



DEFEAT

EVELYN SOLA

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Defeat

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May contain sexual situations, violence, sensitive and offensive language, and mature topics.

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A self-proclaimed bachelor, content on his own. A runaway bride, searching for her freedom. They may seem like they've got nothing in common, but the tiniest sparks make the biggest flames.

Delaney Lewis is desperate for her freedom. From her controlling mother and the man she left standing at the altar.

Her best friend is more than happy to help her escape and sets Delaney up at her soon to be brother-in-law's house while he's out of town, confident that when David comes home—he'll do whatever it takes to keep Delaney safe from her crazy family.

David Sutton finds the surprise of a lifetime when he discovers a woman sleeping soundly in his bed. When she explains how she ended up there, David's heart and mind slowly open, leading to a permanent place to stay, a job, and best of all, a new outlook.

The woman who was much like a stranger before, slowly becomes his friend...with a few intimate perks and before they know it, real sparks start to fly.

For L and J. You know who you are.

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NO ONE SAYS A WORD ON THE RIDE TO WHERE EVER. IT'S barely five o'clock in the morning, and I'm still in the pajamas my best friend had to buy for me yesterday. I glance over at my small carrying case, full of clothes and toiletries that were given to me by the generosity of the other two people in the car. Even now, their fingers are intertwined while Max, my best friend's fiancé, drives down the dark, winding street.

We left the hotel thirty minutes ago, in the dark of night. I fell asleep fast last night but was awakened by a nightmare not two hours later. I was trying to run away from the altar when Mitch sprouted wings, flew, grabbed me with his talons, and brought me back. Instead of saying his vows, he opened his mouth and fire sprayed out.

I woke up coated in sweat, breathing heavily, and unaware of my surroundings. It took me a full minute to realize where I was. Unwanted memories rush back, and I'm reminded that it was only a few hours ago that I ran away from my fiancé and abandoned him at the altar.

I don't regret that part. In fact, the only thing I do regret is that I let it get as far as it did. If I hadn't, maybe I wouldn't be feeling like the entire world is on my shoulders.

My best friend, Summer, looks back and gives me a smile much too big and fake for this early in the morning. I give her an exaggerated smile back, and we burst into laughter. I reach over and put my hand on her shoulder. She rests her free hand on top of mine, and for a moment, I forget my problems.

That is, until Max makes a left turn down a sleepy, tree-lined suburban street. I was told we were going to his brother's townhouse, but this is like a mini mansion at the end of a cul-de-sac. There's a dim light at the front door. Max pulls into the driveway, and the four-car garage door goes up. There are four cars and two motorcycles inside. The space is full but in pristine order. I follow them through the side door and into the main house.

I almost trip over an orange cat. It rubs itself on the legs of my pants, and I pick it up, needing to feel another living thing against me. My best friend and her fiancé are on their way out of the country for a few days, leaving me alone to think about my life and what I'm going to do next.

"That's Pumpkin," Max says. He takes the cat from me and rubs her head. When he tries to give it to Summer, she yells and runs behind me. I quickly take Pumpkin back.

"James, I know you're not scared of a cat." My friend, Summer Madison, will always be James to me, after the fourth president of the United States. Pumpkin purrs and closes her eyes. I hold her against me while I follow them into the kitchen.

"The car keys are here," Max says, pointing to a hook inside the walk-in pantry. "I'm going to write down the code for the alarm. There's a set of house keys right there." He points to a red keychain hanging on the wall. "Borrow any of the cars you want. I've left a few messages for David, so he knows you're staying with him. He won't mind, but the good news is, no one will know to look for you here."

Right. My mother and ex-fiancé's first stop would be Max and Summer's house. In fact, I bet they've already been there. They're probably there right now, lying in wait.

"Call us if you need anything. Day or night," Summer says. "And we'll be back in five days. We'll figure everything out."

"We will," Max says. "Don't worry about anything." I take them into a group hug.

“You guys go,” I say. “I don’t want you to miss your flight.”

“Private plane,” Max says. “They can’t leave without us.”

“I appreciate you two so much. I don’t know what I’d do without you, James.” She’s the first and best friend I’ve made. We met sophomore year at Boston University and lived together during our last two years there. When we graduated, my parents bought me a condo as a graduation present, and Summer moved in with me. The truth is the condo never belonged to me. They bought it for themselves and only allowed me to live there. It was a place they approved of, and everything I’ve ever done was always for their approval.

From my friends to private schools and colleges. Even my major was their choice. Biology until I was diagnosed with vasovagal syncope, a condition where I faint at the sight of blood. When we realized I could never follow in their footsteps and become a doctor, I was told to major in art history despite having little to no interest in art. But it was what my mother wanted. I guess she thought it would be good conversation for the dinner parties I’d have to throw for my doctor husband.

Well, the joke’s on her because I’m not married to Doctor Mitchell Owens and never will be. I doubt I’ll marry anytime soon, and if I do, it will be a man of my choosing. Not my parents’.

“Why don’t you go get some sleep?” Summer asks.

“Come on. Let me show you upstairs.” Max grabs my suitcase, and we take a back set of stairs. I leave my flipflops off and enjoy the feel of the plush carpet under my feet. The house is immaculate, and I’m sure it’s beautiful, but I can’t bring myself to look around and enjoy the beauty of it.

“That’s the master bedroom,” Max says when we walk by a set of double doors. The doors are cracked open, but I’m too wired to bother looking in. “Our cousin Caleb has a bedroom downstairs, but this one is free.” He pushes the door open. It’s across from the master bedroom. It’s a big space with a queen-

sized bed that's off to the corner. The colors are muted, but the room looks inviting. I put the cat on the bed and sit next to her.

"I don't know what he has in terms of food, but—"

"I'll manage," I tell Max. He gave me an envelope of money. I haven't counted it, but I'm sure I have at least two thousand dollars, not to mention the Visa gift card and the new iPhone he bought me. I left everything behind in the church when I fled. I left without my identification, credit card, or cell phone. I didn't even have shoes on my feet when I left. Everything I have now, including the clothes on my back, is because of these two friends. "You guys go. Call me when you get there."

We hug and I follow them back to the side door that leads to the garage.

"IT'S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT," SUMMER WHISPERS IN MY EAR. I do my best to appear brave, but I hold on to her a little bit longer than necessary. When they get in the car and drive away, I'm alone for the first time in what seems like forever.

I glide my hand over the marble countertop, still too distraught to admire the beautiful kitchen. I retrace my steps back upstairs, determined to put everything out of my mind until I get a decent night's sleep. I haven't slept a full night in months. Each day the wedding got closer, I slept less.

The conversation I had with my mother a few days before the wedding tries to surface, but I stuff it down.

Not now. I have some time. I have a reprieve, and no matter what may come, I will never marry Mitch or any man that I don't love. A shudder runs through me at the thought of spending the next fifty or more years with Dr. Mitchell Vance Owens. A life sentence for sure, only not behind iron bars.

"Here, kitty," I whisper when I reach the second floor. "Where are you?" Like she can understand me, she meows, and I follow the sound. She's sitting in the middle of the bed in the master bedroom.

It's a big space with a four-poster bed in the middle. It's masculine with dark wood, and everything appears to be custom-made. The space is minimalistic with quiet earth tones. There's a door to the adjoining bathroom. I peek my head in and admire the tile floor and find a white garden tub in the middle of the room.

As much as I want to look around, my eyes are as heavy as my heart and the weeks of no sleep have caught up with me. I scoop up Pumpkin on my way to my room. If this cat is going to be the only other living thing in this house for the next few days, we're going to get to know each other very well. But when I put her down in my new room, she meows and runs across the hall back to the master bedroom.

"Come on, kitty. Delaney needs company." I bring her back, but she runs across the hall before I can close the door.

The closet in this room is empty, as are the drawers in the dresser. I change into my pajamas and decide to put my few things in the drawer after I sleep. Later, I'll figure out a time to go to Mitch's and get my stuff.

"Not now, Delaney. You can worry about that shit later, or let Mitch keep it. Who cares?" I pull back the plush comforter and slide into the bed. It's like heaven. I close my eyes and wait for sleep to overtake me, but half an hour later, I'm still wide awake. Resigned, I get up and go to the master bedroom. "Since the kitty won't come to Delaney, Delaney will come to the kitty." She purrs when I slide into the California king sized bed. The cat lies on my feet, and I finally feel my eyes start to get heavy.

“THAT IS ONE FANCY FOOD CONTRAPTION, KITTY.” I STROKE Pumpkin’s back, and she lets out a meow. The food dispenser lets out cat food right on time. Just like clockwork, every day it releases the food, and the automatic water dispenser releases the water. “Your human definitely loves you. We all deserve to be loved, don’t we?” Pumpkin ignores me, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d think she shrugged away.

“Okay, I’ll let you eat. Come and find me when you’re done. We’re all each other’s got until our people come back.” I get not so much as a purr. Rejected by the feline, I head back upstairs, but not to the room that was given to me two days ago. Nope, I go across the hall to the master bedroom and drop myself in the middle of the bed.

This room, though much bigger, feels warmer. Maybe it’s the fact that this is another human being’s space and not an empty guestroom, but I feel a sense of comfort here that I have no business feeling. I tell myself that I’ll sleep in my own bed tonight. I’ll lock me and Pumpkin in there and shut my eyes until I fall asleep. And Pumpkin will have to deal with it.

I tell myself that another reason I like this room is because of the large flat screen TV on the wall, but I know that’s not it. I love the smell of the pillow and the smell of the sheets. They smell masculine, and for some unknown reason, I feel comfortable in this room.

I like the sound of the TV in the background as it makes me feel like I have other people here. I’ve had people around me all my life. I grew up with both parents and a brother in an

affluent neighborhood. I went to elite private schools and had access to everything I needed and wanted. I've traveled the world with my family. I've always had everything. If I didn't have it, all I had to do was ask, and it was given to me. I'm a pampered princess.

That sounds great, but people fail to remember that there's a price to pay for everything. The price in my case is any autonomy in my own life. I'd been made to think that I was making the decisions all along until the curtain was pulled back to reveal I control nothing, least of all myself.

It was so ingrained in me that I had no idea it was happening. From the way I dressed to the way I styled my hair. The college I went to and the type of men I dated. All handpicked for me but done so subtly and with so much finesse that I thought I was in charge all along.

It's the biggest con in history, and I had no idea it was happening until very recently. Mitch was handpicked by my mother for me. I had another boyfriend the night we met, the accidental meeting my mother orchestrated. I hadn't introduced her to Neil, but now I think she knew, and because he was raised by a single mother in a two-bedroom apartment, he was not acceptable. Cue in Mitchell, medical doctor from the upper echelon of the black bourgeoisie, and Neil becomes irrelevant.

It didn't matter that Mitchell didn't care about what I wanted or about what made me happy. The most important thing to Mitch is that he's the most important person in the room at any given time. I was the accessory on his arm, a woman born to two doctors, also from the black bourgeoisie.

He was perfect in my parents' eyes. Twelve years of private school, Brown University undergrad, and Harvard Medical School. He was the type of man their only daughter should be with, especially when I couldn't become a doctor myself.

My intentions were good. I've always excelled academically, and the heavy course load of a biology major was nothing I couldn't handle, except I faint at the sight of

blood. Turns out, that's a real condition. After passing out and knocking myself unconscious one time, I realized that medical school would never be something I could get through.

“Contact your advisor and change your major to art history.” It was a direct order from my mother, and I never questioned it. Not for a single second. She cared about me. She only wanted the best, and I had disappointed her enough. I could do this for her. “You can go to Italy or France for a semester,” she had winked over dinner being served to us by the housekeeper. She threw that in, knowing how much I love to travel, confirming that she was only looking out for me. I kept my mouth shut about wanting to major in business. I told myself once I graduated, I would be able to find a job that made me happy. I consoled myself with the thought of going back to school on my own terms in a few years.

My new cell phone rings, pulling me away from unpleasant memories. It's funny how the past only recently became unpleasant. It's funny what happens when you finally open your eyes.

Since only two people have my new phone number, I pick up without looking. “And how is the Grand Cayman's?”

I hear laughter and a loud shriek. “I'm going to FaceTime you,” Summer says. She yells something before she hangs up, and the phone rings again with a FaceTime request.

“Look at you!” I say. She's in a turquoise tankini and is clearly sitting on Max's shoulders in the middle of a swimming pool.

“Max, you better not drop me and ruin my phone!” Summer says. “Hey!” she says when she looks at me. “How's my bestie?” The phone goes dark, and a few seconds later, I'm looking into her face. This time, she's sitting on Max's lap while they both look into the phone. He has a towel draped across her back.

“I'm good,” I say, trying my best to be enthusiastic. “Miss you guys.” I wish they were here with me. I wish they had never gone away at all, but they had planned a vacation the

day after my wedding, and I pretended to be better than I was after abandoning my groom at the altar.

“I miss you too, but we’ll be back in a couple of days. Everything okay at David’s?” Max hands Summer a drink and she kisses his cheek. “Thanks, baby,” she whispers.

“Yeah, everything is great here.” The house is beautiful with every available amenity. “And this kitty has been keeping me company.” I lift Pumpkin and hold her to the camera.

“Ugh, you like that thing?” Summer asks, making a face.

“She’s been the best.” I kiss the top of Pumpkin’s head, but she jumps away and leaves the room. “Thanks again for letting me stay here. It’s been great. I’ve done a lot of thinking, but we’ll talk about that when you get back.” Max bites her bare shoulder and she giggles.

“So, they haven’t tracked you down yet?” Summer asks.

“They won’t,” Max says. “Our lunch is here, Breeze, and then I have a surprise for you.”

“Go eat. How are you feeling? You look absolutely glowing,” I tell my best friend.

“I was sick as a dog this morning, but I’m better now. I’ll be sick again in a few hours, so I’m going to enjoy it now. And Max keeps hovering over me.” She whispers when she says it.

“You are having his baby. Let that man spoil you. I’ll be fine.” We talk for a few more minutes until Max calls her for lunch and we say our goodbyes.

“It will be okay, Ms. Kitty,” I say when the cat comes back into the room. “As soon as I come up with a plan. If only I had planned better.”

I’ve come up with several, the first of which is to update my resume and look for a job, but that’s hard to do without my laptop. I was able to order a new license with my phone and wrote down a few jobs that I might be a good fit for, but the reality is, I’m like a fish out of water.

My parents paid my credit cards all my life. I lived in their condo and paid nothing. I saved some of the money I made

working as office manager in their plastic surgery clinic, but most went to spa treatments, nice restaurants, and girls' trips to Vegas and New York City. There was never any incentive to save. They took care of me, and then once I married Mitch, that job was going to fall on him.

"You are so stupid, Delaney. So damn stupid." Things could always be worse. I could be pregnant. Worse than that, I could be married to Mitch.

Then I remind myself that things aren't so great now. I have no place to live. No income because there is no way in hell I'm going to work for my parents again. Especially not after I went to my mother last week for the second time with my concerns. It was like I wasn't a person to her. She looked right through me and dismissed my concerns as nerves.

"YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN FLIGHTY, DELANEY." SHE PUSHED MY hair to the side and looked down at her iPad. "Always so dramatic. Fainting at the sight of blood and getting hysterical at the strangest times." She put the iPad down and sighed. "Do you think you can do better than Mitch? You can't. You're just nervous. Relax." And she left the room, leaving me standing alone in the middle of her gourmet kitchen, feeling deflated and dismissed.

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SO MUCH FOR A RELAXING FEW DAYS AWAY. IT WAS THE FIRST real vacation I've had in over a year. What can go wrong at a destination wedding for one of your old college buddies? The number of available women there, desperate for meaningless sex, was supposed to be massive. I had visions of taking more than one of them to my room for a night of fun, but everyone but me was part of a couple.

I had no idea the resort catered mostly to couples, and that a single man stood out like a sore thumb. The flight home was delayed several hours, and I didn't land in Boston until one o'clock in the morning. The only upside was that it didn't take too long to clear customs, and by the time I dragged my bags and tired ass to my car, I could barely keep my eyes open.

I was on autopilot the entire forty-minute drive home. All I want to do now is see my cat, crawl into bed and sleep for a week, but I have to be at work first thing in the morning. And since my brother is away with his fiancée, I'll be needed at the office more than usual.

My only brother and I inherited Sutton Marketing from our father, who inherited it from his. We don't need it. We have enough money to last us more than ten lifetimes, but it was something grandfather started in the nineteen-fifties. He wanted something to pass down to his son beyond just hundreds of millions of dollars.

My brother, Maxwell Sutton Junior, returned a few months ago after taking a year off to breathe after his divorce. When he returned, he fell in love with my personal assistant. I've

never been as surprised as I was the night I found out about them.

I'll be sure to take a day off just to sleep when he comes back from his own vacation.

"Hallelujah," I sing when I pull into my driveway. There's a light on in my house, and I wonder if I left it on in my haste to leave. I know for a fact that Caleb, my cousin who also lives with me, is still away for a few days.

I grab my luggage and go through the side door of the garage. I dump my bags in the middle of the kitchen, not having the strength to carry them all the way upstairs.

All I want now is my bed. A shower will have to wait until tomorrow. I'm pulling my shirt over my head, eager to get undressed and drop myself on the bed.

"Hey, Pumpkin." My cat goes between my legs, and I pick her up. "Daddy's missed you." I kiss the top of her head and drop her to the floor. She meows and jumps on the bed.

I might be exhausted, but I have to brush my teeth before bed. Once that's done, I take off my pants, leaving me in only my boxer briefs.

The room is pitch black, which is unusual. I prefer the blinds to be partially open so moonlight can seep through the windows at night, but maybe my housekeeper shut them while she dusted.

Too tired to think of it any further, I pull down my crumpled comforter and drop myself on the bed. Except, I'm not on my cool sheets. I'm on top of another human being.

"What the fuck!" I jump off and turn on the lamp. Pumpkin meows, but all I can do is stare at the strange female in my bed.

"Hey!" she says. She jumps off, wearing nothing but a black tee, which I'm sure belongs to me. The first thing I notice is a pair of long, lean brown legs. She's running a hand over her face by the time my eyes travel up her slight frame. She's tall but thin. She pushes back a head full of dark hair, and I look into her dark brown eyes.

She's pretty. Very pretty with full, pouty lips and high cheekbones. Her only imperfection is a mole in the middle of her right cheek, but it works for her. She would have been too perfect without it. It's the only blemish on her clear, smooth skin.

"Who the hell are you and what the fuck are you doing in my house, in my bed?" I look around for my phone; then I remember the stupid thing broke on me. That's another thing I need to do tomorrow. I need to go buy a new phone. I haven't had one for days.

"Um," she glances around the room, looking a little confused. This is a high-end neighborhood. There are no squatters here. "Max said I could stay here." She yawns, showcasing her perfect straight teeth. That's not the mouth of a squatter. She runs her hands over her face again, and I notice a fresh French manicure.

"Max said you could stay here? My brother said that? And did he also tell you that you could sleep in my bed?"

She sighs almost as if I'm inconveniencing her and sits on the bed,

"He called you a bunch of times. I'm Delaney Lewis." She offers me her hand, but I don't take it.

"Am I supposed to know who you are? You have five seconds or I'm calling the police." It's a total lie. I have no phone, but she doesn't know that. And I'd never call the police on such a stunning creature. Beautiful women are my Kryptonite, and this one is as beautiful as they get.

"I'm Summer's best friend and—"

I calm down now that I recognize the name.

"Right," I relax, but I don't sit. "They went to your wedding last Saturday." I pull back the rest of the covers to make sure there's no naked man in my bed.

"Well, the wedding didn't happen," she mutters. She looks down at the carpet, and her shoulders slump.

"That doesn't explain why you're here," I tell her.

“I’m not ready to face my parents or ex-fiancé yet. They know where Max lives, so he said I could hide out here for a few days.”

“In my bed?” I ask again. Of all the people on earth, Max knows not to dangle a beautiful woman in front of me. At least I thought he did.

“No. He gave me the room across the hall.” She points one of her perfect manicured fingers at my door. “But Ms. Kitty would only sleep in here, and I was lonely so I figured it wouldn’t hurt. And there’s a TV in here and none in the guest room.” Pumpkin meows, and as if she can sense this girl’s sadness, she rests her head on her lap. Her hand automatically starts to stroke her back. “You didn’t get his messages?” she asks. She sounds a little sad, so I temper down my anger.

“My phone broke, so no. I didn’t.” Finally, she stands and picks up Pumpkin.

“I’ll go to my room.” The very idea that she thinks she has a room in my house is laughable, but I don’t tell her that. I’m too tired to argue, and my beef is with my brother, not her. She looks like she already has enough on her plate. I cross the room and take Pumpkin from her, making sure not to touch her in the process.

“Yeah, do that, but *Pumpkin*,” I say, emphasizing my cat’s name, “stays here. I’m too tired now, but tomorrow morning, I’ll figure out what the hell is going on here. In the future, if you’re staying at someone’s house, you might not want to make yourself at home in their bedroom.” She nods and walks to the door. “Unless you’re invited,” I throw in. She looks behind her and stares at Pumpkin one last time before walking out. I cross the room to close and lock the door behind her.

Maxwell Sutton Junior is going to hear from me tomorrow.

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I WAS OUT THE SECOND MY HEAD HIT THE PILLOW. THE BED was still warm, and it smelled different. Lucy changed the sheets while I was away, but this wasn't the refreshing smell of fabric softener. No. This was the sweet scent of a woman.

While I wait for my coffee to brew, I pull out my iPad to call Max. I hear footsteps coming down the stairs as my finger hovers at his name. She walks into the kitchen, a disheveled mess. Her hair is tangled and all over her head. She makes a loud noise in the back of her throat. Her eyes are still closed, and she's in my black t-shirt. Those damn legs of hers look like they go on for miles.

"Oh!" She puts a hand to her chest when she sees me. It's as if she's surprised to see me in my own damn kitchen. "What are you doing here?" She yawns and opens my fridge. She pulls out organic almond milk and helps herself to the coffee I made, pouring it into my favorite mug without asking.

"This is my house," I mutter under my breath. She leans against the island, and the shirt goes up, showing more thigh than I need to see first thing in the morning.

She drinks the coffee, making little moaning sounds of approval with each sip. A mess of hair falls on her forehead, covering half her face, and I itch to push it away and look into her eyes again.

Did I think she was pretty last night? I was wrong. She's downright flawless, but it's her mouth that draws the most attention. Pouty and full. She has the kind of lips I can kiss for

hours. She looks like she's from a different era. Something about her reminds me of a woman from the nineteen fifties.

She drains my mug, fills it up, and adds more organic almond milk. I know I didn't put that on the grocery list, and Caleb just eats whatever I have and never shops himself. She brought that here.

"Ugh, I need a haircut," she mutters to herself after pushing her hair off her face again. "And I'd kill for a hot stone massage."

Organic almond milk. Haircut and hot stone massage. This is a pampered princess standing in my kitchen. I've spent my entire life around rich girls. I can spot one from ten miles away, and the way this one acts as if my house is hers, drinking almond milk first thing in the morning and bemoaning her lack of hot stone massages, she definitely comes from affluence.

"I can call my masseuse and have him come over," I mention. I have zero intentions of doing that. I just want to see her reaction.

"Oh my God, that would be great. It's been weeks." She stretches her neck from side to side and groans. That's probably not a good idea since I haven't been with a woman in a couple of weeks. I'm used to a few different ones each week, but I've slowed down the last couple of months. "Do you think he can get here today?"

Yeah. Definitely a spoiled princess. Used to being handed everything. I don't respond. Instead, I say, "Excuse me." I grab my backup iPad and walk around to the other side of the house and into my office. I close and lock the door behind me since I'm sure she will have no problems barging in. This woman has no boundaries.

I FaceTime my brother and it rings several times. We're in the same time zone, so it's barely eight o'clock in the morning over there. Knowing Max, he's in a deep sleep. Well, he's just going to have to wake his ass up.

His phone goes to voicemail, and I call it again. Someone finally accepts and the screen goes gray.

“Hey, David,” Summer, Max’s fiancée says. She rubs her eyes and sits up in the bed. She drapes the cover over her.

“Hey.” I smile into the phone. “How’s it going over there? Having fun?”

“Yeah. We went on a helicopter tour of the island yesterday. It’s been great.” We talk for a few minutes. When I hired her, I never could have guessed we’d become family. Finding out about her and my brother was one of the biggest shocks of my life, but after a bad marriage, I’m glad he’s found someone new. Someone worthy of him. “You’ve met Delaney?” She has a hopeful tilt to her voice. “We’re going to come pick her up when we get back in two days.”

This pampered princess has everyone willing to take care of her.

“Yeah, we’ve met. I’ll keep her here until you get back. Can I talk to my idiot brother?” She puts the phone down, and I hear her telling him to get up. I don’t know what he says, but I hear giggling and I try not to groan in frustration. A few seconds later, his sleepy face comes on the screen.

“It’s too fucking early for your bullshit,” he says. I hear Summer in the background say she’s going to shower. Max says and does something that makes her scream and laugh. “I’m just going to get you dirty all over again,” he yells. I roll my eyes.

When I hear a door close in the background, I whisper, “You couldn’t stash this pampered princess anywhere else? You had to leave her here, fuckhead?” He gives me the middle finger.

“She’s not a princess. She’s—”

“She abandoned her groom at the altar. There’s no way you can spin this story and not make her the villain.”

“Her groom’s an asshole,” he says. “Trust me on that.”

“Why didn’t you leave her at your place?”

He runs a hand over his face as if my questions annoy him. The fucking asshole. He's in love and looks well rested. I make a note to punch him in the teeth when he gets back.

"Her ex knows where I live, and I didn't want her to have to face him alone. She needs a few days to clear her head. This is different from you and Bethany. Just let her stay there for two more days. She's Summer's best friend, and she's all alone." He'd die for Summer, and since I like Summer too, I reluctantly nod my head.

"Fine, she can stay for two more days, but that's it. I'm not running a hostel. I already have Caleb staying here." Caleb is our twenty-seven-year-old cousin. His mother, my favorite aunt, has asked that we give him a job and mentor him. So far, he's been okay, but he's family. Delaney is nothing to me.

"Oh, whatever. She'll stay as long as she stays. Are you done? I'm going to go join my fiancée in the shower." He ends the call, and the screen goes black.

I almost collide with her when I open my office door. It's obvious she was eavesdropping and I arch an eyebrow at her. She clears her throat and won't meet my eyes.

"Um, do you want more coffee?" She bites her bottom lip and won't look at me.

When I stare into her face and don't answer, she walks down the hall, and I'm left to admire her tan legs. She walks like a graceful gazelle or a young woman who's had years of dancing lessons.

"So," I say to her once we're both back in the kitchen, "you've just been hiding out here? What are you so afraid of? Is your fiancé violent?" The last thing I need is some angry man barging into my house. I despise guns, but I will have no problem beating his face into my hardwood floors if he tries anything, and any man who thinks it's okay to put his hands on a woman would deserve that and more.

"Ex-fiancé, and no, he's not violent," she says.

"Then what? What could be so awful about him that you'd leave him the day of the wedding?" I cross my arms and wait

for her answer. She looks into my face, sighs, and looks away. Her thin shoulders sag, and for a brief moment in time, I feel a twinge of sympathy for her.

“Look, I’ve already disappointed a bunch of people. Not to mention the hundred thousand dollars my parents spent on that stupid wedding, but my mom and Mitch’s mom made all the decisions. Mainly my mom since she was footing most of the bill. I couldn’t even have Summer as a bridesmaid, and you should have seen the stupid dress. I cut it to pieces at the hotel.”

I’m picturing her now, in a moment of total bratty craziness, ripping a wedding dress to shreds to prove a point to Mommy. She opens her mouth to say more but catches herself and takes a deep breath before talking again. Slower this time. “I realized I don’t love Mitch. I don’t even like him. If I’m being honest, I loathe and despise him. Even now as I imagine the sound of his voice, I want to scream and run from this room.”

“And yet you almost said I do,” I remind her.

“But I wised up. There was a lot of pressure. Pressure from my parents to marry him. *He’s a catch, Delaney,*” she mimics someone’s voice. I imagine it’s her mother’s. “You will never do better than a Harvard educated doctor, Delaney. He’ll support you, Delaney. As if I’m incapable of supporting myself, but in my family, if you’re not a doctor, you’re nothing. The best I could have done was marry one.” She looks at me and says, “I don’t expect someone like you to understand.”

What decade are her parents living in, I wonder, but I don’t say that. Instead, I say, “A doctor, huh? I’ve never met a doctor who wasn’t a pompous, conceited, condescending, judgmental, douchebag asshole.”

She snorts, and says, “Both of my parents are doctors. Plastic surgeons.” A daughter to two plastic surgeons. Pampered princess indeed. She’s probably had everything in life handed to her.

Really, David? Aren't you the same person who inherited hundreds of millions of dollars, not to mention a business? Yet, you're judging her.

"I guess that answers how they paid for that six-figure wedding." I let out a loud, long whistle.

"I have no idea what a regular wedding costs," she says. I bet she has no idea what anything costs, but I have a feeling she's about to find out. "And you're right about Mitch. He is a condescending, pompous asshole. He makes my skin crawl." She visibly cringes at the thought of this man.

The front door opens and my housekeeper, Lucy, walks into the kitchen a few minutes later. She stops short when she sees my guest. Lucy is used to seeing a variety of women coming in and out of this house, but never one so young.

"Lucy, this is Delaney. She's a friend of Max's fiancée. She'll be staying here for a few days."

Lucy nods, goes to the pantry, and puts her apron on. "I'll have my usual."

"Fruit salad and a Denver omelet coming right up," Lucy says with a smile.

"Oh, that sounds good. I'll have the same." Delaney jumps on one of the stools at the kitchen island. When she crosses her legs, I catch a glimpse of her panties. Plain white cotton panties have never looked sexier.

Nope. Not this one, David. Anyone else but her. I don't do pampered princesses. Actually, I do, just not this particular pampered princess. She's best friends with someone who is about to become family, which means she's going to be around. I wouldn't fuck her with a plastic dick. I like to be able to walk away once the magic is gone. I don't need the hassle of running into her at family brunches.

She wraps those perfectly manicured hands around a mug and sips her coffee. I'm sure she's not aware of this, but she lets out a little sigh of satisfaction with each sip.

"So, what are your plans? Change your identity and leave the country or tell these people that this is your life, and they

can all kiss your ass.” And it’s a great ass too. I wouldn’t think twice about kissing it. Or biting it.

“It’s much too early in the morning for such serious conversation.” She appears shy and looks away. She bites that full bottom lip, and all I can think about is sucking it into my own mouth or having it wrapped around my dick. I’m a sucker for a blowjob. Even a bad blowjob is better than most things.

I shake my head clear of that thought. I’m only babysitting her for a couple of more days, and then she can get the hell out. In the meantime, I’m going to contact a lady friend and see if I can slide into some pussy today because celibacy does not look good on me.

I’d bet a million dollars that she has no plans. She’s going to wait it out and hope that things work out on their own. Not my problem. If Max wants to take this one because he’s madly in love with this princess’s best friend, he can have it. I have enough of my own problems to deal with.

The main one is the lack of pussy in my life, and the other is replacing Celia Brooks. She was the closest thing we had to a vice president at the office. She was an excellent employee, but unfortunately, we had to let her go.



AN HOUR LATER, I LEAVE DELANEY IN THE LIVING ROOM flipping through the channels. Her long bare legs are stretched out on my coffee table while she strokes Pumpkin’s back.

“See you later,” she says absently. She has the nerve to wave me off as if my presence in my own house is an inconvenience to her. Forty-eight hours. I can do that. Once she’s gone, I’ll change the locks and the security code so my brother won’t get any more ideas.

I should have been in the office two hours ago, but having a guest is disruptive, and I wanted to hear what she had to say for herself. Just as I expected, she had nothing good to say. Who leaves a man at the altar on their wedding day? Only one kind of person. A spoiled, selfish, thoughtless, inconsiderate

brat. There's no way I'm letting her convince me she was too scared to tell her mother where to stick it. Not in this day and age.

It's been two days since she abandoned the man she was engaged to. I bet he's no longer worried. He's angry now. Next will be embarrassment when he realizes she made a fool of him in front of his family and friends.

I ought to know. I went through the same thing five years ago with my ex-fiancée, Bethany, but at least she did it two weeks before the wedding and not on the actual day. I guess that's better.

Instead of making the short drive to the office after buying a new phone, I decide to drive past Max's house and get his mail like he asked. He lives in a quiet, upscale residential neighborhood where the houses cost at least seven figures. His large house is at the end of the cul-de-sac and I see a strange car parked haphazardly in his driveway. It's a black BMW, which I know does not belong to Max or Summer.

I pull in behind it and when I get out, I find a man of moderate height banging on the front door. He's knocking so hard, he doesn't notice me walking up behind him. He looks through the frosted glass. Idiot. He won't be able to see anything.

He pulls out his phone, only to slide it back into the pocket of his khakis.

"Can I help you?" I ask. He nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound of my voice. He turns to face me, and his dark eyes narrow. He takes a step forward, and I know one punch would lay him out cold. He's not a big guy at all. In fact, the pampered princess is the same height as him. He's not very handsome either. He looks gaunt, and he has a receding hairline. I can't picture them together. Nope. Absolutely not. Doctor or not, she can do better than him.

He stands in front of me and looks me up and down. I cross my arms, doing my best to appear bored.

"Who are you?" he asks.

“I think the better question is, who the hell are *you*?” He inches closer, and I take a step forward, towering over him. I’m three inches over six feet, and this guy doesn’t even come close to that.

“I’m Doctor Mitchell Owens, and my fiancée is in there.” He jerks his thumb at the door. This fool still thinks he has a fiancée. Idiot. This is going to be harder than I thought.

“Is your fiancée’s name Summer Madison? She’s the only woman who lives in that house. And she can’t be your fiancée because she’s engaged to my brother.”

He eyes me again, and I think understanding finally dawns on him.

“Do you know Delaney Lewis?”

“I do not,” I lie, looking him square in the eyes.

“Where is your brother?”

“He’s out of the country with his fiancée. Why the hell are you banging on his door? Your issues with Denise have nothing to do with him. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

He ignores me and doesn’t bother to try and correct me on her name. He returns to the door, presses the bell, and pounds against the wood.

“They are not home,” I say, my tone flat. “You have about five minutes before one of the neighbors calls the cops.”

“Pulling out the cop card on the black man? I’m not surprised. And does his black fiancée know how police happy you people are?” He turns to me and points a finger in my face.

I was right. Every doctor I’ve ever known was a smug, condescending, douchebag asshole, and this guy is no exception.

“If you don’t want to lose that finger, doctor, I suggest you get it out my face.” For good measure, I swat it away.

“Fine. I hope one of your neighbors do call the cops on Summer. She’s the fucking reason the shit went down the way

it did.” I shake my head sadly at him. The one thing this guy better never, ever do is utter those words where my brother can hear them.

“How is Summer responsible for this?” I gesture at him. “She’s not even in the country.”

“Well, she got into the car with your brother and Summer. If that bitch had stayed her low-class ass out of my business —” I get in his face and hold my hand up, silencing him.

“I’d shut up. My brother’s not here to beat your ass for disrespecting his fiancée, but I am. Shut the fuck up and get out of here. Now.” I step in his face, and he knows he can’t take me on. He walks around me and returns to his BMW. I’m parked behind him, so it takes him a few minutes to maneuver his car out of the driveway.

An idiot and a bad driver. I’m really questioning the spoiled princess’s taste and judgment. She might think that she’s no longer involved with this guy, but he still refers to her as his fiancée. Someone really needs to update this idiot on where he stands.

As if leaving him at the altar wasn’t enough of a hint to let him know the woman is repulsed by him.

I wait and make sure his car is gone before I let myself inside Max’s house. It’s quiet and dark as I walk through and make sure everything’s okay.

I pull out my new phone and call him. He answers after a few rings. He’s sitting outside now, shirtless, and sporting sunglasses. His hair is wet and dripping down his face.

Summer sits on his lap and puts a piece of pineapple to his lips.

“Hey, David,” she says, waving at me as if we didn’t just talk three hours ago.

“What now?” Max asks. I catch his eye and subtly tilt my head to the side. He’s a pain in the ass, but he’s astute. He excuses himself, and after loudly kissing Summer, he leaves her outside. “Are you in my house?”

Just as the words leave his mouth, I hear a meow and spot a black and white kitten from across the room. I approach and pick it up.

“Put my cat down,” Max warns. “Summer got her for me to replace the one you stole, and you can’t have her.” The cat jumps out of my arms. I turn back to Max.

“I drove by here and guess who was banging on your door? Dr. Dickhead. He didn’t get the memo. He still thinks she’s his fiancée.” He runs a hand over his face and walks into another room. I hear a door close, and he grabs a towel to drape over his head. “And he blames Summer for this.”

At that, my brother freezes and his eyes darken.

“Oh, really? Well, fuck him. God, I hate that asshole.”

“Just be warned. He looks like he might be a problem. At least for a little while,” I tell him. He waves me off, seemingly unbothered by Dr. Dickhead. I end the call and leave his house. As I drive up the street, I see the same black BMW parked a few houses up. I stop and make sure he sees me. We make eye contact, and he doesn’t flinch. He puts the phone to his ear and looks away from me.

AS SOON AS LUCY LEAVES FOR THE DAY, I RUN BACK UPSTAIRS to the master bedroom. Well, first, I lift all the lids to the dinner she's cooked. There's a big Caesar salad in the fridge, and a paella on a dish on top of the stove. I scoop out a piece of sausage and a shrimp and run upstairs.

The bed is back to being immaculate. Lucy was up here for a while. Pumpkin naps in the corner of the room, and I drop myself in the middle of the bed and grab the remote.

The pillow now smells like him. Something strong and musky. I put it on my face and inhale. Mitch never smelled this good. I make sure to check the time. It's only two in the afternoon, so he probably won't be home for a few more hours.

Pumpkin jumps on the bed and lies in the crook of my arm. The television is on for background noise, to keep me from falling into a deep sleep. Last night was a night of restlessness. I tossed and turned, and the few times I fell asleep, I had dreams of my mother dragging me down the aisle to a fire breathing Mitch. When I'd reach him, he'd open his mouth and fire would shoot out, waking me up in a cold sweat.

Now, in this California King bed with the million thread count sheets, I finally close my eyes. I let out a loud yawn. Tomorrow. I'll make a plan and figure out what I'm going to do with the rest of my life. I know I will never marry Mitch. That's a fact, and once I let him and my family know, I'll be free to do what I want. But tomorrow.

I grab the other pillow and wrap my arms around it. This time when I close my eyes, I see David's brown ones.



I MOVE MY HAND AROUND, SEARCHING FOR THE CAT'S WARM fur, but all I do is hit the sheets. The room has gotten dark now, and I try to remember if I closed the blinds to the bedroom, but my mind is foggy. I reach for my phone and realize I've slept for over four hours.

"Shit." I sit in the bed and stretch, yawning wide in the empty bedroom. Then, I smell something. It smells like the pillow but stronger.

"Alexa, turn on the lights," a deep voice says. David stares down at me, not looking at all impressed to find me in his bed again. He crosses his arms and waits for an explanation.

"Oh, I'm sorry." I try to stand, but I slip and fall on my ass in front of the bed. He curses but offers me a hand and yanks me up. I'm tall for a woman, standing at five feet and nine inches, but David towers over me. His scent invades and I yank my hand from his. "I, ah. I fell asleep." I look around the room, gesturing at the messy bed. I have no memory of getting under the covers, but it's obvious that I did. The down comforter is in a heap and my body imprint is on his gray sheets.

"Is there a problem with the room you were given?" He yanks on the comforter and fixes the bed. "You're a guest here. Is it too much to ask that you do not climb into *my* bed?" He storms out of the room and slams the door behind him, leaving me alone to ponder just what the fuck it is I'm doing.



I TAKE A HOT SHOWER TO CLEAR MY HEAD, AND I FIND A PAIR of blue ankle length yoga pants and a matching shirt. I take a deep breath and head downstairs to the kitchen. I find him there, standing over the stove and looking into the paella dish.

My stomach growls loud enough for him to hear. He sighs, opens a cabinet, and pulls out two plates. He points to the table, and I take a seat.

“I’m sorry,” I explain quickly. “I didn’t sleep well last night, and your bed is really comfortable.”

“I know. That’s why it’s *my* bed. When I invite a woman in there, it’s not to sleep.” He brings the dish over, along with a bottle of water for me. He pours himself a glass of chardonnay, but he doesn’t offer me one. Feeling like I’ve encroached enough in his life, I don’t ask for one, but I do eat the paella as if I haven’t eaten in days.

I can feel his eyes on me, watching me as I eat. I’m so hungry, that I don’t care. I help myself to a second plate of the delicious meal. He gets up and grabs another wineglass. He fills it and puts it in front of me.

“Thank you,” I tell him. I take a sip. It’s the good stuff and not the cheap bottles that I share with Summer. I finish it and wash it down with my water. He holds up the bottle, but I shake my head no. “Listen,” I say to him. I reach over without thinking and rest a hand on his but immediately snatch it away and wipe it on my lap. “I’m sorry about being in your bed. It won’t happen again.”

I could swear his eyes darken at my words. He drops his eyes and looks down. I check my shirt to make sure I didn’t spill anything on it. I look back into his eyes and he licks his lips.

“You should know that I went by Max’s place after I left here this morning. Your ex-fiancé or whatever the hell he is was there trying to beat down the door. I told him to get lost, but he was parked up the street when I left. If you’re not ready to face him yet, I’d stay away from there if I were you.”

DAVID'S WORDS PLAY IN MY MIND LIKE A LOOP WHILE I STAND at his kitchen sink and do the dishes. I've been fooling myself for the past few days. I was either naïve or obtuse if I thought walking out of the church would be enough to make Mitch hate me and walk away. He doesn't love me. I know that for a fact. What he feels is ownership over me. He sees me as a trophy that is good for his image and walking away is not an option. At least in his mind. In reality, it's over, and there is nothing or no one who can make me go back to that death spiral of a relationship.

And that's what marrying Mitch would be, like a slow death. It would start with me falling into a depression and steadily dying inside. That would be a fate worse than death. Just the thought of having his hands on me is enough to make me cringe. The sound of his voice makes me want to run out of this kitchen screaming.

The bowl I'm washing suddenly slips from my hand and breaks in half.

"Fuck." I drop it in the sink and check my hands for blood. There's none. The fractured bowl reminds me of my life. Broken and irreparable. Even if glued back together, it will never be the same.

The pathetic thing is, I don't see a way out. My parents will be livid, and when I make it clear I'm not going back to Mitch, they will retaliate. My credit cards will be canceled. I doubt I'll have a job, but when I think about it, I don't want to go back to work for them. It's a dead-end job being their office

manager. If I go back there, they will still control every aspect of my life. From my work to where I live to who I date. All of it was picked by them. I can go back a few years and even my college was chosen by them. I wanted to go to college on the west coast, but they would only pay if I went to Boston University. I didn't hate my time there. That's where I met Summer, and she's the best friend I've ever had. I'd do it all over again if only to meet her.

I'm only here in the safety of this house because of her. We might not share blood, but she's the closest I've ever come to having a sister, and she's the best kind. The kind you choose instead of the kind you just get. I do know that whatever's ahead, she will stand by me, but this is my fight. And it's time I start fighting for myself and what I believe in.

For twenty-four years I've been the proverbial frog in the pot of water who didn't realize it was getting hotter by the minute, and that it was time to jump out. I've let things get too far. I should have never accepted Mitch's proposal. Hell, it wasn't even a proposal. I've always pictured something romantic. A diamond ring slid onto my finger while the man gets on one knee. In my fantasy, he would cry and tell me he can't imagine life before he met me. I'd scream yes before he'd finish his proposal and I'd jump into his arms.

What I got from Mitch was completely different. It was completely unexpected, but not in a good way. Not in the way that knocks you off your feet and takes your breath away. His proposal was so shocking and unexpected that I didn't even know what to say.

SIX MONTHS AGO

"I'M COUNTING THE MINUTES UNTIL I CAN GET THE FUCK OUT OF here," I whisper to Summer. I'm hiding in a half bathroom on the first floor of my parents' home talking to my best friend on the phone. "You, me, Adele, and ice cream."

Summer lets out a squeal of anticipation. “There’s a fire starting in my heart. Reaching a fever pitch and it’s bringing me out the dark,” she starts to sing. Like every time she sings, she sounds amazing, and I wish I had a fraction of her talent.

“Hold on now. You wait for me. If I start to sing here, the house might fall apart.” My voice is terrible. My parents might have had money for dance, piano, and swim lessons, but the kind of talent Summer has can’t be paid for. At least not when you’re tone deaf like me. “And stop showing off, James.”

“Whatever. Just hurry up.”

“I swear, one day, you’ll meet a man who will fall in love with you at first sight.”

“Uh-huh.” I can imagine her rolling her eyes. “Right now, I’d settle for one with a driver’s license and his own car.”

“You and your damn standards.” The last guy she saw had neither and she had to drive him everywhere.

I want to say more. I want to tell her she’s going to meet someone worthy of her, but the bathroom door opens and my mother walks in. I should have locked the damn thing. She’s never had any boundaries where I’m concerned. She barges into whatever room I’m in whenever she feels like it.

She takes the phone from me and hits end, uncaring that I wasn’t done talking. “Come, Delaney. Why are you hiding in here?”

Why the fuck am I still here is the better question. They are throwing a birthday dinner for one of their doctor friends. He just turned eighty and he mentored my father when he first got out of medical school. There’s no reason for me to be here, but my mother wants to show off her children. My brother, Damon, is in his last year of medical school at Brown University. And me. The one who graduated Boston University with an Art History degree when being a bio major didn’t work out.

In my parents’ eyes, there is one reason for them to be proud. It’s not because of any of my accomplishments though. When I couldn’t find a job with an Art History degree, they told me I could manage their office. There was no asking.

There was no choice. Only the expectation that I would do what I was told.

“Mitch is sitting out there all by himself.” My mother takes my hand and pulls me out. Mitch was another one of their expectations. Since I couldn’t become a doctor, the next best thing I could do was date one. One picked out by them.

Of course, Mitch was sitting there by himself. Not only can no one stand him, he thinks he’s above everyone else and should be adored. If he’s not getting praise, he’s going to sit there until someone makes an effort. “And Dr. Graith is kicking himself for not introducing you to his grandson, but I made it clear that you’re taken.”

“Hasn’t he already been married twice? And he’s not even forty yet,” I tell my mother. She gives me a look of disapproval. No one is to trash talk her doctor friends. “And I’m not some debutante to be paraded around.” In fact, I’m only giving Mitch another month before I kick him to the curb. That’s if I can make it that long, but my plan is to see him as little as possible in the next four weeks. It will be six months, and that will be long enough.

We return to the foyer, where everyone has gathered now that dinner is over. Damon is at the grand piano playing Beethoven’s Für Elise while everyone mills around. Mother takes me directly to Mitch and puts my hand in his. As always, his touch is cold and the only reaction my body has is to pull away.

Just one more hour and I can get the hell out of here. Tomorrow is Sunday and I’m going to spend the day with Summer at her parents’ house. I’ll need some normalcy after enduring this evening.

“Go ahead, Mitch,” my mother whispers. I get a glimmer of hope that Mitch got called into work and he’s going to leave this party early.

One more month. Thirty more days and I can walk away and say that I tried but couldn’t make it work.

You're only fooling yourself, Delaney. They will only find you another Mitch. Free yourself now. Don't wait another second.

I shouldn't have ignored the little voice in my head. I should have walked out of that house and gone home. Only the condo I shared with Summer belongs to my parents. We could have packed our bags and moved into the small house she grew up in with her family, but I didn't do any of that.

Mitch gives my mother a cold smile that doesn't reach his eyes. He takes both my hands in his and turns me around to look at him. We're practically the same height even though I'm wearing flats. The room goes silent, and the piano music stops. My father stands next to my mother, their bodies close, but not touching. Heaven forbid they should show any affection toward each other.

Mitch lets go of one of my hands and sticks his hand inside his jacket pocket. He rummages around and I feel the temperature in the room drop.

No. Please, God, no.

He pulls out a black box, and my parents take a step closer. Mitch doesn't get on one knee. He doesn't smile. Hell, he doesn't even ask me the dreaded question.

He opens the box and shows me the two-carat solitaire platinum engagement ring. It might as well have been a noose for my neck. He stares into my eyes, finally smiling. The fake smile doesn't add any warmth to this moment, and I ask myself why he's doing this.

His parents also approach and stand behind him. No words are said. My mouth has gone suddenly dry, and I look around the room and wish one of the servers would give me a shot of tequila. Or a gun.

He stares at me and says nothing. In that time, I'm preparing my rejection speech. One that doesn't tell him how much he repulses me. No, I'll take the blame. I'll tell him I'm not ready and he can do better by finding a doctor for a wife, but I don't get a chance.

You fool. He doesn't want a doctor or any type of professional for a wife. He wants a trophy he can parade around when necessary.

I open my mouth, but my mother steps between us and says, "Of course, she'll marry you." She puts her hands on my shoulders and kisses the top of my head, just like she used to do when I was a little girl. "I'm so proud of you, Delaney." She's never said that to me before, and for a fraction of time, my heart swells at her words. That's all I've ever wanted.

Suddenly, the room goes from quiet to alive, and everyone claps and congratulates us at once. My heart quickens, and I feel the noose being placed around my neck.

"I hope Dr. Graith doesn't mind sharing his birthday with your engagement party, Delaney," my father announces. Everyone laughs, and Mitch slides the ring on my finger, securing the noose around my neck.

I HEAR A CAR DOOR SLAM ON THE OUTSIDE, BREAKING ME OUT of my nightmare. The gravity of my situation hits, and I grab the broken bowl pieces, raise them above my head and crash them on the ground.

"Fuck!" I yell into the kitchen. "God damn it." I stand there, looking at the mess that I made, and make a promise to myself. Never again. Never will I let anyone else dictate my life's choices. Never again will I be like that frog in the pot of water oblivious to its escalating heat. From this day forward, it's my life and I'm taking full control.

After making my resolution, I go to look for the broom and almost collide with David's broad chest.

He stares down at me, and I crane my neck to look at him.

"What did my bowl do to you?" He turns, goes to the pantry, and pulls out a broom. I reach for it, but he ignores me and starts to sweep.

"I'm sorry. I'll replace it." Suddenly ashamed about my little outburst, I clear my throat and start to wipe down the

already immaculate counter.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says while he sweeps the broken pieces into a dustpan. “What were you thinking about? You looked like you were in a trance before you lost it and took your frustration out on my dishware.”

He stands up straight and looks down at me. I’m a tall woman, and I can’t remember the last time a man had to look down at me. It feels good. I’d never noticed it before this moment, but David Sutton has nice eyes. Brown with flecks of gold around them. He looks a lot like his brother, but also different. He looks less intimidating, a little more approachable. His hair is just as dark, and unlike Max, he’s clean shaven. His skin looks smooth and his lips full. I blink a few times and look away.

“Huh?” I’ve already forgotten what he asked. I walk to the table and pick up my phone. The only numbers I have saved belong to Summer, Max, and my brother Damon. My finger hovers around his name, and I’m tempted to call him.

He’ll be on my side. He’ll go with me when I talk to my parents and will help me convince them that marriage to Mitch would be like being buried alive and slowly suffocating to death.

“Who is Damon?” David says from behind me. My index finger hovers, but I decide now is not the time. I’ll call him tonight when I’m alone in my room. I stuff down the guilt I feel at causing so many people to worry about me.

“He’s my brother.” Pumpkin walks into the kitchen, meowing along the way. Relieved to see her, I pick her up and bury my nose in her fur. She never judges.

“Are you two close?” David asks.

“Sure. He’s six years older, but we are.”

“Uh-huh,” he says as if he doesn’t believe me. He opens his fridge and pulls out another bottle of white wine. He pours two glasses and hands me one. Pumpkin jumps out of my arms and runs away.

“What do you mean by that?” My voice is too sharp for someone who needs to count on this stranger’s generosity for the next two days. “He’s my only sibling. Of course, we’re close. Aren’t you close with Max?”

Max trusted his brother enough to let me stay here, so I’m going to assume that they are. They run a business together and Summer has never had anything but good things to say about their relationship.

“That uptight prick? Yeah, we are. We tell each other exactly what we’re thinking. He doesn’t tiptoe around my feelings, and I don’t around his.”

I swallow my wine and think about me and Damon. I don’t think we’ve ever said a cross word to each other. It’s always polite and friendly.

“Let me ask you something.” David pours himself another glass while I wait to hear his question. “Think back to when you got engaged. What was your brother’s reaction?”

My mind flashes back to him at the piano. Then silence while Mitch opened the box. My mother screaming yes, and Mitch putting the noose around my neck. Damon never asked any questions, offered any advice, or told me I didn’t have to do it if I didn’t want to.

“He, ah, he kissed my cheek and said congratulations.” He never said congratulations either. He never said a word, but he did kiss my cheek.

“When Max got engaged, I told him he was out of his fucking mind and to call that shit off. We got into an argument that turned into a fist fight. He blackened my eye, and I busted his lip.”

My hand flies to my throat, and I almost drop the glass of wine. “Why would you say that about Summer?”

David lets out a breath almost as if he’s annoyed with me. “Not Summer. The idiot was married before. If I knew Summer existed, I would have tracked her down years ago. My point is siblings who care don’t let us do dumb shit

without telling us about it. Maybe your brother is more like your parents than you think.”

I push that thought aside. No way. Damon is not like that. He was away at college by the time I was in middle school, but we’ve always gotten along. He’ll understand.

“You’re wrong,” I tell David.

He shrugs. “No skin off my nose. You’ve been warned.”

“You don’t even know him,” I say in Damon’s defense.

“You’re right. I don’t, but if he’s so great, why didn’t you go to him last week? Or last month? Why wasn’t he the one who got you the hell out of the church? You went to Summer and Max and not your own flesh and blood. Maybe I know him better than you think, and maybe you’re just a little blind where your family is concerned.”

He stares into my eyes as if he’s challenging me, and as much as I try to come up with a rebuttal to his argument, I can’t. I give him my back and pretend to be busy washing the wine glass, but what he says stays with me all night.

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SHE STAYS OUT OF MY ROOM THAT NIGHT, AND I DON'T SEE her the next morning. I make sure to leave the house around six a.m. and stop off at the gym on the way to work. I do feel a little relief that Max will be back home tomorrow and at work the following day. Our cousin Caleb, who works as his personal assistant, will be back too. Summer has been promoted, and we'll need to fill her position as my personal assistant, but for now, Caleb can work for us both.

In the meantime, I have another marketing analyst position to fill since someone gave their resignation notice this morning.

Last night, after she went upstairs, I stood behind her door for a few minutes, but I didn't hear any talking. I guess she thought twice about calling her brother. She's right. I don't know him, but I don't have a good feeling about him. I don't have a good feeling about any of this, but it's not my problem. She'll be gone by tomorrow or the next day, and I won't have to think about her again. Yet there's a small part of me that feels for her.

She left the guy at the altar, but he does seem like a prick, so I can understand. She just looked so deflated and a little broken standing at my sink. Then she showed me another side of herself when she smashed that bowl on the floor. There's a fighter in there that she needs to tap into. My guess is that she will have no choice but to fight. I feel a little better knowing that she has it in her.

Again, not my business. Not my fight and not my problem. I'm doing my brother and Summer a favor, and after tomorrow, I probably won't see much of her or those legs that go on for miles. I won't miss her pouty, full lips either. That's too much temptation under my roof.

The workday is quiet but busy. It's afternoon when I look at the clock and realize I haven't eaten yet. Needing to get some air, I stand and stretch from my desk, but my phone rings before I get to take a step.

"David Sutton," I say, eager to get the hell out of here and get some lunch, but I always answer my phone when I'm in the office. Every call is a potential business deal.

"Hello," the female voice says. I shouldn't have picked up. Celia Brookes is the last person I want to hear from. A former employee who tried to come between my brother and Summer. We had no choice but to let her go, and yet it's complicated because her parents were close friends with mine.

"Celia," I say, doing my best to sound professional. She fucked with my brother, and nobody fucks with my brother but me. "What can I do for you?" At best, I can give her a reference. She was an excellent employee until she lost her damn mind.

"You can give me my job back. I'm hoping cooler heads have prevailed now that Max has had time to get over his little temper tantrum. Otherwise, things are going to get ugly."

I sit back down, close my eyes, and wonder how the hell my life turned into this. I only care about my work and getting laid, but now I'm babysitting a pampered princess and dealing with a former employee who has just threatened me.

"Celia, we let you go. Max will never agree to give you your job back, and frankly—" she cuts me off before I can tell her I don't want her back either. If it's between my brother and anyone else, I'm always going to choose him.

"Oh, fuck Max." Yeah, that's exactly what she wanted to do. Unfortunately for her, he wouldn't touch her with someone else's dick. "Max just left for a year leaving us in the lurch.

Went to live on a yacht to lick his wounds after a divorce. He didn't give a shit about dumping us with all the work. We don't need him. The office ran better without him. If he has a problem with me coming back, let him leave. He'll be back with his tail between his legs when this relationship blows up in his face too."

I let her get too close and too comfortable. She's right. Max did need some time off after a very bitter divorce. He needed the time, and I will never begrudge him for that. He would have done the same for me without hesitation. He came back better and stronger and met the love of his life.

"But you see, Celia, the name of this firm is Sutton Marketing. Not Sutton and Brookes. He owns half the business, and I own the other half. You were an employee who went too far and got fired for it. Here's something you should know about me. If it's between my brother and anyone else, I'm always going to choose my brother. He's family, and you're not." I should just hang up and go on with my day, but I'm eager to hear what she says next.

"Wrong choice, David. This isn't over."

"What are you going to do? Sue us? We fired you for cause. Go ahead. You're the one who will end up going broke from the legal fees." Her family is comfortable, but they don't have wealth. At least nowhere near what I have, and she knows it.

"There are other things I can do besides sue you." She hangs up on me, and I wonder if we'll be served with a wrongful termination suit or whatever bullshit Celia's going to throw at us. What else can she do? Let her. We can handle it, and we're going to come out on top. If she wants to fight it out in court, that's exactly what we'll do.

Already done with the office, I grab my laptop and decide that I'm going to work from home the rest of the day. I send an email to the receptionist so that she can forward any calls directly to my cell.

Just as I step out of the front door, I see the receptionist, Olivia, walking back to the building with another employee,

Kevin. They usually have lunch with Summer.

“Hey, guys,” I say to them. “Your third musketeer will be back soon.” They both nod at me. “Olivia, there’s going to be an analyst position open, and I want you to apply for it.” She stops walking so abruptly that Kevin nearly collides with her. Technically, you need a college degree for that position, and Olivia, a part-time college student, won’t graduate until May, which is eight months from now. She’s proven herself to be not just a good but loyal employee.

“Thank you, Mr. Sutton. I’d love to.” I tap her shoulder on my way to my car. Instead of driving straight home, I decide to drive down Max’s street. There are no strange cars in his driveway this time and no strange black BMW on the side of the road. In fact, the street is back to its usual quiet state.

I turn in his driveway and back out to go up the street. Just as I make a left turn onto the main road, I spot the same BMW from yesterday. Knowing Max and Summer still aren’t there, I decide to drive home. If that Mitch guy wants to go up against Max, it’s his funeral.

When I arrive home ten minutes later, the house is quiet. I don’t even see Pumpkin anywhere. The only person there is Lucy, who is cleaning inside the oven.

“Hey, Luce,” I say to her. “Where is everyone?”

She sticks her head out from the oven, seemingly surprised to see me.

“Ms. Delaney stepped out, and Pumpkin is hiding somewhere upstairs. Do you want me to get you some lunch?”

I nod at her, but I have a nagging feeling in the back of my head. I hope she didn’t decide to contact her brother. I just have a bad feeling about that. But then, another thought hits.

“Did she call a cab or Uber?” The question is barely out of my mouth when I have the door to the garage open. “And why the fuck is my Porsche missing?” I think of all the ways I’m going to wring that woman’s neck. Her long, graceful neck. The kind I want to push to the side and suck on.

Lucy doesn't answer, and I know she has no idea. For all she knows, I could have told Delaney it was okay, but I didn't. The fucking audacity of that woman. I was right about her. She's an entitled, spoiled princess. Entitled to sleep in my bed, eat my food, and drive my six-figure car. If she so much as gets a scratch on it, Max will have to buy me a new one.

While Lucy makes me a chicken Caesar salad, I set up my laptop and try to respond to work emails, but then I pull out my phone. All my cars have a tracker, and I track her about a mile away at a strip mall parking lot.

"How long ago did she leave?" I ask Lucy.

"About two hours. I think she was feeling antsy. Nice girl, that one. A little chatterbox." Lucy starts to talk about other things, but I tune her out.

A few minutes later, I hear a car in the driveway and the sliding glass door opens. Caleb, my cousin, walks in. He's a giant at six feet five inches. He has a full beard, but it looks like he's trimmed it. He sighs as if he has the world on his shoulders and sits next to me. I ask a higher power for patience.

Caleb is only twenty-seven, and even though I'm eight years older, it might as well be eighty when it comes to dealing with him.

"Where the hell have you been?" I ask him. He's a college dropout who has never stayed at a job more than six months. He's only been Max's assistant for four, but he's doing a surprisingly good job.

He rubs his giant hands over his face. Whatever he's going to say, I don't want to hear it.

"Do you want some lunch, Mr. Caleb?" Lucy asks.

"Thanks, Luce. You should take me out of my misery and marry me."

I roll my eyes.

Lucy chuckles and shakes her head. "I'm old enough to be your mother. And a handsome guy like you can do better." She

pats his head as he rests it on her round stomach.

“I can’t. You’re the total package, Luce. I think I love you.” Lucy blushes but steps away and opens the fridge.

“How about I fix you a steak?”

“See? Total package,” Caleb says.

I hear another car and seconds later, Delaney walks in. This is the first time I’ve seen her out of loungewear. She’s in a royal blue maxi dress with a slit on the side. She has a wide belt around her thin waist and big sunglasses on her face. I was right about her. She looks like she’s from another era, like a movie star from the nineteen fifties. She’s also holding two shopping bags.

She struts into the kitchen as if she owns the damn house. Caleb stands and towers over her. Then a slow smile spreads across his face, and he takes her hand in his.

“Caleb,” I say, standing up abruptly. “This is Delaney. She’s Summer’s friend and will be staying here until tomorrow.” In other words, get your paws off her, she’s off limits. He lifts her hand to his lips and kisses it. I’ve never noticed how long and graceful her fingers are before this moment. Her French manicure is still impeccable.

“Delaney?” Caleb says, finally looking into her face. “Wait? Weren’t you supposed to get married last weekend?” Caleb drops her hand and sits, but his gaze travels up her body. He has the nerve to lick his lips when he gets to her face.

“Yeah, it didn’t work out,” Delaney says. She whips off her sunglasses and takes a seat at the table. I let out a loud snort.

“I just got out of a relationship too,” Caleb says. Always the narcissist who turns the conversation to himself. “She just up and left me for no reason.”

I catch Lucy’s gaze and she shakes her head and rolls her eyes.

“That’s not exactly what happened to Delaney,” I mutter.

“Would you like some lunch, Ms. Delaney?” Lucy asks.

“Thanks, Lucy, but no. I treated myself to lunch at Whole Foods. I just had to get out for a few minutes.” She shakes her head, and her dark hair practically shimmers in my kitchen.

“I hope my Porsche was good enough for you.”

She ignores my sarcasm and says, “It was perfect, thank you.” She stands and puts a hand on her waist. “It was nice meeting you, Caleb.” She picks up her shopping bags and saunters out of the kitchen as if she doesn’t have a care in the world. I think I even hear her whistling while she goes up the stairs.

“She’s hot,” Caleb says. I drop my fork in my bowl and turn toward my cousin. He’s so busy stuffing his face, he misses the scowl I’m giving him. “I’m crazy about long legs, and I love a good ass.” He licks his lips again, and I lose any patience with him, which wasn’t much to begin with.

“Put your tongue back in your mouth. That’s Summer’s friend, and if you piss her off, Max is going to knock your teeth in.” I try to picture the two of them together, commiserating on their failed relationships, and it turns my stomach.

“Why would Max care? He’s off in relationship bliss.” He looks up the stairs again and I whack him upside the head. “What the fuck?”

“She’s off limits,” I warn him.

He shrugs. “Whatever. Why can’t I just look? Anyway, I met this spicy little redhead.” He starts to drone on, and I tune him out.

I DON'T SEE HER AGAIN FOR SEVERAL HOURS. SHE COMES bouncing down the stairs around six, dressed simply but elegantly. She's in black, ankle length pants and a light blue wrap around top. Her hair is different. She's straightened it, and it looks fantastic. Her feet are in black ballet flats.

She sticks a hand in her pants pocket and walks to the back of the house, toward the kitchen. I follow her.

"Going somewhere?" She smells good too. I don't know what it is, but the scent is light and intoxicating.

"I called Damon, and he wants to meet me for dinner to talk." My alarm bells instantly go off, and I step closer.

"What did he say?"

She pulls out the sunglasses from her purse and puts them on. "He said they've been worried sick, and it's about time I called. He said we should talk and set everything straight. See? You were wrong about him," she tells me.

Like hell I was.

"He said they, not he. It's an ambush."

"An ambush? Don't be ridiculous. I told him I wanted to meet with him alone." She digs around her purse and pulls out the key to my Porsche. I could snatch it from her and tell her she can't go, but I remind myself this isn't my fight. Besides, I'm sure she's spent her entire life being told what to do. She doesn't need that from me too.

"What did he say to that?"

She pulls out lipstick and walks to the half bathroom. I follow behind her and stand at the door. She leans into the mirror and covers her lips with red lipstick. She smacks and pouts until she decides it's perfect.

“He suggested we meet and talk, just the two of us.”

“Did he say it would be just the two of you?”

“It's implied.” I stare at the ceiling and ask the Lord for patience. “I told him I only wanted to meet with him.”

“Where are you meeting him?” She finally turns and looks at me.

“Why?”

“Because you're my responsibility until you leave, and I need to know where you are. And since you're taking my car, I have a right to know.” I can always track her, but I need her exact location.

“Jimbo's South in Braintree,” she says, shrugging as if I'm being ridiculous.

“I think you should rethink this, Delaney. He won't be there alone. Did you tell your brother where you are?”

“Of course not. I told him I'm safe and I'm okay.” So, she doesn't fully trust him. She just won't admit it to me or herself.

“And he has your new phone number?” I know Max had to buy her a new phone when she fled the church.

“No. I blocked my number when I called him.”

“You don't really trust him, so why are you going to meet him?”

“Because he's my brother, and I can't stay here forever. I also can't live with Max and Summer forever either. If I can talk to him and tell him all the reasons why I can't marry Mitch, that's one person in the family on my side. Maybe he can come with me when I talk to my parents. All I want is my life back, only without Mitch.”

It doesn't sound like an unreasonable wish, but this girl is delusional if she thinks there's a chance in hell that's how things are going to play out. From what she's shared with me about the family dynamics, they all live in another century on another planet. Her parents are either narcissistic borderline personalities or total control freaks when it comes to her. They won't appreciate this bout of defiance, and they will do everything they can to beat her back into submission.

"If only unicorns were real and magic beans were aplenty." I say, realizing even to myself that I make zero sense.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's a pipedream, sweetheart."

"Well, a pipedream is all I've got!" she yells. She must stun herself with her outburst. She stares into my eyes for a fraction of a second before she grabs her purse and heads to the sliding glass door. "I don't want to be late."

"Wait," I tell her. She stops, and I can tell she's considering her options, but she turns around and waits for me to speak. She has some color on her cheeks and her full lips are pursed shut. Her cute little nose is flared while she waits to hear what I have to say.

"I need your phone number. Call me." When she pulls it out, I give her my number and a few seconds later, I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. "I'm only a call away."

"Thank you, David." She takes a step closer and the sweet smell of her perfume hits. She takes it a step further and grabs both my hands. Big mistake. My body automatically reacts. I haven't been this close to a woman in weeks, which is as long as a lifetime for someone like me. I hold her stare and hope that she doesn't look down. "I really appreciate you letting me stay here. You don't know me, and you don't owe me anything, but you've been so kind. I won't ever forget that." She moves fast and hugs me. Her soft hair brushes my face, and her scent takes over. I inch back so she won't feel my erection. She pulls away and quickly kisses my cheek. I stand there like an idiot who's never gotten close to a beautiful woman before. She lets out an awkward laugh and wipes the

lipstick on my cheek with her thumb. Satisfied, she nods and walks out.

She's walking right into an ambush. I just know it. She's either naïve or so desperate for these people's approval that she's not using her head. I storm out of the kitchen, walk toward the front of the house, and burst into Caleb's bedroom. He's a fucking slob. There are clothes everywhere, and he's shirtless doing pushups in the middle of the filth.

“Get dressed. I'm taking you out to dinner.” The decision was made before she closed the sliding glass door behind her. “You like seafood, right?” I really don't give a shit what he likes, but I'm certain he's never met a meal he didn't inhale. When he nods, I say, “Let's go to Jimbo's.” The words are barely out of my mouth before Caleb is standing up and clapping his hands like a tween girl at a K-pop concert.

“Give me five minutes to shower.”

“I'll give you three.”

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IT'S QUIET AT THE RESTAURANT ON A TUESDAY NIGHT. I GET lots of jealous glances when I step out of the Porsche. My heart is in my throat when I walk through the front door. I drove around the entire parking lot when I arrived. I spotted Damon's car but not my parents'. There was no sign of Mitch's black BMW either.

I feel a little relief that my brother didn't betray me. I knew he wouldn't. David Sutton, though gracious and extremely kind to let a total stranger stay at his house, doesn't know Damon. We might not be very close, but that's because he's so much older than I am. The age difference between us made it impossible for us to be friends, but maybe that's something we can work on now. Now that I'm free of Mitch and the confines of that relationship. Bile rises in the back of my throat at the thought of Mitch. I never should have let it go this long. I never should have gone out with him at all. There was no attraction on my part when I first met him, and the only reason I agreed to the date was to earn my mother's approval. That's all I've ever wanted. At least until now.

I'm greeted by a young hostess with purple hair and two nose rings. When I give her my name, she tells me my date is already here and for me to follow her. Another relief. She said date. Singular. I knew he would come through for me. I'm his only sibling. Of course, he would understand.

I ignore the little voice in my head that reminds me that he stood by and never said a word. I push down the memory of him being there when I tried to talk to our mother two weeks

ago. When Mother accused me of being dramatic, he nodded his head in agreement and never said a word in my defense. I don't dwell on how he sighed in annoyance at the dinner table when it was announced that medical school was not in my future. He rolled his eyes then too. He and my mother both. I push all of that down.

The hostess leads me to a small room. I assume Damon asked for privacy, and since it's a slow night, they agreed. He's alone when I get there, and I almost want to weep in relief. Almost. He stands, rushes over, and takes me into a hug.

It's only been a few days since Summer left. She hugged me tight in David's kitchen. Holding Damon now feels like I've been without human contact for years instead of days.

I can feel tears burgeoning. A loud sob flies out of my mouth and his arms tighten around me.

"Jesus, Delaney," he says. "Where the hell have you been?" He pulls out a chair for me, and I sit. He takes the seat across from me. I reach over and grab his hands, but they don't feel like I was expecting. David's hands were warm and inviting. I almost didn't want to let them go, but Damon's feel ice cold, and I yank mine from his. I ignore the voice in my head yelling at me to leave and not look back.

Our waitress arrives with water. When she leaves, Damon starts the interrogation.

"Tell me where you've been. You left without anything. How have you been living?" He eyes me up and down. "You look well." What was supposed to come out as a compliment feels like judgment and disapproval.

"That's not important," I tell him. The last thing I want is for him to show up at David's, who might finally get fed up and throw me out. "Listen, I had to get out. The very idea of being stuck with Mitch for the rest of my life was—" I pause as I think of a word, but all I can do is cringe. "I don't love him. I don't even like him. He repulses me." He stares into my eyes as if he's waiting for me to say more. As if the reasons I just gave him aren't enough. "I couldn't do it."

“It was nerves. Cold feet.” It’s as if he’s repeating the same words our mother said to me not too long ago. He reaches for my hands, but I put them on my lap before he can get to them.

“No, it wasn’t cold feet. Didn’t you hear me? He repulses me.”

He runs a hand over his face.

“What do you mean by that? He’s a doctor. He comes from a good family. Our parents approve. We all agreed this was best for you.”

I let his words sink in. I lower my gaze and look down at the white tablecloth.

“Who is we?” I hiss. When all I get is a blank stare, I say, “Well, I never agreed, Damon.” I stare into his face, and his head rolls back as if I slapped him. “He pulls out a ring and slides it on my finger and our *mother* said yes. *I* didn’t agree.” I point to myself before I lift the glass to my lips and take a sip. I wish it was something stronger, but I need to keep a clear head.

“Our parents spent over a hundred grand on your wedding only for you to run out, embarrassing them. They invited over three hundred people. How could you be so selfish?”

If he had slapped me across the face, I wouldn’t have been more shocked. This is not how our phone conversation went. I thought he understood.

“You know how many decisions I got to make on *my* wedding? Zero. None. Not the dress or the wedding cake. Not even the colors. Zilch. I couldn’t even have Summer in the wedding party, and she’s my best friend. That wedding was for them, not me. I was just a prop they got to dress up.” It’s been barely ten minutes, and I’m already exhausted.

Brittany, our server, returns and asks for our order. I order shrimp scampi and hand her the menu.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” Damon asks.

“Nothing’s wrong anymore. All that time of going through the motions with Mitch was wrong. Things are finally right.”

At least they will be when I make him understand and ask for his help in talking to our parents.

“They’re still willing to throw a small wedding for you at the house.”

“Are you not hearing me? No!” I lift the ice water to my forehead, my meticulous makeup be damned.

“Yes!” he yells and his eyes darken. I’ve never heard him yell before. “You’ve embarrassed our entire family.”

“What about *me*?” I ask him. “I’m sorry I embarrassed everyone, though I don’t understand why *you* would be, but I’m not going to marry Mitch as an apology.” I stand so fast, the chair I’m sitting on falls over. “This was a bad idea. I was wrong about you. I’m leaving.” He stands too, and when I turn to walk out of the room, my parents and Mitch walk in.

I turn to Damon, feeling the sting of his betrayal. He has the grace to not meet my stare. He looks down at the floor. I try to walk around them, but the three of them block me in.

“Damon, you told me it would just be us,” I whisper to him. My eyes brim with tears, but I refuse to let them fall. At least not in front of them.

“I never said that.” He finally looks back into my eyes. “I told you we could talk. *All* of us.” He lifts my chair from the floor, points at it and says, “Sit. Let’s fix this.”

The only way to fix this would be if Mitch disappeared off the face of the earth. He takes a step closer to me, and I take a giant one back. I can’t even stand the smell of his cologne. It makes me nauseous.

“I thought you would have been hiding out at that white guy’s house. The one your friend is hooking up with.” There’s so much venom in his voice that a shiver runs through me.

“You mean Maxwell Sutton? Summer’s *fiancé*? No, I wasn’t at their house.” I toss my hair, putting on a bravado that I don’t feel.

“Where the hell have you been?” he hisses.

“None of your damn business. I’m not engaged to you anymore. I left the ring for you in the church.” It was only a ring, but I remember taking it off and feeling as if the weight of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. I’d sooner die than put it back on.

“Please, step away so I can leave,” I say to Mitch, who is now standing between me and the exit. I look away from him and into my mother’s eyes. She’s assessing me, almost as if she’s taking inventory of everything I’m wearing. She didn’t have a say in this outfit. I used some of the cash Max gave me to buy it. Mother, as always when she’s away from the hospital, is impeccably dressed in a designer pantsuit.

“You’ve caused us nothing but sleepless nights,” she says. Everyone always says my voice is just like hers, but I’ve never agreed. Right now, she sounds shrill. She approaches and brushes the hair off my shoulders. She prefers it when it’s curly. I found a flat iron on clearance and straightened the hell out of it. I love it.

“We can have something at the house in three weeks, two if we find a suitable dress tomorrow. Mitch’s parents are humiliated, but I managed to smooth things over. Mitch, honey, where’s the ring?” Like I’m in a trance and the last few days didn’t happen, Mitch pulls out the noose from his pocket. He holds it in front of me. It’s like an out of body experience. I slap the ring from his hand. It flies across the room, hits a wall and lands on the floor.

“Delaney!” my mother yells, but I ignore her. I decide to try another tactic.

“Dad, I don’t want to marry Mitch. Can you please understand? Help me make them understand. Please.” I approach him and take his hand in mine. He’s always let my mother deal with me, but he’s never been cruel or mean. I can’t imagine him forcing me into a marriage I don’t want.

“Here,” my mother says, handing me my Chanel handbag. “Your wallet and credit cards are in there. Let’s eat and discuss the new ceremony.” It’s as if she didn’t hear a word I said. I look at my dad, but he looks away.

“Listen to your mother,” he says without looking at me. “What were you thinking running off like that? You took years off my life.” Listen to your mother. That’s my father’s mantra when it comes to dealing with me. I should have known. He’s never expressed an opinion or thought when it comes to me. He only reserves that type of energy for his son.

For the first time since they got here, I address Mitch. Maybe I can get him to understand.

“I don’t love you.” I look him directly in the eyes. “I’ve never loved you, and I will never love you. You repulse me.”

My mother loudly gasps.

“She doesn’t mean that, Mitch,” she says.

“I do, and please don’t speak for me,” I tell her, then I turn to Mitch again. “I mean it. I can’t stand you.”

“Delaney,” Dad admonishes, “we didn’t raise you to be mean and hurtful.”

“I’m only trying to be honest. Since you guys aren’t hearing me, I’m hoping Mitch will.” I cross my arms and wait for my words to hit. For him to storm out after he tells me to go to hell, but he never does that.

“I can call my parents and see if they can arrange dinner at their house tomorrow. I’ve already pushed back our honeymoon.”

“Oh my God! Are you people deaf? I am not marrying Mitch. It’s not happening.”

The waitress returns, and I think she heard me. Her face turns red, and she looks away. She asks for my parents’ and Mitch’s orders, but they ask her for more time, and she practically high tails it out of the room.

“Oh, yes, you will,” my mother hisses once the waitress is gone. Lynn Lewis never raises her voice. She’s always in control. At most, she’ll hiss like she did just now. It used to scare me as a child, but not today. Today, she’s making me angry. “Your will or those credit cards are cut off. We’ll take your car back, and you can forget about going back to the

condo. Your job at our office? Done. And you can forget about moving back home.”

Each word is laced with venom. I look around the room. At the faces of my family, and neither my father nor brother will look at me. Mitch is standing there with both hands on his hips, breathing hard as he waits for my next move.

“You can’t take my car back,” I say, taking a step closer to her. “It’s not yours. You didn’t buy it. It was a gift from my grandparents, and you have no right to it.” She gasps as if I’m the one who is being unreasonable, but I know what her issue is. I’ve never stood up to her before today. I always do as I’m told, but no more.

“Why, Mitch?” I ask, turning back to him now. “Why do you want to marry me so bad?”

He seems surprised by my question. He swallows twice before he opens his mouth and says, “We’re a good match.”

“That’s it? We’re a good match? Based on what? Do you love me?”

He shakes his head and scoffs as if my question is ridiculous. “Sure.” He shrugs as if that’s either a foregone conclusion or absurd. Sure. That’s it. I think back to Summer and Max. Their love is palpable. It’s whenever they are in the same room. It’s the small way he touches her lower back whenever she walks past him. Or the way he looks for her whenever she’s not there. If I can have a tenth of that, I’ll be happy. I won’t get close to a tenth with Mitch.

“I’m not marrying you,” I say again. I look around and decide to address everyone in the room.

“Mother, I’m not marrying Mitch. Dad, I’m not marrying Mitch. Damon, since you seem to be so invested in my personal life, I’m not marrying Mitch. When I left the church, I meant it. And Mom, I’m sorry you went through the trouble and expense, but I came to you weeks ago and tried to tell you, but you shut me down. Damon, you were there.”

“Don’t drag me into this,” Damon says, raising both hands.

I slowly approach him. “Don’t drag you into this? Really? After you lie to me and set me up? Now you don’t want to be involved.” He looks around the room as if he can’t believe those words came from me. I ignore him. He’s not important.

“Mother, I know you could sense it in the church. That’s why you wouldn’t let me out of your sight for long. It’s over between me and Mitch.”

The room goes deathly quiet. This isn’t where or how I wanted to have this conversation, but since I’m only having it once, being direct is the only way.

“Oh, really?” My mother’s approach is almost like a slither. “And what are you going to do? We’ll cut you off just like that.” She snaps her fingers.

She expects me to cry and capitulate. I realize now that’s how she’s always handled me my entire life. She holds the purse strings. She holds the money. She’s made sure of it. She’s made sure I’m completely dependent on her. From the schools I attended to the man I marry. All picked out by Dr. Lynn Lewis.

“I’d rather sleep in the subway than next to Mitch for the rest of my life.” I can see the color drain from Mitch’s face, and for the first time tonight, I regret my words. It’s never my intention to be mean or cruel, but I don’t know how else to get my point across.

“You ingrate,” my mother says.

“Delaney, you will apologize to Mitchell right now.” Dad sounds stern just like he did when I was a little girl, and I would fight with my cousin Jade. She’d break my toys but would blame me. Whenever I’d tell them what really happened, he’d make me apologize. He would never listen to my side.

“I will not apologize. Mitch, I don’t mean to hurt your feelings. I’m only trying to make you understand.”

“Lynn, Pascale, you said you had this under control,” Mitch says. He tries to hand me the ring again, but I knock it out of his hand as if he’s approached me with a lit pitchfork.

“She’ll come around,” my mother says.

“I will not come around. The only way I will marry Mitch is if you drug me, and when the drugs wear off, I’ll leave again.”

Mother snatches the purse from me and says, “You’ll come to your good senses when you realize your friend can’t support you for the rest of your life. I told you, Pascale. I told you that girl was nothing but trouble. Look at what she turned our daughter into. I always knew she was beneath you.”

It takes a moment for her words to sink in, but when they do, I approach my mother. I do something I’ve never done before in all my twenty-four years of being alive. I point a finger in her face. “I’m capable of having my own thoughts and feelings. I know that’s hard for you to believe because I’ve always made it so easy for you to control me, but Summer has nothing to do with this, so leave her out of it. This is because I don’t want to be married to *him*.” I point at Mitch without looking, unable to stomach the sight of him even for a second.

“When did you turn into such a vile bitch?” Mitch asks. “You’re nothing. I’m a goddamn doctor. You’re lucky I’m still willing to marry you. The only thing you have going for you is your family name. Now, let’s go.” He takes my elbow, and I reach up to smack him across the face. He snatches my wrist and twists it.

“Let her go,” Damon says. He pulls Mitch away from me while our parents watch.

“I apologize. I don’t know what got into me,” Mitch says. He clears his throat twice and steps away.

“Apology accepted,” my mother says as if I don’t matter. “Delaney, you and Mitch obviously need to talk. You two can have this room and the three of us will have dinner in the main dining room.” She comes closer and plays with my hair like she used to do when I was a little girl. “I’ll have Reverend Adams come to the house for dinner to give you two some counsel. It’s important that—”

“Oh my God! No!” I yell into the room. I shock everyone. Mother takes a step back and looks around as if she’s asking for help. “No!” I scream again. “Will you people listen to me?”

Damon takes a step toward me, but I put a hand up and tell him not to come any closer. I expected resistance. I expected reproach, but I never expected this outright refusal to hear a word I’m saying. Talking to the walls would give me better results. I run a hand through my hair as I gather my thoughts.

“If we walk out of here without you coming to your senses, Delaney, we are cutting you off,” my mom says. My father winces. It’s quick, but I catch it. However, he still doesn’t contradict my mother. Mitch has a smug smile on his face as if this is checkmate, and I’ve lost. Damon nods in agreement with our mother.

David’s warning hits, but I’m glad I didn’t listen to him when he told me that Damon wasn’t on my side. I needed to hear this with my own ears. I needed to see their reactions with my own eyes.

Not a single time did the members of my immediate family offer me solace or a shoulder to cry on. I’ve gotten more from perfect strangers than from the people who are supposed to love and support me.

“So, that’s it?” I ask.

“That’s it,” my mother confirms.

“I see.” I take a seat. The fire has gone out of me. I have no more fight left. This is what it’s come to. Marry Mitch or lose everyone that I’ve loved for twenty-four years. I’m nothing but a pawn. A means to an end, and my happiness be damned.

But will it be so bad to be married to him? He’s a doctor. He’ll be working a lot, leaving you to your own devices. You’ll be paraded around when he needs a wife on his arms. You’ll be there to raise his children.

I feel the bile rise in the back of my throat at the thought of having Mitch’s children. The very idea of him climbing on top

of me to create a life is enough to make me regurgitate right here in this family friendly restaurant.

“I’m only of use to you when I’m an obedient daughter, right? Like a good little golden retriever, is that right, Mom? What about you, Dad? Until now, I thought we had a good relationship. I know you’ve always let Mom deal with me. You’d rather save your precious free time for your son, but I’ve always thought you wanted the best for me. The joke’s on me, I guess.” I finally stand and steel my spine.

“Delaney, will you stop with the dramatics? We all know this is an act. We are willing to call your bluff,” Mother warns.

Just as I open my mouth to speak, David and Caleb walk through the door. I almost want to weep. I’ve known David for three days, and I know he must think I’m a vapid idiot, but he tried to warn me, and when I wouldn’t listen, he followed me here for support.

I hold my hand up and signal for him to stay quiet. He leans against the wall and crosses his arms. Caleb stands next to him, probably oblivious, but standing by his family, nonetheless. I’ve never felt more alone than at this moment.

“I’m calling *your* bluff.” I point to all of them. “I will not spend the rest of my life with a man I loathe to appease you. Believe me, it will be a slow death every single day. So, if all I am to you is a transaction, I’m out. Use Damon. Mitch has a sister. Marry them off.” Damon’s eyes nearly bug out of his head at my suggestion. “It’s different when it’s you, isn’t it, Damon? But you see, you wouldn’t ever have to worry about that because you’re a man. I’m only a woman. One who couldn’t become a doctor, so they made me feel obligated to marry one. Mother, you think Mitch is so great, divorce Dad and marry him. As for me, I’m done. I’m free.”

IT TAKES CALEB TWENTY MINUTES TO SHOWER AND CHANGE. By the time we exit the highway, there is a three-car accident, and we are stuck in traffic for much too long. Thankfully, the hostess knows who I am talking about and leads me right to the room.

I check out her family. I know their type. I've been around it all my life. Sticks up their asses, noses up in the air because they are too good to breathe the same oxygen as everyone else. Half of my family is that type. The only reason why Max and I aren't the same way is because our parents made sure of it. That's how our parents grew up and didn't want to raise us that way.

The room goes deathly silent after Delaney's speech. I don't think they were prepared for this. They figured they were four against one and she'd give in. That's probably how it's always been. They brow beat or manipulate her into submission, but that will only get you so far. This marriage was the last straw. They should have gotten a clue when she ran from the church minutes before her wedding, but they aren't used to losing. I'm pretty sure this is not the end of it. It might be for today, but they will regroup and plan another form of attack. I'm as sure of that as I am of my own name.

"Who the hell are you?" I think it's her father who addresses me. He's a tall, thin man with a thick mustache. He has Delaney's eyes and her light brown coloring.

"I'm David Sutton." I don't give any more explanations beyond that. I'm sure they'll figure it out.

“He’s Max’s brother. I guess I should have known Sutton was hiding you somewhere,” Mitch says to Delaney. She doesn’t bother to look at him.

“Him? You’ve been staying with this man? No. You will come home right now” Delaney’s mother tries to grab her hand, but she moves away.

“I’m done here,” Delaney says.

I push myself off the wall and approach the other young man in the room. He’s her spitting image, except he’s male. He’s almost as tall as me, but he’s rail thin. I could pick him up and body slam him without breaking a sweat, but I’m not the violent type. Not unless I’m provoked.

“You have a lot to learn about what being a sibling means,” I say to him. He has the grace to be embarrassed. He refuses to meet my eyes. His father comes and puts a protective hand on his shoulder. “So, you do know what protecting your child looks like? You just don’t extend the same courtesy to your daughter.” Unlike his son, he looks me in the eyes.

“This is a family affair,” he admonishes.

Delaney’s mother stands in front of me, her brown eyes quickly assessing me. I do the same.

“With a family like this, Delaney is better off with the wolves.” I walk around the room slowly as I take them all in. “I have a brother,” I say to Damon, looking at him directly in the eyes. “We might have our issues, but he would never do some fucked up shit like this.” He remains quiet, but his posture stiffens. I point a finger in his face. “She trusted you. She came to you for help.”

He swats my finger away, finally showing some balls, but he won’t meet my eyes again.

“Let’s go,” I say to Delaney. I have no right to be here, telling her what to do when that’s what she’s running away from, but unlike them, I have her back. She must realize that. She picks up the purse she left the house with.

“Delaney, this is your last warning,” her mother says.

“I won’t wait on you forever.” I almost want to snort at Mitch’s lame attempt at manipulation.

Delaney, with her head held high, walks out of the room. Her mother loses her balance, and her father rushes to hold her up. I can see all color leave her face, making her look ashen.

Mitch stands there, both hands on his hips. He’s angry, not a man hurt by the breakup of a woman he loves. But I can tell from the firm setting of his chin that he’s not done. Not yet. When he does accept she’s not coming back, I’m afraid that’s when the real drama will begin.

“Hey,” Caleb says. The three of us stop in the middle of the restaurant. I’m sure he’ll have questions about what the hell is going on. Any normal person would. “I thought we came here to eat. Why are we walking toward the door? I’m starving.” Caleb is not normal, I remind myself.

“Let’s get it to go,” I offer, but he pouts like a little boy.

“But I want drinks,” he moans.

“You guys came here to eat.” Delaney catches my eye. She knows damn well I didn’t come here to eat. “So, let’s get a table and eat. I’m done being cowed.”

I ask the hostess to seat us. She leads us to a round table in the center of the restaurant. I pull out her chair while Caleb orders each of us a Moscow Mule.

“Dinner’s on Caleb,” I announce. My cousin practically spits out his water in shock. “Just kidding. Dinner’s on me. Get whatever you want.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Caleb says. I want to reach over and slap him upside the head. He’s gone through a sizable inheritance from his paternal grandmother. He won’t have access to his trust fund until he’s thirty, so for now, he lives off me. I don’t mind. He looked up to me and Max when he was a little boy, and I promised my aunt I’d mentor him.

“Thank you, David,” Delaney says. She puts a hand on top of mine. Her hand is warm and very pleasant against my skin. I admire the contrast of our skin tones. “You didn’t have to come find me, but I’m glad you did. You were right.” She

sighs sadly, and something in the room changes. The temperature increases, and I feel a flutter in my stomach. I clear my throat and pick up my water glass. I remind myself that she'll be gone tomorrow and that she's not my responsibility. She's a grown woman who can obviously stand up for herself.

When the server returns with our drinks, we toast. Just as we're all sipping, her family and Mitch start to walk out of the restaurant. They walk right by our table, and I can feel their eyes on us, but we don't react. They stand there and gawk, but we pretend as if they are not there.

In reality, I'd love for one of them to say something to give me an excuse to tell them off, but they don't. They just stand there, not saying a word.

Caleb lists off a bunch of appetizers and entrees he wants us to share. They stand there for a few more seconds before they leave. Delaney doesn't look up at all, but she visibly exhales once I tell her they are gone.

"What the fuck was that all about?" Caleb finally asks. "I had your back, girl." He taps her shoulder, and she chuckles. "Let me tell you guys about my last few days." He breaks off a piece of bread from the table. "So, I find out Justine, that's my ex," he says to Delaney. I roll my eyes. I really don't want to hear this. "I find out from a mutual friend that she's dating some guy, so I park in front of her house—"

"Okay, that's enough. I don't want to have to be a witness against you." He ignores me and prattles on and on about himself. Delaney giggles at the nonsense that spews out his mouth. She's probably relieved that the ugliness from a few minutes ago is behind her, at least for tonight.

Then I see a tall figure approach. It's her brother. He stands at the table and looks down at her. Her smile disappears, but she doesn't look up.

"Delaney, I need to speak with you," he says.

"No," is all she says back to him.

"Listen, I need—"

“She said no,” I remind him, standing up from the table. “You’ve done enough damage. Leave before I make you leave.” He looks into my eyes, then back at Delaney.

“I want you to go. I have nothing to say to you. I realize you’re just like them. You don’t want to talk. You want to control my life. No more.” She turns toward Caleb. “So, what happened when she saw you?”

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AFTER A DECADENT DINNER WITH MY TWO NEW FRIENDS, I still feel down. Caleb spent dinner regaling us with stories of his failed attempt to get his girlfriend back. I tried to push everything from my mind and focus on anything that wasn't about me, but I couldn't clear my head. Once Damon left, my tablemates tried to lighten the mood, and I pretended to be okay, but the truth is, I'm not. I need my friend, but I refuse to call her on the last night of her vacation and dump all of this on her. Besides, I'd rather do it face to face so we can eat ice cream and sing Adele songs.

I don't know how I'm supposed to feel when I've lost my entire family only because I want to be able to make my own life's decisions. Going through with the engagement and wedding planning was a mistake. I never should have let it get that far. I should have told Mitch right away that I didn't love him, but he didn't seem to care about my lack of feelings for him.

It's all about the image. His wife, though not a doctor, is the daughter of two doctors. I have the right pedigree and breeding. I'd know how to act. In other words, he expected me to be as fake as the rest of them, but I just couldn't do it. I would die inside. The biggest mistake I ever made was taking that ring, but at least I didn't marry him. At least it forced me to see my family for who they are.

My fingers itch to call Summer, but I don't. I am relieved that I was at least smart enough not to give Damon my phone number. They have no way of calling me, but it probably

won't take long for them to figure out where I am. I just hope they don't bring any drama to David's house. David, who has been nothing but kind since he found me in his bed.

It's after eleven, and I open my bedroom door and tiptoe downstairs for water. I eye the open bottle of white wine in the fridge, but I decide not to. One, it would be rude, and two, I had three drinks at dinner. An expensive dinner that he paid for, and even though I know he's filthy rich, he owes me nothing. Besides, he's done too much for me as it is.

Just as I pull out a bottle of water, I hear a set of heavy footsteps coming down the back set of stairs. It can only be David. Caleb's bedroom is downstairs. I feel self-conscious standing in nothing but a plain, white t-shirt that barely covers my thighs. He seems surprised to see me. The only light in the room is coming from the open fridge. He misses a step, and I can feel myself blush while his dark eyes probe my body.

I decide to stand tall and let him look. Mitch never looked at me with need. Our sex life, at its best, was mediocre. At its worst, it was a waste of time. He never made me feel beautiful or wanted. There were never hungry looks of need exchanged between us. Not even close.

"I'll be out of your hair by this time tomorrow." Max and Summer are due back by mid-afternoon.

"Are you okay?" he asks. He comes close and puts a hand on my back. They're big hands. Big and masculine. Mitch is always worried about his hands and injuring them. Right now, I wish someone would put them through a meat grinder.

David's hands feel good, and I wonder how they would feel if this T-shirt wasn't a barrier. I look up into his face to see his Adam's apple bob. I swear his eyes linger on my mouth. One throat clearing later, he pulls out the bottle of wine and holds it up.

"No, thanks. I've had enough. Thanks again for dinner." I start to walk away, but his voice stops me.

"It's okay to be upset, Delaney. What are you going to do now? Where do you work?" He pulls out a stool at the kitchen

island and gestures for me to sit. Not really wanting to be alone right now, I take the seat.

“I’m the office manager at their medical practice. I guess I was.” I hang my head. “I’m going to the library tomorrow to look through job listings.”

“And do you have a car?”

“Actually, I do. It was a gift from my grandparents, but it’s parked at Mitch’s.”

“Do you have the key?”

“Yup. It was in the purse my mother brought me. That’s the only thing I took out of it.”

“I’ll drive you over there in the morning so you can get it. Do you have anything else over there?”

“Only everything. My clothes, passport, birth certificate. Everything, but I don’t care about those things. They’re all replaceable, but I’ll be happy to have my car back.” His hand finds its way between my shoulder blades. He rubs, and I lean into him. I was right. Those hands are strong, but it’s been a long time since I’ve wanted to be touched by a man.

“I can probably find you something at Sutton Marketing. Let me look at our roster tomorrow and I’ll get back to you. If you managed an office, you’d be a good fit.” My head snaps up and I look into his eyes. He gives me a small smile, and my heart flutters. I don’t even care that he’s only offering me this job because he feels sorry for me. I’ll be the best damn employee that place has ever had.

“Really?” A sudden burst of emotion hits and I let out a soft sob. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“I’m offering you a job, not a handout. Listen,” he says. “Everyone gets to where they are with someone’s help. Sutton Marketing was given to me and Max from our father, who inherited it from his own. I’m a trust fund baby, who is also a product of nepotism.”

I don’t know what comes over me, but I stand and take him into a hug before I can talk myself out of it. God, he’s so

tall. And hard. His chest is broad and feels like a wall of muscle. All I want to do is stay in his arms forever. They tighten around me, and I bury my face in his chest and inhale.

Mitch, for all his arrogance, was average height at best. I was slightly taller the instant I put on shoes. With David, I'd have to get on the tips of my toes to reach his mouth. His full, firm lips.

I slowly raise my head and find him looking down at me. There's a look in his eyes that I know well. I've seen it in movies. It's lust, but I know I can't indulge. Not in him. I clear my throat, break the hug, and step away.

"Um, good night, David." I run out of the kitchen and take the stairs two at a time. His bedroom door is ajar, and I spot Pumpkin snoozing in the middle of his bed. I run in, grab the cat, and take her to my room. I make sure to close the door behind me.

I lie on my back and put her on my stomach. She stays put and closes her eyes while I stroke her head.

My heart is still racing as I think about what happened downstairs. Technically, nothing happened. He comforted me. He showed me more kindness than people connected to me by blood.

I grab my phone and download the Tinder app. One thing I will do now that I'm free is find someone who wants to have nothing but meaningless, no commitment sex. Once Tinder is downloaded, I open the Amazon app and do a search for vibrators.

I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THE HUG SINCE LAST NIGHT. I went to sleep with a hard dick and woke up with one. I kept smelling her all night. I almost barged into her room to get Pumpkin back, but I let her keep her if only for a night. She had a rough day and maybe she needed another living thing next to her.

And now, at barely seven o'clock in the morning, she's filling my Mercedes with her sweet, intoxicating scent. Without asking, she turns off NPR and puts on an insipid morning show while I drive her to her ex-fiancé's house to get her car. I hope he doesn't make a scene, but if he does, I'll have no problems handling him. Arrogant, smug little asshole. I should break one of his hands just for fun. I doubt it would take much effort.

The way he was looking at her yesterday, like she was a piece of property he needs to own has irked me since. There's got to be a reason why they are so hell bent on this marriage. Nothing else makes sense.

She hums along to the song on the radio. She has those big sunglasses on again. There's a new lightness to her now. When I met her a few days ago, she looked like she had the world on her shoulders. Now, she looks like a young woman her age, ready to take her place in the world. She even has a small smile on her lips while she sings off key. The song ends and an old Tupac song plays. She does a one eighty and starts to rap along. She knows all the words. She even dances in her seat.

"You're kind of young for this song," I tell her.

She stops rapping to say, “This is my favorite song of all time. I’m not the best dancer, but when this song comes on, I forget that.” When Tupac says up and down like a rollercoaster, she gyrates her hips, and I can’t help myself. I remember all the lyrics, and the words fly out of my mouth.

When the song ends, she gives me a high five, and we both laugh like we don’t have a care in the world. A commercial comes on, and she does another one eighty, and the car becomes somber again.

“Take your next left,” she says. With those words, all the air seems to get sucked out of the car. She sits up straighter and squares her shoulders. She starts to lean out of her seat as she looks out the windshield.

We’re driving down an idyllic, tree-lined street in the sleepy suburb of Braintree. The homes are small. It’s really a picture-perfect place for young newlyweds to start their lives.

Something hits and my stomach sinks at the thought of her living happily ever after here with that idiot. She points to a white house with blue shutters at the end of the street. It has a long driveway, hidden by trees. I pull over to the side of the road and face her.

“What if he comes out?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “It’s my car, and I have the right to take it. It will only take a minute.”

“You drive this car and I’ll drive yours. My mechanic will check it out and make sure there are no trackers on it.”

Her eyes widen, but she nods.

“Thank you.”

I pick up my phone. “I’m texting you the address. Meet me there, and then we’ll go have breakfast.”

I heard her stomach growl twice on the short drive here. I wrap my hands around my steering wheel and take the turn onto the driveway. There’s a white Audi SUV parked to the side. I hop out of the Porsche. Delaney doesn’t bother coming out of the car. She throws one of her long legs over and slides

into the driver's seat. I think I imagined it, but she hunches down, almost as if to hide.

The car beeps when I press the unlock key. I have my hand on the door, ready to open it when the front door of the house opens, and Mitch walks out. At first glance, he's still in the same clothes as last night. He stumbles and almost falls. Unlike yesterday, he's now drunk.

I gesture for her to go. I can easily deal with this fool, but she doesn't need to see it. She sits there like a deer in headlights. He gets to the Porsche and manages to get the door open. I pull him away.

"Go!" I yell at her while I shove Mitch away.

"You're on my property. I'm within my rights to shoot you." I eye him up and down. I doubt he's ever held a gun.

"She's only here to get her car," I say to him. "That's it."

Delaney opens the door and steps out. I go and stand next to her in case he tries something.

"I told you to go," I whisper.

"I've run enough," she says. She steels her spine and turns to her ex. "Mitch, I need to go inside and get my stuff."

At that request, he stands up straight and smiles. Unfortunately, it doesn't reach his eyes. It's cold and calculating. How the fuck did she ever convince herself that being with this snake was a good idea?

"I'm going to burn all your shit in that fucking fire pit you asked for. I thought it was a waste of time and money, but I guess it has its use. Fuck you and your stuff, Delaney, you rancid whore." He says the last word with so much force, he nearly stumbles. I stand between him and Delaney, but I don't miss her surprised gasp. "You're a cunt. A rancid, dirty cunt. A worthless piece of shit who can't even suck a dick or fuck right."

I grab his collar and drag him away from her. "Either you shut up or I'll make you."

“I’m the one who can’t fuck, Mitch?” Delaney lets out a loud cackle. “Mr. Half a Minute. Maybe you’ll last longer when you finally grow an adult sized dick. And I’d rather be a rancid cunt, than a pompous, condescending, smug son of a bitch with a three-inch dick.” She walks past us and runs inside the house.

Mitch tries to pull away from me, but in his drunken state, he’s as weak as a mouse.

“Get out of my house, bitch,” he slurs.

“You know, this behavior is unbecoming of a doctor,” I taunt.

“Fuck you.”

“And such gutter language. How are you going to look down your nose at everyone if you continue to talk like that?” I laugh in his face, and something changes in his eyes. He manages to pull away and starts running to the house, but all the alcohol he consumed slows him down.

I sigh and follow. I’d find this funny if this wasn’t my life. He trips twice on the way to the house. The second time, I have to grab him to hold him up.

“Fuck off me,” he says, yanking his body away from me and stumbling once again.

“Mitch! You son of a bitch!” Delaney yells from inside the house. When I step in, there are clothes strewn all over the floor. That wouldn’t have been so bad, but there’s fresh paint thrown on all of them. I also smell bleach, and upon closer inspection, everything is soaked and discolored.

Mitch stands tall, almost as if he’s proud of himself.

“I’m still gonna burn it all.” He pretends to light a match with his fingers. There are boxes and suitcases open with all their contents ruined. She manages to pull out a purse and finds that it’s been slashed.

She lets out a guttural sound before running to Mitch and wrapping both her hands around his neck.

“If only you showed this much passion in bed.” He pushes her away and she falls on her ass, right on a box. “Bitch.”

He stumbles too and hits the wall behind him. He can't manage to catch his balance and slides all the way down to the floor, landing on his scrawny ass.

“Come on. You can get new stuff.” I reach for her hand, but she runs toward Mitch to attack him again. I catch her and wrap an arm around her waist, lift her off her feet and walk her out of the house.

I don't put her down until I get the Porsche door open. I practically shove her inside. “Let's go.”

She starts the car and backs out. I start to follow behind her when Mitch comes out holding a carton of eggs. He manages to hit Delaney's car three times before I finally back onto the main road.

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I CAN STILL FEEL THE COLOR ON MY CHEEKS THIRTY MINUTES later. I don't care about the hate spewed from Mitch's mouth. He's bitter and probably embarrassed, but I'm mortified that he said them in front of David.

Can't suck a dick. Oh, please. He could never last longer than a minute and a half, and he wants to criticize my skills. Fuck him. And what about him? Three pumps and he's done. He'd barely give me time to get acclimated. Just the idea of being intimate with him makes me want to vomit. I'll never have to think about or endure that again. The only good thing about it was that it was always over quick, and he'd roll over and fall asleep while I lay there dissatisfied and unfulfilled.

I seethe in the corner of the little breakfast place while I wait for David. I sip the coffee, but it does nothing to ebb my anger. A few minutes later, David walks in, and I wonder why I didn't notice how good he looks in that dark blue polo or how broad his shoulders are.

His dark brown hair is full, and I imagine running my fingers through it. I clear my throat and look away.

Down, girl. Anyone else but this one.

When he takes a seat and picks up the coffee I ordered for him, I say, "I'm so sorry you had to witness that. It's humiliating."

He adds cream and one sugar to his coffee and sips. All I want to do is take the mug from him and put my mouth on the same spot where his had just been.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve all had bad breakups. I’m famished.”

Some of the humiliation starts to dissipate, and I’m relieved that he’s not asking questions or dwelling on that ugly scene. I’m also happy he didn’t say I told you so yesterday after Damon set me up.

“So,” he continues, “I’m promoting the receptionist to a Marketing Analyst position in a few weeks, but I think you’re overqualified to be a receptionist. You can step into Summer’s old job, but I’m thinking of making that into an assistant slash office manager position. There will be more responsibilities, but it sounds like something you’ve done before. You’ll also be responsible for coordinating this year’s holiday party.” And on he goes about the position. As relieved as I am to be talking about something other than my disaster of a life, I’m a little disappointed that he hasn’t asked my side of the bad fuck equation. I want to assure him that I’m not the problem. “I’ll need to discuss with Max first, of course, but I don’t foresee any problems. Why don’t you come by the office for a formal interview on Friday?” He grabs his phone and scrolls through something. “I should be able to squeeze you in around one.”

Maybe I imagined that look in his eyes last night or the feel of an erection when I surprised him with the hug. He opens his menu, blocking my view of his face and dismissing me.

I pick up my own menu and mentally count the money I have left from what Max gave me and what I have in my bank account. I have a few thousand that I managed to save, but that should be enough to tide me over until my first paycheck. Then, I need to find a place to live, but I’m sure I can rent a room somewhere. In the meantime, Summer and Max have already offered to let me stay with them.

The waitress returns, and David orders a Denver omelet with a side of wheat toast and extra bacon. I order the same, suddenly ravenous.

While he ignores me and looks through his phone, I do the same. I open the Tinder app and look through several profiles,

none of which capture my attention.

The bright side about this breakup with Mitch and my family is that I don't have to take their consideration into account. I could never introduce my family to someone who wasn't from a black family. Not just a black family, but a professional, highly educated one. Now, the world has opened to me.

"What's got you so fascinated over there?" David asks. He eyes my phone, and before I can put it away, he snatches it from me.

His eyebrows shoot up to his forehead. "Tinder. Wow, I guess someone is ready to move on. Are you going to swipe left or right on this one?" I take the phone from him and put it in my purse.

"It's not what you think," I tell him. I don't want him to think I'm one of those women who jump from relationship to relationship.

"Enlighten me, then."

He picks up his coffee mug, and I say, "I'm just looking for meaningless sex." He spits out coffee everywhere. Some of it ends up on my face.

He continues to cough while I wipe my face. I stick my tongue out and lick a drop that hit my bottom lip. He notices and his eyes darken. He lowers his gaze and looks at my breasts.

"Come again?" he asks. He runs his tongue along his bottom lip and stares at my chest, then looks slowly up.

"Again? I wish." I let out a snort. "Hopefully, the Tinder gods will smile down on me."

His head jerks back and he chuckles. He puts his hands together and looks up at the ceiling. "Oh, Father who art in heaven. At least I think that's how it goes. It's been a while since I stepped foot in a church. Lightning would strike and I would be smited." Our food is brought out to us, and we eat in complete silence for a few minutes.

“It’s our father,” I tell him.

“Hm? Call me daddy, not father.” He laughs at his own joke.

“Our father who art in heaven, heathen. Breakfast is on me,” I tell him. I do a mental calculation of my funds. I spent money on clothes and a few Amazon items. I’ll need a new power suit and shoes for my interview. Once I get my driver’s license, I can get a new debit card and access my bank account. I can wait for my first paycheck before I order a new passport and birth certificate.

I should go back to Mitch’s and slap the shit out of him for destroying my things, but like David said, I can slowly rebuild.

He had no right to destroy your things.

“I can handle breakfast.” He looks at me. It’s as if he wants to ask a question but doesn’t know if he should.

“You look like you want to ask me something. Go for it. That ugly scene with Mitch gives you the right to ask anything.” I slather the butter on my toast and take a bite.

He watches me while I chew. His eyes darken.

“You’ve been broken up less than a week, and you’re already on Tinder.” I arch an eyebrow and wait for the question. “From that scene, it’s clear that your sex life wasn’t the most—”

“Satisfying?” I fill in the blank for him while he ponders the right word.

He nods. “Yes. Tell me more about that.” He leans closer and waits.

“Not exactly a question, but Mitch is the worst fuck I’ve ever had. It’s over before it even begins, at least for me. And those things he said, I assure you, I wasn’t the problem.”

“Oh, I can tell.” His eyes lock with mine when I put the fork in my mouth. I feel a sudden bout of bravery and slowly pull it out.

“Mmhmm,” I say slowly, drawing out the moan.

“Yeah,” is all he says. He continues to stare, and I hold his gaze the entire time until he looks away first.

“How bad was it?” he asks a few minutes later. “I mean, we’re friends, right?”

“Yeah. Friends,” I agree. That’s the best thing. I’m not going to start some sort of entanglement with my future boss. “It was awful. Three pumps and he was done, and I wasn’t even warmed up. There was no passion. No build up and no heat. He was vanilla. Missionary only, and the lights had to be off. I want more.” I forget about my proper breeding and put an elbow on the table. “Real talk.”

“Real talk.” He leans in.

“I want to be with a real man. I want a man who loves to fuck. I want him to set my panties on fire with one look. I want it so good and deep that I forget where I am and what my name is. I want to sweat my hair out, and trust me, when a sistah sweats her hair out, it better be worth it.” I reach across the table and put my hand on his forearm. It’s coiled with muscle. I forget all the reasons why this is a bad idea and squeeze it. I picture wrapping my hand around something else. “I want orgasms, David. Many, many of them. I want to be left breathless and spent.” I tighten my grip on him, and I think I hear him moan. “I’ve never had that, and I’m single and free, so I’m going to get it. Sex and nothing else. No strings. No commitments. Just sex. Raunchy, dirty, filthy sex.” I lower my voice and say, “I want to be plundered, David.”

We stare into each other’s eyes, and in this moment, I’d give anything to know what he’s thinking.

“Every man’s fantasy, you are.” he whispers. “Beautiful, passionate, and horny.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s gonna happen,” I tell him.

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SHE'S GETTING MAIL AT MY HOUSE NOW. I GRAB THE AMAZON package and envelope and step in. I left breakfast, dropped her off, and high tailed it to the office, all the while sporting an erection I couldn't get rid of. At least not until I went to the bathroom and took care of it.

I wonder if she also wants to be spanked. Not really my thing, but I can make an exception. She's yet to be punished for sneaking into my bed. And what an ass it is. I'd not only spank it, but I'd also bite it. I might even eat it before I fuck it.

Or force her on her knees and slide my hard dick inside those full, luscious lips. Why couldn't she be unattractive? Or a vapid airhead? Or smell bad? She's none of those things. She's beautiful and sweet. The last thing I need is sweet.

She's also free and willing to spread her legs without an attachment. That has my name written all over it.

My phone buzzes, and the name Grace flashes across my screen. I hit ignore. It was fun six months ago when we started. She's a recent divorcée and a mother of two who wasn't looking for anything serious. That changed quickly, and I don't know what it is about me that says I want to be a stepfather of two. No, thanks. I haven't spoken to her in months and don't know why she's calling now.

Unlike Grace, Delaney just escaped something serious. She fled the church of her own free will. Grace's husband left her for another woman. Delaney is looking for the type of arrangement that I'm always seeking.

I push the thought aside and close the front door behind me. Nope. Not her. I can find that elsewhere.

But she's fallen into my lap. It's fate.

"Lucy, I'm home." Lucy giggles as if I don't make that same joke at least twice per week. I stand next to her and kiss her cheek. She blushes.

"Dinner's almost ready." She points to the sliding glass door. I drop the mail and Delaney's package on the table, but Lucy puts her hands on her hips.

"Sorry, Luce." I pick them up and shove them in the pantry and step out the sliding glass door. My brother and Summer are outside talking to Delaney and Caleb.

"Welcome back," I pull my brother into a hug.

"Miss me?" he asks when I tighten the hug. I let him go, pick up Summer and kiss both cheeks.

"How's my nephew?" I ask her. I put her down and put a hand on her stomach. "Be a boy. Be a boy. Be a boy," I whisper. She rolls her eyes, and Max knocks my hand away.

"I'm waiting for Delaney to tell them what a bunch of dicks her family is," Caleb says. Max reaches over and swats him upside the head. "What? They are." He rubs his neck.

"What happened?" Summer walks over to Delaney and stands next to her.

"Thanks a lot, Caleb." Caleb has the grace to flush when Delaney gives him the death glare.

"You guys just got here, and I missed my bestie, but a lot of things have happened." I take a seat and listen as Delaney tells them everything that took place at the restaurant to the ugly scene with Mitch this morning. Summer's eyes get bigger and bigger with each word. Caleb chuckles and shakes his head.

"That doctor guy is such a fucking asshole. I was dying to hit him," Caleb says. "Your brother's an asshole too, Delaney. No offense. And I thought my brother was a dick. Thank God

for my cousins.” He offers me a fist bump, and I take it. Caleb’s right. His older brother is an asshole.

Delaney gives him the side eye, but she doesn’t contradict him about Damon.

“David’s been so gracious, though,” she says instead. “So helpful with everything.” When she reaches across the table to squeeze my forearm, Max narrows his eyes at me. I give him my best smile. He doesn’t smile back.

“Can you believe Damon did that to me?” Delaney asks Summer. I can tell she’s expecting Summer to agree that it’s impossible, but she purses her lips and looks at Max.

“Damon called me,” Summer says.

Max finally stops glaring at me and turns to his fiancée. “Did you just say another man called you, and I’m just hearing about it now? What the hell did he want?”

“He said he wants my help in getting you to talk to him. We didn’t speak. He left a message. But I didn’t know about any of this. And that’s not all.” Max puts a hand on hers. “Mitch was parked across the street when we got home a couple of hours ago. He didn’t approach us, but he was out there for a while.”

Delaney covers her face with both hands. Her slight shoulders sag. I lift my hand to reach over and offer her support, but Max’s intense glare stops me. He’s looking at me as if he’s trying to read me. When Delaney starts to sob at the table, Summer takes her hand and they run inside the house.

“If we’re not going to eat now, I’m going inside to fix me a drink. Anyway, she shouldn’t waste her tears on those bunch of jackasses. Don’t tell her I said this, but her mother reminds me of a Disney movie villain. I was waiting for her to sprout horns or something.” Caleb goes through the sliding glass door, leaving me alone with my brother.

“So, you look good, Maxi Pad.” He’s always hated that nickname. “Looks like you got some sun.” His eyes narrow as he stares. “And that stick seems to be permanently out of your ass.”

“She’s off limits,” he warns. I shrug and pretend to have no idea what he’s talking about. He doesn’t buy it. He knows me. He’s well aware that the only thing I love more than pussy is new pussy. While Max is the committed relationship type, I’m the jump from bed to bed with no attachment type. “You can have any woman you want, but not Summer’s best friend. She’s vulnerable right now. Her family’s abandoned her, she has no job and no money. She has enough problems. Go fuck someone else.”

I let out a deep sigh and rub the bridge of my nose. Lucy comes out with a whiskey for each of us. Once she leaves, I look into my brother’s face. He’s still glaring at me.

“I haven’t laid a hand on her.” He leans closer, as if he’s trying to determine whether or not I’m telling the truth. He finally leans back and picks up his drink. “And you trusted me enough to send her here,” I remind him.

“We had a trip planned, and you were convenient.”

“I’m touched. Don’t worry about me. I like my women a little older and a lot more jaded. Besides, I have plans tonight. Plans where pussy is involved.” I wiggle my brows at him, and he rolls his eyes. I check my phone and send a text to Brandy, my date for the evening. She just broke up with her boyfriend and is hopefully looking for a rebound. “Anyway, I was thinking that we can offer her a job. I’ve got it all worked out.”

“I was going to bring up the same thing. What you got?” I explain the hybrid position of personal assistant and office manager, and he nods in agreement.

“Fine, but I want to keep Caleb,” he tells me.

“Mom called and told me she finally met Summer over FaceTime. She’s excited about the wedding.” My brother sits back and smiles with satisfaction. I was never more stunned as when I found out he was into Summer. My black assistant is eighteen years younger than my brother, who has only ever dated rich, snobby blondes.

“Breeze was so nervous.” He calls Summer by the nickname he gave her. “Thought Mom was going to accuse her

of trapping me with a baby.”

I let out a loud cackle. “If anyone got trapped with that baby, it’s Summer. It’s cute that she hasn’t figured that out yet.” He punches me in the arm.

The women return with Caleb following behind them. Delaney is still upset, but she’s doing her best to hide it. Summer rubs her shoulders and whispers something in her ear. She sniffs and nods.

I expected this reaction after we left the restaurant, but it never came. Maybe she needed to break down in front of someone she knows. Lord knows I probably wouldn’t be very comforting, and Caleb only thinks of himself. I’m suddenly grateful she waited until now to breakdown. My only job was to give her a roof over her head for a few days, not a shoulder to cry on or to rub her snotty nose.

Not my problem, I remind myself. She’ll be out of here in another hour. Lucy serves dinner, a delicious prime rib served with roasted potatoes. Delaney pushes her food around on her plate. This is the same girl who ate an appetizer, a full-sized entrée, and dessert the other night after that ugly scene. Even this morning after the confrontation with Mitch, she ate an entire omelet and two sides of bacon. Now, she hasn’t taken a single bite.

“Do you want Lucy to make you something else?” I ask Delaney. She doesn’t answer and continues to look down and push her food around. “Delaney?” Her head finally snaps up. “Lucy can make you something else if you don’t like this.”

She looks around the table, seemingly embarrassed. Max leans back but his eyes dart from me to Delaney as we all wait for her answer.

“No, this is fine. Thank you.” She’s being polite and detached. I imagine she was raised to have the best manners from those snooty people I met the other night.

It’s not your problem, David. Forget about it.

“So, we’re meeting with the wedding planner tomorrow evening at the house,” Summer says. That gets Delaney out of

her funk. “There’s so much to do.”

“Yes, but you have Delaney, the wedding planner, my mother, and yours,” Max tells her.

“Oh my God. What if your mother doesn’t like anything I choose?”

“You want to know what our mother doesn’t like? Max’s ex-wife. Trust me, you’re an upgrade.” Max kicks me under the table, and I kick him back.

Delaney finally cracks a smile.

“She was mean. She had the nerve to tell me once that I’m self-absorbed,” Caleb adds.

“I’ve never heard a more ridiculous thing, Caleb.” I offer him a fist bump for support.

“Your maid of honor will help you with everything. It’s going to be beautiful and romantic,” Delaney tells Summer. Max intertwines his fingers with Summer’s and kisses the back of her hand. “Tell us about The Cayman’s.”

The dinner conversation turns lighter, and Summer passes her phone around so we can look at her pictures. Delaney barely eats, and when Lucy offers dessert, both women pass.

“Since when do you pass on ice cream?” Max asks Summer.

“Since I don’t want to gain a ton of weight with this pregnancy, especially since I have to fit into a wedding dress.”

“You’ll gain what you need to. You’re beautiful and perfect no matter what.” He lifts his spoon of ice cream to her lips, and she takes it. She smiles into his face, and he leans down and kisses her. She rests her head on his shoulder while he feeds her dessert.

Delaney watches them with a sad smile on her face.

“Mitch once told me that if I kept eating pasta, I was going to be as big as a house, and he wouldn’t be seen with Jabba the Hutt on his arm. I had no idea what that was until I looked it up. I was never so offended in my life. I spent an entire month

eating pasta and only gained two pounds. The sad thing is, I would pick Jabba the Hutt over Mitch any day. At least Jabba has swagger.” She lets out a sob and runs inside. Summer goes after her.

“Man,” Caleb says. “Women are complicated.”

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SUMMER HOLDS ME IN HER ARMS WHILE I LET OUT GUT wrenching sobs. I held it together as much as I could, but the instant I saw her, it was like a dam broke and all my emotions came gushing out.

“It’s going to be okay,” she whispers into my hair.

I don’t think that it will, but I’m crying too hard to utter a coherent word. Summer has no idea what it’s like. Her parents are amazing. They allow her to make her own decisions, and her little sister, unlike my traitorous older brother, admires and looks up to her.

To think that my family always thought Summer’s family was beneath us because they don’t come from money. They think I can do better in the friend department, but when I left high school, I left behind those preppy private school friends I was told were acceptable.

She’s the one person I’m allowed to be myself with.

“You know you’re not alone.” I sniffle into her shoulder. I know, I’m not. She’s going to be there for me, but she’s engaged, planning a wedding, and has a baby on the way. There’s no way I’m going to be more stress to her.

“I’ve done everything, James. Everything. I was willing to marry a man I don’t love for their approval. Not only do I not love him, but I despise him. He called me a rancid cunt this morning.” I burst into tears again. “And the one time I tell them I won’t do something, they all band together and turn their backs on me. My brother set me up, and my father didn’t

utter one word in my defense. Why can't I control my own life like everyone else gets to?" I wipe my nose on her shoulder and her arms tighten around me. "Caleb and David are strangers and they've shown me more kindness than my own family. I deserve to run my life like everyone else. I deserve unconditional love from a life partner."

She rocks me like a small child while I sniffle and whimper like one. Tears fall from my eyes and run down my cheeks.

"You do, and it will be okay. The first thing we're going to do is help you find a job. I'll ask Max to find something for you. You know you're welcome to stay with us for as long as you need. Your family will come around when they see you're serious." She pulls away and cups my cheeks. "This will be a good thing, Delaney. The best thing is, you're not married to Mitch. It can only get better from here."

I nod into her shoulder and replay her words in my head.

"It is what it is, right? At least for now." Someone knocks on the door, and it opens. Pumpkin walks in, and Summer jumps to her feet to get away from her. David follows behind and leans against the door frame.

"Ice cream fixes everything," he says. "And Pumpkin wanted to see you." He reaches for my hand and pulls me to my feet. He surprises me when he pulls a tissue from his pocket and wipes my face, smiling while he does it. I look away, embarrassed at my emotional outburst at the table and my puffy eyes and red nose, but he grasps my chin and forces me to look at him. He doesn't say a word, but his smile is warm and reassuring.

He looks like his brother with dark hair and tall body, but he's even more handsome. His hair is messy and all over his head, making him look boyish.

"Come on, ladies." He pulls me out of the room with his hand firmly holding my wrist.

Everyone else is in the kitchen when we arrive downstairs. David lets go of my wrist before we reach the bottom step.

Summer walks right into Max's arms, and he holds her close.

"So, our mother called while you two were upstairs. She'll be here in two days and is hosting a dinner to welcome Summer into the family." I can see my friend blush and bury her face in Max's chest.

While they discuss their family plans, David hands me a bowl of cookie dough ice cream and subtly squeezes my shoulder.

"Do you need me to help you pack your stuff?" Summer asks a few minutes later.

Before I can tell her that it will only take a few minutes for me to gather my few things, David surprises me by speaking first.

"Didn't you say Mitch was lurking outside your house? Why don't you just stay here? He hasn't figured out where I live yet." The entire kitchen falls silent. "You're welcome to stay. Unless you want to hear Max and Summer going at it at all hours of the day and night."

Summer's eyes widen and her mouth hangs open in shock at David's words. She swats him on the bicep, and he takes a step back and pretends to be hurt.

"I can't inconvenience you any more than I already have," I tell him.

"Not an inconvenience. I already have this one here." He elbows Caleb.

"We can form our own lonely-hearts club," Caleb says.

"Thanks, but James and I are going to sing Adele and eat ice cream." When I look at my friend, she's looking adoringly into the face of her fiancé. "And I'm going to help her plan her wedding."

"Alexa, play an Adele song," David announces. "Caleb, mix some drinks. It's time this family has some fun." He goes to the fridge and pulls out bottled water for Summer.

"I want to talk to you for a minute," Max says to David. "Let's go into your office."

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“IT’S NOT A BAD IDEA FOR DELANEY TO STAY HERE. AT LEAST until everything blows over. Look.” He pulls out his phone and shows a video of Mitch at his front door. “Arrogant little prick. I need your word that you’ll keep your hands and your dick to yourself.”

I pretend to be offended, but Max doesn’t buy it. I like women. I like sex, and I don’t do commitment. The arrangement that Delaney is searching for is exactly the type of thing I want, but with conditions. I’d only let it go on for two months at the most. Even if the woman says she doesn’t want attachment, if you keep it going long enough, she’ll develop feelings and want to change the rules. You can’t change the rules in the middle of the game. That’s when I walk away.

My phone vibrates and the name Ashley flashes across the screen. Ashley is a blonde I met at the airport a few days ago. She lives in Rhode Island, which is close but far enough away.

“Are you going to get that?” Max asks.

I grin at him and hit ignore. “You have my word.” I hold up both hands. “Do you not know that my entire life is a pussy buffet?” I playfully punch his arm, but he doesn’t crack a smile. I hold up my phone and shake it. “Case in point Ashley.” I wiggle my brows at him, but he only sighs. “I already told you I’m hooking up with someone tonight, and I’ll probably see Ashley this weekend. Delaney is not my type.” I throw in the last part to make him feel better. I imagine Delaney is every straight man’s type. Tall, perfect

body, with a great ass, and legs that seem to be endless. Full kissable lips and high cheekbones. She has the bone structure of a model. Throw in a dash of innocence and naiveté, and she's a wet dream. As a bonus, she has the proper upbringing that would make her an easy fit in our social circle.

I don't know why I thought of that. I don't even hang out in our social circle anymore, but with our mother moving back, we'll probably have to interact more. Not that I would need a woman on my arm. I prefer to go to social events unattached because it's easier to hook up that way.

My mind flashes to her on her hands and knees while I pull her hair and pummel her from behind. Since she wants it dirty, I'd pull out and come all over her back. I can just see it now. My cum against her brown skin.

Max clears his throat, and I check my watch. In about two more hours, I'll be sliding into brand new pussy and forgetting all about Delaney and her nice ass.

"She can come into the office on Friday for an interview. We'll also need to look for a new receptionist. I want Olivia to apply for an analyst position. Since we lost our foothold into Silicon Valley, it's going to be business as usual for a while." Our marketing firm almost signed on a Silicon Valley software company as a client, freeing us from pursuing new business for a while. There would have been less traveling for the both of us, something we both desperately want. But since Celia had the contact, we lost out on that account when we showed her the door.

"She can stay here until the drama with Mitch dies down, or until he figures out that she's staying here." I lean closer to my brother and say, "What do you know about her family? Doesn't it seem strange to you that they want her to marry a guy she can't stand?"

Max shrugs. "It's weird, but all families have expectations, most of them unrealistic. They are all about appearances, and their daughter being married to a cardiologist is a coup."

Maybe, but they don't need a coup. Delaney's parents are very successful. Their son is a doctor, and their daughter is

obviously a beautiful and intelligent woman. She doesn't need to be a doctor's trophy wife.

"Yeah, I suppose," is all I say to my brother. "Oh, Celia called demanding her job back." Max snorts and shakes his head. Nothing else needs to be said about that. Celia's days at Sutton Marketing are done. Max follows me out of my office. Adele is on the speakers singing about finding someone like you, but someone cuts off the music. The singing continues, but it's not Adele.

Max stops and closes his eyes, but he has a happy smile on his lips.

"Summer?" I ask him. "Summer can sing like that?"

He doesn't respond for several seconds. When he finally opens his eyes and looks my way, he says, "She can. She sings to me all the time."

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I DON'T KNOW WHY I DO IT, BUT AFTER SHOWERING, I PUT ON jeans and run down to the kitchen shirtless. It's empty and back to its pristine order. Not even Pumpkin is walking around meowing.

I've put in extra time at the gym and hired a personal trainer six months ago. The results have been incredible. Too bad there's no one here for me to bump into who would appreciate my hard abs and chiseled pecs.

Go back upstairs and put on a shirt. You have a willing woman waiting for you.

I do, and it's been weeks since I last fucked. I need this as much as I need my next breath. I don't remember the last time I went weeks without sex. There's always a willing woman, and I plan on indulging tonight, but not in my bed. I'll have to take her to a hotel if her place is not an option.

Just as I turn to go back up the stairs, I remember the mail I stashed in the pantry. I grab it and take the stairs two at a time. I pause at the top, count to three, and casually walk to the guest bedroom across from mine.

It takes her a full minute to open the door after I knock. Her eyes are red and puffy again, and her nose is running. She lets out a sob, turns, and gives me her back.

This is when I should leave the mail on her bed and walk out without a word. I don't need this complication. I'm not the type who holds a woman's hand and makes her feel better. I bet that's the type of shit my brother does with Summer.

Life is all about decisions, and she's already made hers. She needs to stand firm and tell everyone who objects to kiss her ass. Her nice firm ass. The only good feeling I can give a woman is an intense orgasm.

She looks so vulnerable standing there, staring out the window with her arms wrapped around her. She lets out a sniffle, and I curse softly under my breath.

Why didn't I send her packing with Summer and Max? I know that idiot ex of hers isn't ready to admit defeat yet, and if he causes any drama at my brother's house, Max will lose his temper and all hell might break loose, especially if it affects Summer.

You know it's only a matter of time before they track her down to your door and bring the drama to you.

I ignore the voice in my head and approach. I don't touch her, but I know she knows I'm close. If she moves an inch, she's going to collide with my bare chest. Part of me hopes she does.

"You know things won't be this bad forever."

She snuffles but doesn't respond. She lowers her head and starts to sob. I finally put my hand on her shoulders, but she goes stiff and continues to cry. I turn her around, but she refuses to look at me. I pull her into me and wrap my arms around her.

The dam breaks, and she wails. Hot tears roll down her cheeks and land on my neck. I pull her to the bed. I don't know why I do that, but I lie down and pull her to me. She buries her face on the side of my neck.

We stay there for an indefinite amount of time. It could have been five minutes, or it could have been five years, but at this moment, there's no way I can move. The cries start to ebb, but I continue to rub her back. I don't say a word.

The crying stops but every few seconds, she snuffles. The sun sets and the room darkens. She removes her head from my neck and rests it on my shoulder. I don't flinch when I feel

something slide out her nose and land on my bare skin. She must realize it. She quickly wipes it away with her hand.

“I’m so embarrassed,” she says minutes later. She sits up, and I do the same, but I stay close in case she loses it again. “Crying won’t solve anything. All it does is give me a headache and make me look like crap, but it’s not good to hold it in either. I’m done crying though.”

She has streaks on her cheeks. Her eyes are swollen, and her nose is red, but she still looks beautiful. There’s a depth to her dark eyes, and a sadness too. Despite the energy that she puts out, I can tell there’s a loneliness to her. How can she not be lonely when she’s part of a family that doesn’t see or hear her?

“I definitely did not mean for you to see me breaking down.” She stands and looks out the window. “I just feel so alone, you know.” I leave the bed and go stand next to her. “Summer and Max have been amazing. I don’t know where I’d be without them. You’ve gone above and beyond even though you’ve known me less than a week, but now I have no family. I’m going back and forth from missing them to being glad to be rid of them. From feeling angry and betrayed to wanting to call them.”

Unsure of what to say, I only offer my presence as comfort, not my words. “As angry as I am with them, I own my part in this. I should have stood up for myself months ago. Hell, maybe even years ago, but sometimes you can’t see things the way they are when you’re too close. Do you want to know something funny? Well, it’s more horrifying than funny.”

I nod and wait.

“Mitch never officially asked me to marry him. It was more of an ambush. We were at my parents’ house for a party, he had a ring and my mom accepted on my behalf.” I can feel my mouth open, but no words come out. “Yeah, you heard that right. Before that, I had decided to break up with him, but I found myself engaged to be married instead. I should have called it off the next day, but I didn’t. I went along with

everything. I let my mother make all the decisions, right down to the wedding dress, cake, and color scheme. I had no say in anything. I just took it all, so I'm as much to blame as everyone else. Maybe more so because I was the one who almost got stuck with Mitch."

She covers her face with both hands, but she doesn't cry. She lets out a loud breath and removes her hands.

"Yeah, but you didn't," I finally say. I put my hands back on her shoulders. "You might have gotten close, but you didn't marry him." I turn her around, put a finger under her chin, and tilt her head up. "Your parents took advantage of you, Delaney. You've probably wanted to please them all your life, and they seized on it. Right?" I ask. She nods. "Especially since you can't be a doctor. Maybe this is their way of punishing you." By they, I mean her mother. Her father is not blameless, but he's not the one pulling her strings. "Who knows? I don't know how they think, and you know what? It doesn't matter anymore. You're in charge of you now. I know you feel alone, but you're not. You have Summer, and if you have Summer, you have Max. You're welcome to stay here for as long as you need." She finally smiles for the first time in what seems like forever. Her face changes and the sorrow disappears. Her eyes become alive and those perfectly straight teeth make an appearance.

She takes me into a hug and presses her body into mine. Her arms wrap around me, and I feel her soft, warm hands on my skin. Something inside me stirs. Something I didn't know I had.

"Thank you, David." She kisses my cheek and lets me go. The loss of her is so sudden, I almost fall over. The moment is gone, and she's back to being the carefree girl. "And where is your shirt?"

She finally looks at my bare chest. Her eyes linger a little too long as she peruses my entire body. She bites her bottom lip and arches an eyebrow before she looks away.

"Um," I clear my throat. "I'm meeting someone soon, and I forgot you got some mail earlier." I point to the dresser, and

she runs to it. She picks up the envelope first and tears it open.

“It’s my driver’s license,” she says.

“Oh good. I’d hate for you to continue driving my Porsche without a driver’s license.” If anyone else had done that, I’d have lost my mind, but she’s been through enough. She doesn’t need me yelling at her on top of everything else.

She runs her fingers along the other package, but she doesn’t open it.

“I hope I didn’t make you late for your plans.”

I pull my phone from my pocket and realize I should have left fifteen minutes ago.

“Not at all,” is all I say.

“Good, but you should probably get going. I’ll be okay. I promise.” Just as the words are out of her mouth, Pumpkin comes strolling into the room. She runs to the cat and picks it up. “Maybe the best kitty in the world can keep me company.”

I give her a curt nod and walk out of the room without another word. Once I close her door, I stand there, unsure of what to do. There’s a part of me that wants to stay home tonight, but there’s another part that’s desperate to get out. I need to return to my regular life. That life includes sleeping with as many women as I can, not staying at home with a stranger and my cat.

Old David has a different woman in his life every week, and I’m eager to get back to that. There was a minute after Max found Summer that I considered something like that for myself, but I got over that almost immediately.

He’s different, yet still the same since he met her. He’s still the grumpy brother I grew up with, but there’s a lightness to him now, and that’s what I want. Then I realize that when he met Summer, he wasn’t looking for a relationship. The relationship found him. And I don’t need lightness. My life is perfect without the complications that all relationships eventually bring.

I run to my room and put on a dark blue polo. I text my date to tell her I'm running late, but instead of going straight downstairs and out of the house, I walk back to Delaney's room.

Her door is now ajar, and I push it open, only to come to a complete standstill. She has the package opened, and in her hand is a purple vibrator. She doesn't see me standing there. She presses a button, and it starts to buzz. From my position at her door, I can see her smile and bite that full bottom lip. She lets out a soft giggle, turns around and her eyes collide with mine.

I hold her stare. There's no embarrassment in her eyes. She turns the vibrator off and tosses it on the bed.

"I guess someone is about to have a good night," I say to her. I don't know what possesses me, but I walk into the room, pick up the vibrator and turn it on.

She tries to take it from me, but I move it out of her reach.

"It will do for now," she says, and my mind flashes to her writhing around in this bed with a man. Bile immediately forms in the back of my throat.

"Until you start swiping right." She winks playfully at me. I clear my throat and say, "Enjoy your night." I hold out the vibrator and wait for her to take it. "Don't burn the engine out on that thing."

I hightail it out of there without a second look, backing my Porsche out of the driveway so fast, my tires screech.

THE INTERVIEW IS JUST A FORMALITY. I DON'T KNOW WHY, but I've barely seen David for the past few days. Since he practically ran out of the room and out of the house a few nights ago. I know he wasn't gone too long. I figure he was meeting a woman and would be out all night, but that's not what happened. He was barely gone two hours before I heard the garage open and his footsteps down the hall.

I could have sworn he stood outside my room before going to his. I held my breath and waited for him to open the door and check on me, but he didn't.

He is up and out before me for the next two days, often coming home late at night. The interview we just had is the first time we've had a conversation since that night. I didn't realize it until I sat down across from him in the conference room, but I've missed him.

The playful and caring guy I've come to know was gone. In his place was a no-nonsense business owner looking to hire a new employee. He questioned me about my duties at my parents' practice and asked direct questions about how I would handle myself in certain situations. I wasn't expecting it to be so serious, but it's a good thing I was able to answer in a clear and concise manner. After the interview, he gave me a tour of the office, including where my desk will be. He took me back to the conference room and made a formal offer, handing me a letter detailing my salary and benefits package. I happily accepted and practically skipped out of there.

Summer is waiting to take me to lunch to celebrate. We go to a local restaurant not far from the office.

“I can’t remember the last time it was just the two of us,” I tell her once we’re seated. Things got really busy for me as my wedding approached, and Summer was kept busy by Max.

“I know. I’ve missed you,” she says. “I can’t believe you’re going to be working here. I’m so excited.” She reaches over and squeezes my hand. I almost burst into tears at the relief of finding a job so soon. The pay is more generous than my last job as well as the benefits package, but that’s not the best part. The best is not having to deal with my parents for the first time ever.

“Anyway,” I say, wanting to take the attention off me, “we need to start working on your wedding. We don’t have much time and we have lots to do.”

“I know. The wedding planner is on top of it, but I’m so nervous about meeting Max’s mom this weekend. I want you to come.”

“James, it’s a family dinner. Mama Sutton just wants the family, and that’s you now.” She covers her face with her hands. “What’s the problem? I thought you guys got along when you talked.”

“That was a Zoom. I just know she’s going to think I’m a gold digger who trapped her son with a pregnancy. I just know it.” She looks away as she sips her water.

“Are you a gold digger who trapped her son with a pregnancy?”

“Of course not.”

“Okay then. If she thinks that, that’s her problem. Her son is a forty-one-year-old man who should know how to either keep it in his pants or use a condom, so she better not blame you for anything.” I squeeze her hand for reassurance. “She will love you. You love him, and he adores you. She’ll see that. It will be fine. And this will be her first grandchild. I’m sure she’s excited.”

She makes a face and shakes her head. “Maybe but said grandchild will be half black. She might not—”

“Girl, stop. I will cut her if she even goes there.”

“I know. Maybe I’m being silly. She was really sweet when we talked, but I’m nervous. Anyway,” she says, waving her hand. “Enough about me. You should know that Mitch called me again this morning, but I didn’t answer.”

I let out a rushed breath, angry at myself for involving my friend in this mess. “I’m sorry. I’ve told him it’s over. I don’t know how else to get my point across. Honestly, I don’t know why he still wants to marry me. I don’t know why he wanted to marry me in the first place. He doesn’t love me. I’m just an accessory.”

The waitress arrives and I order a chicken Caesar salad. Summer orders the same, but with a cup of soup.

“He’ll get the message eventually, but what about your parents and brother?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to give it some time. Maybe a month or two before I contact them again. I don’t know what to do about them either, but I know I’m done with them running my life. I run this,” I say to my friend. “I’ve spent my entire life being the dutiful daughter. I was even willing to go to medical school until it became apparent that I couldn’t. I’ll be honest, I never wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to major in business, but that was never an option because of them. I didn’t tell you this, but I went to my mother a couple of weeks before the wedding. I barely got two words in before she shut me down. Called me flighty and dramatic.”

I FOLLOW HER OUT OF THE LIVING ROOM AND INTO THE KITCHEN. She pulls out a bottle of white wine and pours herself a glass. The kitchen is white and sterile. There’s no warmth or personality in the room. Damon is standing off to the side, and I’m happy he’s here. I know he’ll be a help to me.

“I don’t think I can do it, Mom.” I walk over to her and try to pick up her hand, but she moves it away. It’s subtle but the

message is received. I drop my hand and take a step back.

“You have your final fitting tomorrow, but I think everything will be perfect.” Perfect my ass. It’s a ball gown. It’s exactly the type of dress I told her I didn’t want. I want something form-fitting and sexy, not something big and poufy. “Everything’s already been arranged and thank goodness. This wedding took years off my life, not to mention thousands and thousands out of my bank account.”

“You made all the decisions,” I remind her. She drains her glass, puts it down, and faces me again. She’s a beautiful woman, tall and slender. Not only that, she’s fashionable. She’s in designer white pants and a black and white silk blouse. She doesn’t have a single hair out of place.

“Thank goodness I did. Who knows what you would have chosen? Your taste has always been hit or miss.” My taste has always been my own, but she can’t ever let me have anything that’s just mine. She steps closer and fluffs my hair. I’ve been dying to cut it, but she wants me to keep it long for the wedding. She’s always wanted me to keep it long. “You are marrying a doctor. If you can’t be one, marry one. He’s a catch.” From the corner of my eye, I see Damon nod in agreement.

She walks out and doesn’t say another word. I stand in the kitchen, unsure of what to do until I decide to follow her. I find her in her bedroom, taking off her red bottom shoes.

“Mom, I don’t want to get married to Mitch.” The shoe in her hand drops with a loud thud on the plush carpet. “I don’t love him.”

She sits on the bed and rubs her temples.

“Delaney, I’ve had a long week. I really don’t need these dramatics right now. Everything is all set. All you have to do is walk down the aisle and say I do.”

“But I don’t want—”

She stands and holds up a hand, cutting off the rest of my words. “You don’t want? You think you’re supposed to get everything you want in life? Do you think I’ve always gotten

everything I want? Life just doesn't work that way. We make do with what we have. I guess it's my fault. I've spoiled you." I take a step back at her words. *Spoiled me?*

"If spoiling me means giving me whatever you want, I guess you did. You've never once asked me about what I want, Mom." I feel myself cringe at my tone. *I sound shrill and loud, and we're never to sound loud. It's unbecoming as my parents would say. She arches an eyebrow at me, but I don't back down.*

"You are the daughter of two successful people. You can't follow in our footsteps, so this is the next best option. You're not strong, Delaney. You don't have grit but thank goodness you have me as your mother. You're just nervous. Everything will be fine." She smiles, but that doesn't soften her face. *She fluffs out my hair, but that doesn't have the calming effect that it used to.*

"You're not hearing—"

"I've heard enough. This conversation is over. You're getting married in two weeks."

"I'M SORRY," SUMMER SAYS AFTER I TELL HER ABOUT THE conversation I had with my mother. I should have left that night. I should have stood up for myself and given Mitch back the ring then. "Listen, I know they're your parents and you love them, but maybe a separation is the best thing for now. Give it a couple of months. In time, they will have no choice but to accept your decision."

The waitress returns with our food, and my stomach growls.

"You're right," I tell her. "Forget about me, and let's talk about you." I pull out a little notebook from my purse. "Let's plan the wedding of the century."

I HAVEN'T SEEN HER SINCE SHE LEFT THE OFFICE NINE HOURS ago. I stayed late and was the last person out of the building on a Friday. After almost two hours at the gym, I meet Ysabel for drinks, but I end the date after about an hour. She's beautiful with dark hair and dark eyes, but the color of the eyes isn't dark enough, and her hair is wrong. Her long legs are thick and not lean. The dress doesn't drape on her like the blue maxi dress Delaney wore the other day.

Everything about Ysabel is wrong, even though she's beautiful and does everything right. I should be in her bed right now. Or she should be here with me, but I can't stomach the idea of bringing a woman here to fuck while she's here. Which is completely ridiculous. It's my fucking house, and I should run it as I see fit.

In fact, I wasn't able to fuck my date from two nights ago either. After drinks, I made an excuse and left. Despite the calls and texts, I have zero desire to call her back. A second date will have certain expectations that I'm not sure I can meet right now. Or want to meet.

I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me, but I don't like it. David Sutton lives for women, and it's been almost two months. I can't remember the last time I went two weeks, never mind months without sinking into the warm, soft flesh between a woman's legs.

The house is dark when I get home, but the television is on, and I hear laughter followed by talking. It's two people

talking at once. I drop my bag on the kitchen counter and follow the voices into the living room.

I lean against the wall and watch. Caleb is sitting on the floor, and Delaney is on the couch. They both have a container of ice cream and after they each take a spoonful, they switch. Something happens on the television and they both howl in laughter.

I could slip away upstairs and go to bed. No one would notice. Even though Delaney is a few years younger than Caleb, I'm sure she surpasses him in maturity. They have more in common than she and I ever could. For some reason, I get the sudden urge to bash him in the face.

"This is my favorite part," Caleb says as he points to the screen.

Instead of walking away, I approach, and they finally notice me.

"Davie!" Caleb says. "Come watch *Ride Along* with us."

Delaney takes her feet off the couch and pats the spot next to her. I kick off my shoes and join them. She offers me her container of ice cream, and I take it.



"DAVID," I HEAR. THE VOICE SOUNDS FAR AWAY, BUT WHEN fingers start to stroke my scalp, I let out a loud contented moan. "David, get up." I blink into the dark room a few times. The television is still on, but it's on mute. I have my head on someone's lap while they stroke my hair. "It's time for bed."

"Yeah, bed." I yawn. "Naked."

There's a chuckle. I blink twice before I realize that the lap belongs to Delaney and that I fell asleep while we were watching a movie. I stretch and finally sit up. She gets up, offers me her hand, and does her best to pull me up. I finally have mercy on her and stand.

"Where's Caleb?"

“He must have gone to bed. I fell asleep too. It’s been a long day.” She stretches, and I finally notice she’s in white shorts and a matching white top that barely covers her stomach. She straightens the cushions on the couch and folds the throw.

“Good night.” She walks past me and out of my sight.

After standing there like a dummy for several minutes, I go upstairs. I brush my teeth and strip down to just my boxers. I sleep naked, but I have to find Pumpkin before I go to bed. I have a feeling I know where she is. Her door is shut, and when I go to knock on it, I hear a buzzing and a soft moan coming from the other side. Instead of going back to my room like I should, I press my ear to the door and listen. There’s definitely a buzzing sound. After a few seconds, I hear the moaning again. My body instantly reacts. I know what she’s doing. She’s putting her new vibrator to use. My dick goes from hard to rock solid, and I couldn’t walk away now if my life depended on it.

After a few more seconds, the moans get louder, and I know the moment she comes. She lets out an elongated groan and then the buzzing stops.

“Oh, God,” I think I hear her say. There’s no more noise until I hear her open a door. She’s probably going into the guest bathroom that connects to her bedroom. I stand there like a complete idiot. An idiot with an extremely hard dick. Then I remember my cat, and I open the door.

The plan is to go in, take Pumpkin, and go out without being seen. But I think I stand there too long. Just as I pick up the cat, she comes back into the bedroom without a single stitch of clothes.

She’s glorious with small but perky breasts and pert brown nipples that I want to suck into my mouth. The only light in the room is coming from the bathroom, but her brown skin looks flawless. She’s long and lean, and I imagine those legs either wrapped around me or on my shoulders while I eat her until she comes on my tongue. She deserves more than an orgasm from a piece of plastic.

She lets out a surprised gasp and takes a step back when she sees me. I expect her to scream or run into the safety of the bathroom. Jumping into the bed and hiding under the covers would also make sense, but she doesn't do either of those things. She stands tall and waits. She doesn't even cross her arms or wrap them around her. I think she wants me to look. So, I give her what she wants.

"Did you come for the cat?" she asks. I can hear some amusement in her voice from that question.

"I'm always looking for a good pussy," I reply. I stroke Pumpkin's back, making her purr. I bet I can make Delaney purr too.

She looks down at me, stares at my crotch, and says, "Yeah, I can tell." Pumpkin jumps out of my arms and runs out of the room, leaving the two of us alone.

"Is there anything I can do for you, David?" It's a challenge, and any woman who challenges me in the bedroom gets fucked. "Anything you need?" She walks toward the bed but doesn't get in it. Her nipples harden. I could fit one entire breast in my mouth. I imagine doing that after biting down hard on her dark nipples. "Or want?" she asks.

I picture myself forcing her to her knees and stuffing my hard dick down her throat. She'd take it all. I know she could. I wouldn't come in her mouth, though. At least not the first time. I'd pull out and coat her breasts with my release. Maybe even get a few spurts on her chin and watch it dribble down to the floor.

Then, I'd order her to get on all fours, eat her from the back before sliding inside of her. Before I can talk myself out of it, I cross the room and stand in front of her.

"You don't know what you're asking," I tell her. I put a finger under her chin and tilt it up. Our eyes lock and the temperature in the room doubles.

"I haven't asked for anything." She holds my stare.

"But are you offering?"

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Her soft hands land on my stomach. I hold my breath and wait to see which direction they will go. If she chooses to go south, and those hands touch my dick, I’m done for.

They travel north, and I don’t know if I’m disappointed or relieved. She explores my abs, slowly going up to my chest.

“This is a man’s body,” she says.

“All man. Something you’re not used to and doubt you can handle. Stick to plastic.” I inch closer. She closes her eyes and flares her nostrils. I do the same. She smells good. Like vanilla and musk, and I wonder if her pussy would be just as intoxicating. I already know the answer.

“I can take it,” she whispers. “I can take it more than once.”

I surprise her when I pick her up and toss her on the bed. She stays still, looks me in the eyes, and slowly opens her legs. She’s bare down there, and the idea that she waxed for her honeymoon unsettles me. I shouldn’t care that she made her pussy pretty for another man. She didn’t even know me when she did that, but I still don’t like it.

I sit on the edge of the bed and glide my hand up her leg. Her skin’s supple like a rose petal. She moans, and sticks a hand between her legs, touching herself.

“Did you shave your pussy for another man?” I ask.

“I shaved my pussy for me,” she responds without hesitation.

My hand stops at her upper thigh, so close to her pussy that I can feel the heat emanating from her. Just a little bit more, and I can touch her, but I know if I do that, there will be no coming back.

I lean down close to her full lips. Just another inch and I could get my first taste of her. I bet she tastes sweet, and I don’t like my women sweet. I like them a little on the bitter side. She moves her hand from her pussy and puts a finger close to my lips. She holds it there and waits. I can smell it, and it’s intoxicating. I haven’t even tasted it yet, and I’m

already addicted to it. I move my head a fraction and suck that finger deep into my mouth.

“Mmhmm,” I moan as I lick her fingertip. She moves away and pats the side of the bed next to her.

“Goodnight,” I whisper. “I like my women a little older and a lot more jaded.” It takes all my strength, but I stand, walk out of the room and close the door behind me. I lean against it while I catch my breath. My dick is still rock hard, and I know there is no way I’ll be able to get to sleep tonight if I don’t relieve it myself.

I go into my bedroom, strip, and jump on my bed. I wanted pussy tonight, and my hand doesn’t even come close, but it will have to do for now.

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THE OLD DELANEY WOULD HAVE WOKEN UP EMBARRASSED AND ashamed of her failed attempt at seduction last night. The new Delaney, not so much. A few minutes after David leaves my room, I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep. I wake up refreshed, happy, and eager for a second round with my vibrator, Mr. Happy. That will have to do for now until my new dildo arrives.

David might have walked out of my room last night, but I know it took every ounce of his willpower. He did the right thing. We have no business getting involved. I live in his house, though temporarily. I'm going to be working for him in a couple of days. We don't need further complications, but the man is sexy as sin. From his height to his muscular build to his face.

I was too upset those first few days to fully appreciate the dark hair, dark eyes, and perfect five o'clock shadow. And his swagger. He doesn't even need to try. Not to mention, he's kind. After being with someone like Mitch, kindness is a definite turn on.

Thank goodness we didn't do anything last night. I would never be able to be with Mr. Happy again if I let David Sutton give me an orgasm. Everything else would be a disappointment.

I'm practically floating by the time I get downstairs Saturday morning. Caleb is standing in front of the opened fridge shirtless. He's studying the contents as if he's trying to memorize them.

“Is something interesting in there?” I ask him. I stand behind him, staring at the contents too. I reach for my organic oat milk only to find the carton empty.

“Sorry,” he says. “I really like oat milk.” I toss the empty carton in the trash. “I wish Max lived here so he can cook.”

I shove him away and grab a carton of eggs. I find ham and diced vegetables.

“Sit down. I’m going to make us breakfast.” Like a kid at Christmas, he rubs his large hands together and sits at the counter. “You know what goes good with breakfast? Mimosas.” I pull out a bottle of champagne and the orange juice. I mix our drinks and we clink our glasses together at the exact moment David walks in. He’s in workout clothes, shorts and a sweatshirt. It’s a chilly fall day, and he’s in all black. There’s a sheen of sweat on his forehead, and I ache to wipe it away for him.

“Delaney’s making breakfast,” Caleb announces. David looks at me and raises an eyebrow. He pulls the sweatshirt over his head, revealing a nice patch of stomach in the process.

“Is someone going to mix me a drink or what?” he asks. He doesn’t wait. He takes my glass and drains it. When he finishes, he licks his lips while looking me in the eye. There’s a certain intimacy in sharing glasses, I’ve always thought. Mitch would never drink after me. He is always worried about germs, but David doesn’t seem to have the same hang ups. Mitch wouldn’t French kiss me or eat my pussy either. I just know David would do those things freely and happily. I can still feel his mouth on my fingers from last night.

I mix three more drinks and make breakfast. We eat while Caleb shows us his online dating profile, which he’s certain will make Justine jealous and take him back.

“You know, Caleb,” I tell him a few minutes later. “Maybe you should forget about Justine. If she doesn’t see you for the catch you are, she doesn’t deserve you.” I ignore David while he lets out a long string of exaggerated coughs. “Find someone worthy of you.” I put a plate of food in front of both guys and lean against the counter. “Let’s make a promise that we’re

gonna date as if this is the last year of our lives.” I hold my pinky finger up, and he wraps his around mine.

“You mean date each other?” David drops his fork in the middle of his plate. His head snaps up, and his eyes narrow at his cousin.

“You couldn’t handle me, Caleb,” I warn him. “You’re a catch, and you deserve a steady girl. I’m just looking to hit it and quit it.” David starts to cough again, and I reach over, absentmindedly tapping his back. “I’ll help you with your profile.”

“You’re right. I deserve it all,” Caleb says. “You can help me tomorrow since we have a family thing today.”

I wink at him, but my light mood dissipates. The mention of family makes my stomach sink and I lose my appetite all at once. Even the mimosa tastes sour.

“What do you have going on today, Delaney?” David asks. I can’t prove it, but I swear he’s noticed my change in mood. I can feel him staring at me, but I refuse to look at him.

I clear my throat and say, “I have to go to the bank now that I have my ID and then run a few errands.” I don’t mention the joint account I share with my mother and my plan to open my own bank account today. I plan on transferring the money from our account to mine. I’m ashamed of myself for allowing that to go on, but I can only move forward. I also leave out the tiny detail of meeting a man for drinks later this evening.

The room remains quiet while everyone eats. I can still feel his eyes on me, but I don’t look up. It’s best if things remain as they are. I’ve calculated my savings, and if I save up for three months, I can afford a studio apartment close by. Maybe if I save every penny and never eat out again. I don’t need much, but I can’t continue to stay here and live off David.

While I look through some of my apps, my phone buzzes and Summer’s name and face flash across my screen.

“Hey, James,” I say into the phone.

“Who the fuck is James?” I look up at the sound of David’s voice. His eyes are almost black, and I furrow my

brows in confusion. “Are you serious about this Tinder bullshit? No strange men in my damn house. In fact—”

“James is Summer. James Madison, fourth president of the United States.” I stand and leave the kitchen, but not before I glare at him. He glares right back.

“Delaney,” Summer says, her voice panicked. “How soon can you get here? I need you.”

“What’s wrong?” I walk inside my bedroom and close the door. “You and the baby okay?” My heart starts beating erratically at the thought of something being wrong.

“Yes, but Max’s mother will be here in a few hours, and I’m freaking out. I need you to help me find something to wear.” I drop myself on the bed and stare at the ceiling. She has great taste in clothes. In fact, she helps me with my outfits, but I understand her nerves.

“I’ll be there. I need to run to the bank, but I’ll come over after.” I end the call, and after a quick shower, I put on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved tee. I pack a bag and head downstairs. The kitchen is still a mess from breakfast, so I decide to clean it before I go.

After clearing the counter and loading the dishwasher, I scrub the skillet. David walks downstairs, but I can’t decide if I want to address his tirade from earlier. After a few seconds, I decide to say something.

“For the record, David, I know I’m a guest here, and I would never bring strangers into your house. However, I’m an adult, and I’ve had enough of other people controlling me. Anyway, I’ll only be here a few more months.” After making sure the kitchen is back to being spotless, I start to leave, but he grabs my elbow as I walk past him. I could yank it away and keep on walking, but I stop and wait.

“Last night,” is all he says.

“What about last night?”

“You’ve got to know you’re beautiful.” He drops my elbow, and I turn to face him. “You are. And kind and sweet.”

“You make me sound like an eighty-year-old grandma.”

“Yeah. A grandma with a great ass and perky tits.” He licks his lips and takes a step closer to me. “It’s not a good idea. *We* are a terrible idea.”

“I agree.”

“But that doesn’t mean you should hook up with random strangers either. It’s not safe.”

“I’m not an idiot, David. I’ll be careful. I have to go.” I finally pull my elbow away and leave the house.



IT TAKES ME TWO HOURS BEFORE I FINALLY PULL INTO SUMMER and Max’s driveway. My business at the bank only took forty-five minutes, but I needed about an hour to calm down. Actually, I might need a lifetime to calm down after what I learned. My mother cleared out my bank account, leaving a balance of thirty-five dollars. The six-thousand dollars I thought I had is gone. It’s not a fortune, but it was a start to building a life. She had no right to do that. That was money I earned working, and she took it all.

I checked the balance of my credit cards, and I owe a few thousand. She normally pays the balance each month, and last month I shopped for my honeymoon and spent thousands more than usual. Now, I have no way to pay it because I know she won’t. I rest my head on the steering wheel and let out a silent scream. I still have a little money left from Max, but that’s barely enough to last until my first paycheck, which is still weeks away. If she’s trying to force my hand, she’s going to have to do a lot more than that.

My phone buzzes again, and it’s Summer. I look in the mirror, drop a few eye drops in my eyes to erase the redness, and plaster a fake smile on my face before grabbing my bags and leaving the car.

Summer has the door opened for me as soon as I step out. She’s in a long purple robe, and she waves me inside.

“Delaney is here,” I announce, doing my best to sound upbeat. “Where’s the daddy?” Right on cue, Max comes down the stairs, looking handsome in a pair of gray slacks and a blue button-down shirt.

“Come on.” Summer grabs my hand and pulls me toward the stairs.

“Relax, Breeze,” Max says. “It’s a meal with our family.”

“We were supposed to go out, but she’s coming here. Probably to judge me.”

Max rolls his eyes to the ceiling.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “She’s going to come here to make sure you’re keeping this mansion clean and cooking three meals a day for her son.” Summer groans and Max chuckles. They have staff to clean, and he does all the cooking. “Let’s get you presentable.”

I follow her upstairs and into their master bedroom. It’s usually spotless, but there are clothes all over the bed and couch. I find a pair of black pants and a purple, long sleeved tie neck bow blouse.

“Simple and elegant. Perfect for meeting your fiancé’s mother.” I put both hands on her shoulders to steady her. “It will be okay. All she wants to know is that you love her son, and she’ll see that with her own eyes the minute she gets here. It’s going to be great. That man is crazy about you, and you are going to give his mother her first grandchild. You’re a goddess.” She exhales and sits on the bed. “And stop stressing. It’s unnecessary. She raised Max and David, two of the most generous people I’ve ever met. It’s going to be okay.” I sit next to her, and she rests her head on my shoulder.

“You’re right. I’m just nervous, you know. Things happened so fast with us.”

“Would you change a thing?”

“Not a single thing.” She smiles for the first time since I got here, but the anxiety soon returns. “She says she wants me to sit on some charity with her. Some hospital charity. I’m not

the charity chairing type.” She puts both hands on her face and blows out a breath.

“Okay, then. Let’s finish getting you ready to meet your future mother-in-law. No one is the charity chairing type until they become that type. This is good. She wants to build a relationship with you.”

“But what if she just wants to—”

“Un-uh. We’re going to give her the benefit of the doubt until she gives us a reason not to. It can always be worse, James. She can be Mitch’s mother.”

She looks at me through the mirror, completely horrified by my statement.

“Oh, God. You’re right.” And we both burst into laughter. “Remember that time she gave you a list of acceptable colors to wear? Colors that Mitch prefers.”

“Yeah. I set that piece of paper on fire.” I chuckle at the memory, but inside, my stomach feels like it’s churning acid. Mitch’s mother’s interest in me only extended to how I would affect her son. I had to wear the colors he likes or eat his favorite foods when I was at their house. She never once asked a single question about me or my preferences.

The one time I expressed disinterest in jazz music, Mitch’s favorite, she made sure to give me the history of jazz and its effect in the African American culture. I know the history. I just don’t like the music, but she took that as a slight against not just an entire group of people, but her son. How dare I not like what he likes?

I can only imagine what she thinks of me now since I’ve never known her to have a thought of her own. She’s not a doctor, but her husband is, and he treats her as an afterthought. She might as well not exist, so in her mind, Mitch’s treatment of me is acceptable.

“Where did you go?” Summer asks. I finally snap out of it and look at my friend. She’s dressed, looking casual yet elegant. I take her hand and lead her to the bathroom. She sits at the vanity, and I reach for her makeup. Usually, she’s the

one who does this for me, but she needs me today. “Very little,” she says when I open the concealer and foundation. “Just to smooth out my skin, but I want to look like myself.” I nod, but when I reach for her face, I freeze and remember a moment with Mitch’s mother.

“MITCH DOESN’T LIKE TOO MUCH MAKEUP,” SHE SAYS. WE’RE at a restaurant of her husband’s choosing, and she follows me when I go into the ladies’ room. I dab the bridge of my nose and look at her through the mirror. Her smile is as fake and plastic as a Barbie doll.

“Good thing he doesn’t wear any then.”

She frowns, and I look away.

“It’s best for a woman to look natural.” She looks like she’s wearing a pound of makeup, but I don’t point that out.

“It’s best for a woman to look how she wants.”

She purses her lips but doesn’t contradict me. She moves closer to me and rests her hand on my shoulder. I freeze at the unexpected touch.

“You can have a great life, Delaney. All you have to do is —”

“DELANEY!” SUMMER TAKES THE COMPACT FROM MY HAND and pats my cheek. “What happened?” I didn’t realize I was crying until a teardrop slides down my cheek. She stands and forces me into her vacant seat. “I’ve been rambling all about myself, and you’re falling apart. Tell me what’s wrong.”

A few more tears fall, which I quickly swipe away. I grab the compact and reach for her, but she takes my wrists and lower my hands. “I’m here for *you*. It’s nothing.”

“Talk, Delaney.”

I take a deep breath, set the compact aside, and say, “So, you know how I went to the bank before coming here?” When she nods, I tell her how my mother drained my bank account.

She purses her lips, but she doesn't appear to be surprised. "I have credit card bills due, and—"

"Okay, you need your own account."

"I made one today." She walks out of the bathroom, and I follow.

"Give me your info. I'm going to transfer money to your account. This is not a loan. Don't ever try to pay me back. You would do the same for me." I stare at her, not sure of what to say but unwilling for more tears to fall. I just hand her my phone with the app pulled up. A few seconds later, my phone buzzes. I almost drop it when I see the amount.

"James. Are you shitting me?" My jaw practically drops to the ground.

"Definitely not shitting you." She shrugs as if it's no big deal.

"Do you have an allowance?" I rub my eyes and look at the amount again.

"No. He says I can spend whatever I want."

I pull her up and take her into a hug. "Thank you, but let's get you ready."

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“JUST TALKED TO MOM. SHE’S ABOUT TEN MINUTES AWAY,” I say to Max. A server gives me a glass of wine, and I sip it. Caleb stands in the corner, staring at his phone. He’s probably checking out women on Tinder. I wish there was a way to remove that app from a certain someone’s phone. “Did Summer escape?” I know she’s here. Her car’s outside and so is Delaney’s.

“She’s getting ready. I hope Delaney can calm her down.” Just as the words come out of his mouth, Summer comes down the stairs doing her best not to look nervous. Whatever she’s doing is not working. Max extends a hand to her, and she takes it, intertwining their fingers together. “There’s my Breeze,” he whispers in her hair.

I put a hand on her stomach and say, “Boy.” Max swipes my hand off, but I chuckle at them both.

“I want a drink so bad,” I hear Summer say. She’s holding on to my brother’s hand for dear life. He practically has to drag her a few feet away to pour her a glass of water.

I lean against the wall and watch them. It’s strange seeing my brother so in love and protective. He was married before, but I don’t remember him being this consumed by a woman. Summer’s hand shakes as she sips the water. He takes the glass from her and whispers something in her ear that seems to calm her.

I hear a car and I run to the front door. “They’re here,” I yell. I run outside, and when Claire Sutton steps out of the car,

I lift her off her feet. Caleb does the same with his mother.

I put her down and kiss each cheek. She hugs me again, tighter this time. “It’s good to be home. I missed my boys.” I take her arm in mine and lead her to the house. Max and Summer are standing outside, she like a deer in headlights with a fake smile on her face. Max hugs our mother, lifting her off the ground too. When he puts her down, she approaches Summer, who looks like she’s either going to throw up or run for dear life.

Mother cups her cheeks and smiles at her. “It’s nice to finally meet you. As pretty as you are over the computer, it’s nothing compared to seeing you in person. I’m so happy to finally meet the woman who’s made my son so happy.” Mom hugs her, and I see Summer finally exhale.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mrs. Sutton.”

“It’s Claire. You and I are going to be good friends, and all my friends call me Claire. And this is my sister, Minnie.” Aunt Minnie eyes Summer. She takes a step closer as if she’s studying her. Summer’s smile slips, and she inches closer to Max.

“It’s nice to meet you, ma’am,” Summer says.

“Ma’am? That makes me sound like an old fuddy duddy. It’s Aunt Minnie.” Then she turns to Max, and I hold my breath. “Keep this one, Max. I have a good sense about these things. She’s way better for you than Faith ever was.” I look at Caleb and we both smirk. “Did you know he was married before?”

“Aunt Minnie,” Max warns.

“Yes, I know.”

“She was awful. Come inside with me. I’ll show you how to make a proper martini.”

“Minnie, she’s pregnant,” our mother warns.

“I didn’t say she had to drink it, Claire. You’re so uptight these days. I said I’m going to show her how to *make* one.

That was Faith's one redeeming quality. She could mix a mean martini."

The deer in the headlights look is back on Summer's face, and Max is staring at the heavens. I'd laugh if Summer wasn't so nervous. There are two people on earth Max can't get mad at. Our mother and our aunt. The problem is our aunt has zero filter.

I follow them inside, and true to her word, Aunt Minnie takes Summer to the wet bar by the formal dining room and pulls out a bottle of gin. I watch them from the corner of my eye as Mother approaches and the three of them talk.

While I wait for lunch and the inevitable martini my aunt will force down my throat, I wonder what Delaney is doing upstairs. I walk to the back deck to return Ashley's call. As I pull out my phone, I get a text from Bridget asking to have drinks tonight, but Delaney comes down the back staircase, and I almost drop my phone when I see her. She's in tight black jeans and a red crop top. Her hair is in a high ponytail, showing off her long, graceful neck. Her lips match her top. She looks taller today, and I realize she's wearing stilettos. My mouth has gone dry.

She comes up short when she sees me.

"Are you joining us?" I ask. Before the words are out of my mouth, I can tell something's wrong. She's hiding it well, but something is off. The fire in her eyes is dim. She looks worn, like she's lost a fight and needs time to recover. "What happened? What's wrong?"

She takes a small step back, seemingly surprised by my question, but I take one forward and grab her chin. She's been crying. Her eyes are red and there is puffiness that makeup can't hide. She swallows and opens her mouth to speak, but she shuts it when everyone walks in.

"Who do we have here?" Aunt Minnie asks. "David, did you finally get yourself a woman too?"

"Uh, this is Delaney Lewis, my best friend and maid of honor," Summer says. She crosses the room and stands next to

Delaney. Yeah, something definitely happened, and I wonder if Mitch stopped by today. I don't think he did or Max would have said something.

“Lovely to meet everyone. I'm just leaving. I have plans.” Stunned by her admission, I whip my head around to look at her, but she doesn't turn in my direction. She was vague about her plans this morning, but now I know why she's dressed the way she is. “Enjoy your family dinner.” Something catches in her throat when she says the word family.

“Speaking of the wedding, I want to host a small dinner so I can meet everyone. We have a lot to do, and not a lot of time. Summer, do you think your family can make it on Wednesday? We can have it here since I'm still working on the house. What about you, Delaney? Does Wednesday work for you?”

“You couldn't keep me away. Have a wonderful afternoon.” She practically runs out of the kitchen toward the front of the house. I follow while everyone is busy talking.

“Hey,” I say to her. She has the door of her car open. “What is it?” I stand in front of her and see tears pooling in her eyes. “And don't say nothing,”

“It's fine,” she says. “I've handled it. I've managed to put a band aid on the gaping wound that is my life.”

“Did that asshole find you?” I wipe a stray tear.

“No, but my mother managed to mess with me from miles away.” I stand and stare into her eyes, waiting for her to say more. “I had about six thousand dollars saved. She drained the account. She was on it,” she says.

I don't know why I didn't think of that, but I assumed she had her own accounts. Of course, she wouldn't. Her mother has made her dependent in every way, and she is still doing her best to hold on to all the control.

“I can give you an advance on your salary, and you don't have to pay any rent while you stay with me. And for fucks sake, get your own damn account.” I raise my voice at her, but my anger is directed at her mother. “It's time to grow up, Delaney. Time to cut the fucking cord.”

She takes a step back as if my words hit her like a physical blow. I move closer, but she puts her hand up, warning me to stay away.

“Thank you for that, David. Thank you for making me feel worse than I already do. I don’t need your judgment. No one can judge me worse than I judge myself.” She turns to the car door, but I close it before she can get in.

“I’m sorry. I’m not judging you,” I tell her.

“That’s not what it seems like. Go inside and leave me alone.” She opens the car door for the second time.

“Just come back inside with me. Maybe you should fix the mess in your life before you go looking for a man to fuck. Dicks will be there waiting for you. No need to make your life more complicated.”

I don’t mean to sound like such an asshole, but the idea of her all dressed up to go find a man to lose herself in is like a fire in my chest. If she needs comfort and solace, she can come inside and find it here, not in the arms of a stranger who gives zero fucks about her.

“Tell me again how you’re not judging me?” She shoves me away and hops in the car. “I’ve had twenty-four years of being bossed around and having every facet of my life controlled. I don’t need it from you too.” She slams the door and locks it before I can say anymore. She puts on her sunglasses, backs out of the driveway and out of my sight.

I ONLY MAKE IT TO THE FIRST RED LIGHT BEFORE I PULL OUT my phone and cancel my date. It was something to break up the monotony of my life and to make me forget my problems, but my mother managed to ruin it for me. She's not the reason I didn't go, though. I was still going to go, have a drink, chat, and leave. The confrontation with David is the reason I bailed. I've seen different sides of David Sutton. I've seen him annoyed like he was the first night when he found me in his bed. I've seen his judgmental side before from our first conversation. I've seen his sarcastic and funny sides, but I've never seen him angry.

I deserve a lot of things from him, but his anger is not one of them. He can judge, but he doesn't have the right to yell and give me orders. At least not in this capacity. It's one thing when I start to work for him, but today's reaction was personal.

Deep down, I know I deserve some of it. I fucked up. I've led a comfortable life. I've always had everyone take care of everything for me, and I didn't realize I had choices until it was too late. Or maybe I did and didn't want to deal with the consequences. If I went to the college of my choice, my parents wouldn't have paid. If I rejected Mitch the night we were introduced, they would have only found another Mitch. I wasn't worthy of making my own choices. Choices only belong to people who can be doctors. At least, that's what I believe my parents think.

I pull the car into David's driveway and walk in through the front door.

"You're the only one who doesn't judge me, Ms. Kitty," I say to the cat when she walks between my ankles. I pick her up and hold on to her. "You and Summer. I don't know what I'd do without you guys."

As angry as I am with David, I can't even lash out at him. I'm living here out of the goodness of his heart. Yes, I can go stay with Summer, but she's engaged and planning a wedding. She's also pregnant, which means she only has a short window to have Max all to herself. I'm not going to intrude on that.

The money that she put into my account, which I have every intention of paying her back, will help me move out that much sooner. I'll wait a month into my employment to start looking for a studio.



IT'S LATE NOW, AND I FIND MYSELF DOZING ON THE COUCH IN front of the TV. I grab Ms. Kitty and go upstairs. Sure enough, when I put her down, she runs out of the room and goes across the hall.

I sigh, but I don't go after her. After a hot shower, I put on shorts and a t-shirt, but when I get in bed, I can't focus without having another living thing next to me. That was never a problem for me, but I've never lived alone before. I've always had someone in the next room, but now that David's house is empty, I can't relax. Pumpkin's in the middle of the bed, and I know if I take her to my room, she won't stay. It's barely ten, and Summer texted me an hour ago to tell me that things are going great. There's no telling when David will be back, and that's if he doesn't go out. I pull back the covers and climb in. The bed smells like him, and I take one of his pillows, put it over my face, and inhale.

I put an alarm for two hours from now on my phone just in case I fall asleep, which I promise myself that I won't. I grab the remote and turn on the television. Sleep doesn't move in

slowly on me. I don't feel my eyes get heavy while getting pulled under. I feel nothing. I go out the instant my head hits the pillow.

I don't know how long I sleep. The alarm doesn't go off, and the cat's warm body on my legs is like its own sleeping pill. It's not until I hear a door slam that I'm jolted out of my sleep. David is standing over me and the bright light of the bedroom is beaming down.

I cover my eyes with a hand. "Can you turn off the light?" I drop back down on the bed and pull the blanket over my body, but it's yanked away and pulled to the floor. "Give me the blanket." I reach down and grab it. He stomps away, but the light continues to beat down on me, so I cover my face with a spare pillow.

Just as I close my eyes, the reality of my situation hits. I'm asleep in David's bed again. I jump out of it as if it's on fire and nearly collide into his bare chest. He grabs my hips to steady me.

"I'm sorry. I, ah, set my alarm but—"

"You're not allowed in this room. Period. By the way, you're wearing my shirt." I look down at it.

"Lucy put it in my drawer."

"Still doesn't make it yours."

I sigh, look at the cat, who is snoozing on the bed. There's no way he'll let me take her, but I still take a step forward. He blocks me.

"Don't even think about it."

"Good night, Ms. Kitty." I turn to walk out.

"Her name is Pumpkin." I shut the door behind me and return to my room. This bed, as comfortable as it is, is cold and empty. It doesn't have David's masculine scent on the pillow, but I'm exhausted mentally and physically. I shut my eyes and wait for sleep to take me.

Minutes later, I'm wide awake, and I wonder if an orgasm from Mr. Happy will do the trick. As I get up to get it, the door

in my room bursts open, and David steps inside. I don't know why I do it, but I cross my arms. He's shirtless and wearing nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs. I wait for him to speak first.

"Look, I'm sorry for what I said earlier. You have enough going on without me dumping on you."

I drop my arms and let out a breath. I close the drawer feeling suddenly exposed.

"You don't owe me any apology, David. The stuff you said about me not taking charge of my life was right, but I can't change the past. I can only do things differently going forward." And I plan to, starting with a conversation I'm having with my mother very, very soon. That money was mine. I earned it. "Don't worry. I won't be here much longer, and I never intended to bring anyone into your house."

Having had enough for today, I climb back into bed and cover myself with the blanket. I don't take the time to admire his toned body. He doesn't leave. He sits on the edge of the bed.

"Why didn't you go out?"

"Are you kidding? I just got back and washed the sex smell off my body. Had a gangbang." I cover my head with the blanket and hope he'll leave. "With four guys with six-pack abs. I let them run a train on me."

"I get an alert on my phone every time someone opens my door. You came straight home and haven't left."

"This isn't my home," I remind him. "I'm a guest."

"I'll help you go through your finances and set up a budget, but we'll save that for tomorrow. Right now, how about we watch a movie? I need to unwind. It was nonstop excitement about the wedding and baby, which better be a boy or else."

I'm wide awake now, and a movie would relax me enough to lull me back to sleep. Besides that, I like David and enjoy his company. I throw the covers off and stand. I expect to follow him downstairs, but he walks across the hall to his

room. He gets on his side of the bed, which is also the side I like and grabs the remote. When I start to go to the couch, he pulls down the covers on the empty side and pats the bed.

“We’re just going to watch a movie, and then you can go across the hall.” I dive right in, uncaring about being on the wrong side. He doesn’t ask me what I want to watch, and I don’t care. He puts on an action movie, something I would never choose, but I don’t complain. I know I’ll be sound asleep in no time, but I don’t tell him that. If he wants me gone, he’ll have to carry me to my room.

After a few minutes, my eyes become heavy. I can feel him breathing just a few inches away. I move closer to him, so close now that my leg brushes against his. He doesn’t move away, so I put my head in the crook of his arm and close my eyes.

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THE MINUTE SHE CLIMBS INTO THE BED, MY DICK TURNS TO stone. It was semi-hard before but instantly got worse. Then she moves closer and put her head in the crook of my arm. I'm a goner.

She smells good and looks amazing in another one of my plain white t-shirts and pajama shorts. Her hair is a disheveled mess, but she's so perfect. She looked so lost when she left hours ago. Behind the anger, she was unbalanced and trying to find her footing.

I spent the entire day only pretending to be engrossed in the events going on with my brother, but my thoughts were with her from the moment she drove away. I was relieved when I got the alert that she brought herself straight home. While my mother gushed over Max and Summer, I came up with a dozen ways to get even with that snake that birthed Delaney. The fiancé is only an afterthought, but that mother of hers is going to suffer.

Now, Delaney is not only in my house but in my bed. I can't remember the last time I had a woman in this bed. I always take them to one of the guest bedrooms. I've even had them on the couch, but it's been years since I didn't climb into this bed alone.

It's nice having another warm body next to me. I intertwine my legs with hers. I can feel myself being lulled to sleep. I don't know if it's her intoxicating scent, warm body, or the movie, but I yawn and close my eyes.



BIG MISTAKE. I SHOULD HAVE PICKED HER UP AND CARRIED her across the hall as soon as she fell asleep, but I didn't. I liked having another warm human body next to mine. It's been too long since I've been with a woman, and even though there was no sex, I like the intimacy of sharing my bed. That's never happened before. I'm not against sharing a bed. It's expected after sex, but I've never enjoyed it this much.

My dick is happy too. Happy and frustrated. It's hard as brass but there's no one to stick it in, and I know it won't be satisfied with my hand. She moans and stirs. Her nipples are like little pebbles through her t-shirt.

She moans again and arches her back like a cat. The sounds she's making are carnal, and I know whatever dreams she's having must be erotic.

"David," she groans. Her hands roam down her body until they get to the hem of her shorts. Her eyes flutter open and lock with mine. I stare down at her until reality dawns. She pulls the covers off and runs out of my room without a word.

I lie back down and stare at the ceiling. My dick has not gone down, and it's fucking painful now. I roll out of bed and go into the bathroom. After brushing my teeth and washing my face, my dick is still hard.

I don't try to talk myself out of it when the idea hits. I blame being without pussy for weeks for this. Even as my feet take me through my room and across the hall, I know it's the stupidest fucking idea I've ever had.

I can hear the buzzing sound from my side of the door. I push my way through. She's on top of the covers, naked with her legs spread. Her pussy is bare, and I long to run my tongue along her slit. Her only reaction to my presence in her room is to spread her legs wider and moan louder. She cups one of her breasts and pinches the nipple.

I cross the room and lean between her legs. Not only is she using a vibrator, but there's also a black dildo next to her. I

snatch the vibrator from her hand and toss it on the bed. She pouts those incredibly full lips. I grab the dildo and pull her knees apart. I glide the back of my hand along her swollen pussy lips. She hisses and practically jumps off the bed.

I lift and put the dildo to her lips. She opens her mouth and I slide it in.

“I want you to get this nice and wet,” I whisper. I push it further down her throat and she moans. Anyone else should have gagged by now. I pull it out slowly and push her legs further apart. For someone so slender, her pussy can only be described as fat. It glistens with her desire, and my mouth waters. I put the dildo at her entrance, and she braces herself, probably eagerly waiting for me to slide it in. But I’m not only greedy, I’m hungry. I put the dildo down.

I open her legs wide and stick my head between them. I was right. Her scent is addicting. I glide my tongue across her pussy lips, then without warning, I suck on her pink, fat clit.

“David,” she softly whispers. “Aah.” Her moans spur me on, and I ravage her pussy with my mouth. Her hand finds its way into my hair, and her fingernails caress my scalp.

“More,” she says when I lift my head. “More.” She arches her back and reaches for me, but I knock her hand away. I grab the dildo and slide it inside of her.

“Mmhmm.” She throws her head back into the pillow while I fuck her. I want to pull this dildo out of her and replace it with my dick. I can make her scream instead of only moan, but this is better. If I use my dick, we’ll cross a line, but this doesn’t take it to a point of no return.

How jaded are you, David? You just ate her pussy.

Her tight little pussy contracts with each thrust. I know she’s ready to come.

“Here,” I tell her. “Take it. Let me see you use this on you.” My dick is ready to burst. She sits up and starts to fuck herself with the dildo. I take the vibrator and put it to her lips. Just like she did with the dildo, she licks it.

I turn it on and press it hard against her clit.

“Oh, shit, David,” she moans. Her thrusting stops and the dildo pops out of her while she becomes undone by the vibrator. She falls back on the bed, sweaty and spent. I slide my hand through her soaked pussy and put it to my mouth.

She thrashes, her body convulsing as moisture from her pussy seeps out and drips on the bed.

My dick is angry with me. It's so mad, I'm afraid it might pierce its way through my boxers. I stand. She eyes my erection and licks her lips. I walk to her, and she pulls it out. It springs free and points straight at those full pouty pink lips. I press myself against her mouth, and she opens for me.

I'm not a small man, but she takes me all the way down her graceful throat. I throw my head back and moan her name. Her rhythm is off. Normally, that would annoy me, but knowing that it's because she probably doesn't have much experience makes me swell inside her mouth.

Hypocrite.

I cup her face and slowly guide her. She starts to suck me harder, and the weeks without pussy, and her sweet innocent mouth turn me into a fifteen-year-old boy. I come down her throat without giving her any warning. She doesn't object. I pull out while I'm still coming, and some of it spurts on her cheek and chin.

Again, no objection. She sticks her tongue out and licks the cum from her chin. She swipes her cheek with her thumb and sucks that into her mouth too.

“Mmhmm,” she says, licking her lips. As good as that was, I still want more. I want to sink into her pussy. I've never wanted someone's pussy more than I do right now. I don't do what my body is begging me to do. I lie next to her, which is still a big mistake. She rolls over without any warning and straddles me. She's light as a feather, and I could move her with hardly any effort, but I like the feel of her wet pussy coating my stomach. She reaches behind her and grabs my dick.

“Delaney,” I say. My voice comes out like a whine. When she strokes me and flits her thumb on my crown, I close my eyes and enjoy the feel of her hands. “Don’t. You don’t know what you’re asking.” I take her hands and lift them away. I put them on my bare chest and hold them there.

“I don’t remember asking for anything. You didn’t ask, so why should I?” I pull her off me, and she lies next to me. I inch away to make sure our bodies don’t touch because I don’t think I’ll be able to resist her if she touches me again.

It takes a full five minutes for me to return to earth and catch my breath.

“I’m not sorry,” she says. “And you’re the one who came into my room.”

“And in your mouth,” I add.

She lets out an unguarded laugh. “That was the best part.” Without any embarrassment, she straddles me, and this time, I don’t fight it. “You taste good, David.” I glide my fingertips along her spine. Her breasts are so close, I could just pop a nipple in my mouth. I lift my head up, and she meets me halfway. I take the pebbled nub between my teeth and pull. Then I suck it hard, surprising her. She throws her head back and groans. I suck it so hard, she gasps.

When I reluctantly let it out of my mouth, I say, “I’m not the relationship type. I’m not Max. I’m not going to take you on vacations and make a baby with you,” I tell her. “There’s no happily ever after here. All I can offer a woman is my body, not my heart.”

“I’m not looking for happily ever after, and I sure as hell don’t want anyone’s heart. At least not now. What I want is to feel good in the moment. I want passion and sex, not the confines of a relationship. I just got out of one, and all it did was bring me misery. I want exactly what you’re offering,” she tells me. “Nothing more because the idea of commitment makes me want to scream, and not in the good way.”

She glides her hands along my pecs, and I feel myself start to harden again.

“Just sex?” I ask. It’s too good to be true. I’ve had this happen before, but the women always change their minds after a few weeks, and I have to end things. If I was lucky, I would get harsh words and expletives thrown my way. If I was unlucky, there would be tears or pleading. I can’t abide by either. “I can fuck, but I’m not going to make love to you,” I warn. “Ever.”

But Delaney just ran from a church wedding. She’s restructuring her entire life. She’s not looking to get tied down to another man any time soon.

“I want you to make me come. That’s it.”

“Obviously, I can,” I state.

“That’s all I’m looking for. Sex that makes me want to climb the walls good. I won’t settle for anything less.”

“You’ve settled long enough.” Climb the walls? I can make her fucking fly to the moon. I’ll give her a dick down like she’s never had before and will never have again once we’re done. By the time I’ve had enough, she’ll be out of my house. Maybe she’ll be ready to find a boyfriend by then, and we can go on as if nothing ever happened. I would have no problems with that.

Your brother will kill you.

As if I’m scared of that asshole. He got with my personal assistant behind my back and got her pregnant within a few months. He doesn’t have any sanctimonious ground to stand on.

“Take a day and think about it. Just sex. No commitment. No emotional attachments,” I remind her. “That’s not negotiable.”

“I don’t need to think about it. I agree. I only want my sexual needs met. I’d rather be shot in the head than be in a committed relationship. I already know and trust you, so I won’t need to go search for someone. At least not yet.”

I ignore the bile rising in the back of my throat at just the thought of her with another man. The truth is, it’s best if she’s not out there with random men. They could be deranged for all

I know. It's unsafe for a young woman. I convince myself I'm doing her and the world a favor. I'm doing this for my future sister-in-law. She'd be devastated if something happened to her best friend. And she's pregnant, so she doesn't need the stress. I'm doing this for my brother. He already follows Summer around like a lost puppy. I can't imagine how bad he'll be if she has to worry about Delaney too.

"Let's take a day," I tell her. "Make ground rules." I trace my hand from her sternum down to her belly. She's lithe and strong. I can flip her around, slide into her, and make her scream in ecstasy for hours.

"Okay. Let's meet back here tonight to discuss." She hops off the bed and stretches. God, she's flawless. That idiot Mitch didn't realize what he had. Not only is her body perfect, but she's beautiful, with skin as soft as porcelain. Add her insatiable sexual appetite, and she's every man's fantasy. That asshole ex of hers will never, ever be able to do any better. I wonder if part of him knows that and that's the reason he tried to trap her in marriage. If she had said I do, he never would have let her go.

There's got to be a reason everyone is fighting so hard for that marriage, and I'm going to figure out what it is if it's the last thing I do.

DAVID LEAVES SOON AFTER OUR MORNING ESCAPADE TO GO have brunch with his family. Summer sends a text inviting me, but I decline. Yesterday went well with her and her future mother-in-law, and she's much more relaxed this morning. She needs this time to get to know her new family. If I'm there, she's going to spend half the time making sure I'm okay. She doesn't need me there, but I need to do something for myself today.

I can't believe how scared I was about facing my family. For days, I holed myself in a perfect stranger's house. I was so anxious and spent sleepless nights trying to figure out a way to still maintain my relationship with my parents and stay unmarried to Mitch. There does not seem to be a path for that. At least not right now, and I need to be okay with that. I need to spend my time and energy on figuring out how to take care of myself.

The fear and anxiety I had about facing them is gone. I feel like Dorothy when she found out The Wizard was only a man. What's the worst that can happen now? They've fired me, kicked me out of my home and have cut me off financially. Not only that, but my mother has also stolen all the money I managed to save. That's what brings me here today. She can fire me. She can disown me. Those things are all of hers to give or take as she sees fit, but she doesn't have the right to take what is rightfully mine.

I park my car on the circular driveway. There are no other cars here, which means they are home alone. At least I hope

that's the case. If anyone else is here, it will be Damon since he would put his car in the garage.

The mini-mansion I grew up in has never looked so cold. Despite the mild September morning, it feels bleak and chilly. I no longer have a key, and I refuse to use the security code to open the door. This isn't my home anymore. I ring the doorbell and stand there for several minutes.

I know they can see me on the security camera, but they are playing a game. I'm willing to play along now. I've been docile long enough.

The door finally opens, and I don't bother looking into my mother's eyes. She's elegantly dressed for a Sunday morning. My father joins us in the foyer. Unlike my mother, he has a hint of a smile on his face, but that's quickly wiped away when my mom elbows him in the ribs. He stands up straight and any evidence of him being happy to see me is wiped from his expression. It's like he remembered they're supposed to agree about how to handle me.

"You had no right to take that money," I say to my mother. I forget all the manners my parents have drilled into me and get straight to the point. "I earned that, and I want it back." She seems surprised by my outburst. Her eyes nearly bug out of her head. I wonder if she thought I came here to beg her to forgive me.

"Excuse me?" she asks.

"You heard me. I had six thousand three hundred and seventy dollars and I want it back."

"And you owe me over a hundred thousand dollars for the wedding you so selfishly ran out on. This is a drop in the bucket toward what you owe me." She points at my face, and I take a step back, chastened. But that doesn't last for long. I stand up straight and meet her glare for glare.

"What do I owe you for? For a wedding I didn't want? You made every decision from the colors to my dress. I told you I didn't want to marry Mitch, but you pushed and pushed. I don't owe you a damn thing." I take slow steps toward her, but

she holds her ground. I see a flash of something in her eyes. I don't know if it's anger or surprise, but it's gone before I can analyze it. I point a finger at her, and she knocks my hand away. My father must sense my anger because he approaches and puts an arm around her.

"I'll give you one more chance," she tells me. It's my turn to take a step back.

"For what?" I already know what she's going to say, but I wait.

"I'll call and have Mitch and his parents over for dinner and we'll clear everything up." The anger is gone, and my mother returns. The one who has made every decision in my life. The one who pulls out her credit card and pays for everything. The one who has made sure that I'm solely dependent on her my entire life. The one who didn't prepare me to live a life on my terms once it was determined that I wouldn't become a doctor. The one who I now realize is forever punishing me for a condition I have no control over.

"Let me say it again. There is no possible scenario on this earth where I will marry Mitch. When I walked out of that church, I meant it. What I don't get is why you want me to spend my life unhappy and miserable to a man I loathe. Why?" She purses her lips and doesn't speak. I turn to my father. "Why, Dad?" My father clears his throat and opens his mouth to speak.

"You said yes," my mother says before Dad can answer. "We planned a wedding. You—"

"I'm allowed to change my mind!" I yell for the first time at my mother. She takes a visible step back. "I'm allowed to run my own god damn life! And let's be clear, Mother. I never said yes. I didn't have a chance to utter a single word before you accepted a marriage proposal on my behalf."

She inhales and takes a step back as if I slapped her, but I'm not done. "For my entire life, you've made every decision. From my clothes to my hair to where I went to college. Well, I've had enough. I'm not going to marry Mitch or anyone else just to make you happy."

“What’s all the shouting about?” Damon comes running down the stairs, still in his pajamas, before my mother can utter a retort. “Hey, Del,” he says. He smiles, but I refuse to acknowledge him. I cross my arms and turn my head in the opposite direction.

“You brought Mitch into my life, and I wanted to please you so bad, I went along with it. I never loved him. I never even liked him.”

“Well, I’m not pleased, Delaney. Not at all,” she says.

Frustrated, I throw up my hands in defeat. “Fine. I’m not going to talk about Mitch anymore. Not with you or anybody. I’ve made my decision. I’ve said all I’m going to say about it, and I’m honestly sick of talking about him. What I want is the money you took from my account.”

“Mom, really?” Damon asks. I think my words shock him. Mom looks away, but then she turns her cold eyes back on me.

Dad finally walks away from her. I watch as he goes into his office and returns with a checkbook. He signs and dates it and hands it to me.

“Write whatever amount you’re owed.”

I smile in gratitude, but the check never makes it into my purse. My mother snatches it from me and rips it in half. Dad writes out another.

“I’ll stop payment on it the instant you leave this house. You want that money back, sue me for it,” she snaps. The fire and anger are back in her voice now. I don’t know how I never noticed how hateful my mother was before this very moment. It’s humbling, but I stand firm.

My dad hands me the check, but I hold both hands up and step back. “You know what? Keep it.” I peek around my father and stare at my mother. “Do you hear that, Mother? You go ahead and keep the money you stole. It’s the last thing you’re ever going to take from me.” I turn and walk out of the house, but Damon follows behind me. I ignore him and march to my car.

“Delaney!” he yells. I open my car door, but I don’t get in. I decide I’m done running. So, I turn and face him.

“What?” While I wait for him to talk, my father comes out too.

“Come back inside. I’m sorry about—”

“Stop. I don’t want to hear it. In fact, you’re just like them. I don’t want to speak with you ever again, Damon.” He lowers his head as if my words hurt him. “When did you turn into such a controlling asshole? Maybe you’ve always been, and I was just blind to it. All I know is, when I needed you, you weren’t there for me. I don’t know who told you that you have the right to dictate how I run my life.” I turn my back on him and get in my car.

“Delaney, wait,” my dad says as he reaches my door. I roll down my window and wait to hear what he has to say. “When did you tell your mother you didn’t want to marry Mitch?” I look upward and shake my head in frustration. He’s always been blind when it comes to me.

“A couple of weeks before the wedding. She told me I was being a drama queen and refused to listen to me.”

“Why didn’t you come to me?”

“Are you serious, Dad?” He looks confused, as if he doesn’t understand my reaction. “Why didn’t I come to you? Are you really that delusional? You’ve never cared enough to listen to me or my problems. That’s why I didn’t come to you.”

His mouth hangs open, but he says, “Is that what you think? That’s not—”

I cut him off before he can finish his sentence. “Whenever I’ve come to you in the past, you tell me to go to my mother. When I told you I wanted to go to college on the west coast, what did you say? Listen to your mother, Delaney. When you realized a future in medicine wasn’t in the cards for me, I told you I wanted to major in business, and Mother insisted on a useless Arts History degree. What did you say? Listen to your mother, Delaney. This is what listening to my mother has

brought me. Disowned, unemployed, and broke. So, no, I didn't come to you, and I'm glad I didn't because you wouldn't have done a single thing to help me. I don't want to speak to you again either." I roll up the window and leave the driveway. I look in the rearview mirror to see both my brother and father standing there.

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SHE LEAVES THE HOUSE AN HOUR AFTER ME, BUT IT'S AFTER nine and she's still not back. I hate that I've made her my problem, but there's no turning back now. Not after this morning.

That's all I've thought about all day. That fat pussy that glistened. I'm still hard just thinking about it. I pace the first floor like a lion in its cage. I'm eager for her to get here so we can continue our discussion. The first thing we're going to do is share our location on our phones. This is for her safety, of course. There's her psycho ex out there in the world. Not to mention every member of her family that I've met so far.

I grab my phone and call my brother. He picks up after the second ring.

"What?" he asks. "You just left here an hour ago. What can you possibly want?"

"Funny, Maxi Pad. Is Delaney over there?" I decide to get right to the point. The idiot doesn't speak immediately. "Stop breathing so hard and answer me."

"No, she's not here. You gave me your word," he reminds me, lowering his voice. I want to laugh and tell him my word ain't worth shit when a beautiful woman is throwing her pussy around in my face, but he'd probably drive over here to punch me in the teeth. He has hands like bricks and packs a mean punch.

"I'm responsible for her," is all I say.

I hear the alarm beep, and I know it's her. Caleb is gone for the night. I hang up on Max without another word and practically run to the door. I catch myself and walk at a normal pace. I'm not going to turn into my brother.

"Hey," I say, trying to sound as casual as I can. She's holding several grocery bags and one from a department store.

"Hey. Just did a little food shopping for the week and bought some new work clothes." I follow her into the kitchen and sit at the island as she puts her things away. "I'm very excited about work tomorrow," she finishes and turns to face me. There's something different about her. She looks happy, almost content. It's as if she's floating around my kitchen. "In a way, it's my first real job."

When she gets within reach, I put my hands on her waist. She freezes but doesn't try to move. I pull her close and she straddles me. Her light scent infiltrates my senses. "Your rules. Let's get down to it." I stick my head to the side of her neck and rub my nose along her silky skin. Her face is so close to mine that I bump my nose on hers.

"Sex. That's all I want," she says. She lets out a soft little moan as she slowly grinds on top of me. "No feelings."

"Your body is betraying your no feelings rule. You're feeling a lot of things right now, aren't you?" I say against the side of her long, graceful neck. I bite down on her supple skin and she whimpers.

"No emotional feelings," she clarifies right before she moans again.

"I want that too, but we need more rules. My first rule is that you can't sleep in my bed. The other night was an exception, not the norm. After we're done, go to your own bed. I don't cuddle." I've been known to cuddle. I don't hate it, but she's the type of girl who would like it so much, she'd come to expect it, and I don't want expectations. Expectations equal complications.

"We're both free to see other people." I open my mouth, but she puts a finger to my lips. "I won't bring anyone here."

That's a given because that person would end up buried in my backyard after a very painful and brutal death. We're definitely going to share our location tonight.

"If we're with someone else, we use protection. That's non-negotiable," I tell her. I stuff down the image of her with anyone else. I'll blow up that bridge when I get to it.

"Agreed. What about protection between us?" she asks. I cup her ass and pull her in closer. "I got an IUD a month before my wedding. I'm STD free and I won't get pregnant."

"I don't remember the last time I didn't use a condom." Actually, I can. It was with my ex-fiancée, Bethany. It's been five years. "If we can agree to only go bare for each other, I'd like to ride this ride without a condom." I grind into her and she pushes her body down on me. All I can think about is sliding into that hot, warm glove and forgetting everything for a few minutes.

"Agreed," she says. "This is easier than I thought it would be."

"And this stays between us," I tell her. I grasp her chin and lock eyes with her. "That means Summer can't know." She goes stiff on my lap. "You didn't tell her anything, did you?" Now that I think of it, Summer took a call during brunch and excused herself. For all I know, that was Delaney unloading on her best friend.

"No, I didn't, but I do tell her everything. She won't tell Max if that's what you're worried about." I snort. I bet those two probably go to the bathroom together. If Summer knows, Max will know about it within days, if it even takes that long.

"Non-negotiable," I tell her. "This is between us. The more people who know, the more complicated it will be." Not to mention my brother kicking my ass.

"Okay. It stays between us. Anything else?"

"We can add more rules at any time. This is always open for negotiation or revision."

"Deal." It's a soft sigh right above my lips. She's so close, all I have to do is move a fraction of an inch, and I can finally

taste that mouth. I don't know how I've resisted for so long, and I don't know what Max was thinking when he sent her to my house of all places.

She's so beautiful, and I bet her mouth tastes as sweet as her pussy. If I close my eyes, I can still taste her on my tongue.

“What are you waiting for?” she challenges. I tilt my head, and she lowers hers, and our lips finally connect. It's like fireworks on the Fourth of July. She tastes of heaven, and I know in this moment, she'll drag me into hell if I let her. But I don't care. I'll go there right now if it means I get to kiss her any time I want.

All I focus on now is her sweetness and how it will feel when I sink into her soft, wet pussy. I stand with her in my arms and take the back stairs two at a time. She moans in my mouth, damn near driving me insane with desire.

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HE BARGES INTO MY ROOM AND DROPS ME ON THE BED. I reach for his belt, but he moves my hand away. “Get off the bed. Undress yourself.” I obey. He grabs a remote from the nightstand and dims the light. I unbutton my shirt and shrug it off. The tank top goes next. I can see his eyes darken at the sight of my lacy black bra. I unbutton my jeans, slowly slide them off, and kick them aside. Finally, he stands and tears my panties off. “Bra off before I rip it too.” I unclasp it and stand in front of him completely nude. He walks around me as if he’s inspecting me. His big hand glides down my back, giving me goosebumps. He cups my ass roughly, almost painfully, but I love it. I hope I have his handprints on me tomorrow. I can feel myself start to moisten at just the feel of his rough hands.

He stands behind me, and a hand snakes around and tweaks one of my nipples. My head rolls back, and I let out a loud, wanton moan. “Spread your legs for me,” he orders. I do and he spreads my pussy lips apart. His thick fingers massage my clit, and one finds its way inside of me. I could come just from that. This right here. This is what I’ve been missing. A man who knows where a clit is and how to touch it.

His warm, full lips search the side of my neck, and he rubs his hard dick on my ass. I want more. I reach behind me to touch him over his jeans, but he says, “No. Turn around.” Slowly, I turn to face him. “Last chance to leave,” he says, but I stand firm. “On your knees.” I’ve never gotten on my knees so fast. Once I’m there, he orders me to unzip his jeans. I squeeze his bulge before I slowly undo the button and zipper.

His dick pops out, hard as a rock, and he slides it between my lips. “Take me all the way to the back of your throat like you did before. That’s all I’ve been able to think about all day.”

I take him so far back that I gag. He pulls it out and shoves it back into my mouth. I do my best not to gag again, but I fail. Tears roll down my cheeks, but I keep taking him as far back as possible. He pulls out, and I almost fall back on my ass.

“Bend over.” He yanks me to my feet and positions me over the bed. My ass sticks up in the air, and his large hand caresses it. He squeezes one side before he slaps the other, taking me off guard.

“Oh!” I gasp, almost losing my balance. He does it again, surprising me just as much as the first time. I’ve never been spanked before in my entire life, and I almost cry because I’ve missed out on so much. I want him to do it again, only harder.

I feel another slap, and I bite my lower lip. He squeezes then spreads my ass cheeks apart. He puts a hand on my back, bending me like a pretzel. I’ve never wanted someone to crack my spine the way I do now. He stands behind me and slides his dick along my wet pussy. He doesn’t sink in like I expect. At least not at first. He rubs his hardness between my pussy lips, almost bringing me to orgasm from the sensation. Then, with no warning at all, he slides in, filling me.

“Oh, God,” I moan. He’s huge. Much bigger than what I’m used to and bigger than anything I’ve seen in pornos. He’s long and wide, and he stretches me. I arch my back and let out a loud moan. He pushes further, and I yell at the sensation.

“You still want to be plundered?”

Fuck yeah, I do. “Yes,” I manage to whisper. Both hands grab my hips when he pulls out and slams back in. He takes me rough and hard, barely giving me any time to get used to his size. His fingers dig into my flesh as he thrusts in and out of me. My mind goes blank, and all I can think about is how good he feels. All the stress and drama from the last few months fades away while David consumes me body and soul. Only he remains.

One of his hands grabs my breast and he pulls on my nipple. The hand leaves much too soon but travels down my body and finds its way to my pussy. He rubs my clit, and I'm done for. I come all over his dick, calling and moaning his name. He pulls out of me and climbs on the bed. I almost fall over without his body for support. My legs have suddenly turned to jelly.

"Get on and ride me. I'm not done yet." He points at his dick, which is still hard but now glistening with the remains of my release. "Now," he orders. I straddle him and slide onto his dick. I'm like a greedy slut, desperate and eager for more of him. His hands grasp my hips and help to guide me while I ride him. "Now be a big girl and fuck me." He slaps my ass and grabs my hips again. "Put your money where your pussy is."

This is not a position I'm used to. I've only been with a total of three men before David, and Mitch was my longest relationship. Mitch only did missionary, and before that, the other guys were as inexperienced as me. Being on top always felt awkward, but with David guiding me, I gain my momentum and start to grind on top of him.

"Look at me," he says when I close my eyes. My eyes pop open and lock with his. His brown eyes are practically black now. "Don't look away. Take this dick, Delaney. Don't be shy about it." He lets go of my hips, but he surprises me when he leans in and captures my mouth with his. It's a wet and sloppy kiss. It's a kiss only lovers share in the throes of sex. I wrap my arms around his neck and press my body against his while I continue to fuck him. All awkwardness is gone now. I'm claiming this as mine, at least for tonight. I deepen the kiss, and his arms wrap around me. He tastes of bourbon, and I suck on his tongue. He groans in my mouth and squeezes me tighter, not leaving any space between our sweaty bodies.

It's like we're in a cocoon of our own lovemaking. My second orgasm of the night takes me by surprise. It rips through my entire body. It's like a volcano, bubbling inside of me until I explode. There's a loud guttural sound that comes out of me, and I see stars. It's like I'm floating outside my

body and looking down at myself. I start to shake, but David holds me in his arms. He starts to shiver too, and I realize we're both coming at the same time. He rests his head on my sternum while he holds and kisses me until we both come back down to earth. He makes circles on my hot skin with his tongue, causing me to shudder.

I'm covered in sweat, but David doesn't seem to mind. He kisses my mouth, the side of my neck, and the top of my breasts. He whispers soothing words while I catch my breath.

"You're beautiful when you come," he whispers, and I realize there's no better drug in this world than being told you're beautiful when you're naked in the arms of your lover.

His dick softens and slides out of me. I move off his lap and collapse on the bed. He does the same and pulls me into him. He kisses my temple, so I throw an arm around him and bask in the afterglow. I don't think I've ever had an afterglow before. Who am I kidding? I know for a fact I haven't.

David now has me wrapped in his arms. So much for not cuddling. I don't dare remind him of one of his rules though. This is one I hope he'll break every single night. I don't remember the last time a man held me in his arms. Mitch never did. He always slept next to me, but without touching. Looking back now, he's always been as indifferent to me as I am to him. Maybe I've set us both free to find happiness. Even if he did hold me, he would pale in comparison to David Sutton, whose hard body is a sight to behold.

He kisses my temple again. Emboldened, I throw a leg over him.

"That was very nice," I say to him. My body is practically singing. Two orgasms in one night. Even now, I'm getting turned on again while I feel some of our release sliding out of me.

"Come on." He stands and offers me his hand. "You can watch TV in my room if you want, but you have to come back in here to sleep." He scoops me up in his arms and carries my naked body across the hall. He dumps me in the middle of his bed, barely giving me enough time to roll over before he slides

in next to me. I inch closer and rest my head on his chest. When he doesn't ask me to move away, I throw a leg over his body like I did in my room. He kisses my forehead and turns on the television.

I think I fall asleep before he chooses something to watch. I wake up the next morning with the bright sun streaming through the blinds and the sound of his shower and his whistling.

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THE PARKING LOT IS ALREADY FULL THIS MONDAY MORNING. I left Delaney sipping her coffee in the kitchen with Caleb. It took everything in me not to walk up to her and kiss her goodbye. It also took a lot of willpower for me not to punch Caleb for making her laugh this morning. She seemed relaxed and happy, and when Caleb or Lucy wasn't looking, she pinched my ass.

She was supposed to go back to her bed, but it's been so long since a woman felt so good. Now, reality has hit, and I need to be professional while we're inside this building. I may be a slut like Max says. I may change women as often as I change my underwear, but my job is something I take seriously. This is my father's legacy, and I honor him.

It's also our grandfather's legacy, but he was the type of rich man who only dealt with other rich men. My parents raised me and Max differently. When Max Senior took over Sutton Marketing, he hired women and minorities. He taught us tolerance and acceptance. He was the opposite of our grandfather, and Max and I do our best to make our father proud. Despite that, we grew up in a world of money and privilege. Sutton Marketing could disappear tomorrow, and Max and I will never need to work for the rest of our lives, but this gives us a purpose.

Max's Mercedes pulls up next to mine, and he steps out before rounding the car to open the passenger door for Summer.

“You guys didn’t bring me any coffee?” I ask. Summer pulls out another cup and hands it to me. I kiss her cheek and say, “You’re going to be my new favorite Sutton.”

Max scowls at me.

“That’s if I change my last name. I haven’t decided yet,” she says. From the way she looks at my brother, I know she’s only saying that to get a reaction. Like hell, she’s not changing it. Not that I’d ever get married, but if I did, she’d be taking my name as soon as we said I do.

“She’s changing it,” Max grumbles.

She giggles and shrugs. If I was a betting man, I’d bet she’ll be going by Summer Sutton as soon as the ink on their marriage certificate is dry.

“Let’s meet in thirty,” I tell Max. “Summer, I’ll need you to help Delaney as much as you can. If you can show her around and take her to HR when she gets here, I’d appreciate it.”

She nods and we climb into the elevator. Max has his arm around her the entire time, almost as if he’s afraid she’ll disappear. That’s what I don’t need in my life. This little arrangement I have with Delaney can only last so long. I don’t want her looking at them and hoping or thinking that this will become a reality for me and her. It won’t happen.

But visions of us together last night come to mind. Her perfect little ass sticking out. The way she kissed me with wild abandon, and the way she took everything I gave her without complaint. She gagged on my dick and didn’t flinch, and let me stretch out that wet, tight little pussy. My handprint on her ass this morning was also a sight to behold. I’m starting to get hard just thinking about it. How that loser doctor didn’t find himself lucky just to breathe the same air as her is baffling.

That’s another thing. Tonight, she’s going back to her room. When I opened my eyes this morning, I was wrapped around her. She folded into my body just perfectly. Her hair was in my face and her sweet scent was already invading my senses. I can’t wake up like that every morning, wrapped

around a woman. It's too intimate. I want sex and orgasms, not intimacy.

I put that out of my mind and get into work mode. There are a couple of companies that can make good potential clients, and the good news is, they are all local and no overnight traveling is required.

My good mood only lasts as long as it takes for me to log into my work email. I have two resignation letters from junior analysts. I sit back, stunned. There has always been very little turnover here, but for the past couple of years, it's been down to practically nothing. Getting two resignation letters in one morning is not something I expect to find first thing on a Monday.

Max is copied, and when he arrives in my office a few minutes later, he's as stunned as I am.

"I'm going to speak with them and see if I can get them to stay," I tell him. "These are good employees. One is rare, but two in a day?"

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EACH TIME I TAKE A STEP, I FEEL HIM BETWEEN MY LEGS. David Sutton and that huge swinging dick he keeps hidden in his pants. It's the world's best kept secret. Well, I'm sure it's hardly a secret. He screams big dick energy.

I wrap my arm around Summer's. None of this would have been possible without her. Our other two lunch companions, Olivia and Kevin, walk ahead.

"We need to talk," I whisper to her. She knows that tone. She turns her head and looks into my face. She knows I have a secret inside of me that's dying to come out. I can never keep anything from her, and I don't intend to start now.

"Max's office is empty. Meet me there in five minutes." We go our separate ways, and I find my desk. This used to be Summer's when she was David's personal assistant. Once I log in with my new credentials, I check my email. I have none.

A few minutes later, I join Summer in Max's office and close the door behind me. I decide to get right to the point.

"I had sex with David." She dramatically drops herself on the couch. Her mouth hangs open like a fish. "Huge dick," I whisper. "Big swinging balls and a hard body." Her eyes widen in shock at the very idea. "I was like, good gracious, dick is bodacious." I start to dance wildly. I bend toward her and start shaking my ass. "Don't be surprised. You told me about Max."

"How?" is all she says.

“You’re the one who’s pregnant. You tell me, you slut.” I let out a loud cackle in the middle of the office. “He had me every which way,” I whisper. “Stretched me out. I came, James. I came more than once. Do you know the last time I came with a man? Never. N-E-V-E-R. Let me tell you something. Orgasms from dildos and vibrators just do not compare. I don’t think I can ever look at Mr. Happy again.”

Summer finally stands. She puts both hands on my shoulders and shoves me onto the couch. “What the hell are you doing, Delaney?”

“I’m getting my pussy popped,” I whisper. “Getting my spine crushed. My uterus tickled.” When she starts to giggle, I tell her, “It’s only sex. Nothing else. We both agreed. You can’t tell Max. You’re not supposed to know, but I can’t keep anything from you. I’ll die if I keep this to myself. He had me bent over—” The words die in my throat when the door opens and Max and David walk in.

Summer clears her throat, but her eyes remain as wide as saucers. She blushes when she looks at David, and she quickly looks away.

“Hi, baby,” she says to Max. “I was just showing Delaney your office. How was your meeting?” She can barely make eye contact with David. I try not to roll my eyes. Summer has always been the worst liar I’ve ever met.

“Well, I have to get back to my desk. I have a couple of online tutorials to finish as part of my training. I’ll come find you when I’m done, James.” I walk out, making sure to nearly rub against David.

The first tutorial takes forty-five minutes. Before I start the second, I run to the kitchen and make myself a coffee. I’m surprised to hear my office phone ringing by the time I come back. Expecting it to be either Summer or David, I pick up without bothering to look at the caller ID.

“Delaney Lewis.” There’s breathing on the other line. “Fuck,” I say when I recognize the number. “What do you want, Damon? I meant it when I told you I didn’t want to speak to you ever again.”

“Don’t hang up,” he says quickly. “Please.”

“What? And how did you find me?”

“After I looked up the Suttons, I figured you’d get a job there. Look, I really was only trying to help. You don’t want to marry Mitch. I get it.”

I wait for him to say more, only he doesn’t. “Did you get it when you lied and ambushed me? Yeah, you get that I don’t want to marry Mitch, but I didn’t hear the part where you say you support me. Not that I need it now. And you never did offer an explanation as to why you think you’re entitled to have a say in my life.” I think back to David’s words the day I told him I was meeting Damon. He warned me that he was just like them, and deep down, I knew it. That’s why I never went to him for help months ago. It would have been like dealing with my father.

“I do support you, and I’m sorry I didn’t before. You’re my little sister. I was only looking out for you.”

Sure. Only looking to control me. I don’t bother to tell him that if he really wanted to look out for me, he would have listened without judgment. My days of trying to reason with members of my family are over.

“What are you after, Damon?”

“Let me take you to dinner.”

“No, thanks. I’ve learned my lesson when it comes to accepting dinner invitations from you.”

“Who is asking you out to dinner?” David stands over my desk. He snatches the phone from me and says, “Who is this?”

I try to reach for it back, but he moves out of the way. “Damon?” He looks back at me. “Did you tell this idiot that you work here?” I cross my arms, not dignifying him with an answer. “Keep calling here, and I’ll have you arrested for harassment.” He slams the phone down. “Why would you even talk to that clown?” He glares down at me.

I decide to ignore him and say, “I was just about to do one of the HR tutorials.” He sits on my desk, right in front of my

desktop. “He called here on a whim, and I guess Olivia put him through. You know, I just left a situation where everyone felt it was their duty to tell me what to do. I don’t need that again.” I stare into his eyes, and he looks right back. Neither one of us is willing to look away first.

“I know you told Summer,” he whispers. I hold his stare, neither denying nor confirming his words. “She wouldn’t look at me and couldn’t get out of the office fast enough. I give Max until the rest of the day before he drags it out of her. He’s suspicious as fuck on a good day.”

I sigh, but I don’t look away. “Look, she’s my person. I have no one else. She won’t say anything.” When he continues to remain quiet while looking into my face, I say, “Can I have my seat back?”

He stands and towers over me. I crane my neck to look up at him. It’s nice to have to look up at a man. Another reason why I will never miss Mitch. I love having a tall man in my life.

Except he’s not your man. He’s made it clear he will never be. And he’s not really in your life. Not in the way you’re thinking. He’s in your panties, and that’s it.

“Did you not hear me? He’s going to figure it out.”

“Are you scared of him? Why would he care? We’re two consenting adults, and we both know what we’re getting into. I’m so sick of everyone trying to control everything I—”

Big hands grasp me by the shoulders. “Relax,” he says to me. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll handle Max if he says anything. We agreed to no complications, and this is a complication,” he says. “That’s all I mean.”

“I don’t see how. It’s my body and if I want to let you in it, it’s nobody’s business but ours. Let me get back to work.” I move away from him and take my seat. It’s only a little past the middle of the day, and all I want to do is climb into bed and take a nap. Preferably David’s bed. “Last night can be a one time thing if you’re worried about your brother’s reaction.” I don’t bother to look at him again. I find the next

tutorial, but he puts a large palm on mine before I can click on it. His hand feels warm against my skin. His free hand grasps my chin and gently turns my head toward him. He leans down and presses his lips on mine. The kiss isn't deep like the ones we shared last night, but it feels much more intimate. He grasps my chin and holds me in place. I open my mouth, and I feel the sweep of his tongue on mine. All too soon it ends, and he breaks the kiss and steps away.

“My brother doesn't run my life,” he tells me. “I do whatever the fuck I want.”

“Good,” is all I say.

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I WAS STUCK WITH CALEB AND MAX FOR DINNER. SUMMER, Delaney, and my mother went to Summer's parents' house so she can try on her wedding dress. I think I heard something about her wearing her mother's dress.

Summer is the complete opposite of Max's first wife. Not just in looks, but in attitude and demeanor. Faith, his first wife, flew to Milan for a custom-made wedding gown. Summer could do the same. Max can more than afford it, but she's wearing her mother's dress. How my uptight prick of a brother ever ended up with her will remain a mystery for the rest of my life.

The three of us go out to dinner, and I only listen with half an ear while Caleb drones on about Justine. Afterward, I go home alone.

Today was a rough one. I was not able to convince either of my two employees to stay. I'm still puzzled by their resignation, but I can't force anyone to stay when they want to leave.

Something's wrong though, and I can feel it. We haven't had any turnover in two years. I pay my employees more than my competitors, and the benefits package is quite generous, including the vacation time. Positions at Sutton Marketing are highly sought after, so I'll be able to fill them very soon.

I lean back in my home office chair and close my eyes. It's almost nine o'clock, so I haven't seen Delaney since she left with Summer four hours ago. I don't like that her brother

called her at work today. That's still a shitstorm ready to float downstream. That entire family raises alarm bells in my head. Even now, having her away, is unsettling because they can easily get to her, and I won't be there to intervene.

I've only been home an hour, but I call my brother.

"What's up?" he asks after two rings.

"Is Summer home yet?" My brother is a lot of things, but dumb isn't one. I hold my breath and wait, hoping he doesn't pick up on why I'm asking.

"She's five minutes away," he says. "Why?" I can hear him typing something.

"It's after nine. I know how you worry."

"We were just talking. I think—" He stops speaking suddenly for a few seconds. "She's here. I'll see you tomorrow." He ends the call, and I'm left wondering why Delaney isn't home yet. If they left at the same time, she should have been here by now. Then I remember we shared our location, and I can track her phone.

About a minute later, I'm tracking her to my house, and I hear the alarm go off. I try to calm myself down before I casually walk to the kitchen. She always comes in through the side door as opposed to the front. She's carrying a brown paper bag and holds it up in the air. "Summer's mother gave me leftovers," she says. "Her parents are the best." I guess with a family like hers, anyone's parents are an improvement.

She puts the bag on the kitchen island, and I approach. I surprise her when I pull her into my arms and kiss her deeply. She's stiff at first, but she relaxes into me and kisses me back. She tastes of peppermint and smells of musk. I lift her off her feet, and she wraps those incredible legs around me. My hands travel down her body and cup her ass. I grind against her, letting her see how much I want her.

Her shoes fall off in the process and I carry her upstairs, making sure that our mouths never separate. I slam my bedroom door shut with my foot, and end the kiss only to drop

her in the middle of my bed. When she starts to unbutton her shirt, I pull her hands away and do it myself.

“Lie back,” I order, and she cooperates. I pull down her pants and underwear and throw them off the bed. I lift one of her legs and put it over my shoulder. She’s spread wide open for me, and her pink little clit is enough to make my mouth water. I spread her lips apart and run my tongue from her clit to her slit.

“Oh, God,” she moans. She almost falls off the bed from the onslaught of my tongue. “Oh, fuck, yeah, David. Eat my pussy.” I love the sound of my name on her tongue so much, I slide the tip of mine inside of her. She’s drenched, and never has any woman tasted and smelled so good. I take her leg off my back and spread her apart. She’s glistening. Her head is thrown back and she’s moaning as if my tongue on her pussy is the best thing on earth.

I eat her just as she ordered. She puts her hand in my hair and pulls. I take her to the brink of orgasm but don’t let her come. I lift my head from between her legs, and she groans in frustration. I get off her and position her on her side. Her perfect little ass hits my dick just right, and I moan at the sensation.

“I’m going to take you this way,” I say against her neck.

“You can take me any way you want, any time you want, and any fucking where you want,” she moans. “Just as long as I end up with your dick inside of me.” I lift her leg and push the head of my dick into her. I knew she’d be moist, but she’s dripping already. I should slowly sink into her, but I’m too far gone. I shove myself inside of her without any more warning, and she throws her head back. I can see her eyes are closed and her mouth is open.

I reach over and grab one of her breasts and hold her tight to keep her in place. She feels so good, I need a minute to compose myself, otherwise, I’m the one who’s going to look like an inexperienced lover. I fuck her from behind, and she fucks me right back, but it’s those sexy little carnal sounds she’s making while she has her eyes closed and head thrown

back that are nearly my undoing. While she's in the middle of a moan, I slap her ass hard. Her eyes fly open, and she bites that bottom lip. I can see the lust in her eyes.

“That mouth,” I rasp. “I want that mouth on mine. Now.” To show her how serious I am, I spank her again before I pull my dick out. She groans in frustration, but I turn her around, push her face into mine and take that fat, plump bottom lip into my mouth. I bite it hard, and she moans. I end the kiss and turn her back around and give her what she wants. I fuck her into an orgasm, and she screams out my name. Before she can recover, I pull out of her.

“Suck this dick. Right now, and swallow my cum,” I order. She scoots to the end of the bed and takes my hard and wet dick into her mouth without a second thought. I explode down her throat, and she swallows everything I give her.



THIS ISN'T HOW THIS IS SUPPOSED TO GO. SHE NEEDS TO BE across the hall in her own bed. I didn't even check to see if I locked the bedroom door, but I can't remember a single time when Caleb would just burst into my room. He might be clueless, but at least he has manners.

She's not supposed to be pressed up against me either. Her long legs are intertwined with mine the same way our fingers are intertwined. I reach underneath the blanket and run a hand over her smooth thigh.

We've been fucking for two hours. I took her three times, giving her a total of five orgasms. We finally collapsed underneath the sheets ten minutes ago, both of us sweaty and breathless.

“I'm so thirsty,” she complains. “You need a mini fridge up here.” I take our joined hands and run them along her ribcage. She giggles, and I do it again.

“Is that your way of asking me to get you water?” I pull her on top of me and let her lay on my chest. She lifts her head

and bites my chin. I cup that luscious ass of hers and squeeze it.

“I can get it.” She tries to get up, but I hold her in place. It takes very little effort. Part of me enjoys dominating her. Dominating a woman in bed has never been my thing. I like to give and receive, but she’s brought out a different side to me. A bigger part of me really likes how she lets me handle her.

“Nope.” I push her off me and she ends up on her back. I roll over and cover her body with mine. She’s so soft and pliant, and those lips are so plump that I have no choice but to kiss them. “I’ll go.” I give her hips another squeeze before I get up and put on a pair of boxers. I walk out of the room and head to the kitchen. For all I know, Caleb might be in the kitchen. The idea of him getting a view of Delaney’s breasts or tight ass is not something I want to think about.

The kitchen’s empty though. I grab two bottles of water and return to my room. When I get there, she’s out of bed and has her panties back on. Just as she reaches for her blouse, I snatch it from her and toss it away. I lift her off her feet with one arm and throw her back on the bed. When I climb in next to her, I give her the water and get the remote. I intertwine our legs again and cover us with the down comforter. After pulling her close, I turn on the television and put on a late-night talk show. We don’t speak, but she rests her head on my shoulder, and I feel calmed by her presence.

“No panties allowed in my bed,” I say after a few minutes. She doesn’t argue or respond, but she removes the panties and throws them on the floor. I do the same with my boxers. When she cuddles to my side again, I kiss her forehead before turning my attention to the television.

I THINK THIS HAS BEEN THE BEST WEEK OF MY LIFE. I'VE gotten the hang of my position at Sutton Marketing. I'm planning this year's holiday party, but since the location and vendors are the same every year, it's easy work. Besides, Summer and Caleb are always around if I have questions.

I've spent almost every night this week working on Summer's wedding, and I've spent every night in David's bed. He hasn't made any comments about me not being allowed to sleep there anymore. He even holds me at night. Two of his rules out the window. Cuddling is something I never had before, and never thought about, but now I don't know how I can go without it. Especially next to a hard, strong man. Mitch, despite his healthy diet, didn't come close to David.

Mitch avoids carbs, red meat, and anything with gluten, but still has the body of a man twice his age. David eats like a man, and that's about the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

The dinner party David's mother threw on Wednesday was light and fun. His aunt showed me how to make a Martini and made me and Summer have a martini making competition. She said it was a tie and drank both drinks in a matter of minutes. Summer even had Olivia and Kevin there, who are also members of the wedding party.

It was nice to be around two families who were coming together to celebrate their kids' wedding. On paper, Summer's family and Max's have nothing in common. Her dad's a mechanic and her mom's a nurse. Max's mother has never worked a day in her life and comes from a life of comfort. She

chairs charities and lives in luxury, but the one thing they have in common is love for their kids. They want to come together and give them a perfect day.

I contrast that with mine and Mitch's. Mitch didn't give a shit about the wedding and was happy to let everyone else decide everything. At first, I tried to offer my opinion and realized no one cared. Since I didn't care either, I was fine to let my mother run the show. Mitch's mother never once asked me anything about myself. It was always how I could change to be more pleasing to her son. But I guess I can't blame her too much for that. She's probably been conditioned like that all her life. I'm lucky that I got out before it was too late for me, unlike her.

Today, we're going to an elite bridal shop to pick out dresses for the wedding party and the mothers of the bride. Max has informed everyone that he's paying for all our dresses and accessories. The bridal shop has also agreed to do the alterations for Summer's wedding dress. The dress was made by her grandmother, but with the short timetable, it's best to let professionals handle the changes.

While I look through the fridge, David comes in from his jog. He's in shorts and a black t-shirt that drapes over him just right. He grabs the back of my neck and kisses me hard on the lips. He doesn't deepen it, and the kiss ends sooner than I would have liked, but Caleb comes down the stairs.

"What's for breakfast?" David asks while he pours himself a cup of coffee.

"Well, I woke up with a craving for banana oat pancakes, but someone used all my oat milk." I stare at Caleb who just flashes me a guilty smile.

"That sounds good," is all he says. "I want some. Damn"

"Me too. I'll go run out and get some oat milk," David says. "I want eggs. And bacon. Some fruit would be nice too. I'm starving." He wiggles his brows at me. Yeah, he's starving. We were up until three o'clock in the morning feasting on each other.

“I’ll be back,” Caleb says. “Going for a quick run. Gotta keep this body in tiptop shape for when Justine comes crawling back.” He gets up and leaves, all the while never taking his eyes off his phone. When he’s out of sight, David wraps his arms around me and kisses the side of my neck. While an arm remains wrapped around my stomach, the other cups my pussy over my shorts. He squeezes it, and I bite my lip.

“Tonight, I want to put my dick down your throat. I love having your lips wrapped around me. I’m going to pull out and come all over those perky tits. Maybe your face,” he whispers. He bites the side of my neck and sucks. I let it go for too long before I realize what he’s doing. When I pull away, it’s too late. I already know there will be a mark.

“David,” I complain while I try to wipe away where he just sucked. “What the hell?” He chuckles and grabs my ass, but he lets go when he hears footsteps.

“I’m off,” Caleb says.

David gives my ass a subtle squeeze and walks out with Caleb.

While they’re gone, I pull out everything I’ll need to make breakfast. I only have a couple of hours to cook, get ready, and pick up Summer so we can go to the bridal shop.

Ten minutes later, I hear the doorbell ring. Assuming it’s David with the milk, I run to the front of the house and open the door without asking who it is. The smile on my face vanishes when I stare into Mitch’s cold eyes. He’s not alone. He’s brought reinforcements in the form of our mothers.

I go to slam the door shut and lock it, but he pushes his way inside, and our mothers follow behind him. I could run to the back of the house, out the door, and hop into my car. I could get out of here and meet David at the grocery store, but I don’t do any of that. I stand in the middle of the entryway, cross my arms and wait for them to spew whatever nonsense they came here to spew so I can get on with my day.

“Get your things and let’s go.” I guess my mother is reverting to form. “I didn’t raise you to live here with two men like a common whore.” She eyes my thin shorts and even thinner tank top. My nipples are still hard from David’s touch. My pussy’s still wet, but no need for them to know that.

“My son is a forgiving man, Delaney. That’s the only reason why we’re here.” Lois, Mitch’s mom says. Mitch crosses his arms but says nothing. There’s nothing in his eyes. There’s no anger or sadness. It’s just blank. It’s like I’m a possession he wants, not a human being that’s worthy of love.

“You’re trespassing,” is all I say. I leave them in the entryway and return to the kitchen. I can’t believe I ever let these three people control my life to the point that I almost married a man I loathe. I pour myself a small glass of orange juice and pray they leave, but I’m not that lucky.

“I mean it, Delaney. Let’s go,” my mother says. She pats her hand on the island and taps her foot as if she’s getting impatient.

“Go where?” I ask. I look around, doing my best to look contrite.

“I’ll take you home and we can talk. Like Lois said, Mitch is the forgiving type. We can figure out how to get you two back on track.” My mother looks over at Mitch’s mother and they both nod in agreement. It’s as if it’s already settled.

“Then what?” I ask.

“Then you work on your problems like adults and get married.” My mother lowers her voice and smiles at me for the first time since I ran from the church. “Look, no relationship is perfect. I admit, I should have listened when you told me you were having cold feet. We could have fixed it then.” She puts a hand on my shoulder and gives it a gentle squeeze. “I’ve had my issues with your father too, but we act like adults and fix them. We don’t run away.”

I nod slowly as if I’m taking my time to absorb her words of wisdom. She seems relieved, and she looks like my mother again. She’s smiling, and her eyes have softened.

“I see,” I say, lowering my head.

“This is unbecoming, Delaney,” Mitch’s mother says, looking around. She has a pinched look on her face as if this place is filled with lepers. “But no one else will need to know about this,” she whispers as if we’re girlfriends sharing secrets. “We all know you’re only staying as a guest, but what will everyone else think if they find out you’re here with two strange men? This arrangement you have going here stays with the four of us. Like I said, Mitch has a big heart. He’s already forgiven you for leaving the church, but there’s only so much he can take.” I check out Mitch. He will throw this in my face every single day of my life if I’m to walk out of here and pick up where we left off.

“How did you know I was here?” I ask softly. I look down at the floor as if I’m too ashamed to look into her eyes, but what I really want to know is if Damon sent her here.

“I hired an investigator, and he tracked you here. I was worried about my daughter.”

“I see,” I say. “You were really worried?”

“Of course, I was. You’re my daughter.”

“But Mother, I didn’t come to you with cold feet. I told you point blank that I didn’t want to marry Mitch. You refused to listen. You dismissed me and told me in no uncertain terms I was going to marry him. Those days leading up to the wedding, you wouldn’t let me out of your sight. I wanted Summer to spend the night with me at home, and you said no. You kept everyone who cared about me away. And Mrs. Owens,” I say, turning back to Mitch’s mother. The fake smile she had on her face has now been wiped away. “I want you to listen closely. I loathe your son. His touch makes my skin crawl.” All color leaves her face, and for a second I regret my harsh words. Then I remind myself that I need to be direct with these people. “I know you think the sun rises and sets with him, and I should be grateful that he wants to be with me, but I don’t feel that way. I don’t love him. I don’t like him. I hate him. In my eyes, he has no redeeming qualities. He’s arrogant, conceited, and smug. He thinks that being a doctor

makes him above everyone else. Maybe you should wipe the wool from your eyes and examine your own marriage and stop trying to force something between me and your son that will never happen. The very idea that you would think that I'd want or need Mitch's forgiveness is laughable. I ended things. I don't need forgiveness from him or you. The only thing I need from you three is to understand that I am done with him." I point a finger at Mitch without bothering to look in his direction.

She takes a step back as if my words hurt. She runs to Mitch, who puts an arm around her.

"She's just being dramatic, Mom," he says, trying to soothe her.

"Jesus, Mitch. Are you deaf? I just said that you repulse me, and you think I'm being dramatic? Aren't you always telling me what a catch you are? Why don't you have someone else already? What's in this for you because you're as indifferent to me as I am to you."

"Delaney, that's enough." The gentle tone my mother had earlier is gone and the anger returns. This, I can handle. "Get your shit and let's go. Better yet, leave all that here. I'm sure it's contaminated." My mother just cursed. That's beneath her. She's rattled now. She looks around the kitchen with her nose up in the air.

I'd laugh if this wasn't my life. This townhouse is high end and has the best of everything. Beyond that, David is old money. My family might be considered wealthy, but they don't come close to David's level and I doubt ever will.

"The only people who are leaving are the three of you." I ignore my mother and address Mitch, who still has his arms around his mother. "Why do you want to marry me? What's the real reason because it's not because you care about me."

He looks at my mother, who is standing there like a deer in headlights. Then he turns back to me and says, "I do care about you."

“Really? What’s my favorite color? What’s my favorite food? Tell me three places I want to visit. What’s my favorite movie?”

He scoffs and says, “Grow up.”

“You want me to grow up? What about you, Mrs. Owens? Do you want me to grow up too? I remember that list you gave me of Mitch’s favorite colors and food. You even gave me a list of subjects he likes to discuss. You told me I wear too much black and that Mitch prefers lighter colors.”

“I was only—”

“I’m a person too. Do you care about that?,” I ask, interrupting her. “I’m not marrying him. Leave me alone because this is pathetic and bordering on harassment.” I turn my back on them and wait for them to leave.

“Delaney, I don’t think you understand the consequences you will bring down on yourself,” my mother warns.

“Yeah? What more can you take from me? You stole my money. You’ve alienated me from my family. You’ve fired me from my job. You kicked me out of the condo. What more can you take? There’s nothing left. You’ve played all your cards, and you’re not taking my life too, which is what will happen if I marry him.” I point toward Mitch.

The words are barely out of my mouth when the front door opens, and I hear footsteps running through the house. David stands in the kitchen with a grocery bag in his hand. He looks around at his uninvited guests and slowly walks into the kitchen where he stands in front of me and looks down into my eyes. He surprises me when he cups my face and examines me as if he’s trying to read my mind.

“Are you okay?” he whispers only so I can hear. When I nod, he asks, “Did he lay a finger on you?” I shake my head, no, and he lets go of my face.

He turns to the three people in his room. I finally look at my mother again, and her eyes are open wide. She’s in a state of shock as she looks from me to David. My mother is no fool. She knows David is more to me than a landlord.

“You three, get the fuck out of my house before I lose my temper.” He says this as he walks to Mitch. He looks down at him and waits for him to speak.

“I’m here for my daughter,” my mother says quickly.

“Delaney,” David says without bothering to turn to look at me, “do you want to leave with these people?”

“I do not,” I say.

“You heard her,” he says to my mother. He then turns to Mitch and says, “And for the record, she doesn’t want to be with you in any capacity. She’s moved on.” Then he walks back to me and puts an arm around me. He pulls me to him and cradles the back of my neck, while his thumb gently rubs the skin. This is not a gesture of someone protecting someone else. It’s intimate. This is how a man puts an arm around his woman. “She’s with me.” If he wasn’t holding me, I would have fallen over at that declaration.

Mitch leaves his mother’s side and takes menacing steps toward us. David stands in front of me and meets Mitch head on.

“You’re fucking this bitch?” Mitch asks.

David doesn’t dignify him with a response, but he does take another step closer and gets in Mitch’s face. Mitch looks like a little boy standing in front of a grown man.

“You can have the whore,” Mitch says. “Delaney, you rancid bitch. Fuck you and your entire family. I’m done. This is the last straw.”

“Good. Finally,” is all I say.

“You fucking cunt,” Mitch begins. He tries to lunge at me, but David wraps a hand around his neck, stopping him. He does this while still holding me to him. From where I stand, it looks like he’s hardly exerting any effort at all, but Mitch starts to gasp for air.

“I can easily break your neck,” David says, his voice even. “You are here uninvited. You tried to attack my woman. I

doubt I would even get a slap on the wrist.” I can tell David starts to squeeze.

Mrs. Owens screams and runs to Mitch. She tries to pry David’s fingers from around Mitch’s neck but can’t. “Let him go!” She screams.

My mother joins her and tries to help, but neither one of them makes any impact. David finally lets him go, and Mitch stumbles back. His mother puts her arms around him, stopping him from falling over. He starts to gasp like a fish out of water. David looks at me and winks before he says, “Get out of my house before I really get mad.”

Mitch’s mother helps him out. He coughs and gasps for air the entire time while leaning on her for support. I’m not a violent person. I don’t even like violent movies, but seeing David easily handle Mitch is something I’ll never forget.

I hear the front door open right before they slam it. My mother attempts to walk to me, but David intercepts. “Don’t even think about it,” he threatens. “Your days of bullying my girlfriend are over. You want to bully someone? Bully me,” he whispers. “I’d love nothing more than to teach you a lesson.”

My mom puts her hands to her throat almost as if David’s words scare her.

“You’re going to let him talk to me this way, Delaney? I’m your mother,” she says.

“I’m your daughter, and you let Mitch call me a whore and a cunt,” I remind her. “Why are you here, Mother? I’m not going back to how things were.”

I KNEW SOMETHING WAS OFF. I CALLED HER TWICE FROM THE store to ask her what brand of oat milk and she didn't answer. She always has that damn phone in her hand. I had a sinking feeling that something was wrong, so I grabbed three different brands of oat milk, ran to the self-checkout, and got the hell out of there.

There were two new cars in my driveway, and I knew who one belonged to.

Even now as I stare into Lynn Lewis's cold eyes, I wish she'd do or say something, but she only stands there, staring from Delaney to me. She goes around me to her daughter. I don't block Delaney this time. I'm not worried about her mother being violent. She pushes Delaney's hair away and runs a finger along the hickey I left there earlier. That was unintentional. She just tastes so good, and I got carried away, but now I'm glad I left it there. I cross my arms and wait for her to spew her hatred.

"I didn't raise you like this." Delaney doesn't flinch at her mother's rebuke. In fact, she appears bored by it. "He's not the type of man you should consort with." She gives me the side eye. I hold back from telling her that her daughter and I have done a lot more than consort. "We come from a different set of society, and we don't deal with people outside our own social circle." She eyes me again. I have no idea what the hell she's talking about, but the sound of her voice is starting to irk me. I fight the urge to tell her to shut the fuck up.

“You also didn’t raise me to make my own decisions,” Delaney says. “This has nothing to do with you. I don’t need your permission or approval to be David’s girlfriend.” Our eyes catch for a minute, and she gives me a mischievous grin. I don’t regret my words. “I made the choice to be with him. That’s it.”

“That’s it?” she asks for clarification.

“I’m not going to repeat myself,” Delaney says.

“Okay. Just remember that actions have consequences,” she warns.

“You should remember that too,” Delaney responds.

Lynn eyes Delaney one more time before she turns her back and walks out of the kitchen. I go behind her and follow her out of the house.

“You know,” I say. She stills, but after a few seconds, she faces me, “I’m going to find out why you’re trying to sell your daughter into a marriage she doesn’t want.” Her eyes harden. “And when I do,” I say, taking one more step closer to her, “I’m going to bring all kinds of hell down on you. You can count on that.”

She stares into my eyes, and for a moment, I want to look away. Her eyes are a lot like Delaney’s, but I hold her stare until she breaks it and gets into her car. I stand in the driveway until she backs out onto my quiet street.

Delaney’s in the kitchen. She’s mixing something in a bowl, but I can tell from her stiff posture that she’s affected by what just happened. I stand behind her, and she freezes. I don’t know what possesses me, but I wrap my arms around her and bring her back to my chest.

“It will be okay,” I tell her. “It was only a matter of time before they tracked you down here, but we’ll get a restraining order if we have to. I know a lot of judges and—”

“David, it’s okay.” She puts down the bowl and faces me. “Thank you.” Her eyes glisten with unshed tears. “You have gone above and beyond for me, and I’m sorry about bringing this drama to your doorstep.”

“Don’t worry about that.” I pull her into my body and press her into me. I rest my chin on top of her head and hold her. She’s stiff in my arms at first, but she relaxes and wraps her arms around me. I hold her close. I stick my head in the crook of her neck and give her open mouth wet kisses.

“Don’t even think of marking the other side of my neck,” she warns, but her voice is light, almost playful.

“Sorry, not sorry.” To prove my point, I suck the base of her neck, but she pushes me away and steps out of my arms.

“You didn’t have to lie to them about us being together, you know.” She puts a skillet on the stove and turns on the burner. “This might be hard for you to believe since I live here, but I never intended to suck you into my drama.” She snuffles as she grabs a ladle and scoops big globs of pancake mix into the skillet. With her back turned to me, I wrap my arms around her waist for the second time this morning.

I press my sudden erection into her. “I’ll let you suck me in any time,” I say. “Let’s say, twelve hours from now.”

I hear the side door open and footsteps walking into the kitchen. I should jump away and pretend nothing is going on. I should run to the island and pretend to stare at my phone while she prepares breakfast, but despite her recent show of bravado, I know she’s upset about what just happened. So, I offer her solace. I kiss her shoulder and travel up to the side of her neck.

From the corner of my eye, Caleb opens the fridge and pulls out a bottle of water. He takes a seat and drinks it all without taking a breath.

“You’ll never guess what I just found out,” he asks as if seeing me and Delaney like this is an everyday event. “Justine changed her Facebook status to in a relationship. I clicked on the guy, and he’s some asshole.” He stands and shoves the phone in my face as if I don’t have a woman in my arm.

I look and shake my head. “Looks like she has a type, Caleb. The asshole looks a lot like you,” I tell him. He snatches the phone away and stares. His eyes widen with each passing second.

“Let me see,” Delaney says, and he puts it to her face.

“There’s a resemblance, but you’re much better looking,” she says. “That reddish facial hair you have makes you look like one of those guys in Outlander.”

Caleb stands up a little straighter at Delaney’s praise, and I do everything I can think of not to scoff, but I fail.

“You know what this means?” he asks. “She still wants me.” Delaney offers him a high five.

“She definitely does, but you’re too good for her, Caleb,” she tells him.

“Don’t encourage him,” I whisper in her ear.

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“So,” I SAY, WALKING INTO MY BROTHER’S OFFICE MIDDAY Wednesday. I stop short. His fiancée is sitting on his lap while he sits behind his desk. “Where are your hands? I can’t see your hands.”

They both stare at me. Summer holds both hands up, but Max gives me the middle finger with one hand. Summer stands, but he pulls her back and gives her a kiss that’s rather indecent for a Wednesday afternoon at work.

“I have to meet Delaney, Liv, and Kevin for lunch.” She bends down and picks up her shoes. “I’ll see you later.” She kisses Max’s cheek and starts to walk away.

“No kiss for me?” I tease. She comes back, kisses my cheek, and leaves.

My brother scowls at me, and I smile because I managed to irritate him.

“What do you want?” he asks.

“I was doing a deep dive into the Lewis family. There’s got to be a reason why Delaney’s family treats her like cattle. I thought maybe they’re broke and are trying to facilitate some kind of merger with Mitch’s family’s practice, but that’s not it. Turns out, they have way more money than I thought. Someone in that family is a wizard with investments. They are not lacking in money at all, and their medical practice is the least of it. They own tons of commercial real estate, shares in major corporations. They invest heavily in startups.”

Max waits for me to say more, but I plop myself down on the couch in his office.

“And?” he asks.

“That’s all I have so far about their business, but I had someone dig into their personal lives too. As snooty as her mother is, she comes from a lower middle class family and went to college on a scholarship. Her parents both worked for the US post office. Her husband’s father was a doctor, but his mother was a housewife. His family is originally from Pittsburgh, but he met Lynn in medical school.”

“Why do you care so much?” He stands and glares down at me. I close my eyes, but I know staring a hole through my skull. “I asked one thing of you, David. One fucking thing and you couldn’t even do that.” He sighs and when I open my eyes, he’s running his hand through his hair.

“I’m responsible for her,” is all I say.

“You’re not. You’re offering her a place to stay, but I know you’ve fucked her. Summer can barely look at you without blushing, and you’re not as subtle as you think. Neither one of you. She rubs against you every time she walks by, and you’re constantly grabbing her ass. Not to mention that hickey she had on her neck a few days ago. I asked you for one fucking favor,” he repeats. “One fucking thing. In case you’ve missed it, her entire life is a shit show right now. She doesn’t need you to toy with her too.”

I stand and sigh. I put my hands on my hips and lower my head. His words never bother me. I let them slide off my back because I own my life. I live it the way I want, and I don’t need permission or approval to do whatever the hell I want, but it’s always like this with Max. Other than the relationship I had with my ex-fiancée, he always sees me as a man whore. Someone unable to commit, unlike him. He didn’t even know his fiancée a year ago.

“I’m trying to help,” I say to him.

“By fucking her?”

“It’s mutual, Max. She needed someone. She needed comfort, and I’m a better option than some random stranger.” Just the thought makes me want to punch the wall.

He snorts as if my explanation is bullshit, but I stand my ground.

“She’s too damn young for you.” He shakes his head and takes his seat. He leans back and puts both hands on his face. “I should have just put her in a hotel until we got back, but I thought—” I cut him off before he can continue.

“She’s too *young* for me? Tell me that didn’t just come out of your mouth. You of all people.”

“She is,” he says, not backing down or acknowledging his hypocrisy.

“Yeah, eleven years is a big age gap, but how many years do you have on *your* fiancée? The one you met less than half a year ago, I might add.” When he remains quiet, I say, “Eighteen years, isn’t it? I might not be a math genius, but I’m sure eighteen is greater than eleven.”

He shakes his head at me as if I’m the one being unreasonable. “It’s not the same thing,” he says.

“It’s not the same thing,” I repeat. “That’s the hypocrite’s creed.”

“Summer is different. She’s mature.” I open my mouth to argue, but he holds his hand up. “Not to say that Delaney isn’t mature, but Summer was raised differently. Not only do her parents treat her like an adult, but they also respect her. They trust her judgment and support her from the sidelines. She didn’t come into this relationship with family baggage. All I’m saying is that Delaney is dealing with a lot, and she doesn’t need the David Sutton complication. Not to mention, she’s my wife’s best friend and not going anywhere. She’ll show up for events, and it will be awkward.”

“It’s not like that. It’s an arrangement. No one is going to get hurt. We agreed to just sex,” I tell him. I ignore the voice in my head that says that things have already gone beyond just sex. She sleeps in my bed. Not only that, but I hold her at

night. I haven't been with anyone else since we started, despite getting calls and texts from a different woman every day. I don't mention that I think of her when she's not with me, and just the idea of her being upset makes me want to punch someone even though I'm not a violent man.

“Just an arrangement, huh? Well, in that case, what can possibly go wrong?”

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I HAVE MY ARM WRAPPED AROUND SUMMER'S WHILE WE WALK back from lunch. Kevin and Olivia drove separately. It's the first time we've been alone since Saturday. Even now, the early October wind whips around us, sending a scattering of leaves flying around the parking lot. Our heels click against the concrete as we approach the office building.

It's been almost two weeks since I started. It's a short time, but it feels like years, in a good way. The wool has fallen from my eyes, and even though I have no place of my own and had to borrow thousands from my best friend, my life has never been better. I've never been free to do whatever I want and not worry about Mitch or how my parents would react.

I no longer have to be perfect Delaney, the girl willing to do anything to make others happy. I can simply be Delaney. The girl who works as a personal assistant slash office manager. The girl who is professional with her boss by day but turns into his wanton slut by night.

"Is that Jade?" Summer whispers. My head snaps up, and sure enough, it's my cousin. She's the only daughter of my mother's only sister. We're barely three months apart in age, but despite that, we've never been close. In fact, we can't stand each other. We never could. Not even when we were little. She was the one who would break my toys, only to go crying to her mother. She'd say I broke them on purpose so I wouldn't have to share with her. My dad would force me to apologize, despite me telling the truth. Even then he'd never listen to me.

We grew into teenagers who would ignore each other at family events. Events I'd be forced to attend. Jade is also the same girl who would steal my clothes and make fun of my body. Often telling me I was built like a pancake, flat on both sides.

I wasn't much better than her. I recorded her making out with our gardener's son and texted it to the entire family. When my mother insisted I have her in my wedding party, I made sure to tell Jade to her face that I didn't want her there. I refused to speak with her after that, and since my mother made all the decisions, I didn't have to. She stayed away, but she was always in the background looking on. Watching me and Mitch as if we were a puzzle she needed to put together. Maybe she wants to go after him now. She always wants everything I have, but I wouldn't wish him even on her.

She's leaning against the building door, looking down at her phone. She stands straight when she sees us and takes a step forward, but stops as if she's afraid to come any closer. I stop too, so stunned to see her here that I don't know what to do. I know it would only be a matter of time before more of my family figures out I work here, but the idea of sending Jade to talk me into taking Mitch back is laughable. Not even my mother would be delusional enough to send her.

I drop Summer's arm and cross mine. My eyes narrow at her, not trusting her for a second, but I refuse to cower to her or anyone else.

"Hey, Delaney," she says. She's impeccably dressed in gray dress pants and a light pink top. She finishes her outfit with a short, black leather jacket. Her big sunglasses sit at the top of her head. Despite all the shit she talked about my body, we're built almost the same, tall and thin.

"Whatever you're doing here, Jade, I'm not in the mood for it, okay. Have a good day." I walk past her, but she turns around and starts walking with me.

"Hold on. Please," she says. Her voice is gentle, not the haughty bitch I've known all my life. "Just give me a few minutes." She stands in front of the door and blocks us. "Hi,

Summer.” I don’t remember Jade ever once attempting to be nice to Summer. I figured she was like the rest of my family and thinks Summer is beneath her somehow.

“Jade,” Summer says. She inches closer to me. I wrap my arm around hers for protection.

Jade takes a deep breath, and says, “Can I talk to you for a few minutes? Please? I promise, I come in peace.” She raises both hands.

“What the hell do we have to talk about?”

“Just give me five minutes. Please.”

“Two minutes,” I tell her. “But if the first thing out of your mouth is how I should go back to Mitch, you can leave right now.” She opens her mouth to say something, but then she looks at Summer. “She stays. That’s not negotiable,” I tell her.

“I have no problems with Summer,” Jade quickly says. “Believe it or not, I have no problems with you either. And I would never, ever tell you to go back to Mitch. I don’t know how you could stand to be around him for more than thirty seconds.” Summer snorts, but Jade’s words make me feel unstable. She’s the first family member to ever say them. Those are the words I longed to hear from my brother and father. Jade is the last person I would expect to hear them from. “The guy’s an ass, and that’s the nicest word I can think of to describe him.”

I stare at her, unsure if I heard right. I blink three times, and still can’t seem to focus.

“What word do you really want to use to describe him?” I ask.

“Motherfucking asshole who probably couldn’t find a clit with a map.”

“That’s the smartest thing you’ve ever said,” I say to my cousin. I still don’t trust her, so I pull Summer along and say, “Goodbye.”

“Look, I know we’ve never gotten along, but think about it. Why is that?”

“Because you’re a bitch,” I say quickly. To my surprise, she laughs. I was expecting a lot of reactions, but laughter is not one.

“I own it, but you’re a bitch too.” I scoff and start to walk to the door. “Think about it, Delaney. Our moms pit us against each other. We were never given a chance to just be. It was always a case of one-upmanship with them, and when they had daughters, it continued with us.” She continues to block the door. “I’m sorry for being a bitch. I’m here to offer you friendship now. Some support.”

I think of all the people I have in my life now. Not just Summer, but Max, Caleb, and David. Especially David. “I’m good, but thanks. Move.”

“Come on, Delaney. Let me take you out to dinner tonight. I promise I come in good faith. Please.” She pulls out a business card from her purse and scribbles something on the back. “Here’s my cell.”

I don’t take the card from her. I open my mouth to tell her to go away, but the front doors burst open, and Max and David walk out. I know they have a meeting off site today. Max goes to Summer and pulls her away from me into a hug. David looks from me to Jade and narrows his eyes as he steps between us.

“Who are you?” he asks her. He’s blocking her from my view.

“I’m Jade Thornton, Delaney’s cousin. Our mothers are sisters.” She offers David her hand, but he doesn’t take it.

“You have five seconds to get out of here before I call security,” David says. “I’ve met Delaney’s family, and all of you are a bunch of vipers.” Max arches his eyebrows and stares at his brother.

Jade steps to the side and catches my eye. She tilts her head to the side and arches an eyebrow. She also gives me what I think is a nod of approval. She doesn’t try to engage David in conversation again. She turns to Max instead.

“I’m Jade,” she says to him. Unlike David, Max takes her hand and shakes it. “You look like you might be a little friendlier than him.” Summer chuckles at that.

“I bet this is the first time you’ve ever been called friendly,” Summer whispers.

“Maxwell Sutton,” he says to Jade.

“My fiancé,” Summer adds.

“You think he looks friendly?” David asks Jade, while pointing a finger at Max. “Him? Are you serious?” David shakes his head in disbelief.

“Well done, Summer,” Jade says, eyeing Max up and down. She has a gleam of appreciation in her eyes. “Look, everyone, I come in peace.” She gives David the side eye. “I only want Delaney to know she has one member of the family on her side. That’s it. I’m here on my own.”

“How did you know to find me here?” I ask her.

“I heard my mother on the phone with yours. As competitive as they are with each other and us, they still tell each other everything.”

“Wow, Jade, is it? That’s quite a story. It really warms my heart that your dysfunctional family shares tales of their dysfunction with each other,” David says without bothering to look in Jade’s direction. “Delaney, can I talk to you for a minute?” David takes my elbow and walks me inside the building. He takes me behind a pillar, shielding us from the outside. “Are you out of your god damn mind? That Jade or whatever her name is has snake written all over her.” He pulls out his phone and says, “I’m calling security before I go out there and physically put her back in her car.”

I take the phone from him. “I’m not entertaining anything. And you need to leave now so you won’t be late.” They’re pitching for a new account, and from what I hear, it could be a big one.

“You’re right but tell her to get lost before I do it. I won’t be nice about it.” He leans close and gives me a quick kiss. “You smell good.”

I smile into his eyes and kiss him back. “So do you.” I grab his collar and tilt my head for another kiss.

I want to take his hand and walk outside, but I don’t. That’s not our deal. He follows behind me, and Jade is still there, talking to Summer and Max.

“We’ve got to go, David,” Max says, checking his watch. He bends down and whispers something in Summer’s ear before kissing her soundly. “Come on. I’ll drive.”

Once the guys leave, Jade clears her throat to get my attention. She hands me the card again, and I finally take it. “I have to get back to work,” she says. “But I mean it. Have dinner with me and let’s clear the air. All that petty, childish stuff is stupid, Delaney. It’s a mess, but it’s our mothers’ mess, not ours. We were never given a chance to be friends. I’m happy you didn’t marry Mitch. I’m proud of you for standing up for yourself because I know that couldn’t have been easy. Trust me, I understand. My mother is not all that different from yours, but my father has always been there for me. I’d love to get to know you, and I hope to hear from you soon.” She gently taps my shoulder, and I don’t flinch. I think the last time she touched me was when we were fifteen and we got into a fistfight. I don’t remember why, but I remember the sense of satisfaction I had when I punched her in the eye. “It’s good to see you, Summer. Congratulations on getting engaged.” She walks away, gliding through the parking lot like a long-legged gazelle. She’s always been so beautiful and graceful. When I had acne as a teenager, her skin was flawless.

“She’s up to something,” I say to Summer. I watch until she drives out of the parking lot.

“Maybe not,” she says. “I know your history with her. It took guts for her to come here, and she sounds sincere.” I wrap my arm around Summer’s, and we walk back to the elevator.

“Maybe, but I’m so over my family right now.” We return to the eighth floor and Summer goes to her department. She’s a new analyst, and now that she’s done training me, she’s sitting with her own mentor.

I have the entire afternoon to work on this year's holiday party and to think about the scene with Jade. She's right about one thing. I don't think our mothers ever intended for us to have a good relationship. They pitted us against each other. When I was breaking out as a fourteen-year-old, my mom seemed to be disappointed that Jade was prettier than I was. Our grades were compared as well as our schools and circles of friends. When I was sixteen and got my first car, Jade's mom got her the same one. It was always a cycle of comparison that whenever one of us seemed to be on top, the other would seethe with resentment.

I pull out her business card and look at it. Jade's mother wanted her to go to medical school too, but Jade forged her own path and works as a party planner. She started her own business. Unlike me, Jade has always been close to her father, and as we got older, I saw less and less of her. I wonder now if her father kept her away to protect her from our toxic family.

I think about my own father and how he never did a thing to protect me, and resentment tries to rise, but I stuff it down. It doesn't matter now. Resentment is not going to change the past, and that's all that is. It's the past.

I eye Jade's card, and I eye the trash can. I can rip it to shreds and never think of her again, but my interest is piqued. Our relationship, or lack thereof, is not of our own making. Jade is right about that. It's a direct result of the toxic relationship between our own mothers. Instead of burying it, they've kept it alive through their daughters. The last thing I want to do is give my mother power over any of the relationships in my life.

I'm still skeptical, but at this point, what the hell do I have to lose? I have a roof over my head because of the generosity of someone who was a stranger to me weeks ago. My best friend and her fiancé have become my family, and Caleb has become my friend. I've even made work friends, another first. No one at my mother's practice extended me anything beyond professional courtesy. I was the boss's daughter, and no one dared get close.

Best of all, Mitch is out of my life, and as dramatic and painful as all of that has been, I don't think I would change a thing. Before I talk myself out of it, I pick up my office phone and dial her cell phone number.

"Hello?" she says. She lowers the radio, but I don't speak. I just sit there, unsure of what to say to my cousin.

"Delaney?" she asks. "I know that's you. You've always been a loud breather." I open my mouth to respond to her criticism, but she speaks first. "Oh my God, that was a joke."

"It's me," I finally say. "I'm just calling to tell you that if you're up to something—"

"I'm not up to anything! I want to have a relationship with my only female cousin who is my age. That's all. We're adults, Delaney. We can decide what our relationship will look like. Maybe we'll decide we really hate each other and go our separate ways, but it will be based on us, not our mothers' toxicity. Come on."

I let out a breath and sit back in my chair. She's one hundred percent correct.

"You're right," I finally concede. "And if you're not up to anything, I guess it took guts to show up here today."

"Yeah, especially since that David Sutton was ready to rip my head off." I don't know if she's fishing, but I ignore the comment about David.

"If you meant it about having dinner, we can meet up sometime this week. Maybe Friday." David has a meeting in the afternoon in New Hampshire, and he won't be home until late that night. I don't plan on telling him about this dinner until after the fact.

"I mean it. How about tonight?"

"No. I have wedding stuff for Summer tonight and tomorrow. Friday is the only day that will work for me this week. We can do it next week if that doesn't work for you." It's sad, but I have no idea if she's in a relationship. I don't think I've said more than five words to her in the past year, despite seeing her because of the wedding.

“I can make Friday work. Are you going to give me your cell phone? I’m pretty sure this is your office phone. I went to Damon for your number, and he doesn’t have it.”

This is the test. If she gives my number to anyone in my immediate family, I’ll know she’s full of shit. I’ve had this number for only a few weeks, and I can easily change it.

“Fine. I’ll send you a text. I hope I don’t need to remind you that I don’t want anyone else in our family to have it.”

“Of course, and I’m glad you’re trusting me with it. I promise you won’t regret it, okay?”

“I better not. You’re paying for dinner, by the way.”

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“WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?” I ASK MY BROTHER THE instant we get back into his car. He slides into the driver’s seat and sighs. “They were on some serious bullshit. I don’t know why they agreed to this meeting because it’s obvious to me that they’re not going to hire us.”

I start the car and pull out of the parking lot. I raise my left hand and give the building behind me the middle finger.

“Mature,” Max says. “I got the same impression.”

We don’t get every account, but there was something odd about the way this small business interacted with us. Small, local businesses are our specialty. We build on the fact that we were once a small, local business too.

This chain of convenience stores in Rhode Island initially contacted me for a marketing strategy, but once we arrived today, it’s like they were back peddling. This is the second time this has happened in two weeks. Companies normally seek us out, and once we have a meeting, it’s almost guaranteed we’ll be drawing up a contract.

“We wouldn’t even need these fuckers if things didn’t go to shit in Silicon Valley.” Max gives me a death glare, but I ignore him. He doesn’t scare me. Silicon Valley wasn’t his fault, but if we had gotten the contract with the software company there, we could have stopped chasing new business for a while.

Since Celia went to college with the owner of the business, we lost the account when we fired her.

“Don’t bring up Silicon Valley ever again,” Max warns. “I’m still pissed off about it.”

“Have you heard from Celia?” I ask him.

“Why the hell would I hear from her?” he practically yells in the car. “Has she contacted you again?”

“She sent a text yesterday asking to meet with me,” I tell him. “I haven’t replied, and I don’t plan to. I think we’ve said all there is to say, but Mom said Celia’s parents won’t talk to her anymore.”

“Good riddance,” Max says. “Their daughter is a menace, and our mother is better off. What has that family ever done for us, and who the hell is Celia to demand anything?”

He’s not wrong, but her parents are old friends of our parents. After our dad died, they were a great support to us and our mother. I hold my tongue and don’t tell Max that our mother approached me about the idea of inviting them to Max’s wedding as an olive branch.

After I laughed for a full five minutes, I told her that was the worst idea she’s ever had.

“What?” he asks. “You’re keeping something from me.”

He’s six years older, and once upon a time, I followed him around and worshipped the ground he walked on. He never told me to get lost. He took me everywhere and taught me everything. Whenever I got into trouble, I’d go to him first, and he would always defend me to our parents. The downside is that he knows me more than anyone else on earth.

“Mom was thinking about inviting Celia’s parents to your wedding.” From the corner of my eye, I see all color drain from his face. If they’re invited, they will bring their daughter. “Don’t worry, I told her it was the worst idea she’s ever had. I got your back.”

“I’ll be sure to reinforce that later. It’s ridiculous that she would even have that thought.”

“She thinks it will be an olive branch. I told her she was nuts, and Aunt Minnie backed me up. Don’t worry about it.”

We remain quiet while he drives us back to the office, but I can't help thinking that there's something going on in the background that I don't know about. My instincts won't let me rest. Whatever it is, I'm going to figure it out.

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IT'S NOT UNTIL SEVEN O'CLOCK ON FRIDAY NIGHT THAT I walk through the front doors of a local sports bar a few miles from David's house. Between work, Summer's wedding, and my nights of passion, it's been a long week, and I'm looking forward to sitting down for a few drinks.

Jade is talking to the hostess when I walk in, but as soon as she sees me, she gestures for me to follow them to the back of the restaurant. We're seated in a secluded booth, and as loud as the place is, I'm happy we're in a quiet little corner.

Our waiter, a handsome man about our age, takes our drink orders. We both order a Long Island iced tea. When he leaves, I stare at Jade, not sure of what to say. We've never wanted to be around each other, and we've never sought each other out. But it's been a few days since I saw her, and true to her word, no one from my family has called my cell.

"So, how's work?" I ask. "How's the party planning business?" Our drinks are delivered.

"Forget about my job. How are you really doing?" she asks.

I take a long sip of my drink, and I wish the alcohol would hurry up and hit my bloodstream. Jade surprises me when she reaches across the table and lays a hand on mine. My first instinct is to push it away, but I don't do that. I cover it with my other hand, and for the first time ever, I really look at my cousin.

“It hasn’t been easy, Jade.” I let out a deep breath and unload on her. I tell her everything that’s happened since I left the church. I tell her every attempt my family has made to force me back to Mitch, including Damon’s betrayal, which I don’t think I’ll ever get over.

“Wow,” Jade says several minutes later. I think I’ve managed to shock her with everything I’ve said because she has her mouth wide open. “Your mom is giving my mother the watered-down version. She says you ran off because you got nervous, and you’ve refused all her attempts to talk to you. She says it’s teenage rebellion years too late.”

I shake my head at my mother’s lies, but Jade speaks before I can respond. “I believe every word you’ve said to me. Listen, I know my opinion doesn’t count for much, but you did the right thing. The only reason my mom doesn’t treat me like yours does is because my father won’t stand for it. I know your dad’s not like mine, but you have people on your side. For what it’s worth, you have me now.” She moves her hand off mine, but this time, she reaches across the table and extends a hand. She waits for me to take it, and after several beats, I do.

Jade will never replace Summer, but I’ve known her my entire life. She knows the inner workings of our family. She understands things I will never have to explain.

“Thanks, Jade,” I say. The waiter returns and we order some appetizers to share, and several minutes later, the first two are delivered.

As we’re sharing chips and guac, I see a very angry David Sutton walking to our booth. He slides in next to me without an invitation. I haven’t seen him since this morning, and I realize that I’ve missed him. He’s still wearing the same clothes, which is odd because David always changes out of his work clothes when he gets home. And I know he was on his way home because I talked to him less than two hours ago.

He smells great sitting next to me, and instead of asking him what he’s doing here, I kiss his cheek and feed him a chip. It doesn’t mollify him. He’s still seething next to me.

“What the hell is this, Delaney? You didn’t tell me you were meeting her.” He points at Jade, and instead of being offended, Jade picks up her drink and takes a long sip.

“The name is Jade,” she reminds him. “It’s nice to see you again, David.”

He ignores her and says, “Let’s go.” He slides out of the booth and offers me his hand. “And you,” he says, pointing to her. “I’d trust a snake not to bite me before I’d trust a single member of Delaney’s family.”

We’re given a reprieve when the waiter brings more food. “David, Jade and I are reconnecting. There’s nothing anyone in my family can do to me anymore.”

He looks from her to me, but he doesn’t leave. He slides back into the booth and grabs one of the menus on the table. “Fine, but I’m staying.”



IT’S OVER AN HOUR LATER THAT WE LEAVE THE RESTAURANT. Even now, he’s following closely behind me while I turn into his driveway. He stayed with me the entire time. He didn’t interrupt our conversation, but I know he was taking mental notes of everything Jade said. As soon as the waiter brought out the check, he snatched it from Jade and handed over his credit card.

Once in the driveway, I wait for him to reverse out, so I can get out and let him in to park in the garage, but when he opens the garage door he honks and gestures for me to go in instead. I do, and a few minutes later, we step inside the kitchen. I’m ready to go off on him and remind him that I’m a grown woman capable of making my own damn decisions, but he doesn’t give me a chance. He pulls me into his arms and shuts me up with a kiss. He lifts me off my feet, and when I wrap my legs around him, he puts me on the kitchen island. He breaks the kiss, cups my face, and looks into my eyes. He doesn’t speak, but I think he’s examining me to make sure I’m okay. He looks away from my eyes and looks down at my

body. He pats me down as if he's ensuring that I'm not hurt. I sit there and let him do it. I don't know the last time a man took care of me like this. Probably never.

"I haven't seen you since this morning," he whispers. He cradles my face and looks into my eyes. "And I come home, and you're not here." He gives me a gentle kiss on my lips. He pulls away and does it again.

"I missed you too," I tell him. I wait for him to deny it and remind me that this is not what this is, but he puts his forehead on mine, and I've never felt closer to a human being.

He starts to unbutton my blouse, but I grab his hands. "Take me upstairs." He lifts me off the counter and carries me right to his bedroom. When he finally puts me down, instead of climbing into bed with him, I take his hand and lead him into the bathroom. He stands there while I turn the faucet on in the clawfoot tub. I find bubble bath and add it to the hot water. He leaves and returns moments later with three candles. He lights them, dims the lights, and helps me undress. After he helps me in the tub, he strips himself of his own clothes and slides in the tub behind me. I position myself between his legs and sigh when he puts his arms around me.

He kisses the side of my neck and nips my ear.

"All day long, I've thought of nothing but sinking into you, but this is nice too. I'm still going to fuck you for hours when we're done here. And since tomorrow is Saturday, we're going to sleep in."

"Does this mean you had a good day away from the office today?"

"I did not, but I don't want to talk about work again until Monday. All I want right now is Delaney." I turn around and sit on his thighs. I wrap my legs around him and he pulls me closer. He's rock hard, and I can easily let him slide into me, but I want a different type of intimacy in the tub. I grab a washcloth, wet and lather it before I run it across his expansive chest. He closes his eyes, leans his head back, and exhales. I've been here for weeks and David has always taken care of me, but other than making breakfast a few times, I realize that

I haven't been taking care of him. He needs that just as much as I do.

He leaves his eyes closed while I wash him, and every few seconds he sighs. It's during our time in the bath that I figure out he's ticklish. He giggles uncontrollably when I wash down his sides. He has to take the washcloth from me and do it himself. He tries to return the favor and wash me, but I don't let him. I wash myself, and his eyes follow my movements. They darken when the washcloth dips below the water and I wash between my legs. He bites his bottom lip, and I swear I hear him moan.

We finally leave the tepid water, and I dry him and wrap a plush white towel around his trim waist. I do the same with myself and follow him to the bedroom. He takes over the instant I walk over the threshold. He takes my towel off and cups both my breasts. I tilt my face up, and he runs his nose along my cheeks, inhaling me in. I hear a grumble in his chest before he captures my mouth in a kiss. This kiss is different than the others we've shared. Those were desperate and hungry. This is slow and sensual and tentative. He lifts me and I wrap my naked legs around him as he walks us back to the bed with his mouth still tenderly caressing mine.

He gently lowers me to the bed, and I open my legs for him. He takes his time, kissing his way down my body. I'm completely soaked by the time he makes it to my secret place. The place that only he's been able to awaken. He kisses my pussy, leaving gentle pecks on the skin before he spreads me apart and feasts on me.

He takes me to the brink over and over again until he finally lets me fall over and crash. I call out his name while I stroke his soft hair, but he's not done with me yet. I hope we're only just beginning. He puts his heavy body on top of mine, and I feel as if I've finally found my other half. I've just become whole, and something inside of me shifts.

He slowly enters me, sinking into me inch by inch until he's all the way in, filling me to the hilt.

“David,” I moan. My hands slide down his damp back and I run my fingernails over his ass.

“David what?” he teases. He’s yet to move, and as good as he feels I need to feel him thrust inside of me. He kisses my cheeks and the side of my neck before he takes my mouth again. “David what?” he repeats.

“I want you to fuck me,” I manage to moan.

“Not tonight. Tonight’s not about fucking.” He finally starts to move, but the rapid claiming thrusts I’m used to aren’t here tonight. Tonight, he moves slowly, giving me something I never had before. Something I never thought I’d find, at least not with him. Not with the agreement that we’ve made.

Tonight, David Sutton makes sweet love to me. The orgasm doesn’t sneak up on me like the others. This one is a slow build. I feel it travel from the tips of my toes and up my body. It’s more than physical. It’s more than emotional. It’s spiritual, and when I crash, I feel all the air get sucked from my lungs. I want to moan his name, but I can’t utter a single word. I close my eyes and feel myself float out of my body.

He comes too, but it’s not with the usual erratic shudder. This is slow, as if my body is pulling his into mine, meshing our souls forever.

“Del—” My name gets cut off. Just like me, he’s lost his ability to speak. He shudders more, and it feels like our orgasm is endless. He fills me, and I feel our release dripping down my thighs and onto the bed. He stays on top of me while breath returns to our bodies. I glide my fingertips down his taut back to the top of his ass.

He rolls off me but pulls me to his side like he has all week. Pumpkin comes walking out of the closet and jumps on the bed to lay at our feet.

I tell myself not to dwell in this. The most perfect moment of my life. I remind myself this is temporary and won’t always be this way, but for now, I will enjoy every last second of it. I’ll deal with the aftermath when the time comes.

I'M NOT GOING TO THINK ABOUT IT. I'M NOT GOING TO RELIVE how I broke the speed limits to get home after my disastrous meeting in New Hampshire. I'm going to shove down the feeling of disappointment that hit the instant I didn't see her car parked in my driveway. I will deny the panic I felt when a very unsettling thought occurred to me. I imagined her somewhere with a man she met on one of those stupid dating apps. My heart dropped when her location said she was at a sports bar. Max was the first person I called, and when I heard Summer laughing in the background, I knew she wasn't with Delaney. That led to me breaking more speed limits, and despite my initial reaction of seeing her with a member of her family, I also felt immense relief.

Now, she's here in my kitchen with my arms wrapped around her waist. My bare chest is on her back, and I'm barely giving her space to cook breakfast. She giggles when I bite the side of her neck. We only made love once last night before we both fell into a deep sleep. I don't remember the last time I slept so peacefully. I leave the side of her neck only long enough to sip the cappuccino she made for me. I put my mug to her lips and she sips it. It leaves behind a foam mustache, and I turn her around long enough for me to suck her upper lip into mine.

"I don't like my women with mustaches. I'm fine with leg hair, but not on the upper lip." She tries to push me away, but I wrap my arms around her and press my body into hers. "Hurry up. I'm hungry."

She soon plates our breakfast. Three plates instead of two. I roll my eyes when she goes and gets Caleb.

“Guys, I’ve made a decision,” Caleb says while attacking his breakfast. He barely looks up at us, so I put my hand on Delaney’s lap. When she rests hers on top of mine, I intertwine our fingers. She smiles and picks up her fork. Neither one of us replies to Caleb. He’s going to tell us his decision whether we ask him about it or not. “I think it’s time I move on from Justine.”

Delaney squeezes my hand when I snort. Like Caleb has a choice.

“I think that’s a good idea, Caleb,” she says.



I’M ON MY THIRD MIMOSA BY THE TIME THE WEDDING planner, Nicole, pulls out her iPad and starts going through a list. She gave me the eye the moment I walked inside Max’s house. Ordinarily, it would have been a done deal. I’d give her my number, and we’d meet for a hook up that could last anywhere from a day to a couple of months. Nicole is looking at me now and trying to seductively bite her bottom lip. I look across from her, and Delaney is watching me. She looks over and looks at Nicole and back to me. Her smile dips and I feel the little bubble we were in burst. She looks away, and I feel dismissed.

“Let’s go down a checklist,” my mom says to the room. A few minutes later, it’s confirmed that everything for the wedding has been decided.

“Okay, now that the boring stuff is done, let’s talk about Max’s bachelor party,” I say to the group.

Aunt Minnie raises her martini glass and says, “Didn’t he have one for his last wedding?” The room goes quiet, but my aunt is oblivious.

“Uh, let’s just pretend that never happened,” I say.

“Let’s. Your last wife was a bitch,” our aunt says.

“I’m still not over her calling me self-absorbed,” Caleb throws in.

“Yeah, the very idea,” I say, tapping Caleb on the shoulder. “But let’s move on. I’m planning it, so it’s going to be epic.” I turn the conversation away from Max’s disaster of a first marriage. “And Maxi Pad, it’s going to be overnight, so start saying goodbye to Breeze now.”

While everyone talks at once, I catch Delaney’s eye, but she looks away and walks into the kitchen. She gives Nicole the side eye on her way. While I follow her, Nicole nearly collides with me. She smiles and closes the little bit of space between us. Delaney must sense something because she turns around just as Nicole wipes a non-existent piece of lint off my shirt.

“I’m wondering if you have any questions about this wedding I can answer for you,” she whispers. She inches closer, but I step around her and jog to Delaney. I get a hold of myself and slow down to a walk. I’m not my brother. I’m not going to chase after a woman like a lost puppy. She eyes me up and down when I get to her. Then she gives me her back and pretends to be busy looking at her phone.

Something inside of me snaps when I see her looking at her Tinder app. I snatch the phone from her and quickly delete it. I search through the screen to see if she has any other dating apps, but she doesn’t.

“What the hell, David?” she whispers when she takes the phone back from me.

I take her elbow and pull her into the walk-in pantry. Before I step inside, I look around and Max is watching us. He shakes his head and walks away.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I take the phone from her and close the app store she has opened.

“What the hell am I doing? What the hell are *you* doing with Nicole the wedding planning whore?”

This would be a deal breaker with another woman. Bouts of jealousy are a no. Jealousy is a sign you want more than

what I can offer, and I don't do more.

"I'm not interested in her." I put my hands on her shoulders.

"Really? I couldn't tell with all the lip biting she was doing while undressing you with her eyes. She rubbed her thighs together so many times, I thought she was going to start a fire between her legs." She gives me her back, and I turn her around to face me.

"So, you start looking at Tinder? Bullshit. And don't you fucking download that app again. I mean it," I warn.

"Don't tell me what to do," she hisses. "I'll do whatever the hell I want."

I look down at her. She's in a short skirt. Her long legs are bare until you get to her ankle boots. She's sexy as sin, but there's so much more. She's beautiful, smart and has so much passion. Any man with half a brain cell would hold on to her and never let go.

"Is that really what you think?" Images of us in the tub and my bed flash through my mind, and I picture her doing the same with a faceless man. No. Not going to happen. I grab her hips and pull her to me. I cup her face and give her a kiss that steals her breath. While my lips ravage hers, my hands slide underneath her skirt, and I rip her panties apart. Her gasp is swallowed by my kiss.

"Shh. Everyone's outside that door." I put my finger to her lips. Her breath comes out in short pants, so I spin her around and bend her over. She grabs onto a shelf for support, but in no time at all, I've unzipped my pants and taken my dick out. I know she's wet for me. I can tell by the tightening of her nipples and her rapid breathing. I've come to know her body like I know my own.

I rub my tip at her entrance, and I'm proven right. She's soaked. I slide right in. I take her rough and fast. She can't stop moaning, so I stick two fingers in her mouth. She sucks on them greedily. It doesn't take long for her to show signs that she's about to come. I cover her mouth with my hand to

drown out her noises. She never comes quietly, and I don't want anyone to hear what's only meant for my ears.

She shakes violently, and I explode inside her tight, wet pussy. I pump every last drop in her before I let her go. She stumbles like a newborn deer but manages to find her footing. I take her torn panties, sniff them, and put them in my pants pocket. I pull her close and put a hand between her legs. Her pussy is dripping with our release. I run my fingers through it and put them in her mouth. She takes my fingers all the way to the back of her throat and spits them out clean.

“I'm not interested in Nicole or anyone else. And you're going back out there with my cum swimming inside of you. Tell me something, who's the only man who has made you come?” I cup her face and force her to look into my eyes. “Tell me.”

“You, David. Only you,” she moans.

I kiss her deep. “And that's exactly how it's going to stay.”

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“So,” I WHISPER TO SUMMER EVEN THOUGH WE’RE THE ONLY ones in Max’s office, “he bent me over, ripped my panties, and fucked me into a blinding orgasm.”

Summer’s eyes widen. “In our pantry, Delaney?” she admonishes. “You couldn’t have gone upstairs in one of the spare bedrooms?”

I put my finger to my lips and tell her to shh. “Don’t worry. We didn’t damage your canned goods. He was all growly and possessive because he caught me looking at the Tinder app. I told him not to tell me what to do, and you know what he did?” I whisper.

She leans toward me on the couch and asks, “What?”

It’s taken me four days to tell my best friend. She’s been busy with the wedding, and we haven’t been alone in almost a week, despite working together now. I decide I’m going to tease her.

“What do you think he did? You two are almost family now.”

“Okay. Let me think. Had that been Max and he saw me on Tinder, he’d probably take my phone and run it over with his car.” She rolls her eyes at the thought, but she smiles fondly. “And he’d probably say something ridiculous like, ‘I’ll find that guy and kill him.’” She bursts into giggles at that.

“He deleted the app.” Summer puts both hands to her cheeks.

“Really?”

“He told me that he’s the only man who will give me an orgasm. And boy, does he deliver.” I jump off the couch and start to gyrate my hips. “I’m going to turn into Cardi B and start rapping about my pussy.” We both burst into laughter before I say, “I wanna gag, I wanna choke—” She holds her hands up. “I don’t know the rest, but you get my meaning. Something about that dangly thing in the back of my throat.” I sigh and sit back down. “I’m so happy. Who knew my family was so toxic?”

Judging from the slight arching of her eyebrow, I’m guessing she’s known for a while now. She’d never say it though.

“Are you this happy because of David?” Her voice drops when she asks the question.

Is it because of David? The sex is incredible, and the man is delicious. He enhances how I feel, but he’s not the cause. I’m happy because I found the courage to say no to a life that everyone else planned for me. I’m happy because I have friends who helped me land on my feet by finding me a place to stay and by offering me a job. I’ve found acceptance and a no judgment zone. David is extra. David is gravy. Or better yet, he’s a decadent piece of cake after a delicious meal.

“He doesn’t hurt my happiness, James,” I whisper, but there are doubts in the back of my mind. “But don’t worry. My heart is not an option for anyone at the moment. I’m all about exploring my sexuality and living my best life. A boyfriend doesn’t fit right now, but I’m going to have fun along the way.

Summer leaves the desk and comes and sits next to me. “Be careful, Delaney. Sometimes, we can’t help our feelings, and I love David a lot, but he’s not known for being the monogamous type. I know you two have a deal, but—”

Her words are cut off when Max and David walk in. They had a call in one of the small conference rooms, and whatever happened there was not good news. Max slams the door behind him and practically stomps across the room. David runs both hands through his hair and groans.

“Everything okay?” Summer asks.

Max extends his hand to her, and she takes it.

“Not really, but I’m going to find out why the hell we keep losing employees and potential new accounts. This is uncharted territory, and I don’t fucking like it.” David grabs a paperclip from the desk and throws it across the room. The only times I’ve seen David kind of upset was when my mother, Mitch, and Mitch’s mom crashed his place, and that was more annoyance than anything.

“Should we be worried?” Summer asks. She eyes me when she poses that question. She’s really asking if my job is safe. She knows she’ll be alright no matter what, but she’s really worried about me.

“Of course not,” David says. I check my watch and stand up, determined to do a good job. When I walk past him, he snatches my wrist and I stop mid-step. Our eyes collide and some of the anger disappears. “Your job is safe he whispers.” He looks like he wants to say something else. His mouth opens, and whatever was going to come out gets stuck. I nod and walk out. The office door opens a few seconds later, and Summer comes out too.

We walk together in silence and when we get to Olivia’s desk, she waves us over. The phone is still attached to her ear, and she says, “Thank you. I will get back to you on that.” Whoever is on the other line keeps talking. Olivia closes her eyes and puts a hand to her forehead. “I will definitely give it some thought.” She ends the call and bangs her head on the desk. She finally looks up, looks around the deserted office and leans closer to us. “Meet me in the ladies’ room. Right now.” She gets up without another word, and we follow her.

Once we’re all in there, she checks under all the stalls to make sure they are empty. Once she’s satisfied, she whispers, “That was Celia on the phone.” She puts a finger to her lips as if we’re not the only ones here.

“Celia? The one who wanted Max?” I ask.

“The one and the same.” Olivia takes a deep breath as if she’s weighing her next words. “She got a job at McCallister and Sloane, did you know that?” I shrug, having no clue what she’s talking about.

“I haven’t so much as heard her name since she was fired,” Summer says. I’m sure that’s how she wants it. When a woman tries to fuck your man, you don’t exactly want to discuss her once she’s gone. “What did she want?”

Olivia looks around again. Once she’s certain the coast is clear, she whispers, “She offered me a job. Said that they will value me there unlike here because I’ve been stuck in receptionist desk purgatory since I got here.” The girl eyes the bathroom one more time and lowers her voice when she says, “I think she’s the one who’s been poaching our employees. She bragged about getting the accounts that David and Max were after, and she said she’s going to call Kevin next.”

David has mentioned his frustration about a few people quitting out of the blue.

“How many freaking people are they hiring over there? Fucking bitch,” Summers says. “Don’t tell me you’re going to quit, Liv.”

“No, of course not, even though the money is good.” She sighs as if she’s conflicted. “I just don’t know what to do with this information.” She bites her thumbnail.

“Are you kidding me? You’re telling David and Max right now.” Summer takes Olivia’s hand, and I follow them out of the bathroom. David’s at the reception desk when we arrive.

“Olivia has something to say to you and Max,” Summer says.

David eyes Olivia and says, “You better not be quitting, Olivia. I’m interviewing you next week for the analyst job.”

“No, it’s not that,” Olivia quickly reassures him.

“Good. Come with me then.” He tilts his head to the side, and even though I know I should get back to my desk, I follow everyone to his office. He calls Max, who shows up a few minutes later. I lean against the wall to enjoy the show.

“So,” Olivia begins, then clears her throat, “I was just telling Summer and Delaney that Celia called me and offered me a job. She’s at McCallister and Sloane now. She’s also the one who poached those three employees. She’s not done yet. She’s going after Kevin next.” Olivia exhales as if she no longer has the weight of this secret on her shoulders.

The room goes deathly quiet after Liv’s announcement. David’s body gets so rigid, he looks like he might snap. Summer rubs between Max’s shoulder blades, and I long to do the same for David, but I rein that thought in. What we have isn’t that.

“She called you *here*?” David asks Olivia. She nods. “The nerve of that woman. After everything this family has done for her, she’s trying to sabotage us. I know that bastard Shane McCallister. The last time I ran into him at a Starbucks, he was wearing yellow Crocs. What grown ass man wears Crocs? If she thinks we’re just going to sit down and take it, she doesn’t know who she’s fucking with.”

He grabs the phone from his desk, but Max takes it from him and hangs it up. “Let’s call a meeting and find out who else she’s approached. And why the fuck didn’t we make her sign a non-compete clause?” Max grumbles.

“Because our father, God rest his soul, treated everyone like family. Even those who didn’t deserve it.” David runs both hands down his face. “She’s just going to keep coming at us until we squash her.”

“Delaney, send out a memo and have everyone at the large conference room in two hours. Get some snacks delivered,” Max says. “David, we need to strategize. And Olivia, that analyst job is yours. We don’t need to interview you. I’ll have HR send you an official offer letter and a start date. We’ll need to fill your position first though.” Olivia rubs her hands together in anticipation and runs her hands through her luscious strawberry blonde hair.

Everyone disperses out of the office, and I return to my desk to do as asked.

IT'S ONLY SIX O'CLOCK WHEN I WALK THROUGH THE DOOR OF my home a few hours later. Ten other people admitted to getting approached by Celia. The good news is, the bulk of our employees are loyal. The house is dark when I step through the front door, but I hear talking.

Caleb and Delaney are in the living room, and he's showing her something on his phone. He's shirtless and that irritates me. I toss my bag on the floor to get their attention. "Don't you own a shirt?" I ask my cousin. "I need a damn drink."

"I have a date," Caleb says. "Delaney was helping me with my clothes." I roll my eyes, but I'm mollified by his plans. "I gotta go shower."

I walk to the kitchen and pour two glasses of red wine. I hand one to Delaney, and when she goes to take it, I pull it away and put it down on the counter behind me. I pull her and take her in a savage kiss.

Earlier in the office when Summer rubbed Max's back to comfort him, I wanted Delaney to do that for me, but she was all the way across the room. Right at this moment, though, she's in my arms. I kiss her deep, cup her ass, and push her into me.

"Hey," I say against her lips when I finally pull away. Already wanting more, I kiss her again. She moans in my mouth and my body comes alive. I can lift her right now, take her upstairs, and have my way with her until morning, but

that's not what I want right now. I release her lips and hand her the glass of wine. We clink our glasses together. "Let's go out to dinner," I say without thinking about it.

She tilts her head to the side as if she's pondering, and that stirs something in me. Not something good. I don't remember the last time a woman had to consider accepting a date with me.

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"Positive." I kiss the side of her neck. "Dinner and whatever else the night brings. How about Ostra since you like seafood?"

"Fancy. I'll have to go get ready." She finishes the wine, and I take the glass from her. I lift her off her feet, and she wraps her legs around me.

"Get in the shower, and I'll make a reservation. I'll join you in a few."



SHE LOOKS BEAUTIFUL IN A SIMPLE ROYAL BLUE, FORM FITTING dress. There's a thin belt around her waist. It's a warm night despite it being fall. Once I hand the valet the keys to my Porsche, I tuck her arm in mine, and we walk into the restaurant together.

She's stunning with her hair brushed to the side. I feel eyes on us while we follow the maître'd' to a secluded table in the corner. We drink white wine while I admire her graceful long neck. I wish she was sitting closer so I could suck on it. Other than her pussy and ass, her neck is my other favorite part of her body. I extend my hand across the table. She puts hers in mine and I stroke the soft skin inside her wrist.

"I hope you don't mind, but I requested our meals when I called for the reservation." I'm kicking myself now. She's had everything in her life controlled. She doesn't need a man doing the same thing. "I remember you said you like lobster."

A blush spreads across her cheeks. “You remembered that?”

“I did.”

“That’s so thoughtful, David. Thank you.” She lets out a nervous little laugh. “Can I tell you something? Fair warning, it’s about Mitch.” She grimaces after saying his name.

“Hit me,” I tell her. “Nothing is off limits.”

“He’s allergic to shellfish, so I haven’t had lobster or shrimp since I met him. He ruins everything,” she says. “His mother gave me a list of everything he can’t eat, won’t eat, and didn’t want me to eat the second time I met her.”

I squeeze her hand for comfort and shake my head. “Assholes,” is all I say.

“You don’t know the half of it. I look back now, and I ask myself how I could have been so stupid.” She waves a dismissive hand around. “Then I remind myself that I never said I do. And guess what? I told him I wanted to go to Athens for the honeymoon.” She stops and shudders in disgust. “He said okay and then a week later announced we were going to Nova Scotia.”

“Does anyone under sixty go to Nova Scotia?” I ask. “You know what?” I forget my good table manners and move my chair closer to her. “We’re going to eat lobster, drink wine and not worry about the past.” I hold up my wine glass and say, “To the future.”

“To the future,” she repeats. She lets out an unguarded laugh and puts a hand to her cheek. I have never toasted to the future with a woman. That would make them hope for things that I’m not willing to give, but Delaney is different. She understands. She and I want the same thing. Explosive sex with no strings attached. Given her recent past, she wants more even less than I do.

I snake an arm around her waist, pull her close and kiss her cheek. “How about some champagne?” She downs her wine, and I flag our waiter over to order a bottle of Cristal.

We finish the entire bottle while we enjoy our roasted lobster, Yukon potatoes, and lemon butter. I wipe the corners of her mouth and quickly kiss it. She's giddy and happy when I escort her out of the restaurant and into my waiting car. The temperature has dropped, and she wraps her arms around herself. I shrug out of my blazer and drape it over her shoulder. She rests her hand on my thigh while I drive us home, and I find that I like it. I rest mine on top of hers. We don't speak, but she hums along to the music.

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THERE'S BEEN NO MORE TALK ABOUT ME NOT SLEEPING IN HIS bed. I haven't slept anywhere else in weeks. Even now, hours after coming back from dinner and making love, I'm wrapped in his arms with Pumpkin purring at our feet. I'm in nothing but one of his tees, no panties. His large hand rests between my thighs right now. It's not moving, but his thumb strokes the skin every few seconds.

"Can I confess something without making things weird," I whisper. There's something on the television, but it's on mute, and I have no idea what's playing.

"Mmhmm," he almost purrs. "This is a weirdness free zone. Hit me." I cuddle into him. He's not mine. This is purely carnal, but I feel safer with him than I ever did with Mitch or anyone else.

"I had a few boyfriends before Mitch, but tonight feels like my first real date." I put a hand to his chest. "I know that's not what this is, but tonight has been amazing."

I hold my breath and wait for him to set me straight and remind me of our terms. Maybe he'll tell me that he does this all the time and tonight is nothing special.

"I'm glad it was me," is all he says.

"Me too," I whisper.

"What were your dates like with Mitch?" he asks. "I can't imagine that guy taking the stick out of his ass long enough to show a lady a good time."

I throw my head back and laugh at the thought. That's a perfect description of Mitch, and as much as I never want to talk or think about him again, I'll tell David whatever he needs to know. Maybe this will help me purge him from my life for good.

"Oh my God, they were awful. My parents introduced us, but I'm sure my mom was the one behind it. I don't know how they even know them, and I don't care. We went to a steakhouse for our first date, and he ordered chicken." David chuckles at that. He reaches over and grabs an opened bottle of champagne. He drinks straight from it before he offers the bottle to me. I take a long sip, hand it back and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

"What an asshole," David mutters.

"He has all these food restrictions. No sugar, red meat, gluten, or shellfish. Very little dairy. He's extremely self-absorbed, and he was raised to be that way. His mother treats him like a prince. Everything is about him. What Mitch likes. How I can improve myself to be better for Mitch. No one cared about me. His father barely said two words to me the entire time I've known them. I think they just saw me as a vessel. My family is acceptable, and I'm young and educated. I was always so scared to speak up, and when I did, I was shut down."

I rest my head on his chest and he runs his hand down my side. "You don't have to worry about those motherfuckers anymore." He drinks some more from the bottle and offers me the last little bit. "You want more champagne?" I shake my head no, and he pulls me back to him. "So, what the hell did you and Mitch talk about?"

"We talked about Mitch, duh." I pinch his side. "The college he went to. Harvard Medical School. Did you know he was the first in his family to get into Harvard?" I put both hands to my face in mock shock. "What Mitch likes and doesn't like. How his last girlfriend was prettier than me, but her family was too common for him, so he dumped her. He was considerate enough to show me her social media and tell

me things I can do to make my body look more like hers.” I blow my breath upward.

“Cookie, this body is already perfect,” David says. My heart stops at the endearment. No one has ever given me a pet name before, and I’d give anything to be called Cookie again. He surprises me when he pulls me onto him. “You know that right? Long legs and a perfect ass. Just the way I like it.” He slaps my ass hard. “And a long, graceful neck for me to suck on.” He does just that, and I don’t push him away. Let him mark me for the world to see. “And that mouth.” He kisses me so deep, I lose my breath. “Especially when I have my dick in it.” I stay on top of him and let him wrap his arms around me. One of his hands stays on my ass while his fingertips stroke my skin. “If I ever see that guy again, I’m shoving a crab leg up his ass.”

“I’d pay money to see that.” I squeeze his bicep and straddle him. My bare pussy coats his taut stomach. After being with a man like him, I don’t know how I can ever be with anyone else. His body is so hard, and he takes care of himself, but he’s not obsessed with what he eats or his workout regimen. “I contacted his ex,” I whisper. “Her name is Alexis.”

“Juicy,” he says. That’s another thing. He never judges my choices. The only other person who knows about me contacting Alexis is Summer. It was Summer’s idea, but she said it as a joke. “Don’t keep me waiting. What did Alexis have to say for herself?”

“I sent her a message on her IG and told her who I was. She replied less than an hour later with her phone number and I called her. She said she would not wish her worst enemy on Mitch, and that she’s the one who broke up with him when he insulted her parents for not being college educated. She told me he didn’t take it well, and her brother had to threaten him so he would leave her alone. He met me a few months after that. She’s messaged me a couple times since, but I never responded.”

He stays quiet and my eyes grow heavy. I know I should get up and brush my teeth, but I’m so relaxed and comfortable

in this bed with this man and the cat. Nothing short of a fire could get me up right now.

“You should message her and tell her you got out. Start a Mitch survivor’s support group. I bet there are more of you out there.” I chuckle at the thought. “You know what I think?”

I rub my pussy on him and wiggle my brows.

“You already know what I think about that pussy. I’m going back in there real soon, but I think you were the best thing to ever happen to Mitch. He will never meet anyone else like you, and he knows it. You were the perfect match for him, and he only got as far as he did with you because your mother was the puppet master, but now that you’re free, he’s fucked. Don’t waste any more time on him. He’s in the rearview mirror, and I won’t let anything happen to you.” He kisses my forehead, turns off the TV, and promptly falls asleep with me in his arms.

His words stay with me. The entire day stays with me. We’ve been together in some capacity all day, and it was perfect. He’s just promised to protect me from my past and from my family. Those aren’t just words. He means them, and now I’m off balance. How could we have blurred the lines so quickly? The rules we established are never discussed anymore. He hasn’t gone on a single date since we started our arrangement. He says he’s the only man who will make me come, but does he mean for now or also for the future?

I don’t want to know the answers. I’m going to live in the moment. I’m not leaving my heart out of it. I’ve been on the sideline and watching my life happen for too long. If I get hurt, I’ll hurt for a little while, but I’ll get up and keep moving. For now, for the uncertain future, I will take life as it comes, and that life includes David Sutton.

The worst has already happened. I’ve left a man at the altar. I’m estranged from my family, and yet, I’ve never been happier.

David doesn't pull my elbow like he normally does when he needs to talk to me alone. He takes my hand, intertwines our fingers, and gently pulls me out of Max and Summer's kitchen where everyone is congregated.

"You're in charge of Summer's shower and bachelorette?" he whispers. Both sides of the family are here as is the wedding planner. We're waiting on dinner to arrive since we're done with wedding talk for today.

"I am. Her mom is helping." I inch closer to him. He's been by my side all day. We drove here together, and when we walked in, he had his hand on the small of my back. "The bachelorette is going to be a sleepover here. Summer wants her little sister to participate in everything, but I'm going to throw her the best damn party." I rub my hands in anticipation. David pulls out his wallet and hands me a credit card.

"Great. Spare no expense." He leans in and kisses my forehead.

"You sure?" I ask.

"Positive. Invite Alexis." We both laugh at the reminder of my late-night confession. I slide the credit card in my pocket while I think of a million ways I can give my best friend the best of everything. "But absolutely no strippers."

"But that's the best part. You should have seen the half dozen strippers Summer got for me for our weekend in Newport."

"What did you just say?" Max appears in front of us, scowling at me.

"Oh, Daddy, stop. I was kidding. She only got three, not a half dozen." I giggle and walk away, but the two Sutton brothers follow me.

"Summer Breeze," Max practically yells at Summer while she's talking to his mother and hers. "You got Delaney strippers when you went to Newport?" Summer looks my way, and we both burst into laughter.

"Um, no," she says and rolls her eyes. "But so what if I did?"

“Yeah, so what?” Aunt Minnie chimes in. “You should have seen the strippers your mother got for me before I married Caleb’s father. What was the big one’s name, Claire? Savage Thunder?” She wiggles her brows and sighs. “The name fit. He looked pretty savage.

“Mother?” David says. “Really?”

I cover my mouth with my hand, but that doesn’t drown my laugh. Summer doesn’t do so well. She holds her stomach while she looks at Max’s face.

“Oh, stop clutching your pearls, boys,” Claire says. “I like to have fun too.” Max pulls his mother aside to talk, but she kisses his cheek and walks away.

“I’ll put on some music tonight and strip for you. That’s the best you’re going to get.” He pulls me close and slowly grinds on me. “But if I hear about a stripper, I will burn this fucking house down,” he whispers so close to my ear, I get goosebumps. “With the fucking stripper in it.”

“Mr. Sutton, I’m going to take you up on that.” He runs his nose down the side of my neck and inhales.

“Let’s get the hell out of here after we eat,” he whispers. “Then we’ll go home, and I’ll eat you.” He leaves a soft kiss on the side of my neck before walking away. I catch Summer’s eye from across the room, and she arches an eyebrow, but she lets out a squeak when Fancy, their cat, runs between her legs.

David picks up the cat. He rubs and kisses her head, and she closes her eyes and purrs. Max approaches and snatches the cat from him.

“Touch Fancy again, and I’ll break all ten of your fingers, thief.”

David gives him that mischievous grin I’ve come to know and love. He rubs behind the kitty’s ear and says, “My cat is so much better than this one, but I’ll do you a favor and keep her for you when you two go on your honeymoon.” He tries to take her, but Max moves away, puts the cat down and she runs out of the room.

“Pumpkin is mine, idiot, and I want her back. And no. I don’t trust you to cat sit.”

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WE STAYED AT MY BROTHER'S MUCH LONGER THAN EXPECTED. It's almost midnight, and even though tomorrow is a workday, I'm in no hurry to go to sleep. Pumpkin is at the foot of the bed, slumbering softly. Delaney walks through the door, juggling two bottles of water and a bowl filled with ice cream. I sit up, take the bottles of water from her and strip her of the short robe, leaving her in nothing but a sheer tank top. She slides into the bed and the crook of my arm. It's like she was made to fit into me so perfectly.

"That's so fucking good," I moan after taking a spoonful of ice cream. "I dedicate this next spoonful to Mitch and his lactose intolerance." I raise the spoon in the air before I eat it. Delaney giggles uncontrollably.

"To Mitch," she says. She takes a spoonful, hangs her head, and sighs. "He'll never understand the joy of cookies n cream." I dim the lights and soft music plays through the speakers. "You ready for work tomorrow?" she whispers. We haven't talked about work or what I've discovered on Friday all weekend. We've either been with the family planning the wedding or in our little bubble.

"Oh, yeah. Heads are gonna roll, mainly Celia's. Damn bitch," I mutter.

"What's the deal with her? All of this because Max turned her down? It seems a bit overkill, but I guess you Sutton boys are just so hot." She runs her hand down my sternum to my abs.

“We’ve known her our entire lives. Her parents were friends with ours, and we used to vacation and spend holidays together. Dad gave her a job at Sutton Marketing after she graduated from college. She was a fantastic employee, and I’ll be honest. When I learned about her crush on Max, I laughed about it for days. The idea of him having a girlfriend and another woman wanting him was the funniest thing I’d heard in a long time.”

“WHY? YOUR BROTHER IS A TOTAL DADDY AND A COMPLETELY devoted man. Celia sensed it and wanted it for herself. Unfortunately for her, Summer got him first.”

I snatch the bowl from her. Pumpkin jumps on the bed and rests on my naked torso while I absently rub her back.

“Stop calling my brother daddy.” I put a finger under her chin and turn her head to me before giving her a loud kiss and squeezing one of her breasts.

“You said Celia’s parents were friends with yours. Are they no longer close to your mom?”

“Not since we fired her. They’ve iced Mom out, and I know it bothers her. She likes to stay close with anyone who was friends with our dad.”

She intertwines our legs under the blanket and cuddles into my body. “What’s your story, David? You know mine. Have you ever been in love?” My body freezes at the question. We’ve only ever talked about her past. Mine isn’t nearly as dramatic as hers, and I hardly ever think about it.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” she says.

“This is our judgment free bubble, remember? We talk about anything here. Have I ever been in love? I was once,” I tell her. “At least I think I was. We were engaged. Her name is Bethany, and she called things off two weeks before our wedding.” I try to feed her more, but she shakes her head no. She sits up and looks into my face as if she’s trying to read my mind.

“Oh, I’m sorry that happened to you.” She lowers her gaze and tries to move away, but I pull her to me. “I really believe she did you a favor, David. Would you really want to be married to someone who isn’t one hundred percent certain?”

She rests her head on my shoulder, and we both remain quiet while I put the empty bowl on the nightstand.

“You’re probably right.”

“Tell me about her. You know all about Mitch.”

I put my hands behind my head as I think of how to answer. I don’t remember the last time anyone asked about Bethany. “She wasn’t ready to be married and admitted she wasn’t in love with me. I was hurt but not devastated. I ran into her a couple of years ago, and she’s married with two kids. There are no hard feelings, and I really don’t think about it anymore. Thankfully, she didn’t have gluten issues and she loved dairy as much as the next guy.”

“So, she was better than Mitch? Showoff.”

I pull her on top of me. “I have news for you, that’s a low bar. Why are we talking about our exes? That’s all in the rearview mirror. Let’s focus on what’s happening right now.” She opens her mouth to say more, but I silence her with a kiss. By the time I pull away, she’s panting. “You’re really beautiful,” I whisper while looking into her eyes. Her skin breaks out in goosebumps, and I kiss her shoulder. She has her head down as if she’s experiencing a bout of shyness. I grasp her chin, and she looks into my eyes. “You must know that you’re beautiful. You have this long, graceful neck. You remind me of a swan.” I kiss the side of her neck and run my hand down her spine. “Your skin is soft as silk. You have this perfect little nose.” I tap it with my finger before kissing the tip. “And these gorgeous pouty lips. I don’t understand how Mitch didn’t live inside this mouth of yours.” I suck her bottom lip into my mouth before kissing her soundly.

“He barely kissed me,” she admits before looking away. “Maybe after the first few dates, and I want to vomit just thinking about it.”

“He never told you that you’re beautiful?” Before she can respond, I say, “Of course he didn’t. This is why I’ve always loathed doctors. They’re not as smart as they think they are.” I pull her closer and press her lean body into mine. “This is what you do to me.” I take her hand and put it on my hard dick. “I can barely control it when you’re around. All you have to do to get a reaction out of me is to walk into a room.” She blushes. “Don’t be shy about it. Own it. There’s nothing embarrassing about two adults wanting each other.”

“I’m not embarrassed, just not used to hearing that, but I like it.”

“Now, what are you going to do about my hard dick?” I tease.

“I have a few ideas.”

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“CAN I HIT IT IN THE MORNING?” I TRY TO DO MY BEST JAY-Z impersonation for Summer. “Yes, and I did.” I give her a high five. “He beat up this pussy.” I gyrate my hips in the empty office kitchen. “What that man does to my body, I just can’t explain.” I sigh and put a hand to my chest. “But I’m sure you know.” I wink at Summer while I pull my bagel out of the toaster oven and slather it with cream cheese.

“Um, why would I know?” She smells her coffee and must deem it acceptable because she sips it.

“You’re with the original Sutton man, and he knocked you up in no time.” I bump her shoulder with mine. “James, my life has never been this good.” She arches an eyebrow. “Not just because of David.” It’s all because of David, but I’m going to keep that to myself for now. Judging from the way she’s pursing her lips, I doubt she believes me anyway. “It’s because for the first time in my life, I’m free to live how I want. I didn’t even know I was in a cage until I ran from that church.” I take a big bite of my bagel. “The food tastes better. The air is fresher.” I lean close to her ear and whisper, “My pussy is happier too. It tingles regularly.”

She giggles non-stop. I offer her a bite of my bagel, but she shakes her head no.

“I had breakfast at home, but that smells good.”

“Cinnamon raisin. My favorite. Haven’t had it in a while. Mitch with his gluten issues would pitch a fit if I brought any

bread in his house.” I roll my eyes. “He always had something to say about what I eat. Was he always such an asshole?”

“Yes,” she says without hesitation. “Anyway, what’s up with you and David? Are you two a couple?”

I take another big bite and revel in the taste of my breakfast. There was no time to make or grab food this morning. David was too busy stretching out my pussy for us to worry about eating. Before I can answer Summer, the man himself walks in.

Our eyes lock while he walks toward us. He snatches the bagel from me and shoves it in his mouth. He growls and bites the side of my neck before I can jump away. “Delicious,” he whispers, uncaring about Summer standing there. “And you,” he points at Summer, “this baby better be a boy.” He puts both hands on her stomach, which is still flat.

“What the hell are you doing?” Max walks in and pulls David’s hands off. “Keep your hands to yourself.”

“What does it look like? I’m making sure this baby is a boy.” He puts his hands back on her stomach.

“I’m pretty sure Maxi’s swimmers gets to decide if it’s a boy or a girl.” Caleb walks into the kitchen and pours himself a tall cup of coffee.

“Thanks for that visual, Caleb.” David whacks him upside the head. More employees trickle in on this Monday morning. There was never a time when I looked forward to Monday mornings. Not when I was in school. I didn’t want to attend the all-girls private school and begged my dad to put me in public. As always, he dismissed me and told me to ask my mother. I already knew what she was going to say, so I didn’t bother to ask.

My first year at Boston University was okay, but it wasn’t until I met Summer sophomore year that I started to enjoy my college experience. If she was going home for the weekend, I’d tag along with her. A few times, I wished I was part of her family instead of mine.

It wasn't all bad. I grew up in a beautiful home and had everything I needed and wanted. I've had a life of privilege, and I recognize it. I was just never allowed to have my own opinions and make my own way. Not until now.

David gets me out of my own head when he snatches the other half of the bagel from me. He takes a big bite and puts the rest to my lips. "Stop thinking about them," he whispers. "Nobody's going to fuck with you ever again."

I smile into his eyes, and he smiles back. I open my mouth for the bagel, but he pulls it away and eats it. "Max, my office in half an hour," he says, turning his back. "Delaney, check your email. I have some things I need you to get done this week. Let's have a good week everyone. I know I will because Celia's head is about to roll."

He winks at me and subtly squeezes my ass while he walks away.

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“HOW WOULD YOU FEEL ABOUT A QUICK TRIP NORTH TO CHECK out a bed and breakfast? There are three of them in Maine and Vermont. You’ll only be there one night. I want you to take the owners out to dinner and schmooze. I don’t intend on losing this one to McCallister and Sloane,” I tell my brother. His eyes darken at the mention of the other marketing firm. Celia tried to come between him and Summer, and that’s unforgivable in his eyes.

“I’d rather not stay overnight. Breeze still gets sick sometimes and—”

“She can come stay with me and Delaney, but we need this. We’ve lost two accounts, and that doesn’t include Silicon Valley. I don’t take well to losing, especially to someone who owes her entire career to our family.”

I lean back in my chair and stare at the ceiling. The meeting we were supposed to have this morning got pushed back to now because I spent the first half of the day researching McCallister and Sloane and Delaney’s family.

The first thing I saw when I pulled up the other company’s website was Celia’s duplicitous face. Her biography mentioned taking Sutton Marketing as far as it could go, but she had to leave to flourish.

“When?” Max asks, resigned to the trip.

“Wednesday. You’ll be back on Thursday. In the meantime, I’m going to formulate a plan of attack. McCallister has high turnover, so I’m gonna find a disgruntled employee

for inside information.” I’d tell him more, but there’s a knock on my door, and Delaney walks in. All the air gets sucked out of the room. She’s pushing a cart with packages on it.

“Your mail, Mr. Sutton,” she practically purrs. She places a box and several large envelopes on my desk.

“Thank you, Ms. Lewis.” She winks at me, and I wink back. If Max wasn’t here, I’d pull her on my lap and kiss her until we’re both breathless. “Did you have a good lunch?”

“I did. Thank you for asking, boss.” She giggles, and a blush spreads across her face. “Did you see my email? Jakobe Jones confirmed your meeting on Friday. He’ll be here at eleven. Should I make any special lunch arrangements?”

She does her best to sound serious, but I can hear the humor in her voice.

“I do. I’ll give you details later.” She clears her throat, nods, and leaves my office without another word.

“Subtle,” Max says, standing up from his seat.

“What?” I ask him about a minute later. I finally look away from the door and look at my brother. “Did you say something?”

“Yeah. I said you’re about as subtle as a nuclear bomb.”

“Get off your sanctimonious high horse. You’re engaged to my assistant, fuckhead. Not to mention you got her pregnant, which I’m pretty sure you did on purpose.” I flip him the bird and stand from my desk. Instead of leaving, Max leans against the wall and crosses his arms.

“First of all, I did not. Second, is it a crime to fall in love with someone’s personal assistant? By the way, what’s the deal with you and Delaney? Are you a couple?”

I scoff and wave him off. This idiot always has to label everything. He’s a serial monogamist. The longest he went without being in a relationship was after his divorce.

“Are we a couple? Am I supposed to ask her to be my girlfriend like we’re in junior high? That’s probably the lame shit you did with Summer.”

“Uh-huh,” he says. He gives me a sly grin. “So, no labels?” he asks again.

“We’re both adults, fuckhead. We’re just having fun.”

“Yeah. Fun. But Davie,” he says, calling me by the childhood nickname he gave me, “you haven’t been your usual whore self in a while. I find that interesting.”

Just as the words leave his mouth, my phone buzzes on my desk and the name Mariah flashes across the screen. I hit delete, and it rings again with the name Tessa. I ignore that one too, and a text from Mariah comes through. Max stands behind me the entire time looking at my phone. I put it on silent and turn it face down. He crosses his arms and waits for me to answer.

“I’m a slut, not a whore. Don’t worry about me. As you can see, I’m not lacking in female companionship. Delaney knows what we have is not only physical but temporary. I’m not a lame ass like you. Did you get on one knee and ask Summer to be your girlfriend? I don’t do girlfriends, and when I’m ready, I’ll still get more pussy than a rock star. More than you ever did.”

He taps my shoulder and says, “I bet you will. Good for you. I’ll be here to see how this works out.” He chuckles all the way out of my office. As soon as he’s gone, I call Delaney’s extension, but the phone goes to voicemail. I send her an email asking her to come to my office.

My phone rings again, but this time, it’s my office line. I don’t recognize the number, but I pick up anyway.

“David Sutton,” I say, checking my watch. Only five more hours and I can go home and get naked with Delaney.

“David.” I groan at the sound of her voice.

“Celia. I heard you managed to land on your feet at McCallister & Sloane. I’d congratulate you if you didn’t take such a giant step back.”

She must move the phone from her face because I hear half a conversation she’s having with someone else. I don’t know if

she's trying to waste my time or attempting to make a power move. Either way, it's not working.

"Yes, I have. I see you're keeping tabs on me. You must realize the giant mistake you made by letting me walk away from Sutton Marketing."

"You didn't walk away. You were fired. Well, security did have to walk you out of the building, so I guess you do have a point about walking away. You have thirty seconds to get to your point."

She chuckles and says, "How's the staffing over there? I heard you lost a few people."

"And how did you hear about that?" I lean back in my chair and put my feet on the desk. If Celia wants to play, I'll play, but I know she won't like the outcome.

"Well, imagine my surprise when three of Sutton's employees are now working here. For me." I can see the smug look on her face now. How did I never notice what a snake she is? My father hired her. I promoted her, and she fucks us all over. "Maybe they realize there's only so far they can go over there. With you and Max holding onto the reins so tight."

"Well, the name on the front door is Sutton. Are you a Sutton, Celia? No, you're not, and you never will be. But I know you've poached our people. This could have been amicable. You took three employees. That's kid's stuff. You should have gone bigger."

"What makes you think I'm done?" she challenges.

"You are done, sweetheart." I never use that word. I always found it to be condescending, but it's warranted here. "You see, when I make a move, you'll realize that." She starts to talk, but I end the call, having had enough of her voice to last me a lifetime.

Fifteen minutes later, while I'm reading Mariah's erotic text message full of filthy promises, Delaney walks back in. I put my phone down, meet her halfway, and lift her off her feet. She's in a skirt that comes to her knees. I carry her back to my seat, and she straddles me.

“Mr. Sutton, is there something I can do for you?” She bites that fat bottom lip, and I suck it into my mouth. I slide my hand under her skirt and squeeze her ass cheek.

My phone vibrates, and Mariah’s name reappears. I grab it and turn it over, but Delaney sees it. She turns her head to look at me, and something in her eyes sets me off balance.

“Who is Mariah?” she asks. Before I can answer, my phone buzzes again. She reaches for it before I can and looks at the screen. The name Heather flashes. She holds the phone up and shakes it. “Are you going to answer? Don’t want to keep Heather waiting.”

I take the phone from her and stick it in my top drawer. “They can wait. You can’t. You’re killing me in this little thong.”

I pull back the elastic and let it hit against her skin. I can pull my dick out and let her slide down, but I have a meeting in five minutes, and I’d need more time. One of the perks of our little arrangement is that I don’t need to worry about condoms. Her pussy feels so wet and hot, I don’t know how I can ever return to the world of fucking with protection. “Kiss me.” I kiss her until she moans in my mouth, and I reluctantly break the kiss. The last thing I need right before a meeting with the managers is to be walking around with a hard dick. I don’t need a sexual harassment suit with all the other problems we have now.

CALEB SITS AT THE KITCHEN ISLAND WHILE I TOSS A SALAD ON the counter. I have short ribs braising in the oven, and he's opened up a bottle of red.

"Men who know how to cook are a plus," I tell him. He writes it down on a piece of paper. "And maybe one who pays attention to the woman and what she wants." I don't think he'll get my hint, but he nods and writes it down too.

"You think this asshole Justine is dating cooks? I hope he chokes on a chicken bone," he grumbles.

"Forget her. You're moving forward remember? What about all the women on the Tinder app?" I reach for his phone and open the app. "Look at her. She's cute." I hand him back the phone while he studies the pretty brunette on the screen. I swipe right. "Shit or get off the pot, Caleb. Time to jump into the deep end of the pool."

I need to take my own advice. Especially after this afternoon in David's office. He runs a business. He's always on his phone. There's a strong possibility that Mariah and Heather are business associates.

Really? Then why didn't he answer? He's never shy about taking a work call when you're around.

I know I'm fooling myself. If he has a business contact saved on his phone, he'll have the name of the person's company listed as well. These calls were personal.

Caleb runs one of his hands over his face and nods. Then he looks at a few more profiles and swipes right on all of

them.

“It’s time,” he says. He stands, shocks the hell out of me when he lifts me off my feet and spins me around the kitchen. I scream in surprise and hold on to him so I won’t fall. That’s the position we’re in when David walks through the side door. He normally comes in through the garage, but not today. He comes to a stop when he sees us. Caleb is oblivious and continues to spin me around, but my laughter dies on my tongue and my heart rate accelerates from the darkening of his eyes.

“Put me down, Caleb,” I say. He does, but he rubs me against his body on the way down. It’s not intentional. Caleb is clueless like that, but when he puts me down, I stumble. Firm hands grab my hips, and they’re not Caleb’s. I know those hands.

“What’s going on here?” His eyes bore into his cousin’s when he asks the question. In fact, he steps between us, shielding me from Caleb’s view altogether.

“Breaking news, Dave. I’m over Justine.” Caleb puffs out his chest. “Thanks to Delaney.”

David arches an eyebrow and steps closer to Caleb. “Really? And how did Delaney convince you of that?” His voice is low, almost threatening. He turns from Caleb to me.

“It’s time to move on, and she’s going to go through all of these Tinder profiles with me later.” He seems so happy that I don’t have the heart to tell him that I didn’t say that. I guess he needs help to fully move on.

“Really? Why? Were you two comparing Tinder profiles? What does hers say?” He snatches my phone that’s on the counter. The screen is blank, and he doesn’t know the code.

“Why would she? Aren’t you guys together? You haven’t had any women here, and she sleeps in your room every night. You had a different woman over all the time before.” Caleb scratches his head and stares at his cousin. I hold my breath while I wait to hear what David says next. The kitchen has gone deathly quiet after Caleb’s question.

A phone rings and David pulls it out of his pocket and puts it to his ear. “Maxi Pad,” he says while he walks out of the kitchen without responding to Caleb. I don’t know if I’m disappointed or relieved at not hearing his answer.

“What do you think of her?” Caleb puts his phone in my face. This woman is blonde with curly hair. I quickly read her profile.

“Are you into the sharing thing? She’s looking for a man to share with her boyfriend.”

“Oh hell no.” He quickly swipes left and puts the phone down. Without asking, he sets the table for three while I put the food in serving dishes. David returns a few minutes later, and the three of us eat the dinner I prepared.

The cooking lessons were a Christmas gift given to me by my aunt two years ago. That Christmas was a train wreck. My mom invited her sister, and that included Jade and her father and brother. Her mom gave me cooking lessons, and my mom gave Jade a trip to Puerto Rico. In the end, I loved the cooking class, especially the last one when we got to sample a different wine with each course.

I loved to cook until I became engaged to Mitch, and his mother gave me a list of his favorite foods. I hadn’t cooked anything in over six months until I started staying here.

Everyone is quiet while we eat, but I notice that David doesn’t put his hand on my thigh like he normally does when the three of us share a meal. He showed more affection this morning in the company break room when he helped himself to my bagel.

Once dinner is finished, David and Caleb offer to clean up, and I go upstairs. As I’ve done the past couple of weeks, I go directly into David’s room. Pumpkin is on the bed snoozing.

Since the housekeeper is off the entire week, the room is a bit of a mess. The bed is unmade, and there are clothes thrown on the floor. I fix the bed and am in the middle of picking up the clothes when he bursts through the door.

“Hey,” I say, while I go into his closet and throw the clothes in his hamper. He’s standing in the middle of the room when I come back. He has his arms crossed, and he’s watching me with a strange expression on his face. I can normally read him, but not tonight. “I was thinking I can massage your back, and you can massage my pussy. A little quid pro quo.” I get on my toes and nip his earlobe. His ears are extremely sensitive, and I expect him to jump, but he doesn’t. He freezes and moves away.

“I have some work to do,” he says. “It’s going to be a long night.”

He usually leaves work in the office. He works at least ten hours a day and doesn’t bring it home with him, but maybe my presence here has interrupted his routine. For all I know, working from home could be his norm.

“Anything I can do to help?” I stand behind him and start to rub his shoulders. “I won’t charge you overtime,” I whisper close to his ear. I snake my hands around his waist and start to move them south. His large palm wraps around my wrists.

“No.” He pulls my hands down and steps away. “I’ll be in my office.” He walks out and closes the door behind him without another word.

A nagging feeling starts to take over, but I push it down and refuse to feel the sting of his rejection. In the short time since we’ve become intimate, he’s never turned me down. I’ve never turned him down either, but maybe he’s stressed. There’s someone out there who is intentionally trying to sabotage his business, and I know he’s vowed to come out on top. Maybe formulating a plan is harder than he thought.

I LOCK MY OFFICE DOOR AND DROP MYSELF ON THE BROWN leather couch. I avoid working from home as much as possible. Nothing beyond taking a phone call. I don't want to be in my office now. I'd rather be upstairs with Delaney either watching television, talking, or fucking. Talking while fucking. I'd even settle for cuddling while talking. That was my plan. That's why I stayed at work for a couple of extra hours so I could focus on her tonight. At least until my brother called and fucked everything up. Even before his stupid phone call, which I admit had impeccable timing, Caleb threw me off balance. Since when does he pay attention to anything that isn't about him? The most self-absorbed human being on earth assumes that Delaney and I are together. What the fuck is happening?

That only made what Max said worse. I don't know how a simple dinner invitation with him and Summer upended my entire evening, but it did. It wasn't just the dinner invitation. It's his assumption that bringing Delaney is a foregone conclusion. The very idea that he would assume that upset me. I'm left wondering if people besides him and Caleb see it. Are Sutton Marketing employees under the assumption that Delaney and I are a couple? Are they gossiping about us? Does my brother and everyone else think my playboy lifestyle is beyond me?

What playboy lifestyle? You live with a woman. And your cousin. You didn't answer your phone when Mariah and Tessa called because you were worried about Delaney's reaction.

I throw an arm over my face, take a deep breath and ask myself how the hell I got here. I'm not the relationship type. Not since my engagement with Bethany ended. I've used that as an excuse. The truth is, I was hurt for about a week, and then I was balls deep in someone else. I wasn't ready to get married, and I doubt that we'd still be together if we had said I do. I wasn't in love with her. I didn't even put up a fight when she ended things. I simply went on.

My life revolves around work, women, and whatever family time I have with those close to me. It's been perfect that way, and now I'm practically living with a woman. I should have let her leave when Max and Summer came back, but I told myself I was keeping her away from that asshole ex of hers, and she would be safer here. Now, I'm stuck. Stuck having dinner like we're some sort of family. She works in my office. She's managed to insert herself in every facet of my life, and I'm not sure if I'm ready for that. She's even managed to get her hands on my cat. Pumpkin would be here with me now, but I left her upstairs to be with Delaney.

My phone rings and I ignore it. I don't want to see any of the women who called me today. A few minutes later, it rings again, and the name Nancy flashes across my screen. She's a woman I dated casually a few months ago. I even introduced Max to a friend of hers, and they went out a few times, but it didn't work out. I think it's because he was obsessed with Summer.

I ended things with Nancy and haven't heard from her in months, but here she is now calling me. Things were easy with her. She likes sex, and so do I. She doesn't want strings. She's divorced with a daughter, and she's not looking for anything serious. Maybe this is a sign. Maybe this is destiny's way of telling me that I'm not cut out to be with only one woman. Besides, Delaney and I have an arrangement. We're not exclusive. We are both free to do as we please, and it's time that I show her that we are not in a relationship.

Will you be able to handle it when she shows you the same thing? She's beautiful and sexy. She won't be without companionship for long.

“Hey stranger,” I say into the phone, ignoring the warning in my head.



SHE'S IN THE MIDDLE OF MY BED WHEN I RETURN UPSTAIRS twenty minutes later. Pumpkin is at her feet, and she has pillows propped behind her while she flips through the channels. She looks like she belongs there, and that only makes my irritation escalate. She hasn't slept in her bed since we made our arrangement. Every single day more of her clothes find their way into my room. There are dresses, skirts, and blouses hanging in my closet. I should have spoken up when this first began, but I let it all slide.

She pats my side of the bed. I've never had a side of the bed. I always slept in the middle until she moved in here and claimed the right side. Like a fool, I let her have it.

“I'm going out.” I unbutton my shirt, peel it off, and toss it to the floor. She jumps out of the bed and rubs her hands together. Then she picks up the shirt and walks to the closet and throws it in the hamper. That irritates me too. She acts like this is her house. She's always making sure everything is neat.

Yeah, she's awful. Idiot.

“Where are we going?” We? The very idea that she just assumes she's going with me unsettles something in my stomach. She starts rummaging through *my* closet for clothes. I've never been pussy whipped enough to allow a woman to put her clothes in my closet. How the fuck did I let that happen? That sounds like something Max would do. “How fancy do I need to be? I got this little black dress the other day and want to put it on. What do you think about—”

“*We* aren't going out. I am.” I walk to the bathroom in nothing but my boxer briefs. “I have a date.” The last word almost gets stuck in my throat. I make the mistake of turning to face her. From here, it seems that her face has gone ashen. She swallows a few times and looks at the floor. I want to run to her and tell her I won't go, but I don't do that. I need to go

because if I go any further with this, this version of me will cease to exist, and I can't let that happen. I like this version. I love this life.

“Oh,” is all she says. Then she puts the dress back in my closet.

“Yeah. You might want to go back to the guest room tonight.” Her eyebrows shoot to her forehead, and I think understanding dawns. I take it a step further and say, “You should take your clothes too.” I bite my tongue and don't tell her that she's gotten too comfortable in my house and my bedroom.

She nods and says, “Okay. Goodnight.” She walks out and slams the door behind her without taking any of her clothes. I don't give myself any time to feel guilty. I shower quickly, and I'm out of the house and in my car in thirty minutes.

I floor my car all the way to a bar on Massachusetts Avenue. Nancy is already there when I arrive. She's in a short, tight little black dress, and all I can think about is how Delaney would have looked in her little black dress. How she would have turned heads if I had walked in with her on my arm. But that didn't happen, and tonight isn't about Delaney. I'm here to see Nancy, and I'm going to leave with her soon. Very soon.

I RUN A HAND THROUGH MY HAIR AS I STARE AT MY reflection in the mirror. Twenty more minutes. He should be in the building in less than one hour. I haven't laid eyes on him since he left on Monday night to go see another woman. He never returned home, and I tracked his phone to a hotel in the city. He worked from home the next day, probably arriving after I had left for work. He left for a business trip that afternoon and is finally on his way back now.

I told myself I would not be angry, and I'm not. We had an arrangement, and obviously it doesn't work for him anymore. There's no anger. I went into this voluntarily, and I might have even nudged David into it. No, I'm not angry. Anger I can control. My anger is reserved for certain members of my family. Not for David who has only helped me in the short time I've known him.

What I can't handle is the disappointment and hurt that's bubbled to the surface. Or the bile that rises to the back of my throat as I think about him and another woman in bed, giving her all the things that he's given me. That's the worst part. That's the part that's haunted me every time I've tried to close my eyes these past three days. I've never experienced jealousy before. I used to hope and pray that Mitch would find someone else and leave me for her. Now, I want to track this other woman down and cut her face. I take a deep breath and shake my head at that ridiculous thought. David was never mine. We were only using each other for carnal pleasure, but somewhere along the way, I became attached.

There's only one thing to do, and that's to move out. I'm not going to give up this job though. I love it here. I love the job, and I love working close to Summer and Caleb. But I can't bear the thought of being in a room across the hall while David fucks another woman a few feet away. That I can't handle. At least he had enough consideration for me not to bring that woman back a few nights ago.

I take my phone out and pull up Craigslist. I realize the irony, but I'm undeterred. A rich girl like me who lived a life of luxury and was on the cusp of marrying a doctor is now looking for a room to rent from a stranger. That's still a better alternative than going back to my old life.

Summer walks into the bathroom, and I plaster a fake smile on my face. She's not buying it. She takes the phone from my hand and closes the Craigslist app.

"Nope," she says. "I have a room ready for you at our place. Bring your stuff. You're not going to rent a room from some stranger." I take my phone back and slide it in my pocket.

"I've already told you I can't do that. You only have a few months until your baby is born. You need this time alone with Max, and it's time I take charge of my life."

She opens her mouth to say more, but I shake my head at her. "You're going to be late." She hugs me before leaving to go to her doctor's appointment, and I sag in relief. I stare in the mirror and realize my eyes look hollow. I haven't slept more than a few hours in the last few days, and that needs to stop.

After receiving a text that my lunch date is ten minutes away, I leave the bathroom and sit at my desk. Once I get a text confirming that they're here, I grab a light jacket from my desk and take the elevator to the lobby. The door to the elevator opens, and I nearly collide with David.

Our eyes lock briefly, and I realize he looks worse than I do. I look away and go around him and out the front door. He calls my name, but I don't look back.

That's another thing I learned about myself. The arrangement I had with David is one I can't handle. I don't need marriage, but I need a commitment. I'm not going to be in an open relationship and share a man with other women. That's not me. At least I've figured that out.

Jade's luxury SUV is at the front of the building waiting for me. Instead of going to the restaurant across the street, we go a couple of blocks over to a Mexican restaurant.

"Fuck it," I say after we're seated. "I'm having a drink." Jade offers me a high five, and when the waitress arrives, we both order margaritas, totally uncaring that it's a Thursday afternoon in the middle of our workday.

"You're not so bad, Delaney. Don't freak out, but I think I like you." I put both hands to my cheeks and pretend to scream.

"I guess you're not so terrible," I reluctantly grumble. We talk or text almost every day, and true to her word, she hasn't gone back and told the family anything about me. If she had, I would know. My mother would make sure of it.

"But you look awful. What's wrong? Aunt Lynn get to you?" Normally, I wouldn't tell her anything about my personal life, but we've come so far.

"No. I haven't heard from them. I'm sure they're regrouping and figuring out a way to bring me to heel. Have you heard anything?" The waitress brings our drinks, and I take two big gulps. Jade arches an eyebrow, but she doesn't comment about my lack of table manners. She sips her drink like the lady she was raised to be.

"Nothing new. Only what my mother's told me, but if I were you, I'd watch out. I don't think your mom is done yet." I sigh, not needing to hear this shit right now. There's nothing she can do, and she needs to come to grips with that.

"Well, she's nothing if not persistent." I finish my drink. "Are you paying for lunch?" When she says yes, I order a second cocktail.

“How long before that David Sutton storms in here and tries to put me in my place? I hope he shows up so he can pay like he did last time.” The mention of David makes my stomach sink to my feet, and I look away from Jade. “Oh. What happened?” she asks. “Trouble in paradise already?”

“Paradise? I wouldn’t say it was ever that. It was an arrangement, and I let my feelings get involved.”

Jade rests her hand on mine. “Delaney, feelings always become an issue in these circumstances. That’s how human beings are wired. I’m sure he’s developed some too, especially after the way he’s defended you to me.” She squeezes my hand, and I squeeze back.

“I doubt it. He went out on a date on Monday, and I feel like I’ve been punched in the gut.”

“Ouch,” she says.

“Yeah. He didn’t come home that night, and he’s been out of town the last two nights for business. I feel so stupid for thinking I can just hook up with someone, especially when I live and work with them. Anyway,” I wave my hand around. “I’m looking for a room to rent on Craigslist. But enough about that. Let’s talk party.” I’ve hired Jade to plan the bachelorette party I’m throwing for Summer. “And Summer says you’re invited to join us if you want.”

“Um, yes.” She giggles and gets giddy at the invitation. “I’d love to. Okay, let’s talk party.” She pulls out her iPad. “But think about this. You can move in with me. My townhouse has three bedrooms, and you can rent one. It will be just us. I’d love to have you. I’ve really come to like you.”

I don’t know if it’s the booze or my emotions, but tears cloud my vision and I nod at my cousin. “Me too.” She moves to my side of the booth, and we hug for the first time ever. “You know what? Forget David Sutton. I have his credit card, and he’s paying for this lunch, not you.” We high five, and she calls the waitress over to order another to go entrée for her dinner tonight. “Okay, enough of that jerk. Let’s plan the best bachelorette party in history.”

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“HEY, GUYS.” IT’S FRIDAY MORNING, AND I’M IN THE OFFICE kitchen pouring myself a cup of coffee when my brother and Summer walk in holding hands and giggling. Summer’s smile drops the moment she hears my voice. “Hi, Summer.” She glares at me before she turns her head away.

“Hey,” Max grumbles.

“Anyone seen Delaney?” She didn’t come home last night, and all my calls went unanswered. Her phone was off, and I have no idea where she’s been. I spent the entire night on the couch downstairs waiting for her to come home.

“What do you care?” Summer says. “I’ll see you later, baby,” she says to Max before she storms out of the kitchen. I think I hear her mumble jerk on her way out.

I sip my coffee and have some relief for the first time today. Summer knows where she is and she’s safe. Max eyes me, and I walk out of the kitchen, not wanting to hear whatever bullshit he was going to say, but he’s in my office before I can sit at my desk. I lean back in my chair and stare at the ceiling.

“What?” I ask him.

“I told you not to upset my wife,” he growls.

“She’s not your wife yet.” He’s not amused by my words. He scowls as if that’s supposed to scare me. “I didn’t upset her. I didn’t do anything to her, so I don’t know why she’s angry with me.” I can’t stand anyone I care about being upset with me. “Make her stop being mad. I hate it.”

“I told you not to touch her. I asked one fucking thing of you, and you couldn’t keep your dick in your pants. That’s your biggest problem, you whore. You don’t think Delaney called Summer and told her about your date as soon as you left? All you had to do—”

I hold a hand up to shut him up. I’m tired. I’m hungry and not in the mood for a lecture from anyone right now.

“Just shut up,” I tell him. I sit up and log into my computer. Max doesn’t leave. In fact, he sits across from me and crosses his arms.

“You look like shit,” he says. “Are you hungover?”

“Nope.” I stopped after my second drink last night. I made sure I was okay to drive if I needed to go get her. I look through my email and find nothing from Delaney, but the green light on her instant messenger is on, so she’s here.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I do not.” I open up instant messenger and start to type a message, but I can’t think of a single word.

“Fine.” He finally stands and walks toward the door, but he stops at my next words.

“This is all your fucking fault,” I say to him. I take a paperclip and throw it at him. It lands in the middle of his back. He turns around and takes a seat in the chair across from me. “You called me on Monday and invited me and Delaney to dinner.”

“My dinner invitation made you go fuck another woman?”

“You called and assumed I’d take Delaney. Like the four of us were going on some double date where our women are best friends and we’re in this relationship utopia, which is bullshit.” Even to me my words sound stupid. “Caleb assumes I’m with Delaney. Caleb of all people,” I whisper. “Caleb who never sees beyond himself, and if he—”

“I invited you to dinner, not to join a commune. And for the record, I am in relationship utopia, and I love it.”

“Well, I don’t want to be in fucking relationship utopia, fuckhead. Or any kind of romantic relationship.”

“Oh, yeah.” He gestures at me. “This is much better. You look like you haven’t slept in a month.”

“So,” I continue, ignoring his last bout of sarcasm. “When Nancy called, I thought it was a sign from God.”

“A sign from God? You think God was telling you to go out and fuck Nancy? Tell me, David, what religion do you belong to?”

“Have you always been so damn sarcastic? For the record, I didn’t fuck Nancy or anyone else, okay. Delaney is the only person I’ve been with, but I could have fucked Nancy. We had drinks, and she was practically begging for it, but I walked her to her car and got in mine. Nothing happened, you nosy asshole.” I put both hands on my face and ask myself why I feel guilty when I did nothing.

“Then where the hell did you spend the night on Monday if you didn’t fuck anyone?”

“Why am I being interrogated? Did you fuck Summer last night?” When he stares at me, I add, “See how inappropriate your question was?”

“We left work and went out to dinner. When we got home, we made love twice and soaked in the tub for about an hour. Now, where the hell were you?” He looks into my face until I confess.

“I went to a hotel, fuckhead. I went alone. Is that a crime? I couldn’t go home to her, even though that’s all I wanted to do. I want to be free of this hell. And this is another reason why I’m fighting this. The fact that you know I didn’t come home on Monday like I’m some wayward teenager who needs to be chastised is absurd.”

“Oh, poor David. Our women are best friends. So what? And now you want privacy? You tell me every little detail about your sex life whether I want to hear it or not, which I don’t. But now you’re bothered that I know where you spent the night on Monday?”

“Our women? I don’t have a woman.” I ignore everything else he said. He’s right. I have no boundaries when it comes to talking about my conquests with him. The only time I’ve been discreet is when I’ve been with Delaney.

“Yeah, that might be true after your childish behavior. Grow up, David.” He stands and walks to my side of the desk. He sits on the side and looks over at me. “I’ve been where you’re at. I fought my feelings for Breeze too. I put up one hell of a fight, and losing that fight was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Well, great for you, but which part of I don’t want a relationship didn’t you hear?” He stands and sighs as if he’s disappointed in me.

“Yeah, this version of you is so much better. Don’t worry about being in a relationship because I’m sure you’ve completely turned her off. And she’s moving out. Her cousin Jade offered to let her move in, so all your problems are solved. That’s where she was last night. I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before she finds another job, and you’ll never have to see her again and you can go back to fucking a different woman every night. You win. Good for you.” He taps my shoulder and walks out of my office. I put my head down on my desk and bang it three times.

I should go to his office, put my hands around his throat, and kill him. The only reason I don’t is because he has a baby on the way, and because his fiancée would probably kill me too. I follow him into his office. I don’t bother to knock. I just let myself in and stand in front of his desk. He looks up at me and doesn’t say a word. We stare at each other until I look away and sit on the chair he has in front of his desk.

“Okay, so maybe my actions weren’t the best,” I admit.

Max still doesn’t say a word. He types something on his computer, but I continue. “I feel bad about it, okay.”

“Well, congratulations for having feelings, Davie.”

“Oh, stop being an ass. When you got yourself in trouble with Summer, I helped. Can you throw some help my way,

fuckhead? I need you.” I get up from the chair and throw myself on the couch he has in the corner of his office. I put an arm over my face and shroud myself in darkness.

“My situation was different. I was in a relationship with Summer. We had just moved in together. Celia tried to mess with that. You’re the one messing up your own life, and you just admitted to me a few minutes ago that you don’t want to be in a relationship. If that’s true, the best thing to do is to let her go. She can find someone else who wants—”

“Oh, fuck that. I’d kill that guy.” Not only is her body mine, but the rest of her too. I still don’t understand how Mitch didn’t see how lucky he was to be with her. The very idea of Delaney with someone else makes my skin itch. “While I was alone in that hotel room, I realized that I do want her. More than just sex, and I freaked out. I care about her. She’s beautiful and sweet. Despite her fucked up family, she’s kind and giving. She never has a bad word to say about anyone other than Mitch. She doesn’t even trash-talk her parents and brother. I look forward to going home to her. We cuddle at night.” I sit up and put my head down and stare at the floor. “And I swear to God, Max, if you repeat what I’m going to say to you next, I’ll never speak to you again.”

He perks up at that and waits.

“She reminds me of our mother. Not in looks or anything, but in the way she carries herself. She’s sweet and thoughtful like our mom. Jesus, I need a whole team of shrinks to come help me analyze that.” I cover my face with my hands. “Don’t ever repeat it.”

The office goes deathly quiet for a full minute.

“Since I’m no psychiatrist, I’ll leave the last thing you said alone,” he says.

“Thank you.”

“But you Cuddle? The horror. So, she makes you happy?” He holds my stare until I nod. “Then why did you sabotage it?”

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t stick my dick in any other pussy,” I say quickly. “I can salvage this, right?” Max gets up and sits next to me. He puts a hand on my back.

“You can, but you have to be sure it’s what you want. Otherwise, leave her alone. She can be free to be with someone who wants all the things that she wants. Someone who will give her those things freely. Can you do that?”

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“LET ME WHEEL THESE FOR YOU, MS. DELANEY,” LARRY, THE UPS delivery man says. He puts the three boxes of office supplies on his dolly and follows me from the reception desk to my cubicle at the back of the office. He sets them on an empty desk.

“Thanks.” He grins at me and pulls out his phone.

“Let me show you my twins. My wife got their Halloween costumes already.” He shows me a picture of two five-year-old boys dressed as superheroes. Whenever I run into him making a delivery, he’ll show me pictures of his sons and wife. “Valerie says she’s getting me a costume too, but I told her I’m too old for that nonsense.”

“You’re never too old for Halloween, Larry. And if your wife gets you a costume, you put it on, you hear me?” He nods at me.

“Happy wife, happy life. Truest words ever spoken.” He slides the phone back into his pocket and offers me a fist bump. After bumping fists, he tells me he’ll see me tomorrow.

I look up and find David a few feet away, leaning against the wall. I turn away immediately and curse the fact that my pulse has now sped up. I’ve done a good job forcing myself not to think about him today. I’ve managed to keep all our communication to emails. The one time I had to go into his office to drop off a contract, he wasn’t there so I left it on his desk. Now, here he is, and I don’t know how to deal with him.

He crosses the room, and I take a step back. The last thing I want to do is smell another woman on him. I refuse to speak first, so I grab a letter opener and break the seal of one of the packages.

“Delaney,” he says, clearing his throat.

“Yes, Mr. Sutton.” I look up, and some of the color leaves his face. I’ve called him Mr. Sutton before, but only when I was being playful. There is nothing playful in my tone right now, and I think he realizes it.

“Mr. Sutton? Really, Delaney?”

I put the letter opener down and address him. “What is it? Do you want me to make dinner reservations for you and Mariah? Or Tessa?” I hold his stare when I ask that. My phone vibrates on my desk, and it’s an alert from Tinder. He sees it too, but I snatch the phone before he can take it and put it in my pocket.

“Fucking Tinder again? Really? Are you incapable of going without dick?” He tries to go for my phone, but I shove his hand away and take a step back.

“Don’t touch me,” I hiss. “And you’re one to talk. You still have the stench of that woman on you. And it’s disgusting.”

“That’s ridiculous, not to mention impossible.” He runs a hand through his hair. “We need to talk, but we can do that at home later.”

“At home? I’m moving out, so you don’t have to worry about me. I won’t be at your place tonight, so feel free to bring your date back. I’ve taken all my clothes out of your closet in case she’ll need the space. Don’t stay away from your own house because of me. I’ll be back to get the rest of my stuff this weekend.”

I take paper and other office supplies out of the box. He huffs and rolls his eyes to the ceiling.

“Can we have a conversation later? That’s all I’m asking.” Then as if he’s searching for patience, he mutters, “Please.”

“There’s nothing left to say.” My phone buzzes, and I pull it out my pocket. Before I can read the message from Jade, David snatches it from me.

“I’m sick of this fucking Tinder app.” I try to take the phone from him, but he gives me his back, and I can’t snatch it. “I’m sick of Jade too. I don’t trust her.” He finally hands me the phone, and I want to smack the smug look off his face. I check my apps and Tinder is gone. He walks away without another word, but I get a text from him about a minute later.

DAVID: I’LL BE HOME AROUND SIX. LET’S TALK THEN. PLEASE.

I DON’T REPLY, AND I DON’T INTEND ON TALKING TO HIM. AT least not tonight. If he wants to end things, I’m going to need a few more days to get used to the idea of no more David. I miss the man who watches movies with me in his bed while the cat sits at our feet. Sometimes she’ll sit on his head. I miss the guy who holds me at night after making love to me or after fucking me. I miss the man who always finds a way to touch me when we’re in the same room. When we walked into Max’s house together, holding hands, I thought we had turned a corner from casual hookups to inching closer to coupledness. I miss the protective guy who promised that no one else in my family would get a chance to hurt me because he would be there to fight for me. I’ve never been around a man so kind. A man who loves his family the way he does and who does his best by his employees.

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IT'S AFTER NINE O'CLOCK WHEN I PULL INTO A SECLUDED neighborhood of townhomes. It was eight o'clock when I realized Delaney wasn't coming home, and when I checked her room, about half of her clothes were missing. True to her word, nothing of hers was in my closet or dresser drawers. I was unprepared for the feeling in the pit of my stomach at her things being gone.

It took me less than ten minutes to find an address for Jade Thornton. She only lives eight miles away from me, two towns over. The tires of my Porsche screech when I make the sharp turn onto her street. She's in the last house in a cul-de-sac, and Delaney's white SUV is sitting in her driveway. The lights are on, but I don't see any sign of life in the house. After everything Delaney's told me about her family, I don't trust this Jade, and it makes my head spin that Delaney would give her the time of day. As far as I'm concerned, she comes from a family of vipers who would eat their own young.

I park behind her car, blocking her in, ready to remind her how ridiculous she's acting when we weren't exclusive. Not to mention, I didn't do anything beyond kissing Nancy's cheek. I walk through the grass, and when I get to the door, I don't bother knocking first. I turn the doorknob, and it opens.

"Fucking hell," I mutter under my breath. They don't even know to lock the fucking door. "Delaney!" I yell as I walk through the front door. "Where the hell are you?" I find them in the back of the house, standing over the kitchen island. There are several Chinese food containers out, and Delaney is

holding one and a pair of chopsticks. There are two bottles of wine opened, and it looks like they are drinking directly from the bottle. “I can’t believe you would come stay here with her.” I point at her cousin without bothering to look in Jade’s direction.

Delaney puts down her container and looks around the kitchen almost as if she can’t believe I’m here.

“My name is Jade Thornton, and I happen to be her family, but please, make yourself at home.” She gestures toward me and goes back to her food container.

“Let’s go,” I say to Delaney. I grab her hand and pull her toward the front door. She tries to pull away, but mine is like a lock around her wrist.

“David! Let me go.” I stop walking, and she yanks her hand free from mine. “I’ve already had twenty-four years of being told what to do. I don’t let anyone control me anymore. I want you to go.” She turns her back to me, returns to the kitchen island, and grabs another container of food.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Oh, really?” Jade asks, challenging me. “We’ll see about that.” She picks up her phone, and I snatch it from her.

“I came here to talk to you,” I say to Delaney.

“Go talk to Mariah.” She doesn’t bother to look up at me as she eats.

“Asshole,” I hear Jade whisper.

“It wasn’t like that,” I say in my defense.

Delaney ignores me, but Jade doesn’t. “Oh, really? What was it like then?” When I only give her a blank stare, she says, “What? You barged into my house. Enlighten me.”

“Lock the damn doors if you don’t want people to barge in,” I snap at Jade. Then I give her my back. “Delaney, can I talk to you alone for a minute, please?” I hold both hands up to show that I come in peace. She slams her food container down and finally looks into my eyes. God, I’ve missed her brown

eyes. I even miss that little mole she has underneath the left one. All I want to do is bring her home and kiss it.

“Fine. Go ahead, but I’m not asking Jade to leave because this is her house.” Jade ignores me while she eats, but I know she’s going to listen to every word.

“I’m sorry. I was an asshole.”

“You got that right,” Jade says under her breath. Then she speaks up and says, “I find it ironic that you’re the one who ended up hurting Delaney after all the threats you hurled my way.”

“Nobody asked you,” I say without bothering to look at her.

“It’s my house. I can say whatever the hell I want. One of the perks,” she says.

I decide I’m done speaking with Jade for today. “Can we step outside, please, Delaney?” I ask, craning my neck to give Jade the side eye. She glares right back at me.

“Fine. You have three minutes.” I follow Delaney through the sliding glass door and onto a small patio. Jade doesn’t follow us outside, but she stands on the other side of the door and watches.

Delaney crosses her arms but remains quiet.

“I freaked out,” I say. “I get home and you’ve made dinner. You were hugging Caleb, and I wanted to punch his face for touching you. Then Max calls and invites me to dinner with him and Summer and assumes you’re coming. Caleb thinks we’re together.” She doesn’t react to any of my statements, and I take a deep breath while I think of what to say next. “I’m a confirmed bachelor. You’ve been sleeping in my bed. You put your clothes in my closet. You were starting to feel like a live-in girlfriend. It freaked me the hell out, and when Nancy called, I fucked everything up and met her for drinks.”

Her eyes narrow at my confession, and she takes a step closer to me. “Nancy? Who the hell is Nancy? I thought you were with Mariah or Tessa? Or Heather. She’s called a few times too, but exactly how many women are you juggling?”

Damn. Rookie mistake. I never say another woman's name to another woman. I'm better than this. Delaney's been messing with my head since day one.

"I'm not juggling anyone. Listen—"

She holds up her hand and says, "Fine. Be a confirmed bachelor, David. There is nothing worse than being in a relationship when you don't want to be. I get that. Go and live your best life, and I'll do the same." She turns her back and starts toward the glass door. I take her elbow and keep her in place.

"So, you're just going to walk away from me?" I ask. "We agreed to just sex. Those were the terms, remember? I was going to see someone else, and I let you know. You agreed to it, so you don't get to throw a hissy fit." I want to bite my own tongue. That's not what I came here to say, but her dismissive attitude is infuriating.

"So, you want to talk about rules?" She yanks her elbow from me but turns to face me. "What else did you say? No sleeping in your bed. No cuddling. No dates. Remember that? And only fucking. No lovemaking. Guess what, David? You broke every single rule. I haven't spent a night out of your bed. Not only that, I sleep in your arms. You took me out on dates where you fed me lobster, made me laugh, and made me feel like I was the most beautiful woman who ever lived. You told me about your past. You promised to be my protector. You made love to me time after time. So, to hell with you and your rules." She shoves my chest, but it has no impact. She does it again, and I wrap my hands around her wrists.

"You're right. I freaked out—"

She talks over me and says, "I own my part in this. I'm the one who offered you no strings sex. I offered you my body without feelings or attachment, but I failed. I developed feelings because I like you. I'm just going to say it because I've lived my entire life around people who want to silence me. I care about you. I've never met someone like you, and I want you all to myself. I became attached, and you didn't, and I realize that I can't be in an arrangement like the one we

agreed to. I'm not looking for a white picket fence, but I can't sleep with someone and not develop feelings. I realize it's not fair for me to change the rules in the middle of the game. I get that, so I'm not going to—"

"Will you let me finish?" I yell over her. "There's more. I'm not done—"

"But you were a complete asshole. You could have just told me it was too much instead of announcing you were going out on a date and for me to go back to my room. As if you were done with me and discarded me like I don't matter. Like I was some used tissue you didn't need anymore. I've had enough of that and—"

I interrupt and say, "You're not seriously comparing me to that piece of shit Mitch, are you? Are you fucking kidding me, Delaney? I didn't treat you that way. I'm trying to explain that I freaked out and—"

"And you went and fucked another woman. I'm so sorry you freaked out." The sarcasm oozes out of her. "You don't have to worry about that anymore. Just go ahead and—"

"I didn't fuck anybody!" I yell. Her head rolls back, and she finally shuts up. "Nothing happened beyond a kiss on the cheek. We had drinks and we got in our cars and went our separate ways."

She scoffs and shakes her head. "I'm not stupid. Don't treat me like I am, but not only are you a liar, you're a hypocrite too. You delete my dating app, but you get to fuck someone." She eyes me up and down before she turns and gives me her back. I walk behind her and put my hands on her shoulders. God, she feels good. I've missed how she feels in my arms. Hell, I miss having her close, and despite being in the same building today, she was a million miles away.

"I swear on everything that nothing happened. I went to a hotel because I was too embarrassed to face you." I slowly spin her around. "Please come back." I quickly grab both her hands and bring them to my lips.

"Come back to what?"

“Come back and be with me. Just you and me. I don’t want anyone else, and I haven’t since I found you in my bed. You’ve just changed my life in such a short time, and it’s taken me a minute to come to grips with my feelings.” I cradle her face and stroke her soft skin. “I’m sorry I upset you. That’s the last thing I want, so please forgive me for having a moment.” I lean down and rest my forehead on hers.

“What do you mean by be with you?” She inches away so she can look into my eyes.

“Be with me and only me.”

“Is this because you want me or because you don’t want anyone else to have me? Do you see me as a possession? As something only you can have because if that’s how you feel, I can’t. I’m through being a possession. I have no interest in being your arm candy.”

I run my thumb over her full bottom lip. “I do want you on my arm because you’re so damn beautiful. I do want to possess you, and only want you for me. I do, but there’s so much more than that. I don’t want to control you, Delaney. I just want to be with you because we’re good together. Because we fit. Because I didn’t know I wanted someone like you until you came into my life.”

“And you’ll stop being a slut? Word gets around the office,” she says.

“I haven’t been a slut since we met. There’s been no one else. And please don’t ever download any more dating apps, or I swear I will break your phone.”

“So, you want me to be your girlfriend?” she asks.

“Yes, and I want the world to know.”

“And you didn’t fuck that woman? I swear to God, I will know the moment I get a look at your dick. If you did, I will cut it off, do you hear me?”

I instantly put a hand over my crotch. “I promise I didn’t.”

“Before I agree to anything, I want you to block all those women in your phone and then delete their contact.”

“I will do that tonight, but you have to promise no more dating apps.”

“I’ll promise after you do as I’ve asked. And not tonight. Do it now while I watch.”

I finally cup her face and lean in for a kiss, but she pulls away. I drop my hands, pull out my phone, and go through my contacts. I block and delete every woman who is not a business associate while she looks over my shoulder.

“Now, pull out your dick and let me see it. I’ll know if it’s been in anyone.”

“Are you serious?” I ask. I look around and don’t see any of Jade’s neighbors. She crosses her arms and waits, so I move from the sliding glass door and away from her nosy cousin’s prying eyes. Delaney follows me into a secluded corner where I pull out my dick. She looks down, grabs it, and inspects it. It turns to granite in her hand.

“Okay. I believe you.” I put it back in my pants and she finally lets me pull her into me. I wrap my arms around her and feel her against my body. She capitulates and kisses me back. She slides her fingers through my hair, and it’s like I’m breathing for the first time since Monday night.

We finally break the kiss and start to walk back to the house only to find Jade staring at us through the glass door. She doesn’t smile or scowl, she just watches while she drinks wine directly from the bottle. She finally opens the sliding glass door and says, “You hungry? We have plenty of food.” She leaves the door open for us. I take Delaney’s hand in mine and we go inside. “I’m gonna go shower, then we can finish planning the bachelorette party,” Jade says. “And you,” she points at me, “you’re going to pay a shit ton for that party. And if you upset my cousin again, I’ll slice your face.” With that, she takes her bottle of wine and leaves the kitchen.

I grab a container of fried rice and a set of chopsticks.

“If I ever hear the name Nancy again, I’m going to punch you in the throat,” Delaney says.

“Understood,” I say.

“I want affection and romance, David. I want the opposite of what I had with Mitch.”

I put my food down and say, “If I ever hear the name Mitch again, I’m going to find him and punch *him* in the throat.”

“Mitch,” she says. We stare at each other and burst into laughter. I pull her to me and kiss her neck.

“Will you come back home tonight?” I ask.

“Maybe it’s best if I stay here for now.” She puts a finger to my lips and says, “Hear me out. I don’t want to move too fast. I care about you, David, and I want to try this, but let’s date like normal people. We already work together. We don’t need to live together too. That’s too fast, too soon.”

“But you will spend lots of time with me there, right?”

“Just try and keep me away.”

I nod at her while I absorb her words. She’s not wrong, but I’ve really loved having her there these past few weeks. “Okay. We’ll try it your way, but I’ll miss having you there.”

I sit at the kitchen island, and she sits next to me. I put a hand on her lap while I eat.

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THE FOUR OF US SPLURGE ON DESSERT, EVEN THOUGH SUMMER has a wedding dress to fit into and Olivia and I have our bridesmaid dresses. The only person who is not part of the wedding party at our table is Jade.

Summer's phone rings while the waitress brings our tray of sweetness.

"Hey, baby," Summer says into the phone. "We're just finishing up. Are you on your way home?" She picks up her fork and takes a huge chunk of her cheesecake. "Okay. I should be home before you then." She listens while he talks and says, "I love you too." She puts the phone down.

"I still can't believe you're in love and marrying the sullen Sutton," Olivia says. Sullen Sutton is Max's nickname around the office. "But thank God because he's gotten a lot nicer. You're buying dinner, right?" She flags the waitress over and orders another drink once Summer confirms she's paying.

"Let me try that." Jade swipes some of my molten chocolate cake, and I get a piece of her red velvet.

"Oh! I almost forgot," Summer says. "I want to throw a Halloween party but we won't be back from our honeymoon until six days before. I want to hire you to plan it, Jade. If you have the time."

Jade quickly pulls out her phone and types something in. "Hell yes. I'd love to."

"And I'll help her. I know what you like. Just enjoy your honeymoon, and we'll do the work," I tell Summer.

“Sounds fun,” Olivia says while she sips her cocktail. “I am invited, right?”

“Yes, Liv,” Summer says.

Once we finish dessert, Summer pays and we leave the restaurant. Jade met us at the office, and I drove everyone here. We walk through the packed parking lot to find my car. “Where the hell did I park?” I look around and don’t see my white SUV anywhere. “I thought it was right here.”

“Oh my God! Look!” Olivia points to the end of the lot. A tow truck makes a left, and it looks like he’s towing my car. I start to run through the parking lot, knowing full well that I’ll never catch it. I’m barely halfway there when the tow truck turns onto the main road and out of my reach. I stop running and put my hands on my knees while I try and catch my breath.

A couple of minutes later, my dinner companions reach me, and we all look around as if my car would suddenly reappear. My knees wobble, and I start to fall. Jade is beside me in a second and holds me steady, and Summer runs to my side. All I can picture is her fiancé yelling at all of us if she had fallen.

“What the hell was that? Do you not pay your car note?” Olivia asks. “That happened to my cousin, but he’s never paid a bill in his life. My granny says men shouldn’t be allowed to control their own paychecks.”

“Liv, now is not the time for one of your grannyisms, okay,” Summer says. “Your parents did this, didn’t they?” she says to me.

I can feel tears start to well in my eyes. Not for the car but for the humiliation. I wonder if they’ve been watching me and decided to do this while I was out with my friends. This is their way of showing me that they’re in charge, but they could not be more wrong.

I blink away the tears. Tears won’t fix anything.

“Yeah, it was them,” I say through clenched teeth. I yank my purse open and rummage through it for my phone.

“This is bullshit. I’m going to call my mom to see if she knows anything.” Jade gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze and moves away a few steps.

“I’ll get an Uber,” Summer says. She takes Olivia’s hand and pulls her away. Summer knows me. She knows I’m going to call my mother and doesn’t want Olivia to overhear my conversation. At this point, I don’t give a fuck who hears it.

Since I don’t have her number saved in my phone, it takes me a few seconds to remember and dial it. The phone rings three times before she answers, sounding calm and unbothered. I can picture her now drinking a glass of red wine in the pristine, white kitchen.

“Mother,” I hiss.

“Delaney,” she says as if we’re not estranged.

“I want my car back.” I decide to get right to the point and not play games. “My grandparents gave me that car, and you have no rights to it.”

“Wrong. The car’s in my name. Always has been. Legally, it’s my car, and I want it back. When was the last time you called your grandmother?” she admonishes.

“She has Alzheimer’s. She has no idea who anyone is. Is that your justification for what you just did? What’s next? You want me to hold a séance to get in touch with grandpa from the great beyond. I don’t care whose name the car is in. It’s mine. It was a present for graduating college.”

She goes silent on the other end of the line, and I wonder what she’s thinking. I can read her expressions pretty well, but not being able to see her face puts me at a disadvantage. Whatever she’s thinking, I’m sure she’s surprised that my defiance, as she sees it, has gone this long. She probably expected me to come crawling back with my tail between my legs weeks ago.

“How do you think she could afford that car? From the money I’ve been giving her for years. She never spent a dime of it on herself, but she gives you a luxury car for your graduation?” She scoffs. “I told her the only way I’d let you

have it would be if she put it in my name. And why not? I paid for it.”

“Well, obviously that was her way of showing you that she didn’t need your money. The fact that she never spent it on herself and spent it on me. She didn’t need it, and you know what? I don’t either. You want the car? Take it and enjoy it. You’ve lost all control over me, and this is the last thing you can hold over my head, Mother. You’ve taken my job, but guess what? I found another. You took my home away from me, but I’ve landed somewhere better. Somewhere where I’m not controlled or judged. What else you got, huh?” I can hear her breathing hard on the other line, but she doesn’t speak. I bet some color has crept across her light brown skin. “There will never come a day when I will marry Mitch, so give it up,” I practically yell into the phone.

“Mitch has moved on,” she says calmly. “He won’t take my calls. Seeing you whore yourself for that David Sutton was all he could suffer.” She clucks her tongue as if she’s disgusted by me.

“Well thank fucking God for small miracles.”

“I did not raise you to talk like gutter trash.”

“You didn’t raise me to think for myself either, but that’s beside the point. Take the car and shove it. I want nothing to do with you, but one day, you’re gonna go too far, and you’ll regret it.” I end the call before she can utter another word.

Summer pulls me into a hug, and An Uber shows up a few minutes later. The four of us pile in, and no one utters a single word on the ten-minute drive back to the office. The sting of humiliation still hurts, but I shove that aside. Everyone here knows my history, and I’m not ashamed of it. We all have our shit, but at least I got out before things went too far.

The office parking lot is deserted, but I spot David’s car in his reserved spot. He doesn’t have his Porsche today. He has an Escalade, and all I want to do is climb in it and go home with him, but I refuse to be clingy.

“I’ll drop you off at home, Summer,” Jade says. “I can drop you off at work tomorrow, Delaney, but it will have to be early because I’ll be gone for the next two days.”

She’s going to a party expo in New Hampshire. Before I can respond or think of a way to get back and forth for the next couple of days, the front door of the building opens, and David walks out. I almost want to weep at the sight of him. I’m trying to not be clingy, but we did agree that he would come by Jade’s tonight after my dinner with the girls.

He winks when he sees me, but his steps falter when he looks into my eyes. He looks at my friends and I’m sure he quickly reads the room.

“What happened?” he asks. He stands in front of me and puts both hands on my shoulders. He looks me over as if he’s trying to ascertain that I’m okay. “What the fuck happened? Someone better speak up?” He glances around the empty parking lot and stares at Jade as if this is somehow her fault. “What did you do?” He points at her.

“It wasn’t her. My mother had my car towed. Jade had nothing to do with it,” I tell him.

“I’m getting sick and tired of you blaming me for shit,” Jade says. “And don’t point your damn finger at me.”

“My finger is the least of your problems,” David says to Jade, but then he lets out a breath as if he’s relieved. “She took your car?” he scoffs. “Let her have it. She’s running out of things to take from you. That means she’s desperate, and she’ll go too far soon. I hope she does because I’m dying to teach her a lesson. Come home with me and we’ll figure out a plan.” He takes me in his arms and hugs me tight. It takes everything in me not to weep, but I do wrap my arms around him and pull him closer. “I’ll fix it,” he whispers in my ear. “I’ve got you.” He kisses my temple, and a soft sob slips out.

He holds me to him, and I bury my face in his chest, inhaling him. I’ve never needed a man in my life. My mother’s always run things, and I sure as hell never needed Mitch. The boyfriends I had before him were in high school and college

and were never very serious. This is the first time I've been with a man who has shown me a modicum of care.

"Well, it's probably a good idea to go with David since I have to leave the house by five-thirty tomorrow. If you want, I can pack a bag and drop it off there for you in the morning," Jade offers.

"We'll follow you, and I'll grab a few things," I tell her.

David cups my face, nods, and plants a soft kiss on my lips.

"Aww," I think I hear Olivia say.

"Summer, I'll drop you off at home before my brother has a heart attack. Did you guys Uber here?" he asks, and when we tell him we did, he shakes his head. "No one tell Max, or he'll kill all of us." He intertwines our fingers and offers Summer his other arm.

After helping us both to his car, we take Summer home and see her inside before driving to Jade's. It's almost nine o'clock by the time we get to his place. It's only been a week since I left, but I've missed it. Pumpkin comes running between my legs once we step through the kitchen. I pick her up and put my face in her fur.

"Ms. Kitty," I sigh. "I've missed you." David snakes an arm around my waist. "Not as much as I've missed your daddy," I whisper.

"I've missed you too." He kisses my temple again. "Come on. Let's go upstairs." With Pumpkin in my arms, he takes me upstairs to his bedroom. I expect him to strip me naked and have his way with me, but he doesn't. He rubs my shoulders but soon leaves the bedroom for the adjoining bathroom. I hear water running when he comes back, and without a word, he undresses me and leads me to the bathtub. He undresses himself and slips in behind me. He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me to his chest.

The hot water fills the tub, and neither one of us speaks, but he washes me and massages my back. Once the tub is full, he turns off the water and pulls me to him. I rest my head on

his chest and curse the fact that my hair will be a mess after getting wet. He slowly rubs my shoulders, and I lean into his strong hands as I close my eyes.

I could never imagine doing this with Mitch or anyone else from my past. Mitch would never take a bath with me. He would never try to soothe me when I was upset. He would either not notice or not care.

“I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry, okay. Promise me you won’t worry,” he says.

“I’m not worried, David. I’m upset and humiliated. She did this when I was out with my friends because she wanted to embarrass me. That’s really what I’m mad about. There’s literally nothing left that she can take from me.” He turns on the whirlpool and the water bubbles and massages my legs.

“Are you sure there’s nothing else?” he asks.

“I’m sure,” I say after thinking about it for a few seconds. “She wiped out my bank account. Fired me from my job, not that I would have continued working there, and kicked me out of the condo. There’s nothing left, and my father has done nothing at all. Not a thing. This is my life now.”

I pull away, turn to face him, and wrap my legs around him. “My life is still pretty fabulous. I have my best friend, who is like a sister to me, and I have this really amazing boyfriend. Even though he acted stupid that one time.” I slide my wet hands through his hair and pull his face close to mine.

“I’ll probably act stupid again.” I pull his hair harder and he pretends to wince. “But never with another woman.” I loosen my grip and he leans in for a kiss.

Minutes later, my back is to his chest with his strong arms wrapped around me. Despite what happened today, and the tension I had with David last week, I would not change a single thing about my life. It’s better now than it’s ever been. The only thing I would change would be that I had left Mitch sooner, but if I had, that probably would not have led me here. It happened when it was supposed to.

“I want this, David. I want to be with you.”

“You are with me, woman.” He bites my shoulder, shocking me. I jerk and water sloshes onto the floor. He stands and steps out of the tub. Water glistens on his naked body, and my mouth waters at the sight. His dick starts to get hard, and I bite my bottom lip. He offers me his hand and helps me out of the tub. After drying our bodies, he picks me up bridal style and carries me to his bed. He doesn’t make love to me like I expect. He pulls me into him, and he spoons me. “You know you can move back in.”

“I like the idea of us dating. We already work together. It’s too soon for us to live together too.”

“Well, I work with Caleb and he lives here. I love having you here, and I’m sorry I fucked that up. Come back.” He squeezes one of my breasts, then his hand slides down my body and lands between my legs.

“David,” I moan. I’m already wet when his fingers start to massage my clit. One finds its way inside. He pulls it out and puts it in my mouth. “Mmhmm.”

He lifts my leg, moving closer to me, and slowly slides inside of me. I close my eyes and forget everything but him.

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“SO, IS MY BOYFRIEND GOING TO LET ME BORROW A CAR UNTIL I can get myself something?” She looks in the mirror and adds lip gloss. I lean back and watch her primp and wonder how I’ve ever lived all these years without sharing a bathroom with a woman. In fact, with the exception of college, I’ve never shared a bathroom with anyone. I had my own growing up, and I’ve always lived alone since. Even when I was engaged to Bethany, we didn’t live together.

“Your boyfriend is going to do way better than that.” I approach her and touch the small of her back. She locks eyes with me through the mirror, and I wink at her. She turns her head and gives me a peck on the lips. “You’re already perfection. Let’s go.”

She blushes at the compliment, but I take her hand and lead her out of the bathroom. She puts on a pair of shoes along the way, and when we get downstairs, I help her put on her coat.

Once inside my car, she puts the radio back on that insipid morning show she likes and hums off-key when music plays.

“Where are you going?” she asks when she finally realizes we’re not on the route to the office.

“It’s a surprise.” I pretend to lock my lips and throw away the key. She doesn’t ask any more questions, and her eyes nearly bug out of her head when I pull into a car dealership. I turn off the car and turn to her. “Pick out whatever you want.

It's going to be in your name. There are no strings attached. I'm just a guy buying a car for his girlfriend."

"A rich guy," she clarifies.

"Very. Let's go."

I thought she would have picked out a sporty car, but she surprises me when she chooses a white Porsche Cayenne. Her reason is that Max will never let her put the baby in a sports car. I feel a shift after hearing her reason. She's absolutely right. Max will probably bubble wrap that kid when he's born, but the fact that she chose a car based on others does something to me. I don't bother telling her that it doesn't matter what car she drives. He's not letting anyone else drive that kid.

After signing the paperwork and getting her insured, I follow her to the office. It's mid-morning when we arrive, and she parks in the back of the lot, away from the cars. I wait for her at the door, and with our fingers intertwined, we ride the elevator up to the eighth floor.

Olivia waves at us just as she hangs up the phone.

"Olivia, I'll need your help around two. I have a couple of interviews for your position, and I want you to help conduct the interview with me." Her eyes widen in surprise, but she nods. She eyes our joined hands but says nothing while I walk Delaney to her desk.

"When I get paid on Friday," she says, running her hands over my lapels, "I'm going to take you out to dinner."

"Only if it's between your legs," I whisper right before I nip her ear. "Otherwise, I pay." I slap her ass and leave her desk.

When I get to my office, I text Max and ask him to come and see me. I expect him to tell me not to call him like an errant child, but he comes strolling into my office a few minutes later.

"So, I heard about the car." He sits down and grins at me. "Delaney told Summer, who told me."

I sigh and wave him off. “And? I seem to remember you got Summer a car too?” I turn on my desktop and put in my log-in information.

“Yeah, but I was in love with her at that time.”

I start to cough. He gets up and pats my back a little bit too forcefully.

“Please don’t infect me with your love disease. I’m just a guy with a lot of money who got his girlfriend a car. Let’s not read too much into it.”

He grins again and nods in agreement. I narrow my eyes at him. He never agrees with me without a fight.

“Of course,” he says. “What the hell did you call me in here for?”

“Sit. This will be good. I talked to Carl Gillis on the way in this morning. He worked at McCallister and Sloane. He told me he left because Sloane is a shitty manager and McCallister is a cokehead, and a bunch of employees have quit. McCallister hired Celia to help turn things around, which is probably why she’s poaching our employees. What Celia doesn’t know unfortunately is that the company is underwater. They’ve only gotten these recent accounts because of her. They’ve tried to sell the company twice, but they owe so much money no one wants it.”

Max leans back in his chair, but I can tell his interest is piqued. His eyes light up, and I can practically hear the wheels in his head spinning.

“God, I hope someone does buy it so Celia can be out of a job again.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. I think someone should buy it, and that someone should be us.” I get up and hand him over the report I got from our accountants. “It tells us what McCallister is worth, and what we can potentially buy it for. We can do this. We have the money, and I want to grow. We can make Sutton Marketing bigger and better for our children. The cherry on the sundae is we can fire Celia all over again.”

His eyes scan the report, but I know I have his interest. We've never officially divided the responsibilities, but I handle more of the overall management of Sutton Marketing, and Max works on finding new accounts.

“I want you to talk to our lawyers before we submit our letter of intent, but I'm serious. I want this, Max. I want this to become a true family business. We already have Summer working here, and I'm serious about mentoring her and teaching her everything. This is her family company now too. Let's not forget about Caleb. He's been a good addition.” Before I found out about my brother and Summer, my goal was to mentor her and make her a permanent part of the Sutton Marketing team. She was too smart to remain my personal assistant. Now that she's marrying Max, I want to do this even more. Part of me pictures doing the same for Delaney and making her a permanent fixture here too.

He puts the paperwork on the coffee table and stands. “I'm intrigued, but I want us to have a sit down with our accountants before we talk to the lawyers. If we do this, I want the pleasure of firing Celia again.”

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“WE ALL SHOULD HAVE TAKEN TODAY OFF,” I WHISPER TO myself. I let out a loud yawn, despite it being three o’clock in the afternoon on a Monday. Not only did we party until two o’clock in the morning the night of the wedding, but David’s mother hosted a brunch the next day for the members of the wedding party and some out-of-town guests. This was her first time opening the Sutton mansion, and despite Max and Summer leaving around three for their flight to Spain, we stayed until almost ten o’clock at night. It was a beautiful day filled with family and joy, and I didn’t think about mine for a second. I fed off the happiness and joy radiating off Summer, and there was no room for my issues yesterday.

I’m letting my problems go. Damon has called my cell, which he must have gotten from my mother. In fact, there are two messages from him on my phone that I haven’t listened to yet. I had no time or desire to listen over the weekend, but Mondays are different. Mondays bring you back to reality and make you conquer the things you’d set aside. One of the things I’ve put off is listening to my brother’s messages.

“Hey, Delly.” I haven’t heard Damon call me that nickname since I was a kid. He’s the only one who’s ever called me that. “Mom gave me your number, and I want to reach out and see how you are. It’s not the same without you. Give me a call, and let’s have dinner.”

No, thank you. I giggle at my desk. David would have a fit, and he might actually put hands on my brother. I don’t see him ever warming up to Damon, even if I forgive him. He’s

still frosty with Jade, and she's the most functional of my family members. She's been true to her word. She's given me a place to stay, and we've formed a friendship.

I listen to the second message. "Dad really wants to see you, Del. He feels really bad about what's happened. I don't think he knows how to approach you. You should call him."

I guess in my brother's mind, it's up to me to reach out to our father despite how horrible a parent he's been to me my entire life. I never saw it until recently, but I recognize it now. I have nothing to say to him. I delete both messages and log into my computer when my phone rings.

"Hey, Liv," I say. "I bet you can't wait to start your new job and get away from the phone." I wait for her to laugh or tell me something her granny would say, but she doesn't.

"Um, there's someone here to see you."

"For fuck's sake, it's not my mother, is it?" David will have her arrested, and I really don't want to see that today. I don't need the drama.

"Um, no. It's not your mother or anyone in your family."

"Sounds mysterious," I tease, relieved not to have to deal with them. "I'll be right there." I tell myself it's probably a delivery, but Olivia signs for deliveries more than I do, and she wouldn't call me about it.

My footsteps feel heavy as I walk to the reception desk. There's a man dressed in khakis holding an envelope.

"Delaney Lewis?" he asks.

"Yes. That's me."

"You've been served." He hands me the envelope and walks away. Olivia stands and covers her mouth with her hands. It takes me several moments for the man's words to sink in.

"Who the hell is suing you?" Olivia asks.

"It must be a mistake."

She waves me over, and I go stand next to her. The instant I rip open the envelope, she takes it from me and reads it.

“Oh my God! Your mom is suing you for a hundred thousand dollars.”

I snatch the paper from her, and sure enough, my mother has named me as a defendant in a lawsuit. My legs feel heavy while I read the document, trying my best to understand the legal jargon. My mouth goes dry, and I hear a loud pounding between my ears. Every time I think they’ve sunk as low as they can go and can’t go any lower, they manage to pull the rug out from under me.

I’m so busy reading the document that I don’t notice David when he gets to the desk.

“Hey. What’s wrong?” He rubs the back of my neck. I look up, and when he sees the look in my eyes, his easy-going demeanor drops. “What’s that?” He holds out his hand, and I give it to him.

After reading for a few seconds, he says, “You’ve got to be kidding me. Oh, she’s going to regret this. Come to my office, and we’ll figure this shit out.” He offers me his hand, and I take it. “Olivia, hold all my calls.” He puts a protective arm around my waist.

As soon as he closes the office door behind him, I unleash my anger. If my mother thought this would break me or cause me to fall apart, she miscalculated.

“Every time I think they’ve done it all, they manage to surprise me. Did you read that bullshit lawsuit? I failed to reimburse her for the expenses incurred. I didn’t want the fucking wedding. Now she wants me to pay her a hundred grand? Where the hell does she think I can get that amount of money from? This is just another way she thinks she’s going to regain control of me. God, how did I never see this coming?” I put both hands to my face and cover them. “I can’t afford a lawyer.”

He pulls me into his arms and drags me to the couch. I rest my head on his shoulder. “Max is a lawyer, even though he

hates it. He'll handle this for you."

"He's done so much for me already, I can't—" He holds up a hand and pulls out his phone. He taps the screen, and the phone starts to ring.

"What?" Max's face fills the screen. It's after nine pm in Ibiza, and he's in a white button-down shirt that's opened at the collar. "Do you people know this is the first day of our honeymoon? Our mother called. Summer's parents called twice. Even Caleb called."

Summer comes into the screen and wraps her arms around him. "Come to bed, Maxilicious." She gets on her tippy toes and bites his earlobe. She finally notices us and waves at the screen.

"Well, you haven't talked to me today yet, fuckhead, and I need your legal expertise. Delaney's parents have sued her for the cost of the wedding."

"What?" Summer gasps. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I wish," I say. "I'm this close to going to their office and giving them a piece of my mind. So far, all I've said is that I don't want to marry Mitch, but this one is personal."

"Hold on," Max says. "Was there ever any agreement that you'd pay them back?"

"Of course not. Never."

"Do you have any text messages, emails, or anything in writing that proves she agreed to pay without any expectation that you'd reimburse her?"

"I'm sure I have hundreds of them. Do you know how many times she reminded me of the hit her bank account was taking because of my wedding?"

"Email me the complaint, and I'll review it. If you only got served today, you probably have about twenty days to file an answer. Worst case scenario is I can ask the court for an extension. In the meantime, get me those emails and texts. Don't worry about this. This is another attempt at control."

I'm close to bursting into tears. Not because of the lawsuit, but because of the support that I have. David kisses my temple and tells me everything is going to be okay, and I believe him.

"Thanks, you guys. I'm sorry to interrupt your honeymoon. How's it going?" I ask, eager to hear about someone else.

"It's great, but we're exhausted. We're going to get in bed and relax," Summer says.

"Relax? Is that code for fucking?" David asks.

Summer's eyes widen, but she bursts into laughter.

"We say making love, David," she says back. "And he is my husband, so he better give me what I want." Max runs his nose along the side of her neck. "Oh my God, Delaney. I have a husband."

Max ends the call without another word.

"You know what, cookie? Let's go. I'm itching for a fight, and I've had all I'm going to take from your parents." He stands and offers me his hand. "They're going to learn today that when they fuck with you, they're fucking with me. And they don't want that." Once I'm on my feet, he goes to his desk, retrieves something from a drawer, and slides it into his jacket pocket.

"Let's go," I tell him.

THEIR OFFICE IS IN A THREE-STORY BUILDING IN A QUIET office park in the sleepy suburb of Weymouth. This must mean they have hospital privileges at South Shore Hospital. Before I shut off my car, I send my mom a text and tell her I'll need to speak with her later.

I hop out, open Delaney's door, and hold her hand in mine. She holds her head up high while we ride the elevator to the second floor, and she leads me down the long hallway to the suite that says Lewis Plastic Surgery. Her mother and father's names are listed. Delaney pushes the door open, and we go inside. She ignores the receptionist's voice and picks up her pace. I follow, holding onto her hand the entire time.

"Miss!" the woman from the front desk yells, but we both ignore her. "You can't go in there. I'm going to—"

I don't hear the rest of her threat. Delaney opens a door, and her mother is examining a woman's face.

"Excuse me, but I'm with a patient. Can you please—" She finally turns to face us. I've only seen her once, but she's surprised by us. She wasn't expecting this, but she recovers quickly and stands up to her full height. "Do I need to call security?"

"You're going to need a lot more than security," I tell her. "Go ahead and call them."

"We'll be in the small conference room. You have five minutes," Delaney says. She pulls me out of there and takes me into a small room a few feet away. Her father comes out of

another room and sees us walking down the hall. I'm in the middle of helping her remove her coat when he walks in.

Unlike her icicle of a mother, he smiles when he sees her, but when he approaches as if he's going to touch her, I step in between them. "I don't think so," I warn.

"Excuse me, but Delaney is my daughter." He tries to go around me, but I block him.

"Then maybe you should act like it." He takes a step back as if my words are a physical blow. I'm not violent. Never have been, but right now, I'd really like to deck him for letting his wife hurt his daughter.

"Who the hell are you to barge in here and—"

"I'm David Sutton, that's who I am. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Dr. Pascale Lewis, and you can get the hell out."

Just as I'm about to tell him where to go, Lynn Lewis steps in. She slowly closes the door behind her, and if I didn't know any better, I'd think she was nervous as she looks from me to her husband.

"This isn't a good time," she says. "You two need to leave now." Her eyes dart around the room. She starts to wring her hands, but I think she catches herself and puts them down. She stands straighter as if she's trying her best to be confident.

I pull out the legal summons from my suit jacket and slam it down on the table. Delaney picks it up, and I swallow the words I have on my tongue. She should go first. This is about her, not me.

"I never wanted that damn wedding," she begins.

"Watch your mouth," Lynn says. She tries to grab the papers, but Delaney moves them away.

"I sure as fuck didn't want to marry Mitch, and you knew it. You basically tried to force me, and that was bad enough."

"I did no such thing. He proposed and you accepted," Lynn insists.

“I didn’t. He didn’t propose either. He opened up a ring box, and you said I would marry him. You remember, don’t you, Dad? I know you only pay attention to your son but think back. Do you remember me saying yes?”

“You leave your father—”

“We already know you don’t want to marry him. We accept that,” her father says.

Delaney scoffs and goes around her mother, but Lynn tries to block her. She hands the paper to her father. Lynn tries to grab them, but Pascale gets it first. “You accept it so much you’re suing me for a hundred grand?”

Lynn closes her eyes and exhales after Delaney makes her announcement. She looks to the ceiling. Then she slowly looks at her husband. She’s stopped breathing. Right now, I’d bet my entire trust fund that he has no idea she’s done this. He’s either blind or stupid.

“What? Of course not. We would never do such a thing. What are you talking—” The rest of the words go unsaid while he reads the lawsuit. The room goes deathly quiet, and I lock eyes with her mother. The color has left her face, and she puts a hand to her throat.

“You sued our daughter?” Pascale asks, his voice incredulous. He takes a step closer to her and she steps back. “I’m talking to you, Lynn. You filed a bullshit lawsuit against Delaney because she doesn’t want to do what you want? You can’t be serious.”

Lynn looks around the room. I’m sure the wheels in her head are spinning while she thinks of a believable excuse.

“It was the only way. She wouldn’t talk to me. This was only to open the door for her to talk. I didn’t really intend to —”

“Bullshit,” Pascale says, taking the word right out of my mouth. I pull Delaney closer, put an arm around her waist while we watch the show. This is better than I expected. I thought he was in on it, but now that I think of it, his name is not listed as a plaintiff. “You didn’t really intend to what?”

Your intentions are spelled out right here.” He waves the lawsuit around in the room. “You don’t want to talk. You want to control and you want to bully. I told you to let this go and to leave her alone, but you just can’t do it, can you? She’s a human being, not a pet who fetches at your command. She doesn’t love that boy, and I don’t care about his family’s connections and joining some uppity social club, Lynn. Look around. We have everything. When will it ever be enough for you?”

While they glare at each other, I pull out my checkbook and write a check to Lynn Lewis.

“Wait? What? You were using me so you can join the upper echelon of society?” Delaney pulls away from me and stands in front of her mother, who won’t make eye contact. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Of course not. I thought he was a good fit for you.”

“Really? Based on what?” Delaney asks. Lynn doesn’t say a word. She takes a small step away from Delaney, who is slowly approaching her. “Well, that makes sense now. Unbelievable. No matter how much money you make or your medical degree, you can’t escape your blue-collar background, can you? I guess in your mind, you will always be the daughter of postal service workers. But Mitch’s family could help you ascend, right? Is that what they dangled in front of you? You wanted me to be miserable so they could pave the way for you.” When she still refuses to answer, Delaney yells, “Answer me. You said this lawsuit was to force us to talk, so talk!”

“Delaney,” her dad begins, but Delaney holds up a hand, and to his credit, he shuts up.

“He’s educated. He’s a doctor and he comes from a good family. You agreed to date him. He put the ring on your finger, and we planned a wedding. So what if I got something out of it. You act as if—”

“Even when I told you I didn’t want to marry him? How about when I ran out of the church, and you still tried to force him on me? How about when you showed up at David’s with

Mitch and Lois? I told all of you then I wouldn't marry him, but you wouldn't stop, and it's all for something so petty. You used me as a transaction." With each angry word, Delaney takes a small step closer to her mother, who keeps moving back. "And when nothing worked, you take my car and now you sue me to try and bring me to heel so you can get what you want. Well, you can still get it. Use Damon. Mitch has a sister."

The room goes deathly quiet again. She looks at her husband, who has now narrowed his eyes as he approaches. I pull Delaney out of the way.

"You took her car?" he hisses in disbelief. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Lynn? Have you always been such a control freak, not to mention selfish?"

At that, I snort. "I've only met her twice before today, and I can answer that. How the hell do you not know who you married?"

"She had it towed while I was at dinner with friends. I drove everyone. I'm pretty sure she timed it just right to ensure total humiliation."

Lynn stays quiet, but fire is practically shooting out of her eyes.

"Where's her car?" Pascale asks. When she purses her lips shut, he screams, "Tell me where the fucking car is! Now!" He slams his hand on the table, and she takes a small step back, but she remains quiet while she looks around the room like a trapped animal. "I swear to God, Lynn. Don't make today be the day I put my hands on a woman. You tell me where the fucking car is right now."

She swallows and says, "It's parked in the back of the building."

"Delaney, take the car back. Lynn, you will have this lawsuit dropped within the hour, do you hear me?" He looks at the lawsuit again. "Do you fucking hear me?" he yells when she remains quiet. She practically jumps back but she nods. "And where did you find this quack of a lawyer?"

“I don’t need the car,” Delaney says. “I don’t need anything from you other than for you to drop this suit. I’m done. I only came here to tell you to leave me alone.” She looks directly at her mother when she says that.

I sign my name on the check and hand it to Lynn. “Take this. That’s payment for what you spent on the wedding. Cash it. Don’t come for Delaney again unless she reaches out to you.” When she doesn’t take the check, I wave it in front of her. She still won’t take it, so I drop it on the table.

“Delaney, I didn’t know about the car or the lawsuit. I didn’t even know about her transaction with Mitch’s family until a few days ago. I’m sorry—”

Pathetic excuse of a father. I wish I could deck him, but I’m sure that would upset his daughter.

“Oh, please. I don’t want to hear it, Dad. All my life, you’ve dismissed me. All you’ve ever said to me was listen to your mother. Go to your mother. It’s as if you’re not my parent too. You just let her do whatever the hell she wanted with me. You only had time for your precious son. So, you can keep the car.” She turns to Lynn now. “Even though it was given to me by my grandparents. Take it. Enjoy it because that’s the last thing you will ever take from me. And that includes my time or any space in my head.”

Her father takes off his glasses and wipes his face. His Adam’s apple bobs while he thinks of his next words.

“That’s not true. I’ve always—”

“You’ve always what? Tell me a single time when you listened to me and helped me instead of sending me back to the source of all my problems. Name one single time.” She crosses her arms and waits, but no words leave his mouth.

“Now,” I say, getting everyone’s attention, “it’s my turn to speak. I’ve sat back and watched you bully your daughter for the last time.” I look directly at Lynn when I say that. “You brought that piece of shit Mitch to my house along with his useless mother. You’ve upset Delaney for the last time.” I take a slow menacing step toward her. Pascale stands between us,

shielding her from me, but I push him out of the way. He almost falls over but manages to catch himself. “You want to bully someone?” I lower my voice. “Bully me. Take me on because I guarantee I will destroy you.” She gasps and steps back. Lynn Lewis is used to being the biggest bully on the block. Maybe she was until she met me. “I’m going to do it anyway just for fun. I’ll show you what it’s like to go against someone who is richer, has more connections, and is way more ruthless than you can ever dream of being. Taking a car? Filing a frivolous lawsuit? Kid stuff. Just wait.” All the color has now left her face. Her hand goes to her neck, and she takes a final step back before hitting the wall.

“Get out of my wife’s face,” Pascale says.

“If only you were this protective when it came to your daughter,” I respond without bothering to look his way. “Keep your eyes open. You’ll feel my first attack very, very soon. You fucked around. Get ready to find out.”

I intertwine my fingers with Delaney’s and walk toward the door. “Wait,” Pascale says. “You can’t come here and threaten my wife like this.”

“Oh, that wasn’t a threat. It’s a fucking promise.” I open the door and pull Delaney out. The instant the door closes, Pascale starts to yell at his wife.

“Are you happy now, Lynn? Answer me. Are you finally fucking happy? You couldn’t just leave her alone like I told you to. She doesn’t want to marry that pompous little asshole. So what? She can choose who she wants to be with. What the fuck is the matter with you that you’d sue her. What did you think you were going to accomplish?” It sounds like he slams his hand on the conference table, and I hear something hit against a wall before it crashes to the floor.

Lynn starts to cry and Pascale says, “Dry your damn crocodile tears. I don’t want to hear it. Where were these tears when you stole her money and her car?”

“I only meant to use this as a way to talk to her. I didn’t mean—”

“You did. You fucking did, and you can stop lying right now. You knew exactly what you were doing. You were trying to force her hand so Mitch’s parents would let you into their inner circle. Doesn’t it ring alarm bells in your head that his parents have to find him a wife? The kid’s off, Lynn.”

“What are you talking about? He’s not—”

“Shut the hell up. I’m done with you. I’m going to stay at one of our other properties. I can’t even stand to look at you. You disgust me, you pathetic excuse of a mother. I guess I’m no better than you, but at least I never intentionally tried to hurt our children.”

The door swings open, and he almost collides with us. He looks at Delaney, and I can tell he wants to say something, but I pull her toward me. Her mother comes running out of the room and comes to a complete stop when she sees us. Without another word, we walk down the hall and out of the office.

When we get to the car, I pull her into me and kiss the life out of her. She jumps in my arms and wraps her legs around me, kissing me again, only deeper this time.

“Oh, shit,” she whispers against my lips. “I left my jacket in there.”

“I’ll buy you another.” I pin her to the car and kiss her again, hoping that her mother is watching from upstairs. “Let’s go home.”

We don’t speak again for the entire twenty minutes back to my house. She rests her hand on my lap, and every few minutes, she inches it closer to my dick. It’s already hard and eager to find its way home.

“Don’t make me pull over,” I warn. As much as I don’t want to, I take her hand and put it on my knee. “We’re five minutes away. Behave.” She bites her full bottom lip and slowly licks it. She undoes her seatbelt and leans over and bites the side of my neck. I swerve but manage to get control of the car. “Delaney!” I warn. “Put your seatbelt back on.”

She does as she’s told but wiggles her brows at me. Soon, I turn down my quiet street and pull into my garage. As soon as

I put the car in park, she takes off her seatbelt, comes over the console, and straddles me. Her mouth lands on mine before I can utter a single word.

She only has on a thin white shirt, and I rip it in half. It hangs off her body while I undo her bra. She pulls off my belt, and seconds later, my dick has sprung free.

“God, you’re so damn sexy when you threaten my parents. I almost came in my pants when you told my mother you were about to come after her.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” she says.

“How about this for a threat? I’m about to destroy your pussy. I’m gonna fuck you so hard and deep, you’ll forget your name and where you are. You won’t be able to walk for days.”

“Oh, fuck yes,” she whispers. “Kill this pussy.”

Her eyes lock with mine while she kicks off her shoes and takes off her pants. Once she’s naked from the waist down, I lift her, and let her slowly slide down my dick.

“God,” she sighs once I fill her. “How did I go this long without this? Without you, David Sutton?” I thrust deep inside of her. She grinds down on me, and I almost come. Her pussy is so hot and wet, I stop and catch my breath. I tilt my head up, and she brings her mouth to mine.

She slides her hand underneath my shirt and my t-shirt. Her soft hands touch my stomach, and I cup her ass. Each time I thrust up, she grinds down. Our soft moans fill the car, and the smell of sex becomes intoxicating. I wrap an arm around her waist, keeping her immobile while I thrust inside of her. She breaks the kiss, throws her head back, and moans my name.

“David,” she says. “Oh, God, David.”

Fueled by her need for more, I pump into her until she lets out a long groan while she shivers in my arms. She brings her lips back to mine while she rides the remains of her orgasm. I

can feel her dripping around me, and I lose all control and fill her with my release.

I break the kiss long enough to open my car door and step out. I hold her with one arm while I hold my pants up with the other. We go through the kitchen and up the back staircase until we burst into my bedroom, and I toss her on the bed. I strip out of my clothes, and she does the same, throwing the torn shirt to the far corner of the room.

I jump on the bed and land between her legs. My large hand cups a breast while I suck on the side of her neck.

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I SLIP OUT OF DAVID'S ARMS, GRAB MY PHONE FROM MY purse, and tiptoe into his bathroom. We climbed into bed when we got back and made love two more times. After that, we ordered Chinese food and ate directly from the containers in his bed. He didn't care about what we ate or that we could potentially make a mess. We fed each other with chopsticks, and afterward, he held me in his arms while we watched television. All the while, our cat lay at our feet.

It's five o'clock in the morning here, so it's eleven in Ibiza. I FaceTime Summer and hope she'll answer the phone. It's only the second day of her honeymoon, and I've already talked to her twice, but I need her right now.

She picks up and grins at me. She's outside, and I get a view of the clear blue skies and the Mediterranean ocean behind her.

"Where's the daddy?" I whisper. When she says he's inside getting dressed, I tell her everything that happened after we talked yesterday.

"He said what?" she asks, incredulous when I tell her David threatened my parents.

"Yes, and guess what? I am head over heels in love with David Sutton. Don't you dare tell your daddy husband." I put my finger to my lips. "I'm going to enjoy every second we're together. I don't even care if it ends in heartbreak, James. Other than you, I've never had someone in my corner like this. It's addictive."

“You deserve it,” she says. “But be careful. David is—” The words die in her throat when she looks up. Her face transforms and softens, so I know it’s Max. Seconds later, he stands behind her, leans down, and kisses her cheek. He finally sees me and waves.

“You’re up early,” he says, eyeing me. “Where’s David?”

“He’s still in bed,” I tell him. “I only wanted to say hi to James. I don’t want to keep you guys.”

“We’re going for a walk and lunch. You two talk. I’ll go get us a drink.” He gets up and leaves.

“David is—” Summer begins, but I cut her off.

“David is perfect. Right here. Right now. He’s perfect for me, and I’m going to enjoy it.”

Just as I say the words, I hear David say, “Cookie?” I hear the covers rustling, and then I hear his feet against the carpet.

“He’s up. I gotta go. Love you.” I end the call and open the bathroom door. He doesn’t say a word. He peels his t-shirt off my body and carries me back to bed.

I dab concealer around my eyes. I should be exhausted, but I’m not. I’ve never felt more alive. David was right about one thing, though. Every time I take a step, I feel the evidence of our lovemaking between my legs. He comes up behind me, and when I point to the necklace on the sink, he puts it around my neck and clasps it.

“You know what I was thinking?” he asks. He spins me around to face him and takes both my hands in his. “That every time you think your family can’t sink any lower, you’re wrong. Each time you say there’s nothing left that they can do to you, they figure something out.”

My family is not exactly what I wanted to talk about this morning. Besides, I don’t think there is anything left. For real this time.

“I can’t imagine what else they can do,” I say.

“They won’t stop. They will come up with a way to get you back in their life and find you another Mitch,” he warns.

“I won’t let that happen.” I visibly shudder at the thought.

“I’ve figured out a way to make sure that there is absolutely nothing they can do to you.”

He lifts my hands and kisses them. Intrigued, I arch an eyebrow and wait, but he says nothing. He only stares into my eyes.

“Are you going to enlighten me as to what that is? You’re not going to put a hit out on them are you?” I start to laugh but stop when he doesn’t laugh back.

“No, but we can get married. Today. We can drive down to Providence and do it as soon as the courts open. They don’t have a waiting period.” If he had said dragons had invaded the planet, I would have been less shocked. I stare into his eyes and wait for him to laugh and tell me he’s joking, but that’s not David’s way. “Hear me out, okay?” I nod. “I know you ran from a marriage, but I’m not an asshole. This will protect you from them because nobody will fuck with my wife. No one but me.” He winks at me, and I almost fall over. “If we’re married, they can’t try to make you marry Mitch or anyone else.”

He doesn’t say anymore, and all the questions I have in my mind can’t come out of my mouth. He squeezes my hands, and I finally regain my ability to speak. I want to ask him what he’s going to get out of this. Everything he’s said benefits me, but I don’t say that. I say the first thing that comes to mind.

“Ask me,” I say. “The last time, I didn’t get asked.”

He clears his throat and cups my face. “Of course. Delaney, will you marry me so that we can—”

“Yes,” I scream before he can finish his sentence. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” There is nothing I want more on this earth. I’ll worry about everything else later.

“Do you want to have breakfast first?” he asks.

“No. Let’s go.” I take my hands from his and return to the bedroom. “My shoes are downstairs.” I look down, and I’m

dressed in a pair of gray pants, white shirt, and matching gray jacket. The last time I was to get married, I was in a big ball gown that I hated. This is a million times better.

He seems just as eager as I am to get on the road. We don't bother to make coffee at home like we usually do. We stop off at a Starbucks drive-thru before getting on the highway. We don't speak, but I do peek at his profile, and he has a small smile on his lips.

"We can have a wedding whenever you want," he says.

I think back to the disaster of a wedding my mother planned and shudder. I love weddings, but other people's.

"I'm good," I tell him.

"Okay. If you ever change your mind." Traffic is heavy for a Tuesday, and it takes us over an hour to get to Providence. He takes us directly to the city clerk's office. After parking, he says, "The jewelry store doesn't open until eleven, so we're doing things backwards today." As if that's the strangest part of today. All I do is nod. There's a short line, and when it's our turn, we provide identification and fill out the necessary forms. We wait thirty minutes for an officiant to be available, and the ceremony takes less than ten minutes. After repeating our vows, we're pronounced man and wife, we kiss, and just like that, I'm married to David Sutton.

He drives us to Tiffany's, and after giving his name to a salesman, we're escorted to a room in the back. There are two trays of diamond engagement rings. The last diamond ring I had on my finger felt like a noose, but my left ring finger is now aching for one of these.

The last one I wore was a plain two carat solitaire. It was pretty, but since I felt nothing for the man who gave it to me, I never cared for the ring. This time is completely different. This time a piece of twine around my finger would be the most stunning thing on earth. Tiffany's doesn't carry twine, though. David holds up a ring with a beautiful oval yellow diamond in the center. There are three smaller diamonds around it, and diamonds around the platinum band. My eyes light up when I

see it, and he takes my hand and slides the ring on my finger. It's not only beautiful, but it's a perfect fit.

"What do you think?" he asks. I look down and admire the ring my husband just put on my finger. I fight back the tears.

As he reaches for another ring, I say, "I love it. It's perfect." The man on the other side of the counter practically salivates, and I can only imagine the cost of this ring and his commission. He finds the matching wedding band.

I help David choose a simple platinum band for himself, and we're out of the store a few minutes later. He pins me to the door of his car and kisses me senseless. "Mrs. Sutton," he says. "Of course, you'll need to change your name."

"Yes, Mr. Sutton," I respond. "I guess that's the same for you." I wrap my arms around him, and he rests his forehead on mine. We stand there and hold each other before we finally get in the car.

"How about lunch?" he asks. "I don't think we're going to make it to work today." His hand falls on my lap, and I cover it with my left hand. My diamond ring catches the light, and I hold it up to admire it. He stops at a red light, and I check out his profile. He turns, smiles at me, and leans in for a kiss. My husband just kissed me; I could die right now and feel that I lived a complete life. "How about some lobster, in honor of Mitch, of course. His loss is now my gain." He lifts my hand to his lips and kisses the back of it.

"You know what? That sounds amazing. Let's add some shrimp to that too."

"And something with dairy for dessert." We intertwine our fingers and drive to a local restaurant. It's upscale. Everything about David is upscale, but unlike the people in my family it's understated. It's just who he is. He doesn't have to try. It just oozes out of him.

We're escorted to a secluded table, and as we follow the hostess, my husband wraps an arm around my waist to keep me close. I walk through the restaurant with my head held high, so proud to be with this man who is now my husband.

Months ago when I ran from the church, I had no idea what I was going to do. All I knew for sure was that I had Summer and Max. I figured in time, my parents would forgive me and my life would continue as before but without Mitch. How foolish I was, but this is the best possible outcome.

Just like that impromptu date night from a few weeks ago, we order a bunch of different entrees. We have oysters on the half shell, seafood ceviche, and lobster tortellini. For entrees, we get Maine lobsters and scallops instead of shrimp. We feed each other, and each time his fork enters my mouth, it's like a carnal experience. He moans when my lips wrap around the fork and sighs when he pulls it out. Dessert is just as decadent with baked Alaska for two and chocolate espresso mousse. By the time we leave, my stomach is full, and I can barely walk to the car.

He holds my hand the entire hour ride home. Neither one of us speaks, but I hum softly to the music. When we get home, he takes me to the bedroom, and we undress each other. There's no rush this afternoon. He kisses every inch of my body, and I do the same to his. I've never been made to feel beautiful like I am right now. He gets me on the brink, soaking wet and desperate for him before he slowly sinks into me. I close my eyes and sigh in contentment. He stays inside of me, not moving, and looks down at me. Something changes in his brown eyes, and I'm not sure what it is, but I've never been happier and more fulfilled than I am in this moment.

He kisses me. It's a slow, sensual kiss like I've never experienced before. He loves me slowly. I wrap my legs around him and let him in further. He stretches me, and his gentle hands caress my sides. He moans softly into my mouth, and I do the same. I swallow my need to tell him how I feel about him, but it's on the tip of my tongue.

"Delaney," he mutters, his voice strained. I know he's barely holding on and waiting for me to fall over the cliff first. It doesn't take me long. All he needs to do is reach between my legs, rub my clit and I fall over, calling out his name. He's not far behind and convulses on top of me.

“WE’RE GOING TO HAVE TO TELL MAX AND SUMMER,” I whisper an hour later. I hold my breath and wait for him to tell me he only did this to protect me from my family and wants to keep this a secret. Then I feel the five-carat diamond on my finger and realize there’s no way he would expect that. “And the rest of your family,” I say. There’s no lump in my throat about not having any family of my own. No one other than Jade.

“Our family,” he corrects me. He reaches over for his phone, and we sit up on the bed with pillows propped behind our heads. “We’ll call them now, and we’ll tell everyone else tomorrow.”

He doesn’t give me time to agree or disagree. He presses Max’s contact info on his phone, and it starts to ring. I pull the covers up to my neck and wait. The phone rings four times, but just as I think it’s going to voicemail, he picks up and he appears on the screen.

“Why is it that you people insist on calling us every day?” Max grumbles. “I don’t just mean you. We’ve heard from everyone today. Again,” he says. “Oh, God. Why are you two in bed? It’s only four o’clock where you are.”

David wiggles his eyebrows. Summer comes up behind Max and grins at us. I hear a meow, and Fancy jumps on the bed and sits on David’s chest.

“Why is my cat in your bedroom?” Max asks his brother. He’s fully awake and sitting up in bed now.

“I’m watching her for you. You left her all alone.” David rubs Fancy’s head and she purrs. “Our cats are cousins, so they should hang out more.”

Max shakes his head in disbelief. “I told you not to touch her. You know what, just tell me what the hell you want.”

“Guys, look,” Summer says, interrupting her husband. The screen goes black for a few seconds until we see her standing with her pajama shirt over her belly. “Can you see it?” She rubs her stomach, which is still flat.

“Not a thing. What are we supposed to be looking at?” David asks.

“I’m showing,” Summer insists.

“No, you’re not,” Max says. “That was because you ate a big dinner earlier.” Summer sighs and the screen turns back to Max. “What do you two want?”

“We have an announcement.” Summer comes and sits on Max’s lap. They both stare while they wait. “Get your left hand ready,” David whispers to me. “On the count of three.” Three seconds later, we both hold our left hands at the screen. Summer’s mouth hangs open, and Max’s eyebrows practically shoot to the ceiling.

“Is this some sort of joke?” Max asks.

“Like I would ever joke about getting married,” David says back. When the two people on the other side of the screen remain quiet, he says, “Is anyone going to congratulate us?”

“UH, DELANEY, CAN YOU CALL ME?” SUMMER ASKS. SHE holds up her phone, waves it, and leaves Max’s lap. Delaney slips out of bed, and I check out her ass while she bends over to pick up my discarded t-shirt. She grabs her phone and goes into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. Max is scowling when I turn back to him.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asks.

“I think you meant to say congratulations.” I smile deeply, but he doesn’t return it. “Keep scowling and we won’t be celebrating our anniversaries together. They’re only a few days apart.”

He closes his eyes as if he’s in search of patience. When he opens them again, he asks, “Why?”

I swallow twice while I think of what to say to my brother. The truth bubbles to the surface, but I swallow it down.

“She needs me to protect her from her crazy ass family. Her mother just sued her. I paid her, by the way. I wrote a check for a hundred grand so now they—”

He holds his hand up, and I shut up. “If you paid it, then why get married? What the hell else can they do?”

“Who knows, Maxi Pad. We’re not crazy, so we can’t anticipate what crazy people do. And what if she forgives them only for them to find a Mitch replacement? Someone not so repulsive? She deserves—”

He holds his hand up again, but I don't shut up this time. I continue my speech, determined to convince him. "She deserves—"

"Did she sign a prenup?" he asks, interrupting me.

"Did Summer?" I counter.

"No, but we didn't run off and get married on a whim either."

I throw my head back and laugh. "Oh, please. You've known each other five months. At least Delaney isn't pregnant," I add.

"It's never a whim when you find the right one. Do you love her?" he asks. My throat goes dry. I haven't said those words to a woman since I was with Bethany, which I realize now I didn't mean.

"Do I love her?" I scoff. He stays quiet for once and waits for me to answer. He leans forward into the phone. "Marrying for love is a fairly modern thing, Maxi Pad. People have been marrying for millennia for all kinds of reasons, love being the least of them."

"Is that a yes or a no, David? Stop talking in circles, and I don't need a history lesson." The answer gets stuck in my throat, and all I can do is blink.

He stares at me and waits, but I have nothing else to say. "Okay, so once her family is no longer a problem, you're going to get a divorce then?"

"I'm Catholic. We don't believe in divorce, unlike you, heathen. I won't be your roommate in hell." He sighs and runs a hand over his face. "Just remember I was happy for you when you got with Summer," I remind him. "I always support you. Always."

"You do," he admits. "Do you want me to be happy for you, Davie?"

"Yes," I say.

"Okay, then. Congratulations on getting married. If this is really what you want, then I'm happy for you."

“Was that so hard, you uptight prick? I swear, it’s like pulling teeth with you sometimes. Enough about me. How’s the honeymoon?” Relieved to have this behind me, I exhale and lean back in the bed.

“It’s great. If only our family would stop calling,” he says. “We’re going to Italy for a couple of days at the end of the week. Is it too much to ask that no one call us?”

“Definitely. Talk tomorrow,” I say before ending the call.

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MY PHONE RINGS BEFORE I CAN EVEN CLOSE THE BATHROOM door. Summer's FaceTime request comes in, and I accept. Her mouth is wide open in shock when I see her face.

"Show me the ring," she whispers. I hold my left hand up, and we both softly scream. She fans her face in excitement. "Tell me everything."

It takes me about five minutes to tell her how we confronted my parents together and how David was ready to marry me the next day to protect me from them.

"Protect you my ass. He loves you," Summer whispers. "Has he said it yet?"

I feel myself blush, and I shake my head no. "No, and I'm not going to push it. I love him, and I'm his wife. That's enough for now." This is way more than I've ever had, and I'm not going to push him away by forcing him to make a declaration he's not ready for.

"For now being the operative words. He wouldn't have married you if he didn't. Maybe he doesn't realize it yet, but OMG! That ring is gorgeous." I flash my ring into the screen again. "Are you going to tell your family?" she whispers, and my happy mood evaporates.

"I'm not going to hide it, but I'm not reaching out to anyone in my family other than Jade. I don't want to talk about them right now. I'm too happy." I push everything else down. I ignore the fact that he hasn't said he loves me, but I haven't

either. I'm not ready, and I know it's because I'm scared of rejection.

“Okay. We'll table that for now. We'll start planning your wedding when I get back, and this time—” I hold up a hand to stop whatever she was going to say.

“No wedding. I've had enough of that. Everything is perfect as it is.” I expect her to argue with me, but she nods in understanding. She knows how much I hated the wedding my mother planned for me and Mitch. It went against everything I've ever wanted.

In the beginning, despite not wanting to get married, I told my mother I wanted a fall or winter wedding. I wanted a sexy wedding dress that exposed most of my back. She picked a ballgown instead of the kind of dress I wanted. I wanted a lace-up top with a cinched waist. I wanted long sleeves instead of sleeveless. I wanted it form-fitting with a small flare at the bottom. I wanted to feel sexy and confident. The dress she chose totally overtook me. The dress wore me, not the other way around.

“Okay, but if you change your mind, you'll get the wedding you want.” We talk some more before I end the call and return to the bedroom. David is putting his phone away as I walk in, and he extends his hand to me.

I take it and he pulls me in bed beside him. “I'll arrange a dinner with my family so we can tell everyone at once. We'll tell Caleb tomorrow since he lives here.”

“I'll tell Jade.” He huffs but stays quiet. I rest my head on his shoulder and promptly fall asleep.

I PULL OUT THE LITTLE BLACK DRESS. THE SAME ONE I wanted to wear that night David went on that date. I push that out of my head. Things were different then, and I believe him when he said he didn't do anything with that woman. He's my husband now, and everyone who matters knows it.

As soon as we told Caleb a few nights ago, he called his mother. Minutes later, we were all on a FaceTime call with Aunt Minnie and Claire. They were both speechless, then Aunt Minnie downed the martini she was holding without taking a breath.

“HOT DAMN IT, CLAIRE. HE DID IT. OUR BOY DID IT,” AUNT Minnie says. “I’m going to fix me another drink so I can absorb this.” She gets up and disappears out of the screen. I hold my breath while I wait for Claire’s reaction. Her face is stoic, and I can’t get a read on her. David is his own man, but I know his family’s opinion is important to him. I’m not too worried though. If Claire doesn’t approve, David will do what David wants. I’m confident in that.

“Are we going to plan another wedding?” she whispers. I can see her eyes have pooled with tears, but I’m still not sure if she’s happy or not.

“My wife says no wedding, but I’m hoping I can convince her to have something. Maybe for our first anniversary,” David says. He’s never uttered that to me, but now hope

blooms in my own chest. Claire turns to me as if she's expecting my answer now.

"That will give us a year. Way more than your brother gave us, so that's good." She rubs her hands together and waits for me again. Tears spring to my own eyes as I nod.

"That sounds nice," I whisper.

Claire stands and yells for Minnie. "We're having another wedding, Minnie. I'm going to call the wedding planner." She turns back to us. "Since you two got married during the week, we'll have to plan the wedding for a few days after your anniversary. Maybe that Saturday, and we can have it here at the house. We haven't had a wedding here in over twenty years." She's on autopilot as she digs inside her purse and pulls out a planner. She drops it and suddenly looks up. "I'm so rude. I forgot to say congratulations. I'm so happy for you, Son. And Delaney, I want us to be friends. I'm going to arrange a dinner for us this weekend. When Summer and Max return, we'll have something at the house. Just a small dinner party to celebrate you two. I'll take care of everything. All you will have to do is show up."

THAT WAS THE BEST-CASE SCENARIO, AND TONIGHT WE'RE having dinner at a nearby restaurant. I've invited Jade. So far, she's the only member of my family who knows.

I pull the dress over my head, careful not to disturb my hair. I finally got the haircut I wanted. It's now a layered bob that just kisses the middle of my neck instead of the long hair that went past my shoulders. It has reddish highlights that I love.

While I run around the room looking for my black heels, I hear the doorbell ring. A couple of seconds later, I hear David say, "Delaney, it's for you."

Assuming it's Jade, I grab my shoes and go down the back stairs. I go through the kitchen and nearly come to a stop when I get to the living room. It's not Jade. It's my father and brother. The three of us stand there and stare at each other with

no one saying a word. David crosses the room and zips my dress for me without being asked.

“Beautiful,” he whispers in my ear.

After a loud throat clearing from my father, I finally look into his face. He looks gaunt and a little bit disheveled. I’ve never seen him not impeccably dressed, and right now he’s in faded jeans that belong to decades past and a wrinkled button-down shirt. I cross my arms and refuse to speak first.

“Delaney,” my dad begins. “How are you?”

My eyebrows shoot to my forehead. He’s never asked me how I’m doing. I assume he’s always just relied on my mother to tell him.

“I’m well,” is all I can manage to say.

“I, uh.” He clears his throat. “I brought your car back for you, and your mother has dropped the lawsuit.”

“I know about the lawsuit.” I heard from her attorney yesterday. “As for the car, I don’t need it.”

“Yes, please get that off my property before I have it towed,” David says.

“Delaney, can we speak to you alone?” Damon asks. I almost roll my eyes at him. The last time I thought I was going to talk to him alone, he blindsided me.

“No,” is all I say. I look at David who winks at me. “Whatever you have to say to me, you can say in front of my husband.”

The room goes deathly quiet as we stare at each other. My dad swallows twice, and Damon’s eyes nearly bulge out of his head. I hold my left hand up and wiggle my fingers. Damon crosses the room, takes my hand, and examines the ring.

“I’m in a good mood, which is why I let you two in here. Upset my wife just once, and I’m throwing you out on your asses.”

“You married this guy, Delaney?” Damon says, outraged. “Why would you do that? Do you ever think he’s only trying

to control you too?”

David snorts, but keeps his mouth shut. He leans against the wall and crosses his arms.

“I married him because he asked me, and I said yes. The only people who have ever tried to control me are you two and our mother. Well, maybe Mitch and his mother too. You never gave a damn, Dad. David has only stood by me through a very difficult time in my life, which is more than I can say for you, Damon. Aren’t you the guy who led me into an ambush so I would marry Mitch? Though for the life of me, I can’t understand why you would care who I marry or why it’s any of your business.”

When he looks at me without an answer, I say, “If that’s all, you can leave now. We have a family dinner to get to.” I start to walk away, but my dad calls my name. I turn and face him.

“Is this true?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Did you do this because—”

“I did this because I wanted to marry David,” I say, interrupting him. “I hope you know now that I wouldn’t marry anyone I didn’t want to marry.”

“I told you when I saw you last that was the end of it. You didn’t have to get married because of your mother.” He runs a hand over his face, and suddenly he looks old and tired.

“I see nothing’s changed, Dad. You still refuse to hear me. I just told you why I married David.” I walk away from them and go to the coat closet. It’s a little chilly out today, so I grab a wool coat. They all follow me. “If you two will excuse us. David, we don’t want to be late.” He comes over and helps me with my coat.

“Give me a few minutes, please,” my dad says. He comes closer and puts both hands on my shoulders. “I’m sorry. I own my part in this. For always dismissing you and for not reining your mother in sooner. You were right. I never listened to you or took your feelings into consideration. I grew up with

brothers. I had no idea how to parent a daughter, and I let your mother do it.”

I take an abrupt step away from him, and his arms fall to the side. I should feel better because I never thought I would get an apology from anyone in my family. However, in the same breath, he shifts the blame away from him.

“You think you’re the first man in history to have a daughter, Dad? You’re not. Others seem to figure it out. Let’s be honest, you were never interested in me. It was always about you and your son.” I tie the sash of my coat around my waist and return to the kitchen where I left my shoes.

“Delaney, that’s not true,” Damon says. “Why can’t you just listen to him? You know he left Mom? He hasn’t been home since you and him made the scene at their office.” He points to David as if he’s an afterthought.

“My husband’s name is David Sutton,” I remind him. “And I have nothing to do with their marriage. Are you trying to blame me for that, Damon?” I challenge.

“He wouldn’t have left if you hadn’t—”

“Told the truth? Shed a light on what our mother did?”

I look at David, and the serene look he has on his face disappears. He pulls himself away from the wall and comes to stand next to me.

“Damon, enough,” my dad says without looking at him. “We didn’t come here to fight with you—”

“Too late,” David says. “You two have ruined my good mood. Especially you.” He points at Damon. “I’ve wanted to hit you since I first laid eyes on you all those weeks ago. Get the hell out of my house before I throw a punch.”

“Our family is falling apart,” Damon says.

“And what do you want me to do about that?” I raise my voice for the first time today. “I’m no longer a part of that family. Both of you stood by and didn’t say a word when Mother gave me an ultimatum. Remember that? Either marry Mitch or I’m cut off. Where was your support? That’s your

family and your responsibility to fix. If you want Dad to move back home, talk to Dad. I don't control him. Trust me, I'm under no delusions that anyone in this family would ever side with me and defend me. No one other than Jade, which is the biggest irony of it all." I grab my black clutch and put my arm in David's. "Let's go, handsome. Your mother told us not to be late."

He kisses my cheek, and I feel something swell in my heart. He's the only source of warmth I want right now. His brown eyes look down into mine. He smiles and softly taps his lips to mine before he turns to our uninvited guests.

"My hospitality quota has been exhausted for today. Get out." He gestures for them to leave, but neither one of them takes a step toward the front door. My father comes closer and reaches for my hand. I don't pull it away, but when he squeezes it, I don't squeeze back.

"Can we talk? If not today, then tomorrow? You're my daughter, and I don't want to lose you. I know it hasn't always seemed like it, but I love you. I know I'm a day late and a dollar short, but I want to support you."

"Then you should have thought of that long before now," David says. He checks his watch while he starts to walk us to the front door.

"You don't know anything about our family, so shut up," Damon says. I close my eyes and sigh. David takes two slow steps toward my brother. I could run and stand between them, but I don't. Damon takes a step back.

"I know your mother tried to force her to marry someone against her will for her own selfish reasons. I know your father stood by and did nothing. I know all the dirty shit your mother has done to my wife since she ran out of that church. I know that when your sister came to you for help, you set her up in an ambush. I know—"

"Ambush? Are you crazy?" Damon says. "It was our parents, who were worried sick about you for days, by the way."

“And Mitch. And the man she told you she didn’t want to marry, as if running away from the church wasn’t enough of a clue, you dumb ass. I know a lot of things, Damon, but we’re in a rush. All you need to know is that as Delaney’s husband, it’s my job to protect her, even from her own family. Something you two failed to do. Now, kindly get the hell out of our house.”

The room goes silent. I go to my husband and put my arm through his. We turn, open the door, and gesture for them to leave. Damon walks out first without another word. My father stops when he gets to the door and turns to me. “I’ll give you a call tomorrow.” He waits for my reply, but when I don’t, he finally leaves.

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IT'S ONLY A FIFTEEN-MINUTE DRIVE TO THE STEAKHOUSE. SHE rests her hand on my thigh the entire time, but she doesn't speak on the confrontation with our guests. She looks straight ahead with a serene expression on her face. Her lips even turn up into a slight smile.

“So, Mitch hates steak, right?” I ask. Her lips twitch, and the slight smile turns into a full one, transforming her face to make her even more beautiful.

“No red meat. He claims he couldn't digest it.” She visibly cringes.

“In that case, I think I'll have a porterhouse in Mitch's honor. I'll get extra butter for my baked potato.”

“I'm in the mood for a ribeye,” she says while I pull into the parking lot. Once I open her door, we intertwine our fingers and walk into the restaurant. We're escorted to a long table in a secluded section. Delaney and I are the last to arrive, but when my mother sees us, she jumps out of her seat and hugs us both. When she pulls away, she cups my cheeks before she kisses me. She does the same to Delaney.

“I'm so happy,” my mom says. Her eyes fill with unshed tears. “I never thought this one would settle down. I only wish your father was alive.” She looks away and takes a deep breath. “I speak for him when I say that he would be so happy for both our sons and their wives. All we've ever wanted was for our sons to be happy.” She looks over and extends a hand to Caleb. “You too, Caleb. You're too handsome and have too

good a heart to be alone.” I almost roll my eyes. My mom is blind when it comes to her youngest nephew. That’s Caleb’s problem. He’s the youngest so he’s been spoiled by everyone, including me. “You know Caleb spent the day with us and drove us here.” As if that’s a big deal. They spent way more on feeding him than the gas to get them to and from.

Aunt Minnie is sipping a martini while she approaches and hugs us both. The only blight on this dinner is Jade, who is sitting at the table nursing a glass of white wine.

“Jade,” is all I say.

“David,” she says back just as icily.

“Surprised to see you here.” I help Delaney with her coat. “Don’t know why you’d show up,” I mutter under my breath.

“Because I’m family, and because my cousin invited me.” She smirks and turns away from me. Jade stands and hugs her cousin. They both giggle like schoolgirls while she inspects Delaney’s ring. Thankfully she doesn’t try to hug me.

“We were just chatting with Jade,” my mother says. “She’s an entrepreneur too and has her own party planning business. I’m so impressed. If I had to do it all over again, I would be a working girl.”

I start to cough, and Delaney giggles.

“Jesus, Claire. You’re way too uptight to be a prostitute,” Minnie says.

Mom huffs at her sister. “I want Jade to be my wedding planner,” Delaney announces to the table. Jade hugs her again and kisses her cheek. I catch Jade’s eye and scowl.

“I’ll be sure to charge you triple,” Jade whispers so that only I can hear. She walks away and sits across from Delaney. I sit next to my wife and pull my phone from my pocket. I call my brother, and the phone rings until it goes to voicemail. I call him right back.

“What are you doing?” Delaney asks. I flag the waiter and order a whiskey. She asks for a martini just as Caleb gets to the table.

“Caleb, do you remember my cousin Jade? She was at Max and Summer’s wedding, and she’s the party planner who did the bachelorette party,” Delaney says. “Jade, this is Caleb, and he’s David’s cousin.” Jade offers him her hand. He shakes it, but he barely looks at her. He’s busy looking around the restaurant

“I think I saw Justine,” he whispers.

“That hussy. I better not see her here,” Aunt Minnie says. “No one breaks my baby’s heart.”

Jade gives me a look, but she doesn’t comment. When the server returns with our drinks, she orders another wine. My mom and aunt talk non-stop. I stare at the menu, but I already know what I want. If they don’t have it, this is the kind of place that will make it for you.

I call Max again, but no answer. I know it’s two o’clock in the morning where he is, but I told him I’d be calling now. I dial Summer’s number, and she answers on the third ring. It’s dark in their room, and she rubs her eyes.

“I told your husband that I wanted you two to join us for dinner,” I say.

“David, let them sleep,” Delaney says to me.

“It’s two o’clock in the morning, fuckhead,” Max finally grumbles. “I told you we couldn’t join you.” He comes on the screen too, but unlike Summer, he’s not smiling.

“Put on a shirt. This is a family affair. Talk to Mother.” I hand her the phone so she can talk to them. We order appetizers and entrees.

“What the hell is she doing here?” Caleb asks while he looks around the restaurant. “After the way she treated me, she has the nerve to show up here the same night as me.”

I chuckle at the idiot. “The nerve of her. How dare she eat?” I finish my drink and order another.

“So, what happened?” Jade asks.

“I was with her for six months, and she dumped me. Told me she was sick of looking at my face. Broke my heart.” He

looks around the table and at me. “You think she knew I’d be here and showed up? I’d never take her back. At least I don’t think. She’d have to do some serious begging.” I scoff, but I don’t answer his delusional questions.

“Boy, please,” Jade says. She tosses her hair and some of it hits Caleb in the face. She shifts her body away from him. “Get over it already. I guarantee you she has.”

“I think I see a friend over there. I’ll be back,” my mom says. She hands me back the phone and she and Minnie leave the table.

“Maxi Pad, I’m going to put my phone here so you two can join us,” I tell him. Caleb waves at the phone like the idiot he is.

“David, I’m on my honeymoon, but you people won’t stop calling us. I talk to you now more than I did when we were home.” I give him the finger. Summer comes back to the bed holding a tray of food.

“We’re ready,” she says, and I know I’ve got them. I lean the phone up next to me.

“Oh my God. That *is* her. Look.” Caleb jerks his head to the side, and we all look. There’s a young woman with jet black hair walking toward us. She’s on the arm of a tall man. Yeah, no way she’s been thinking about Caleb, who’s trying to cover his face even though he’s six foot five and sticks out like a sore thumb.

“Caleb?” Justine says. She stops by our table. Caleb puts his hand down and looks up at her. He stands and gives her an awkward hug, but the man she’s with soon pulls her away. “This is Daniel, my boyfriend.”

“He looks just like Caleb,” Delaney whispers in my ear. She’s right. He’s not as tall, but he has dark brown hair just like Caleb along with a red beard. The only difference is his hair is tame and Caleb’s is not.

“Nice to meet you,” Caleb manages to croak out, but even from here, I can see his neck turning red. “I’m here for a

family dinner, and I'm introducing my girlfriend to the family."

"Plot twist," Delaney whispers.

Caleb quickly reclaims his seat. He looks around and then puts his arm across Jade's shoulder, pulling her close. She bumps into him so hard, she spills her wine. "This is Jade, my girlfriend." Jade gasps while Caleb plants a kiss to her temple. He then puts his large hand over one of hers. "I've spent so much time with her family, I feel it's time she meets mine. Huh, diamond?"

"I thought you said her name was Jade," Justine asks, narrowing her eyes.

"Oh, it is, but she's a diamond. My diamond."

"If you don't—" Jade starts to whisper, but Caleb shuts her up by putting his mouth on hers. She does completely still at the sudden kiss, and I imagine she's seconds away from biting Caleb's lip.

"She just can't get enough of me," Caleb says. "Huh, diamond?" He strokes the nape of her neck. Jade tries to inch away from him, but he's holding her in place with barely any effort.

"Would you two like to join us?" I ask Justine and Daniel. Delaney elbows me in the ribs, and Jade shoots daggers at me with her eyes. Caleb purses his lips at me in disapproval. I gesture at the table. "We'd love to have you. We're here celebrating relationships." I pick up Delaney's hand and kiss the back of it. "My beautiful bride, and Caleb and his girlfriend."

Jade widens her eyes at me, and I do the same back. She purses her lips, and when Caleb kisses her cheek, she makes a strange noise. Right now, she reminds me of a cartoon character whose head is about to explode.

"Um, thanks, but we have our own table," Justine says while she eyes Caleb and Jade. "Have a lovely evening." They walk away, and I finally let out my chuckle.

"Now that was worth getting up for," Max says.

“If you don’t get your damn paws off me, I will stab you with a steak knife,” Jade hisses. Caleb finally removes his arm from across her shoulder, but he grins at me. To egg him on, I wink at him.

“You two look cute together,” I tell them.

“David, stop,” Delaney says while she tries to hide her smile with her martini glass.

“She’s still watching you, Caleb,” I tell him. “I think you two need to pretend to be a couple for the entire meal.” The idiot puts his arm around Jade again. She tries to shrug him away, but he won’t budge an inch.

“Get off of me,” Jade hisses just as my mother and Aunt Minnie return.

His arm only tightens around her. Two servers return with our appetizers. They bring Aunt Minnie another martini. She sips it, then notices Caleb and Jade.

“Oh, my Caleb is very special,” she says, practically slurring her words. “He was a good boy, unlike David, who broke into my liquor cabinet when he was sixteen.”

Justine is still watching, completely ignoring her date while he tries to talk to her. Caleb notices and pulls Jade closer, who is now as stiff as a board. She picks up a butter knife and holds it toward him.

“Aunt Claire, weren’t you saying that you couldn’t find a party planner to help you with the Christmas party? How about Jade?” Jade suddenly drops the knife and smiles broadly. She tries to pull away from Caleb, but he still won’t release her.

I give Delaney a sip of my drink while Jade and my mother discuss their schedules. She finally manages to shove Caleb away to grab her iPad.

“How about tomorrow? Are you free to discuss?” Jade asks.

A few minutes later, after arranging a video call, our food finally arrives. Caleb sits as close as possible to Jade without

touching her, and she ignores him completely.

“My aunt has a lot of rich old lady friends who throw parties. They all love me. I can get you more business,” he whispers to her. That gets her attention. She looks from her plate to him. “But you have to act like you’re not repulsed by me. Just put your hand on mine. That’s it.” She looks around the room, and I think she spots Justine, who is craning her neck to get a view of our table. “These old ladies spend money like it grows on trees.” Jade sighs, but she puts her hand on top of his.

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IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE THAT I'VE BEEN MARRIED TEN DAYS. I don't know if it feels like ten minutes or ten years, but I've loved every second of it. Part of that is because I've refused to let anyone in my bubble who would ruin it.

Work has been great, and my best friend will be back tomorrow afternoon. The European leg of their honeymoon ended four days ago, but they went to the Grand Cayman Islands for the last part of their getaway. Claire is planning a family dinner this weekend.

The family. The Suttons are a no judgment zone where no one tries to change me or criticize my choice in clothes or hairstyle. I've received many calls from my father, but I haven't taken any of them, letting them all go to voicemail.

He must sense he's on my mind because my cell phone vibrates on my desk and his number flashes on my screen. It's Friday. David's out of the office for the afternoon, and I'm hungry. I have to meet Olivia and Kevin in the lobby for lunch in ten minutes.

"This is Delaney," I say cursing myself for calling my mother from this number all those weeks ago. Speaking of my mother, I'm surprised she hasn't come by to make a scene yet about my marriage.

"Delaney, this is your father. Why haven't you taken any of my calls? It's been almost a week since I saw you." I rub the bridge of my nose. I don't bother to tell him that we've gone way longer than a week without talking. In fact, weeks

would go by when I was in college. I would see him whenever I'd go home for the weekend, but the only parent I talked to on a regular basis was my mother.

“Dad, I don't want to fight with you. I think it's best if we take a break for a while.”

“That's the worst idea. Look, we need to talk. I haven't told your mother yet about—”

“Tell her what you want. I don't care.”

“Delaney, you ran off and got married, and I can't help but feel responsible for that. I know nothing about this David Sutton guy and—”

I interrupt him before he can say any more. “What the hell do you care, Dad?” I can imagine the surprised look on his face. “Really? Why do you care? What do you know about Mitch other than he's a doctor, and his father is a doctor? You weren't interested in me then when I was doing everyone's bidding like a loyal dog, but *now* you care? Give me a break. Tell Mother or not. I don't give a damn. The only thing you need to know about my husband is that I trust him with my life, which is a lot more than I can say for you.” I end the call and wish he had called the office phone if only to slam it down on him.



“YOU ALL SHOULD HAVE SEEN THE WAY SHE KEPT STARING AT us,” Caleb says as we walk across the parking lot. We had a huge lunch at a local Mexican restaurant. The only thing that would have made it better is if I had a margarita to wash down my tacos. Other than that, lunch was perfect.

“That's the thing with women,” Kevin adds. “Once they think you've moved on, that's when they want you the most.”

I look at Olivia, and we both shake our head. “Kevin, you're gay. Enough with the faux wisdom on women,” I tell him.

“Hey, I've dated women,” he adds.

“My granny always says women are really the ones who control it all. Men are too weak,” Olivia adds.

“Kev’s right,” Caleb says. “She wants me. I had a weird phone number call my phone last night, and I’m sure it was her.”

I highly doubt that, but I keep that to myself. Just as we’re about to reach the front door to the office building, I hear the beeping of a car door locking, followed by loud clacking on the sidewalk.

“Delaney.” There’s no mistaking my mother’s voice. I turn to face her. She’s dressed in all white. White pantsuit and white wool jacket. It’s flawless, but I’m surprised to see her here. Fridays are her days at the hospital.

“Yes, Mother.” I pull the lapels of my coat closer. Right now I’d give anything to have David here with me, but I can’t always count on him to fight my battles.

“It can’t be true,” she whispers. As she approaches, Caleb moves closer to me until he’s in front of me, shielding me from my mother. She comes to an abrupt stop. Her usual bravado is not there today. She almost takes a step back, but she stands tall and steels her spine.

“What?” I hold up my left hand and my diamond catches the sunlight. “This? It’s true.” So much for my dad not telling her.

“I was sure your brother was lying when he told me. I thought he was trying to force my hand so I would come and talk to you.” She inches closer, but Caleb shakes his head at her. “I need to talk to you,” she says, throwing her head back.

“No.” I turn around and start to walk back to the door.

“David Sutton is messing with my business.” That makes me come to a stop. My mind flashes back to that day in my mother’s office when David said he was going to destroy her. He hasn’t mentioned it since, and I assumed he was just making threats. I guess I was wrong. I should have known better. David doesn’t make threats.

“Don’t talk shit about my husband,” I say to my mother. I turn around, go around Caleb and stare her straight in the eye.

“Watch your mouth. I didn’t raise you to be trash. You will get this sham of a marriage annulled. You will tell him to back off, and you will come back home. Both you and your father. Your little bout of defiance is over, not to mention years too late.”

“Or what?” I challenge. I hold her stare and wait to hear what nonsense she’ll spout next, but she remains quiet. The fact that she thinks she still has any authority over me makes me throw my head back and laugh. This time, it’s me who takes slow steps toward her and points in her face. “You have no power here. None. But it’s funny that you think you do. My marriage is my business, and you have no say in it whatsoever. And as for *your* business, David is only getting started with you.” The color drains from her face and she licks her lips. She looks around. Olivia is standing there with her eyes wide, and Kevin is as still as a statue. Caleb is at my side, typing something on his phone, but I’m sure he will be ready to protect me if necessary.

“You think it’s a joke that he’s trying to get my hospital privileges revoked? I’ve built that practice from the ground up.”

If there is anything on this earth that can shatter my mother, it will be losing her status as a doctor. She’s a doctor before anything else. She makes sure everyone knows her credentials wherever we go. To her, not being able to practice medicine is a fate worse than death.

“You think it was a good idea to do all that shit you did to me? Actions have consequences, Mother. Your words, remember?” My phone starts to ring, and I recognize David’s ringtone. I’m pretty sure he’s the one Caleb was just texting.

“Hey, handsome,” I say into the phone.

“Hey, cookie.” He sounds serene and happy. “Today’s been a great day. Very productive, and I can’t wait to tell you all about it. Then, I get a text from Caleb. Put me on speaker.”

I pull the phone from my ear and do as he says. “You’re on speaker.”

“You have two minutes to leave, or security will come out there and make a scene. And that was only strike one,” he says. “I’m just getting started, but I must say, strike one was very satisfying. Just wait until strike two.” My mother looks around the parking lot as if someone is going to come and save her. “What? Cat’s got your tongue?” David asks. “I see your bravado is only when you’re trying to bully your daughter. Come on. At least give me a fight. You’ll still lose, but do something.”

She purses her lips and flares her nostrils. “Goodbye, Mother.” I turn and finally make it to the front door.

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SUMMER STANDS AND PULLS HER SHIRT FROM HER PANTS. SHE lifts it and gives us her profile. I know she's trying her hardest to puff out her stomach, but there's still not much there. "You see?" she asks.

I look at Olivia and Kevin and they both shrug. Kevin shakes his head before taking a bite of his taco.

"I think that's more burrito than baby, James. There's nothing there." I gesture for her to come over and run my hand over her still flat stomach.

"My granny says pregnancy is a blessing and a curse on women because Eve took a bite out of that apple," Olivia says. I try not to roll my eyes. She continues, "She swears she gave birth to my mother and went to work that afternoon. I guess women were just built differently back then."

"I guess when you're on your eleventh kid, it just slides right out," Kevin says. He shudders and adds, "Thank God, I'll never know. I've always hated apples anyway."

I shove the last bit of shrimp in my mouth and savor it. This is Summer's first Monday back, and she ordered everyone lunch as part of their Monday tradition. Since Max and David are offsite, we're having lunch in Max's office. That's one of the perks of being married to an owner. His office is your office. I guess I could do the same with David's.

"Forget about Summer's non-existent baby bump," I announce. "Guys—" The office door opens, and Max and David walk in. The office is spacious, but they manage to fill

it. Max is about an inch taller, but David is more handsome in my eyes. Summer runs to her husband and he takes her in his arms. You'd think they'd been away from each other for months instead of hours.

"You two, get a room," David says when Max kisses his wife. Olivia swoons and Kevin reaches for one of her tacos, not paying any attention to the rest of us.

"This is my office," Max reminds us. "Get out." He puts his hands on her hips and kisses the shell of her ear, making her giggle.

David extends a hand to me, and I take it. He lifts our joined hands and kisses the back of mine.

"We'll see you guys later," Olivia says. She and Kevin pack up their uneaten food and leave the office.

"Did you eat lunch?" Max asks Summer. I point to her barely touched food, and he eyes it. Summer narrows her eyes at me.

"I had a can of soup earlier. I've been nauseous today." He runs a hand through his hair.

"No cans of soup. I'll make soup tonight so you can have some at the office, but no more cans. Come on. You have to eat." He grabs her Styrofoam container and they sit behind his desk, with her on his lap.

"That's our cue to leave." David, with my hand still in his, guides me out of the office. It's been quiet since my mother confronted me in the parking lot a few days ago. The office is empty, likely with most people at lunch. The only person we see on our way to David's office is Olivia. He closes his door, pulls me into his arms and gives me a kiss that's too indecent for the office in the middle of a Monday.

"How was your meeting?" I ask once I catch my breath. I run my hands over the lapels of his coat.

"It was great. We met with the owners of McCallister and Sloane. Our lawyers are going over the contract with a fine-tooth comb, and we've secured financing. Sutton Marketing is growing." His hand slides down my back and cups my ass. He

presses me into him, and I can feel the beginnings of an erection. I look up into his brown eyes and bite my bottom lip to stop myself from telling him that I love him.

I get on my tippy toes and pucker my lips. He leans down, cups my face, and kisses me slowly. I'm so lost in his full lips that I don't register the knock on his door.

"What?" he groans against my mouth. He doesn't let me go though, and when the door opens and Olivia walks in with my family behind her, I sag my shoulders in defeat. Good things never last long for me.

"Thank you, Olivia. You may go," David tells her. She practically runs out of the office. David takes his time and removes his wool coat. He throws it on the couch, likely to make sure they have no place to sit. He takes my hand, goes to his chair, and pulls me into his lap.

My mother watches with a pinched look on her face. My father's expression is showing nothing, but he crosses his arms and narrows his eyes at David.

"What?" David asks. "You have two minutes before I call security."

LYNN LEWIS LICKS HER DRY LIPS AND LOOKS AROUND THE room. She stares at her husband, and I assume she wants him to say whatever they're here to say. Even their clown son is here, and I haven't even messed with him. At least not yet.

"I've tried to call you, Delaney, but you haven't returned my calls. The last time we saw each other, I said I wanted to have lunch. One on one," her father says.

"The last time you talked to my wife, I told you when she's ready to talk, she would reach out to you. Not the other way around," I remind him.

Delaney nods in agreement, and I tighten my arms around her waist.

"This is ridiculous," Lynn says after a few uncomfortable moments of silence. "Delaney, you ran because you claim I'm too controlling only for you to—" She gestures toward us as if she's trying to think of her next words. "Only for you to end up with this man who is quite obviously controlling you. He's not even allowing you to speak. Anyway, we came here to—"

Delaney stands from my lap, but I hold her hand to stop her from getting too close to these people.

"I married him. He *asked*, and *I* said yes. We make decisions together, and frankly, I've had twenty-four years of dealing with you." I gesture at her. "My husband is helping me," she says. "Don't compare my relationship with David to what I had with you."

If they weren't here, I'd throw her on the desk and fuck her loud enough for the entire office to hear. Since I'm not looking for a sexual harassment suit, I'd have to put my hand over her mouth to keep her quiet. My dick starts to stir just at the thought.

"Oh, please. You had it so bad, Delaney. You had everything handed to you on a silver platter. The only thing I asked of you is that you marry a man befitting your station in life. That's the only thing, and you ran away like the ungrateful brat that you are. I guess that's my fault too. I raised you, after all. But fine. You made your bed. Lie in it. We're only here—"

"My station in life? Are we in a Jane Austen novel, Mother? Well, in that case, David is richer than you. How come you haven't congratulated me on marrying a man way above my station?" Delaney challenges. Her mother looks away as if the sight of us together offends her.

"Lynn, this is not what we agreed on," her father interjects. "We did not come here to argue with our daughter."

"Well, I have things to say!" Lynn yells in my office. This little unwelcome visit has already gone on way too long. "I don't know who told you that you're supposed to get everything you want in this world, but I guess you're just entitled. You think I've always had everything I wanted? You think I didn't have to make sacrifices? Do you know how much shit I had to swallow to get to where I am in life? This is something you'll never understand because you never had to sacrifice anything. And after everything I've suffered, I end up with a weakling of a daughter. So delicate like a damn snowflake. Who the hell faints at the sight of blood? Only you! It's shameful. You think someone like you deserves everything she wants? And it will be a cold day in hell before I will even acknowledge this marriage. He is not the kind of man that's welcome in our family."

"Why not? Because he wasn't chosen by you?" Delaney asks.

"Because we don't marry people like him!" she yells.

I try to stand so I can personally escort Lynn Lewis out of my office, but Delaney starts to speak, so I remain seated.

“So you decided to punish me because I couldn’t go down the career path you chose for me? Do you two hear that?” Delaney looks to her father and brother. Pascale is staring daggers at his wife while Damon looks away.

“You just asked, and you received. From me.” Lynn points at herself. “I had different dreams when I was young too. You think your father was my first choice for a husband? He wasn’t, but he—”

She stops speaking, but it’s too late. Those words are out, and she can’t take them back. Even her idiot son is unprepared. He takes a step back as if he’s been struck. Pascale stands to his full height, but he’s looking away as if her words hurt.

“Really, Lynn?” he asks, his voice strained. “That’s news to me. Especially since you’re the one who pursued me. Remember that? I was engaged to another woman, but that didn’t seem to matter to you. Now, I wasn’t your first choice? Really?”

I tilt my head toward Lynn and chuckle. All the color has now drained from her face. I’d offer her a seat and a drink if I didn’t despise her so much.

“Mom, I think you’ve said enough,” Damon says. He puts a gentle hand on her shoulder. I would appreciate his gesture if he had offered his sister any empathy when she first went to him.

“My point is,” Lynn tries to continue, but no more words come out. She clears her throat and remains quiet. She moves closer to her son.

“I’ve made sacrifices, Mother. I’m not going to rehash them. The only one I’m not willing to make is letting you choose my husband. And you know what? This is the last time I’m having this conversation. I’m done with it. I dumped Mitch, and you dumped me. The end.” She sits back in my lap, and I rub soothing circles on her back.

“Delaney, no one dumped you as a daughter,” Damon says. He has the nerve to roll his eyes. “Why are you always so dramatic?”

“Damon, shut up,” Delaney says, standing up so abruptly that I don’t get a chance to grab her hand. She crosses the room to face her brother head on. I remain in my seat, but I can jump across this desk and get to him in under a second if I have to. “These are the last words I’m ever going to say to you, so you better listen. What the hell do you know about it, you dismissive little jerk?” She points her finger in his face. He wasn’t expecting that. His mouth opens like a fish, but no words come out. “Good thing I don’t want you in my life, so you don’t have to worry about my drama. For the record, I’m not dramatic. You’re just repeating Mother’s narrative, you stupid bobble headed bitch.”

This time it’s her mother who gasps. I finally stand and walk to my wife, but I chuckle along the way. I pull her away from Damon, but I have no doubt she’d hurt him if I let her get close enough.

“What do you people want? And tread lightly. Talking to or about my wife is off limits.”

“You know what? I don’t care anymore,” her father says. “Do whatever you want,” he says to me. “Delaney, I meant what I said. I’m not going to stop calling you.” With that, he walks out of the room, his shoulders hunched.

Lynn takes a deep breath and says, “I’ve come here to ask you to call off your dogs.”

“My dogs? I don’t know what you mean. I’m a cat person,” I say, shrugging my shoulders.

“The state board is investigating my practice. There have been several complaints, and I know you’re behind them.”

She’s right. I am. “Prove it,” is all I say.

“Your mother is on the board, and your family donated millions of dollars to South Shore Hospital. It doesn’t take a genius to know you have connections,” Lynn says.

“Our family’s practice should be off limits,” Damon has the nerve to interject.

“Coming after Delaney should have been off limits too, but you people have no boundaries. I guess I don’t either when it comes to protecting *my wife*.”

We stare at each other while I wait to see what she does next. “I have no intentions of doing anything to your wife.” She tries to hide the disdain when she says wife, but I can still hear it.

“Glad to hear it. Not that I’m admitting to being behind your recent problems, nevertheless, I can maybe pull some strings.”

She sighs loudly. “You admitted it already,” she reminds me.

I ignore her and say, “You have to ask nicely though.” I cross my arms and lean against my desk. Delaney does the same.

“This is ridiculous. Mom, let’s go,” Damon says, turning his back to us.

“I need you to call off your dogs,” Lynn practically hisses.

“Um, that’s not a question, and it’s not nice,” I tsk.

“Can you please make some calls and have the investigation called off?” She enunciates her words as if each is a physical blow.

“Now, *that’s* a question, but I guess I wasn’t clear. Ask my wife, not me. I’ll only do it if she wants, otherwise, you’re toast.” I gesture cutting my throat with my index and middle finger.

Lynn stares at her son, and I stare at her. She’s still well put together, but she’s more disheveled today than ever before. I want to pat myself on the back for being the one responsible for her state of chaos.

“Delaney, can you please ask your husband—”

“No,” I interrupt. “Don’t ask her to ask her husband. She has the power, not me. Ask *her*.” I emphasize the last word. “It’s her call, not mine. Provided that anything can be done. You might have fucked yourself beyond repair. If someone has it in for you, I can’t even begin to imagine what else they have planned. I’m sure it will only get worse from here.”

Her face has now gone ashen. I know this woman is not used to asking for anything. She gives the orders. She makes the decisions. She’s run Delaney’s life, and the thought of having to ask her to save her practice, the thing she holds dear to her heart, has got to be crushing.

“Delaney, can you please do something and have the investigation called off?” Each word comes off clipped. Spittle would probably fly out of her mouth if she wasn’t made of ice.

“Now, apologize,” I order. She wasn’t expecting that. Her nostrils flare in defiance and she crosses her arms. “Apologize for everything,” I hiss.

“I apologize for my actions,” she says.

“What actions, Mother?” Delaney asks.

“Delaney, are you serious?” Damon asks.

“Didn’t I already tell you to shut up, Damon? No one here cares what you have to say, idiot,” Delaney says. “You’re irrelevant.”

I’d order him out of my office, but I want him to witness his mother’s embarrassment. She’d probably prefer to have him gone, so it’s not going to happen. To show Damon how insignificant he is, everyone ignores his question.

“For trying to find someone for you who is—”

“Nope. Try again. Last chance,” I tell her. “I’m almost out of patience. Tread lightly.” The lightness I had in my voice is now gone. I’m five seconds away from calling security to escort them out of my office.

“I apologize for not listening to you when you came to me about not wanting to marry Mitch. I’m sorry for towing the car and the lawsuit.” She doesn’t mean a word of it, but it’s a start.

“I’ll think about it,” Delaney says a few seconds later. “Please, leave now.”

They stare at each other. Lynn finally sticks her nose up in the air and turns to leave my office, but I’m not done yet. I wait for her to get as far as the door. When she puts her hand on the knob, I stop her.

“I’m not done,” I announce. She freezes, and I can see the stiffening of her back. She drops her hand and slowly turns around.

“Pay my wife back the money you stole from her.” Her nostrils flare, and she looks around the room. This time, Damon wisely keeps his mouth shut. If he says one more word, I’ll let Delaney handle him. Lynn walks to my desk, opens her designer purse and pulls out a checkbook. When she starts writing, I say, “With interest. I’m sure you can do the math. Doctors are supposed to be smart.” All I hear is the angry scrawling as she makes out a check. She slams it on my desk and tries to make her escape. I stop her again before she can open the door.

“One more thing.” Her back goes ramrod straight, but she slowly turns around. Her face has gone completely red, and I know she’s about a second away from imploding. “You haven’t apologized to my wife for stealing her money. Do that now.” Her eyes lock with mine. If she could, she’d kill me and not think twice about it. To show her how little power she really has, I look at my Rolex and tap on the screen. “I’m a busy man, Dr. Lewis. Let’s get on with it.”

“I’m sorry about the money,” she says through clenched teeth.

“For stealing her money,” I whisper. “Say it.” She closes her eyes and exhales. I know she’s weighing her options. I hope she also knows that I will have no problem making more trouble for her.

“I apologize for st—” She stops herself, exhales, and looks at the ceiling. “For stealing your money.” She opens the door and leaves without another word. Satisfied, I sit back in my chair and grin.

“That was low, Delaney,” Damon says.

Delaney points to the door and gestures for him to go. She gives him her back without another word. I think he’s stunned speechless for once. He blinks twice, and after a brief moment, he walks out of my office. I follow behind him and lock my door. I return to my wife, spin her around, and bend her over my desk.

She’s in a skirt today, so I lift it over her ass and rip her panties off her body.

“David, what are you doing?” Her question is barely a whisper. Instead of answering, I slide my hand between her legs and feel her wet pussy.

“I’m about to fuck my wife in my office.” I unzip and push down my pants and boxers. I lean on top of her and whisper in her ear, “I’m going to be the only man to fuck you in an office.” I slide inside of her with one hard thrust. I’m not gentle. I’ve fucked her enough to know when she wants it rough and when she wants it slow. I grab her hips and thrust so hard, my balls slap the back of her thighs.

“David,” she moans. I grab her breast and remind myself we’re at work and that I can’t rip her shirt open. When she starts to moan, I cover her mouth with my hand.

“Shh. Those sounds are for my ears only.” With my hand covering hers, I fuck her into an orgasm before I come inside of her. Once our breathing returns to normal, I let her go and slide out of her. She stumbles before catching her footing.

She pulls her skirt down and fixes her blouse. She exhales while she runs a hand through her now disheveled hair.

“I need to clean up,” she says. “I would have preferred that in my mouth. Now you’ll be dripping out of me all afternoon, and I have no panties.”

I pick up her torn underwear and put it in my pocket. I pull her into my arms and kiss her soft, full lips. “Go clean up and leave my office before I keep you here all afternoon.” One more kiss, and she goes into the adjoining bathroom.

While she's gone, I turn on my desktop and sign in. I have a mountain of work to get through before we leave tonight. I don't work as late as I used to, but there's so much to do until we close on the McCallister and Sloane purchase, I'll be taking work home for the next few weeks at least.

She comes out of the bathroom and stands across from me.

"Yes, Mrs. Sutton?"

"About what's happening with my parent's medical practice," she says. I don't react while I wait for her next words. "Drop it, please. I don't want to get back at them. I just want to live my life."

"Okay. It's your call, but it's been so fun. Can I let it go on for another couple of weeks?"



JUST AS I HIT SEND ON AN EMAIL, MY OFFICE DOOR OPENS AND Max walks in. He's carrying his jacket, signaling he's on his way out. I check the time and notice it's a little after five.

"I'm headed home, but I'm going to your house first to get Fancy." My head snaps up when he says that. I stand and grab my own coat.

"I'll bring her over. You can make dinner for me and Delaney too."

"I don't trust you to bring her. I didn't want you to take her home to begin with," he reminds me.

"Oh, whatever. She was all alone while you two were gone. You're welcome. Go home and start cooking. I'll bring Fancy and Pumpkin for a visit." He looks into my eyes, probably unconvinced. I hold his stare and give him my most innocent gaze. "Let me ask you something," I say, hoping to take his mind off the cat. "Do you get a rush out of calling Summer your wife? I can't stop saying my wife. Don't repeat this because I'm a true feminist." He rolls his eyes. "Having her take my last name is like a high. I wish I could tattoo

David Sutton's wife on her forehead. Followed by, do not touch, or else."

Max shakes his head at me in disbelief. "You still have no idea, do you?" he asks. "Jesus." He runs a hand over his face.

"No idea about what?" I send Delaney an instant message telling her I'll come by her desk in a few minutes and start to shut down my desktop.

"God, how can one human being be so stupid?" Max asks.

"I'm a million times smarter than you, not to mention more handsome."

He puts his bag down and approaches me. He cups my face and squeezes.

"Repeat after me," he says.

"Get off me." I try to push him away, but he only tightens his hold on me.

"Repeat after me. I." He waits for me to repeat. When I remain quiet, he squeezes my cheeks together.

"I," I say with an eye roll.

"Love." When I don't say anything, he squeezes.

"Love."

"My," he says.

"My."

"Wife." He stares into my eyes and waits.

"Wife?" I try to tilt my head to absorb the words, but he's still holding me.

"One more time, fuckhead. All at once this time. Repeat after me. I love my wife."

I let the words sink in. Visions of Delaney flash through my mind. From the first moment I laid eyes on her until today when I had her bent over my desk. She came into my life out of nowhere, and in no time at all, she became the center of it. She didn't even try. She became everything in the blink of an eye. I can tell myself that I married her to protect her, but

that's not true. I wouldn't have done that for anyone else, and I could have protected her without marrying her.

"I love my wife?" I ask. He nods. "I love my wife!" I break his hold, grab him and kiss both his cheeks. "You're god damn right, I love my wife. Whoa!" I jump in the air and do a fist pump. I pick up my coat and walk to the door. "Forget about making dinner for us. I have other plans. I'll bring the cats to see you another day." I slam the door before he can respond.

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SOMETHING IS DIFFERENT ABOUT DAVID THIS EVENING. HE'S driving and humming to the music I have on in the car. He never hums along. I don't think he cares for the music I like, but he never says a word. There's a slight smile on his lips, and every few seconds, he looks at me. My heart pounds as I think of the conversation I had with Summer a few hours ago.

"PUT YOUR BIG GIRL PANTIES ON AND TELL HIM," SHE SAYS. SHE looks around the small kitchen and takes a spoonful of chicken noodle soup.

"You're sneaking canned soup from your husband, and you're telling me to put my big girl panties on?" I chuckle at her.

"Shut up. This is the only thing I can stomach lately, and he hates prepackaged food. He's a total food snob, so don't tell him." She lifts the bowl to her mouth and takes a big gulp. "And I need you to buy me more cans, but you have to keep them at your desk. Now, back to you. Tell him. Do you really think the man would have married you if he didn't love you? He does. Tell him tonight."

I've been holding the words back for weeks now. I had to literally bite my tongue today to keep them from spilling out.

"What if I tell him and he—"

"He will." She puts her hand on mine. "He will."

HE PULLS INTO THE DRIVEWAY AND THEN THE GARAGE. WE'VE barely said a few words since we got in the car, and I don't bother to wait for him to open my door. He takes my hand when I step out and opens the door into the kitchen.

After helping me with my coat and taking off his own, he says. "How about a glass of wine?" He opens the fridge and pulls out a bottle of white before I can utter a response. I pour each of us a glass and drink mine in three sips. I pour myself another. David watches me, but he doesn't say a word. He just lets me be. He never judges, criticizes, or tells me what I should do.

After draining half of my second glass, I set it down and let the warmth of the alcohol soothe me.

"I want to talk to you about something," he says. He clears his throat and pulls on his tie. I reach for it and start to take it off. He doesn't normally wear a tie in the office, but he did today because of his meeting.

"Can I say something first?" I pull his tie off and let out a deep breath. "There's something I want to give you." He wiggles his brows and wraps his arms around me, pulling me to him. I push against him and take a step back. "Not that. You've given me a lot, David." I put my hands on his. "So much. From the moment you found me here, you—"

"In my bed," he reminds me.

"Since you found me in your bed, you've given me your time, your ear, your body, and best of all, your protection. You gave me all those things I didn't know I needed. Now, I need you to know that I didn't agree to marry you so you can protect me from my crazy family. You've been doing that since day one. I agreed to marry you for only one reason. Because I'm in love with you. I know that's not what we agreed to but—"

He puts a finger to my lips and my heart sinks while I wait for his rejection.

"We agreed to a lot of things, cookie," he reminds me.

“Right.” I swallow the lump in my throat, losing my train of thought for a few seconds. “We did agree to be friends with benefits but I soon wanted more. And you gave it to me. Now, it’s my turn to give you something. I’m in love with you, David Sutton. You don’t have to give me anything back. I came into this relationship with nothing, and this is the only thing I have that I can give you. I’ve never given it to another man. It’s only been for you, and it will only ever be for you. I love you.” I exhale once I finish my speech. I don’t expect him to say it back, so I kiss his cheek and go to the refrigerator. “So, what do you feel like eating tonight? How would you feel about shrimp scampi?”

He closes the refrigerator door and turns me to face him. “You make a declaration like that and start asking about shrimp? For future reference, it’s always a yes when it comes to shrimp.” He cups my cheeks and stares into my eyes. “Delaney, why do you think I married you?”

“So you could protect me from—”

“First of all, you can protect yourself. You don’t need me for that. You’re a fighter, cookie, and I bet you still don’t know that about yourself. It would have been easy to walk down that aisle, say I do, and suffer in silence, but you didn’t. No, I didn’t marry you to protect you. I married you because I love you. I married you because I want to be your husband.” He puts a finger underneath my chin. “Always, cookie. It has nothing to do with keeping those crazies away from you.” He cradles my face. “That’s just a perk because I love making trouble for them.”

I’ve stopped breathing, but I manage to take a deep breath and say, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I was stupid,” he says. “You deserve to not only be loved, but to be told that you’re loved.” He rests his forehead on mine. Tears slide down my cheeks as I raise my face to kiss him. After kissing me soundly, he picks me up bridal style and starts toward the stairs, but the front door opens, and the alarm beeps.

“I’m here for my cat,” Max’s booming voice says. He puts me down, slides his hands down his pants, and adjusts himself.

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I TAKE DELANEY'S HAND IN MINE AND JOIN MY BROTHER AND Summer in the living room. They're still in the same clothes they were in at the office. He looks around and eyes the two cat beds I keep by the couch.

"I told you I would bring the cat to you," I remind him.

"You didn't. You said you would bring both cats to visit me. You're not stealing Fancy too. My wife got her for me as a gift."

Summer barely tolerates the cat. I cut Max off before he can get to the stairs.

"First, Summer wasn't your wife when she got you that cat." I put a hand to his chest, but I know he's seconds from shoving me out of the way.

"And?" he challenges.

"And you interrupted me and my wife. I just told her I love her." Summer runs to Delaney and they hug.

"Congratulations. You two admitted to each other what any blind person could see. You're well matched because you're both visually impaired. Either you move, or I'll make you." As if Fancy can sense she's the topic of conversation, she comes running down the stairs with Pumpkin behind her. They go towards the women, and Summer screams and runs out of the way. Delaney bends down and picks Fancy up while Pumpkin runs out of the room.

“Breeze, please don’t run with my baby inside of you,” Max says. He goes to Delaney and takes Fancy from her. He pets the top of her head and kisses her. He extends his free hand to Summer, who takes it. “Goodnight,” he says, while they walk toward the door.

“This isn’t over,” I yell at his retreating back. “She was happy here! I’ve changed my mind about dinner. We’ll be there in two hours, so make enough. I’m inviting Caleb too.” He’ll pout like a three-year-old if he finds out we all had dinner without him. “What are you making?”

I know he’s a second away from telling me to go fuck myself, but Summer answers. “Shrimp alfredo,” she says.

“Oh,” Delaney responds. “I prefer chicken in my alfredo.”

Max scoffs at her audacity, but I say, “You will make chicken alfredo for my wife or else.” I surprise Delaney when I pick her up bridal style. “See you in two hours.”

They leave, but Max slams the door behind him.

“Why’d you let him take her?” I ask Delaney.

“Because I want my husband to take me upstairs and show me how much he loves me.” Her mouth lands on mine the moment we enter the bedroom, and I put her on her feet.

I STIR MY COFFEE AND GENTLY BLOW ON IT. DAVID GROANS. It's subtle, but I hear it. I take a sip, and he takes the mug from me, putting it to his own lips. "Sweet," he whispers so close to my ear that his lips brush my earlobe. "Just the way I like it." He licks the shell of my ear before moving away. I feel a blush take over my entire body.

I hear a loud throat clearing, and I look around the room. Max catches my eye. I clear my own throat and take a seat, but I blush again when David winks at me. I look around the crowded conference room, and all eyes are on me.

It's been like this for the past few days. I don't know if people can sense the change between me and my husband, but I swear everyone looks at us every time we step into a room. It doesn't matter if we're together or not. He stands behind my chair, and his hands softly caress the back of my neck.

A few more people trickle in, and about a minute later, Summer walks briskly into the room.

"Sorry, I'm late," she says. "I was on the phone with Jakobe." Max grimaces. It's quick, but I catch it, and I wonder what that's about.

"Hey, baby," he says while Summer walks to the seat he has saved for her. Her steps falter, and she crosses her arms. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to call you baby at work, Mrs. Sutton." He pats the chair next to him. "I saved you a seat." She takes it, and he quickly kisses her cheek. "I love you, and

please don't run with my baby inside you." Everyone in the room chuckles.

She huffs and turns from him, but the smile won't leave her face.

"Now that everyone is here," David says. "There are a few things we want to address. It's all good news. I'm sure everyone is aware of the rumors flying around that we're buying McCallister and Sloane..."



"MY HUSBAND IS SO SEXY WHEN HE COMMANDS A ROOM," I whisper to Summer. She mouths whatever, and I nudge her with my shoulder. "He is."

The meeting has just ended, and after announcing that the company is providing lunch today, everyone starts to file out of the large conference room. "Will you help me set up the food when it gets here?" Ordering lunch and setting it up in the kitchen falls under my umbrella, but I always try to recruit Summer or Olivia to help me.

Half the employees have already left the room when a tall woman with blonde hair glides in. She looks around until her eyes land on David. Her eyes narrow and she starts to take slow steps toward him. "Jesus," I whisper. "Is this a woman my husband has scorned?" I elbow Summer in the ribs to get her attention. She curses under her breath when she sees the woman.

"It's Celia," she says. "And she's looking at *my* husband, not yours." Summer's right. No other people file out. They stand there as if they're expecting a show. In fact, several people who had already left return.

"You," Celia says, pointing at David and Max. "You fucking snakes." She slams her purse on the table.

"Pot, meet kettle," David says. "How did you get in here?"

"Fuck you both," Celia hisses.

“No, thanks,” Max says. Celia’s nostrils flare and she looks around the room. Her eyes land on Summer and she scoffs.

“Get over yourself, Max. It’s not enough that you two fired me after all I’ve done for this company. After you ran away with your tail between your legs.” She points in Max’s face before she addresses David. “This marriage will blow up in his face like his other one, and you’ll be left holding the bag because we all know he deals with life by hiding.”

The entire room shuts up as they watch the confrontation. I grab Summer’s elbow when she tries to go toward Celia.

“Are you sure this baby’s yours, Max?” Celia taunts. Her eyes roam Summer’s body and stop at her stomach. There’s so much venom shooting out of her eyes, I worry she will attack my friend. Summer manages to pull her elbow from me and starts toward Celia, but Max steps in front of her.

“Who the hell do you think you are to come in here and make a scene?” Max says. The deadly calm of his voice belies how angry he is, but I can tell from the darkening of his eyes. “Stay the hell out of my personal life, Celia. Right now, our problems are professional. Trust me when I tell you, you don’t want to make this personal.:

“You think you scare me?” she says, but I can see some of her bravado start to fade away.

“I know I do,” he says. “You were hired here as an employee. Do you want a medal for doing your job? A job you were very well compensated for, by the way. Looks like you took quite the pay cut when you joined McCallister and Sloane,” he taunts. “The difference between me and you, Celia, is that I own this business with my brother. You don’t. We’re family and you aren’t. You were fired for cause. You could have gone quietly, but you decided to play dirty and lost at your own game.”

“Not only is this pathetic, it’s also embarrassing,” David says to Celia. “The good news is, we won’t take over until February first. You have months to find a new job.”

She looks around the room, breathing so hard, I'm afraid fire will shoot out of her nose.

"You both can go straight to hell, especially you, Max." Max scoffs and looks away, completely unbothered by Celia's tantrum.

"You're boring," he says. He puts an arm around his wife and kisses her temple. That seems to anger Celia even more.

"You'll be hearing from my lawyer," she threatens.

"Oh, yeah? For what? For firing you? We have reason. For buying another company? Good luck with that, but bring it on," David taunts. "You'll not only lose, but you'll also go bankrupt. I told you poaching employees was kid stuff. Oh, we should thank you, though. You did all the work for that Silicon Valley deal, and we got it." I've never seen my husband look so smug, and I find that I like it.

"They'll never work with you," Celia says, but even I can hear the uncertainty in her voice.

"I'm afraid they will. They have a contract with McCallister and Sloane. I'm sure you can guess what will happen when we take over."

Celia's eyes turn to ice.

"I heard you got married, David" Celia says. She lets out a humorless laugh. "I give it six months. I almost feel sorry for this woman. She must not know you're incapable of keeping it in your pants. Who in their right mind would marry you?" She throws her head back and laughs like a crazed person.

"That would be me, and I'd appreciate it if you'd keep my husband's name out your mouth."

"Her?" She looks around the room as if she's expecting an answer. "Or what, little girl?" She gets in my face, and I move forward, ready to meet her head on, but David steps between us.

"Get the hell out of here before you embarrass yourself further. Olivia, please call security," David says without looking away from Celia. "You so much as breathe on my

wife, and you'll be charged with assault. I'll come after you with everything I've got. Don't even think about it," David warns.

I can't see her with David standing between us, but she must think twice about whatever she was going to do next. I step from behind him in time to see her walk away. She trips and ends up falling on all fours. Everyone stands there in complete silence and looks at her until someone chuckles. That has a domino effect, and pretty soon, half the room is laughing at her. She quickly stands and when she looks around, I can see some color on her cheeks.

"This isn't over," she says.

"I'm pretty sure it is," David replies.

She walks out and slams the door behind her.



"I'M SO READY FOR THE WEEKEND," I SAY WHILE I PULL INTO the office parking lot. "Especially after the drama with Celia this week." It's Friday, and me, Summer, Jade, and Olivia just had lunch. Kevin's off today, and Caleb went to a meeting with David and Max. I check my phone, and there's a text from my husband saying he's on his way back to the office. I respond with a kiss emoji, and he sends back a wink right away.

"Three more hours until the weekend," Olivia says. "And Summer's Halloween party tomorrow." We all cheer at that. Summer turns around and gives Jade a high five for planning the party. I put my car in park, and we all get out.

"I'm going inside to use the bathroom, and then I have a meeting," Jade says. We all cross the parking lot, which is full for a Friday afternoon. We almost get to the door before Mitch practically jumps in front of me from the side of the building.

"Shit." I let out a loud rush of breath and put my hand to my chest. Everyone comes to a stop when they see him. Jade practically collides with my back. I finally look into his face,

and he looks awful. Admittedly, he's never looked great, but there are dark circles under his eyes, and his face looks gaunt. The wind blows, and I smell alcohol coming from him. I'd ask him what he's doing here, but I'm sure I already know. It's confirmed when I see the way he's looking at my left hand, which is still pressed to my chest. I put it down, and slide both hands into my jacket pockets.

I go around him, unwilling to say a word. I've said all I'm going to say to him. He's part of my distant past. The part of the past that I never want to think about again. He blocks me, and Jade bumps into my back.

"Move," is all I say to him.

"You fucking bitch," he says, slurring his words.

I scoff and wave my left hand in dismissal. He takes a step closer. "Move or—" The words never leave my mouth. He slaps me hard across the face. So stunned by his sudden movement, I stand there with my hand holding my stinging cheek. I've never been slapped in the face before in my life, and in this moment, I don't know how to react. I can feel tears start to sting my eyes, but I blink them away. I have never cried over Mitch, and I'm not going to start now. I slap him back as hard as I can. I don't know if it's because of the alcohol, but he stumbles back. Before he can gain his footing, I scratch his face. Thankfully, I don't draw blood.

"God damn bitch," Mitch says while he clutches his cheek.

My crew all start talking at once. All three approach him, but I stand in front of them. "This is my fight," I whisper. "But be ready to jump in," I tell them. "Mitch, I said it all when I left the church, so get the fuck out of here." He shoves me, and I end up bumping into my friends.

"Hey," Summer yells, "what's your damn problem? Delaney is not your property."

"Shut the fuck up. You're a god damn bitch too," he says with venom. "This is all your fault," he says to her. "You and that Sutton asshole, and now you go and marry his brother. You stupid fucking cunt. Both of you."

“Mitch, if I’m all those things, why do you care?” I ask him. “You dodged a bullet. Aren’t you always talking about how great you are because you’re a doctor? Go find someone who is worthy of you then.” I roll my eyes, unbothered by his tantrum. “You deserve better than me. And what the hell was in it for you anyway? It’s not like you ever cared about me.”

“My granny says a man who brags about what a catch he is, is no catch at all,” Olivia says. From the corner of my eye, I see Jade nod in agreement.

“He’s the type you throw back,” Jade says under her breath. “Not good enough to keep,” she says louder.

“Move before I shove my high heel up your ass,” I tell him.

“Try it, bitch. Give me a reason to knock you out.” He waves his fist around. “You humiliated me and my entire family. Your mother said she’d bring you to heel but can’t. Now you’re married to this white motherfucker, and they’ve just given up. Your fucking father called to tell me to move on with my life. When did he ever give a fuck about you? And your bitch mother agrees with him. They were supposed to invest in my father’s business, and now that’s done. You’re right, I don’t care about you, but I need a wife, and you’re adequate. I wanted someone—”

I hold a hand in his face, but he knocks it away. “Don’t worry about who I married. I ain’t married to you. That’s the only thing that matters. You know what, I don’t care about what was in it for you. I’m not a transaction.” He stares at me, and I realize his eyes are dead. Just two dark pools of emptiness. Jade and Olivia get closer to me, probably to attack Mitch if necessary. Summer tries to come closer, but Olivia blocks her. Mitch breaks eye contact and looks around. He shakes his head, gives us the middle finger, and walks away.

Relieved to have him gone, I exhale and start toward the door, but I soon hear the sounds of rapid footsteps. I turn in time to see him running back in our direction. He collides with me, knocking me against the door. He then pushes Summer, causing her to fall on her ass. While I’m trying to catch my

balance, he lunges for Summer, but Olivia jumps in front of her before Mitch can make contact. He knocks Olivia against the wall, and she hits the back of her head.

“Ouch,” she says.

“She’s pregnant, you piece of shit!” Jade yells right before she jumps on Mitch’s back and puts him in a headlock. Olivia bends down to check on Summer, and when I get my bearings, I do the same. While we’re helping her to her feet, I hear a car and tires screeching, but I don’t look to see who it is.

“Are you okay,” I ask Summer. She nods, but she’s breathing hard, clearly still shaken by Mitch’s attack.

“Get off me, bitch!” Mitch, with Jade still on his back, pushes her against the wall of the building. I leave Summer’s side to go help Jade, but he manages to knock her off and start running. Jade falls, landing on her side. I see a figure in a white shirt run and catch Mitch.

“Hold him,” I hear David say. He comes to me while I’m kneeling down next to Jade. He helps her stand up but looks at my face and curses. He runs a hand along my cheek, and I hiss in pain. “Did he do this?” There’s an edge to his voice that I’ve never heard before. When I say yes, he puts his hand down and finally looks at Jade. “You okay?” he asks her. She’s rubbing the back of her head and left shoulder, but she nods.

“You put your hands on my pregnant wife?” I hear Max say while he advances toward Mitch, who is being held by Caleb. Mitch is doing everything he can to get free, but Caleb is not only tall, he’s muscular. He holds Mitch in place with little effort. Max grabs Mitch by his collar, and Caleb steps aside. Before Mitch can react, Max punches him hard in the stomach and he doubles over. He snatches him again, this time punching him in the ribs.

“Max!” Summer yells. “That’s enough.” She tries to go to him, but Caleb intercepts and blocks her with his body, shielding Max from her line of vision. “Stop!” she yells. “Please.” And Max lets Mitch go.

“Leave his face for me,” David says. I try to grab his hands to stop him from fighting, but he walks away from me. David slaps Mitch across the face, on the same cheek that he struck me. He stumbles back, but just as he catches himself, David punches him in the face, and I hear a crunching sound.

“I’m going to break both of your fucking arms, and then we’ll see how good of a doctor you are.” Mitch screams when David takes one of his arms, twists it, and puts it behind his back.

I watch the fight, but it’s no fight at all. Mitch stands there like a rag doll, barely doing anything to defend himself.

“I didn’t know what you saw in David until now,” Jade whispers to me. “Beat his ass,” she yells at my husband. Mitch’s screams become louder after David throws one more punch in his face.

Blood gushes out of his nose, and I feel bile rise at the back of my throat. I start to shake, and my hands have turned ice cold. “Blood,” I mutter right before I feel myself start to fall and everything goes black.

“MR. SUTTON, LET HIM GO.” FROM A DISTANCE, I HEAR Albert, the building security guard.

“David! Delaney needs you!” Jade’s annoying voice pulls me out of my daze, and I let Mitch go. He falls on the floor like a ragdoll. Albert bends down and starts inspecting Mitch.

I leave him to run to Delaney, who is now as white as a sheet and passed out. “Shit! What happened?” I gently pat her unbruised cheek and she starts to stir.

“The blood,” Jade reminds me.

Another reason I should go and kill that asshole.

“There you are, cookie,” I croon at Delaney. “Let me see those beautiful eyes.” I look down at my jacket, which has some blood spatters on it. I take it off and throw it on the ground before she sees it and possibly pass out again.

I help her up to her feet. “Are you okay?” When she nods yes, I pull her in my arms and hold her against me. “I’m going to kill him,” I whisper in her ear. I gesture at Caleb to come hold Delaney. When he does, I go to Mitch again who is finally starting to stand. He loses his balance and starts to fall, but he manages to grab onto the building for support.

“Sir, get inside, and I’ll handle this,” the security guard says.

“Where the hell were you when this asshole assaulted my wife, pregnant sister in law, and wife’s cousin? Olivia, did he touch you? If he did, I’ll—”

“I’m okay,” Olivia says. “I was pushed into the wall.”

“We’re short staffed, and I stepped away to go grab some lunch,” Albert says. “Please go tend to your wife and let me do my job.” I take a menacing step toward Mitch, but Albert stands between us. He’s in his mid-fifties, and I can easily push him aside, but Delaney calls my name, and I decide to leave this for now and go tend to my wife.

I pick her up bridal style and start toward the front door.

“Liv, feel free to leave for the day. I’m sorry this happened,” I say.

“I’m okay, David. Really. This is my last day as the receptionist, and Delaney is throwing an ice cream party for me at three.” I doubt anyone will be in the mood for a party, but I don’t tell her that as I go inside the building. Jade and Olivia follow me, and the four of us ride upstairs together.

Olivia returns to the front desk, but Jade comes to my office with us. I put Delaney on the couch, kiss her forehead, and tell her I’ll be right back. A few minutes later, I return to the office with two ice packs. I hand one to Jade and put the other on Delaney’s bruised cheek.

I CAN FEEL THE ANGER STILL RAGING INSIDE OF ME. THE punch in the face wasn't enough, and the security guard came out before I could break either of his arms. The good news is, I'm positive I broke his nose. That's the least of his problems.

"Fuck," I hiss when I lift the ice pack and look at the bruise on Delaney's cheek. It's already starting to swell, and I know by tomorrow it will be discolored.

"I'm okay, David," Delaney says. "It was just a slap." Just a slap. I curse under my breath. If she didn't need me right now, I'd leave, go find that asshole and finish him off.

"Just a slap? I'm going to kill that bastard." Jade is sitting on my couch and wincing. "What about you, Jade? Did you hit your head hard?"

She stands and hands me back the ice pack. "More my upper back and shoulder than my head, but I'm okay. I have a meeting to get to. I'm not going to let Mitch railroad my business."

"Thanks for sticking up for Delaney. You're not so bad," I admit. I give her an awkward tap on the shoulder.

She rolls her eyes at me while she takes Delaney into a hug. She says to me, "I guess you're okay too."

"Get out of here," Delaney says. "Come by the house tomorrow to get ready for Summer's party."

My office door opens and Max, Summer, and Caleb come rushing in.

“I’m taking Summer to see the obstetrician,” Max says. Delaney jumps off the couch and runs to her friend, and I follow on her heels.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her. I take both her hands in mine and look at her up and down. “Is my nephew okay?”

“I’m fine. Max is just being Max. He called the doctor, and they told him to bring me in just in case, but everything is fine. Your *niece* or nephew is doing great,” she says. I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Jade, we can meet in the kitchen. It’s pretty quiet now,” Caleb says. The rest of us look from Caleb to Jade.

“Caleb is who you’re meeting with? You know he never throws parties, right? He lives in my house for free,” I tell Jade. “And I don’t know what he does with his paychecks, but he’s always—”

Caleb clears his throat and elbows my ribs. I pretend to zip my lips and throw away the key.

“Yes, but Aunt Claire and my mom have lots of rich friends who love to throw parties,” Caleb says. “For example, I got Mom to agree to let you plan a small party she’s having for her friends. She’s going to talk up your skills, but you have to do a little something for me.” He wiggles his eyebrows, and Jade makes a gagging sound.

“Fine. Let’s go. I don’t want anyone else to witness my shame,” Jade says. “Just respect the hustle, okay?” she says to us.

There’s a knock on the door. Olivia walks in with a police officer and Albert the security guard.

Olivia has lost all coloring, and Albert shuffles in as if this is the last place he wants to be.

“The young man downstairs called the police,” Albert whispers. He moves out of the way and says, “This is Officer Lemenski.” Officer Lemenski looks like he’s about twenty years old and brand new on the job. He clears his throat as he looks around the room. My brother walks through us and

stands in front of the young cop. Max towers over him, and he has to crane his neck to look up at him.

“Mitchell Owens assaulted my pregnant wife, my sister-in-law, her cousin, and another employee. I have the witnesses to prove it, not to mention the bruise on my sister-in-law’s face. If he says otherwise, he’s a damn liar. He was trespassing. *We* are pressing charges, but in the meantime, I have to take my wife to the doctor to make sure our baby is okay. Handle this, David.” He takes Summer’s hand, and the two of them walk toward the door.

“Excuse me,” Officer Lemenski says to Max. He clears his throat, and his face turns beet red. “You can’t leave yet, sir. Not until you answer my questions.”

Max takes a step closer to Lemenski. “Are you telling me that you’re preventing me from getting my pregnant wife medical treatment? After she was assaulted?” The color leaves his face, and the officer steps out of the way.

“Of course not, but—” Max holds his hand up, signaling for the officer to shut up. He and Summer walk out without another word.

“Doctor Owens has a broken nose and says he was hit by three men,” the cop says. He looks away as if he can’t look into my eyes. I look at Caleb, who winks at me.

“We defended our wives. Either arrest me or get the hell out of my office, but I promise, I will sue your police department if you so much as look at me the wrong way. Mitchell Owens showed up here, where he has no business, prevented my wife and employees from going inside. He then slapped her across the face.” I cradle Delaney’s face and turn it around so Officer Lemenski can see. “Do you see this? How do you think that happened? Afterward, he pushed my pregnant sister-in-law and assaulted my employee and wife’s cousin. Tell me, Officer Lemenski, who do you think started this whole thing? Why are you here interrogating us when the culprit is downstairs?”

“Did Dr. Owens assault you first, Mr. Sutton?” That weasel is too much of a pussy to ever approach a man for a

fight. He'll only fight women.

“What do you think?” I ask, knowing better than to answer his question.

He looks at the security guard and asks, “Can I look at the surveillance video?”

Albert's bushy eyebrows crinkle and he clears his throat. “Unfortunately, we've been having technical difficulties, and there's no video.” I'm certain he's lying, and I make a mental note to get him a bottle of his preferred liquor.

“Yet you have four women here who can tell you what happened.”

“And we're all pressing charges, and I'm getting a restraining order,” Delaney says.

Jade and Olivia both back her up by nodding in agreement.

“So, you better do your job and arrest that asshole.” Or I'll go back downstairs and kill him with my bare hands.

The cop and Albert leave my office, and everyone exhales in relief. I let out a string of curses when Delaney's cheek starts to swell.

“Okay, we got to get you to a doctor,” I say to my wife. “All of you.” I gesture to her, Jade, and Olivia. “We need to document everything so when this goes in front of a judge, you're given the restraining order. Jade, you and Caleb can have your meeting tonight or this weekend. Liv, we'll do the ice cream party on Monday to celebrate your first day.”

I don't wait for anyone else to speak. I call my physician and I'm told to come in immediately.

“YOU TWO ARE MAKING A MOCKERY OUT OF THE CHURCH,” David says to Max, who is dressed as a priest. Right next to him, his pregnant wife is dressed as a nun. David tightens his arms around my bare midriff. The sexy Cleopatra costume almost kept us away from this party. When David saw me in it, all he wanted to do was take me out of it. “Of course, you’re not handsome enough to pull off Antony.” He puffs out his chest and shows us his biceps.

The house is full, and there’s music playing through the speakers. It looks like everyone we work with is here. It’s almost as if all the drama that happened yesterday was just a dream, but I know better.

Yesterday, as we were walking to David’s car, we saw Mitch being handcuffed and put in the police cruiser. I filed an emergency restraining order last night, and I’m waiting for a hearing in front of a judge, but I don’t want to think about any of that tonight. Tonight, I want to have fun at this Halloween party and then go home with my husband.

“Come on. I have a bar set up in the kitchen. Aunt Minnie gave us a cocktail recipe book for our wedding and a bunch of alcohol. I’ll make you guys a signature drink.”

While we follow Summer to the kitchen, we pass through the living room where people are making use of the karaoke machine. While Summer looks through a recipe book and starts mixing our drinks, David pulls me into his arms, and we start to sway to the music together.

“There you are,” Aunt Minnie says while she comes into the kitchen. “I see you’re using my gift. Make me a martini, extra dirty.” She’s dressed like a nineteen seventies hippie, and she gyrates her hips. She snatches David from me and starts to dance with him. She’s out of rhythm, but he tries to match her moves as best as he can. “Your mom’s out there flirting with your neighbor,” she announces. That gets Max’s attention, and he cranes his neck in search of his mother. “Maybe she’ll knock out some of those cobwebs. You guys know that your father is the only man she’s ever been with?”



“UGH. I’M NEVER DRINKING AGAIN,” I ANNOUNCE TO THE kitchen the next morning. It’s after eleven, and I’ve only been up half an hour. We didn’t get home until two in the morning, and after hours of sex, I fell into a deep sleep.

I press my body to David’s back while he pours coffee into two mugs. He adds sugar and milk to mine and hands it to me.

“God, that’s good,” I moan. “I think I’ll get a karaoke machine for our holiday party too. That was fun.”

He turns around, takes my mug from me, and holds my hands. “Promise me you’ll never sing again. Or at least warn me before you start so I can leave the room.” I pull my hands from him and punch him in the arm.

“Hey, I was good.” He turns his face from me.

“You looked good.” He kisses the side of my neck and starts to grind on me. When I turn my head and try to kiss him, he pulls away and says, “Control yourself, Mrs. Sutton. Our breakfast is on its way. Be good, and we’ll eat it in bed. And I want to talk to you about work.”

Just as the words are out of his mouth, the doorbell rings and he goes to answer it. I tighten the belt around my robe and my stomach growls. I decide to set the table instead of eating in bed. We can spend the rest of the day doing nothing. As I grab the plates, I hear footsteps.

“Let’s eat here and then go back to bed. I feel like—”

He clears his throat, and I turn my head and sigh. I take a deep breath. I don’t want to deal with any of this shit today.

“Dad,” I say. I grab my mug and lean against the kitchen island for support. David stands next to me. “Not now, okay. I ___”

He crosses the room and grabs my chin. He turns my face and gently touches me. I hiss and push his hands away.

“Is this why Mitch was arrested?” he asks. “His mother called me and lit into me. Made all kinds of threats and accusations. I told her to fuck off.”

David scoffs and says, “Talk about too little, too late.”

“I don’t want to talk about Mitch anymore. I’ll deal with him when we go to court, but I’m done talking about it with you and anyone who isn’t my husband.” The doorbell rings again, and David tells me he’ll be right back.

Dad takes off his jacket and hangs it behind a chair. He’s in jeans and a gray sweater, but the jeans are wrinkled.

“Can I have a cup of coffee?” Resigned, I get another mug and fill it up. I point to the sugar and milk on the counter. He helps himself, and David returns as my dad starts to stir his coffee. Dad’s eyes remain on my face.

“That should heal within a few days. I want you to know that I’ve separated from your mother. I’m taking a leave from work too.” Without being asked, he takes a seat at the table. “I told her I need some time.” I look to the ceiling and expel my breath, but he continues. “I’m really sorry, Delaney. So damn sorry.” He hangs his head and holds it in both hands. “You’re right. I’ve been a horrible parent to you. I’ve done nothing but think these past few weeks, and I can’t think of a single time when I was there for you. I’ve let you down in every way.” He suddenly stands and puts both hands on my shoulders. “I hope in time you can think about forgiving me.”

I stare into his eyes, and they seem hollow. I’ve never seen my father like that before. His eyes have always been vibrant.

He might not be the life of the party, but he's always been upbeat. Today he seems void.

"Don't put pressure on my wife," David says from across the room. He's pulling the to-go containers out and plating our food.

"No pressure. I promise," Dad says. "I'm ashamed to say this, but I'd like to get to know you. I realize now that I don't. I'd like to get to know David too."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere, so I guess you have to say that," David retorts.

"And your brother is—" I hold up my hand and he stops talking.

"I don't want to talk about Mother, Damon, or Mitch. Those are my conditions. Please don't talk about them unless I bring them up. At this point, I don't want anything to do with any of them."

He freezes at my declaration. The coffee mug stops halfway to his mouth and his eyebrows rise practically to his forehead. "I understand," he finally says. After taking a long, slow sip of his coffee, he continues. "I'll just say this last thing, and I'll never bring them up again. Your mother has been beside herself since she found out that Mitch assaulted you. Your brother too. I think this—" I hold my hand up, and he stops talking.

"Stop. I don't care." I catch David's eye. He stands to his full height and holds his hand out to me. When I get to him, he puts his arm around me, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

"That's enough," he warns my dad. "Do you want him to leave?" He cups my face and looks into my eyes.

"I'd really like to stay," my dad insists.

"You can join us for breakfast, Dad, and I know this is foreign, but you've got to respect my wishes. This version of Delaney has boundaries." David drops his hand from my face and grabs another plate. He makes a table setting for my dad, and I gesture for him to sit.

“I got this for Caleb, so you’ll have to make him something when he wakes up. How I became responsible for that guy, I’ll never know,” David grumbles, but I know how much he loves having Caleb here. My dad grabs a chair, and David finishes plating our food.

“Thank you,” my dad says. He downs his coffee, gets up, and serves himself another cup. I wonder if he’s been unable to take care of himself since he’s moved out, but I don’t ask. That might invite more talk about my mother.

“So, as I was saying before your dad stopped by, we have some job opportunities opening up when the purchase goes through. I want you to consider taking one. I’ll go over the list with you. And since this is your family business now, I want you and Summer to work side by side with me. I want to teach you the business from the ground up. You’re one of the Suttons now, assuming that’s what you want. If not, that’s okay too. I know you only came to work for us because you were let go from your other job.” He gives my dad the side eye. Dad either can’t or won’t meet David’s stare. The fork falls from my hand and lands in the middle of my plate. There was always talk at my family’s dinner table about me and Damon joining the family practice. No one ever asked if that’s what we wanted. It was just decided we would not only become doctors but go into plastic surgery. No one has ever asked me what I wanted.

Now, I not only have a new family, one that includes my best friend, but I have a new family business.

“I want to be by my husband’s side. Always.”

He picks up my hand and kisses it. “I love you.” He winks at me.

“I love you,” I say back.

We eat in silence, but our hands remain intertwined. My dad sneaks peeks at us, but he devours his food. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him eat so much and so fast.

“I’m happy for you, Delaney,” he finally says.

As if you have a choice. I bite my tongue and swallow those words.

“Thanks, Dad,” is all I say.

“I’d like to take you and David out to dinner sometime soon, but maybe the two of us can have lunch tomorrow. I can come pick you up at work.”

Mondays are reserved for Summer and the rest of our work friends, including Caleb. We eat something decadent and gossip.

“Tuesday is better for me.”

Dad exhales in relief. For the first time since he got here, he appears a little relaxed. “Well, how about Friday for dinner?” David shrugs and I tell my dad Friday is fine. “Pick a restaurant and make a reservation,” he tells me.

“Just the three of us,” I tell him.

“You have my word.”

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“I THOUGHT HE’D NEVER LEAVE,” I WHISPER IN DELANEY’S ear. When her father left, I carried her into the master bath and filled the tub with bubble bath for us to soak in. After eating breakfast, her father stuck around for another three hours. He sat in the kitchen making idle, yet strange conversation. It was as if he knows nothing about his daughter at all.

While they talked, I brought out my laptop and did some work. I could have easily gone into my office, but I wanted to be nearby in case he stepped out of line, and I wanted to be there for Delaney if things got too strained. She seemed fine though. I’m not sure if he’s deserving of forgiveness, even though he’s the least toxic of all her family, but that’s not up to me. That’s up to Delaney, and one of my jobs as her husband is to support her choices.

“I know,” she says. “It’s the most he’s ever talked to me. It’s sad, but I don’t think we’ve ever spent time together without my mother or brother around. Anyway, we’ll see where this goes.” She shrugs and I pull her up against my chest, cup one of her breasts, and squeeze the nipple between my thumb and index finger. She lets out a moan. “Stop. I have something I need to talk to you about.” I drop my hands. She turns to face me and I wrap my legs around her, splashing water on the floor in the process.

“I’m all yours,” I say above her lips. I give her a soft peck, knowing that’s all it will take for the spark to light, but she inches her head away.

“So, remember how I told you I wanted to major in business?”

I bite my tongue and stop myself from going on a tirade about her controlling mother. “I do,” I tell her.

“Well, I want to go back and get a degree in marketing. I still plan on learning the business from you, so I’m thinking of going part time. I have all the general studies done, so I’ll only need to take classes for my major.” She holds her breath as she looks into my eyes, and I wonder if she’s waiting for me to discourage her. When I don’t speak, she says, “I can probably —”

“I think it’s a great idea.”

“Really?”

“Really. Just don’t try and come after my job,” I joke. “But I’ll be happy to share the position with you whenever you feel you’re ready.”

She exhales, wraps her arms around me, and holds me close. She puts her head on my wet chest, and after a few seconds, I hear a snuffle. I cup her cheeks and force her eyes to mine. There are unshed tears brimming. I crinkle my brows.

“I’m just so happy,” she says right before she sobs. “I never thought my life would be this perfect, and it’s all because of you.”

I wrap my arms around her and hold her tight.

“Cookie, all I did was offer you a job. You did everything else when you ran from that church. And thank goodness you did because that led you to me.” I kiss her forehead, and she sighs into me.

“Well, Max led me to you, if we’re being honest.”

“Nope. Not going to give him any of the credit, but I’m so glad I found you in my bed. I’m sorry I sent you back to the guestroom.”

“I found my way back into your bed soon enough,” she reminds me.

“And into my heart. Don’t ever leave,” I say against her lips. “I love you.”

“I’m not going anywhere, and I love you.”

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EPILOGUE

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DELANEY

1 YEAR LATER

“YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL,” SUMMER WHISPERS.

“Stop crying. Come on. This is a wonderful day. Totally different than my last wedding. Be happy.” I do a horrible dance and snap my fingers before we both burst into laughter. I put a finger to my lips, but it’s too late. Summer runs to the crib and picks up her five-month-old son, Maxwell Sutton The Third, affectionately known as Max Max. She only gets him for a minute before our mother-in-law takes him from her. She presses the baby to her and kisses his fat cheeks.

“Grammy’s got you,” she says. “He’s wet, so I’ll change him.” She gently places him on the changing table in the corner of the master bedroom. We brace ourselves. Max Max is the sweetest baby except when he’s getting his diaper changed. Seconds later, his screams fill the room.

“Claire, be careful. He’s a sprayer,” I warn. He’s peed on all of us at one time or another, but Claire ignores me and dotes on her only grandchild.

Summer walks around me and tries to adjust my dress, but there’s nowhere for the dress to go. It fits me like a glove. It’s fitted to my body with not only a plunging neckline, but it’s backless all the way down to the top of my buttocks. It’s the opposite of what I wore all that time ago. This one is custom-made, and I got everything I wanted.

“David’s going to lose his mind when he sees you,” Summer whispers.

“He’d better,” I say.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Summer hands me a tissue, and I dab the corners of my eyes, careful not to disturb my makeup. Planning this wedding with my best friend and mother-in-law has been a dream. Planning was a group effort, with Claire, Jade and Summer making suggestions, but all the decisions were mine. They were there to help and make it easier.

Despite how easy and fun this has been, there have been issues that I’ve been dealing with for the past year.

The judge did grant me the restraining order, but Mitch only got a slap on the wrist for the assault. Since it was a first offense, all he had to do was pay a fine. There was no apology, but there has been no more contact from him. He was suspended from the hospital after David made some calls, but he never went back there. The last thing I heard was that he moved to Connecticut. David says he’s going to make it his mission to make sure every hospital in New England knows about the assault.

True to my father’s word, he never mentions my mother or brother, but Damon has left messages and has sent emails. Most of his emails sit in my inbox unread. I never reply to him, but he’s requested to see me.

The other problem is Dr. Lynn Lewis, who has demanded my presence at family therapy. The therapy started after my dad served her with divorce papers, and I only know that because she left a tearful message on my phone. He’s put the divorce on hold while they get help, but I told him I’m not ready to join them. What he doesn’t know is that I’ve been seeing a therapist on my own at the urging of my husband. It’s been good for me, and as things stand, I don’t know when or if I’ll ever reach out to my mother and brother. My life is exactly how I want it and adding them back in might only cause me distress.

“I’m fine,” I tell Summer. “I’m getting married again.” The words get stuck in my throat. “Everything is perfect.”

And it is. This wedding is small and intimate with our family and a handful of friends. I don’t think we invited more than forty people. It’s at the house David grew up in, and it’s palatial and beautiful.

“I think he’s hungry.” Claire is bouncing the baby while he fusses. Summer reaches for him, but she moves him out of the way. “I’ll give him a bottle.” She kisses his cheek. “I had no idea how much I missed having a baby around. I hope we get more soon.” She stares at me when she says that. “The last baby to run through this house was Caleb.” She cradles Max Max, who is now getting fussier by the minute. “Summer, get our bride ready to walk down the aisle, and I’ll get this one fed. It’s almost time.”

I look at my reflection in the long mirror in Claire’s bedroom. We’ve been in this room all night, and despite the posh nursery she designed for Max Max, she has a crib and changing table in the master bedroom too.

We had a girls’ slumber party where we talked, laughed, and drank champagne. The only boy allowed was the baby. Claire told us hilarious stories of David and Max. It was a bittersweet night because thoughts of my mother would not leave me. I asked myself why she can’t be more like David’s mom. Or Summer’s. But she is who she is, and I have to accept that.

My life is damn near perfect now. I not only have a job, but I’m working at my family business, which is growing. I’m back in school and have taken two classes so far toward the degree of my choice. All with my husband’s encouragement and endless cheerleading.

“Everything looks great.” Jade walks into the bedroom and closes the door behind her. She’s been here since last night too. She doesn’t normally plan weddings, but she agreed to do mine. She, like David, is another life change. She’s become one of my closest friends. One who knows the inner workings of our family. I never have to explain things to her. She just

knows. She's one of the few people I allow to talk about my mother with me. Even though she's my mom's niece, she's my ally. "Your dad's here," Jade announces. He's the only family member other than Jade who got an invitation.

There was never any question about inviting him, but I had to let him know he was not walking me down the aisle. If he was hurt or upset, he didn't show it, but there's a part of me that feels guilty. From the moment we announced our wedding date, there was only one person I wanted to walk me down the aisle, and it was not my father.

"Is he alone?" There's still a part of me that doesn't fully trust him, and I've been worried he would bring my mother and Damon with him. Mother never asked to attend, but Damon did. I let my silence be his answer.

"He is. Relax. Everything is perfect. You look gorgeous." She fluffs out my hair, which has grown some. I plan on cutting it again after coming back from our honeymoon.

We never took a proper honeymoon after we got married the first time. David was inundated with work, and I told him we would go another time. As soon as we set this date, he informed me he'd be taking me to Europe for a month. Our first stop is Athens.

There's a knock on the door, and Max steps in. His eyes are on his own wife, not me. He admires her in the long burgundy dress. I have only two bridesmaids in my wedding party. My cousin and my best friend.

"Don't mess up her makeup, Daddy," I warn Max.

Claire comes back, bouncing a content Max Max, who is wearing a tuxedo onesie. He smiles when he sees his daddy, but his grandma is not letting him go.

"It's time to go, Max. Come on before Aunt Minnie starts drinking," Claire says.

"Too late," Jade announces. "But let's go. Your groom is getting antsy."

I follow my two bridesmaids out. When we get to the hallway, I take Max's offered arm. He helps me down the

stairs. The music starts to play, and my escort and I wait. Claire goes first with the baby. Caleb escorts Summer, and Jade walks down the aisle alone, holding a simple bouquet of white roses.

“Think back to the day we met,” I say to Max. “Could you have predicted you’d be walking me down the aisle to your brother?”

“No, especially since you had a fiancé.” I do an exaggerated shudder. He takes my hands in his and squeezes them. “When I sent you to his house, I never considered that this is where we would be, but I’m so glad we are. You’re good for each other. He needs you.” He kisses my cheek. “Let’s get you wed.”

There’s no veil. The only thing my husband asked was that I not wear a veil so he can see my face. He’s frozen at the end of the makeshift altar. He doesn’t move an inch, but his eyes roam my entire frame from head to toe as if he’s committing everything to memory.

We keep our vows traditional with both of us promising to love and to cherish, but as we’re reciting our vows, the baby starts to fuss.

“Excuse me, Father.” David drops my hands and walks a few feet to take the baby from his mother. “This is because I’m not paying attention to him. He needs his Uncle Davie’s undivided attention or he gets mad.” He kisses Max Max’s fat little cheek, and the baby quiets down. He starts to bounce and the entire room swoons at the sweet scene. Max Max leans in and sucks on David’s cheek, and the room erupts in laughter. “I’m making you my best man. Your daddy’s fired.” He tickles his belly and he lets out a loud laugh.

With our nephew in his arms, we recite our vows. Tears roll down my cheeks when he promises to love, honor, and cherish me as long as we both shall live. When it’s time for us to kiss, he puts the baby to my cheek, and he sucks it. I giggle at the contact. My husband hands Max Max to his father, bends me backward, and gives me a kiss that sets my entire body on fire.

THE END

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I started writing Downfall, I had no idea it would lead to this. I think I was about halfway done with that story when I decided to make these two a couple. I already had David's character figured out, so I had to craft Delaney's background. The villains in this story aren't your typical villains, which made them so much fun to write.

I hope you enjoyed reading about them as much as I enjoyed writing their story. I can't wait to make them fun side characters in future stories.

I want to take a minute and thank my group of supporters.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Boston native, wife, mother, and wine enthusiast. If she's not writing, thinking about writing, you will find Evelyn with a book in her hands. While a new publisher, she's been writing for years, and she will continue to write for many years to come.

Evelyn is obsessed with assertive and confident men who will stop at nothing to get their woman. Her stories are filled with love, passion and humor.

She currently lives in Chicago, IL with her husband and two daughters.

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