

DOUBLE
SURPRISE

LYDIA HALL


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BLURB

I ran from my abusive ex and fell into my forbidden boss's arms.

Griffin Cooper acted like he owned the world.

Rich, arrogant, and oh-so-irresistible. It was lust at first sight.

The only problem?

I worked for him, and he didn't even know my real name.

Escaping my past forced me to hide my identity from the world.

Including Mr. Billionaire Boss.

Especially him.

But I craved his touch every single night.

Trying to keep my distance from Griffin could never work.

It wasn't just my life in danger anymore.

Griffin would have to save me just in time for a *double surprise*.

He didn't know that I was a single mom... or that I was pregnant with his unborn child.

JENNIFER ELIA

“I don’t suppose you can spare your oldest and dearest friend a few hours so I can solicit all the juicy honeymoon details from you?”

“Well, hello to you too, Megan,” I laughed.

“Oh, come on. I’m living vicariously through you, Jen. Remember? Not all of us are lucky enough to marry a gorgeous man who spoils his wife with expensive goods and exotic trips to distant shores.”

“Fine. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

Megan was in town for a few more days. I did miss her terribly since she’d moved to the coast to be with her family. They were very close, which was something for which I’d always envied her.

“Great. Hey, I keep meaning to ask. How’s your mom, Jen?”

“The same. Every time I see her, I look for signs that she’s in there somewhere. But then the veil drops, and she retreats into her own world. Wherever that is.”

“Alzheimer’s is a terrible disease. I’m so sorry, my friend.”

“Thanks, Megs. Anyway, gotta go. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Sure. Enjoy your day, Princess Elia.”

“Haha. See you later.”

I kicked off the covers and stretched lazily. Paul had already left for work, so all was quiet except for the sound of a leaf blower’s high-pitched screeching coming from outside. The

estate my husband of exactly three weeks and I lived on, was immaculately kempt. Trimmed hedges, pristine flowerbeds, swept driveways—everything was just so perfect. I was sure the gardeners carried with them tape measures to ensure absolute precision when it came to pruning the plethora of rose bushes.

It wasn't the sort of wealth I'd been accustomed to while growing up. Dad passed away after a short illness when I was ten and after that, Mom, Tristan and I were left to our own devices. My mother was a hard worker. She did her level best, but it wasn't easy. The money from Dad's insurance policy ran out after a few years, despite Mom's frugality. It wasn't cheap raising two children. Mom often worked two jobs, so my younger brother and I learned pretty quickly how to look after ourselves.

I got up and made my way downstairs to the kitchen. It was summer and even though it was only 7:30, I could tell that the sun meant business.

"Good morning, Mrs. Elia. Did you sleep well?"

"Good morning, Maria. Yes, thank you."

"I made a pot of coffee for you, Ma'am. Would you like me to prepare you breakfast?"

I don't know why, but I felt guilty when Maria was around—as if I was the lazy, privileged colonial, while the staff ran around me, ready and willing to acquiesce to my every whim.

"Uh, no thank you, Maria. I'm not hungry."

"Very well, Ma'am."

I'd have to work on my delegating skills. But, for now, I poured myself a coffee and went outside to soak up the early morning rays. It felt strange still, being the mistress of the home. It felt like a dream.

Paul was wealthy—I guessed so was I now that we were married. All the trappings of success were officially mine to negotiate. I swore to myself that I wouldn't drop the ball.

I spent a good portion of the day writing thank you notes to the guests who'd attended our wedding three weeks prior. Paul

and I went to the Caribbean for our two weeks long honeymoon. It had been bliss. I was so happy.

Paul's business associates showered us with some rather impressive things. He giggled when we got back to the house before leaving for the airport and he threw a handful of envelopes filled with cash onto the bed.

"What's that all about?" I asked him.

"It's an Italian thing."

That was all he said, so I left it at that. Italian culture was new to me. I thought it was a lovely gesture—all that cash. Paul placed the money in the wall safe before we left.

Paul called me at 5pm to tell me he'd be working late. I wasn't too stressed about it, as I was seeing Megan anyway. I left the house at 18:45 and drove to Megan's hotel. I had offered her a room while she was in town, but she'd politely refused to intrude on 'the lovebirds', as she'd dubbed Paul and me. She was waiting in the lobby for me.

"Hi, Jen. Wow! Nice tan."

"Hey, Megs. Thanks. I wish we didn't have to leave the hotel and return to reality."

"Oh, please. I'd take your reality over mine, any day," she said and hugged me. "You look beautiful, Jen. I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks. Where do you feel like going?"

"I was thinking Charlie's for dinner. Then a little thirst quencher at Ruby's afterward. What do you say?"

"Sounds like a busy night out. Let's do it."

"How's Paul?" Megan asked when we were on our way to the restaurant. "Did he enjoy the honeymoon?"

"It was amazing. He was a little distracted by all the business calls he got, but he did well to switch off for most of the time."

"I guess a business like his doesn't run itself."

"Unfortunately, not. How long before you go back home?"

“Two days.”

“I’m going to miss you, Megs. I wish you didn’t have to leave so soon.”

“If it were up to me, I’d stay for a few more days, but life calls. I haven’t found my prince yet.”

“I wouldn’t call Paul a prince, but, yeah, it’s nice to know I don’t have to break my back like Mom used to just so I can eat.”

“Your mom is an amazing woman. I have so much respect for her. I’m sorry she’s unwell, Jen.”

“It’s been very difficult. Somedays I wonder what the hell I’m doing visiting her. Half the time she has no idea who I am. It’s as if she’s afraid of me. I’m a stranger to her.”

“Oh, Jen. How awful.”

“But she’s in the best care facility money can buy. I’m very grateful to Paul for that.”

“Yeah, he’s a keeper.”

I wiped a tear from my eye. I had no intention of spilling tears on such a happy night.

“Come on. Let’s stop talking about what’s wrong with the world and have fun,” I said as I parked the car outside Charlie’s.

“Agreed. I could eat a horse on toast,” Megan said and squeezed my hand. “To the trenches!”

* * *

I looked at my watch as I parked the car in the garage. I took my heels off before I got out so that I wouldn’t make a noise while walking across the Italian tiles in the kitchen and up the stairs to the bedroom.

Paul would no doubt be fast asleep as it was just past midnight. My feet ached after dancing all night in heels. It was fun pretending to be college kids again—Megan and I knew

how to have fun back then and, honestly, she brought out the kid in me.

I floated up the staircase and tiptoed into the bedroom. The strap on my handbag caught on the door handle and yanked it down hard. I giggled like a naughty schoolgirl as I tried to keep correct my balance.

The light on the nightstand next to Paul's side of the bed flickered on.

"Oh, hey, babe," I chuckled, "so sorry, my love. I didn't mean to wake you. I ..."

"Where the fuck have you been?"

What? Was he upset?

"I was out with Megan. I left you a message on your cell. Didn't you get it?" I asked gingerly, a bit shocked at my husband's reaction.

"It's past midnight!"

"Uh, yeah. Sorry, we were having a good time. I lost track of time. Are you seriously angry with me?"

Paul kicked the covers off his feet and got up. He had an unfamiliar look in his eyes. One I didn't care for at all. He moved toward me with purpose. I thought he was going to hug me, or kiss me hello, so I moved in closer.

By the time his hand was midair, it was too late to move away. The slap took me completely by surprise and the momentum spun me around like a cheap top. I gasped and touched my cheek where he'd hit me. It stung like hell.

"What the f..."

He slapped me again. I was stunned into silence.

"If you ever do that again, I'll punch you with my fist," he growled at me.

"Paul, I..."

"Shut the fuck up. You will never go out again without telling me where you're going. Do you understand me?"

I stared at him like a blithering idiot. My head was still spinning after the slaps.

“Do you understand, Jennifer?” he yelled at me.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

I wanted to swear at him—hit him back or something. But, all I did was stand there in stunned silence.

“Go to sleep. You smell like a fucking drunk whore.”

Paul left the room and slammed the bedroom door shut so hard I was sure it would come off its hinges. What the fuck just happened? Was I tripping? Maybe it was a dream—no, a nightmare. I pinched myself. Nope. I was awake.

My whole body was shaking as I tried to get undressed. I battled with the buttons on my shirt. My fingers trembled too much. I gave up and pulled it over my head before I threw the shirt into the hamper. I took off my skirt and repeated the process.

I was unaware that I was crying until I felt the warmth of the tears running down my cheeks and down my neck. I couldn't breathe properly. It felt as if an unseen hand was choking me.

It's okay, Jennifer. You're going to be fine. It was a simple misunderstanding. Everything will be okay in the morning. Go to sleep.

I brushed my teeth and removed my makeup before I crawled into bed. My cheek was tender and swollen. I must have laid there for at least an hour before I drifted off.

* * *

I woke up to find a tray with coffee, croissants, a single rose in water, and a note from Paul waiting for me on the nightstand.

Good morning, my love.

I'm so sorry I overreacted last night. Please, forgive me. I was just so worried that something had happened to you. Let's talk

about it when I get home tonight.

I love you so much. I booked a spa day for you. Maria has the details.

Love,

Paul.

So, it hadn't been a nightmare. I touched my cheek. It was tender, but at least the swelling had gone down. My first instinct was to call Megan and tell her what had happened. But my pride raged against such a silly idea.

Everyone thought that Paul was perfect—everyone, including me. I should have looked closer. There had been subtle signs, if I were honest with myself. He was rather short tempered with the manager of the villa where we'd stayed on our honeymoon. But to be fair, the place wasn't ready when we got there. I'd put his short temper down to the fact that he wanted our honeymoon to be perfect.

But, now that I thought about it some more, I had to admit that I'd been surprised at the time.

I couldn't tell my brother either. Tristan would flip out and beat the shit out of Paul for sure. I didn't want my brother to think badly of my husband. I supposed I could have called Paul to tell him I'd be home later than I'd initially said.

What? What was I doing making excuses for him? He hit me! What the fuck? That wasn't okay!

We spoke that evening, when he'd arrived home from work. Paul apologized profusely and declared his undying love for me. What could I do but to forgive? I loved my husband, and he swore to me he'd never hit me again.

I was so in love with him that I believed him. I shouldn't have because a month later, he did it again. It was on the day that I'd found out I was pregnant with our first child.

JENNIFER

I woke up in a puddle. My water must have broken because the sheets were a slimy mess and I was lying in bed in a fetal position, holding onto my stomach. Labor pains had started.

“Uh, ouch. Paul.”

I felt for him, but his side of the bed was empty.

“Paul!” I called out.

The house was quiet. I looked at the clock—23:48. Where the hell was my husband? Another ‘late night’ at the office? It was bullshit, of course. I knew he wasn’t working. He was out drinking with his sketchy colleagues. The man I’d fallen in love with and had swept me off my feet, turned out to be a monster in disguise. The most cunning creature I’d ever known was the father of my child.

The pain hit me like a sledgehammer. I breathed through gritted teeth until the contraction had passed. Five minutes apart. Not good. I had to get to the hospital before I popped the baby out on our fancy Italian tiles.

I fumbled for my phone and called Paul. It went straight to voicemail. So much for being there for your very pregnant wife. Son of a bitch!

Next, I called Megan who, thank God, was in town for a conference. My best friend still had no idea what I suffered through as the *beloved* wife of Paul Elia. As far as she, and everyone else, knew, I was the luckiest woman who had ever lived. Upmarket homes, nothing but the best clothes and most

expensive jewelry, lavish holidays. Yes, Jennifer Elia had made it to the big time. Lucky, lucky me.

“Jen? Are you okay?”

I could tell from Megan’s voice that she’d been sleeping.

“I’m in labor. Please, could you drive me to the hospital?”

“What? Where’s Paul?”

Her hotel was close to my house so I reckoned it would be quicker if she drove me rather than me waiting for an ambulance.

“Please, Megs. Hurry.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in five.”

I got dressed before I went downstairs to wait for Megan. Maria must have heard me because she came to the living room.

“Are you alright, Ma’am?”

“I’m fine, Maria. Go back to bed.”

“Is it the baby? Can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m in labor. I’m waiting for my lift. Thank you, Maria.”

The woman made me feel like an idiot. She always had. From the moment I became Mrs. Paul Elia, she glared at me over her nose as if I were a repulsive bug she wanted to crush underfoot. She spied on me too. I knew she kept an eye on me for her darling master, Paul. I hated the bitch.

She forced a smile of acknowledgement before she left the room. The front door flew open minutes later and Megan helped me into her car.

“Oh, my God, Jen!” she said when she saw me. “Where is Paul?”

“He’s working.”

What else was I going to say?

“At this time of night?”

“Yeah. Besides, the baby is early.”

I could tell from her expression that Megan wasn't impressed, but she didn't labor the point.

"Don't forget my bag," I groaned and pointed to the foyer.

"Got it."

I spent ninety percent of the journey to the hospital with my feet pressed up against the dashboard. The contractions were merciless.

"You'd better hurry up. This baby is in a hurry," I gasped after a particularly intense contraction.

"Two minutes," she said and sped up.

"Ouch! Fuck it!"

"Hold on, Jen. Just one more block and then we're there."

I wondered what Paul was doing. He'd crawled into bed smelling of whiskey and cheap perfume a few nights before. At first, I told myself I was imagining it. But I had to be straight with myself after it happened more often. Besides, what was the point in confronting him about it? He'd gaslight me and I'd end up with a fat lip or a swollen cheek.

"We're here," Megan said and pulled up to the emergency entrance.

Soon I was in a wheelchair, and on my way to the delivery room. Megan held my hand as the doctor checked how far I was dilated.

"Ten centimeters, Jennifer," she said. "Time to push, honey."

"But Paul..."

"I'm sorry, but your baby is coming now. You can't wait for your husband."

"Can Megan hold my hand?" I asked the doctor.

"Sure. Nurse, please bring Megan in."

A few minutes later, my best friend held my hand as I yelled out in pain and pushed my son out into the world.

* * *

“He’s so beautiful, Jen,” Megan said as she held Jasper in her arms.

We were in a private room. I was all stitched up after my episiotomy and felt as if I’d just given birth to a giant boulder.

Jasper weighed ten pounds and twelve ounces at birth. Thank God he came early, or he’d have ripped me open completely. Megan was right though. He was a beautiful baby. He looked like Tristan when he was a baby.

“Here,” Megan said and handed him to me. “I’m sure he wants to suckle. He keeps opening his mouth in anticipation.”

“Great. Only just arrived and already he’s ready to give me attitude,” I smiled as Jasper latched onto my nipple and drank hungrily.

“I’m so happy for you, Jen,” Megan smiled as she watched mother and child together.

“He’s so precious,” I said in a soft voice to myself rather than to her.

There was a commotion outside before the door opened. Paul walked into the room—staggered rather. He was drunk but he smiled sweetly when he saw Megan. Manipulative bastard that he was.

“Hey, Megan,” he slurred. “Thanks so much. I owe you.”

“Hi, Paul. No problem. I’ll leave you three alone.”

He waited until she left the room.

“Why didn’t you call me? What? Thought it would be fun to make me look bad, did you?” he snarled.

“Of course not. I did call. Your phone was off.”

He walked over to Jasper and me. I could smell the whiskey on his breath, along with the stench of cheap perfume.

“Let me see my son,” he slurred.

“Be careful, Paul,” I said and tightened my grip on Jasper.

“Ah, come on, now. I won’t drop him,” he said and pulled the baby from my arms.

It hurt like hell when Jasper’s mouth was yanked from my nipple, and I winced in pain.

“Stop fucking acting,” he snarled.

Jasper started crying. Paul got flustered.

“Shush, boy!”

“He’s just a baby, Paul. Don’t yell at him.”

“Don’t you tell me how to handle my son. I’m not a fucking idiot. I’m his father.”

The door opened again, and the doctor walked in. I was so happy to see her I could have kissed her.

“Hello, Mr. Elia. Congratulations on your fine boy.”

“Thank you.”

Paul stood up straight and did his best to look sober.

“Jennifer did an excellent job in delivering this little tiger. He’s a big boy.”

“Daddy’s boy,” Paul said and smiled at the doctor.

Was he flirting with my OBGYN? What a fucking lowlife. The doctor smiled and then turned her focus to me.

“How are you feeling, Jennifer?”

“Sore and tired.”

“Stay for the night. I’ll discharge you tomorrow when you’ve had a chance to recover.”

“Thank you.”

“Has he latched yet?” she asked me.

“Uh, yeah,” I said and looked over to Paul.

“I’d like to examine you before I leave for the night.”

She looked at Paul.

“Oh, yeah,” he said and handed Jasper to her. “I’ll be outside.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding onto.

“Are you okay, Jennifer?” the doctor asked me once Paul was out of the room.

“Yes, thanks. I’m fine.”

“I’m asking because I found some old bruising on you during the delivery.”

Shit! I thought those had healed.

“I’ve been terribly clumsy. I guess ‘baby brain’ starts early with some mothers,” I smiled and hoped like hell she would believe me.

The doctor took a few moments before she responded.

“I’m going to give you my card, Jennifer. Call me anytime if you need help, okay?”

“That’s so sweet of you, Doc, but I’m fine. Really. It’s all good.”

“Okay. I want to see you in two weeks, please.”

“Sure. Thank you, Doc.”

“My pleasure.”

I watched her leave the room. I could see Paul through the open door. He was talking to a woman I’d never seen before. She laughed and touched his arm while he spoke. He looked across at me and I swear I could feel hate radiating in waves from his black eyes.

* * *

Jasper was the sweetest child a mother could hope for. He slept like a log and ate regularly. I felt truly blessed. Tristan was crazy about him. He brought around a giant teddy bear the moment he returned from his business trip, filled with guilt at not having been there for me when I went into labor.

I told him not to be silly. He doted on Jasper and me, which was more than I could say for Paul, who carried on regardless.

It was the last day of Megan's stay in town and she came over to say goodbye. I was very teary.

"Ah, what's wrong, sweetie? Baby blues?" she asked while she held a bubbling me.

"I guess."

I wanted to tell her everything. My heart was aching from the loneliness and despair that had become my marriage. The only joy in my life was Jasper. And even that gave me anxiety. What if Paul accidentally hurt our son?

"Jen, is everything okay with Paul?"

Shit. What could I say? I couldn't show her the bruises. Megan would do something about it. There was no way she'd stand by knowing that my husband was abusing me.

"Is he cheating?"

Oh, good. Safer ground. I went for it. I was too far down the rabbit hole to stop.

"I think so."

"Are you sure? Why do you think that?"

"A woman knows."

"I'm sure you're being oversensitive, Jen. You did just have a baby. You're not feeling your best, I'm sure. Do you think you could be wrong?"

"I'm exhausted, Megs."

"Come on. It will pass. I'm sure in a few weeks' time, once you've settled into motherhood, when your sleeping patterns are back to normal, you'll laugh at yourself for thinking that Paul's cheating on you."

Of course. What else was Megan going to say? Paul had never been anything but the perfect gentleman around her. He's even fooled Tristan for shit's sake.

“I suppose you’re right. Having a baby is a lot more work than I thought it would be. I’m just being silly.”

Let it go, Jennifer. You’re farting against thunder.

“Look what I found yesterday,” Megan cooed and took out a little hoodie from her bag.

“Oh, my goodness, that’s adorable. Thank you, Megs.”

“Mom and Dad are asking about Jasper. They wanted me to invite you over for a few days so they can play *dolls*. I told them it’s too soon to travel with a newborn. But promise me you guys will visit soon.”

“That will be lovely. I promise,” I said and put on a fake smile—the one I’d all but perfected since marrying Paul.

“Great. I’ll take you out and we’ll paint the town red. I’m sure by then you’re going to need a break from smelly diapers for a night.”

“Sounds heavenly.”

Megan and I drank tea, served by Maria, my prison warden, and ate Italian biscuits given to us as a gift from one of Paul’s associates. I had to give it to the Italian mafia. Their wives and mothers knew how to bake a fabulous biscuit.

The afternoon flew by, despite my desire to hold onto Megan for as long as possible. I cried again when she left. Then, I went upstairs, washed my face and freshened up my makeup before I waited for the lord of the manor to grace us with his presence.

PAUL ELIA

“Paul, when are you going to get rid of that prissy wife of yours and make an honest woman out of me?”

Candy was lying on her stomach on the king size bed, popping chocolate bonbons into her mouth. She was naked, her tight little ass glistened in the overhead lights.

“You don’t want to be some guy’s ball and chain, do you? You’re too young and fuckable for that.”

She grinned at me with her wide mouth and full lips—the woman could suck a golf ball through a garden hose. It was one of the reasons I kept her handy. Jennifer was a stunning woman, but she would never do for me in the bedroom what Candy would—not willingly, anyway.

“I’m serious, Pauly. I want to be your wife.”

“Don’t pout, Candy. We’ve talked about this.”

It was never a good idea to marry a call girl, no matter how classy or expensive she was. It wasn’t good for business. It called a man’s standing into question. Respectable women like Jennifer were marriage material. They blossomed into mothers and matriarchs. Women like Candy were strictly good time girls, happy to suck you off for a few shiny trinkets.

I was drying myself off after my shower. Candy snorted, got up, and walked past me to the bathroom. I didn’t know what she was being all prissy about. I’d spent a lot of money on her. She had the best clothes, lived in an upmarket apartment that I was paying a fortune for, drove a cheeky little sports car, and had a monthly allowance most girls her age would kill for.

“Careful, Candy. There are more than enough women out there who would kill to live your life.”

Every now and again I found it necessary to remind the whore I kept just who was in charge. If Candy didn't behave, I'd kick her ass to the curb.

“Ahhh, baby,” she purred. “That's not nice. I can't help it. I love you, Big Daddy. That's all.”

She became flirty and playful when she felt threatened. I didn't complain.

“Do you really have to go so soon? Don't you want some more *candy*? Stay for breakfast.”

“Breakfast! You may be good at a lot of things, Candy, but cooking isn't one of them.”

My whore dropped to her knees and put her expensive lips to good use.

“That's better,” I groaned.

I loved my life. I had everything a man could want for. Money, a beautiful wife, a new son, a hot mistress, the respect of those with whom I worked. Yes, Paul Elia was playing with the big boys.

I left an attitude adjusted Candy to her own devices and drove to the office. It was a little after 8 am. Nothing like a good fuck to get the working day off to a cracking start. Jennifer and Jasper had a restless night. My son was teething, and he was not a Happy Chappy. I left the house early so they could sleep in.

I was glad that I'd married Jen. She was a good mother. I'd chosen well. It was torture not being able to be myself around her, back when we were courting. She wasn't the kind of woman who would approve of my lifestyle though, so I had to be careful about how much I shared with her prior to getting hitched.

I hadn't meant to lose my temper with her so soon after we were married. She came home later after being out with Megan, her very hot but mouthy gal pal. My wife caught me at

a bad time. It had been a tough day at the office, so when she wasn't there when I got home, I had to act.

The poor woman was so shocked when I slapped her. But, as my father maintained, rather tame them while they're still fresh. A wife had to know her place.

"Good morning, Mr. Elia."

"Hi, Anna. Any urgent calls?"

"No, Sir."

"Good. Please, get Roberto on the line."

"Yes, Sir."

Anna was old school. Plus, being in her fifties, I was satisfied that she wouldn't get herself pregnant and bail on me. I specifically chose an older woman so there would be no opportunity for office hanky panky. Another valuable lesson my father taught me was that one didn't crap where one ate.

Anna came into my office and placed an espresso on my desk. Then, she left and closed the door behind her. A few minutes later, the phone on my desk rang.

"Hello."

"I'm putting Roberto through to you."

"Thanks."

Music played briefly, before Roberto's voice sprang to life.

"Hi, Paul."

"Good morning, Roberto. What's happening on your side?"

Roberto and I had been working together for roughly a year. He was the new right-hand man for one of the city's biggest mafia families. The previous guy got a little too cocky and ended up *swimming with the fishes*, as they say. I was legal counsel for the family, so Roberto and I spoke often.

"The union is pushing back. They want bigger kickbacks."

"Those fuckers are all the same. Give them a sniff and they want the whole pie. Who are the problem children? The usual suspects?"

“Of course.”

“Okay. Leave it with me. I’ll schedule a meeting and let you know.”

“Thanks, Paul. Chat soon.”

“Sure.”

My network of investigators and knee breakers were out collecting the info I needed to *persuade* the troublemakers to see things my way. I spent the day working on an action plan that was both legal and aggressive.

It was around 7 pm when I arrived home. The house was quiet, so I assumed that Jasper, now a very busy nine-month-old, was down for a nap. Jen was in the living room.

“Hey, babe. How was your day?” I asked.

“Hi. Fine, thanks. Yours?”

Frosty greeting. I wondered what her problem was. What was it with women, anyway? You give them everything they want and still they fucking complain. What did I have to do to get a bit of appreciation at home?

“What’s with the long face, Jen?”

“Sorry, I’m just tired. Jasper was a handful today.”

“Perhaps he needs a sibling to keep him occupied.”

Jennifer’s face tightened.

“I think it’s a bit soon for another baby. I’d like to wait a while.”

“Suit yourself. What’s for dinner?”

“Maria made a beef stroganoff.”

“Oh, good. I’m starving.”

I walked over to where my wife sat and kissed her on the forehead. We hadn’t slept together in months, and, frankly, I preferred uncomplicated sex with Candy. Jennifer was beautiful, that’s why I married her, but she didn’t float my proverbial boat in the bedroom. I liked a bit of slap and tickle–

well, more slap than tickle. I tried it rough with her once. It didn't go down well.

"Can we talk, Paul?"

"Sure. What about?"

"My old firm contacted me today. They have an opening and I'm perfect for the position."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jen. You're the mother of a nine-month-old."

"It's morning only for now. I can always switch to full-time once Jasper goes to school."

"No."

"I don't understand, Paul. Why not?"

I was about to lose my shit. No fucking wife of mine was going to work.

"You don't need a job, Jennifer. You have a job. You're my wife and the mother of my child. Your place is here, at home. I don't understand why that isn't enough for you. Get a hobby if you're bored."

"I'm going to lose my mind," she said, her voice shaky. "I need to work."

"We're done talking about this. I'm going to take a shower and then we're going to have dinner."

I walked away and left her to pout. Ungrateful bitch. Perhaps it was time for me to impregnate her again. That would surely shut her up. Job! Did she think I was a fool? She wasn't looking to stimulate her mind. She was probably looking for a sympathetic male shoulder to cry on. Someone to whom she could lament over her terrible life. Fuck that. No handsy dogooder is going to buff my trophy wife.

I left Jennifer to pull herself together and went to our bedroom. I threw my clothes on the bed and hit the shower. Maria was a fantastic cook—one of the reasons I hired her—and I was looking forward to inhaling the stroganoff and washing it down with a good bottle of red wine. I'd recently restocked

my collection with a decent selection of wine. I'd pop down to the cellar after my shower and select a Bordeaux.

With a bit of luck Jennifer would be in a better frame of mind once she had a glass of the good stuff. It wouldn't hurt for my uptight wife to chill the fuck out.

I had a towel wrapped around my waist and was drying my hair with another when I stepped back into the room. Jen was sitting on the bed. She looked like a lioness about to pounce on a buck. Next to her lay my cell phone.

"What now?" I sighed.

"Who's Candy?"

Shit. I forgot to lock my phone. Now I'd be forced to delay dinner so that I could deal with a hysterical wife.

"That's none of your business," I said and carried on rubbing my hair with the hand towel.

"Are you fucking kidding me? She's your mistress, isn't she?"

"What if she is? It's not like you're waiting at home for me every night, ready to rock my world."

"I can't believe this. How could you do this to us, Paul?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Don't get all Shakespearean tragedy on me, Jennifer. Candy gets my rocks off. You're the one I love. I married you, didn't I? I've given you everything a wife could ask for. A beautiful home, a son, enough money to keep you comfortable. What more do you want?"

"Monogamy! It was in our wedding vows. Or have you forgotten?"

"Don't talk to me like I'm a fucking idiot. Candy is no threat to you. Now, go downstairs and tell Maria we're ready for dinner."

Jennifer stared at me. I could see she wasn't done with the conversation. Not by a long shot.

"I'm not happy, Paul. I know you aren't either. I want out. This isn't what I signed up for. You're never here, and when you are, you're usually too drunk to have a meaningful

conversation. I haven't been anywhere nice with you in months. Now I find out you're cheating on me with a cheap looking, potty mouth whore. I'm done."

I could feel the heat rising up inside me. It spread through my gut and up to my neck. The tiny hairs stood erect as I stared Jennifer down. Who did she think she was? Talking to me like I was a naughty kid?

"Done! Done? I don't think so, princess. This isn't high school. No backsies, Babe. You are my wife. Now, pull yourself together and go downstairs. I'm hungry."

"I'm not joking, Paul. I want a divorce."

Jennifer's eyes were on fire. I'd never seen her so feisty before. It was sexy. I was tempted to screw the sass right out of her, but I was too angry.

"Fine. Take your shit and go. But you're not taking my son anywhere. He's staying right here with me, where he belongs."

My wife grew pale. She didn't say a word. Say about her what you like, but she was an excellent mother, and I knew she'd die before she left her son behind.

"Fuck you, Paul Elia," she glowered, got up, and left the room.

I let her go. Case closed.

JENNIFER

FIVE YEARS LATER

I had a knot in the pit of my stomach. It had become my constant companion—in fact I couldn't think of a single moment when I wasn't walking on eggshells. Paul was a constant source of stress in my life. It had been five long years of running the marital gauntlet, negotiating my way through his mood swings and dodging the fists.

To make my life just that little more challenging, my husband kept asking me why I wasn't pregnant yet with our second child. I maintained my ignorance while silently ensuring that I keep up with my birth control regime. There was no way on God's green earth that I was going to have another child with the monstrous man.

Jasper was a blessing. The child was the light of my life. I did have remorse about bringing him into the world where his father was a cheating, wife beating, mafia affiliated, criminal. But, Paul had hidden his true colors well, and I found out too late who he really was.

There was no escape. I often thought about running away, but where would I go? I had no job, no money of my own, and a five-year-old child. Plus, I had no doubt that Paul would make good on his promise to beat me to a pulp if I tried. He'd certainly perfected his abuse. My dearest husband punched me in places I was able to hide from prying eyes. No fat lips for me. Oh, no. Cracked ribs and bruised legs where he kicked and punched me—those were the sweet spots.

I was lying in bed while Paul dressed for work. My skin crawled whenever he touched me, which wasn't too often, thanks to Candy and those like her.

"I'm going to visit my mom today."

He stopped buttoning up his shirt for a second. I knew his mind was conjuring up all kinds of scenarios about my 'escape' from the house and my supposed hidden motivations. In Paul's mind I had an array of lovers to whom I fled in search of solace. I guessed that as a cheater himself, he was used to thinking up such scenarios.

"The doctor says she isn't doing well," I carried on, hoping to elicit a reasonable response from him.

"I honestly don't know why you bother, Jennifer. Your mother doesn't recognize you anyway. You're just wasting your time."

Yeah, you would think that, you asshole. When last did you visit your alcoholic father?

"I'll go after I've dropped Jasper at playschool."

"The kid is five. I don't know why you bother sending him to school. It's not as if he's learning anything useful yet."

Paul and I often argued over Jasper's schooling. I knew full well that he wanted our son home so that I wouldn't 'step out'. I realized that when I heard him questioning little Jasper once about where mommy had taken him that day and who mommy was talking to. Honestly! As if I would find a lover and screw him in front of my toddler. Besides, Paul was doing enough cheating for the both of us.

"He needs to learn how to interact with kids his own age, Paul. It isn't good for him to hang onto my leg until it's time for him to go to grade one."

Paul snorted, but, clearly, he was in a hurry to get to work. I'd nearly perfected my timing when it came to discussing possibly controversial matters with my husband. Just as he was about to fall into a drunken sleep, and as he was rushing to get to work or leave the house to wine and dine one of his whores.

“Fine. Mario will drive you.”

“That’s not necessary, Paul. I can drive myself.”

Paul turned around and smirked at me.

“Mario will drive you.”

And that was the end of negotiations. I knew better than to argue.

“Okay.”

“Don’t be home late. We’re going out with Roberto and his wife tonight. Be ready at 7 pm.”

Fuck! Another stimulating evening with Roberto and his bimbo wife.

“Oh? You didn’t tell me that.”

“I’m sure I mentioned it. Anyway, wear the red dress I bought you.”

You mean the one that makes me look like a high-class hooker?

I didn’t answer him. There was no point. Paul left the room and went to Jasper’s to say goodbye. It irritated the shit out of me when he woke our son from a deep sleep. It made Jasper grumpy when he didn’t get enough sleep.

I got up and went to the bathroom. No point in lying around now that my son was awake. I stopped in front of the mirror and stared at my reflection. I hardly recognized myself anymore. I was a tender twenty-eight years old, but the eyes staring back at me were those of a much older woman. Perhaps it was the veil of cynicism that had taken root deep within my soul.

“Mamma!”

“I’m in the bathroom, Jasper.”

I picked him up when he came into the bathroom, dragging his favorite blanket behind him.

“Good morning, my little sausage. Did you sleep well?”

“Uh-huh,” he said and rubbed one eye.

“Guess what.”

“What?”

“We’re going to visit Gran today.”

“Oh, yay.”

I wasn’t sure if my son was happy at the prospect of visiting with his grandmother or at the thought of being spoiled by the nurses. They adored him and snuck cookies out of the kitchen for him whenever we’d visit my mom.

“Why don’t you go downstairs and ask Maria to pour you some cereal while Mommy has a shower?”

“Okay, Mamma.”

“I love you, sausage,” I said when he waddled off.

“Love you, Mamma.”

* * *

“Hello, Jen. Oh, hi, Jasper!”

“Hi, Angela.”

Mom’s nurse was an angel. She was so good to her patients. Mom adored her—I was jealous at their closeness, seeing as Mom didn’t always know who I was.

“Hey, Jasper,” she said and squatted in front of him, “want a cookie?”

“Yes, please!”

“Maggie, look. Jennifer and Jasper are here to visit you,” Angela said to my mother before she left the room with Jasper hot on her heels.

“Hey, Mom. How are you today?”

“Jen?”

“Yes, Mom, it’s me.”

“Hi, my darling. Aren’t you supposed to be in school? Your principal is going to be mad.”

I wanted to cry, but I didn't.

"I've missed you, Mom. Your hair looks so pretty."

"Yes, Angela plaited it for me. She says I have the most beautiful hair she's ever seen," Mom smiled and ran her hand over her silver plait.

"She's right. You look beautiful."

"Where's Jasper?" she asked, suddenly, signaling the fact that she was having a lucid moment.

"He's with Angela. They're sneaking cookies from the kitchen."

"Sweet boy. Where is Paul?"

I wanted to tell Mom everything. It couldn't do any harm, really. It wasn't as if she'd remember a word of it anyway. But I didn't want to waste the little bit of time I had while my mother knew who I was.

"He's fine. Working hard. He sends his love."

"You're a lucky woman, Jen. Paul is a fine man. You keep him happy now, you hear me?"

"Sure, Mom."

"Where's Tristan?"

"Uhm, I'm sure he must be at work."

"Work?"

"Yes, Mom. He's an engineer. Remember?"

"Oh," she said slowly.

The glazed look in her eyes returned. Mom was lost in her own world again. Her Alzheimer's had become progressively worse over the years. There were days when she and I chatted as if nothing was wrong with her mind. But those days had become a rarity.

I sat quietly, holding her hand until Angela and Jasper appeared. Angela took my hand when she saw Mom staring blankly into space.

“She’s been asking for you a lot lately,” she said.

“How is she doing, Angela?”

“It depends. Some days she’s a chatterbox. Other days, she’ll go the whole day without speaking a single word. I know it’s hard, Jen. But I promise you I’m taking good care of Maggie.”

“Thank you, Angela.”

We sat with Mom for a while longer before Angela announced that it was Mom’s naptime. I kissed my mother on the forehead and whispered into her ear that I loved her. She smiled, but I knew she was frightened when she didn’t recognize me.

I cried in the car on the way home.

“Why are you crying, Mamma?”

How did I explain to my child that I’d never been as miserable in all my life as I was at that very moment? I knew of no words that would reach a five-year-old’s mind without scarring him for life, so I smiled and told him I had a tummy ache.

I put Jasper down for his afternoon nap when we got home, poured myself a glass of wine, and sat out at the pool. It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining, the air was balmy, and yet, I felt a chill.

My phone rang. It was Megan.

“Hi, Megs.”

“Jen! How are you, my friend? You’ve been so quiet. What’s up?”

“It’s a long story. How much time do you have?”

“What’s wrong, Jen?”

My best friend’s tone changed from upbeat to concerned in a heartbeat. Was it the right moment? Did I tell her, or did I bullshit my way through another phony conversation with the woman who knew me best?

“Jen?” she repeated herself when I hadn’t answered for a while, “are you still there?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m here.”

“What’s going on? Is it your mom?”

“That’s part of it. Megs, I need to tell you something.”

“You’re scaring me, Jen. Are you sick?”

“No, I’m not sick. I’m heartbroken. I’m tired. I’m lots of things, and none of them are good.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“I want to leave Paul, Megs.”

“What? Why?”

“He’s not who you think he is, Megan. He’s not who I thought he was when I married him.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s awful. He’s mean and controlling. He cheats on me constantly. He hits me, Megs.”

I tried to keep my voice steady, but I lost control as soon as the last word had slipped out. It felt as if someone had opened the floodgates to my heart and all the pain and fear came rushing out all at once.

“Oh, Lord. No! How long has this been going on, Jen?”

“Since we returned from our honeymoon.”

“Are you shitting me? But you never said a word to me, Jen. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“At first, I thought it was just a once off. I didn’t want to sound like a hysterical new wife. But then, the more I lied and kept it hidden the more difficult it became to tell,” I sobbed.

“Oh, Jen. My darling, Jen. I’m so sorry.”

“And I didn’t think anyone would believe me. Paul is a master manipulator. He has everyone fooled. Even Tristan thinks the sun rises and sets in Paul’s ass. I can’t take it anymore. I have to get out.”

“Why don’t you divorce his sorry ass, Babes? Kick him to the curb!”

“I can’t. He won’t let me go. He told me I’m free to leave, but he will never let me take Jasper. I can’t leave my child behind, Megs!”

“Of course not.”

“There’s more.”

“More?”

“Yes. Paul works for the mob. I didn’t know that either. He surrounds himself with some pretty unsavory and downright dangerous people. I can’t just up and leave. He’ll kill me. Plus, I have no job and no money. I’m fucked, Megs. Fucked!”

“Jen, take a deep breath and listen to me.”

I did as she asked and got a hold of myself.

“I’m going to help you. Okay?”

“How?”

“Let me think it over. I’ll call you tomorrow. In the meantime, you have to promise me you’ll calm down.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

“Hang in there, Jen. I’m going to help you. I promise.”

“Thanks, Megs. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

JENNIFER

I'd cleared the first major hurdle by sharing my truth with at least one person, Megan. That was hard enough, but telling Tristan was bound to be infinitely more painful and humiliating.

My brother was less likely to take it as well as had Megan. If I knew Tristan, and there was no doubt about that, he would want to do more than offer me a shoulder. I called him once I'd scraped together enough courage.

"Hi, Sis. This is a lovely surprise. How are you and my favorite nephew doing?"

"Hi, Tris. Your only nephew is just dandy, thanks."

"That kid is something special. He's going to be a babe slayer like his uncle, that's for sure," he said and then laughed heartily at his own joke.

Tristan wasn't far off. He was a very handsome guy. All eyes were on him wherever he went. I was always so proud of him. He was truly beautiful inside and out.

"Tris, can we meet for a drink? There's something I'd like to talk about with you."

"Sounds serious, Jen. Are you okay?"

"I'd prefer not to talk about it over the phone."

"Okay. Uhm," he said, as if he were checking the time, "I can meet you in an hour. Will that work for you?"

"Perfect."

“Shall I come to you?”

“No. I’ll meet you at the coffee shop around the corner from your office. Okay?”

“Sure. See you soon.”

“Bye.”

I didn’t want to talk to Tristan at the house. There were always far too many ears around. I was fortunate that Maria was out on an errand when I spoke to Megan, but that was a rarity, so I wasn’t going to push my luck.

Jasper was at school, so I had my morning to myself. Paul was at the office. He was in a good mood when he got up, so I assumed he was looking forward to ruining someone else’s day. I didn’t care, as long as he stayed away from me.

Actually, Paul had been in a good mood for a whole week—lucky me. I was tempted to talk to him about important matters, such as me getting a job, but, honestly, I was tired of flogging a dead horse. No. There was no better time to get away from him. I just had to figure out how I was going to attempt such a Herculean feat. Tristan would surely know how to help me.

Maria was in the kitchen, lording it over the cleaning staff. The old battle ax was on top form, leaving scurrying maids in her wake. All the woman needed was a cane and a mole on the lip and she’d be the epitome of a wicked witch. I certainly wasn’t going to miss her sour face and disagreeable disposition.

“Maria, where is Mario?”

I’d dispensed with all pretenses when it came to my husband’s bitches, Maria included. It must have been a bitter pill for her to swallow, as she considered herself queen bee of the Elia mansion.

“He’s in the garage, Mrs. Elia.”

“Tell him I want to see him.”

She glowered at me. But the thorn in my side was nothing if not a stickler for formality.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“I’ll be in the library.”

I left Maria to her task and went to the library. Mario appeared about five minutes later.

“Good morning, Mrs. Elia. You sent for me?”

“Yes, hello, Mario. I’m meeting my brother in town at 10 am. Get the car ready.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

I didn’t like the way Mario looked at me when he thought I wasn’t paying attention. It was creepy. But he was my dedicated transport, and if I wanted to stay on Paul’s good side, I had to conform. So, I sucked it up and pretended to be none the wiser.

I had a cup of coffee while I watched the minutes ticking by. There would be so much I’d have to attend to before I would be ready to leave my husband and disappear into the night. I hoped I wouldn’t forget anything crucial. There would be no going back if I did.

I often watched shows on the crime channel, so I had a good idea of what it took to drop off the face of the earth. I wouldn’t make any rookie mistakes if I could help it. Written to-do-lists were out. So were telling texts and other traceable communications. Paul was no fool. Plus, he had the infrastructure at work to skiptrace people, so I would have to take special care if I was going to elude him.

Mario and I pulled up outside the coffee shop at 09:55. Tristan was already seated when I entered the lively little shop. One of the waitresses greeted me with a huge smile. She was used to seeing me there with my brother. We tried to meet for a meal at least twice a month and the coffee shop was a welcome distraction, for me especially.

“Hi, Jen,” he said when he saw me, got up, and kissed me on the cheek.

“Hey, Tris.”

I sat down and ordered an espresso and a slice of cheesecake. Tristan did the same.

“What’s going on, Sis? You look nervous.”

Nervous! Try terrified.

“I am.”

“What is it?”

“I’m going to tell you something, Tris. But you have to promise me you won’t go nuts. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “I’m listening.”

Tristan’s cobalt blue eyes were clear as he sat there, focusing on my every word.

“Well, it’s been a long time coming, but I’m leaving Paul.”

“What? Why?”

My brother looked more shocked than I’d ever seen him. Not that anyone could blame him. It was a bombshell moment for sure.

“How much time do you have,” I half-smiled, trying my hardest to keep the tears at bay.

“Talk to me, Jen.”

“My life with Paul is hell, Tristan. He’s violent, he cheats, and quite frankly, I can’t believe he fooled me into marrying him. I’ve always considered myself to be a good judge of character, but it looks like Paul is a better chameleon than any of us could have imagined.”

“He’s certainly fooled me,” Tristan said with a look that told me he’d love to get his hands on my wayward husband.

“I just can’t do it anymore, Tris. I have to get out.”

“What does he have to say about this? Have you served him divorce papers yet?”

“No. And, this is where I’m going to need your help, Brother.”

“Of course! I’ll do whatever you ask. After I kick the shit out of him, that is.”

“No! Please, Tristan, you can’t do that. He mustn’t know. Besides, he’s dangerous. You have no idea.”

“What, dangerous? I’m more than able to wipe the floor with his butt, Jen.”

“I know, but you don’t understand, Tristan.”

“What?”

“Paul works for the mafia.”

“What the fuck, Jen? Who is this fucking guy? Are you serious?”

“I wish I wasn’t.”

“I don’t fucking believe this.”

“I can see I’m not the only one he’s duped. I can’t divorce him, Tris. If I try, he’ll take Jasper away from me. I can’t lose my child.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because he’s threatened to do so—many times. I mentioned the word divorce once and he swore he’d not only hurt me, but he’d make sure I never see my son again.”

“Bastard. How can I help you, Sis?” Tristan asked and slid his hand over mine.

I couldn’t help myself. Despite my outward bravado, I was a quivering ball of nerves on the inside. A lone tear rolled down my cheek at his touch.

“Megan is going to help me. She’s arranged that I stay in her parent’s holiday apartment. She’s moving in with them so that Jasper and I can have our space.”

“Good old Megs. She’s a champion. But won’t Paul look there for you?”

“The apartment is in a trust, so Paul won’t find it if he were to look for it under their name.”

“Okay. What are you going to do for money? I can help you.”

“I’ve squirreled away enough to get by on for a few months. I’ll find a job once I’m settled. Jasper will go to play school

during the day.”

Tristan downed his espresso, held up his hand to get the waitress’ attention, and ordered another when she came to the table.

“I feel like I should be drinking whiskey instead of coffee, but I don’t want my boss to think I’ve thrown myself at the bottle before noon,” he sighed.

“I can appreciate the merits of drinking before noon. It’s tempting, but I have to keep my wits about me if I’m going to escape my prison.”

“You’re going to have to change your name, Sis.”

“I know. Do you know anyone who can help me with that?”

“I’ll find out.”

“Thank you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner, Jen? I could have helped.”

“It sounds ridiculous, but I was embarrassed.”

“Are you crazy? I’m your brother. Nothing you tell me will make me think less of you. Ever!”

“I know, but at first, I thought it was just a phase. Then, when I’d finally got up the courage to leave, I fell pregnant with Jasper. It’s not easy to leave a marriage when you have a child and no job.”

“I always wondered about that.”

“Paul wants to control every aspect of my life. He knows he’s got me by the short and curlies if I have no money of my own. I tell you, saving money has been a feat and a half, but I did it. It’s taken me five years, but I think I’ve got enough to keep me going for a while.”

“I’ll help out for as long as you need, Jen.”

“I love you so much, Tristan. Thank you.”

Paul was silent for a while. Then he looked at me.

“How is Paul with Jasper? He doesn’t hurt him, does he? Because I swear to God, if he raises a hand against that child,

I'll fuck him up."

"No, he doesn't touch Jasper. Trust me, if he ever tried, I'd kill him and take my chances afterward with the courts."

"Good."

"Tris, please, promise me you won't do anything to Paul. This is only going to work if he doesn't see it coming."

"Of course not, Jen. I'm not an idiot. I'd better steer clear of him though. I don't know if I can see him and pretend everything is fine when he's abusing my sister."

"Please, find out about a new identity for me as soon as possible. I'm sorry to ask you, but I wouldn't know where to start looking."

"I'll take care of it. Swear to me you'll call me if he touches you again, Sis. Swear it."

"I will."

"Fucking coward."

We drank our espresso and ate the delicious, award-winning cheesecake. I felt so much better having told my brother. I finally felt as if I wasn't alone in my darkness. I had my best friend and my brother on my side.

"I'd better go, Tris. Paul's spies will be suspicious if I spend too much time away from home. His ears will be burning with the news of my insolence."

"I still can't believe it. I don't know how you've managed to keep this a secret for so long. You're a brave woman, Sis. I'm proud of you."

"That's so sweet. Now, get me a new name and get me the hell out of Dodge."

It was time to smile and get back into the car. Mario opened the door for me when I stepped outside. Paul stayed behind and paid the bill. I asked him to stay out of sight as I couldn't afford him glaring at Paul's driver with murderous intent.

My escape was taking shape. Slowly, but surely. I couldn't wait to be the old Jennifer again. It was time. My son wouldn't

grow up thinking that it's okay for a husband to hit his wife.
Not while I had breath in my body.

AMY GRACE

“Hi, I’m Amy Grace. Nice to meet you, my name is Amy grace.”

I stood in front of the mirror and repeated the little rhyme a few more times. I’d been doing it sporadically throughout the day, and I think I had it down pat. I thought that my new name had a nice ring to it. I could see myself as an Amy.

I stared at the Identity Card in my hand—my photo was pleasant enough. I’d worn a shortish, black wig on the day the photo was taken. I planned on cutting my hair as soon as I could.

I worried about Jasper, though. How did one explain to a five-year-old that his mommy’s name had changed? I toyed with the idea of changing his too for a while, but that wasn’t going to work. I prayed that Paul wouldn’t find us by looking for Jasper’s name, but to be fair, there were plenty of other Jasper’s running about the United States of America. It was a little unusual, I had to admit, but it certainly wasn’t exotic as far as names went.

It was midnight and I’d been ready shortly after I’d woken up that morning. All packed, bus tickets hidden in my jacket, destination...freedom. Paul was away on business for a few days. I knew the opportunity was too good to pass up, so I arranged with Megan for my traveling schedule to coincide with his absence.

Maria was asleep. Or so I hoped. My Uber was booked for 3 am. The plan was to head straight to the bus station and hide

out until 6 am when I would start my journey to freedom. I had no idea what I was going to do with myself for three hours! It felt as if the clock against the wall was taunting me. One minute hand forward, then three backward.

Jasper was fast asleep in his bedroom. He slept like a log once he was down. I was sure that neither hurricane nor gunfire would raise my son from his slumber until he decided it was time to wake up. What a blessing it was—sleeping peacefully without any fear. I couldn't remember the last time I had slept through the night without waking in the wee hours of the morning, wondering where my husband was. Not that I was at peace when he *was* at home either. Sad but true.

I couldn't wait for the next few days to be over. Megan and Tristan were my lifelines. They were amazing human beings. I couldn't wait to wrap my arms around my best friend and let go of the anxiety gnawing at my insides.

I paced and drank coffee. Then, miraculously, the clock shifted, and it was time to fetch Jasper from his bed and sneak out of the house. The Uber driver parked down the street, as I'd asked. He came walking toward me when he saw me carrying Jasper on one hip and pulling a large suitcase behind me with my free hand.

I was afraid to look back toward the house. What if someone was watching? Like Lot, I kept moving forward as if the mere thought of looking back would turn me, instantly, into a pillar of salt.

I held my breath as the driver placed the bag in the trunk of the car. I slid into the back and placed Jasper very gently down onto the seat beside me. He made a little moaning noise, so I stroked his hair. He was still asleep. Thank God.

The driver had to be curious, but he didn't ask me any questions. Surely, I wasn't the first fair he'd whisked away into the night, and I was sure I wouldn't be the last. I sent Megan a text from a burner phone Tristan had given me.

Hi, Megs.

*Jasper and I just left the house. Heading for the bus station.
See you soon.*

Jenn...oh, sorry. Amy.

I sent a text to Tristan too. He answered immediately, as did Megan. I knew I was in safe hands.

Jasper was fast asleep until we got onto the bus. Then it was all system go. The little guy was chipper in the mornings. Unlike his mother who felt like death warmed up. My body hurt from weeks, hell, years of pent-up angst. I was so very tired, but I didn't dare entertain the thought of falling asleep until we were safely in our new hometown.

"He's a cutie pie," a woman I estimated to be in her early sixties said as she smiled at Jasper.

"Thanks."

"Going to visit family?" she asked.

She was very sweet, but I was far too nervous to answer questions about my comings and goings, so I kept it short.

"Yes. We're going to see my sister."

"Oh, how nice. I'm going to visit my daughter. She just had a baby. Her third."

I smiled and prayed that she would stop talking to me. The woman was very sweet, but even so.

"I'm Norma," she said.

Okay, this is your first official introduction. Make it a good one.

"Amy," I said and smiled.

"So nice to meet you, Amy. What's your name, sweetheart?" she asked Jasper.

"I'm Jasper," he replied, innocently.

"That's a lovely name. How old are you, Jasper?"

"I'm five," he answered and held up the fingers of his left hand.

“Wow! What a big boy you are. I have a grandson your age. His name is Charlie.”

“Oh.”

“Do you like coloring in, Jasper?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I have a Spiderman coloring book here in my bag. Would you like to take a crack at it?”

“Ooh, I love Spiderman!”

“I thought you might. It’s Charlie’s favorite superhero.”

Norma took out a shiny new coloring book and coloring pencils. She handed them to a very excited Jasper.

“You look tired, Amy. I’ll keep an eye on little Jasper if you want to close your eyes for a bit.”

I had no reason to trust the stranger talking to me, but something in her eyes told me she was one of the good ones. I smiled at her, and she reached across and squeezed my hand.

“It will be okay, dear.”

I gave Jasper a juice box, then sat back and watched him for a bit. Before I knew it, and despite my determination to stay awake, I drifted off.

I woke up with a start. Jasper and Norma were gone.

Oh, God! Not my son. Where was he?

I looked around bewilderedly. I jumped up and walked down the aisle as fast as I could, looking at every seat I passed by. I looked up when I heard a familiar little voice calling out.

“Mamma!”

Jasper was running toward me, followed closely by Norma. I threw my arms around my son and picked him up.

“Are you okay, my boy? Where did you go?”

“Granny Norma took me to the toilet.”

“I’m sorry if we scared you, Amy,” Norma said. “Jasper needed the toilet, and you were sleeping so peacefully, so I

took him.”

“Thank you, Norma.”

“You’re welcome. He’s a little angel. Such good manners too.”

“Are you okay, dear?” Norma asked me once we were seated.

“Yeah, thanks. I just had a fright when I woke up and you were gone.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“No. Thank you, so much. You’ve been a great help. Your daughter must be so excited to have you around.”

“Yes, she can’t wait. Having kids isn’t for the faint hearted. Everyone needs help sometimes.”

“Amen to that.”

“Where is your mother? Oh, goodness. My apologies. I don’t mean to sound nosy.”

“That’s okay. Mom is ill. She can’t help me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Amy.”

“Thanks. That’s why I’m going to my sister. She’s a big help.”

“Family is a must.”

I prayed that Norma wouldn’t ask me where Jasper’s father was. I didn’t want to talk about it. Especially not with Jasper right there. What would I say, anyway? Hey, I’m running away from my husband because he’s a violent, cheating, asshole who wouldn’t hesitate to set his thugs on my trail?

I think the older woman had seen her share of runaway brides, so thankfully she didn’t ask. The bus ride took forever. I kept feeding Jasper little treats to keep him occupied—even though I swore that I’d never be one of *those* moms. This is an emergency, I told myself.

Eleven hours later, the bus pulled into the station. By this time Jasper and I were more than ready to stretch out and say goodbye to the confined space. Megan was waiting for us as we stepped off the bus.

I said goodbye to and thanked Norma before Megan, Jasper, and I rolled out of the station.

“You look after yourself, Amy,” she said and hugged me so warmly I was completely overwhelmed.

“Thank you for everything, Norma. Enjoy your new grandbaby.”

“Who was that?” Megan asked me when we drove away.

“An angel who just happened to fall from the sky and land on the same bus as Jasper and I.”

Megan smiled.

“It’s so good to see you, Je...sorry, Amy. I have no idea how I’m going to get used to calling you that.”

“I know. I kept looking around when Norma called me that on the bus,” I giggled.

“Mamma, why did Granny Norma call you Amy?” Jasper suddenly interjected.

“It’s an interesting story, my love,” I answered while I thought about how I would respond.

* * *

Megan’s folk’s apartment was perfect for Jasper and me. I was so happy to be in my own space again. The home I shared with Paul never really felt like mine. Megan came over the first few days to help me settle in.

“I found a lovely school just down the road where you can enroll Jasper.”

“Fantastic. I can’t wait for him to get settled, Megs. The sooner he forgets about his old life, the better.”

“He must have had a few questions. What did you tell him?”

“It’s not like he’s going to miss his father. Paul wasn’t exactly a prime candidate for the Father of the Year award. He was gone a lot.”

“I guess so.”

“I told him I needed to live here because it made me feel better. He’s five. He let it go after that.”

“Kids are amazingly resilient. Jasper is going to be just fine. He’s you and me, and of course his new grandparents, my folks.”

“Your Dad is so sweet with him. And I swear, your mom’s hugs could cure any ailment.”

“They’re great. How are you doing, Amy?”

“Good job! You got it right,” I chuckled.

“No flies on me. Come on. Let’s get the rest of this stuff packed away. Afterward, I’m taking Jasper to my folks and then you and I are going out for dinner and a drink.”

“Did I tell you today how much I love you?”

“Nope, but I’m a patient friend.”

“That you are.”

Megan dropped Jasper and me off much later, after she and I’d had a fun night out. I found myself relaxing more and more with each passing day. I called Tristan every night, like I’d promised him I would.

Jasper was excited about his new school. I was relieved. All moms will attest to the fact that a happy child goes a long way to a happy life. Jasper was settled and happy, and the perpetual knot of nerves that had been my companion for so many years, dissipated soon enough.

All I needed was a job.

PAUL

“**A** hhh, do you have to go right away, Pauly? Can't you stay for a while?”

Candy was always clingy after she and I had been away for a few days. I'd taken her with me on my business trip. None of the guys who had attended the conference took their wives, so there was no pressure on me. Besides, everyone I knew had a mistress. It was just the world I lived in.

My little *something on the side* was heavy handed when it came to credit cards, so it was actually cheaper to buy her things myself rather than giving her the key to the vault, as it were.

“Greedy little sexpot, aren't you?” I grinned and pumped her tight little ass in my hands. “Sorry, Babe. It's time I got home.”

“I had a good time, Big Daddy,” she purred and grinded up against me for effect.

“Stop that, or I'll never get out of here.”

“But I want to say thank you for my beautiful coat. Properly.”

“You can make it up to me later.”

She pouted a little but sent me on my merry way. It was just after 6 pm when I arrived home. Jen and Jasper weren't home, which was odd for that time of the day. I searched the whole house for them.

I knew there was trouble as soon as I opened the vanity cabinet in the bathroom. Jennifer's make up and some of her

personal grooming products were gone. Next, I went to Jasper's room and that's where my worst fears were confirmed. Some of his clothes and his favorite bear were gone. Jasper never went anywhere without his bear.

Jen and I fought constantly over that stupid thing. The kid was five, for shit's sake. What the hell was he doing dragging a stuffed toy around with him? My son was not a sissy boy!

"Maria!"

My housekeeper appeared shortly after I'd thundered her name from the landing at the top of the staircase.

"Mr. Elia?"

"Where the fuck is my wife?"

"Uhm, I don't know, Sir," she stammered, looking even paler than usual.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" I growled.

"I haven't seen her today, Mr. Elia. She and Master Jasper were here last night when I went to bed."

"I gave you one job, Maria. One fucking job. Keep an eye on my wife and son! I should kick your useless ass to the curb."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Elia, I..."

"Fuck me! Where's Mario?"

"I'll call for him, Sir."

"You do that. Get out of my sight."

"Yes, Sir."

Where the hell did Jennifer go? I wouldn't have put it past her to cry wolf to her brother. What crap had she told him about us? Poor little rich girl with imaginary problems. That woman had everything she ever could have wanted.

"Mr. Elia?"

"Mario. Where is my wife?"

"I'm sorry, Sir. I don't know."

"Where did you drive her to while I was away?"

“The usual places, Mr. Elia. Master Jasper’s school, the mall, the coffee shop where she usually meets with her brother. Nowhere new, Sir.”

“Fuck!”

Mario stood very still with his eyes focused straight ahead. He was a big guy, so I suppressed the urge to punch him on his square jaw.

“Just go,” I barked at him, then watched him leave.

I dialed Jennifer’s cell again. It was still off and went straight to voicemail. I waited for the beep before I spoke.

“I don’t know where you are or what the fuck you think you’re doing, Jennifer, but it ends now. Do you hear me? I want you home. Now!”

I pressed the end-call-button and threw my phone across the room. It hit the wall and bounced onto the floor. It was clearly an inspired moment when I decided to buy an indestructible cell phone—I threw it around more than I probably should have done. What could I do? My life was complicated and full of stress. Rather a phone than a face.

I called Tristan.

“Hey, Bro,” he answered cheerfully.

I had to keep my tone upbeat. It wasn’t easy.

“Hi, Tristan. How are you, brother?”

“Yeah, all good. Long day. How about you?”

“Just arrived back home after a few days away.”

“Business good?”

“Yeah. Running around like a headless chicken as always. Anyway, is Jen with you?”

“Jen? No. Why, isn’t she home? Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine. She must have forgotten that I was coming home today. It’s not a train smash. She’s probably at the store with Jasper. Okay, sorry, Tristan. Gotta run. Chat soon.”

“Okay. Let’s get together for a drink sometime.”

“Sure thing. Ciao.”

Tristan sounded the way he always did, so I doubted he was lying to me. I couldn't believe that Jennifer would dare to do a runner on me. She wasn't brave enough. Besides, she didn't have any money, so she wouldn't get very far.

Perhaps her mother was unwell. I decided to take a drive out to the care facility to talk to her mother. Surely, she would know where her daughter was. The old woman wouldn't have the mental fortitude to deceive anyone, let alone her son-in-law.

Maria was in the living room.

“I'm going out to look for my wife. Let me know immediately if she comes home or calls.”

“Yes, Mr. Elia.”

My phone rang while I was walking to my car. I looked at the caller ID. It wasn't Jennifer.

“Hi, Roberto. Listen, I can't talk now. Can I call you back?”

“Sure. Everything alright?”

“Yeah. I'm just in the middle of something.”

“Okay, no problem.”

The situation in which I found myself was fucking embarrassing. Jennifer was going to pay for making me look like a fool. Women! I should have never married. It was a ridiculous institution.

The care facility was about half an hour's drive from home. It was expensive—I knew all too well, as I paid the bills—but it was the best. How would it have looked if I allowed my wife's mother to live in squalor? No, it would be damaging to my reputation as a man of means.

It was after 8 pm when I arrived to find the carpark emptying out after visiting hours. The reception area was quiet.

“Good evening, Sir,” a woman greeted me from behind the counter. “I'm afraid visiting hours are over.”

“Hello. I’m so sorry to worry you at this hour,” I said with a sickly-sweet smile and puppy dog eyes. “I’ve just flown in from out of town and I have to see Mom. Please, I promise not to be long. Just a quick hello and a hug and then I’ll be on my way. Please.”

The young woman bore all the signs of someone who didn’t usually get much attention from men. She wasn’t a supermodel, but I rate she was do-able after a few drinks. In her defense, the girl didn’t stand much of a chance against the Elia-Charm-Attack.

“Uhm,” she said and looked around as if she was checking to see if anyone of higher rank was about. “I guess it will be alright. But, please, just a short visit.”

“I promise. You’re an angel. Thank you.”

She blushed.

“Who is the patient?”

“Mrs. Thompson.”

“Oh, you must be Jennifer’s husband. It’s good to meet you...”

“Paul,” I introduced myself.

“Nice to meet you, Paul. I haven’t been here for very long, but your wife and son are so lovely.”

“That’s very kind of you, Nancy,” I said, after checking her nametag.

“I’ll walk with you to Maggie’s room.”

“Thank you so much.”

I knew where the room was, but I played along, hoping the girl wouldn’t expect too much chatter along the way. Playing Mr. Nice Guy was becoming tedious. Especially since I was ready to rip someone’s fucking head off out of frustration.

“Here we go.”

“Wonderful. Thank you, Nancy.” *Now get the fuck out of here.*

“You’re welcome, Paul.”

Maggie was sitting near in a rocking chair, looking out of the window overlooking the pristine gardens maintained with my hard-earned money. She looked smaller and frailer than the last time I'd seen her. Her gray hair was cropped short, and she wore a white nightgown.

"Hello, Maggie."

She didn't respond. I greeted her again, but still she remained perfectly still.

Great. This was the worst time to try and get information out of her. She was clearly captive somewhere inside her mind. The fucking disease was a curse. I'd rather jump off a bridge or blow out my brains with a gun before I'd allow myself to slip away into nothingness.

I walked over to her and stood in front of her, blocking her view from the window. She blinked slowly and moved her eyes over my body. She stared into my eyes for a while.

"Tristan? Is that you?"

"No, Maggie. It's Paul."

I went down on my haunches.

"Remember? Paul, Jennifer's husband. Jasper's father."

Maggie must have been a beautiful woman when she was young. Her big, blue eyes must have been something before they turned vacant.

"Paul."

"Yes, hi, Mom."

"Where is Jen?" she asked and looked around.

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me."

"She's probably working late at the restaurant again. That boss of hers pushes her too hard."

Fuck. I could see I wasn't going to get anything worthwhile out of my mother-in-law.

"You should go over there and talk to the man, Paul. Tell him to stop picking on my Jen."

“Sure.”

There was no point in flogging a dead horse. I was wasting my time.

“I think he’s hurting my Jen,” she said as I was walking toward the door, fed up with having driven all the way for nothing.

Maggie’s comment gave me pause.

“What do you mean, Maggie?”

“I’ve seen bruises on my baby girl’s arms. She tries to hide them, but I know. He’s hurting her.”

My wife wouldn’t have bruises on her arms where I grabbed her occasionally, if she would just listen! Jen’s smart mouth reaction toward me was her undoing.

“I’ll be sure to check up on her,” I snorted and left the room.

“Bye, Tris. I love you, my boy.”

Fucking waste of time.

The only other person I knew who would know where Jen was, was Megan. I called her as soon as I stepped out of the building.

“Hi, Paul,” she answered enthusiastically, “this is an unexpected surprise. How are you?”

“Hey, Megan. I’m fine thanks. You?”

“Great. How are Jen and Jasper? That kid is so bloody cute, I could eat him up.”

“Yeah, he’s a pistol. That’s why I’m calling. I came home from a trip, and they aren’t here. I thought perhaps she decided to visit you and I didn’t get the message.”

“What? No. I haven’t spoken to Jen in over a week.”

“I’m sure it’s just a miscommunication. Don’t worry about it.”

“Will you ask her to call me when you talk to her, please, Paul?”

“Of course.”

“Okay. Thanks. Sorry, but I have to dash.”

“Sure. Chat soon.”

I had an empty feeling in my gut, not sure where next to look for the bitch. What if she and Jasper were in an accident? The nausea got worse. It hadn't occurred to me that my wife and son could be lying in a hospital somewhere.

I drove home and started calling the hospitals in our area. It was close to midnight by the time I'd called them all. No one under her name had been taken up.

My cell phone rang. It was Roberto again. Fuck. In all the chaos I forgot to call him back.

“Yeah, hi, Roberto. Sorry, I forgot to call you back.”

“What's going on, Paul?”

I had two options. I could keep my wife's disappearance from him and spend the next few days stumbling around in the dark, or I could enlist his help and find her sooner.

“Jennifer's gone. She and Jasper weren't home when I got there, and I have no idea where she's at.”

“Shit. That's not good.”

“I need your help, Roberto—on the quiet of course.”

“Of course, Paul. What can I do?”

“Your network of eyes can reach places where I can't.”

“Got it. I'm on it. If she's hiding somewhere in this city, I'll find her.”

“Thanks, Roberto. I owe you.”

“No worries. Get some sleep. I'll call you in the morning.”

Sleep. Yeah, right.

GRIFFIN COOPER

I pulled up to Andy's house at about 9 pm. He was having a few friends over for a barbeque. I'd left the office late, so I was running a tad behind. The gang was all there, judging by the sounds of laughter and music echoing across the valley.

It was the first time in over a year that I'd attend a party without Lucy by my side. I kept thinking that I'd forgotten something. It would take time to get used to the fact that I was single again.

I followed the noise outside to the pool area where I saw Andy at his usual post, barbecuing. He wore a Hawaiian-type shirt with bright yellow and pink flower print. I grabbed a beer from a cooler and walked over to where my friend was slaving over the hot grill.

"Hey, Andy. Sorry I'm late."

"Hey, Griff! I was starting to think you stood me up," he smiled brightly and sprayed some water over a runaway flame.

"And miss out on the best Aussie burger money can't buy? Don't be silly."

"Absobloodylutely. It's good to see you, Mate. How are you?"

Andy was originally from Australia, so *barbies* were his thing. He claimed every available occasion as an excuse to throw meat onto an open flame and wear his cork hat.

"I'm well, thanks, Bud."

"I was sorry to hear about your breakup with Lucy. Me and the gang were convinced that the two of you were on the road to

getting hitched.”

“What can I say? Lucy and I weren’t meant to be, I guess. It wasn’t a big blow up, thankfully. Our relationship turned out to be more of a friendship than a romance, if I’m honest.”

“Yeah, there has to be a spark, or it’s unlikely to last. At least that’s how I like my Sheilas.”

Andy was a good-looking guy. We met while we were at university. He’d done very well for himself since then. My Aussie Mate started off owning and operating an audio visual business and was currently sitting on about five stores in two cities. He’s done well for himself.

“Anyway, what’s new with you?”

“Oh, you know, this and that. Congrats on your new acquisition, Mate.”

Andy was referring to the company I’d recently bought and added to my fleet of software companies.

“Thanks, Andy.”

“Hey, Griff, how are you, Buddy?”

“Hi, Sean. Good thanks. I wasn’t expecting to see you here tonight. When did you get back from Japan?”

“Two days ago. It’s good to be back. I searched far and wide, but I couldn’t find a good barbie,” he laughed and slapped Andy on the back.

“Bloody oath, Mate,” Andy said out loud and raised his beer. “No rice and seaweed on this puppy.”

It was good to chill with friends. Work was crazy busy, and I needed a break. There were about ten of us at the barbeque. We sat down at a long harvest-like table outside under the trees once the food was ready. It was a beautiful summer’s evening, and the full moon bathed the garden in yellow light.

“Oh, before I forget,” Andy said while we were eating. “I don’t know if I mentioned my friend Megan to you.”

“I think I remember you talking about her once. New love interest?”

“Oh, no. We’re just good friends. We grew up in the same neighborhood. Anyway, she has a new friend who just moved here a few weeks ago. She needs a job and Megan says she’s a hard worker and she’s as smart as a tac. I was wondering if you have any vacant positions, now that you’ve bought a new company.”

“Actually, my PA’s husband has accepted a job out of state, so it looks like I’m going to need to start interviewing soon for an assistant.”

“Great timing.”

“Give Megan my office number and ask her to tell her friend to call and make an appointment to see me.”

“Thanks, Mate. Will do.”

“Sure.”

“Oh, by the way, I see you have a fan,” he said softly, then motioned with his head.

A pretty woman at the end of the table was looking at me. She smiled as our eyes connected. I smiled back.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“It’s Rick’s cousin. Cute, isn’t she?”

“Not too shabby.”

“You’re a picky bastard, aren’t you? I’d do her in a heartbeat, but she seems to have eyes for you,” Andy chuckled.

“I consider myself just the right amount of picky, thank you very much. I’m just not ready to throw myself into anything new.”

“Come on, you old prude. No one’s suggesting you meet her parents or anything. Buy the girl some dinner and shag her a few times. Get back on the horse, so to speak.”

“Andrew Henderson, you’re a dog.”

“Ouch. Careful, pretty boy, or you’ll hurt my feelings.”

“Yeah, sure.”

I left Andy's after 11 pm and headed home. I was knackered after the week I'd had, so I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

* * *

It was Saturday morning. I got up early and looked out of the window to see what the weather was doing. The wind was pumping outside perfect for kitesurfing. I called my sister, Alice.

"Hey, Al. Get your wetsuit on, girl. It's blowing a gale out there. You know what that means."

"Ugh...Griff. Do you know what time it is?"

"Yeah, time to get your lazy butt out of bed!"

"It's 6 am, big brother."

"And?"

"And I only got to bed at 1 am."

"Come on, lazy bones. You can sleep when you're old. Get dressed. I'm fetching you in forty minutes."

"Why do you hate me?"

"Stop moaning and get ready."

"Fine."

I chuckled when I ended the call. Alice was a hoot. She was the busiest human being I knew. But she wasn't a morning person—a night owl, yes—but wake her up too early and you were likely to get a coffee cup against the head.

My sister was studying to be a teacher for special needs kids. She loved children and they adored her. Alice had traveled extensively before she decided on teaching, so she was older than her counterparts. Not that it was an issue. My sister had more energy than all her fellow students combined.

She was in her final year at university, so her weekdays were pretty full. We tried to see each other as often as we could over

the weekend, and kitesurfing was one of our favorite pastimes.

Our parents were marine biologists, which meant that we moved around often as kids. We traveled the world as our folks were part of a research team who used to follow a pod of whales around the globe. In addition to working as a researcher, my mother homeschooled Alice and me. Our childhood was adventurous to say the least.

My favorite childhood memory was when we lived in Maui and one of the locals taught Alice and me to kitesurf. Once the bug bit, we made a point of visiting the island as often as we could so we could streak across the water whenever the wind was strong enough to carry our weight.

I hooted once I was outside Alice's apartment. She stuck her head out of the window and waved at me.

"I'll be right down," she shouted from the second-floor window.

She appeared a few minutes later, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. I had our equipment on the roof of my SUV. I kept her surfboard and kite at my place. It made more sense as we usually went kitesurfing together anyway, and her apartment was a bit short on packing space.

"Hey," she said when she climbed into the passenger seat.

"Good afternoon, Sis," I grinned.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Were you and the girls out partying last night?"

"Uh-huh. It was Karen's birthday and because we missed it last year, we went large."

"Is that why you smell like a distillery this morning?"

"Why, Griffin. You say such sweet things. Besides, you know I can't drink to save my life. Three tequilas and I'm looking for a duvet and a quiet corner where I can fall asleep."

"I know. I'm just messing with ya."

"How are you, big brother?"

“Good. I’m looking forward to the end of the year when we can jet off to Maui for our annual kitesurfing holiday. I could do with a break.”

“I know what you mean. I can’t wait for my last exam to be over with. If I don’t have to study anything again it will be too soon.”

“You’re almost there, Al. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, Griff.”

We drove in silence for a while.

“How’s Lucy?”

“She’s fine.”

“Do you miss being with her?”

“Sure. Some.”

“Is she dating anyone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you?”

“No. I think I’ll give it a miss for now. I’m enjoying my freedom, if I have to be honest. How’s your love life?”

“Non-existent. I don’t have time for love and all that jazz. I barely have time for myself. Besides, you’re my guy. If I need a date for a wedding or something, I’ll drag you along.”

Alice and I were very close. We were each other’s best friends growing up. It was nearly impossible making friends when we were all over the world on a boat as often as we’d been.

“I know Andy would scoop you up in a heartbeat if you gave him half a chance.”

“Andy’s cute, I’ve gotta say. But I don’t know if I can listen to our kids talking in that crazy Aussie accent of his,” Alice laughed.

“I’m with you there.”

My cell phone rang. It was Mom.

“Hi, Ma,” I greeted her over my Bluetooth device.

“Hello, sweetheart. How’s my boy?”

“Hey, Ma!” Alice called out.

“Oh, both my little troublemakers in one go. Hi, darling. What are the two of you getting into?”

“We’re off to hit the water,” I answered.

“Kitesurfing?”

“Yeah,” Alice answered. “Your son woke me up at 6 am. You really should have spanked him more often when he was little, Ma.”

“I spanked him plenty. What are the two of you doing later this afternoon? Feel like coming over for dinner?”

“What are you cooking?” Alice asked.

“Your favorite.”

“Ahi?” I asked.

“Yup. And plenty of fried rice to sink a battleship.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” I answered.

“Count me in,” Alice agreed.

“Okay, see you guys around 6 pm.”

“Thanks, Ma. Sounds great. See you later,” I answered, then ended the call.

“My day just got a whole lot better,” Alice smiled.

“It’s ironic, isn’t it?” I grinned.

“What’s that?”

“Mom being a marine biologist and the best Ahi Tuna chef on the planet.”

“At least we know she won’t feed us diseased tuna.”

Alice and I laughed at our inside joke.

The beach was a hive of activity. The wind usually brought out the usual kitesurfing suspects. There were plenty of new faces, but Alice and I were part of *team local*.

“Okay, Kid. Are you ready to rock and roll?” I said when I parked the SUV.

“Are you kidding? I was born ready.”

“Great. Let’s do this.”

AMY

The early morning rays peeped through my bedroom curtains. Another glorious day in the Sunkissed, coastal town I now called home. I got up and tiptoed past Jasper's bedroom. I clung to the peace and quiet I enjoyed in the morning before he woke up. Once he was awake, it was all systems go.

I sat outside on the balcony, soaking up the sun while enjoying a cup of freshly ground coffee. It had been roughly a month since my escape from Paul. My new life still needed some work, but it was already streets ahead of the one from which I'd escaped. I almost didn't recognize myself. I was much more relaxed, and for the first time in years, I enjoyed being alive. I even dared to afford myself hopes of a bright future with my son.

My phone rang at just before 7 am. My heart skipped a beat whenever that happened. Despite my newfound bravado, I still hid inside my soul a sliver of fear that someday Paul would find me. But not that morning. It was Megan.

"I have good news," she announced happily.

"Hey, Megs. Oh? Do tell."

"I've organized a job interview for you."

"Wow! That *is* good news. Where?"

"Do you remember my friend Andy?"

"Yeah, you've mentioned him a few times."

“Well, I mentioned to him that my best friend moved to town and that you need a job. So, he spoke to a close friend of his and it just so happens that this friend needs a new PA.”

“This is wonderful news, Megan. Who is this friend?”

“His name is Griffin Cooper. He owns several software companies. I think he’s a billionaire or something.”

“So, no pressure, then.”

“Oh, come now. You’re a bright girl. You’ll be fine.”

“I know I’m smart enough to do the work. It’s just that I haven’t worked since I married Paul. It’s a little daunting.”

“Paul really fucked with your mind, didn’t he? You were always so confident. What I wouldn’t do to beat the snot out of that asshole.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Anyway, I’ll text you the number to call for an appointment.”

“I don’t know how I’m ever going to repay you for everything you’ve done for me, Megs. I owe you so much already.”

“I told you to stop that. You don’t owe me anything. I love you, Jen...I mean, Amy.”

I laughed.

“Sorry, slip of the tongue. I’d better run. Call me when you’ve spoken to Griffin. Okay?”

“Okay.”

My head was spinning. I was thrilled at the prospect of earning my own way again, but the thought of a job interview left a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach. I didn’t have much time to dwell on it though as Jasper had woken, ready to inhale whatever food I’d put in front of him.

His birthday was coming up soon, so I’d arranged with his teacher to have a party for him at his playschool. She was happy to oblige. I was grateful. I wasn’t ready to host strangers in my home.

“Chew your food, sweetheart,” I urged my little locust, who, in turn, grinned at me with a mouthful of Cheerios.

“I have a surprise for you, Jasper.”

“Ooh, what is it, Mommy?”

“Well, it’s your birthday soon, and Miss Adams agreed to throw you a little party at school. All your friends will be there.”

“Will you bake us some cupcakes, Mama? Chocolate ones.”

“Of course, my angel. Are you excited?”

“Very! Is Daddy coming too?”

His question stabbed me in the heart. Would Jasper ever forgive me for taking him away from his father? Would he ever understand why I’d done so?

“Uhm, no, sweet boy. Sorry.”

He didn’t say anything more on the subject. In fact, that was the last time he’d asked about Paul, if memory serves.

“You’d better hurry, my love. You don’t want to be late for school.”

Jasper hopped off his chair and ran for the room. He came out about ten minutes later, wearing his favorite T-shirt and shorts.

“Miss Adams said we’re going to the zoo today, Mama. I can’t wait to see the monkeys,” he said on the drive to school.

“They are cute, aren’t they? You’re going to see lots of lovely animals.”

“Even giraffes?”

“Even giraffes. Remember to stay with your group, my boy. Don’t wander off,” I said when we got to school.

“I won’t, Mama,” Jasper called out while he was running for the gate where his teacher was waiting for her students.

“Oi! No kiss?”

“Oops,” he shouted and ran back to kiss me.

“Bye, sweetie. I love you.”

“Love you, Mama,” he said, kissed me, then sprinted back to Miss Adams.

It did my heart good to see my son so happy and secure. It made what I’d done worth it.

I called the number Megan texted me when I got home and made an appointment to meet with Griffin Cooper. Once that was done, I called Tristan.

“Hey, Sis. So good to hear from you. How are you and Jasper?”

“Hi, Tris. We’re good. Missing you and Mom so much, though.”

“I miss you, Jen.”

“Amy.”

“What did I say?”

“Jen.”

“I don’t know if I’m ever going to get used to calling you Amy. It’s just weird.”

“You think you’ve got problems. I keep ignoring people when they call me by my new name,” I chuckled. “Anyway, how’s Mom?”

“Not great, Sis. She’s spending more and more time tucked away inside herself. Her lucid moments are few and far between these days.”

“I’m so heartbroken, Tris. I wish I was there to help carry the burden. I’m so sorry I’ve left you to handle it on your own.”

“Please, don’t be. There isn’t anything you can do for her here anyway. I’m just thankful that you and Jasper are safe now—away from that animal, Paul.”

“Have you heard from him again?”

“Uh-huh. He called a few days ago, insisting that I must know where you are. I told him to call the police. He knows that I know, and I know that he knows that I know, but I’ll be

damned if he's gonna get anything out of me. Prick. So, he and I are playing the dancing game."

"Another thing that makes me feel like a useless liability," I sighed.

"Don't you dare. He's the asshole here, not you."

"Thanks, Tristan. Oh, I have good news."

"Sounds promising. What is it?"

"Megan has organized a job interview for me."

"That's fantastic. Sis. Details?"

"A friend of hers is friends with the owner of a software company. He's interviewing for a new PA, and yours truly is meeting with him tomorrow."

"Are you nervous?"

"That's putting it mildly. I'm crapping my pants. I haven't worked for six years. Ask me anything about cartoons and kiddies meds and I'll impress you with my knowledge. But, throw me amongst the business fraternity and I'm a blithering idiot."

"Oh, nonsense. You're one of the brightest people I know. And, I'm not just saying that because you're my sister. You'll be back in the know in no time."

"From your lips to God's ears."

"You're silly."

"I am looking forward to being completely independent again. It's been a while."

Tristan and I spoke for about half an hour before he had to hang up and go to work. I spent the rest of the day fretting about daft things like what to wear to the interview.

* * *

"Good morning, Miss Grace. Mr. Cooper will be with you in a few minutes. Please, take a seat."

I arrived ten minutes before my interview. My nerves were shattered but I thought I was hiding it well. I wore a white pencil skirt, a powder blue blouse, and heels. It felt a little odd after having lived in flats for so long.

My instinct was to take out my phone and keep myself busy that way. However, after having removed myself completely from all my social media platforms, I was left with TikTok, and that would be a bit too noisy.

I wondered what everyone thought of my sudden disappearance. What was Paul telling his friends and associates? I had a sudden rush of glee at the thought of my husband stumbling through lies to explain his predicament. I was tempted to send the police an anonymous note accompanied by an item of my clothing with traces of my blood on it. Wouldn't it be poetic justice if he was arrested for foul play—for murdering his wife? The thought of Paul behind bars brought a smile to my face every time I dared to entertain it.

“Miss Grace. Mr. Cooper is ready for you.”

The receptionist's voice pulled me from my dark thoughts. I stood to my feet and followed her to a closed door. She knocked once, opened it, then stood aside so I could enter.

Behind the desk sat a strikingly handsome, dark-haired man, who stood up as I entered the room. His warm smile and hazel eyes ignited something deep inside of my soul the moment his gaze pulled me in. I'd never experienced such a strong attraction to another human being before. I was suddenly aware of my every move—was I blushing? My face felt flushed, but I put that down to the rush of nervous energy from my gut to my extremities.

“Come in, Miss Grace. Please, sit down. I'm Griffin Cooper. It's a pleasure meeting you.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Cooper.”

“Please, call me Griffin.”

I sat down and placed my purse on my lap. I wondered how old Griffin was. I estimated him to be in his late twenties,

early thirties. He was in good shape. Clearly, he looked after himself. I reckoned my prospective boss was an outdoors man—his skin was Sunkissed and he had a glow about him.

“Andy tells me you’re new in town. How are you finding it?”

“It’s beautiful. I love the ocean. Have you always lived here?”

“Uh-huh. Born and bred. Although my family and I traveled the globe when we were kids before we returned and settled here once again.”

“That sounds very exciting. What did they do, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“My parents are marine biologists, so we spent much of our time on the ocean.”

“What a wonderful childhood.”

“It certainly was.”

We stopped talking for a moment while we took each other in. Griffin spoke next.

“What work experience do you have, Miss Grace?”

“Amy, please.”

I rattled off my job experience as best I could. The nearly six-year gap was a glaring one, but it didn’t seem to faze Griffin. I made up a little white lie and told him I cared for my ailing mother during those years. It wasn’t a complete fabrication. I did spend a lot of time with my mom during the early days of her illness.

“I’m sorry to hear about your mother’s illness, Amy. It’s very admirable, caring for her like that. Family is the most important thing, isn’t it?”

“Agreed.”

Griffin wasn’t at all what I’d expected for a man of his means. In my experience, vast wealth tended to morph people into selfish, self-centered assholes. Perhaps I had been introduced to the wrong rich kids.

We spoke for at least half an hour, after which he thanked me for coming in, and told me he'd be in contact with me. I left Griffin's office feeling as if he and I had made a real connection. But it remained to be seen whether he thought I was qualified enough to do the job, so I decided to keep myself busy in the meantime.

Fortunately, I had other things to keep me occupied, such as buying party favors for Jasper's classmates, and baking the cupcakes I promised him. Megan called me after work and told me she'd pop by with a bottle of wine and a pizza.

Griffin called two days later and offered me the position. I accepted it with immense gratitude. I called Megan as soon as I ended the call with Griffin. My life was coming together so beautifully.

GRIFFIN

Amy was an unexpected distraction. I found myself thinking about her constantly despite my rigid policy of not getting involved with my staff. That sort of thing was tantamount to playing Russian roulette with a sawn-off shotgun.

The snag was that the petite, strawberry blonde had curves in all the right places. Her blue eyes were angelic—a tired metaphor, but no less true—and I found myself looking forward to spending time at the office.

Needless to say, up until that point, our relationship had been strictly professional, but in my mind, I'd stepped over the line too many times already. My new PA didn't talk much about her personal life. All I knew about her was what she'd told me at our initial meeting. I had the distinct impression that there were things in her life she didn't want to talk about.

It was a Thursday, and I was at the office. It was close to the end of the day, and I wanted to discuss an upcoming conference with Amy, so I pressed the buzzer on my desk.

"How can I help?" Amy's voice answered my call.

"Would you come into my office for a moment, please?"

"Sure."

The door opened a few moments later and in walked the object of my growing fascination.

"Have a seat."

Amy sat down and waited for me to speak. She was so beautiful, I found it difficult to concentrate on what I wanted to say.

Come on, Griffin, get a grip. You're not a child.

“There’s a big, annual conference coming up to which I usually take a team from our company. I’ll give you the dates and the details of the individuals that will be accompanying us.”

“Us?”

“Yes. I’ll need you to come along too. Is that okay?”

“Uhm, yes. Of course.”

“Good.”

“It’s only in about two weeks’ time, if you need to make any personal arrangements,” I added, in case she needed time to plan her weekend away.

“It’s no problem at all. Thanks for the heads up. Is there anything else?”

“Are you in a rush?”

“Oh,” she smiled and blushed, “no, sorry. I have a few emails I’d like to finish before the end of the day.”

“Well, off you go, then,” I grinned. “Can’t keep you from your work now, can I?”

Amy smiled and got up. She left the office and closed the door behind her. It wasn’t my imagination. She seemed distracted again. I wondered who she went home to every day. I did enquire about her relationship status when I’d interviewed her. Partly because I was curious, but mostly because I didn’t want to train another PA and have her running off to have a baby. It took a while to get used to working with someone new.

Amy had told me that she was single. I was happy to hear it.

It was past 5 pm, when I checked my watch again, so I called it a day. I’d made plans to have dinner with my sister, so I drove home and changed into something casual. I met Alice at

our favorite pizzeria at 7 pm. The weather was lovely, so we sat outside and ordered a bottle of Prosecco.

“How’s your new PA working out, Griff?”

“So far so good.”

“What’s her name?”

“Amy Grace.”

“Sounds rather angelic.”

“She does look like an angel, actually,” I laughed.

“Oh? Describe.”

“Uh, okay. She’s twenty-eight, petite, strawberry blonde, and intelligent. She picked up on what to do very quickly.”

“Pretty?”

“Stunning.”

“Oh, dear.”

“What?”

“She sounds perfect. Too perfect.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, she sounds like someone you could fall for.”

“You of all people should know I don’t crap where I eat.”

“So, you say. But your last PA wasn’t exactly angelic and sexy, now, was she? And she was married.”

“I had no idea you thought so little of my powers of self-restraint.”

“It’s not just you. Men in general are suckers for a pretty woman.”

“Wow. When did you become so cynical?”

“As soon as I grew old enough to know how the world really works.”

“What are you having to eat?”

“Ah. Changing the subject. Did I hit a nerve?”

“No, Miss Smarty pants. I’m hungry.”

“Well played, Mr. Cooper,” Alice laughed and called the waiter across.

* * *

The two weeks flew by. The resort where the conference was held, never disappointed. No expense was spared, and the attendance was impressive. Our party consisted of eight of our top software specialists, Amy, and me. The event was scheduled to run from Friday morning until midday on Sunday, so we arrived on Thursday afternoon to settle in. I’d asked Amy to book a villa for the ten of us, as I didn’t like to stay too close to where the festivities were held. Night times usually ended up in a boisterous piss up and I liked my privacy.

The manager of the private villa took us on a quick tour of the premises once we arrived.

“Well chosen, Amy. The villa is beautiful.”

“Thank you. I thought you might enjoy being on the beach.”

“Good call.”

We were in the eye of an awkward silence that snuck in every so often. It passed quickly.

“I have the programme for tomorrow morning, I emailed it to everyone. The chef is preparing dinner for us all tonight.”

“That’s great. Thanks, Amy.”

“That’s why you pay me the big bucks,” she said and smiled.

What? A joke? Was this the playful Amy I’d been waiting to see?

I knew that somewhere inside the beautiful woman standing in front of me was a relaxed and witty character screaming to burst forth. I hoped that, in time, she would feel comfortable enough to let that side of her out. I had a feeling I was going to enjoy it.

“Ha-ha. Okay, I’m going to relax before dinner. See you all later,” I said and left the crew to their own devices.

My suite had a spectacular view of the ocean. Being wealthy had its perks. I wasn’t an ostentatious person by nature, but I did enjoy a few ‘finer things.’

I spent an hour or two answering emails before it was time to join the others for dinner. The villa staff had laid out a beautiful spread on a harvest table on the lawn that overlooked the ocean. I hadn’t eaten since breakfast, so I was pretty hungry. Everyone was there except for Amy. I was disappointed.

“Has anyone seen Amy?” I asked.

“Yeah, Boss. I saw her heading down the path that leads to the beach.”

“Thanks, Annie.”

I popped a beef slider into my mouth before I descended the wooden stairs that led to a boardwalk. The tide was low, so I walked along the shoreline. I spotted Amy in the distance. She was walking in the shallows. I marveled at how beautiful she was. The rays of the setting sun caught her hair just so, intensifying its strawberry color. She didn’t see me approaching.

“Not hungry?” I asked when I was close enough to her.

Amy jumped.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you,” I smiled.

“I was far away,” she said, catching her breath.

“It’s a beautiful evening. You’d be forgiven for choosing a walk on the beach over the magnificent feast up there.”

“Don’t be fooled. I’m going to Hoover up whatever I can find when I’m done here,” she laughed.

“You’d better hurry. We’ll be lucky if those locusts leave us anything.”

“You have a nice team working for you.”

“Yeah, they’re a decent bunch. You’ve settled in well. Are you enjoying the work?”

“Enquired the spider from the fly,” she giggled.

“Fair enough. No pressure because the boss is asking, I promise. Please, be honest. I can take it.”

“I’m loving my job. I’m grateful for the opportunity, Griffin.”

“You’re very welcome. You’re doing a good job. And I’m not just saying that because I want you to share whatever food is left with me,” I grinned.

Amy unleashed a brilliant smile upon me—the kind that could stop a man’s heart. What was it about her that brought out from inside me the knight on a white horse?

* * *

“That was a long day of sitting. I’m going for a dip in the ocean. Feel like joining me?” I said when Amy and I left the conference room on Friday afternoon.

“Glad I’m not the only one with ants in my pants.”

“Hell, no. I hate sitting in one place for too long.”

I opened the car door for Amy and hopped in before the driver took us back to the villa. The others stayed behind at the venue.

“I’ll change into my swimsuit and meet you back here in ten minutes,” I said as we walked into the villa.

“Okay.”

Amy’s scent was in my nostrils while I undressed and slipped on my trunks. Being alone with her in the villa had my imagination running wild.

Be careful, Griffin.

I ignored the voice of reason and went downstairs. Amy appeared a few minutes later. I nearly swallowed my tongue.

She was exquisite in her copper bikini and white wrap. I swallowed hard.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yup.”

I was ready, alright. But swimming was the last thing on my mind.

* * *

The wave caught Amy by surprise and slammed her gorgeous body right into mine. Bubbles escaped her mouth as the force pushed the air from her lungs. I caught her in my arms and pushed her back to the surface of the water. She spluttered and gasped for air.

“Shit!” she said once she caught her breath. “Sorry, Griffin. I didn’t see that one coming. Did I hurt you?”

“No. I’m fine. Don’t worry about it. Are you okay?”

“I’ll live. I just feel a little silly.”

“The ocean likes to show us who’s in charge every now and again,” I smiled.

I didn’t realize I was still holding onto her.

“I think it’s safe to let me go now,” she smiled, bashfully.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

I let go of her rather reluctantly. I was enjoying the feel of her skin under my fingertips. The realization that my groin had woken up with a start and was now sporting a very healthy erection caused me some distress. I hoped it would subside before we hit the beach.

“I’d better get you back to the beach before you body slam me again,” I grinned.

“Good idea. How would it look if you attended tomorrow’s conference with a black eye?” she giggled.

“Whipped by a girl? I wouldn’t live that one down easily.”

Amy laughed and started to swim back to shore. I followed her.

“That was an amazing swim. The water is so warm,” she said while she dried her hair with her towel.

I couldn't help but ogle her when she wasn't looking. Her stomach was flat and taut, and her beautiful round breast glistened in the setting sun. Her body was a feast for the senses. I so badly wanted to reach out and touch her.

Amy wrapped herself in the towel.

“I'm starving. I wonder what the chef has dreamed up for dinner,” she said while she waited for me to dry off.

“I'm sure it will be delicious, if last night was anything to go by.”

The small talk was getting more difficult to execute when all I could do was imagine her naked. We separated and went to our rooms to change before dinner. By the time we went downstairs again, the others had arrived.

I watched Amy intently throughout dinner. I couldn't help it. The way her mouth moved when she ate, her smile when someone said something amusing. The woman was perfect. How had she not been snapped up yet? What was wrong with her? A myriad of questions arrested my mind as I tried not to make it too obvious that I was perverting.

And, then it was time to call it a day. How was I going to fall asleep, knowing that Amy was a few doors away from me?

AMY

Had I banged my head in the ocean, or was Griffin checking me out? I felt like a bloody idiot when I crashed into him while we were swimming. Thankfully, I hadn't busted his lip or hit him in the family jewels with a flailing knee. I couldn't imagine living through that embarrassment.

But there we were having dinner with the whole team in attendance, and my boss was definitely checking me out. The crew was a lively bunch, and jokes flowed as thick and fast as the drinks served alongside the delicious meal.

To be fair, Griffin wasn't obvious about ogling me, and I didn't think that anyone at the table had picked up on it. Okay, so I was pretty, not that I was bloated with self-importance about it, but I was used to men checking me out. A woman knew when a man was interested, and, yes, all women know that men can see their nipples through their shirts. FYI, it's no accident when that happens.

I thought back to my interactions with Griffin up to that point and decided that I hadn't done anything to lead him on—the body slamming and quasi groping incident in the ocean notwithstanding. Not that I was terribly upset about that, as my boss's body felt far too good for my own sanity. I hadn't enjoyed the feel of a man's hands on my skin in a very long time, and Griffin was the perfect male specimen.

What are you doing, Jennifer/Amy? Don't you think your life is complicated enough as it is? Finish your meal and go to bed.
ALONE.

The voice of reason was right. It was always right. Perhaps I wouldn't be in the mess I was in had I listened to it before I married Paul. The sudden thought of my husband canceled out any romantic feelings I may or may not have had about Griffin, including the picture I had in my mind of his naked perfection.

I finished the last sip of wine before I got up from the table. The gang were in fine fettle and barely noticed my perfectly executed exit strategy. Griffin smiled at me. Was that disappointment I saw in his eyes?

“Goodnight, everybody. I'm paste.”

“Sleep well, Amy,” Griffin nodded.

“Thanks. You too.”

Upstairs, in my room, I changed out of my dress and walked around in my panties. It was muggy so I opened the sliding doors to let in the cool breeze rather than switching on the air conditioning unit. I lay on the bed and listened to the sound of the waves crashing against the shoreline.

I missed Jasper. We hadn't spent much time apart since he was born. Megan's parents were thrilled when I'd asked if they would mind taking care of my little angel while I was away. I had no doubt that they were spoiling him rotten, but I missed him.

I checked my watch. Damn it. It was too late to call him to say goodnight. I lay down on the bed, turned off the light, and took in a lungful of fragrant, ocean air. I closed my eyes.

Tap-tap-tap.

I opened my eyes and sat up. Was that a soft wrap on the door? I waited and listened.

Tap-tap-tap.

There it was again. I clicked on the light on the nightstand, slipped on the dress I wore to dinner, and went to the door. I looked through the peephole. It was Griffin. My heart skipped a beat.

I ran my fingers through my hair before I opened the door.

“Griffin? Is everything okay?”

“Hey. Yeah, sorry. Did I wake you?”

“No. I wasn’t sleeping.”

“Good.”

We stared at each other in an awkward silence.

“Uh, I wanted to check on you,” he said, suddenly.

“Check on me?”

“Yeah. You seemed distant at dinner. Are you okay? I was worried that you may have banged your head a little too hard today in the ocean.”

“Oh. That. No, I’m fine. Just a little tired.”

“Good. Now I feel better.”

Griffin smiled at me but didn’t leave. A warm feeling in my pelvis kept growing. I blamed my boss’s hypnotically beautiful eyes for the sudden awakening in my loins.

Please, go away before I do something stupid. Please!

“Uhm, would you like to come in?” I heard myself saying.

No! What are you doing?

“Funny you should ask,” he grinned and produced a bottle of Scotch out of thin air. “I brought this, just in case you were feeling poorly.”

“I see,” I smirked. “Not your first ocean body slam then?”

“Nope.”

I stood aside so that Griffin could enter my room. Every ounce of fat in the nooks and crannies of my gray matter yelled at me to send him away, but, clearly, that ship had sailed.

“It’s nice and cool in here with the sliding door open,” he said.

“I’ve never been a fan of air conditioning.”

“You’ve clearly never lived on a boat in the Amazon rainforest. Trust me, air conditioning has its uses.”

“Is there anywhere you haven’t been?” I grinned.

“Sorry, I must sound like an insufferable know-it all.”

“Not at all. I’m jealous. Your childhood sounds like it was idyllic.”

“I could lie and pretend that it was tough moving from place to place, but honestly, I loved it. How about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Did you travel as a child?”

“I wish. No, we were a *stationary* family. I did a fair bit of traveling after high school, but nowhere nearly as exotic as you.”

Griffin laughed. The lyrical sound of his chocolate voice resonated in my stomach.

“Can I tempt you with a drink?” he asked, and I could have sworn his eyes flashed a brief look of pure lust.

“Sure.”

What the hell. In for a penny...

Griffin poured Whiskey into two glasses he’d produced from his pocket and offered me one.

“What else have you got stashed away in those magic pockets?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” he smirked.

Oh, crap. Is it getting warm in here?

“Down the hatch,” he smiled and drained the shot glass of its golden elixir.

“To sliding doors and cool ocean breezes,” I smiled and did the same.

“You’re quite beautiful, Amy.”

His comment caught me off guard. I didn’t know what to say.

“Okay, just to be clear, that wasn’t a line,” he added quickly.

“Of course not,” I laughed.

We stood there, staring at each other. The light breeze carried Griffin's musky scent to where I stood, wondering what the hell I was doing.

"I'd better go," he mumbled, "now that I know you're okay."

"Thanks for checking in on me," I said softly.

"Sure."

Griffin started toward the door. I followed. He reached for the doorknob but stopped midair when I spoke.

"Wait. Don't forget your Scotch."

I turned to fetch the whiskey from the table. Then, bottle in hand, I spun around and collided unexpectedly with Griffin, who had followed me. The bottle slipped out of my hand and fell to the floor.

"Damn it!" I said, feeling like a clumsy fool. And, not for the first time that day.

I bent down to pick it up, but Griffin got there first. We were on our haunches around the whiskey bottle, far too close for comfort.

"I swear, I'm not usually this clumsy," I stuttered.

"God, you are irresistible," he said in a husky whisper, pulled me to my feet, and kissed me.

Every cell in my body exploded with intense pleasure. My mind was in a deep fog as Griffin's tongue skillfully explored my mouth. I ran my hands over his strong back while he held me so close against him, it was as if we'd become one flesh.

"How did I know you'd taste this good?" he groaned into my ear.

I tried to catch my breath, but it was near impossible with Griffin's tongue gliding along my neck in the direction of my collarbone. Then, without warning, he stopped and looked at me.

"I'm so sorry," he said with labored breath. "I shouldn't have done that..."

No shit!

But it was too late for apologies. I wanted Griffin more right then than I'd ever wanted any other man. Something about the way he touched me had rendered me completely helpless to resist. There was no way in hell I was going to let him leave me there, aching for him, so I grabbed him and kissed him like I meant it.

Griffin's body responded to mine in a way that was unmistakable. There was no turning back. I was about to rock my boss's world.

"Are you sure?" he whispered into my ear.

I didn't answer him. I was too busy unbuttoning his pants so I could slip my hand into his underwear. He gasped when I found what I was looking for. I wrapped my hand around his sizable penis and ran my thumb over its warm, wet head.

Griffin slid his hands up the inside of my dress and cupped to my naked breasts. He tweaked my nipples without hurting me. I gasped before he covered my mouth with his. It was a hungry kiss, reminiscent of a new lover's desire to conquer.

"Amy," Griffin said and pulled away from me for a moment. "Are you sure?"

Again, with this? What? Are you afraid I'm going to sue you for harassment?

"Yes," I answered, impatiently, and kissed him again.

Griffin pulled off my dress and stood back to look at me. I was wearing only panties.

"You are exquisite," he whispered.

I watched as he liberated his perfectly formed, bronzed body from all clothing—his erection was nothing short of impressive. Griffin beamed at my shameless gawking and walked very slowly toward me, the way the lioness creeps along the long grass, ever closer to the unsuspecting deer.

"Come here," I said as if he were my slave to command.

Griffin acquiesced and closed the distance between us like a lithe panther. My heart was beating furiously as he approached me without looking away from my eyes. He stopped in front of me.

“I’m yours to do with whatever you please,” he said with a cheeky glint.

“Good. I like it when a man isn’t afraid to hand over the control,” I grinned.

“As if any man possesses control when it comes to the allure of a woman as beautiful as you, Amy Grace.”

Griffin picked me up and carried me to the bed where he laid me down gently. Then, he stood over me and moved my knees apart before running his fingers, teasingly, down my inner thighs to claim his prize.

My core pulled in his fingers, enveloping them with a silky hunger. My pelvis rocked to and fro as my deft lover caressed my swollen clit. I closed my eyes and lost myself in his touch while outside the waves crashed onto the white beach.

My climax was building steadily, nearing eruption, when Griffin lay down on top of me and entered me with one smooth thrust, sending me into a freefall. He rode me hard, faster and faster, deeper with each thrust, until my body succumbed to the wave of ecstasy of an earth-shattering orgasm.

I dug my nails into Griffin’s flesh and held on for dear life while we rode the dragon together. Afterward, breathless and completely satisfied, Griffin and I fell asleep without another word spoken between us.

When I woke up, my lover was gone. There was nothing as sobering as the brightness of the morning light. I lay in bed and looked out at the perfect, blue ocean under the brilliant morning sun. Was it all a dream? The imagination of a woman who hadn’t been loved by a man in way too long.

The smell of Griffin’s scent on my skin and the bottle of whiskey on the rug, confirmed my worst suspicions.

What the fuck had I done?

GRIFFIN

Every day that followed the night I made love to Amy found me thinking about her. It didn't matter where I was—the grocery store, the office, kitesurfing on the ocean—she was constantly on my mind. Amy had completely captivated me. So much for not crapping where I ate.

It had been a week since we arrived home from the conference. Amy and I were in my office.

“Do you have plans for dinner?” I asked.

We'd agreed to leave our indiscretion behind in the rearview mirror, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted more of her. Not just physically, but I wanted to know more about the soul of the woman who had bewitched me.

“I thought we weren't going to poke that particular bear again.”

“I know we agreed to keep our distance. Am I the only one who wants more? Don't you feel it too?”

Amy looked as if she had the world's important issues on her shoulders. She had the cutest little crease between her eyes whenever she was contemplating something heavy. I was tempted to walk over to her and kiss her on that adorable spot just above her nose, but I held back.

Amy sighed.

“Yes. I mean no. Damn it. Yes, I feel it too.”

“Okay, then. Dinner?”

“I’d like that.”

“Excellent. Shall I pick you up at 7 pm?”

“No,” she said quickly. “Uh, I have a few things to do after work, so I’ll be in town anyway. Where shall we meet?”

“The Chopping Block. Do you know where it is?”

“Hey, I’m an award-winning PA, remember? I’ll find it.”

“You’re more than that,” I grinned before she left the room with a cheeky wink.

* * *

I was already seated when Amy arrived. My heart raced when I saw Amy walking toward the table, I’d booked for us. She wore a knee length, figure hugging, white dress and her hair was up in a ponytail. Her perfume settled on me after I’d kissed her on the cheek.

“You look beautiful as always,” I said when she sat down.

“Thank you.”

Amy carried herself in a way that suggested she’d been surrounded by wealth and privilege. It wasn’t anything specific, but I sensed that she’d been around the elite a few times. Her sense of dress was impeccable. However, the delicate creature before me had clearly seen a few harsh winters. She’d become skilled at hiding inside herself.

“Did you have trouble finding the place?” I asked.

“Not at all. It’s lovely.”

“Yes. I come here occasionally with my sister. The food is amazing.”

“Is your sister as adventurous as you?”

“Oh, yeah. She’s a force of nature. I’d introduce you to her, but I don’t know if my ego will survive it.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Let’s just say she had a feeling I may find you hard to resist,” I grinned. “If I know Alice, she’s definitely going to pull the piss for years to come when she finds out that we are seeing each other.”

“But she hasn’t met me.”

“True. I described you to her.”

“Must have been quite a description for her to think that” Amy smirked.

“Oh, it was,” I winked.

“What are we doing, Griffin?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m about to order a steak.”

She gave me an exasperated look.

“I know this is crazy, Amy. But I can’t stop thinking about us. If you don’t feel the same, I’ll bow out gracefully—no hard feelings. But, if you feel it too, then don’t we owe it to ourselves to explore our options?”

“No pressure then. So, if I kick you to the curb, you promise not to retrench me?” Amy grinned.

“Oh, if you do that you’re toast for sure,” I said and took a sip of water.

“In that case, you leave me no choice. Your place or mine?”

I laughed out loud.

“You’re a pistol, Amy. What would you like to drink?”

“I seem to have developed a taste for whiskey.”

“You don’t say.”

I leaned across the table and took her hand. Amy gave me one of her dazzling smiles. In that moment I understood what the great romances depicted throughout history were trying to convey. I wondered if Mark Antony felt the same as I did when Cleopatra gave him *the* look. I could fall hard for someone like Amy.

We ordered our meal and chatted whilst the chef was working his magic. I still didn’t know much about the woman who had

crept so quickly into my heart. She was guarded. I didn't want to pry. I was sure that she would open up to me when she was ready. There was no sense in pushing.

"It's a beautiful evening. Would you like to join me for a walk at the beach after dinner?" I asked when we had finished our meal.

Amy checked her watch.

"It's getting late," she said.

"Oh, come on. I'm sure your boss won't mind if you come in a little later tomorrow."

"I don't know. He can be really tough on his staff."

"Oh, please. I'm such a pushover."

"Sure. I'd love to go. Would you excuse me please? I need to pop into the ladies before we go."

"I'll pay the bill."

"Thank you, Griffin. Dinner was a treat."

"You're welcome."

* * *

"Have you ever been kitesurfing?"

"No, but I did a bit of windsurfing in college."

"I'd love to show you. It's quite a ride."

"With my luck I'll probably get blown out to sea," Amy chuckled.

"You'll be fine."

"Have you already forgotten about the flailing incident in the surf? You'd better come prepared. I'm thinking a jock strap."

"You're quite the little Ninja, aren't you?" I laughed.

"Dynamite comes in small packages, as they say."

"Petite, strawberry blonde packages as it turns out."

I stopped walking and put my arms around her waist.

“I’m going to kiss you now. Try not to injure me.”

“I’ll do my best.”

* * *

“You’re kidding. Is an I-told-you-so appropriate?”

“Alright, Alice. You win this one.”

“Color me surprised,” my sister grinned, just to push the blade in a bit deeper.

“I guess I deserve that.”

“And? Is she what you expected?”

“That and then some. Amy’s amazing. You’re going to like her; I just know it.”

“When do I get to meet the petite fairy who’s stolen my brother’s heart?”

“I was thinking of bringing her along on Saturday for some kitesurfing.”

“Cool. Has she surfed before?”

“No.”

“I hope she’s got a sense of adventure.”

“Something tells me she’s as tough as nails.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting her. Remember to get her a wetsuit. Will she fit into one of mine?”

“You’re quite a bit taller than Amy. I’ll hire her a smaller one. But, thanks, Sis. That’s thoughtful of you.”

“No worries. See you Saturday.”

* * *

“Okay, so this is pretty straightforward,” I said while I strapped a safety vest onto Amy. “We’re going to surf in tandem a few times until you have enough experience and then you can hit the surf on your own.”

Amy looked so sexy in her short wetsuit and sunglasses—a spectacular beach babe.

“Remember to lie back,” I said as we were about to launch.

“Okay. I’ll be fine. I hope you’re wearing that jockstrap,” she giggled.

“Couldn’t find one big enough,” I whispered into her ear, then kissed her on her neck.

“Haha.”

It was hard to focus on the surf while I had the sexy Amy strapped to my body. I had to focus all my energy on not spiking her with my erection. I was sure she felt it. The woman drove me crazy with desire.

“This is amazing!” she shouted when we’d taken flight, then splashed back down onto the surface of the water.

My instincts about her were spot on. Amy wasn’t scared of moving out of her comfort zone. I was falling deeply in love with her.

“That was so much fun,” she said once we were back on land and drying off. “I can see why you love it so much.”

“Wait until you go it alone. It’s the most freedom you can experience on the open water.”

“Alice is brilliant at it. I can’t believe she gets so high up in the air.”

“Yeah. My sister has tons of experience. Plus, I’ve always suspected she’s part cyborg.”

“She’s lovely, Griffin.”

“Thanks. She seems pretty keen on you too.”

“I’m going to have a quick shower.”

“Okay. Meet me in the clubhouse afterward. I could do with a beer.”

“Good idea. I’m starving.”

“They make a killer burger. Shall I order for us?”

“Yes, please. I won’t be long.”

Amy went off to shower while I packed up the gear.

“What a stunning day,” Alice said when she came out of the water. “Looked like you and Amy were having a blast. She’s lovely, Griff.”

“Isn’t she just?”

“I can see why you couldn’t resist her. She’s exquisite.”

“She is.”

“I’m surprised she’s as nice as she is. Usually, women who are that beautiful tend to be on the bitchy side. You’ve done well, big brother.”

“What can I say? I have an eye.”

“Uh-huh, sure. I bet it’s not your *eye* that made the first move,” she winked.

“Honestly, Alice! What are they teaching you at university?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

* * *

“Did you have a good day?” I asked Amy while we stood at her car in the clubhouse parking lot.

“I had a wonderful time. You were right. Best burger I’ve ever had.”

I kissed her while she leaned against her car. I wanted to make love to her right there in the parking lot.

“Wanna come over to my place?”

“Whatever for, Mr. Cooper?” she whispered.

“I’m thinking there’s some *dictating* we need to catch up on,” I whispered back.

“Oh, really?”

“Uh-huh,” I said softly and pushed my steely groin into her hip.

“Okay, but I can’t stay long.”

“What? No sleepover?”

“I’d love to, but I promised a friend I’d join her for dinner later.”

“I promise not to keep you too long.”

“Okay. I’ll follow you.”

I drove home while watching Amy in my rearview mirror. My mind was wreaking havoc with my body as I thought about what I was going to do to her when we got home. I opened the garage door and parked the car. Amy followed me into the garage and parked next to my car.

I closed the automated garage door as soon as we were inside. Amy got out of her car. As soon as she was out, I pushed her against the car and kissed her passionately. I couldn’t wait a second longer to have her.

I fumbled to get her out of her shorts and pulled her panties down with a swift motion. She was wet and warm to my touch.

“I want you right now,” I said in a hoarse voice.

“I want you too,” she said breathlessly.

I hoisted Amy up into my arms. She wrapped her gorgeous legs around my waist as I plunged into her core. There was an urgency to our lovemaking. Amy dug her fingers into me and threw back her head when she climaxed. I followed soon after.

We were out of breath, but I was nowhere near done with my beautiful woman.

“Come upstairs with me,” I breathed.

I put her down and picked up her discarded clothes. When we were in my bedroom, I laid her on the bed and made love to her again. Slowly this time. It was the most amazing experience I'd ever had.

"I hate that I have to go," she smiled after we'd showered, and she was getting dressed.

"As do I. Promise me, you'll be back soon."

"I promise."

PAUL

“It’s been four months. Four fucking months! And you have found exactly squat! What the fuck am I paying you for?”

“Paul, I’m sorry, but whatever plan your wife’s adopted, she’s done a good job of leaving no traces.”

“She is traveling with a child, for fuck’s sake. Are you telling me no one has seen them?”

“If I were to guess, I’d say she’s changed their names. I’m truly sorry. I don’t know what to tell you.”

I ended the call before I lost my shit completely. How in the Holy hell did a woman with no money, no job, traveling with a small boy just disappear? Jennifer was clearly getting help from someone.

I didn’t believe a word of bullshit Tristan and Megan were spewing, but I had people watching them. Still, no sign of my fucking wife. She was making a fool out of me. I was running out of excuses as to why I’d attended functions on my own. The usual dinner parties Jennifer and I hosted had ceased and people were starting to ask questions.

My mother-in-law was a bloody vegetable, so I wasn’t going to get any information out of her. I was close to breaking point. No. Something had to give. I’d been in a foul mood at the office. Not even my pretty assistant could cheer me up, although she tried her level best—her usual bang-up blowjobs did little to settle my nerves.

I checked my watch.

7 pm.

I logged out of my computer and grabbed my briefcase. I had to get the hell out of there or I'd go mad. I drove to the country club. Perhaps a few shots of brandy would fray the harsh edges of my nightmarish reality.

"Good evening, Mr. Elia."

"Hi, Warren."

"The usual, Sir?"

"Yeah and keep them coming."

"Of course."

The bartender reached for the Rémy Martin XO and poured me a double. I threw it back and slammed the glass down. Warren poured me another.

"Hey, Paul. Good to see you, man. How are you?"

"Oh, hi, David."

Great. I wasn't in the mood for chit chatting, but David was somebody, so it behooved me to treat him with respect.

"Good thanks. How's your lovely Samantha? I'm sorry we haven't had you over for dinner in a while, but Jennifer's mother's been quite ill."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I know how stressful that can be. Last year was practically a write-off with Sam's father being so ill."

"My condolences to you and Sam."

"Thanks. Poor Sam took it hard. She and Bill were very close. What's wrong with Jen's mother, if you don't mind me asking."

"Her Alzheimer's has now progressed to such a degree that she struggles to recognize anyone anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Such a tragedy. How are you holding up?"

Oh, for shit's sake. Drink your beer and piss off!

“I’m alright, thanks. Jen is my main concern always. The poor dear is at her wit’s end.”

“I’ll ask Sam to give Jen a call. She knows what your wife is going through. It will be good for them to chat about it.”

“Uh, that’s very kind of you, thanks, David, but Jen’s been so busy with her mom, she probably won’t take any calls. But I’ll convey your sentiments. Appreciate it, buddy.”

“Of course. Call us anytime.”

David’s attention shifted to someone who entered the room.

“Excuse me, Paul. It was good to see you.”

“Sure. Likewise. Love to Sam.”

“Thanks, and to Jen.”

Thank fuck. Alone again. I wondered what Candy was doing. Did I feel like a clingy mistress right then? Probably not.

“Warren. Another, thanks.”

I slammed back another double. The seed inside my mind had taken root. Every single day that went by made me more determined to find Jennifer. Tristan had to know where his sister was. Those two were peas in a pod. There was no way she would go anywhere without telling him. It was time to pay my brother-in-law a little visit.

It was around 9 pm when I parked outside Tristan’s gate. I rang the buzzer.

“Hello,” I heard him say.

“Hi, Tristan. It’s Paul.”

There was a brief silence.

“Paul? I wasn’t expecting you. Everything okay?”

“I need to talk to you, brother. It’s important.”

Let me in, you little shit!

“Uhm. Okay. Give me a second. I’ll be right out.”

The gate opened and I drove in, so I parked in the driveway. Tristan opened the front door. He was wearing shorts and a T-

shirt.

“Hey, Paul. Come in.”

I followed him into the living room.

“Can I get you a drink?”

“No thanks.”

“Please, sit. What’s up?”

“Where’s Jennifer, Tristan?”

“I told you, Paul. I don’t know. She called me once and told me she needed a break. But she wouldn’t tell me where she was or what it was all about. What’s going on, Paul? Why did she leave?”

“I’ve been working too much. Long hours away from home—I guess she’s upset because she feels neglected.”

It was clear that Tristan wasn’t buying what I was peddling. I knew Jen would have confided in him. I didn’t know why he was playing this game with me when I was so much better at it than he was. Tristan was a terrible liar.

“Why don’t we cut the bullshit, Tristan. I know that you know where she is.”

My brother-in-law’s expression turned dark.

“Okay. You want to talk? Let’s talk. But, I’m going to have a drink. Can I get you anything?”

“Brandy.”

My host walked over to a drink’s cabinet and took out a bottle of brandy. He poured me a healthy shot and placed it down on the table next to the chair I was sitting on.

“Jennifer told me everything, Paul.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I know about the abuse and the cheating. What the fuck were you thinking?”

Was the uppity little shit challenging me? Did he know what I could do to someone like him? The only reason he was still

breathing was because I thought he would be useful. But if he thought I was going to stand by while he insulted and challenged me, he was sorely mistaken.

“Your sister is an ungrateful bitch. I gave her everything a woman could want. A beautiful home, a lifestyle unparalleled, and a beautiful son. All I asked for in return was her loyalty and support.”

Tristan was red in the face.

“Are you serious right now? You’ve got to be out of your mind if you think that isolating a woman and beating her is how you treat someone you love. You are an even bigger asshole than I thought.”

“Fuck you. What do you know about love? You’re a kid! Now, cut the shit and tell me where Jennifer is.”

“Get out of my house before I call the cops, you heartless asshole. I will never tell you where she is. Do you hear me? Never! Now get out.”

It felt as though I was going into a tunnel. It grew dark around me. All I saw was Tristan’s eyes. It felt like time had come to a grinding halt. I remembered fumbling in my jacket pocket until I felt the cold steel of my handgun.

I remembered the look in Tristan’s eyes as I held the weapon in my hand and pointed it at his head. How dare he speak to me that way? Did he know that I ate little upstarts like him for breakfast? Was he that delusional that he’d imagine I would let something that insolent slide just because I was married to his sister?

Tristan held his hands up. He said something but I didn’t bother to listen. I was past the point of no return. I squeezed the trigger gently until the hammer clicked. The bullet entered Tristan’s head and exited out the back of his skull, leaving a red spray on the wall behind him.

I watched as he collapsed to the ground, the life draining out of him. I stood over him as he took his last breath.

“No, Tristan. Fuck you. I’m going to find your sister and make her pay. That I promise you.”

The room was quiet. There was no movement apart from the plume of gun smoke playing slowly in the breeze. I put the gun and the discarded shell in my pocket and knelt down next to Tristan. His eyes were open and empty. I looked around the room for his cell phone. Surely, Jen would have been in communication with him. Her new number would be listed on his device.

I couldn't find it so I went upstairs to his bedroom. The phone was on the nightstand. I picked it up and swiped the screen. Fuck! The phone was locked. I didn't want to spend too much time hanging around seeing as I'd just shot and killed the owner of the property, so I popped the phone in my pocket and went downstairs to clean up.

I took the glass I'd handled and wiped off my fingerprints. I'd been careful not to touch anything, so I wasn't worried about my prints on anything else. I started opening drawers and strew about some items. That way the cops would assume it was a burglary gone wrong.

I left the house and drove back to my place. The gun I used wasn't registered so I placed it back in my wall safe. No one would ever suspect that I was the killer. I had a quick shower before I focused on Tristan's phone.

I tried for hours, with zero success, to crack his password. I supposed Jen would eventually call her brother, and when she did so I'd have her right where I wanted her. But, for the time being, I'd keep the phone's battery charged and wait. There was no more I could do.

I fell asleep around midnight.

My cell phone rang.

"Hello, this is Paul."

"Good morning, Mr. Elia. This is detective Reece."

"Good morning, Detective."

"I'm sorry to have to tell you, Sir, but your brother-in-law was shot and killed in his home last evening."

"What? What happened?" I asked in my best, shocked tone.

“We suspect that he surprised a burglar. The home was in disarray.”

“Oh, my Lord.”

“We’re trying to reach your wife. She’s his next of kin. May I speak to her, please?”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Detective. My wife is away.”

“I see. Would you ask Mrs. Elia to contact us as soon as you speak to her?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Thank you. And, again, my condolences for your loss.”

“Thank you, Detective Reece. Please, will you call me if you catch the perpetrator?”

“We’ll be in touch, Mr. Elia.”

Great. The first hurdle cleared.

After the call, I went downstairs. Maria was in the kitchen. The television was on and she was watching something on the news. I could tell from her expression that something had happened.

“Oh, Mr. Elia, I’m so sorry,” she said when she saw me.

“What is it, Maria?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

I had a feeling I knew what the report was about.

“It’s Mrs. Elia’s brother. He’s been killed, Sir.”

“What?”

I walked over to the screen and watched as the reporter gave a short summation of the event. I could see the police vehicles and an ambulance in the background.

‘The neighbors say they heard a noise, but assumed it was the television. The victim was found shot to death in his living room. The police don’t have any comments as of yet. There have been a few break ins in the area of late, so we suspect that the owner of the property may have interrupted the gunman or men.’

“Can I get you anything, Sir?”

“Uh, no. Thanks, Maria.”

My housekeeper left the kitchen. I was relieved. I wasn't in the mood to pretend that I was shocked and gutted at the death of my brother-in-law. I wondered how long it would be before Jennifer saw the news. With a bit of luck, she wouldn't. That way she would eventually call Tristan's cell phone. That was when I'd make my move and nail the bitch. Hard!

All I could do was to wait. Sooner or later my wife would make a mistake and then I'd be all over her treacherous little ass. I had a good mind to beat the shit out of her.

GRIFFIN

“Don’t freak out, but Alice told my folks about you and they’re very keen to meet you.”

“Meeting the parents. Wow.”

“It’s okay if you’re not ready. I’ll tell them you don’t do nosy parents or something like that. I’m sure they’ll understand,” I said and rolled onto my back.

Amy smacked me on the arm. Hard.

“Sometimes I could just whip your cute butt,” she snorted.

“Sorry. I couldn’t help myself.”

I turned onto my side and looked at her perfect face. The cute crinkle appeared above her nose.

“I’m serious. I’d love to introduce you to my parents. But I understand if it’s too soon for you.”

“No,” she smiled after a long silence, “I’d like to meet them.”

“Great. I’ll set it up.”

Amy hopped out of bed and walked to the bathroom. My eyes feasted on her naked body. I wanted to bite into her perky little ass and never let go.

“Why don’t you stay over this weekend?”

The question had been percolating in my subconscious for a while. Amy spent the occasional night at my place, but she’d yet to stay for longer than one night. I couldn’t see her face,

but I would bet the farm that she had that deer caught in the headlights look again. What was Amy hiding?

“I can’t, Griff. I’m sorry. I’ll arrange it for another weekend, if you don’t mind.”

Whatever.

“Sure.”

I got up and threw on a pair of shorts.

“I’ll go make the coffee. You want a cup?”

“Yes, please. I’m gonna have a quick shower,” she said.

Was I being a sulky kid? Perhaps. I’m sure Amy had her reasons for being guarded. She didn’t seem the flighty type, but then again, what did I really know about her?

Give the woman a break, Griff. She’ll open up to you when she’s ready.

* * *

“Are you nervous?” I chuckled, when Amy checked her face in the car’s vanity mirror for the fourth time before we got out of the car.

“A little,” she blushed.

“Please, don’t be. They’re going to love you.”

“I haven’t *met the folks* in a while.”

“It’s like riding a bike.”

“You get that I’m clumsy, right?”

“Okay, perhaps that wasn’t the best analogy,” I laughed.

I stopped walking, took Amy’s hand, and squeezed it.

“Come on. I want to show you off.”

Amy had an odd look in her eyes. I wish I knew what went on in her head.

I opened the front door to my parent's home. The smell of Dad's special barbecue sauce wafted through the air.

"You're in for a treat. Dad's barbecues are legendary."

"It smells divine."

"It's something he learned on our travels. Dad's always loved cooking. Mom's the baker."

"What about you? Did you inherit any culinary skills?"

"I guess you'll have to wait and see. Stay over for the weekend and I might surprise you."

"I look forward to it."

"Griffin, my love."

Mom was wiping her hands on a tea towel while she walked toward Amy and me.

"Hey, Mom."

I kissed Mom on the cheek and hugged her tightly.

"Mom, this is Amy. Amy, my mother, Maude."

"I know right," Mom smiled. "Who calls their baby Maude?" she giggled. "It's so nice to meet you, Amy."

"Hi, Maude. Such a pleasure to meet you too. Griffin's told me so much about you, I feel like I know you already."

"Yes, he's the proverbial chatterbox, isn't he? I hope you didn't air any dirty laundry, my boy."

"Would I do that to my favorite girl?" I smiled.

"Yes, you bloody would," Dad's voice sounded behind us.

"Hey, Dad. Smells great in here."

"Hello, Griff. And this must be Amy. I hope you like barbecued ribs, young lady. There's enough to feed a small army," Dad smiled warmly.

"Amy, meet the Cooper patriarch and griller extraordinaire, Peter."

“Pleased to meet you, Peter. And, yes, I will happily make a serious dent in your barbecued ribs supplies.”

“Fantastic. Come, I’ll show you what you’re in for,” Dad said and took Amy by the arm.

“I’ll be out in a second,” I told her.

Dad and Amy walked arm in arm toward the firepit.

“She’s gorgeous, Griff,” Mom said when they were out of earshot.

“I’m smitten, Mom. She’s perfect.”

“Careful, sweetheart. No one’s perfect.”

“Okay, she’s near perfect.”

“How are things progressing between the two of you?”

“We’re taking it slow.”

“Is that code for something?”

“Geez, Ma, why don’t you come right out and tell me what you really think?” I laughed.

“Cheeky chappy,” she said and winked at me. “I’m just asking.”

“Amy is very private. I haven’t asked her too many questions about her personal life. I figure she’ll open up when she’s ready.”

“I guess dragging her over to meet us must have been a bit of a challenge then.”

“I think I’m more nervous than you are. You know what Dad is like. Mr. No Filter Cooper.”

“Better you get out there then.”

“Already on my way,” I chuckled.

Alice arrived about half an hour after Amy and I. It was wonderful having the family together, and adding Amy into the mix made it perfect. I was concerned at first that she’d be shy, but she was anything but. Amy slipped easily into

conversations with my parents, and I could tell that they liked her.

“So, Amy,” Dad said while we were up to our eyeballs in barbecue sauce, “do you have family in town?”

And there it was, right on cue, the little wrinkle between her eyes.

“Uhm, no. Unfortunately, not.”

“Peter, leave the poor Amy alone, you Nosy Rosie,” Mom barked.

“I was just asking.”

“It’s fine,” Amy laughed. “My mother has Alzheimer’s, Peter. I wish I could spend more time with her, but she doesn’t recognize me anymore.”

“Oh, Amy, I’m so sorry,” Dad said bashfully, “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s okay. Really.”

Amy was very sweet about it, but I could tell from the little wrinkle above her nose that she was back on her guard. I decided to step in and give her a break.

“Dad, the ribs were sensational, as always. Would you excuse us for a few minutes? I want to show Amy my special hiding place.”

“Sure, Son. But don’t be gone for too long. Mom made your favorite dessert.”

“Come with me. Wait till you see my favorite childhood hideout,” I said and took Amy’s hand.

“Thank you for that,” Amy said when we were alone.

“I know you’re not ready to talk about your family and that’s fine by me.”

“How did I get so lucky?”

“Oh, stop it. You’re going to get me all bigheaded.”

“So, where are you taking me, Boss?”

We walked down to the lake on our property.

“Is that a little cabin?”

“Indeed. That’s my first office. The place where I used to boss Alice around.”

“I’d love to see that. Alice doesn’t seem the sort who takes orders from anyone.”

“I didn’t say she obeyed,” I laughed.

“It’s beautiful here, Griff.”

“Wait until you see the inside.”

I opened the door and stood back so Amy could enter. She gasped.

“Oh, Griff. It’s gorgeous. I can see why you’d want to spend time here.”

I watched her as she looked around at the space. Her beauty never got old. A sudden urge to hold her in my arms befell me, so I moved closer and wrapped my arms around her tiny waist. She laid her head back against my chest.

“Does that cute little door have a lock on it?” she whispered.

“Hhmm, sounds to me like you’re in the mood for some pre-dessert hanky panky, Miss Grace.”

“I have to work off the mountain of ribs I scoffed somehow.”

“Let me see if I can be of assistance.”

I kissed the back of Amy’s neck and watched as tiny goosebumps broke out on her skin. She let out a breath as I trailed my tongue down her back. I bit her bum cheek through her skirt. She giggled.

Amy tried to turn around so she could face me, but I held her firmly in place. I reached under her skirt and pulled down her panties. Next, I lifted the skirt up to reveal her naked, milky buns.

“You have the sexiest ass I’ve ever seen on a woman,” I groaned.

I kissed her perky butt cheeks and licked the back of her thighs, while my fingers snaked around to find her wet, swollen clit. Amy took in a sharp breath and opened her legs wider. I sat on my haunches and licked her clit from behind while I stimulated her with my fingers. She came quickly.

“Your turn,” she said once she caught her breath.

“Oh, goodie.”

Amy unzipped my pants and freed my struggling cock from its fabric prison. She took me into her mouth and held onto my ass. I rocked to and fro excitedly as my skillful lover brought me to a sensational climax.

“I don’t know about you, but I could forgo dessert and fall asleep right there on that bed,” I said.

“I’d join you in a heartbeat, but imagine what your family would think of us,” Amy laughed.

“Fine,” I sighed. “Let’s take a slow walk back.”

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could stay here, hidden from the world?”

I looked at Amy. Really looked. Was she trying to tell me something? What was she so keen on hiding from?

What’s happened to you, my perfect angel? Who are you hiding from?

Of course, I didn’t ask. It was too soon. I promised myself I would wait until the time was right before I asked her such personal questions. Instinct told me Amy wasn’t ready to talk about whatever it was she was recovering from.

“It would, my gorgeous. But, for now, we’ll brave my mother’s dessert cart. I promise it will blow your mind.”

“It’s a good thing I worked off a bit of lunch,” she grinned. “I should have just enough space for dessert.”

“Well, if you feel you need to work off a little more, you know who to ask.”

“Get your pants back on, Romeo, and let’s walk.”

“Wow! You’re a mean one.”

* * *

“There’s plenty more, Amy. Help yourself,” my mother said.

“Oh, please, no. I couldn’t eat another morsel of anything.”

I gave her a naughty look. She looked away, blushing.

“The food was amazing. Thank you,” Amy smiled at my folks.

“Can I expect this every time I visit?”

“Absolutely. Every meal is an excuse for Mom and Dad to show off their culinary skills,” Alice chirped in.

“Good to know.”

“You’re welcome anytime, sweetheart,” Mom smiled and placed her hand over Amy’s.

“Thank you, Maude.”

“Coffee, anyone?” Dad offered.

“Not for me, thanks,” I answered.

“I’m going to make some mint tea,” Alice said. “I need a little help with easing the cement mixer that is now my belly.”

“Actually, on second thought, I’ll join you, thanks, Alice,” Amy said.

It was late by the time Amy, and I left my folks’ house. We were quiet on the way back to my place. It was an easy silence. I wondered what she was thinking about.

“Your family is lovely, Griff. I can see why you love spending time with them.”

“Thank you. I’m blessed.”

“I hope to meet your family one day,” I said matter of factly, careful not to make a thing about it.

Amy smiled at me, but she didn’t say anything. I left it at that.

“Are you staying over tonight?” I asked instead.

“If you’ll have me.”

“Are you kidding? You’re lucky I haven’t locked you away in a tower yet.”

“Ooh, a sex slave. That actually sounds like fun,” she purred.

“Don’t encourage me. You have no idea how enticing that sounds.”

“My bad boy.”

“Rotten, honey, rotten.”

AMY

What was Tristan up to? I hadn't heard from him in a few days. I worried about him when he went into radio silence mode, especially as I was so far away. I wondered how Mom was doing. The thought of her out there without me was daunting but what could I do? Tristan promised me he'd keep me posted.

Jasper was still asleep when I decided to punch my brother's phone number into my phone. I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. The feeling had started in the pit of my stomach a few days before and had grown daily until I couldn't ignore it anymore.

I took a sip of tea while I waited for Tristan to answer the call. Finally, the ringing stopped.

"Hello. Tristan? Hello."

Why wasn't he speaking?

"Hello, Jennifer."

I had such a fright I nearly dropped the phone on the kitchen tiles.

"Paul!"

"The one and only. Where the fuck are you hiding, you little bitch?"

I pressed the end call button, which wasn't easy as my hands were shaking uncontrollably. I slammed the phone down on the counter, as if it were a poisonous snake and stood a safe distance away from it.

Paul's words burned in my ears and singed a path through my limbic system. What the fuck was he doing with Tristan's phone? Would he stoop so low as to steal it when Tris wasn't watching?

It took a solid five minutes to calm myself enough before I even attempted to think straight. I dialed the number of the care facility where Mom was.

"Hello, Shady Pines. How may I direct your call?"

"Hi. It's Jennifer Elia."

"Mrs. Elia. I'm so glad you called. Your mother has been asking for you."

"What?"

"Yes, I'm afraid she isn't taking the news about your brother too well."

What was she talking about?

"I'm sorry. Could I speak to my mother's caregiver, please?"

"Of course. One moment while I locate her."

The background noise changed to flute music. I waited for what seemed an eternity before Angela came on the line.

"Jennifer. Where have you been, darling? Your Mom keeps asking for you."

"Angela. What's going on? I'm away. What's happening? Where is Tristan?"

The silence on the other end of the call affirmed my already dark suspicions.

"Uhm, I don't understand, Angela. Hasn't Tristan been to see Mom?"

"Jenn, Tristan is dead. He was shot and killed in his house during a break-in. How do you not know this?"

* * *

"Mama...Mama! Mama, wake up."

I opened my eyes when I heard little Jasper's panicky voice. I was lying on the kitchen floor. My head was throbbing, I must have banged it when I fainted. That was when it all came flooding back to me. Paul answered Tristan's phone...Tristan. Tristan!

How could that be? Why didn't I know? Oh, God, no. Please, not Tristan.

"Mama," Jasper said again, rubbing my arm.

"Sorry, baby. Mama's fine. Are...are you hungry?"

"Can I have Cheerios?"

"Sure, honey. Sit down and I'll bring it to you."

Keep calm. You don't want to freak Jasper out. It's bad enough he found you unconscious on the kitchen floor.

For the next hour, until I dropped my son at school, I was in complete denial. I switched off my emotions and went into robotic mode. I willed the thought of what I'd just learned to the dark recesses of my mind.

The moment I stepped back into my apartment, I completely lost it. I dropped to my knees and screamed at the top of my voice until I was hoarse. Tears streamed down my face, and I was completely numb.

My brother was dead! What the hell had happened? Did the police know who did it? I'd have to find out, but I needed to calm myself down before I attempted a conversation with the police.

I called Megan instead.

"Hey, you. What's up?"

"Megan..." I tried to speak but all I could manage was her name before I broke down again.

"What is it? What's wrong? Is it Paul? Has he found you?"

"Tristan...it's Tristan."

"What about him?"

"He's dead!"

“Dead? What the hell are you talking about?”

“I can’t...talk...”

“I’ll be right there.”

Megan hung up, leaving me in a puddle on the sofa. Twenty minutes after the call she burst into the apartment.

“Oh, my friend. Come here. I’m so sorry. What happened?”

I shook as my best friend held onto me. I still couldn’t talk. I cried for a long time before I managed to take a few deep breaths and compose myself.

“I.. I called his phone this morning. I haven’t heard from him in a few days, so I decided to reach out to him.”

“Okay. What happened?”

“Paul answered his phone.”

“Paul?”

“Yes. I had such a fright when he spoke, I ended the call.”

“I don’t understand. Why do you think Tristan is dead?”

“I called Mom’s caregiver to find out from her if she’s heard from Tristan. She told me that he was shot and killed in a break-in.”

“Fuck. I’m so sorry, darling.”

Megan was crying. She held onto me so tightly I could hardly breathe. After a long time, she looked at me again.

“But I don’t understand. Why would Paul have Tristan’s phone? It doesn’t make sense,” she said.

“I know. I don’t understand that part either.”

“You don’t think...”

“No. Surely not. Paul wouldn’t have anything to do with it. Would he?”

I was talking more to myself than to Megan. Paul hated me, I had no illusions about that. But murder? I was trying my level best to convince myself, but I was starting to smell a rat.

“Do you think Paul had something to do with this?” Megan asked me.

“I don’t know, Megs.”

“Call the police.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll make us coffee. Where’s the whiskey?”

“Top shelf.”

I wasn’t going to argue with her about drinking before breakfast. I would have downed neat shots at that point.

I moved to the kitchen counter and sat down on a chair at the nook. I Googled the police station near Tristan’s home for the number and dialed.

“Park View Precinct, good morning.”

“Uh, hello. I need to talk to someone about a shooting. I mean, who can assist me with a murder inquiry?”

“Do you have the victim’s name?”

“Tristan Marx.”

“Please hold.”

The line was busy. I waited for someone to answer. It was sheer torture.

“Hello, Detective Reece. Who’s calling?”

“Hello, Detective. This is Jennifer Elia, Tristan Marx’s sister.”

“Oh, Mrs. Elia. I’m so glad you called. We’ve been trying to contact you.”

“Detective, please, can you tell me what’s going on?”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you, Mrs. Elia, but your brother is deceased. We suspect he was shot in a botched home invasion. My condolences for your loss, Ma’am.”

My heart sank. So, it was true. My baby brother was dead. I was cold. It must have been one of the hottest days in history, yet I couldn’t warm my hands.

“Mrs. Elia? Are you still there?”

“Yes, Detective. Do you have any suspects?”

“Not yet. But we’re investigating. Could I have your number, please. I’d like to stay in touch.”

“I’ll call you, Detective. Thank you.”

I ended the call. I couldn’t risk putting my number out there for Paul to find. The last thing I needed was for my husband to track me down.

“Is it true?” Megan asked as she set down a cup of coffee with a shot of whiskey in it in front of me.

I nodded.

“Oh, Lord. I’m so sorry, Jen. So sorry.”

“I can’t believe this. I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s going to be okay. I’m here. It’s okay.”

Megan came around to my side of the nook, put her arms around me, and hugged me tightly.

* * *

It had been two days after the shocking news that had ripped my world apart. Thank God Griffin was away on a business trip that hadn’t required my presence. I knew there was no way in hell I’d be able to keep my composure around him after such a shock. As it was, I’d spent two days in bed before I ventured outside.

Megan’s folks were shocked when they heard of the terrible incident and offered to take care of Jasper so I could take care of myself. I was a mess.

I called Angela and asked her how Mom was coping. The news wasn’t great. It seemed that Tristan’s death was the catalyst that drove the nail into the coffin of my mother’s mental demise, once and for all.

“She just sits at the window, Jenn. She doesn’t speak and she eats only when I feed her.”

“I’m so sorry I can’t be there. Angela. Please, tell her I love her.”

“I will. I know it’s none of my business, Jennifer, but Paul has been here twice, asking about you. Are you okay?”

“I can’t talk about that, Angela.”

“I figured. Are you alright? Are you safe?”

“I’m okay. I just wish I could be there with Mom.”

“Will you be here for the funeral?”

“No.”

“I’m here if you need to talk.”

“Thank you, Angela. That means a lot. Thank you for taking care of Mom. You have no idea what a comfort that is to me.”

“Perhaps you and I can have a cup of tea one day and share.”

“I’d love that. I have to go. Thank you, Angela.”

“Take care of yourself, Jennifer.”

* * *

“Hi, beautiful. I missed you.”

Griffin threw his arms around me and kissed me passionately. It was so good being in his arms again. I had no idea how I was going to hide my pain from him, but I couldn’t afford to lose it.

“Oh, Griff. I missed you.”

“Hey, babe. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied and tapped him on his tight buns. “I’m just glad you’re back. How was the trip?”

“It was great. Not that I could focus on anything. All I thought of was flying back home and making love to you,” he grinned.

“Careful, Boss. The last thing we need is for James to burst into your office like he usually does and catch you pawing your assistant.”

Griffin let go of me and walked over to his office door.

“That’s easily remedied,” he smirked and locked the door. “Now, get out of those pesky panties and seat your perfect buns onto my desk, Miss Grace. It’s time for Dictation 101.”

“You are so bad,” I whispered.

I couldn’t let out my usual loud, satisfied moan when I climaxed on my gorgeous boss’s desk, but it didn’t diminish the intensity of my pleasure.

“Welcome home, babe,” I whispered when Griffin came.

“Best homecoming ever!”

* * *

I couldn’t get the thought out of my mind. What had started as a gentle whisper had culminated in a thundering argument in my mind.

Paul had something to do with Tristan’s death. He had to have. Why else did he have my brother’s phone? I knew my brother better than anyone else, and there was no fucking way he’d ever allow Paul near his phone.

The thought had festered, and an ugly, pus-filled, brooding, poisonous realization had taken root. No matter how I tried to reason with myself, I knew I couldn’t let it go. I had to talk to him. I had to.

But when? Would I be brave enough to confront the devil I’d run from before? And, what was I going to do if Paul did kill my brother? I couldn’t exactly drive home and beat the shit out of him?

Fuck! My life had gone from idyllic to nightmarish in less time than it took to make a cup of tea. If I thought it was complicated before I was mistaken.

Keep it together. Just keep it together. Remember, you are not a lone ranger. You have someone very important who needs protecting. Think of Jasper. Your son needs you more now than ever. Stay out of trouble.

AMY

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay over? I don’t mind. When was the last time we sat around in our pjs and talked through the night?”

“No, thanks, Megs. I’ll be fine. I’m gonna crash as soon as my head hits the pillow. Thanks for dinner.”

“My pleasure.”

I carried a sleeping Jasper to his room and tucked him into bed. I watched him for the longest time. He looked so peaceful. If only he knew what was happening around him.

Jasper hadn’t asked for Paul again. I felt terrible. Was I depriving my son of his father? Every boy needed a dad. Would my son forgive me one day once he learned the truth about his father?

I could feel myself on a steady path to emotional decline. The shock of losing Tristan clung to me like a bad smell. Worse still was that I couldn’t attend my own brother’s funeral for fear of Paul. I shuddered to think what my family and friends back home must have thought of my absence.

I left my baby sleeping soundly in his bed, went to my room, and changed into my pjs. I’d told Megan a white lie. Yes, I was tired, but I wasn’t ready for sleep. I couldn’t remember when last I’d slept through the night. I felt permanently ill with guilt and fear. What if Paul found us? Would he hurt me?

Instead of sitting in the room, brooding, I went to the living room and poured myself a tequila. I sipped it slowly while I contemplated my next move. I hadn’t spoken to the Detective

on Tristan's case since my initial call. Perhaps he'd found the killer. Then I could scratch Paul off the list of suspects I'd drawn up in my mind. Okay, so my husband happened to be the only one on my list.

I looked at my watch. It was just after 9 pm. I called the precinct and asked for Detective Reece. He'd gone home, obviously, so another officer agreed to speak to me.

"Do you have a suspect?" I asked the officer who came on the line.

"I'm afraid not. We're starting to think that perhaps it wasn't a burglar. Do you know if your brother had any enemies, Mrs. Elia? Anyone who would wish him harm?"

Of course, I did. But I couldn't tell. Not until I spoke to Paul.

"No. Everyone loved Tristan."

I kept the conversation brief. Once I hung up, I poured another tequila shot and sipped it slowly.

No! Don't do it. It's a bad idea.

I poured myself another drink. Liquid heat was spreading through my body, numbing the fear and silencing the voice of reason raging inside my head.

"Fuck it."

I dialed Tristan's number. It rang for a while before Paul answered it.

"Well, well. This is a lovely surprise. What can I do for you, my darling wife?"

"Cut the bullshit, Paul. Why do you have Tristan's phone?"

"Ah, yes, poor Tristan. My condolences, darling. Must have been quite a shock."

"You did this, didn't you?" I spat into the phone, wishing I could see his eyes.

"What are you accusing me of, Jennifer?"

"I'm not going to play this game with you, you fuck! Why did you kill Tristan? He was your family."

“Oh, please. That’s bullshit and you know it. Tristan wouldn’t piss on me if I were on fire. Neither would your mother, especially now that she’s a drooling vegetable.”

“How dare you? That woman loved you like a son, Paul! Don’t you have a heart? Who are you?”

“*I’m* the one without a heart? *ME!* You’re the one who stole my son away from me. A son needs to be with his father, you bitch!”

“Oh, please. You’re not a father’s piece asshole! You were never home. And when you were, you taught him that it’s okay to beat the shit out of a woman. Don’t talk to me about parenting. You’re a terrible father!”

I was close to screaming at him, but I needed to calm myself down or Jasper would wake up.

“I’m going to find you, you little bitch,” Paul growled into the phone. “And when I do, you’re going to beg me for mercy. So, enjoy this little tantrum of yours, Jennifer. It’s the last one I’ll allow you.”

“Fuck you! You killed Tristan. I know you did. Admit it!”

“Of course, I did. The smug shit thought he could lie to me about where you’re hiding. He should have known better. It’s your fault your brother is dead. How do you feel about that?”

“You utter bastard! Don’t you dare put this on me! I’m going to ruin you, you son of a bitch. You seemed to have forgotten how much I know about you and your gangster friends. What? Did you think I wasn’t paying attention?”

“You are playing with fire, little girl. Don’t write cheques your ass can’t cover.”

“What’s the matter, dearest? Nervous? You should be. I’m going to make sure you pay for what you’ve done. You’re the one who’d better watch his ass. I hear they enjoy tight ones in prison.”

I ended the call before Paul could say another thing. I felt sick. Partly because I’d had far too much tequila, but mostly because I felt dirty after having spoken to Paul.

I went to the bathroom and turned on the shower. I spent at least fifteen minutes scrubbing my skin with a loofa, desperate to erase him from my person. My skin was red and broken by the time I got into bed.

I closed my eyes and saw Tristan's face. That's when I cried.

* * *

At last! The stupid bitch blundered right into the bear trap, and not a moment too soon. The thing was this. I hadn't intended on killing Tristan, but when he started shooting off his mouth, I couldn't help myself. The little whippersnapper thought he could disrespect me. Me, of all people! Plucky prick got what he deserved.

The cops were useless, as usual. They were tripping over their dicks looking for a burglar when I was right there, in plain sight, the whole time. I had no fears of being busted. In addition, I had an in at the precinct. Someone rather high up owed me a sizable favor. It amazed me how easy it was to buy the cops. I supposed I'd be for sale too if I got paid such a crappy wage.

The fact was that I couldn't have scripted it better. Now I knew exactly where to start looking for my wife. I'd called in a favor and managed to put a trace on Tristan's phone. Jennifer was clearly intoxicated when she called me, so it was easy to keep her talking long enough for me to get a general idea of which state she was hiding in. Fucking brilliant!

It was all I could do to shout out to her that I'd be over soon to teach her a lesson. I couldn't wait to see her face when I snatched her from her perceived place of safety.

I went to bed and slept like a baby, but not before I screwed Candy senseless. Nothing like victory to get the cock up and ready for action.

With Jennifer gone, Candy was growing too big for her britches. She was becoming a nag, pushing me all the time to move her in with me.

“Please, Big Daddy. Now that she’s gone, we don’t have to hide anymore,” she said one evening after dinner.

“Candy, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but that is never going to happen. You are my mistress. You’re always going to be my mistress. You’re a brilliant lay, but you’re not wife material. If this displeases you, you’re welcome to move on.”

That was the end of marriage talk. The woman was a great fuck, but there were a million like her out there, just waiting to replace her tight, little ass. Candy didn’t have much else going for her, so she stopped kidding herself and became more grateful for what she had.

I woke up early the next morning and called my PI. I gave him the name of the region Jennifer was hiding in and set him off to find her. It wouldn’t be long before I had her back. I was convinced of that.

Jennifer had caused a shitstorm when she left. My colleagues were more than a little nervous when they found out that my wife, the woman they perceived to be close to me, disappeared into thin air.

I couldn’t blame them. Ours wasn’t a strictly savory business. There was a lot of dangerous information locked away in my home. If I had any fears that Jennifer had discovered it, I’d be shitting myself. But I knew she was bluffing when she threatened to go to the cops. She had nothing.

She could, however, make my life uncomfortable, so I had to get her back and stash her where I could keep an eye on her. Divorce was simply out of the question. I wouldn’t kill her either, not unless I absolutely had to. Jennifer was a good mother to Jasper. I had to give her that. My son deserved to have the best care until he was old enough to care for himself. So, until such time, my wife had a get-out-of-jail-free card.

I left the house after I ate the breakfast that Maria had prepared for me. She was a sullen bitch, but she had her uses. She ran the affairs of my home like a drill sergeant—the staff were terrified of her—and she was an excellent cook.

I'd arranged to meet with my PI at the office first thing that morning. He was waiting for me in the boardroom when I arrived. My assistant had prepared coffee for us.

"Good morning, Mr. Elia," the PI greeted me as I entered the boardroom.

"Forget about the coffee. You've got work to do. Jennifer called me last night. The tracer you gave me shows her approximate location. Get to it. I want my wife home as soon as possible."

"Yes, Sir."

"There's an envelope with cash for your traveling expenses, etc. Call me as soon as you find her. Don't engage with her. Your job is to tell me where I can find her, and I'll do the rest. This is very important. Do you understand?"

"Of course."

The PI looked inside the envelope.

"Is that enough?" I asked after he'd counted the cash.

"This should be sufficient."

"Let me know if you need anything else."

"Don't worry about a thing, Mr. Elia. I'll be in touch. Good day."

He got up, shook my hand, and left the room. I sat back in my chair and stretched out my legs. It wouldn't be long now before my problems were solved, I thought. Jennifer wouldn't know what hit her.

I spent the rest of my day in and out of meetings. I kept an eye on my phone the entire time, willing it to ring. The PI had an excellent reputation for getting the job done, so I wasn't too concerned about it. But it was nerve wracking waiting around for news.

My life was hell without Jennifer. I still couldn't believe she'd succeeded in escaping me. Letting her get away was a mistake I didn't intend on repeating. Once she was back, I'd make damn sure she didn't pull a stunt like that again.

Enjoy your illusion of freedom, bitch! You're about to pay the piper for trying to make a fool out of me.

MEGAN

“He did it, Megan. Paul killed Tristan. I knew it!”
“What are you talking about?”

“I called him last night.”

“You did what? Are you crazy?”

“I’m sorry, Megs, but I had to know.”

“What did he say?”

“He blamed me. Said it was my fault he had to kill Tristan. Can you believe it?”

“Fuck me. Aren’t you going to tell the cops?”

“Tell them what? Paul is an attorney. He has more cops in his pocket than brain cells in his bloated head.”

“There must be something we can do.”

“We, nothing. You stay out of this, Megan. I can’t lose you too.”

My heart broke for my best friend. She’d been through so much. First, she had to leave behind her home and her family to flee from an abusive Paul. And now, she’d lost her brother. Tristan and Jennifer, or Amy rather, had been the closest sibling pair I’d ever known. They simply adored one another. Now, after everything she’d been through, her brother was dead.

I felt so useless. All I could bring to the party was love, understanding, and the occasional assistance with Jasper. Amy

assured me I had saved her life, but even so I felt as if I wasn't doing enough.

"Can't I go to the funeral for you, Jen?" I asked. "That way I can at least stand in for you. I'll pop in and visit with your mother at the same time."

"I don't know, Megs. I'm not sure it's safe. What if Paul confronts you?"

"I have to go. Think about it. If I don't, Paul will know for sure that you're here with me."

"I don't know, Megan."

"Don't you worry about Paul. He won't dare harm me. Besides, I'll be sure to keep my distance from him."

"Okay. Promise me you'll be safe, Megan. Don't be a hero. Paul is dangerous."

"I know. I'll be careful."

I planned on talking to Detective Reece while I was in town. The cops were looking in all the wrong places for Tristan's killer. I wasn't sure yet how I would point them in the right direction, but I had to at least try and bring some justice to the Marx family for Tristan's murder. Paul wasn't going to get away with it. Not if I had anything to say about it.

* * *

The day of the funeral started out with shitty weather. I'd never seen so much rain. It was as if the heavens were weeping at the loss of such a beautiful soul. Paul was dressed in his finest suit and tie. He put on quite a show, all teared up and downcast—I wanted to vomit at the sight of him. Smug bastard.

He had a second take when he saw me. Obviously, he hadn't expected me to attend my best friend's brother's funeral. I was sure he thought I was harboring his errant wife. I kept my distance until after the funeral proceedings in the church.

Poor Maggie looked awful. I hardly recognized the poor woman. The disease had ravaged her. Her rapid decline was unmistakable. I was almost glad that Amy wasn't there to see her mother in such a state.

I went over to talk to her once Tristan's body was laid to rest in the ground.

"Maggie, it's Megan," I said softly and gently touched her on the shoulder.

She looked up at me with vacant eyes.

"I'm sorry, love, but I don't think she'll remember you," her carer answered instead. "Hi. I'm Angela, Maggie's caregiver."

"Yes. Hello, Angela. I'm Megan. Jennifer talks about you with such fondness."

"You're a friend of Jennifer's?"

"Yes, we've known each other for a long time."

"How is she?" Angela asked me, looking around to see that no one was listening.

"She's struggling," I said in a muted tone. "Tristan's death has been very hard on her."

"I don't want to poke my nose in where it doesn't belong, but I have to say, I'm very worried about her."

"That's very nice of you to say, Angela. I'm sure Jen appreciates your concern."

I could tell that the caregiver had questions, but she was polite, and probably smart, enough not to ask too many questions.

"Please, give her my love and condolences."

"I will. Thank you, Angela."

"Where's my baby girl?" Maggie suddenly asked. "Jen?" she said and looked up at me.

"No, Maggie. It's Megan," I answered carefully.

"My Jen is married to a very nice man, you know. He takes good care of her. Where's Tristan? Is he here yet? He promised

me he was going to bring me some chocolate. Where is he, Angela?”

“It’s been a long day. I think I’d better get Maggie back to her room so she can rest,” Angela said softly before she answered Maggie.

“Guess what you’re having for dinner, my love. Chicken soup. Your favorite.”

“Ooh, chicken soup. I’ll have the chocolate afterward. Come on, Angela. Let’s go home.”

“It was lovely meeting you, Angela. Thank you for taking such good care of Maggie.”

“Please, tell Jennifer to be careful and to take good care of herself and little Jasper.”

“I’ll do that.”

I watched as Angela wheeled Maggie away. A tear ran down my face. Life wasn’t easy, but it was better than death.

“Hello, Megan. It’s good to see you.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up at the sound of Paul’s voice. I steeled myself before I turned around to face the monster.

“Paul,” I nodded. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

It took all the strength I had not to scratch out his lying eyes.

“Thank you. Can we talk?”

I felt like a mouse trapped in a corner by a particularly playful, but deadly cat. I had to think like Paul. Why would I refuse him if I had nothing to hide?

“Of course.”

“Not here. Shall we take a drive to Sally’s Diner? I’m over the sadness and mud.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you there.”

There was no way in hell I’d get into a vehicle with him. I wasn’t crazy.

“Okay. I’m leaving now.”

Paul walked away and said something to the priest who, in turn, said something back and shook Paul’s hand. I wondered what Paul told people when asked about his wife’s absence. But, I wasn’t about to flick the tiger’s nuts. Paul’s lies were his business.

I called Jen from the car while I drove to Sally’s Diner.

“Are you insane? I told you to stay away from him, Megan!”

“Calm down. I’ll be fine. We’re meeting in a public place.”

“What do you think he wants to talk to you about?”

“I have a fair idea. If I don’t go, he’ll have more reason to suspect that I’m in on your disappearance. I don’t see how I have any choice in the matter.”

“Fuck! I knew this was a bad idea.”

“It’s going to be fine. I’ll call you afterward.”

“Be careful, Megs.”

I parked outside the diner and looked around to make sure we weren’t alone. The place was full. Rainy days were always good for restaurants. No one wanted to go to the beach when the weather was crap.

“Please, sit,” Paul said when I walked up to the table at which he was seated.

The waitress came over and made eyes at Paul. And why not? He was a very good-looking guy. Pity about the ugliness he hid under that perfect skin and sexy smile.

“So,” he said once the waitress had taken our order and left the table, “hear much from Jen?”

I didn’t like the look he had in his eyes. It was the kind of look that set off warning bells in my head.

“Some.”

“Interesting. Does she talk about why she left?”

“Paul, I don’t feel comfortable discussing Jennifer’s and my private conversations with you.”

He sat back in his chair and looked at me for a while. What was he up to?

“Fair enough. How is my son?”

“Jasper’s fine. I’m sorry, but what did you want to talk to me about, Paul?”

“How are your folks, Megan?”

What?

“They’re fine, thanks. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. I was reading the newspaper the other day and I saw that the crime in their neighborhood was on the rise. It would be a shame if anything happened to them.”

“I’m sorry. I have to go.”

I stood up and was about to walk out of the diner, but Paul grabbed my arm.

“Sit down, Megan,” he said in a low growl.

“Let go of my arm.”

“I will as soon as you sit back down.”

I wasn’t happy, but I sat down.

“You think I’m an idiot, don’t you?”

“I don’t spend much time thinking about you, either way, Paul.”

“Well, you should. You see, I recently learned something very interesting about you. It seems that you are quite the little Mother Teresa.”

“What are you talking about?”

Paul took a sip of his coffee, then placed the cup down gently on the table.

“I know you are the one who helped my wife. Why wouldn’t you? You’re tight, aren’t you?”

“Look, Paul. I don’t know what you think you know, but...”

“Stop talking and listen.”

My mouth was dry, and my knees were shaky, but I kept my composure.

“You are going to help me.”

“No, I’m fucking not.”

“Oh, yes, you are. Because, pretty Megan, if you don’t, I’m going to make sure that your folks end up on the six o’clock news. If you get my drift.”

The world around me was spinning. Jen was right. I should never have come anywhere near her murderous husband. I was properly fucked.

I got up and glowered at him. Then, I turned and walked away as fast as I could manage.

“I’ll be in touch,” he yelled after me.

* * *

“So, what happened? What did he say?”

I was back home and looking into the eyes of my best friend.

“He was just fishing. I kept my cool. Nothing to worry about.”

“Did you see my mother?”

“Yes, I did.”

“How is she?”

“She’s okay. Angela sends her regards. She’s lovely.”

“Yes, I don’t know what I would do if she wasn’t taking such good care of Mom. Were there many people at the funeral?”

“Yes. The church was full.”

“Did anyone ask about me?”

“I kept to myself. I thought it was safer that way.”

“I guess so.”

I didn’t want to talk to her anymore. I was in a terrible quandary. I was afraid if I stuck around longer, I’d blurt it all

out.

“I’m sorry to rush off, but I have to get to the office,” I lied.

“Okay, Megs. Thanks for everything. I love you so much.”

“I love you too.”

* * *

My cell phone rang. I knew it was Paul before I even looked at the caller ID. I didn’t answer. It rang a second time.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath.

I pressed the green button and listened.

“I’m going to need your answer, Megan. Are you going to help me or are you going to attend a double funeral?”

“You fucking bastard,” I spat into the phone.

“Yeah, yeah. Just answer the question.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Paul explained the plan of action to me in great detail. I was going to lure my best friend to a prearranged location where Paul’s men would grab her and drag her back to their boss.

I felt sick. I didn’t want to do it, but I knew Paul would have no issues with killing my parents if I didn’t cooperate. I was completely helpless.

“Fine. I’ll help you, you horror of a man. But I need you to swear to me that you won’t hurt her.”

“You’re in no position to be making demands, Megan.”

“Swear it!”

“If I wanted Jennifer dead I would have done so already. She’s the mother of my child.”

I held onto those words during the days that followed. I had to. They were the only things that kept me sane. The guilt of what I was about to do stuck in my craw. I compartmentalized the

thoughts and told myself I was doing the right thing for my family.

AMY

It was Monday morning and it felt as if a train had hit me. I dragged myself out of bed and into the kitchen so I could prepare Jasper's school lunch. I wasn't surprised that I felt like death warmed up. Losing Tristan was a blow from which I didn't think I would ever recover.

I hadn't slept through the night since learning of the terrible shock. I had nightmares in which Tristan was calling out to me for help, but I couldn't get to him. An awful mix of anguish and guilt clung to me, and no matter how hard I tried to reason with myself, I kept coming back to the same conclusion—my brother's death was my fault.

I should have stayed with Paul and sucked it up. Why did I leave? How could I have been so foolish and naive as to imagine that my horrible husband would play by the rules? How Paul must have hated me. What did Tristan say or do to warrant his own murder? So many questions and regrets.

I was halfway through Jasper's lunch prep when a wave of nausea hit me. I dropped the knife on the counter and ran for the basin. I had a feeling I wasn't going to make it to the bathroom in time.

"Ugh..." I groaned when the heaving had passed.

"Did you eat too much sugar, Mama?" Jasper's voice sounded behind me.

"No, my love. I must have picked up a tummy bug."

"Oh, like the time I threw up on Daddy's boat?"

“Uh-huh. Yes, like that time.”

Marvelous. Kick a dog when it's down, hey, universe.

“Sweetheart, will you get dressed, please? It's almost time to leave for school.”

“What if I get sick too?”

“I wouldn't worry about that, Jasp. You're as healthy as a horse,” I smiled and ruffled his hair.

I pulled off the road after I'd dropped off Jasper to throw up on the side of the road. There was no way I was going to work like that, so I called Griffin when I got home.

“Hey, beautiful. You calling to invite me over for a quickie?” he chuckled.

“If only,” I groaned. “I think I've picked up a stomach bug. I'm greener than Shrek this morning.”

“Oh, my poor angel. Can I do anything to help?”

“Yes, stay as far away from me as possible or I'll pass whatever this is onto you.”

“So, what you're saying is that you don't want to have to deal with the man flu. Is that it?” he laughed.

“All I want to do is crawl into a corner and die quietly, with a modicum of dignity.”

“Poor baby. Okay, Amy. Stay at home and call me if you need anything. Alright?”

“Okay. Thanks, Griff.”

I ended the call and crawled back into bed. To my surprise and great relief, I fell asleep. It was around noon when I woke up again. No nightmares, no dreams. I felt much better, but I wasn't going to get cocky, so I made myself a cup of green tea and a slice of dry toast.

If only I had someone to take care of me for a change. I felt as if it had been years and years since I had a break. Motherhood was tiring, especially if you were doing it alone. Paul was never actively involved, so I was it. I didn't mind caring for

our son, after all, I loved Jasper more than anything in the world. But the sleepless nights had accumulated over six years and left me reeling.

It was no wonder my body eventually pulled up the handbrake. I decided that taking a few days off and doing absolutely nothing while Jasper was at school would do me the world of good.

I took my tea and toast and headed for the balcony where I could gaze out at the ocean. There were worse views to behold whilst feeling like a dog's breakfast, I supposed. I thought of Griffin as I watched the waves crashing onto the beach. It was a windy day, perfect for kitesurfing.

It had all been going so well. I was falling in love with Griffin, a perfect man if ever there was one, and Jasper and I were settling into our new home and routine. I even enjoyed my job. I should have known it was all too good to be true. That little voice inside my head had warned me, but I ignored it.

Thank God for the stomach bug. That way I didn't have to pretend that all was peachy when I was with Griffin.

I hadn't spoken to Megan in a few days. She'd been quiet since returning from Tristan's funeral. It must have been a shock for her, seeing Paul and my mother. I was so thankful for Megan. I didn't know what I would have done were it not for her and her folk's generosity.

I decided to give her a call.

"Hi, there. Is everything alright?" she said when she answered.

"Hi, Megs. Yeah, I'm okay, apart from a bug that seems to have made its home in my stomach."

"That's no good. Dare I swing by after work and drop off some food for you guys?"

"That's very sweet of you, Megs, but I wouldn't risk it if I were you."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I've got some leftovers for tonight."

“Okay. Please, let me know if you need anything. I’m sorry, but I have to run.”

“Uh, okay. No problem. Thanks, Megs.”

“Chat soon. Bye.”

That was odd, I thought. Megan wasn’t acting like herself. I wondered what was wrong. I wasn’t imagining it. We’d known each other long enough for me to sense when something was off.

I wouldn’t have blamed her if she was a little tired of me. Honestly, who could blame her? I had become a gigantic pain in the ass, after all. Drama upon drama, with no happy ending in sight.

The tea and toast went down like a homesick mole. I was feeling so much better that I almost regretted taking the day off. I missed Griffin.

I collected Jasper from aftercare later that day and drove home. He was talking the hind leg off a donkey, telling me about all the fun stuff they did at school and how his new bestie caught a frog and put it on the teacher’s desk. How uncomplicated childhood was.

Griffin called me that evening and asked if I needed anything. Jasper had the television on loud while he watched his favorite toons.

“Are you running a secret daycare center at home?” Griffin asked, tongue in cheek.

“Oh, yes, that. I’m keeping an eye on my friend’s son for a bit while she’s out shopping,” I lied, making a mental note to move away from the noise.

“That’s very brave of your friend. Isn’t she worried her little one will catch the bug?”

“Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if he gave it to me in the first place.”

“Yup, kids are contagious little snot bubbles waiting for a place to erupt,” Griffin chuckled.

I was suddenly worried. Didn't Griffin like children? How would it ever work between us if he didn't? Also, when and how I would tell him about Jasper was an issue I'd swept, indefinitely, under the rug.

"Not a fan of the little ones, are you?" I ventured.

"No, don't get me wrong. I like kids. I just know how contagious they can be. I've seen Alice inflicted with enough creepy crawlies to surmise that parenthood is a crapshoot."

"Fair point. How was your day?"

"Work was far too boring and uninspiring without you. How are you feeling?"

"A bit better. I managed to sleep away the entire morning, so who knows what the night holds for me."

"I know what helps when you can't sleep," he purred.

"No. I told you. One puking lover at a time, please. Besides, I'll be mortified if I pass this onto you."

"I'm seriously considering it," he chuckled. "Your perfect little butt is so worth it."

"Behave. I think you'd better go, before I give in to your wicked advances."

"Okay, but you'd better make it up to me."

"I promise I will."

"Oh, before I forget. I'll be out of town again for a week. The upside is that it will give you time to get over this pesky bug so we can get back in the saddle, if you get my drift."

"I read you loud and clear, Captain."

"That's my girl. See you soon. Dream of me."

"I will."

* * *

Tuesday morning started off the same as Monday had. I was throwing up for the Olympic squad and went back to sleep

after dropping Jasper off at school.

Megan called me at 2 pm.

“Hey. How are you feeling today?”

“Like crap.”

“Okay, that’s it. I’m cooking dinner. I’ll be around after work. Any requests?”

“Yes, please. Bring a baseball bat and put me out of my misery,” I said, meaning it on some level or another.

“I’ll fetch Jasper from aftercare so you can spend the day in bed. Okay?”

“I don’t know how to thank you, Megs.”

“No thanks needed. You’d do the same for me.”

“Good point. But I’m a bit behind on payback.”

“Nonsense. I’ll see you soon.”

Megan arrived at 6 pm with Jasper in tow, carrying a large brown bag, filled to the brim with food.”

“Good grief! Just how hungry do you think we are?” I said while I watched Jasper’s eyes light up at the sight of all the snacks.

“I can’t allow my little man to starve?” she smiled and winked at Jasper.

“I hear food makes everything better,” she laughed and handed Jasper a pudding cup.

“Just one of these, big boy. Then it’s dinner time.”

“Thank you,” he grinned from ear to ear and wandered off to his room.

“You’re so good with him, Megs.”

“I adore him. He’s so sweet.”

“He’s the best part of the last five years.”

“I was thinking,” Megs said with a frown.

“Sounds serious.”

“Well. It doesn’t have to be, but...”

“What?”

“Okay, so hear me out before you. I’m acting strictly as the devil’s advocate here. I checked, and there aren’t any spates of tummy bugs going around. So.”

Megan stopped as if she was working up the courage to say something crazy.

“Yes?”

“What if it’s morning sickness?”

“Morning sickness! What? No. That’s not possible. I’m on the pill.”

“You were on the pill when you fell pregnant with Jasper too.”

Megan was right. The thought hadn’t occurred to me.

“Oh, shit, Megs. Now you’ve got me thinking.”

“I bought a pregnancy test. Just in case.”

She fumbled around in her bag and pulled out a sealed test.

“Ugh! This is the last thing I need right now, Megan.”

“No shit.”

I stared at the test, too scared to touch it. As if that was going to make a difference.

“Off you go,” Megs ordered and handed me the test.

I took it from her and headed to the bathroom. Honestly! What else could go wrong? Wasn’t my life complicated enough?

I peed on the stick and set it down for the allotted waiting time. It was now or never, I told myself. I looked down from the mirror at the stick lying on the edge of the basement.

Son of a bitch!

AMY

““O h, crap,” Megan said when she saw my face.

“You could say that. Another way of putting it is that I’m in the deepest pit of shit that’s ever been dug! This is an utter disaster, Megan. What am I going to do now?”

“You’d better sit down before you fall down. Come, take a seat.”

“I can’t believe this. How is this happening to me? Again.”

“Hey, I just hope that I’m as fertile as you when I decide to have kids,” Megs said in an attempt to cheer me up.

“I can’t do this. I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. You’re the strongest person I know.”

“No, I’m the dumbest person you know. Damn it, I need a tequila.”

“I think your tequila days are behind you. For a while anyway.”

“I can’t afford a baby. What will I tell Jasper? Oh, shit. What will I tell Griffin? Shit, shit, shit! He doesn’t even know about Jasper. What sane man would be happy with a twofer right off the bat?”

“Are you okay, Mama?” Jasper appeared out of thin air. The way that kids do when you’re trying to avoid them.

“Uhm, yeah, sweetie. I stubbed my toe. I’ll be okay.”

“I’m hungry.”

“I’ll warm up the pizza and call you as soon as it’s ready, baby.”

“Okay,” he said and wandered off again.

“I’ll turn on the oven,” Megan said and got up.

I still had the pregnancy test stick in my hand. I stared at the two lines. Crazy how something so small could have such an impact on a woman’s life. Was I having another nightmare? Perhaps it was all a bad dream and I’d wake up any second to find myself alone in bed.

“I know this is a dick move, but I’m going to have a drink,” Megan said while she was in the kitchen.

“Go ahead.”

Clearly, my situation was stressing her out. And who could blame her? I had just become an even larger pain in my best friend’s ass.

“What am I going to tell Griffin, Megan? He’s going to think that I’m a single mom looking to land a rich sucker. I mean, what other conclusion would a reasonable man come to? That’s what I’d think if I were him.”

“From what you’ve told me about him, I doubt it. He sounds like a genuine guy.”

“Not wanting to be argumentative, but that’s what we thought about Paul. And look how that turned out.”

Megan didn’t answer. She had a worried look about her. Her eyes were shifty. Was she feeling guilty because she didn’t pick up on Paul’s behavior? I hoped not.

“I’m sorry, Megs.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“For being such a nightmare friend. I cannot tell you how stupid I feel. You and your family have done so much for me, and I keep getting myself into trouble. You must rue the day we met.”

Megan came over to where I sat and threw her arms around me.

“Don’t you ever say that to me again. I love you so much. I’m so very sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“Because I was too blinded by Paul’s charm to see what was right in front of me. If I’d acted sooner, you wouldn’t be in such an awful situation.”

“Let’s get one thing straight. None of this is your fault. I could have spoken up sooner if it wasn’t for my pride. I didn’t want anyone to know about the abuse because I thought I could fix it.”

“That’s not how abuse works.”

“It’s my fault that Tristan is dead.”

“Don’t say that! It’s all Paul. He’s the monster here. You are a victim, just like Tristan was.”

“Yeah, well I’m tired of being a victim. I’m going to do something about it. Paul is NOT going to get away with what he did to my brother.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure yet. But soon Paul will know that he made the biggest mistake of his life. I’m going to make him pay if it’s the last thing I do.”

I put Jasper to bed around 8 pm. He was out for the count as soon as his head hit the pillow. I watched him for a bit while he slept. My son was so beautiful. He was arguably the best thing I’d ever done with my life.

I wondered what Griffin’s and my baby would look like. Would he or she be as irresistible to love as Jasper? How I loved my child. I snuck out of the room and left the door slightly ajar.

I’d never felt so utterly alone as I did right then. Tristan had always been my go-to when I needed to talk about important milestones in my life. I remembered how excited he was when I told him he was about to be an uncle.

My brother was my rock. Now he was dead. I felt so terribly lost. I couldn't tell my mother about any of the tragic events that had plagued me, either. The only person I had who I could confide in was Megan. And I was starting to feel like a tired record.

Griffin. If only I could share my life with him. I'd fallen deeply in love with the gentle, beautiful man, and yet I couldn't share my secrets with him. That relationship was about to come crashing down too.

Why would he even give me the time of day when he found out I'd been lying to him about practically everything. Everything, except for how I felt about him. Would he kick my ass to the curb?

How was I going to tell him about the baby? I was still married!

Well, that's just marvelous, Jennifer, or shall I say Amy? Now, apart from making an adulterer out of the man you profess to love, you're carrying his bastard child too. Are there any other lives you'd like to destroy along with yours and Jasper's?

I longed to close my eyes and lose my troubles in sleep. I lay down on my bed and switched off the lights. The balcony sliding doors were open. A cool breeze floated into the room, bringing with it the scent of the ocean.

I thought of the first time Griffin, and I'd made love. I slept like a baby that night. Being with him transformed me from a ball of nerves into someone I liked. I was my old self around Griffin. My laugh was genuine, my joy was complete—I dared to hope.

It was a beautiful dream while it lasted. But, as with all good things, they must come to an end. I just wasn't sure yet how or when this dream would come crashing down around my ears.

What I was absolutely certain about was that the fallout would be too big for one soul to bear.

* * *

Oh, my fucking shit!

I downed the tequila so fast I almost choked, and then I poured another while Jen wasn't looking. How was this happening to us? As if it wasn't abhorrent enough of me to betray my best friend, now I was about to offer up a pregnant woman to her monstrous husband, Paul. The whole thing was simply unforgivable.

I left the apartment as soon as I could without creating suspicion. I couldn't stay a moment longer. I burst into tears as soon as I got into my car. What was I going to do to fix this? Apart from taking out a hit on Paul, I had no way of making it all go away.

I was so close to blurting out everything when I saw that positive pregnancy test, I had to bite my lip to keep from exploding and spilling the beans. My heart was beating so hard I could hear it in my ears.

As if the universe was playing a sadistic game with me, my phone rang—it was Paul.

“What do you want, Paul?” I answered, trying my level best not to sound teary.

“Hello to you too.”

I didn't comment.

“I'm calling to give you the details of our little arrangement. Are you there? Megan?”

“Just talk.”

“I'm sending over two colleagues of mine. They'll take Jennifer and Jasper off your hands, so to speak.”

“Where?”

“I'll send you the address of a restaurant downtown. The men will be waiting there for you.”

“When?”

“The day after tomorrow at 4:15pm.”

“That's too soon, Paul!”

“Do it!”

Paul hung up.

“F.U.C.K!!!” I yelled out loud, hoping the eruption would bring some modicum of relief.

But it was useless. I was a louse. Plain and simple. A horrible human being without a spine.

* * *

It was close to midnight, and I was a ball of nerves, unable to sleep. I had to make sure that Paul wasn't going to hurt Jen. I had to know that I wasn't sending her to be slaughtered by the wolf.

I called Paul. The phone rang for a long time before he answered. It sounded like he'd been sleeping.

“Megan? Why are you calling? What's wrong?”

“I need you to assure me that you're not going to hurt Jennifer.”

“That's none of your fucking business, Megan. What happens between my wife and me is our affair.”

“Paul, I swear, if you hurt her, I'll...”

Paul cut me off mid-sentence.

“Are you threatening me? Surely not. You're smarter than that, Megan.”

“Paul, please. Jennifer is my best friend. I love her. I need this.”

“I told you. I'm not going to harm the mother of my son. Don't you concern yourself. You just do as we agreed. Or have you forgotten what will happen if you screw me over?”

Fuck him for threatening me with harming my parents.

“No, Paul. I haven't forgotten.”

“Good.”

Paul ended the call, leaving me feeling no better than before I'd made the call.

What if I sat my parents down and explained the situation to them? Would there be anything they could do to stop Paul? I doubted it. His influence was far reaching. I remembered the stories Jennifer would tell me when she and he had first started dating. Paul was a lionheart when it came to getting what he wanted. He knew all the 'right' people everywhere. In the police force, in the law courts.

No. I had to make a choice. Betray my best friend or bury my parents. It was Hobson's choice at best.

One thing I was crystal clear on was keeping Jasper safe. There was no way in hell I was going to hand him over to his father. Having his wife and son together would give Paul far too much power.

I would 'deliver' Jen, but Jasper wasn't going anywhere. Not yet anyway. Not until I heard from Jen's own lips that Paul wasn't hurting her.

That was non-negotiable!

AMY

“Come on. You’ve been stuck in the house for three days now. You need to get out. I’ll swing by at 4 pm and pick you up. We’ll go for a snack before you fetch Jasper from daycare.”

“That’s sweet, Megs, but...”

“No buts. Be ready at four,” Megan said and ended the call before I could argue some more.

Thoughtful Megs to the rescue, as always. Bless her.

I was ready when she arrived at the apartment. Thankfully, my nausea spell had passed.

“Hi. You look better. How are you feeling?” she asked me when I got into the car.

“Hey. Better. Mornings are hell, but I feel more human by the time afternoon rolls around. Not by much, mind you.”

“You were never this sick with Jasper, were you?”

“Nope. This must be a headstrong girl,” I smiled.

“I guess so.”

“So, where are we going?”

“I’m taking you to a new restaurant downtown. They’ve had rave reviews.”

“Let’s hope the baby will allow me to eat. Hopefully, I’ll keep it down.”

“Have you spoken to Griffin?”

“Yes, we chatted this morning. He’s away for a few days.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I kept it light.”

“Are you going to tell him about the baby?”

“I don’t know what to do. All I know for sure is that I’m not ready to tell him yet. Who knows if I’ll ever be.”

“There’s no rush. You won’t be showing for a few months still, so you’ll have time to think it through.”

“I’m officially sick to death of talking about my shit. What’s happening in your life, Megs? You look stressed. I hope I’m not the cause of it.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, but she was acting squirrely enough for me to know that she was obviously trying to make me feel better.

“How are your parents? I haven’t seen them in a while. Is your dad healing well after his knee replacement?”

“They’re fine. Dad is up and about, threatening to sneak off to the gold course. Mom practically has him under lock and key to keep him from hurting himself.”

“That sounds like your dad, alright. I know I keep saying it, but you are so blessed, Megs. They are such caring people. I owe them so much.”

Megan looked teary.

“What’s the matter? Is there something wrong? Did I upset you?”

“No,” Megan said, smiled warily, and wiped away a tear. “I’m just sad about all the awful things that have happened to you.”

“Ah, Megs. That’s so sweet. Please, don’t be sad. I’ll be fine. I’m tougher than I look,” I said and gave her a brave smile of assurance. “I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of being miserable. No more complaining or tears. Okay?”

“You are the bravest human being I’ve ever known, Jennifer, Amy, whatever!”

“Right back at ya. It took a decent set of balls to go against Paul in order to help me, Megan. What can I say? You’re a rockstar.”

Megan gave me an odd look. Then she nodded her head.

“Okay. To the future. May it look kindly upon us.”

“Man! What I wouldn’t do for a tequila with which to toast that sentiment.”

The restaurant was in a mall. Megan drove into the underground parking area and pulled into a parking space.

I reached for the door handle, but she stopped me before I could get out of the car.

“I love you so much,” she said and squeezed my hand.

“I love you too, Megs. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Let’s eat.”

I opened the car door and got out. As I closed the door, I heard a noise behind me, but before I could turn, a hand, holding in it a rag, appeared in front of my face. It all happened so fast; I didn’t have time to react.

My vision was blurring, as if I was entering a dark tunnel on a sunny day. After that, total darkness overtook me. I remember hearing Megan’s screams. The last thing I heard was a man’s voice asking, “Where is the kid?”

After that, nothing but silence.

I came to a few times, aware of being in a moving vehicle. But that hand was there every time and then I’d be out again. When I finally opened my eyes, I knew exactly where I was. It wasn’t the familiarity of a room that gave away my location but rather the face I was staring into.

“Paul!” I said with a mixture of fear and surprise in my hoarse voice.

“Hello, darling. Miss me?”

“What the hell? Where am I?”

“Welcome home, wife. You’ve been a very bad girl.”

I felt sick. I looked around the room. It looked like our basement.

“What have you done, you bastard? Where’s my son?”

“Our son, Jennifer! Or shall I address you as Amy? Which do you prefer?”

“Where is Jasper?”

“He’s safe. I think you should be more concerned about your own wellbeing.”

“What do you want from me, Paul?”

“That’s a ridiculous question. You’re my wife. Your place is here, at home, with me.”

“I was never your wife. I was an arm candy and a punching bag for those times when you needed to feel superior. Wives are to be cherished. Not beaten and belittled.”

“Excuse me, Oprah. I didn’t realize you were so fragile,” he laughed.

“You can’t keep me here. I’m not your possession.”

My husband’s expression morphed from mild irritation into abject rage.

“Now, you listen to me, bitch. You will do exactly as I say, or I will make sure you never see the light of day again. If you don’t play nice, I’ll make sure you never see your precious Jasper again. Do you understand me?”

“Fine. I’ll do as you ask. But promise me you won’t hurt Jasper.”

“He’s my kid too. But hear me now, Jennifer. I can easily send him away to a boarding school. I don’t need you, but I prefer having you here for his sake. Piss me off and this little arrangement of ours is over.”

I nodded without saying a word.

* * *

“Don’t hurt her!” I screamed at the man who had Jen in a chokehold.

“Where’s the kid?” the other man yelled back at me.

“I don’t have him.”

“Fuck!” he swore. “Get her in the van. We’ve gotta go.”

I watched as they laid Jen down in the back of a van and sped off, tires screeching. My legs collapsed under me, and I fell to the floor. I sat there for the longest time, unable to move. I had to stop myself a few times from fainting.

I eventually got up and climbed back into my car. I was shaking like a leaf. What did I do next? I had to pull my shit together before fetching Jasper from daycare, that much I knew. I started the car and drove to my office. There, I washed my face and took some kava to calm me down.

My phone rang. No prizes for guessing who.

“Where is Jasper, you bitch?”

“He’s safe, Paul. His school took them on a surprise trip I didn’t know about. I’ll keep him with me. You don’t have to worry about his well-being.”

I lied about the school trip. What else could I say? *Hey, asshole. I won’t let you have all the cards*, seemed to be a tad on the confrontational side. I didn’t want to make an enemy of a murderer.

“Is Jen, okay?” I asked, but Paul ended the call without answering me.

Damn it! I paced up and down my office, thankful that everyone else had left for the day. I had to get going if I was going to make it to Jasper’s school in time, but I kept bursting into tears.

Come on, Megan. You did the only thing you could to save your family. You had no other choice.

The words kept sounding inside my head. They were true. So, why did I feel like I had just led my best friend to the slaughter?

I washed my eyes again and went downstairs to my car. I was outside Jasper's school gate at exactly 6 pm. He came running towards the car as soon as he saw me. I got out and picked him up.

"Ugh! You're squeezing me too tight, aunt Megs. I can't breathe," he said and squirmed to break free.

"Oh, goodness. Sorry, little buddy. I'm just so glad to see you. Did you have a good day?"

"Where's Mama?"

"Your Mom had to go out of town for a while. She said it's okay for you to stay over with Nana and Grandpa until she gets back. Would you like that?"

Jasper had taken to my parents like a duck to water. He adopted them as grandparents and that was that.

"Yay! I love Nana and Grandpa. They're oodles of fun."

"Oodles? That's a word I haven't heard in a long time."

"That's what Nana says when I miss Mama."

Stab me in the heart, why don't you?

"Let's go, sweetheart. I'll pack some clothes for you tomorrow."

"Okay," he said and hopped into the car without fussing.

My mother was surprised when she saw Jasper with me.

"Hello, my little angel," Mom greeted him.

"Hi, Nana. Where's Grandpa?"

"He's in the den, sweetheart. Go say hi."

"I'm sorry I didn't clear it with you first, Mom, but is it okay if Jasper stays here for a few days?"

"Of course, Megs. You know we love having him. Is something the matter?"

I thought I was holding it together pretty well. That was until my mother looked at me. That was when I cracked like a cheap glass jug.

“Megan,” Mom said while I broke down in tears, “what on earth is going on?”

“I’ve done something unforgivable, Mom,” I sobbed.

“What is it? Talk to me, honey.”

“I betrayed Jennifer. I’m a horrible human being.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Paul’s got her, Mom. And I delivered her to him on a platter.”

My mother stared at me, mouth ajar. I sat down on a chair, fearing my legs would fail me at any moment.

“What?”

He found her, Mom. Paul found Jennifer.

“Oh, my Lord.”

“There’s something I have to tell you, Mom. It’s horrible.”

“What is it, Megan?” she asked and sat down across from me.

“Paul killed Tristan.”

My mother gasped and went paler than I’d ever seen her.

“Paul? Killed Tristan?”

“Yes. And he threatened to kill you and Dad if I didn’t help him get Jennifer back.”

“Oh, Megan!”

“Don’t you see, Mom? I didn’t have a choice. I had to do it. I didn’t have a choice,” I rambled on.

“Okay, shhh, darling. Stop crying. I’ve got you,” Mom said and wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

“I feel terrible, Mom,” I cried. “What am I going to do if he harms her? I’ll never forgive myself?”

“Hey, my girls,” Dad said as he entered the kitchen.

He stopped in his tracks when he saw my face.

“What’s wrong, my girl?”

“I think you’d better sit down, love,” Mom said. “Where’s Jasper?”

“He’s sanding a piece of wood for me,” Dad said. “What’s going on?”

“We have a problem,” she said and looked at me.

“What can I do to help?” my father asked, ever the fixer.

I told my parents everything. From the abuse to the murder to my betrayal. Everything, after which my dad spoke first.

“Megan, I’m so sorry this has happened to you, my love.”

“What am I going to do now, Dad?”

“We can’t just do nothing,” Mom said.

“I agree,” my father said. “But we have to be very careful. If what you said about Paul’s connections is true, then we need to proceed with extreme caution.”

“I need to tell Griffin.”

“Griffin? Why tell her boss?”

“Because Jen’s pregnant with his baby.”

“I wasn’t sure how many more bombshells my parents would survive?”

“We’re going to need a miracle,” Mom sighed.

“And then some,” Dad agreed.

I dropped my head into my hands. What a fucking mess.

AMY

Paul read me the riot act before he allowed me to leave the basement and go upstairs to the bedroom. If I tried anything, he swore he'd kill me. I didn't see that I had any options other than obeying, so I kept my outward appearance of abject loathing and did what I was told. He left me there and locked the bedroom door.

Once I was over the initial shock of being kidnapped and dragged back home, I was livid. How the hell did he know where I was? Then it hit me. I was the idiot who had given away my secret. Paul must have put a trace on Tristan's phone. That was why he'd taken it. Clever son of a bitch.

Any murderer knows that keeping a victim's possessions after the fact was tantamount to admitting to the crime. Paul wasn't an idiot. He knew how the law worked. Damn it! I'd given away my location when I called him and spoke for so long. Stupid drunken fool.

Poor Megan must have been in a state. The poor thing. I didn't know how I was going to get a message to her to tell her I was okay. Oh, and Jasper! My poor child would be so confused. I hoped Megan would keep him safe. There was no telling what Paul would do to Megan if he knew she was keeping Jasper from him.

The back of my head was throbbing. I moved my hand over the left side of my head and felt a patch of caked blood. I must have bashed it somewhere between Megan's car and the basement.

“Ouch,” I said out loud as I splashed water onto the wound.

Once the stinging had subsided, I realized I needed a bath. I was dirty from being manhandled and thrown into the back of a van. I’d taken very few items of clothing when I’d initially left Paul, so there were plenty of clean outfits in the closet to choose from.

I filled the tub and added salts and foam bath before soaking my aching body. Being back in the same house as Paul was surreal. Had my escape been nothing but a vivid dream? Was the universe playing a cruel trick on me? I wouldn’t have been at all surprised had Jasper suddenly knocked on the bathroom door and asked for his dinner.

I spent the rest of the night, locked away in the bedroom—a prisoner in my *own* home. I woke up feeling like shit. The morning sickness was all over me like hair on soap and my body was sore from the previous day’s trauma. I ran for the toilet and sat on the cold tiled floor, hugging the porcelain for almost an hour before I dared to move.

Paul unlocked the bedroom door and came in without bothering to knock.

“Please, come in,” I murmured under my breath.

He glared at me, so I shut up.

“Come downstairs,” he barked.

I followed him to the dining room where good old Maria was standing on ceremony.

“Welcome home, Mrs. Elia,” she said with a straight face. If only I could read her miserable mind.

“Hello, Maria.”

The table was laid out with a full spread. I was far too green to eat the rich food, so I poured myself a cup of tea and sat down.

“Thank you, Maria,” Paul said, dismissing his watchdog. “I’m sure you are wondering what I have planned for our future,” he said while he dished up eggs and bacon.

“Future,” I snorted, amused by the ridiculous word.

Paul shot me a look filled with warning.

“As I was saying, this is how it’s going to be from now on. You will be my wife, you’ll be the mother of our son, and you’ll like it.”

“Is this really what you want, Paul? Don’t you want to be with someone you love? Someone who loves you?”

“Love is a fairytale peddled by Walt Disney to kids and horny teenagers. I live in the real world.”

“Were you always this cynical?”

“What do you care?”

“I don’t. Not about you, anyway.”

“Spoken like a true princess. Speaking of love, do you think your moneybags boss gives two shits about you?”

My heart stopped beating.

“What are you talking about?”

“I told you, Jennifer. You can’t run away from me and think I won’t find you or know exactly what you’ve been up to?”

Paul’s smile told me he was having the time of his life—torturing me was what he did best.

“What’s the matter, my love? Nervous that I’ll do the same to your lover as I did to your plucky brother?”

“You son of a bitch!” I glowered at him. “You’ll pay for that someday. That much I promise you.”

“You’re not very good at keeping your promises, Jennifer. You promised to honor and obey, and that I’m yet to see.”

“Oh, please. Pot, kettle, Paul. Let’s not get into the details of our vows. You never intended on keeping any of them. How’s your little whore?”

“Much more accommodating in the sack than you ever were.”

I felt bile rising in my throat. The thought that I’d shared my heart, soul and body with a man who slept with prostitutes made my skin crawl. What did I ever see in the monster shoveling eggs into his face?

“You can’t keep me here like a prisoner, Paul.”

“Says who? I can do what I like, and you, for all intents and purposes, will be the dotting wife or else.”

I was sure that I’d find a way to escape his clutches. I did it once, I could do it again. I drank my tea and ate a piece of dry toast.

“What have you told everyone about me?”

“I told them you were terribly stressed over your mother’s illness, and you needed a break. So, I sent you away to a friend in Florida for a while.”

“Nice move, counselor. Ever the consummate bullshitter.”

“I’d watch that mouth of yours if I were you.”

Paul threw back his head and let out a hearty laugh.

“Yeah, yeah, sticks and stones, blah, blah, blah.”

“I fucking hate you,” I blurted out.

Paul threw down his fork. It bounced on the table then crashed to the floor. He jumped up from his chair at lightning speed, made his way to me, and slapped me hard across the cheek. The momentum threw me off my chair. I landed on my knees on the Persian carpet.

Paul grabbed me by the hair and dragged me to my feet. His eyes were wild. I realized too late that I shouldn’t have antagonized him. My husband had a nasty habit of punching me in the stomach when I pissed him off. I couldn’t allow him to do that. Not when I was carrying a baby.

I held up my hands in surrender. My cheek was on fire.

“Wait! Please, Paul. Wait. I have to tell you something,” I yelled before he could hit me again.

“What?” he growled.

He held onto my hair and pulled my neck back just a little more. He was enjoying the pain he caused me, the fucker.

“I’m pregnant.”

Paul let go of my hair and stood back, as if I'd kicked him in the balls. His face was contorted. I closed my eyes and prayed that he wouldn't hurt me again. I used the opportunity to scramble to my feet and move away from his reach.

"You whore!" he said in a monotone I didn't like. "I'm going to kill that fucker!"

"No! Please, Paul. Don't do that. I promise I'll behave. I'll do what you want, I swear."

"Oh, I see. You're in love with this asshole, are you?"

"He isn't important. Not anymore. I'm home now. I won't be any trouble."

"Maybe I'll break a few of his bones. Teach him not to play with my toys."

I didn't say anything. Whatever I said would be seen as a challenge, so I kept my mouth shut. To my surprise, Paul went back to his seat and finished his breakfast. I sat down and drank my tea. It seemed that we'd reached a temporary truce.

"I'm not hungry," I said softly. "I'm going to lie down."

Paul nodded. I took that as permission, so I left and headed for my room.

"Everyone wants to see you," he said as I passed him. "We'll host a party here in two days. Maria will help you with the arrangements."

"Okay."

I was relieved to be back in my room. I sat on the edge of the bed and touched my cheek.

It's gonna be fine. You survived much more than a little slap. You can do this.

* * *

"It's so good to see you, Jennifer. I was so sorry to hear of your loss."

Mandy Scott was one of the firm's highfalutin wives. The woman had so much Botox and silicone, I was sure her body would take at least a hundred years to decompose.

"Thank you, Mandy."

"Carol and I would love to treat you to a weekend away at a delicious little spa we've discovered. A bit of pampering is all you need to bounce back."

"That sounds lovely. Thank you, girls."

As if Paul would let me out of his sight again. I wondered what my new life was going to be like. I imagined my coffee shop days were at an end.

Paul came over to where the women and I were talking. He put his arm around my waist. I stiffened at his touch. My spine was so rigid that any sudden movement would have snapped me in half.

"Are you ladies enjoying yourselves?" he said, turning on the Elia charm a notch or two.

Mandy had always had a serious crush on Paul. She'd fuck him in a heartbeat if he gave her half a chance. She came over all giddy.

"Hi, Paul. Carol and I were just telling Jen about a lovely little spa we'd like to take her to."

"Spa, hey. Sounds wonderful." He turned to me and grinned. "I'm not sure you're going to be well enough yet to go, sweetheart."

Fuck! I knew exactly what he was going to say.

"Perhaps you'll feel better once you're through the first trimester."

And there it was! Was there no end to this man's gall?

"Oh, my goodness!" Mandy said out loud, clamping her hands over her mouth for dramatic effect. "A baby. Congratulations. Little Jasper must be so excited."

"Thank you," he grinned and dug his fingers into my side as I tried to move away. "Yes, our little man is looking forward to

having a sibling. Isn't he my darling?" Paul asked me, then kissed me on the cheek.

"Yes, he can't wait. I'm sure a day or two at a spa will be lovely, once I feel better."

"Oh, I hated my pregnancies," Mandy sighed. "There has to be a better way to secure a legacy," she groaned.

"Would you excuse me, please?" I spoke. "The Barkers have just arrived."

Paul kissed me again.

"I'll be there in a minute, hon," he smiled sweetly.

I suppressed the desire to poke his eyes out with my manicured fingernails.

Paul stayed behind and enjoyed Mandy's not so subtle gropes. They deserved each other.

The party was a triumph. I was once again the hostess with the mostest, and Paul the man of the evening, strutting around like a peacock.

"I'm going to bed," I said once the last guest had left.

"Sleep well, my darling," Paul snickered. "Take good care of that baby of ours."

I was too tired to fire off a venomous retort. I was never going to win the battle anyway.

I got undressed and lay down on my bed. I wondered what Jasper was doing. I missed him so much. He and I had never spent more than two days apart since he was born. I worried that he would forget how much I loved him. What had Megan told him?

Griffin would be back from his trip. Was he trying to call me? I didn't know how I was going to get over my heartbreak. I loved Griffin. I should have told him. I didn't want him to think I didn't care.

I fell asleep mid-cry. My eyes were puffy when I woke up the next morning. What did Paul have in store for me? More sitting around the house like a prisoner? I wanted to see my

mother. I knew she wouldn't know who I was but I wanted to touch her skin and smell her hair, the way I used to do when I was a child and the thunderstorm grew louder.

I needed comfort and the Elia residence was in short supply.

GRIFFIN

My flight landed at 9 pm. It had been a rocky one, with more than its fair share of turbulence. It was closer to 10 pm by the time I'd collected my bags and paid my car's undercover parking fees.

There was nothing quite like the feeling of coming home. The first thing I smelled when I got off the plane was the ocean's scent. The smell wrapped itself around me in a hearty embrace. I drove with the car window down so I could let in as much of home as possible.

It sounds silly, but after having traveled so extensively as a child, I enjoyed having a place I could call home. I called Amy from my car, looking forward to hearing her soothing voice. It wouldn't be long before I held her in my arms.

I wondered if she felt the same way I did about our budding romance. Amy was honestly unlike any woman I'd ever been with. She was kind, smart, witty, and strikingly beautiful. What man wouldn't fall head over heels for someone like that?

I had a lot of time to think about Amy. I wondered what had happened to her that made her so guarded. No matter how close we were, I knew she was a piece of herself back. The only reason a woman acted like that was usually thanks to a man's abuse. I couldn't imagine the type of brute who would hurt someone as special as Amy. Whoever it was, had better pray that I didn't find him, I thought.

Amy's phone rang for a long time before it went to voicemail. I hoped she was feeling better after her stomach bug. She was

probably sleeping, so I didn't call a second time. I'd call her in the morning.

I had a quick dip in the pool to cool off when I got home and then hit the hay. I didn't sleep well. I wasn't sure if it was due to the heat or that tiny voice inside my head, telling me that all was not as it should be.

I called Amy as soon as I woke up. No answer. Something was wrong. I was more than a little disappointed when I got to the office, and she wasn't at her desk as usual. What was going on?

I called one of Amy's colleagues and asked if she'd heard from her. She hadn't. I thought about taking a drive to Amy's apartment, but as I'd never been there before, I wasn't sure where it was. It wasn't as if I hadn't hinted often enough to pop over. Amy always changed the subject or made an excuse as to why it was better that she came to my house.

I thought that perhaps she'd been down on her luck and didn't want me to see where she lived because she was embarrassed. I wasn't going to make an issue of it. I hoped that the longer we were together and the better she got to know me, she'd see that I didn't care about such things.

I called the HR and asked for her address. To my surprise, Amy lived in an upmarket apartment complex on the promenade. The fresh bit of information did little to allay my fears that something was desperately wrong with the picture I had of Amy.

I left the office and drove over to the address we had on file. I was stopped at the gate. The security guard wanted to know who I was visiting. I gave him Amy's details and waited while he buzzed her apartment.

"I'm sorry, Sir. Miss Grace isn't answering."

"I know that. I've been trying to call her for two days now. I'm concerned that something may be wrong. Would you let me in please, so I can have a look for myself?"

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I can't do that."

I was frustrated, but there was no sense in taking out my irritation on the guard who was merely doing his job right.

“Would you ask someone to check on Miss Grace’s apartment for me? Please? I’d really appreciate it.”

“Very well, Sir. Would you mind parking over there for me?” he said and pointed to a parking bay.

“Sure.”

I parked my car and waited while one of the other guards went to Amy’s apartment. The wait was painful. About ten minutes later, the second guard appeared and spoke to the first one, who then walked over to where I sat waiting.

“I’m sorry, Sir. There’s no one at Miss Grace’s apartment. It’s locked up.”

What? Where was she?

“Okay, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Sir. Have a pleasant day.”

I left the area feeling as if a rat was gnawing at my stomach lining. I called Alice. Perhaps she’d recently spoken to Amy.

“Hi, Griff. How are you? How was the trip?”

“Hi, Al. When last did you speak to Amy?”

“Not for about ten days. Why? What’s wrong?”

“Shit. I can’t find her and she’s not answering my calls.”

“Did you guys have an argument?”

“No. That’s why I’m worried.”

“I’m sorry, Griff. Have you called any of her friends yet?”

“No. She speaks often about her friend Megan, but we haven’t been introduced yet.”

“I’m sorry, Griff. I don’t know what else to suggest. Have you asked around the office?”

“I did. No one’s spoken to her for a few days. I’m really worried.”

“Did you check her apartment?”

“I just left there. She’s not home.”

“I’ll call you if I hear anything, Griff.”

“Thanks, Al. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

It was crazy how my girlfriend had fallen off the planet. I thought back to our more recent conversations and I couldn’t think of a single incident that would have warranted a disappearing act on Amy’s part.

I wondered if I should call the police and report her missing. Surely it was too early for that. I imagined how silly I’d look and how pissed off Amy would be if it turned out to be nothing too serious.

No. I couldn’t rush into hysterical thinking. I would give it another day or two and then take it to the next step. I could only pray that she was safe.

* * *

It was becoming more and more of a challenge getting out of bed in the morning. It had been four days since the kidnapping, and I had no way of knowing how Jen was. To make it all worse, Jasper was starting to miss his mom and asked for her constantly. He’d thrown a mini tantrum the night before, demanding I call his Mama so he could talk to her.

My mother was brilliant with him. She’d managed to distract him, but I knew it was only a matter a time before her efforts would become futile. I knew I would have to do something about the situation. My best friend’s child was hurting, and I didn’t want to imagine how Jen must have felt at that point.

Did Paul tell her that it was thanks to me that she was back in the clutches of the monster? If so, did my best friend hate, no, loathe me? I wouldn’t blame her if she did want to scratch out my eyes. I deserved it.

I got up and heard Jasper's teary little voice downstairs. I had to do something before it was too late. Out of sheer desperation, I decided to call Andy and ask him for help. What other choice did I have?

I went downstairs, poured myself a cup of coffee, and then went outside and sat by the pool where Jasper wouldn't hear my conversation.

"Hi, Andy. I'm sorry for calling you so early."

"Hey, Megan. That's okay. How are you?"

"Not so good."

"I'm sorry to hear that. What's the matter? Anything I can do to help?"

"Actually, yes. I hope so, anyway."

"What do you need?"

It was time to lay out all my cards on the table. There was no point in holding back on any information about Jen's situation if I expected Andy's help.

"Do you remember my friend, Amy?"

"Yes."

"She's in big trouble, Andy."

"Sounds serious. What's wrong?"

"There's something I didn't tell you about her, Andy. I'm sorry I didn't disclose the whole truth, but it was for her protection."

"Okay, I'm listening."

"Amy's real name is Jennifer Elia. She's married to a violent man who used to beat her. I helped her to get away from him. But he found her and kidnapped her."

"What?"

I was careful to tiptoe around the part where I was the one who sold her out. I didn't think that part of the truth was relevant. The weight of my shame was crushing me anyway. That was my punishment for the time being.

“I need help, Andy.”

“Why haven’t you gone to the cops?”

“I can’t do that. Paul, her husband, is a dodgy attorney who has most of the police force in his hood in his back pocket. I can’t risk one of the bastards tipping him off. He’ll kill her for sure, Andy. He’s already killed her brother when he refused to spill the beans on Jen’s location.”

“Shit, Megs, this is serious. Let me see what I can do. Give me a few hours. I’ll call you this afternoon.”

“Thank you so much, Andy. I’m sorry to drag you into this. But I don’t know who else to ask for help.”

“It’s okay. Call you later. You hang in there. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I felt the tiniest bit better after having spoken to Andy. He was a get-the-job-done kind of guy. Andy was the friend who hooked us up with beer when we were teenagers. He’d always make a plan, no matter how tricky the situation.

Mom was in the kitchen when I went back inside. She looked stressed.

“Darling, I think you should call Jasper’s school and tell the teacher he isn’t feeling well today and that we’re going to keep him home. He’s very teary.”

“I’m so sorry, Mom. I feel terrible.”

“It’s not your fault, Megan. Paul would have taken Jen with or without your help. You can’t blame yourself. It isn’t going to change anything.”

“I just called Andy and asked for his help.”

“What did he say?”

“He’s going to call a few people and get back to me this afternoon.”

“Andy was always the fixer. I’m glad you reached out to him.”

“Why don’t I take the day off work so we can take Jasper to the museum and the zoo?”

“Excellent idea. That will keep his mind off his mom, the poor darling.”

I went to my mom and gave her a big hug.

“Thank you, Mom.”

“For what?”

“For being such an amazing human being. I love you so much.”

“Ah, that’s nice. I love you too, sweetheart. Don’t worry. We’ll get through this.”

“I hope so. I’m so worried about Jen, Mom. She’s going to hate me.”

“She won’t.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

Would I hate Jen if the roles were reversed, and she’d betrayed me? Who knew? Nothing I did would ever erase the betrayal. All I could do to try and make it up to her was to make sure that Jasper was loved and cherished and taken good care of. And that was what I was going to do.

“Hey, Jasper,” I called from the kitchen, “guess where Nana and I are taking you today.”

I heard the sound of little footsteps against the oak floors.

“Where?” he said, eyes sparkling like only an innocent child’s could.

“What would you say if I told you that today you’ll get to see monkeys and giraffes, and eat all the ice cream you can handle?”

“Wow!” he said and grinned from ear to ear. “Monkeys *and* ice cream. Yay! Can Grandpa come too?”

“Where are we going?” my dad asked as he came into the kitchen at that point.

“The zoo! You wanna feed the monkeys with me, Grandpa?”

“That sounds like oodles of fun!”

Jasper ran out of the kitchen.

“Where are you going, little man?” Mom asked.

“I’m going to put on my monkey shirt,” Jasper yelled back.

“Kids are so resilient,” Mom laughed.

“Thank God,” I said.

GRIFFIN

I was surprised to get a call from Andy. He and I hadn't spoken in a while. Not that there was anything amiss between us. That was merely the kind of friendship we had. We didn't live in each other's pockets. Besides, I'd spent most of my time at work or with Amy when I had time off.

"Hi, Andy. This is a nice surprise."

"Hey, Griff. How have you been?"

"Good, thanks. You?"

"Yeah, not too shabby. I wanted to meet you for a drink. I need your help with something. Are you free now?"

"Sure. Where shall I meet you?"

"Come to my place."

"Okay. See you in a bit."

I wondered what Andy needed that he couldn't accomplish alone. He was a pretty resourceful guy. I drove over to his house, my curiosity level right up there.

"Hey, buddy. Come in. Can I get you a cold beer?"

"Yeah, thanks. Are you okay? You sounded a bit stressed over the phone. What's up?"

Andy handed me a frosty beer and motioned to the sliding door. I followed him out to the garden, where we sat at a table under the shade of a large oak tree.

"I have a favor to ask, Griff."

“Of course. Shoot.”

“I got a call from Megan this morning. You remember? Amy Grace’s friend?”

“Yeah, I remember. Is she okay?”

“Not really. She’s in a bit of a state. It seems that Amy is in trouble.”

“My Amy?” I cleared my throat. “I mean, the Amy who works for me?”

“That’s the one. The one you took on as your PA.”

My heart was beating faster by the second. What was Megan worried about? Did she know where Amy was? I didn’t want to let the cat out of the bag yet and tell Andy that Amy and I were dating. I thought I’d see where the conversation was going.

“What about Amy?”

“I’m sorry. I feel responsible for introducing you to this woman, bud. It seems she has a past.”

What the fuck are you talking about?

“A past?” I asked, hoping Andy wouldn’t pick up on the fact that I was practically shitting in my pants right then.

“Yeah. I think I’d better start at the beginning, or this won’t make any sense.”

I nodded, took in a gulp of beer and set the bottle down on the table, just in case it slipped out of my sweaty, shaky hand.

Stay calm and hear the man out, Griffin.

“By the sounds of it, Amy’s married to a real asshole...”

Married! What? My brain got stuck on the word and went into a loop. Amy was married? What the fuck!

“Hang on. Back up. Amy is married?”

“Yeah. And her name’s not Amy. It’s Jennifer Elia.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Apart from the ringing that had so suddenly come about in my head, Paul’s words were burning

painful tracks into my brain. I found it almost impossible to take in what he was saying despite the fact that I couldn't take my eyes off his lips.

"Jennifer," I heard myself saying.

"Yeah, Jennifer Elia. Anyway, Megan helped her a few months ago to get away from the bastard. The poor woman ran away in the middle of the night. Left everything behind. Megan's been helping Jennifer and her son ever since they escaped this Paul guy."

Son! What son?

"Amy, I mean Jennifer, has a child? She's never said a word about him."

"Megan says he's the sweetest little guy. Anyway, and this is where I need your help, Paul snatched Jennifer a few days ago. Megan is very worried about her friend. I know you have connections in that sphere of people. An investigator or a close cop friend or someone like that."

"Kidnapped!"

I was well aware of the fact that I sounded like a blithering idiot. I could only imagine what Andy must have thought about my one liners. I was starting to unravel.

"Are you okay, Griff. You're about the color of vanilla ice cream."

"This guy sounds like a piece of work. Go on."

"Paul's a very dangerous man, according to Megan. He's a murderer."

"Murderer?"

"Yes. He killed Jennifer's brother."

"What the fuck! Are you sure?"

"Yeah. He admitted it. But, as I've said already, he's got too many cops on his payroll, so Megan isn't sure what to do about it."

I got up and started pacing and raking my hands through my hair.

“Fuck!” I said out loud. “I knew something had to be seriously wrong. Why else would she disappear like that?”

“Griff? What are you talking about? Are you okay? What’s going on, mate?”

I felt like the world’s biggest sucker. The woman I loved was a stranger. I knew absolutely nothing about her. Nothing! How could she have lied to me like that? Married? A mother? Was she ever going to tell me? Had Amy, or rather Jennifer, been using me all along?

All those times I looked into her eyes, made love to her, how did I not see it? Was I that cunt struck that I couldn’t see what was right in front of my face? The excuses as to why she never stayed over. Was everything she ever said simply bullshit?

“Griff,” I heard Andy calling. “What’s up?”

“I can’t believe this, Andy.”

“I know. It’s shocking, alright.”

“No, you don’t understand. I thought this woman was in love with me, Andy. I thought I loved her back.”

“What? You and Amy. I mean Jennifer. Hang on. Didn’t you once tell me you never date your staff?”

“Of course, I did. That’s the smart way to live, but it seems that I got really dumb where this woman is concerned.”

“Shit. I’m so sorry to hear this. The situation is a proper balls-up, mate. What are we going to do?”

“I have no fucking idea right this minute,” I said and sat back down.

“I’ll grab us another beer. Be back in a second. We’ve got this, Griff.”

I felt sick to my stomach. The woman I thought I knew and loved turned out to be a fantasy. Not only was Amy married, but she had a child and a life completely apart from the one she and I shared.

I felt so betrayed. And stupid! My pride had taken a gigantic knock. Who knew if I'd ever recover from the shit storm I was in?

Andy returned with two beers and gave me one.

“Okay. Talk to me, Griff. How can I help you, mate? Looks like you're hurting big time right now.”

“That's the understatement of the century, Andy. My fucking heart is in pieces.”

“You love her, don't you?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“It is to me. I'm so sorry you're hurting.”

“I'm fucking shattered! And pissed off too.”

“I hear you, Griff. But this poor girl has been through the mill. Her mother has severe Alzheimer's, her brother was murdered, and now she's back in the clutches of a man who has brought her nothing but pain. I can't imagine what she's going through right now. Please, don't misunderstand. I feel for you. But this girl needs help.”

“I guess she didn't know enough about me to trust me with her secrets,” I said out loud, talking more to myself than to Andy.

“I know I wouldn't trust any man again if I were in her position. Megan told me she had no idea that Paul was such an animal until Jennifer told her about the abuse. He's one of those sneaky fuckers who beats his wife in private and parades her around in public as his princess. A real Jekyll-and-Hyde motherfucker.”

Andy was probably right. Amy must have been desperate to tell me the truth. Who could blame her for her reticence to trust a man after the way her husband had betrayed her?

I had to help her. We'd sit down afterward and have a real conversation, but for now, I'd put aside my injured pride and save the woman I loved.

“You're right, Andy. I need to help her. She was brave enough to escape this man once, I'm not going to be the asshole who

leaves it up to her to escape a second time. I'll make a few calls and see what I can arrange."

"Good. I thought you might say that. I'll give you Megan's contact number. She has more information that could be of help to you and an investigator."

"Thanks, Paul."

"Please, keep me posted, Griff. And, it goes without saying that I'm here if you need anything."

"I appreciate that. Thank you."

"You bet."

* * *

I decided to spend the day in my room. I didn't have the strength to deal with Paul or Maria. My morning sickness had me feeling like crap and I missed Jasper somewhat fiercely.

I closed my eyes and saw his beautiful, little face—his big blue eyes that danced whenever he laughed. Was he crying for me? I was experiencing physical pain from my separation from Jasper. All mothers knew that pain. It was one that left a woman breathless.

I lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

Griffin, will you ever forgive me?

He'd been on my mind ever since I opened my eyes to find Paul's menacing face. I missed Griff more than I'd ever imagined I would. Did he know about the truth yet? Had Megan told him about my kidnapping? What the hell must he have thought of my lies and deception?

I ran my hand over my belly and thought of the child I was carrying—Griffin's and my child. The child that Paul was going to claim as his own. The bastard! I wished I'd never left Paul. Nothing good had come from that. My brother was dead and now I was pregnant with a child who would never know his wonderful father and how much I loved him.

“I’m so sorry, little one,” I whispered. “Mommy’s made a terrible mess of things.”

If only there was a way that I could make a phone call. I was desperate to speak to Jasper. I needed to hear my son’s voice. I didn’t even know where he was. I prayed that he was with Megan, because the thought of Paul taking care of my son wasn’t one I had the will to accept. I imagined that Megan would have hidden Jasper the moment I was kidnapped. But honestly, who knew what Paul was capable of?

It’s all your fault, Jen. You should never have called Paul in that drunken state. You are the reason this has all gone to shit. You couldn’t leave it alone, could you?

The voice had been torturing me for days. It *was* my fault. All of it was my fault.

Paul opened the bedroom door and waltzed in like he owned me.

“Get dressed. I’m taking you out for dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass. Get dressed. And wear something sexy.”

He slammed the door when he left. Oh, goodie. A night out with the devil. Just when I thought my life couldn’t get any shittier.

I wouldn’t get anywhere if I chose to antagonize the man who held the keys to the castle, so I got dressed and waited to be collected.

“Where are we going?” I asked him when we were in the car.

“I’m meeting a new client. I don’t have to tell you what will happen if you don’t behave, do I?”

“No, Paul. I got the message loud and clear.”

“That’s my girl,” he said and placed his hand on my knee.

It took every ounce of my will not to throw up on my tight, satin dress.

MEGAN

Not even the river of kava drops I'd taken to calm me down were likely to help me through the conversation I was about to have with Griffin. My nerves were shot by the time the doorbell sounded.

"It's okay, sweetie," Mom said and placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Where's Jasper?" I asked her before I answered the door.

"He's outside with your dad."

"Thanks, Mom. I wouldn't want him to hear any of this."

"Of course not. Now, go answer the door and I'll make sure Jasper stays away."

Mom left to join Dad and Jasper outside at the swimming pool. I didn't know how parents coped without a pool. It was the easiest way to keep a child occupied. Jasper was like a little merman. He would spend the entire day in the water if given half the chance.

I steeled my nerves and opened the door. I was taken aback when I saw Griffin face to face. All at once I got what the fuss was all about. He was a gorgeous specimen of a man! I swallowed hard.

"Hi. It's good to meet you, Megan."

"Hello, Griffin. Same here. I'm just sorry it's under these circumstances. Please, come in."

I wondered if the guilt was written on my face. I positively reeked of self-loathing and regret.

“I can’t imagine what you must think of Jennifer, I mean Amy, Griffin. But, may I just say that she is a beautiful human being,” I said once we were sitting comfortably in the living room.

“Tell me more about her, please.”

“Well, we’ve known each other for a lifetime it seems. My family kind of adopted her when her dad passed away.”

“It’s crazy, but I don’t know anything about the woman.”

“One doesn’t need to know much about Jen to fall in love with her. She’s just that kind of person,” I said, meaning every word.

“I know what you mean. What about this husband of hers.”

“Paul. Talk about polar opposites. He had all of us fooled, the bastard. He has to be the most manipulative person I’ve had the displeasure of knowing. He even had Jen fooled.”

“How did they meet?”

“Jen and I were at a friend’s party one night and Paul was there too. The two hit it off. Why wouldn’t they? Paul pulled out all the stops once he’d set his sights on her. Looking back now I should have known something was up. No one is that perfect.”

“When did the abuse start?”

“As soon as they were married. Not that I knew about it until Jen came to me one day and told me she was leaving Paul.”

“I don’t get it. Why didn’t she leave him sooner?”

“If only that were possible. Jen fell pregnant. Paul warned her that he’d keep Jasper and she’d never see him again if she tried to leave. He drove the message home by beating the shit out of her.”

Griffin’s eyes were glowing. He was most definitely in love with Jen, even though he knew her only as Amy, the woman who had captured his heart.

“He’s a sneaky bastard too. Hit her where she could hide the bruises so no one would see. I can’t tell you how devastated I was when she told me and showed me her latest medal of honor.”

“I’m going to crush his balls under foot.”

“So, you’ll help?”

“Of course. Amy, or Jennifer, and I will have to have a serious talk about our relationship, but I love her, Megan.”

“I’m so happy to hear that, Griffin. Thank you.”

“How old is her son?”

“Jasper is five. He’s an angel like his mother.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s here with us. Thank God Paul didn’t get hands on the poor boy. It’s not as if he’s ever cared about his son. Jasper is just another possession to showcase.”

“Can I meet him?”

“Uhm. Sure.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t say anything about his mother.”

“Of course not. He’s outside with my folks. Come, let me introduce you.”

Griffin got up and followed me out to the pool area. Jasper was laughing hysterically at my dad. The two were playing aquadodgeball, a game my dad had invented to keep a busy young boy entertained.

“Mom, Dad, this is Griffin,” I said when we were outside. “Griffin, my parents, Peter and Maude.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Mom said. “I’m sorry it’s under such awful circumstances.”

“The pleasure is mine, Maude.”

“Hello, Griffin,” Dad said when he got out of the pool.

“Pleased to meet you, Peter.”

“This is Jasper,” I said when the little guy, soaked to the bone and wrapped in a towel, came over.

Griffin went onto his haunches so he could be more or less eye level with the boy.

“Hello, Jasper. My name is Griffin. I’m your mommy’s boss.”

“Hello.”

“You’re a good swimmer. And you’ve got quite a throwing arm.”

“When is my mommy coming home?” Jasper asked Griffin.
“Aunty Megs says she’s working.”

My heart was aching. I turned my head away so little Jasper couldn’t see the tears.

“I’m sorry your mom had to go away, champ. But I’m going to get her back for you very soon. Will you promise to be a brave boy until then?” Griffin spoke softly to Jasper.

“Okay.”

“That’s a good boy.”

“Come on, sweet pea. Let’s get you dried off and into some clean clothes,” my mom said and led Jasper away.

“He looks just like Amy,” Griffin said under his breath.

“A carbon copy,” I smiled as I watched him walking away with Mom.

Dad wrapped himself in a towel and sat down.

“Are you able to help, Griffin?” he asked our guest, who couldn’t take his eyes off Jasper.

“I’m certainly going to try my best, Peter.”

“Good. That son of a bitch can’t get away with this.”

“Agreed.”

“I only wish I were a few years younger. I’d love to kick his sadistic ass.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m going to deliver justice. That I promise you. Paul Elia is going to get what’s coming to him.”

“How do you feel about Jennifer?”

“Dad, that’s a little blunt.”

“No, I don’t mind. I love her, Peter. I wish I had made her feel more secure. Perhaps then she would have shared her pain with me.”

“You can’t blame yourself, Griffin. A woman’s heart is a mystery.”

“I hear you, Peter.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Dad said. I’m going to get out of this wet bathing suit. Can I bring you back a beer, Griffin?”

“Not for me, thanks. I can’t stay long. It was good to meet you, Peter.”

“Same here.”

I decided to drop the bombshell on Griffin once he and I were alone. It wasn’t a secret I could keep from him. The reason we were in this mess was thanks, in part, to secrets. Having met Griffin, I was convinced that had he known about Paul sooner, he would have done something about it.

“Griffin, there’s something I have to tell you,” I said.

“Something tells me this is going to be another shock.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“What is it?”

“Jennifer is pregnant.”

Griffin flinched as if someone had slapped him across the face. He grew pale while he stared out into space.

“Pregnant?”

“Yes. She found out a few days ago. I’m sorry that I’m the one who has to tell you. And, in case you were wondering, she’s freaked out about it. She doesn’t want you to think that she did it on purpose.”

“Pregnant,” Griffin said again, as he was having difficulty grasping the meaning of the word.

“This is probably a stupid question. Forgive me. Is it mine?”

“Of course. Griffin, Jen hasn’t lied about how she feels about you. She’s crazy about you.”

“I’m going to be a father.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry, Megan. I have to go. I need to make arrangements to get her back.”

“Here,” I said and handed him a notepad. “I’ve written down as much as I could about Paul. This should help you to track him down.”

“Thank you, Megan.”

“Griffin. Please, be careful. I don’t know if Andy told you, but Paul murdered Jen’s brother. He’s ruthless. He won’t hesitate to do the same to whomever tries to stand in his way.”

“I’ll call you soon.”

* * *

I could hardly breathe while I drove away from Megan’s home. The woman I loved was in grave danger, and she was pregnant with my child! If I was a wreck before, I was positively petrified after that bit of news. I had to get her back, and fast.

I drove straight to a detective friend of mine’s office. He was someone I knew I could trust. Corruption in the police department wasn’t something new. Everyone knew of that one of two guys who sailed just below the radar when it came to taking bribes to keep secrets.

Jud wasn’t one of those assholes. I called his cell phone to make sure he was at work.

“Griffin, Hey, buddy. This is a pleasant surprise.”

“Hi, Jud. Are you at the office?”

“Yeah. What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you when I see you. Be there in fifteen.”

“Okay.”

Jud was alone in his office. He got up and shook my hand.

“What can I do for you, Griff?”

“I need your help, Jud.”

I sat down and told him everything I’d learned from Andy and Megan. He listened intently without interrupting me before he spoke again.

“This is going to be difficult, Griff. If Paul were here, I could pick him up and he’d be in front of the judge before he could scratch his ass. But he’s in another state, so I don’t have the jurisdiction to march in there and arrest him.”

“I figured as much.”

“However, if he happened to find himself here, in our neck of the woods, I would arrest him and make sure he never sees the light of day again.”

“Then I need to give him a reason to come to us.”

“You say Amy’s son is still here.”

“Yes, he’s safe for now. He’s with her best friend, Megan.”

“Good. I think I need to have a chat with Megan.”

“I’ll arrange a meeting. I don’t know how to thank you, Jud.”

“Don’t thank me yet. This is going to be very dangerous and difficult.”

“I know. But, knowing that you’re on the job makes me feel more confident.”

I left Jud’s office and drove home. I needed to call Alice and tell her what was happening. I’d tell my parents later. I didn’t want to stress them out.

“Hey, Bro.”

“Hi. Al. Where are you?”

“Home. Why?”

“Can you come over? I need to talk to you.”

“Sure. Are you okay?”

“Not really, no. I’ll tell you when I see you.”

“You’re making me nervous, Griff.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“I’ll see you soon, Sis.”

I poured myself a shot of whiskey when I got home. It had been a difficult morning. Alice arrived an hour later. I sat her down and explained the whole situation to her. I’d never seen my sister so shocked.

“Please, don’t tell Mom and Dad anything. Not yet.”

“I’m worried about you, Griff. This Paul guy sounds like a piece of work. Please, be careful.”

“I’ve got help. Jud is meeting with Megan and me tomorrow morning. We’re working on getting Paul here. I don’t trust the cops in Paul’s backyard. He has too many friends in the right places if you get my meaning. Here he’s a nobody. He’s about to come to my town.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to be a father, Griff. How do you feel about that?”

“I have no words.”

AMY

“Please, Paul. You can send someone with me if you don’t trust me. I must see my mother.”

“If I don’t trust you! Ha!” Paul was toying with me. I wanted to scream! “I don’t know if you’ve been a good enough girl,” he smirked. “What will you do for me if I allow you to go?”

I didn’t know what to say. I hoped my husband wasn’t expecting me to sleep with him. Sex with Paul would make me throw up for sure. Just the thought of him touching me made my skin crawl and my morning sickness amp up.

He threw back his head and let out a menacing laugh.

“You should see your face. Don’t worry, my little whore. There’s no way I’m going to touch you again. I’m not keen on sloppy seconds.”

I knew he was referring to Griffin, but I kept my mouth shut. There was no point in poking the bear.

“Fine. One hour. That’s it. And you’d better make it a good one. That’s the last time.”

“Thank you.”

I didn’t want to face the possibility of never seeing my mother again, but there was no sense in arguing with Paul. If I made him angry, I’d never see her again.

“Tomorrow morning. Mario will go with you.”

I ate my dinner in silence.

It was ready at 10 am the next day.

“Mario is downstairs, Ma’am,” Maria said when she unlocked my door. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, thank you, Maria.”

Maria’s attitude toward me had shifted slightly. Did she finally have empathy for me? Had she seen her boss for the monster that he was? I wasn’t sure either way, but I was thankful for the change.

I didn’t speak a word to Mario on the drive to the care facility. He opened the car door when we arrived and walked with me to the front desk.

“Jennifer!” Angela said when she saw me. “Oh, my goodness. I’m so glad to see you.”

“Hello. Angela. How’s Mom?”

“She’s been hanging in there, Jen. I think she’s been waiting for you.”

“Please, take me to her.”

Mario ignored Angela when she said that only family members were allowed to see Mom. I gave my mother’s caregiver a pleading look. Thankfully, she got the message.

“Alright,” she agreed. “But, please, wait outside the bedroom while Mrs. Elia sees her mother.”

Mario nodded, but only after he saw that there was no way I could escape. Mom’s room was on the third floor so he was satisfied that I wouldn’t escape through the window and shimmy down a drainpipe. Asshole.

“I’ll be right outside if you need me,” Angela said and squeezed my hand.

“Thank you, Angela.”

I walked over to where my mother was resting in bed. I hardly recognized the person she’d become. Mom was so small and frail. Her skin was so thin it was almost translucent. She couldn’t have weighed more than a hundred pounds.

“Mom,” I whispered, afraid to startle the fragile creature before me.

She didn't respond, so I spoke her name.

"Maggie."

My mother opened her eyes. It looked as if she was struggling to focus.

"Hi, Mom. It's me. Jennifer."

I wiped away my tears and smiled at her.

"Jen?" she whispered.

"Yes, Mom. It's me."

A spark of recognition flashed in her sunken eyes.

"How are you feeling, Mom?"

I took her hands very gently in mine and kissed the back of them. Her skin was paper thin.

"Jen, my baby."

"Yes, it's me. I'm sorry I haven't seen you in so long."

"Jasper?" she whispered.

"He didn't come with me."

"Where's Tristan?"

I couldn't stop the tears from flowing when she said his name. How was I going to explain it to her? Would she even understand if I tried?

"It's just me, Mom. Are you thirsty?"

I looked around and picked up a glass with water in it. But Mom shook her head. I read somewhere once that when someone was dying, their body started to shut down. Things like food and water became more harmful than helpful. I placed the glass back down again.

"I love you, Mom."

I sat there, holding my mother's hands, afraid of what I knew was coming. It was inevitable. Perhaps it was a blessing that she didn't know who Paul really was. How she would have suffered had she known how unhappy I was.

And Tristan, her beautiful son, dead and buried. How would she have survived that? How could any mother, for that matter? I was worried sick about Jasper. And soon there would be another child. How would I keep my baby safe from Paul, a man who wasn't the baby's dad and a cruel vindictive bastard at that?

I laid my head down on my mother's frail chest. She whispered something.

"What was that Mom?"

"I love you, my ladybug," she said.

My mother hadn't called me that in years. I looked into her eyes, and I knew instantly she knew who I was.

"I love you, Mom."

She closed her eyes. I sat with her for another half an hour. Mom's eyes were closed when I left.

I cried all the way home. Maria brought me some tea.

* * *

I was asleep when Paul entered the bedroom.

"The care facility called. Your mother is in a coma."

* * *

I stood next to my mother's open grave long after everyone had left. Paul was acting the part of the grieving son-in-law and husband perfectly. He was shaking hands and kissing cheeks while I tried to pick up the pieces of my broken heart.

Mom had gone into a coma the night after I'd seen her and died two days later. Now I was truly alone. The last of the Marx family. My heart ached when I realized that my mother would never see Jasper again or meet her new grandbaby. Life was cruel.

I was close to giving up. I couldn't bring myself to accept that this was my life. A life of nothing to look forward to and everything to lose. Standing there in the noonday downpour, the last bit of fight I had inside of me stirred to life.

Paul was distracted and Mario was standing by the car. It was raining pretty hard, and I got the hairy eyeball from the guys who were waiting to close up mom's casket. Call it bravery, call it desperation, call it what you will, but I had to get the hell out of there.

I dropped my umbrella and took off my heels. The ground was muddy so legging it barefoot was my only reasonable chance of getting away. I backed up and waited. No one noticed. I took a few more steps. Paul was still sucking up to his boss. That's when I turned and headed for the building where the restroom was.

I walked calmly at first, but the closer I came to perceived freedom, the faster I moved. I had progressed at a healthy pace by the time I got to the restroom. My heart was racing out of my chest, and I struggled to focus. Fear had once again replaced the sliver of bravery that had reared its irresponsible head.

There were two women inside. I forced a smile, walked past them calmly, and locked myself in a cubicle where I fought to catch my breath. Did they see the panic etched on my face? I wasn't exactly sure of my next move, so I closed the toilet lid and sat down to regroup.

The women left a few minutes later and soon the room was quiet—the only sound was that of my heart thundering in my ears. I figured by that time Paul would have noticed that I was gone. I hoped he would think me dumb enough to escape along the road. That way, I could hide out in the bathroom for a while.

Then, I had an idea. Paul would look for me in the ladies restroom, but if I slipped into a cubicle on the men's side, I may get away with it. It was a rocky plan at best but certainly worth a shot.

I slowly opened the door and peeked outside. The coast was clear. I moved quickly to the men's restroom and put my ear against the door to see if I could hear anyone inside. It was quiet. I imagined I'd cause a stir if I walked in on someone at the urinal. I opened the door slowly and looked inside. Empty. Thank God! I was practically doing a jig when I saw the out of order sign on one of the cubicles. I rushed straight for it and locked myself inside.

All I could do was wait. Wait and pray. I checked my watch. It felt as if I'd been away from the grave for an hour, but it had only been five minutes. Would Paul be looking for me? Was he frantically rushing about? Not that he would get his hands dirty. Oh, no. That was Mario's job.

I sat there for what seemed to be a lifetime when I heard muffled voices outside the door. I recognized them as those belonging to Paul and Mario.

"Check the ladies, I'll check the men's," Paul spat the order at Mario.

I held my breath as the door opened. Should I pull my feet out of sight? I did so as quietly as I could, just in case. I held my hand in front of my mouth in case a sound slipped out. I listened as Paul opened the first empty cubicle door, then the next, then the next. He was getting too close. He was about to touch *door-number-Jennifer*, when Mario burst into the restroom.

"I heard two women talking about seeing a woman running towards the main building," he said.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Move your ass!" Paul yelled at him.

The two men rushed out and left me cowering on top of the toilet, trembling and breathing hard. How long did I have before they came back? I checked my watch again after a while. I'd managed to fool my captor for twenty minutes and counting. My husband must have been beside himself with rage.

An hour later, I decided it was now or never. I couldn't stay hidden in the men's restroom forever. I placed my feet on the ground and waited. Then, very slowly, I unlocked the cubicle door and rested my hand on the nob.

I walked out slowly and waited in the restroom for a few minutes. I had to move, or I would lose my nerve, so I opened the restroom door and stepped out. I must have looked a sight, barefoot and disheveled. I walked toward the carpark to check if Paul's vehicle was still there. I didn't see it anywhere.

Yes! I was free! I was...

"You bitch!"

A hand grabbed my hair and yanked me back so hard I lost my footing and crashed to the ground. Before I could move Paul was on top of me.

"I can't believe you'd try this shit again! You're going to be sorry."

He yanked me onto my feet and dragged me off to the car. He threw a punch as we got there. It hit me square on the jaw and knocked me out cold.

I came to my conscience and looked around. I was back in my bedroom. My jaw was throbbing, and I was pretty sure I'd be wearing a shiner for a good few weeks to come.

Paul was standing in the corner of the room, glowering at me.

"I can see that you are incapable of using your common sense. You've forced my hand, Jennifer. Now you're going to see what I'm capable of. Jasper is coming home. And, if you don't behave exactly as I tell you to. I'm going to take it out on your son."

"No. Paul! Please. I'm sorry...I..."

"It's too late for that. I've made up my mind."

Paul left the room and slammed the door behind him.

Oh, Lord! What have I done?

MEGAN

“**M**om!” I called down the hallway. “Will you take Jasper to school, please? I have an early meeting.”

“Sure, my love.”

“Ah, thanks, Mom, you’re a star. Oh, and don’t forget the muffins. He’s the baker man today.”

“It’s a good thing you reminded me, Megs. My head has been all over the place this week with Dad’s checkup and all,” Mom said as she came walking towards the kitchen.

“Oh, that’s right. I completely forgot about Dad’s checkup today. I’m sorry. Are you sure you can manage?”

“Of course. Don’t worry about a thing. I’m on it.”

“Thank you so much, Mom. I’ll see you later. Can I pick up anything from the market for dinner?”

“No, thanks. All good.”

My mother stepped up the moment I told her what had happened to Jen. I would never have coped were it not for her and Dad jumping in at every opportunity to help me with Jasper. Truth be told, I had a feeling they enjoyed having him around. I know they would have loved to have a second child, but it just wasn’t in the cards for them.

Dad had so much fun with Jasper. They did ‘men’s stuff’ together which usually got them into trouble with Mom when they left a mess in the den. They laughed and told me the home was full with Jasper in it—a happy full, mind you.

I found little Jasper in the kitchen. He was eating his cereal and gave me a sweet, milky goodbye kiss.

“Oohh, what a sweet boy you are,” I chuckled. “Have a good day at school, my angel.”

“Will Mama be home when I get back?”

“Not yet. But very soon. I promise.”

I hated lying to the poor child, but what else could I do?

I grabbed my coat and headed for the front door. My phone rang as soon as I got into the car. I had a busy day ahead of me so the last thing I needed was a call to slow me down. I answered without looking at the caller ID.

“Hello,” I said, impatiently, shoving the items back into my bag that had spilled out when I dropped it onto the passenger seat. My lipstick rolled beyond my reach.

“I want my son.”

My body reacted in the same way it usually did whenever I heard Paul’s voice. It started with a wave of nausea and a rapid heart rate, followed by a tingling sensation in my limbs. I was getting just a little fed up with the way he spoke to me. As if I were one of his lackeys. Fuck that!

“I want to talk to Jennifer,” I said in an equally brash and disrespectful manner.

“Careful, Megan. You of all people should know that I don’t take kindly to that sort of tone.”

“Fuck you and your tone, Paul. I want to talk to Jennifer.”

I closed my eyes and prayed that I hadn’t just signed Jennifer’s death warrant. The line was quiet for a while.

“Why?”

“Because I need to know that I’m sending Jasper back to a mother who is unharmed.”

“I thought we covered this in our last conversation. I told you I wouldn’t harm her.”

“Yeah, well, you told me many things, Paul. For instance, you swore to me you’d be the best husband you could to Jennifer. So, you’ll forgive me if I find your *truth* somewhat lacking in substance.”

“Well, aren’t you the little livewire?”

“I mean it, Paul. I won’t let you near Jasper if you don’t put Jennifer on the phone. I’ll send him away and you’ll never see him again.”

“Really? Tell me, Megan, how are the folks?”

“Oh, no. You’re not going to scare me off like that again. I know far too much about you. I’m sure the cops will be very interested in what I have to tell them about the great law-abiding citizen, Paul Elia. Jennifer told me all about your extracurricular activities. In the bedroom and the boardroom.”

The last sentence was a bluff. I had no evidence, only Jen’s word, but Paul didn’t know that.

“Sassy,” he laughed. “Looks like I bedded the wrong friend.”

The thought of Paul touching me in any way made my skin crawl.

“So? What’s it gonna be?” I held firm, deciding not to mention that he grossed me the fuck out.

The call ended. I took in a gulp of air.

Oh, you’ve gone and done it now, Megan.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! What have I done?”

I sat very still in my car, wondering what Paul was doing. What was his next move going to be? My mind was racing about as fast as my heart.

I didn’t have to wait long. The phone rang again a few minutes later. It was Jennifer’s voice.

“Jen! Oh, thank God. How are you? Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“Hi, Megan. I’m okay. I can’t talk for long.”

“I’m so relieved! I’ve been worried sick about you.”

“How’s Jasper?”

“He’s fine. We’re taking good care of him. He misses you.”

“Mom died, Megs.”

“Oh, Jen. I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

“No.”

“I’m going to get you out of there, I swear I will, Jen. I…”

“That’s enough.”

It was Paul again.

“I want my son. I’ll call you with the details. And Megan. Don’t fuck with me.”

Paul ended the call, leaving me reeling.

* * *

He called me the following day to arrange the date, place, and time for the handover.

“I won’t hand Jasper over to anyone but you, Paul.”

“And why the hell not?”

“The poor boy is scared enough without his mother. He’s been through more than any child his age should. I want the next face he sees to be that of either his mother or his father.”

“Oh, for shit’s sake. Stop with the drama, Megan.”

“I’m serious, Paul. If I don’t see you, it’s not happening.”

“Fine.”

* * *

“We’ve got him, Griffin!”

“Hi, Megan. I’m sorry, I’m not following. What do you mean?”

“Paul called me. He wants Jasper.”

“Good. When? Is he doing the pickup?”

“Yes. I insisted he be there, or I won’t hand Jasper over.”

“Fantastic. Well done, Megan. When?”

“In three days. Will you be ready?”

“Oh, yes. I’ll be ready. I have to make a few phone calls. I’ll chat to you soon.”

“Okay. Thanks, Griffin.”

* * *

I was hauling a heavy burden around. One that grew weightier by the day. I needed to come clean with Griffin. I had to tell him that I was the one who handed his Amy over to her murderous husband, but I didn’t know how to.

I thought of telling Andy first. Using him as a sounding board seemed like a good way to break the ice. I called him.

“Hi, Megan. How are you? Any news yet about your friend?”

“Yes, actually. Griffin’s been a great help, by the way. Thank you so much for calling him.”

“You’re welcome. What’s the plan?”

“We’re luring Jen’s husband to town. He wants his son. I told Paul that I wouldn’t hand the boy over to him unless he collects him in person.”

“Smart. So, I take it that Griffin and the cops will be on hand to arrest the jerk?”

“That’s the plan, yes.”

“You must be a mess, Megs.”

“Completely. Anyway, Andy, I wanted to tell you something. You’re my guinea pig on this one.”

“Sounds heavy. What is it?”

“Promise you won’t judge me.”

“Of course not. Shoot.”

“This is harder than I thought.”

“Come on, out with it.”

“It’s my fault she’s in this mess, Andy.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I knew Paul was coming to grab her, Andy and I let him.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“Andy? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, sorry. That’s heavy. Why would you do that?”

“I was afraid. I know Paul killed Jen’s brother and he threatened to do the same with my parents if I didn’t cooperate. I didn’t have a choice. At least, that’s what I keep telling myself.”

“I’m so sorry, Megs. What a terrible position to be in. I imagine I would have done the same, though.”

“I feel so guilty, Andy,” I said with a teary voice, close to breaking down.

“Stop torturing yourself. You did the right thing by holding onto Jasper. It’s not all doom and gloom.”

“I suppose so.”

“It’s going to be okay. You’re a good friend. So, you made a mistake. You’re about to rectify that. Give yourself a break.”

“Thank you, Andy. You have no idea what your words mean to me.”

“No more beating yourself up. Okay?”

“Okay. It’s going to be hard telling Griffin.”

“Of course. But I’m sure he’ll understand. He’s a good man.”

“Who knows what Jen will think of me when she finds out. I’m not looking forward to that conversation.”

“You have to put it out of your mind for now, Megan. You need to focus on getting her back. Once your friend is back home and she’s safe, then you can hash it out.”

“I know you’re right. I’ll try.”

“Great. Please, keep me posted. I’m here if you need me.”

“How did I get so lucky?”

“Good question,” Andy said jokingly.

“Chat soon. Thanks, my friend.”

I felt about twenty percent better after I’d spoken to Andy. I hoped Griffin would understand.

It was time to fetch Jasper from aftercare. I parked outside his school and waited. I climbed out of the car when I saw him speeding toward me, carrying an empty cake tin. His soft curls bounced around his angelic face. He was so precious.

“Hey, buddy.”

“Look! The cake is all done. Annie said it was the best cake she’s ever tasted!”

“That’s wonderful. I’m so glad. Come on. Let’s get you home. Are you hungry?”

“Nana said she’s making roast chicken for dinner. I love chicken.”

I wanted to grab Jasper and squeeze him until he popped. He was so cute. He called all meat chicken. It was adorable.

“Ooh, goodie. How was your day, angel?” I asked while I was strapping him in.

“It was good. I painted you a picture,” he said and squirmed in his seat so he could dig in his school bag.

He pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to me. It was a picture of a stick figure with long hair holding a boy’s hand.

“Look,” he said, “that’s you, that’s me, and that’s Mama in the plane up in the sky. See? She’s looking out of the window.”

“Wow, what a clever boy you are. Let’s hang it on the fridge so Mama can see it when she’s back.”

“I made one for Nana and Grandpa too.”

“You are so sweet. They’re going to love them. I have a great idea. Let’s stop off at the store on the way home and buy two frames. That way Nana and Grandpa hang their picture on the wall.”

“You’re the best, Aunt Meg,” Jasper beamed.

“If you promise not to tell Nana, we’ll even sneak in a quick ice cream.”

“This is the best day ever!”

I laughed. Kids were so easily pleased. If only adults were that uncomplicated.

“What’s it gonna be, little man? Strawberry, chocolate, vanilla? What are you in the mood for?”

“Strawberry!”

“Strawberry it is.”

“Oh, my teacher left a note in my book for you.”

“Thanks, Jasper. I’ll take a look when we get home.”

I had a feeling I knew what the note was about.

I sat down after dinner and read it. Frankly, I was surprised it took so long for the teacher to ask about Jen’s prolonged absence. I could only assume that she was confident that Jasper was being looked after because Jen and I registered him together.

I wrote her back and assured her that Jasper’s mother would be back from her trip soon. Very soon.

GRIFFIN

I couldn't sleep knowing that Amy was in the clutches of her evil husband. My anger was festering inside of me, and I was afraid that once it spilled over there would be no stopping it. I hoped that I would get an opportunity to get my hands on Paul Elia before the cops arrested him. They could have what was left of him after I was done with the asshole.

My phone rang. It was Megan. My heart skipped a beat every time I saw her name on caller ID.

"Hi, Megan. What's wrong?"

"Hi. Nothing. I know we spoke earlier today, but I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Okay."

"It's hard for me to tell you this."

"What is it, Megan? Is Amy alright?"

"Oh, sorry. I must be scaring the life out of you. It's not that. She's okay. I think. Anyway, it's about something I did."

"Would you rather meet for a drink?"

"Uhm, okay. Where?"

"Shall I come to you?"

"No, I'd prefer to talk away from the house."

"Alright. Come to my place then. I'll send you a pin location."

"Sure. See you in a bit."

I wondered what Megan wanted to tell me. She sounded upset. I would be too if I were in her position. The poor woman was taking strain.

She arrived at my house about half an hour later. I invited her in and led her to the living room.

“What can I get you?”

“I’ll have white wine if you have.”

“Sure.”

“What’s on your mind?” I asked once we were seated.

“I went to Jen’s brother’s funeral. While I was there, Paul confronted me. I’m not sure how he found out that she was living here and that I’d helped her get away.”

“That must have been frightening for you, Megan.”

“It was. Anyway, he told me I had to help him get Jen back.”

Megan stopped talking and took a deep breath before she carried on talking. I didn’t say anything.

“He threatened me, Griffin. He told me that if I didn’t help him, he’ll kill my parents. After what he’d done to Tristan, I believed him. So, I did it. I helped him.”

I was speechless.

“I’m so sorry, Griffin. I betrayed my best friend, and I will never forgive myself for that. And I’m so sorry that I lied to you.”

I stood at the window and looked out at the valley of lights in the distance. I was angry, but I didn’t want to say or do anything that I would regret.

“Please. Say something, Griffin.”

Megan’s eyes were wet with tears. She looked a pitiful sight. I knew that nothing I could say or do would make her feel worse than she clearly did, so I reserved my reproach. Instead, I walked over to the drink cabinet and poured myself a shot of whiskey.

“Thank you for telling me, Megan. I know it couldn’t have been easy for you to admit.”

“I’m so sorry, Griffin. So sorry.”

“Okay, let’s look at this logically, shall we? I don’t judge you, Megan. Who knows what I would have done were I in your position? The important thing is that you’re doing something about it now.”

“I’m going to make it up to you two, if it takes a lifetime of apologies.”

“I forgive you. I think it’s Amy, I mean, Jennifer, that you need to ask for forgiveness. But I’m sure you know that.”

“I hope she’ll understand.”

“You guys have been friends for so long, I’m sure she’ll give you an opportunity to make it up to her. The fact that you’re there for Jasper will go a long way toward mending your friendship.”

“I love Jasper. Nothing will happen to that boy while I have breath in my lungs.”

“We need to talk to my detective friend. I’m phoning him in the morning. I’ll let you know when and where we’ll meet him. It will have to be in secret, in case Paul is watching you.”

“Okay.”

“By the way. Aren’t you afraid that he’ll snatch Jasper from school?”

“There’s no way in hell that will happen. Security is tight at his school. Only Jen, me, and my folks are authorized to collect him. They are very strict with that.”

“Good.”

I called Jud after Megan left and arranged a time to meet him the next morning. We had one day left before Paul would swoop in to snatch Jasper and I was planning on being ready to kick his ass.

Alice called me around 10 pm.

“Hi, Griff. How are you holding up?”

“Hey, Al. Hanging in there. We’re meeting with Jud tomorrow to finalize the details.”

“We?”

“Yes, Megan and I.”

“Oh, okay.”

“She just left here, actually.”

“What did she want?”

“To unburden herself, I would say.”

“What do you mean?”

“She told me that she knew that Paul was going to snatch Amy, and that she helped him.”

“What the fuck? Why would she do that?”

“It’s a long story, but Paul threatened to kill her parents if she didn’t cooperate.”

“What a mess.”

“I’d say. Shame, she’s a tortured soul. I can see the guilt is eating her up.”

“To be fair, I don’t know what I’d do if someone threatened to hurt you, or Mom and Dad. I’d probably do the same as Megan.”

“Yeah, it’s not an easy choice, is it?”

“Griff, I’m worried about you. This Paul character sounds like a nasty piece of work.”

“I won’t argue with you there. But I’ll be fine. Don’t stress about me, Sis.”

“Promise me you won’t do anything stupid and get yourself hurt.”

“I promise.”

* * *

Megan, Jud, and I met at a neutral location, early the next morning.

“Jud, this is Megan.”

“Good to meet you, Megan. I wish it were under better circumstances.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jud. Thank you for your help. I can’t tell you what it means to me.”

“There’s a lot to do before you can thank me, so let’s get started.”

“Okay. What do you need from me?” she asked.

“Griffin filled me in on the where and when, so let’s talk about the how, shall we?”

“I think it’s vital we talk about Jasper’s safety first,” Megan insisted.

“I agree wholeheartedly,” Jud affirmed. “The boy is young, so we need to keep him close. It’s too easy for a parent to snatch a child. We’d better make sure we keep him with Megan at all times.”

“I’ll strap him to my body if I have to,” she said.

I nodded in agreement.

“I’ve drawn up a diagram of where my officers will be,” Jud said and handed Megan and me a sketch each. “On there, you’ll see the parking lot of the water park where Paul is going to meet you, Megan.”

“Where will I be?” I asked.

“In the back of the surveillance van, buddy,” Jud said firmly. “You are a civilian, Griffin. I can’t put you in danger. It’s complicated and dangerous enough that Megan has to put herself out there. I’m not going to allow you to do something stupid and get yourself killed in the process.”

“Come on, Jud. We’re talking about the woman I love. I can’t sit around twiddling my thumbs, can I?”

“I could lock you in a cell until it’s all over, if you prefer.”

“Fine.”

I wasn’t happy. I’d been sitting by idly for too long already.

“I’m serious, Griffin. No heroics, please. I run a tight ship. My men know exactly what to do.”

“I have something for you, Jud,” Megan said and handed him a manilla envelope. “I found this in Jen’s room when I was looking for something.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s a list of contacts and illegal business deals Paul’s involved in. I’m no expert, but I reckon there’s enough there to keep his ass in prison for a long time.”

“This is very helpful, thanks, Megan. If, for whatever reason we can’t nail Paul for the murder, we will use this to ensure a conviction.”

“I don’t care if you have to put him away for mail fraud,” I said, “just make sure you put his ass in the slammer and throw away the key. Or he’ll have me to deal with.”

“I did not hear that,” Jud said.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Megan, we need you to wear a wire,” Jud said.

Megan looked nervous when he said that. I couldn’t blame her. I wouldn’t want to be in her position either.

“A wire? Why? Am I supposed to talk to him?”

“It’s just a formality. I want to have whatever he says on tape. It will come in handy.”

“I’m crapping bullets here, guys,” Megan sighed.

Jud put his hand over Megan’s.

“You are safe, Megan. I’ll be right there, I promise. Nothing will happen to you or to Jasper.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I know I’m being a baby about this. I’ve never been in a situation like this before.”

“I’m actually impressed by your bravery, Megan. What you’re doing is no small thing,” I said and smiled at her.

“I’m glad you think so. I’ve been working on my poker face.”

Jud laughed. I thought I saw a spark between them, but it wasn’t the time to comment.

“Not that I play for money,” Megan smiled.

“Of course not,” Jud grinned. “We have to talk about the safety of your parents, Megan,” he said with a serious face.

“What are you suggesting?”

“We don’t know what Paul’s true intentions are when it comes to you and your folks. I’m thinking he’s not too impressed that you helped his wife escape. If he’s the kind of scum I’m used to dealing with, he may want to harm you and your parents.”

“Shit. I didn’t think of that.”

“That’s because you’re not a criminal.”

“What do you have in mind, Jud?” I asked.

“I’m going to post officers at Megan’s home tonight. They’ll stay there until Paul is in custody. Just in case he has plans to hurt the family.”

“Thank you, Jud,” Megan said. “I’ll let my parents know.”

“I take it you won’t be sending Jasper to school tomorrow?” I asked Megan.

“No. He’ll stay home with me until we meet with Paul in the afternoon.”

“I’m not a psychologist, but I think it’s a good idea to call in on your family doctor and ask him for something you can give Jasper to sedate him. I’m not talking about knocking the little one out, but something that will make him sleepy. I don’t think anyone wants the kid to remember the trauma of seeing his father arrested.”

“I agree,” I said. “I’m sure the poor child’s been through enough.”

“Thank you, Jud. I’ll call my family doctor and arrange it,” Megan agreed.

“Okay, guys. Anything else?”

“No, I think you’ve answered all my questions,” I answered. “Megan?”

“I’m all good, too. Thanks.”

“I’ll call you later and tell you what time and where to meet me tomorrow, Megan,” Jud said.

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Jud,” I said before we left.

“Sure, buddy. Get a good night’s rest, you two.”

A good night’s rest. What was he? Crazy? I wouldn’t rest again until Amy was safely back in my arms and Paul was locked away for good.

I left the meeting feeling a little less anxious. At least the plan was in place, and I knew what was expected of me. Not that I planned on remaining a mere observer. If Paul so much as looked like he was about to double cross us, I was going to take him out.

AMY

I forced myself to stay calm. Stress wasn't good for the baby, and I'd been under too much for too long.

Maria brought me breakfast. I hadn't left the room since my mother's funeral. Paul locked me in and that was that. Like Repunzel, I was trapped with no hope of escaping.

"Good morning, Ma'am," Maria said and placed the tray with my breakfast on it down on the table near the window.

"Thank you."

"Forgive me for saying so, Ma'am. I know it's none of my business, but you're not looking well. Is there anything I can get you?"

"That's kind of you, Maria. But I'm okay."

I saw her eyes move to the bruise on my face. I didn't bother hiding it. It wasn't as if I were trying to keep up appearances. Not anymore.

"I'm sorry," she said, unexpectedly.

"Sorry?"

"Sorry for not being more sensitive," she said.

Maria's eyes were softer than I'd ever seen them before.

"Thank you, Maria. That's very kind of you to say."

"I would help you if I could, Ma'am," she said with regret written all over her face.

“You don’t have to say more. I’m sure you have your own reasons.”

She nodded and left the room, locking the door behind her. I imagined that Paul had something with which to manipulate Maria. That was how he operated. Why else would she ignore the beating I’d obviously sustained at his hand? I couldn’t blame her. I know how it felt to be at the mercy of someone like Paul.

I was surprised when I was told to meet my husband downstairs for dinner. I deliberately didn’t cover up the bruise on my face with makeup as I had done with all my bruises back in the day. Paul looked annoyed.

“Trying to garner sympathy, are we?” he snorted when I sat down at the dining room table, wearing my badge of honor like a boss.

I didn’t answer him.

“I thought you’d like to know that I’ll be fetching our son from Megan tomorrow. We’ll be home for dinner and a delightful family reunion.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Am I?”

“Megan will never let you have Jasper.”

“She didn’t put up much of a fight when I instructed her to hand you off to me.”

Paul was being an asshole again. As if Megan would ever betray me. She wouldn’t. Would she?

“Oh, I see. You think I’m lying. Perhaps you should be more careful when choosing your friends,” he grinned.

“What are you talking about, Paul? How did you find me? You never said.”

“Interesting story. It was a combination of things, really.”

“Stop messing with me. Just tell me. I think I have a right to know.”

“A right? You have no rights. You lost those when you ran off with my kid!”

I would have to calm him down if I was going to get any information out of him. I bit my tongue and tried to speak as calmly as I could.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Paul. Please, tell me.”

“I’m right and you’re sorry? Man, you must really want to know,” he laughed.

“I do.”

“It started when you called me that night, or should I say the night you called Tristan. I had more or less of an idea where you were, but I couldn’t narrow it down. Not until Megan showed up for Tristan’s funeral, anyway.”

So, it wasn’t all my fault. I’d been blaming and punishing myself for so long it never occurred to me that anyone else could be involved. And definitely not Megan!

“Megan?”

“Yup, threw you under the bus without thinking twice, she did. Some friend.”

“You’re lying.”

“Fine. Don’t believe me. I don’t care.”

The puzzle pieces were coming together but the picture I was seeing was a dark, ominous one.

“I’m not hungry,” I said and got up.

“Sit down, Jennifer,” Paul barked, his eyes filled with warning.

I did as I was told.

“You’ll leave when I say you may. Get it?”

I nodded.

“Anyway, I’ve decided to send Jasper to boarding school. You baby him too much. No son of mine is going to be a pussy. You’ll see him during term breaks, but only if you behave. If you keep acting like a brat, you won’t see him at all.”

“Please, Paul. Jasper is only five. He’s too small to go to boarding school. I’ll behave, I swear it!”

I would do anything to keep my child near me. I didn’t want someone else to mother my child. He was *my* son!

“Oh, stop fussing. Besides, you’re going to have your hands full with the bastard child soon. That will keep you out of mischief.”

“Please, Paul. Don’t send Jasper away. He’s, our boy. His place is here, with us.”

“Crazy how your attitude has suddenly changed. You didn’t care about our family when you stole him and disappeared into thin air, did you?”

“I made a mistake. I don’t know how many times you expect me to apologize for that.”

“Well, actions do speak louder than words,” he grinned, his expression suddenly changing to one of a predator. “Why don’t you put those lying lips of yours to good use?” he said and started to unbutton his pants.

Oh, hell no!

I was desperate enough to keep my son with me. A blowjob wouldn’t kill me. Fortunately for me, I didn’t have to sink that low. Paul’s phone rang.

He answered it and disappeared. I used the opportunity to leg it back to my room. Thank God for small mercies. Once I was locked away safely in my room, I thought about what my husband had accused Megan of.

Was it possible? Would my best friend in the world sell me down the river? Why? I hoped I would have the opportunity one day to ask her what the fuck she was thinking. But, until then, I had to put the thought out of my mind and focus on my next hurdle—keeping Jasper with me.

* * *

The cops were at the house before nightfall. I'd prepared Mom and Dad before they got there so they wouldn't be alarmed. The officers were dressed in plain clothes, so Jasper didn't suspect a thing. As far as he was concerned, the nice man and women were friends of my parents.

After dinner, I put Jasper to bed and excused myself. The officers stayed up so they could keep an eye out for anything suspicious. I eventually drifted off to sleep, even though I was a ball of nerves.

Our family doctor had prescribed a sedative for little Jasper.

"Why am I staying at home today, Nana?" Jasper asked my mother at the breakfast table.

"Your teacher is sick, sweetie," she said and looked to me for confirmation.

"Yes, she called and said she'll be back tomorrow and that everyone could have the day off. Isn't that fun?"

"Okay. Can we swim, Grandpa?"

"Sure thing, little man."

I was grateful for his enthusiasm. Hopefully, the swimming would tire him out enough so that I wouldn't need to give the poor kid too much of the sedative.

It was 2 pm when Jud called and told me to meet him. I gave Jasper his *jungle juice* before we left the house. He was sleepy by the time we met with Jud.

"I'm so nervous, I hope I don't drop him," I told Jud while a female officer was fitting the wire to my chest.

"You're going to be fine. You can do this. Remember, you're not alone. I've got more than enough officers out there keeping an eagle eye on you."

I nodded, nervously, then checked my watch.

"Half an hour," Jud announced over the police radio. "Everyone in place?"

One by one his officers checked in and confirmed that they were ready.

“Ready?” he asked me and smiled softly.

“I guess so.”

Jasper was fidgety. I’d hoped he’d be asleep by then, but the little critter was more resilient than I’d expected.

“Come, sweetheart,” I said and picked him up.

“I’m tired,” he moaned.

“Close your eyes, my angel. Have a nap.”

“I want to go home.”

“We’ll be home soon, pumpkin. Close your eyes.”

Jasper squirmed a bit when I picked him up. He was teary which made me more nervous than I already was.

“Wait,” I said to Jud before I left for the entrance to the water park.

“What is it?”

“Do all of your officers know what Paul looks like?”

“Yes. Everyone has a photo of him.”

“But what if he disguises himself?”

“No one is going to come near you without us being all over him like cold on ice cream, Megan. Trust me.”

“Okay.”

Jud touched my arm and looked into my eyes. I felt a calm descending on me. I walked to the entrance of the water park and paid the entrance fee. Next, I made my way to the spot where Paul had told me to wait for him.

The place was teeming with excited kids. I supposed, in hindsight, that Paul had chosen the park for that reason. What cop in his right mind would choose to pull out a weapon with so many kids around?

“Calculated man, your daddy,” I said under my breath to Jasper who had finally fallen asleep with his head on my shoulder.

He was getting heavy. Where the hell was Paul? I checked my watch. He was late.

“Excuse me,” I heard a woman’s voice behind me. “I’m sorry to worry you, but do you know if there’s a kids clothing shop here? I see you have a little boy. My son left his bathing suit at home.”

“Uhm, I’m sorry,” I said when I turned around, “I don’t.”

My heart was thundering in my chest. I looked around frantically, checking if this was one of Paul’s minions. It was at that moment when someone jumped out from behind a waterslide and tried to snatch Jasper out of my arms.

What happened after that was a blur. I heard myself screaming, although I don’t remember doing it.

“Let go of him, you bitch!” Paul growled at me, but I held onto Jasper like my life depended on it.

Paul tried to punch me, but I ducked. The momentum from swinging his arms and missing spun him around. Paul lost his balance and stumbled. As he did so, I saw a flash of metal as it caught the sun.

“Gun!” someone shouted.

I held onto Jasper and dropped to the ground, covering his little body with mine. Griffin appeared out of nowhere, scooped Jasper and me up, and ran for cover.

By that time, Paul was on his feet again. He reached for his weapon. I watched from afar as the scene played out in front of me in slow motion—the way it does in *The Matrix* and other blockbusters. Paul’s arm came up and I realized all at once that he was pointing his weapon at Jasper and me.

“No!” I shouted at the top of my lungs, so loud that my throat was instantly on fire from the strain.

Griffin turned his back to Paul and threw himself down onto us. Jasper was crying, I was screaming, and Griffin was cursing. It couldn’t have lasted more than five seconds, but suddenly the danger had passed as quickly as it had started.

Paul went down in a blaze of gunfire, life draining from his body.

“Clear!” one of the officers shouted, and soon Jasper, Griffin, and I were surrounded by cops, encircling us in case there were other gunmen around.

I couldn’t stand. My legs were like those of a newborn fawn.

“Is it over?” I asked Griffin.

“It’s over, Megan. Are you okay? How’s Jasper?”

“We’re fine. I’m going to get him out of here before he sees his father. No child should see this.”

“Agreed. Come, I’ll help you,” Jud appeared, and put his arm around my shoulder while Griffin carried Jasper.

“Jennifer!” I said. “We have to get her back before Paul’s men hurt her.”

“I’m way ahead of you,” Griffin said.

AMY

I'd been pacing the room the whole day. Paul left the house early that morning. I asked Maria if she knew where he'd gone. She told me she didn't know but he'd packed a bag and she saw a plane ticket on the hat stand in the entrance hall when she'd left the night before.

So, he was making good on his promise to bring Jasper back, only to keep him beyond my reach anyway. It was a bitter pill to swallow. On the one hand I couldn't wait to hold my baby in my arms again. But, by the same token, I'd be fearing for my son's safety growing up around his murderous father.

I had no misgivings about my usefulness. Paul needed me to be the wife and mother extraordinaire whilst the kids were small, but what would he do with me after that?

Kids. I wondered if I'd ever have the opportunity to tell Griffin that I loved him and that together we were parents.

"Oh, Griffin. I miss you so much. What must you think of me?" I spoke out loud.

Would he believe that my lies were separate from my feelings for him? Could any man forgive such betrayal?

And, what about Megan? What was she doing? How could she betray me like that? Worse still. How could she hand my Jasper over to Paul after everything she knows about him?

I hadn't eaten breakfast that morning. I was too anxious. Maria brought me a sandwich and a glass of orange juice at noon and left it on the table near the window. I stood there, looking out

at the perfectly manicured garden below, bathed in the glow of the moonlight.

I reached for the sandwich. I didn't get to it though. A fracas downstairs stopped my hand in midair. My heart stood still. Was Paul back? Was Jasper making a fuss? I rushed for the bedroom door and tried the knob. I turned it but the door was locked.

It was at that moment that I heard a gunshot. What was happening?

I banged on the door. I screamed and kicked at the wooden obstacle, but it didn't give an inch.

"Maria! Paul! Open the door!" I cried out frantically.

I heard footsteps racing up the stairs. Suddenly I was afraid. What if it wasn't Paul? What if someone he'd slighted was out for revenge? No! I couldn't die there like that and leave my Jasper alone. My son needed me.

Hide, Jennifer! You don't know who's on the other side of that door. Hide!

I looked around for a place to hide. The space between the bed and the floor was too tight—I'd never fit under there. The closet. It wasn't terribly original, but it was the only option, so I climbed into it and hid behind a few fur coats.

I heard someone turning the key in the lock. I didn't move a muscle.

The door flew open and banged against the door stopper. I closed my eyes and pressed my hands over my mouth.

Please, God, don't let them find me.

"Amy! Jennifer!"

I opened my eyes and listened intently.

"Jennifer! Where are you?"

Griffin? Was I dreaming? I knew pregnancy brought on some pretty vivid dreams, but this was next level, batshit crazy stuff!

"Griffin?" I said softly.

“Yes, it’s me. Where are you?”

I opened the cupboard door and peeked out very slowly.

“Griffin!”

“Oh, thank God! Yes, it’s me.”

Griffin walked over to me at speed and put his arms around me. He held me so close to him I could feel his heartbeat through his jacket.

“I don’t understand. How did you get here? Where’s Paul? Where’s Jasper?”

I was crying so hard I could hardly speak. Griffin held onto me as if we were bracing for a hurricane.

“Jasper is safe. He’s with Megan.”

“Where’s Paul?”

“You don’t have to worry about him.”

“Did the police arrest him?”

“No. Paul is dead.”

“What?”

Griffin held me at arm’s length and looked at me face.

“Oh, I said. Yes, that was Paul’s handiwork.”

I assumed he was wondering why I wore a shiner.

“That bastard will never hurt you again, Amy. Or do you prefer Jennifer?”

“I don’t care what you call me, as long as you never let me go, Griffin.”

“Never again, Amy. Never again.”

“I like Amy. Jennifer is dead, along with the monster who kept her in chains.”

“In that case, I love you Amy Grace,” Griffin said and kissed me.

“I love you so much, Griffin. I’m so sorry I…”

“Sshhh,” he said softly and kissed me again.

* * *

Griffin and I flew back home that night. It was early morning when we landed. I was exhausted after my ordeal and Griffin didn't look too fresh either. He took me to his place so we could sleep for a few hours before we met with Megan and Jasper.

We fell asleep almost immediately. I awoke feeling groggy and for a moment I forgot where I was. I calmed down as soon as I saw Griffin's face. He was asleep next to me. I couldn't believe it was all over.

I got out of bed and went to the bathroom. Griffin was awake by the time I got back. He lay on his back with his arms folded behind his head. The love of my life was so handsome.

“Welcome home,” he smiled.

“It's good to be back,” I said and climbed back under the covers.

“Can I offer you some tea or something? Are you hungry?”

“I'm okay, thanks, Griffin. I think we should talk about what happened.”

“Agreed.”

“First off, I want you to know that I feel terrible for lying to you. I'm so sorry.”

“I understand, Amy. I'm no longer angry about that.”

“I wanted to tell you so many times, but I was afraid you wouldn't want to be with someone with so much baggage.”

“I met Jasper. He's adorable.”

“He's, my life.”

“I can understand that. A mother's love is a force of nature.”

“I need to tell you something, Griff.”

“I think I already know what you're going to say.”

“Did Megan tell you?”

“Yes.”

“I wanted to tell you, but Paul got to me before I had the opportunity to do so. How do you feel about it?”

“Becoming a father? Are you kidding? I’m elated, Amy! The woman I love is having my baby. What do you think?”

“I was so afraid you’d think I was trying to trap you with a baby, but I promise you, Griffin, it was an accident.”

“A very happy one, my love.”

“You’re perfect. Do you know that?” I said and cupped Griffin’s face between my hands.

“I can’t believe I almost lost you. Promise me you’ll never keep anything from me again. I couldn’t live without you.”

“Nor can I.”

Griffin kissed the place where Paul’s fist had left its final mark. His scent aroused the deepest of desires inside me. I loved everything about the man.

“Make love to me, Griffin,” I whispered.

My lover unbuttoned my PJ shirt and kissed my growing breasts. I arched my back to meet his lips.

“I’ve missed you so much,” he groaned.

Griffin kissed my stomach and made his way to my belly button. An urgency burned within me.

“This was all I thought about while we were apart,” I whispered. “I want you so desperately.”

“No more wishing and waiting, my love,” he cooed and pulled down my shorts.

I was so wet for him. Griffin slid into me. The sensation shot pleasure through my whole body as he satisfied the dull, throbbing ache with each purposeful thrust. I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him in so deep, we were practically one flesh.

“I love you, Amy,” he said breathlessly as he drove harder and harder, chasing the crest of the wave.

“I love you too,” I gasped before I climaxed.

“Marry me,” he said while I tried to catch my breath.

“What?”

“Will you marry me, Amy? I never want to be without you again.”

“Yes! Of course, I’ll marry you.”

We lay in each other’s arms for a long time before we got dressed to meet with Megan. I wanted to see my Jasper.

* * *

My nerves were raw. Seeing Paul shot to death had been an awful experience. I was glad that Jasper didn’t see it. That wasn’t a scar I wanted him to carry on his young soul.

Griffin called me from the airport and told me that Jen was safe. They were going to meet us at my parents’ home after they’d rested for a few hours. I was relieved that my best friend was safe, but I wasn’t looking forward to meeting with her after I’d betrayed her so shamelessly.

“Guess who’s at the door,” I said to Jasper when the bell rang.

“Who?” he said, his eyes full of innocent curiosity.

“Why don’t we go and have a look.”

I opened the front door and stood back.

“Mama!” Jasper shouted and ran towards his mother.

“Jasper, my big boy,” Jen said and dropped to her knees.

Mother and son clung to one another.

“What happened to your eye, Mama?” he said once he had a good look at his mom’s face.

“Oh, this old boo-boo,” she smiled. “It’s nothing. I was a little clumsy.”

“Does it hurt?” Jasper asked and poked the bruise lightly with his finger.

Jennifer laughed.

“It’s all better now that I’m here with you, baby.”

“You want to see me swim with Grandpa, Mama? I’m very fast now.”

“I’d love to see you swimming, my darling. Why don’t you go and put on your swimsuit while I talk to Aunt Megan?”

“Okay,” he said excitedly and ran off.

“Hi, Megan,” Jen said.

“Hi, Jen,” I greeted her gingerly.

“I’m going to give you two some privacy,” Griffin said and left us.

“Shall we take a seat in the living room?” I asked.

“Sure.”

Talk about the Green Mile. My heart was beating wildly. What was I going to say? How would I justify what I had done to her?

I decided to just get it off my chest. I couldn’t stand the pain and guilt anymore.

“I’m so sorry, Jen,” I blurted out as soon as we sat down. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“I must say, Megan, the news of your betrayal came as a terrible shock. I never would have seen it coming,” Jen said as tears formed in her beautiful, big eyes.

“I was trying to protect my parents, Jen. It’s not an excuse, I know. I hope that one day you will be able to forgive me. But I understand if you’re not ready now. I’m truly sorry,” I said and burst into tears.

“It’s not all your fault, Megan. I had a little something to do with it too. I can’t shift all the blame onto you. That wouldn’t be fair.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I called Tristan’s phone one night when I was drunk and spoke to Paul for a long time. I didn’t know he had put a trace on the call, so he already had an idea of where I was before he spoke to you at the funeral.”

“What?”

“Yes. He told me later that he’d put two and two together.”

“So, he already knew I was lying about not knowing where you were?”

“Yes. He knew I was with you.”

“But, even so, I never should have let him take you like that. I should have warned you.”

“Yes, you should have. But who knows what I would have done if I were in your shoes? Besides, you kept my child safe and away from him. And, for that I will always be grateful, Megs.”

“Can you ever forgive me?” I asked with all the sincerity and contrition I had in me.

“Of course, I forgive you, Megan. I love you. You’re my best friend.”

“Thank you. I’m so sorry.”

“Just so you know,” Jen said while we were in an embrace, “we’re even.”

“Agreed,” I laughed.

“Do you want to be my maid of honor?”

“What?!”

GRIFFIN

“I can’t believe this is your last night as a bachelor, Griff,” Alice chuckled as we sat outside around the fire at my folks’ place.

“I know. The end of an era, hey,” I smiled.

“You couldn’t have chosen better brother. Amy is the perfect mate for you.”

“Agreed. I’m the lucky one. I almost lost her.”

“A wife and a new baby. You’re going to have your hands full soon. It’s a good thing I’m a loving aunt and an excellent babysitter.”

“Uh-huh. And how much are the fees going to set me back?”

“Hey, you’re getting the best care money can buy, buddy. You should be so lucky.”

“Speaking of aunt. I asked Amy if I could adopt Jasper. She agreed.”

“Ah, Griff! That’s lovely.”

“I don’t want him to think that he is any less important to me than his sibling.”

“You’re such a softy,” Alice smiled and punched me on the arm.

“Have you told the folks yet?”

“Nope. I thought I’d tell you first.”

“They’re going to be so thrilled. We all adore little Jasper.”

“Mom and Dad are going to have quite the time luring Jasper away from Megan’s parents.”

“I think it’s wonderful how everyone has rallied around Amy and her boy. A child can never have too many grandparents. It takes a village, they say.”

“Village, check.”

“Are you nervous about tomorrow?”

“Hell, yes. I hope I don’t forget the vows I wrote,” I grimaced.

“Don’t worry. I’ll sneak a copy into my purse. Just in case.”

“There’s the groom to be,” Dad said as he walked toward the firepit.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hi, darling. When did you sneak in?” Mom asked me and kissed me on the cheek.

“Alice let me in through the side gate. I thought I’d surprise you with a quick visit.”

“You should get some rest, Son,” Dad said and placed the meat on the table. “Tomorrow’s going to be a big day.”

“My baby is getting married,” Mom sighed.

“Oh, no. Don’t you start bubbling again, woman,” Dad chuckled.

“You know I can’t help myself,” she said and wiped her tears away with Dad’s apron.

“I have another surprise for you, if you promise not to cry,” I said.

“Yup, this one’s a doozy,” Al chirped.

“What is it?” Mom asked me.

“I’m adopting Jasper.”

“That’s wonderful, Son,” Dad said and patted me on the back.

“Oh, my darling boy. You mean I’m getting two grandchildren? Fantastic! I’m so proud of you, Griff.”

“Thank you, Mom. I love you guys.”

I went home after an hour and lay on top of my bed. Amy was spending the night with Megan and her family. I didn't think I was going to be able to sleep without her next to me and little Jasper down the passage.

My joy was complete. I had everything I'd ever wanted.

* * *

“I have no idea how I'm going to fit into my dress tomorrow,” I said as Megan and I sat outside at the pool, watching Jasper and Peter enjoying a night swim.

“Hey, we'll hook that baby up with safety pins if we have to,” Megan smiled.

“I can't believe I'm getting married tomorrow, Megs.”

“You want me to pinch you?”

“Hell, no. Your bony fingers pinch hard.”

“Are you excited?”

“More than I could ever say.”

“Well, you are marrying the sexiest, most eligible bachelor in town,” Megan grinned.

“I am, aren't I?”

“Yup, and I'm pretty sure this one won't go bad like potato salad left out in the sun.”

“Like Paul, you mean. It's okay, you can say it.”

“I don't even want to say his name. I'm sorry that Jasper's daddy is dead, but I'm not sorry that monster is where he belongs.”

“Griffin told me how brave you were and how you shielded Jasper with your body. Thank you for that, Megs.”

“I love you and your son. And I'm going to love Griffin and your new baby just as much.”

“I love you too. By the way, is it normal for a detective to make house calls so long after a case has been wrapped up?”

“I know, right. Isn’t Jud a doll?”

“He’s crazy about you, that’s obvious. Is the feeling mutual?”

“Very,” Megan smirked.

“It’s about time.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I think it’s time to get Jasper out of that pool before he morphs into a tadpole.”

“Dad calls him a merman.”

“Close enough. Come on, Jasper,” I called out. “Time to get ready for bed, sweetheart.”

“Ah, Mama! Five more minutes. Please!”

“Okay. But then I’ll scoop you out with a pool net if I have to.”

* * *

“Good morning, sleepy head,” Griffin said over the phone.

“Hi, Babe. Did you sleep well?”

“Nope. The bed’s too empty without you.”

“I bet. I do fill up that mattress these days, don’t I?” I giggled.

“I’m not complaining. More for me to fondle.”

“See you at the church, handsome.”

“See you soon. Perhaps we can have a quickie in the changeroom before the ceremony.”

“You’re a bad boy, Griffin Cooper.”

“You better believe it.”

After the call, I got up and had a long, leisurely soak in the tub. The house was quiet which meant that Jasper was most

likely still asleep. I slipped my very pregnant self into comfy clothes and went downstairs.

“Good morning, darling,” Maude said when I entered the kitchen.

“It’s becoming impossible to sneak up on anyone with this tummy,” I laughed.

“Yup, I saw your perfect bump long before I saw you,” she agreed.

“Getting into my dress is going to be a challenge. I’m sure my waistline expanded some more during the night.”

“Don’t you worry about a thing. Megan and I are all over this. Tea?”

“Yes, please. Is Jasper still sleeping?”

“Nope. He and Peter went to the store to get milk.”

“I was wondering why it was so quiet around here.”

“We thought you could do with a bit of a lie in. Before the big day starts, and all.”

“Thank you, Maude.”

“You’re welcome.”

“No, I mean it sincerely. Thank you for everything you and your family have done for me. I don’t have words to express my gratitude.”

“No thanks needed, sweet girl. It’s been and will always be our pleasure.”

“I must just tell you; Peter is a ball of nerves.”

“It was so sweet of him to offer to give me away at the altar.”

“I think he’s trying to drop a hint with Megan. I know he feels the same as I do. We’re looking forward to the day he gives away his little Megs.”

“Well, you may have your wish sooner than you think. I see the way Jud looks at her.”

“Ah, so it’s not just an old woman’s imagination?”

“Nope. I see it too.”

“Thank God!”

We laughed.

“What’s going on here?” Megan asked. “What have I missed?”

“Nothing,” I said and winked at Maude.

* * *

The church decorations were spectacular. I’d never seen so many flowers in one place. Griffin’s family had insisted on footing the bill, no matter how much we protested.

I had my arm linked with Peter’s as he and I walked, or rather wobbled, down the aisle to where Griffin was waiting patiently for me. He looked so handsome my knees turned to jelly.

I didn’t hear a thing the minister said before the I dos. All I remember was Griffin kissing me after we were pronounced man and wife. It must have been some kiss because suddenly he and I were standing in a pool of wet.

“Uh-oh,” I whispered into Griffin’s ear. “I think my water just broke.”

Griffin looked like a deer caught in the headlights. He grew pale and I was pretty sure he would have keeled over had his father not raced up to us and supported him.

“I see someone wants to join the celebrations,” the minister said into the microphone and smiled as everyone descended on me, trying to get me to a car.

Griffin and I hopped into the limo and the driver sped off to the hospital. Megan and Alice had bailed into the car with us, while the rest of the crew followed in their own vehicles.

“How are you feeling, my love?” my new husband asked me with panic in his voice.

“I’m okay,” I said in between contractions.

“Can’t you drive any faster?” he snarled at the driver.

“It’s alright, Griff. We’ll be there soon,” Megan said and held onto my hand. “Luckily for us babies don’t pop out that easily.”

“Lucky,” I groaned. “Ouch!”

The last contraction was a bitch. Our new baby was in a rush.

“We’re here,” the driver said, no doubt keen to get the noisy, messy woman out of his nice, clean car.

I was wheeled into the delivery ward, huffing and puffing, with an entourage of people all talking at once to the attending nurse.

“Where’s Jasper?” I asked before Griffin, and I were taken to my room.

“He’s fine. Amy. He’s with my mom,” Alice said.

“I’ll bring him in to see you as soon as the baby is born,” Megan smiled.

It was quiet in the delivery room. The staff hooked me up to a monitor so we could keep an eye on the baby’s heart rate.

Griffin fed me ice while the nurse kept an eye on my progress.

“I didn’t have a chance to tell you,” Griff said while clinging to my hand.

“What?” I breathed hard.

“The papers came to the house this morning. Jasper is officially my son too.”

A tear rolled down my face. I wasn’t sure if it was the fear of pushing out a baby or Griffin’s expression of joy that was to blame for the flood of waterworks that was to follow. Either way, I had an excuse to bubble like a girl.

“Thank you, Griffin,” I sobbed once I could speak.

“No, my love. Thank you. You have made my life complete.”

“Okay, who’s ready for a fresh-faced siren?” the doctor said when she walked into the room.

Griffin stayed by my side throughout the labor and the birth of our new baby. The doctor encouraged him to stay on the safe side of the sheet while I pushed out our newest family member.

“If you’ve never seen an angry one before, you’d better stick close to your wife’s head,” she chuckled.

I remembered shouting at my poor husband and nearly crushing his hand at the final push.

“She’s got a healthy set of lungs, I can tell you that much,” the doctor smiled. “Congratulations. You have a gorgeous baby daughter.”

“Ah, a girl,” I sighed with joy and utter exhaustion.

The doctor handed her to Griffin while she finished up with me. His eyes were wet with tears.

“She’s perfect, my love. Our little girl looks just like you,” he said and wiped his eyes.

“Does she have a name yet?” the nurse asked me.

“Yes,” Griffin said proudly. “Her name is Maggie.”

“What a beautiful name. You don’t hear of too many Maggie’s these days,” the doctor said.

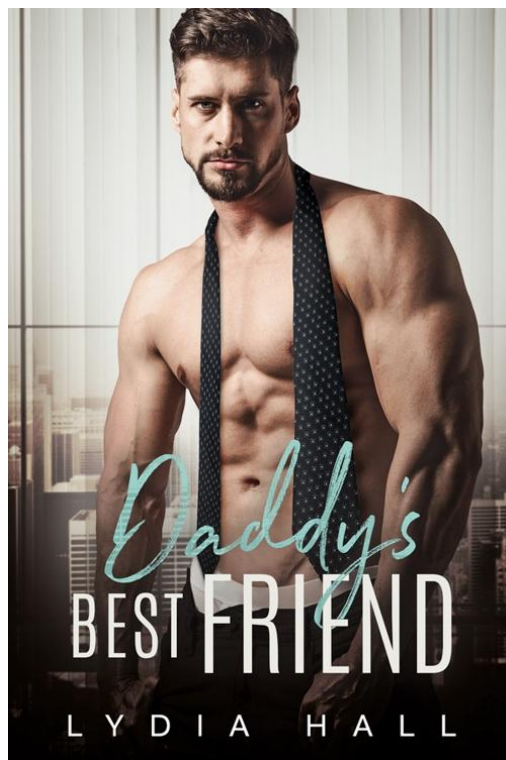
“It was my mother’s name,” I smiled, so touched that Griffin had decided on that name.

“Well, Maggie,” he said to her while she gripped his baby finger with her tiny hand. “We’d better toughen you up, little one. You have a big brother who is dying to play with you.”

“We’d better get her a set of water wings,” I smiled. “I think she’s going to need them.”

“Maggie Cooper, Kitesurfing Olympic Champion. I like it. It has a nice ring to it,” Griffin grinned and kissed me.

EXCERPT: DADDY'S BEST FRIEND



I forced myself to forget about Allan... the man who was not only my father's best friend, but also my new boss.

Resisting my urges to jump into bed with a hot older man only led to trouble.

The more I ran from my feelings, the closer I felt to Allan.

He was aware of my secret – the filthy things that excited me.

But the secret we had to hide from the world continued to get more complicated.

I kept thinking that I still had time to get out.

It was only when I missed my period that I saw my future flash before my eyes.

I was about to lose not only my father's trust, but also my job.

Those two pink lines came with two choices...

Hide the news and disappear, or be honest with Allan and have my heart broken.

Prologue: Ella

Paul sat on the couch, flipping through the channels as I slipped into something a lot sexier than jeans and a t-shirt. His roommate had left for the evening, and Paul had hung the obligatory sock from the doorknob to indicate we wanted privacy. It had been six months that we'd been seeing each other. Things really heated up over summer quarter when the majority of the student body went home for summer break. Paul and I stayed behind to fuck like horny teenagers while taking skeleton classes to give a credible reason for being there.

The emerald-colored satin contrasted with my ginger hair and the touch of ruby lipstick I put on—which would soon stain his dick—only made the ensemble hotter. The slinky negligée hugged my curves like a glove, boosting my self-confidence. I adjusted my breasts, making sure the cleavage revealed was just enough to tease him, without being so much that I revealed my world to him all at once.

I brushed my thumbs across my nipples until they hardened, showing through the fabric. After fluffing my hair for added volume, I pinched my nipples one last time—for good measure—and opened the door of the bathroom. Paul sat with a video game controller in his hands staring at the TV. He seemed pretty invested in the game, so my sexy pose against the door jamb was wasted.

I scowled, remembering that 20-year-old men were really just boys in larger bodies. They hadn't even grown into their full potential. And Paul, despite being on the football team, heavy weightlifting and fit, was no more grown up than my brother Alex—who also sat playing video games 5 hours a day, ignoring his studies.

The floor creaked as I walked closer to him, the squeaky floorboard always an indicator that someone was using the toilet in the middle of the night. I'd spent enough half-drunken nights at his place to know exactly where the loose board was, but I stepped on it on purpose. Still, he did not look up at me. My nipples were starting to go soft again, but I didn't want to stir them up in front of him, so I ditched the idea that he'd see their outline and get turned on.

Instead, I stood next to him, striking my sexiest pose. With a hand on my hip, lips pouted out perfectly, I cleared my throat. He shouted some obscenity at the TV and punched the buttons on his controller harder. His face deepened into a scowl, and he leaned around as if he were avoiding the monster—whatever the fuck it was—that he was fighting in the game.

Frustrated, I decided to take things into my own hands. He wasn't paying attention to me, but I had things I wanted to talk to him about. And after that, I planned to fuck his brains out better than I ever had. He was so distracted by the game; it was like he had forgotten the reason I came by. So, I reminded him, forcing his controller out of the way as I slid onto his lap, straddling him. He leaned to the side, punching away at the buttons.

I'd never had to beg for his attention before, and I shouldn't have been begging now, but this was important to me. I pushed my hand down the front of his pajama pants and took hold of his flaccid dick, gently massaging and stroking him. After shouting out a few more obscenities, he tossed the remote onto the couch cushion beside him and grabbed my hips.

“Fuck, you made me lose.” Paul's hands slid up my sides to my breasts, and he gave them a squeeze. “You gana fuck me good, huh?”

He started to get hard in my grip, and it brought a smile to my face. “Yeah, but can we talk first?”

I tucked him back into his pants and watched the desire in his eyes flash to annoyance.

“You got all sexy like this, interrupted my game, and now you want to talk?” His head flopped back like a ragdoll, his eyes rolling.

“Yeah, well after we talk, we fuck.” I shrugged and watched him shake his head.

“Get it over with. You got me worked up now.” Paul rested his hands on my thighs, sliding one up my nightgown until his thumb pressed between my legs.

“So, we’ve been together for six months. Yesterday was the six-month anniversary of the day we hooked up the first time.” I drew a line down the center of his chest with my finger as I talked. “And well, I’m ready for the next steps. You know?”

“Next steps?” He looked confused, his hand slid away from my groin, resting on my knee.

“Yeah, like making this official. We fuck a lot; I help you with your studies. But I want to tell people we’re seeing each other now. You know?” I held my breath, hoping he was as happy about the move as I was, but he scoffed, laughing at me. It took me by surprise. “Why are you laughing?”

“Ella, is that what you think this is?” He laughed harder. “You think we’re in a relationship?”

I swallowed, my confidence deflating like a cold balloon. My heart hovered somewhere between helplessly in love with him, and terrified he’d smash it with a hammer. I felt the emotions stirring, and it wasn’t a good feeling.

“This is literally just fucking. You wanted to help with my English, so I let you. You wanted to tutor me in math, so I let you. You wanted to sleep over and get all snuggly in that tiny-ass bed, so I fucking let you. But that does not mean we’re dating.”

I felt like I'd be slapped. I scrambled off his lap, running to the bathroom to hide the tears I knew were coming. I had never been more humiliated in my life, not even the time when I was 12 and I started my period on a day I wore white pants. Paul had never been so callous to me, and he had never let on that this was just sex.

I dressed in record time, calling an Uber as I did so. I was hurt. I didn't know what I had expected him to say, or how I thought he'd react, but that certainly wasn't it. I only wished I'd have been dressed when I started that discussion, because now I had to walk out the door of the bathroom and past him before I could leave the dorm. I braced myself and slipped out, hoping he was absorbed in his video game.

He wasn't.

"Ella, we can still fuck. You don't have to leave." Paul gave me a genuine expression of shock and disbelief, and I could have slapped him.

"I didn't come here to fuck. I came here to talk to you."

"You don't have to rush off. We can talk." He grabbed my wrist and I jerked away from him. I didn't want to talk anymore.

"Paul, you don't get it. I'm in love with you. I wanted to tell you that I want to make it official, and you laughed in my face. This isn't a game to me." Turning the deadbolts on the door, I let the tears fall. He didn't deserve my explanations or my heart.

"You're the one that got all cuddly and fucked it up. We had a good thing. Now you want to get emotional? This was always just sex and friendship. Always. I never led you on."

I whipped around and glared at him. "You're right. You didn't. But you never gave me any indication that we couldn't be more either. Asshole." I slammed the door behind me, hopefully to never see him again.

The Uber driver was a typical, "turn your radio up and ignore the passenger" type, so the 45-minute drive home from UM to Weston wasn't awful. Mom and Dad wouldn't be expecting

me, but I couldn't go back to my dorm room. I shared it with Wendy Romer—daughter of billionaire David Romer, hedge fund manager. She was the most superficial person I'd ever met, and half the reason why I refused to continue living under my father's shadow. I just wanted privacy tonight, not a lengthy lecture on how crying would make my face pucker when I was older. Wendy was good for that.

"Here?" The Uber stopped in front of my father's house; the gate locked.

"Yeah, sorry. I have to type in the code. Thanks for the lift." I was out of the car and sneaking in the back of the house before he was even at the end of the street driving away. I thought I could get to my room unnoticed, because Mom and Dad had given me the only bedroom on the ground floor of the fourteen-million-dollar home. But Mom and Dad sat snuggled up together on the sofa in the media room, eating popcorn and watching a movie. The minute the door slid open; Mom sat up.

"What's wrong, Ella? What are you doing here? Your face!" She left dad in a pile of popcorn and walked over to me with arms outstretched. "Did something happen? Are you okay?"

I pushed her away. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh, dear. Did someone hurt you?" She hugged me and pushed a few strands of hair behind my ear. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed they had mascara streaking them.

"No, Mom. I just tried to tell Paul I loved him, and he didn't feel the same way."

She hooked her arm around me and refused to let me leave. Because April in Miami was already sweltering, the air-conditioned temperature of the room made me shiver. It was no wonder they were under a warm blanket.

"Dear, you should just focus on your studies. You have too much going for you to let it get screwed up by puppy love." Mom tried to guide me to the couch, but I planted my feet.

"What you should really be doing is not wasting your time on boys. You should be working for me. The business is really doing well, and I could really use your skills in our accounting

department.” Dad set the half-empty bowl of popcorn on the table and shook out the blanket after Mom’s spill. The housekeeper would be irritated she had to clean up after that mess, and he seemed not to care.

“I don’t want to work for you, Dad. I want to make my own way.” It was the age-old argument. Every time I came home, he reminded me how bad I was screwing up and what I should be doing. Still easier than Wendy Romer.

“The path you’re on right now is destructive, Ella. You are playing with fire. Your future is only a breath away and you’ll destroy it by the partying you’re doing. Mark my words.”

He pointed his finger and shook it and I rolled my eyes. My bed, a bottle of gin, and a good night’s sleep were calling to me.

As I slunk out of the room, I called, “Good night.”

I just couldn’t win.

[Read the full story HERE!](#)

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