me, my time is done here."

She dampens the tears with a tissue. "No, it isn't," she says. "You'll be here for the next holiday party."

I laugh. Probably true.

The holidays are behind us. Soon, spring will bring its healing showers. And then, in the summer, the weather will be stunning. Everyone will spend their hours outside. It's the perfect time to go on a walk or, you know, take your dog with you.

"Gotta take care of things, Sandra. Have a great day."

Ali probably hates me right now. But I'm on a mission to get her back.

ALI

A Prius arrives to pick me up. It's not a stretch limo by any means, but that's okay. I don't need the glitz and glitter Marc offered me last week. I'd rather live a humble life, anyway.

Oh, who am I kidding? I'd kill to ride in comfort.

The man in the driver's seat looks young. His hair is long and greasy, barely covered by a beanie. The vehicle smells like a wet dog.

The driver turns up the song on the radio. It's an electronic dance tune with a beat that is practically ear-shattering. The driver turns it up even louder. "Cool if I max out the volume for a bit?"

I throw my hands over my ears, but it's not enough to dampen the noise. "Um, actually, I'm sorta trying to concentrate," I say.

"What?" he yells.

"Silence would be nice, actually."

"I can't hear you."

"Never mind."

He seems to hear that just fine. "Rad. Holler if you need anything!"

That's exactly what I'll do. I'll holler, you jerk.

For most of the drive, I lean back and close my eyes. I try not to relive every good moment I had with Marc and Sammy, but it's just not possible. The grass is always greener on the other

side, and I'm on that other side, trying to see through the window to new pastures, but the window is just too dark to see out of.

The driver snaps me out of my depressive thoughts. He's looking in his sideview mirror, mumbling to himself. "Come on, man," he whispers, tapping the steering wheel.

Blinker on, he's so focused on the car next to us that I have to take a look. There's a jet-black car in the other lane, speeding. The figure behind the tinted glass isn't paying attention to us, but he sure is in the way.

"I can't get over," he says. "This guy won't let me in."

"Can you speed up?" I ask.

"I can try," he says.

He floors it, attempting to get over so he can make the exit. The black car does the same move, blocking us from getting into the exit lane.

I recognize this car. It's a BMW M-Series with a custom paint job. This is Marc's car.

Fate is beyond twisted.

"Might have to take the next exit," he says.

"Oh, no you don't. You get in that lane if it's the last thing you do," I say.

If this is a race to the finish line, we're neck and neck. After a few seconds of speeding next to each other, he looks over. At first, he doesn't seem to think much of it. But after a few more seconds, he notices me. I see him mouth something like my name before slamming on the breaks.

As we're nearing the point where the freeway merge ends, he lets my car pass. We speed through the finish line without a moment to spare. But the problem wasn't that he was beating me. It was that I didn't expect him to get home so early.

Pulling into his gravel driveway, I feel my heart start to pound, rather than it sink. I didn't expect to see him today. I just wanted to get my things back.

Taking a few seconds to breathe, I lean back. The Prius driver turns. “I hope you give me five stars.”

I exhale and open the door. “Sure. Five stars. Whatever.”

Marc is standing near his car. He’s not saying a word, but his eyes are all over me. He looks like he’s searching for something to say. We both are, but none of us can seem to find the right words.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hi. I mean, hey,” he says. “Didn’t expect you to come over today.”

I take a few steps toward the door, shooing away the urge to come up and give him a big hug. “Yeah. I got a call from your daughter. She was pretty broken up about what happened.”

He laughs, thinking I’m joking. When he sees that I’m not, he changes the expression on his face. “Wait. How did Sammy...”

A tinge of betrayal comes to the surface. “You must’ve told Amanda,” I say. “It doesn’t matter. I’m sure you were just relaying the situation, so she knew you wouldn’t be coming home.”

“You heard I spent the night at the office?” he asks.

“I’m looking at your hair. It’s pretty obvious, Marc.”

He nods, scratching the back of his head. He’s still handsome, but his clothes are wrinkled. The front of his hair looks like a chaotic tidal wave. Bags have formed under his eyes. “I fell asleep in my office chair,” he says. “It’s remarkable I didn’t fall.”

He mimics sleeping with a really dumb look on his face.

I’m trying not to smile or laugh, but I still jive with his sense of humor. Unfortunately, compatibility doesn’t just go away because someone gets hurt. Well, maybe for some. For me, it’s not that easy. I don’t like to let go of unexplored possibilities.

“I take it you came here to grab your things,” he says. “Don’t let me hold you up. They’re right inside.”

I start to walk toward the door, taking note that he isn't following close behind. "You coming?" I ask.

"I thought I'd wait outside. Gives you more time away from me," he says.

"It's your house, Marc," I say. "Quit acting weird. You can come inside."

Stiffly thanking me, he follows me in and shuts the door. Ragamuffin betrays my quiet footsteps by barking. Rowdy slides into the room, barreling toward me. I put out my hand, and he slips into the *sit* position. "Good boy," I say.

"He's a much better boy than me," Marc jokes.

That gets a quiet chuckle out of me, as well as a lingering smile. Still, I don't waste time near Marc. I don't want to smell his cologne, or keep hearing his stupid dad jokes. I don't want to see Sammy, and I don't want to stand in this giant, cozy house, knowing it could have been so different.

Those are things that will keep me here forever. And I just have to let go.

I head into the family room, inhaling the smell of old, expensive parchment for the last time. "Here are your things," he says, pointing to my bag on the table. A book is sitting on top.

"Marc," I whisper. It's that copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, First Edition.

"I don't need it," he says. "I thought you could have it. You'd enjoy it more than me."

Feeling melancholia tug on my heartstrings, my eyes start to water. I didn't know I'd miss this place so much. Now that I'm here, I don't really want to leave.

I come up to the book, slowly dragging my fingers over the binding. "Marc, you know I can't take this."

"You're taking it," he says. "If you want, you can read it to the class."

I laugh, tears falling down my face. Even though I'm facing the other way, I think he knows I'm crying. "I'm not sure second graders will enjoy it," I say.

"Well, in any case, it's yours."

I look up from the book. Amanda is in the hall with Sammy. My friend is looking at me with empathy in her eyes. At the same time, she looks very uncomfortable. I wish she didn't see me like this.

I wave to her. She gives a wave back.

"Mr. Wylan, I'm going to go now," she says.

Marc gives her a pretty hefty wad of cash before seeing her to the door. When she's gone, it's just us three, the family that couldn't be.

"Well, I got all my things," I say.

Marc sucks in his lips, seemingly occupied on his thoughts. "You sure the station wagon will start?"

It's another joke, but it doesn't hit right. And it just makes me realize that if I don't leave now, I never will. "Only one way to find out."

Sammy marches into the room. "Hearie! Hearie!"

Marc turns, chest rising. For the first time since we the day we met, I see tears in his eyes. He's trying harder than ever before to hold them back. I can see the physical pain, the emotional wrought that this has taken on him, and I recognize it as my own because I'm right there with him. This is shit. To protect my heart, I had to be the one to call it off, but nobody really wins.

We all just lose.

Tears spill down his cheeks, resting in his stubble. He looks years older, as if one small fiasco can wreck someone beyond repair. "Sammy, not now," Marc says.

Sammy won't stop. She's in one of her moods again. Strutting around the room like a queen, she yells, "Hearie! Hearie!"

Marc grabs her. She kicks him once in the chest and another time in the balls. Even in his down moments, he's gentle with her. My dad would've spanked me to high hell and back.

He falls to the floor with a soft thud. "Sammy, stop."

Does she stop? No. Instead, she picks up the pace. She runs across the room, flinging her dress above her head, showing her butt to everyone in the household. Chaos takes over, and soon, she's running over the sofa, knocking over a lamp in the process.

Up against the calamity of the situation, I just snap.

I walk right over to her, take her hand, so she can't run away. She can kick me in the balls if she wants. I'm not budging. "Enough is enough, young ma'am."

"No," Sammy squeals, pulling.

I point to Marc. He's a shell of a man, breathing on the rug. "You need to apologize to your dad right now."

She bucks. She kicks. She fights me. "No, no, no."

However, eventually, she stops. And that's when the hurt forms in her eyes. "Daddy..."

She breaks down, scream piercing my ears. It's hard to hear what she's saying over her breathing.

Finally able to stand, Marc cautiously approaches his daughter. "Sammy, what has gotten into you?"

Marc takes her in his arms, hugging her with so much love it breaks my heart. "It's okay," he whispers. "Remember what I told you? It's always going to be okay. I'm here with you forever."

It's not my place to see this. I feel like I should go. This is too tender of a moment.

She bends forward, over his arms. She reaches for me. "I don't want her to leave."

"You have to let her go, Sammy," he says.

"I don't want to. I love her," she says.

And that's when I realize that this is not even about me. She's thinking about her mother and realizing that when I leave, she'll be back to where she was. Just her and Marc. At the time, she seemed pretty enthused about that dynamic. She got a taste of the other side, that place with greener pastures. I don't blame her for acting out. I don't blame her for anything, but I do have to go.

"I'm sorry, Marc," I whisper.

He nods toward the door, still hugging Sammy. "It's okay. Text me if you get home and realize you left something else."

Something like my heart? I'll do that.

Rowdy sits at my feet, tail wagging with excitement. I wish I could return the sentiment.

"Okay," I whisper. "Goodbye, Marc."

"Goodbye, Ali."

Outside, I try my station wagon. Ironically, it starts without any problems.

I take the long way home, avoiding the freeway as much as possible. The weather is beautiful today, accentuating the green forest mountains and dark blue bay. I'm not even mad to hit ten minutes of traffic. Then again, I'm not feeling much of anything except the emotional waves that roll in with the tide.

I flip on the radio to offset my feelings. First, I land on a talk radio show. Some old man is screeching like a crow about the senate. Something crappy happened, I guess. Something *always* happens, but I can't focus. I turn to the next station instead. It's classic nineties. Alannis Morissette is playing, my mom's most favorite singer-songwriter in the world.

The angst used to make me giggle as a kid, but as she belts out an emotional chorus akin to spilling ten pumpkin spiced lattes, it hits me harder than I thought any song could. As I turn on the main intersection near my house, I slam the volume to ten and belt out the lyrics. Tears cloud my vision, and I feel every word. Rowdy looks concerned.

I pull into the parking lot and finish the song. Rowdy's ready to get inside, so I throw a leash on him before hugging and kissing him. "You're the only man for me," I tell him.

He responds with a loud fart.

Desperate to get into bed, I jog toward the promenade, shut the gate, and head up the second floor. Every step seems to take away ten energy points from me.

When I get to my front door, there's something waiting for me. It's a letter and a bundle of sunflowers.

"Marc?" I wonder.

If it was him, he must've sent a courier very early in the morning.

I bend and pick up the card. On the front are two hand-drawn people tied up by a dog leash. "I'll always miss the fun we had. I was so tangled up in you."

This is never going to get better, is it?

The good times never go away. They fester as memories, waiting for the wrong moment to surface.

In reality, there's never a "right moment." Dealing with those memories is a part of moving on. I've done that with plenty of other men.

Problem is, I don't want to let go of this one.

Because with Marc, every moment is right.

MARC

February 16 is the day I lost my company. And February 16 is the day I lost Ali Greenwald forever. It's not a holiday, but I'll always remember today because I wasn't the only person to lose someone I cared for. Sammy did too.

Sammy was rooting for us the entire time. A big part of that comes from losing her mother. That's also the reason why I haven't dated anyone in a while. If I give the wrong person the keys to captain this ship with me, it could have detrimental consequences.

Ali wasn't the wrong person. She was everything Sammy needed and more. I didn't tell Ali this, but I think her presence was a huge reason why she made it through the winter. I thought I could come up with a plan to get her back. Now that she's gone, I'm not sure what we're going to do.

Today is a rare occurrence. Without work obligations riding my ass, I let Sammy have a sick day from school. Together, we sit in bed, watching silly cartoons and reading books. Then, we take a long nap. If my breakup didn't destroy my happiness receptors, this would have been the best day ever. Then again, if Ali was with us now, it would be even better.

Throughout the day, I periodically step outside to check my phone. It's usually as soon as Sammy mentions Ali's name, or I see a reminder of her on the TV. I'm overwrought with delusions surrounding her calling me back. I need to wise up. It's not going to happen.

The hours fly by. Evening hits. We order a pizza. I eat three too many. Then I eat another three more. I eat so much my shirt feels tight. I've never had a woman do this to me before.

When I re-enter the room, Sammy's fast asleep. The hazy glow from the television flashes over her, so I turn it off and tuck her underneath the covers. She's out pretty hard, and I'm feeling tired as a dog. Ragamuffin is quietly sleeping in her bed, so I take this as my cue to get my pajamas on.

I head to the bathroom, but something stops me in my tracks. It's a dark shadow outside my window. At first, I'm inclined to ignore it. That's when I hear a loud popping noise.

Thinking it's something sinister, I run out on the porch, shirtless. A bright light flashes in my eyes, forcing me to squint. "Who's there?"

The lights turn off. It's a very familiar station wagon. An even more familiar woman steps out of the car. I'm looking right at her, but I can't believe it.

"Hi," she says. "Again."

I wave. "Um. Hey."

She bends her neck, breath billowing outward like fog on a rainy day. "I'm back."

It's impossible to frown at a sight like this. "It's an Easter miracle."

"Not quite April yet," she says.

"Forgive me. I lose track of time whenever I see you."

Breaking the ice for the second time today, she moves toward me until she's close enough to touch. Lord knows how bad I want to touch her again. "You're smooth, Marc Wylan."

"Just another desperate attempt to make you laugh," I say.

She cracks up, scrunching her nose.

"Is it working?" I ask.

She waves her hands to make me stop, giggling so hard she sways back and forth. I reach out to keep her balanced, but she

just falls into me. She's not heavy by any means, but I'm not well balanced. I guess the sight of her does that to me. Holding her, we both fall to the ground.

It's quiet outside, spare for the crickets. She's staring at me, a look of surefire determination in her eyes. I want to believe she's here to give me a second chance, not to pick up another item she left behind.

I point to her car. "I thought I got rid of that thing. It leaked a bunch of oil across my driveway," I joke.

She puts a finger to my lips. "Shh."

It's not a time for jokes.

It doesn't matter why she's here. I want her. No more waiting for things to fall in place. I'm going to take what I want.

Closing my eyes, I kiss her. A flurry of emotions take over as I push my lips open.

I feel her tongue against mine, her hands on my face, hands that know me. Hands that care. I hold her close as she straddles my waist. I suck her lower lip into my mouth, biting down. Gasping for air, I'm exhilarated.

She pulls away, surprise flashing across her face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"No, I'm sorry," I mutter. "I need to be more careful of your feelings. It's too fast."

She pauses with that same look of devotion in her eyes. "Is it too fast, though?"

Above us, the stars flicker. Below, the forest is silent.

"Fuck no."

We kiss frantically, almost too frantic. I'm not used to this makeup sex thing, but I think that's where this is headed.

She shivers. It's too cold for us to be making out in the driveway. Plus, I've got some nosy neighbors. Someone could be watching us, so it's time to take this inside.

“I love you, Ali Greenwald,” I say. “It doesn’t matter how many times you run from me. I’ll always love you.”

“If I didn’t love you so much, I’d be a little creeped out,” she says, kissing back.

“Yeah, but you do love me,” I say. “And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Wanna bet?”

Oh, no. Not another bet. I’m sick of those.

I swing her into my arms, pouncing through my front door. Upon entry, my face burns from the change in heat. “Oh, thank god,” she says. “It feels so good to be back here.”

I place her gently on her feet and cover her shoulders with a wool blanket. “I know something that might feel even better,” I say.

She nuzzles her nose against mine, and I hug her, feeling more free than I ever had before. “You want to give me an apology?”

I hope this isn’t one of those situations where she makes me go an apology tour for the next five years. “I’m sorry. I’m a fucking idiot. I’ll never do anything so stupid again.”

“I don’t mean that type of an apology.”

“Huh?”

She cups her hand around my cock, rubbing up and down. I’ve been fighting it down ever since she kissed me.

“Oh... fuck...”

Soft and sweet, she kisses me. Then, she leads me to the bedroom where the apology tour of a lifetime begins. I’ll start with offering her my mouth. When I’m not lying my teeth off, she seems to like what it can do.

“What made you come back for me?”

“I got your flowers,” she says.

“Oh?” I ask.

I didn't buy any flowers for her. I bought something else. A ring. But nobody knows that, so who is the chump that bought my girl the bouquet?

As soon as she shows me the card, it hits me square in the face. I'd recognize that chicken scratch anywhere. It was Brian...

And then I remember what he said to me so many days ago. *I'm going to save you.* This was his way of doing that, I guess. It's the most simple idea in the world, yet so effective. Who would've thought?

I'm not going to rock the boat any more than I already have. I'm just grateful she's here. There will be plenty of chances to make her proud. And even more to make her happy.

From here on out, I'll be a good boy. Obedient, well-trained, and a lover of doggy-style.

What?

Is it something I said?

ALI

HAPPILY EVER AFTER...

Nothing in life is guaranteed. Especially not love. Everyone has to work for it. Depending on your situation, that can be hard. But as I wake from my sweet slumber, I'm pleasantly aware that Marc and I have been pretty solid from the beginning.

Yeah, it got a little messy at times. He came off as pushy in the beginning. I'm sure he thought I was a little bratty. It took a while for us to both understand each other. We were betting against our future together, even if we didn't know it yet. And we came from such different backgrounds.

In the end, we both made out like bandits.

As I adjust my eyes to my phone screen, I roll to my side and breathe a sigh of relief. Last night, Marc carried Sammy to her bed. It was heartwarming to be in this environment again, so close to the movie-style family I never had. After she was asleep, I got him all to myself.

Marc turns over, spooning me from behind. His hard cock brushes beneath my ass, and I find myself grinding back for good measure. "Mm. Good morning," I say. "Sleep well?"

He kisses the back of my neck, engulfing me in his arms. "I can't believe you're here," he says. "I don't think I've ever slept this well in my life."

I laugh, spinning to face him. Finally, I get to share a bed with him, and it's not one in a sex-themed motel.

"What's your plan for the day?" I ask. "Work?"

He gives me a funny look. Not sure I like it. “Nah, I called out this week,” he says.

Coming from Marc, this is so surprising that I don't take it seriously. “Called out? You? I don't believe it. You're like a workaholic.”

He's staring, smiling like a total creep.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Lying to you,” he says.

I frown. “What did you do now?”

His grin grows wider. “I might've quit my job.”

My jaw drops. “Um. Do you think that's a good idea?”

He shrugs. “Got a couple billion in the bank. The rest is tied to stable long-term investments. Sammy's college fund is taken care of, and I've set enough aside for her healthcare and retirement. Everything is taken care of.”

I sit up. “Should I be excited about this or nervous?”

He rubs my arm. “Considering I'll be home twenty-four seven now, probably a little of both. You might get tired of my jokes.”

“Who could ever?” I ask. The upside is that I'll never tire of his cooking.

He rolls his eyes. “Seriously, though. I gave it a big think on the night you left me,” he says.

The worst night ever.

“Did everything important feel as pointless as it did for me?” I ask.

“You don't know the half of it. Between crying my eyes out and fantasizing to your Fonebook picture, I was having the time of my life,” he says.

“Okay, weirdo.”

He sighs, turning serious. “I don't know why I stayed so long. I could work another twenty years, but the money wouldn't

add anything more to my life. I've hit the point where I need something real. I need you, Ali."

Hearing this makes me the happiest woman in the world. Marc is a great businessman, but he's an even better dad to Sammy. With his expertise at home, he'll be able to give her the time she needs.

As for my teaching job, I needed to take a few days off. Amanda convinced Dean Berman to allow it, despite spring break being in just in a few weeks. I felt this was an important thing to do. I'm starting to see the benefits already.

Rolling out of bed, he stretches his *very* naked body. It's a splendorous sight made only for me. "Hey, I wanted to show you something."

My stomach growls. "Can you make that egg breakfast again?"

He takes my hand. "After," he says. "Come on."

I jump to my feet, startled by his excitement. I'm still sleepy, but he's got the energy of a marathon runner. "What's going on, Marc?"

He leads me into the hallway, toward the photo room. "Right through here," he says.

"Marc, it's early," I groan. "I don't want to take any photos."

"Just one," he says, opening the door. "To remember this day forever. The day I finally got to have you."

I don't protest. It's a really sweet thing to say and suddenly feels like a mission that needs to be undertaken. Our love is important, and I want Sammy to remember that. And who knows? Maybe someday soon, we'll have another child of our own.

Once inside, he shuffles me toward a row of cameras sitting on a rack near the door. He grabs one, fumbling with the lens cap. "Okay, stand in the center of the room," he says.

I meander to the middle of the room, feeling awkward. "Aren't you going to join me?"

His hands shake as he places the camera on the tripod. “Yeah, just one-second.”

“You need help?”

He’s sweating. I’ve never seen him like this before.

Starting to get concerned, I ask, “Marc, what’s going on?”

He drops the lens cap on accident. It rolls underneath his desk. “Oh shit,” he exclaims. “One sec.”

Lowering to his knees, he reaches for the cap. After a minute of struggling, he seems to find something. He pulls it out. Only, it’s not a lens cap. It’s something my brain can’t comprehend, something unbelievably unimaginable.

It’s a... a... *a ring!*

My heart stops. “Marc...”

Everything feels like a dream. I don’t want to pinch myself out of fear I might wake up. Sammy wasn’t making stuff up. He really got me a ring.

Marc exhales. “I was empty, and the sun that once shone so bright turned dark. I was struggling when I first saw you. And then everything seemed to glow. I was halfway to insanity, rushing to find a way to make my daughter happy, as well as myself. In that search, I almost gave up. Then I found you. I didn’t know it at the time, but I believe we were meant to find each other at that gas station. I think your card was meant to fail. I was supposed to get Ragamuffin. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have had much of an excuse to get to know each other. I’d just be another dad dropping off his daughter at school.”

“Fate,” I whisper.

He nods. “I never believed in that hippy crap before, but you make me feel so good that I have to believe it now,” he says.

My throat swells with emotion. A tear rolls down my eye. “I do too.”

He takes my hand. He’s not shaking anymore. “I want to make you the happiest woman in the world. And when the time

comes, if you want, I want to make a baby with you.”

I crack up and wipe the tears from my cheek and eyes. “I want that too.”

“I want to go on nice trips. Quality time with you and Sammy. I want to enjoy life again,” he says.

“I’ll stand by your side, Marc. I love you with all my heart.”

His eyes are fixed on me. “Ali Greenwald, will you marry me?”

I’ve always wondered what this moment would be like, and now I know. Pure bliss. That feeling isn’t going away. What we have is stronger than any argument, any stupid misunderstanding.

“Yes,” I say.

“Good because my knees are killing me.”

As he places the ring over my finger, everything slows down. It’s just me and him. And I’m happier than I’ve ever been.

He stands, hand curling around my jaw and cheeks. We kiss like it’s the first time again. He tastes even better. “I’m staring at the rest of my life,” I say.

“Shocking, isn’t it?”

A soft noise snaps us out of our love trance. “Daddy?”

It’s Sammy. She’s standing in the doorway, holding a soft lamb.

“Good morning, Sammy,” I say.

Sammy’s smile lights up. She leaps toward me, throwing her arms around my waist. “Ms. Greenwald, you’re back. I knew you’d come.”

“Well, your phone call made a big impact on me,” I say.

Marc’s face twists. “Phone call?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll explain later,” I say. “We should break the news.”

I'm a little nervous as Marc bends down to talk to her. "Sammy, I have a surprise for you," Marc says.

"Uh oh," she says.

"It's good news," he says. "I think you're going to be one happy pumpkin."

She snickers. "I'm not a pumpkin."

I bend and tickle her. "Oh, yes, you are."

Sammy wiggles and laughs. "Tell me, tell me."

"Okay," Marc says, releasing her. He looks at me.

"Tell her, Marc," I say, smile growing.

Sammy narrows her eyes. "Am I getting a new sister?"

"No," Marc says.

"But maybe someday," I add.

Sammy's eyes glance at the ring on my finger. When she realizes what's happening, she jumps in the air. "You're getting married?"

"Yes, sweetheart," I say.

She runs into my arms. "It's Christmas all over again."

"As long as I have you, every day is Christmas," I say.

"Daddy, hug us. We are having a sent-lim-ental moment."

Marc joins in on the hug, and I gotta say, it feels really good to have this support. It's been a long time since I had a real family to call my own. Some days are going to be hard. I know how difficult life can get. But we're always going to work at this.

This is ours.

"So," he says, "anything you want to do today?"

"I was thinking we keep it simple. Would you like to go on a walk later?" I ask.

"A walk? That could be nice."

I smile. “I have a dog who likes a good run and a hard belly rub.”

Ragamuffin stands on her hind two legs as Marc leads us to the kitchen to show off his cooking skills. “Hm. He sounds fun, but I have to warn you, my dog is a maniac. She might tear his balls off.”

I laugh pretty loud for how dumb his joke was. Yes, we’re in a good place. “Oh, yeah. I’ve seen her. Real monster.”

“Come here,” he says. “Kiss me.”

This is the beginning of something wonderful. A fresh start and new beginning.

We’re a family now. I’ll cherish it forever.

END.

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