



BOOK
ONE

Fake It Till We Break It

TYLA WALKER

Resort Romances

FAKE IT TILL WE BREAK IT

RESORT ROMANCE

BOOK 1

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EBOOK CAROUSEL

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CONTENTS

1. Josephine
2. Aiden
3. Josephine
4. Aiden
5. Josephine
6. Aiden
7. Josephine
8. Aiden
9. Josephine
10. Aiden
11. Josephine
12. Aiden
13. Josephine
14. Aiden
15. Josephine
16. Aiden
17. Josephine
18. Aiden
19. Josephine
20. Aiden
21. Josephine
22. Aiden
23. Josephine
24. Aiden
25. Josephine
26. Aiden
27. Josephine
28. Aiden
29. Josephine
30. Aiden
31. Josephine
32. Aiden
33. Josephine

34. Aiden
35. Josephine
36. Aiden
37. Josephine
38. Aiden
39. Josephine
40. Aiden
41. Josephine
42. Aiden
43. Josephine
44. Aiden
45. Josephine
46. Aiden
47. Josephine
48. Aiden
49. Josephine
50. Aiden

Preview

51. Jennifer
52. Ren
53. Jennifer
54. Ren
55. Jennifer

Also by Tyla Walker

JOSEPHINE

I rub my eyes wearily, slumping against the steering wheel of my car. If I could just find the energy to put the key in the ignition, I could at least drive myself home.

For a moment, even just starting the car seems like a noble but unreasonable dream. I settle for lifting my arms to cushion my head, resting it on top of the wheel as I rest my eyes. It's terribly uncomfortable, but I'm too tired to care.

Finally, I rouse myself enough to pick up my cell phone, calling my dad. While I wait for him to answer, I turn the key to start the engine. After five rings, I know he must be working at the coffee house.

"Hello?" he answers, his voice rushed.

"I won't keep you," I start. "Just wanted to say I'm leaving the hospital. She's sleeping. Are you busy?"

"I was waiting on someone. Not a lot of activity today, no," he replies.

A part of me feels guilty at being relieved to hear it. If the shop was bustling, I'd feel obligated to hurry down and help. Now, with my mom sleeping anyway, I don't need to stay with her or rush off to work. Maybe I can cram in a nap before I head in.

It's a reasonable thought, and the only reason I feel guilty for it is that I know we need the business. I shouldn't be happy things are slow, not with the medical bills we are facing.

“I’ll head down a little later,” my dad says. My mom doesn’t need constant companionship, of course. Still, we try not to leave her for too long. She’s been sick for awhile, and we know she’s bored of what seems to be an endless string of days stuck in a hospital bed. Keeping her company and providing entertainment is the least we can do.

“Okay,” I answer. “I think I might take a quick nap before I come in?” It’s phrased like a question, leaving him room to argue that he needs me right away. He doesn’t.

“Good. You need more rest than you’re getting. You’re going to end up in the bed next to your mother,” he warns.

I chuckle darkly at the thought. We are *all* stretched too thin these days. “You’re one to talk.”

He laughs, but the sound of the shop doorbell chiming in the background alerts me that a new customer might be coming in. I quickly say my goodbyes and hang up the phone.

The drive home feels like it takes forever, possibly just because I am bored of doing this day after day. I finally arrive, moving as fast as my tired body can toward my pillow. I need food, I need fresh clothes, I need a shower. But I don’t need any of them as badly as sleep.

Still, I set my alarm to ensure it’s only a brief cat nap. When it goes off, I can’t say I feel rested, but I feel better. It’s a start.

I hurry around the house to get ready for work, noting he still isn’t home. Maybe things picked up at the coffee house after all. Of course, it could also just mean someone didn’t show up for their shift, and he can’t leave the crew short-staffed. I hope for the former, but even the latter would save us money on payroll.

I rush out the door just in case business is booming and they need me. It’s a wishful thought, I know, but it’s there. Call me an optimist.

I wave hello to the skeleton crew as I walk in the door. We run bare bones these days, without adequate money to pay for

more workers than absolutely necessary. Of course, this means my father and I are stuck picking up the slack.

I don't see my father and make my way through the back rooms to find him. When I finally locate him in his office, he is staring anxiously at a piece of paper. My heart skips a beat, his nervous expression apparently contagious.

"What is it?" I ask quietly, already dreading the answer. My mind spins with possibilities. A new bill from the hospital? Bad results from one of mom's many tests? *No, it can't be that, I think. The doctors would deliver that news in person...wouldn't they?*

He looks up from the paper in surprise, noticing me for the first time. Quickly, the glum look settles back on his face as he reflects on my question. "An eviction notice," he finally says with a sigh, not even trying to hide the problems from me anymore. How could he? There are too many.

I rub my hands across my face fretfully, feeling my pulse race at this newest bit of bad news. It is bad for all of us, but my heart really breaks for my poor parents.

They started their business fresh out of college, putting their blood, sweat, tears, and every dime they had into it. Over time, it became a success – not the instant kind, but the hard earned kind that made them glow with pride when they got to tell others they had expanded to a second shop. Maybe someday, there would even be a third.

Most of their money went toward future progress, but the business did provide a more than adequate and comfortable living. My childhood could not be considered deprived, by any stretch of the imagination, even though my parents expected me to contribute to the family with age appropriate chores around the shop.

And then mom got sick. Not only did the bills pile up like snowflakes, but she could no longer help out. Running two buildings quickly became overwhelming. The second coffee house was sold, a painful but necessary decision to reduce our workload and pay for her care.

We had thrown ourselves into the one that remained, determined to at least keep half their legacy alive. This one bore my mother's name with the moniker Amy's Coffee and Pastries. The idea of losing it stole the breath from my lungs and felt like a poignant, bitter reminder of the very real fear we still might lose *her*.

Finally, I just walk around the desk to give my father a hug, unsure what else to do. "How can I help?" I ask simply, even as I know this is a question that we are all desperately trying to answer.

He pats my back, taking another deep breath. "You just do what you do best. Get behind the counter and let me worry about the rest. This isn't a problem a child should need to deal with."

It isn't a problem anyone should have to deal with, I want to argue. Besides, I am 25, hardly a child. But I know what he means, so I just give him one more comforting squeeze in response.

Then we break apart, and I walk away to begin work. At the door of the office, I turn back, studying his forlorn expression as he gazes down at the letter again. He must sense it, because he raises his head and tries to give me a reassuring smile. It comes out more like a grimace.

I smile back, and it is just as weak as his. "Hey, Dad..." I begin, not sure what I am going to say next but feeling the need to say *something*.

I end up settling for the only thing I can think of. "I love you."

For the first time, some degree of genuine peace flickers across his face. "I know," he replies. "It's the only thing that keeps me going, anymore."

I just nod, understanding *exactly* what he means.

AIDEN

I study myself in the mirror, making sure my tie is knotted in a perfect square and everything looks impeccable. I'm not usually a sloppy man, but my father has such high, borderline impossible, standards for etiquette. Even the tiniest slip up, something no one else would even notice, will give him an excuse to jump all over me.

I'm determined to make sure he has no ammunition. I scrutinize myself one last time, fiddling a bit with my hair. Then I finally turn away, satisfied with my appearance. *Let's see you find something to complain about now, Dad.*

The thought feels a bit hollow, like a thread I don't really want to pull. I'm sure he'll find something to start in on me for, even if I can't imagine what right now. He always does. I wish I felt as confident as my snarky inner voice sounds.

It's not just him I'm worried about impressing, though. I'll be meeting my family for lunch while we prepare for another business meeting later today. That's why I have to be dressed to kill, and God help me if I spill anything on my clothes. What's the neatest thing a person can order for lunch, anyway?

Our business meeting is with a big shot investor my dad wants to impress. But it's not just any investor – it's the father of my ex-girlfriend. Whenever I think too hard about it, it's enough to make me break out in a clammy sweat. So I try to ignore it, finding it preferable to agonize over my reflection instead.

I'm not going to miss this chance to show off the mistake she made, though. I hope her dad sees me and is so impressed, he goes home to tell her all about it. I hope he points out that she made the worst decision of her life, cheating on me.

She threw out a perfectly good man. No, an excellent man. This is my one chance to really rub it in. I want her drowning in regret.

To be honest, I'm kind of glad she blew up everything we had. It had been messy at the time, but it was for the best. We weren't going anywhere. Now that I'm free of her, it's obvious I'm better off without her.

Still, I'd like to see her squirm a little. Just a little lesson she can keep in mind for the future. Before she does the same thing to some other poor, unsuspecting guy.

When I arrive at the restaurant, my parents and sister are already seated and waiting for me. I greet them respectfully, already feeling my dad's eyes burning into me as he checks me over. I settle in my chair as he begins to talk.

He starts right away in business matters. I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding, relieved that he didn't find anything to criticize about my appearance. My sister twirls the straw in her iced tea, looking bored.

My mother, on the other hand, fidgets in her chair and keeps fussing with the tablecloth. For a moment, I stop listening to my father, watching her smooth out roughly the hundredth wrinkle in the material that no one but her can see, anyway.

She's nervous, I realize. A red flag goes up in the back of my mind. The conversation, or perhaps the correct word is monologue, of my father pauses abruptly when the waiter comes to take our orders. My sister's face lights up, thankful for the temporary respite of literally any other topic.

As soon as the waiter leaves, my father starts again. I listen warily, still wondering why my mother seems so anxious. And that's when the bomb drops.

“He’s a vital investor for our company. You know as well as I do how much we could do if we put our funds together.” My father is looking at me expectantly, waiting for a response.

“Yes...” I agree slowly, hesitantly. I can sense a trap snapping shut, but I don’t know how to avoid it.

“Now, we can strike up a partnership. That’s all well and good, but that only gets us so far. He funds one project, and then we have to hope he funds another, and another. Right? There’s only one partnership that’s permanent.”

My mother won’t look at me. My father’s jaw is set, prepared for an argument that hasn’t even begun. My sister is squirming down in her seat, and I half think she might crawl under the table.

“What?” I finally ask in confusion. This strange code he’s talking in makes no sense to me. What is he getting at?

“You and Ada,” my dad answers simply. I feel my cheeks heat up, frustrated just by the mention of her name. “It’s not like you don’t know each other. Heck, you already dated. If the two of you get married, it creates a permanent bond between both of our companies.”

He leans across the table. “We’ll be on equal footing, merged and both with a child benefiting from it. It’s the greatest motivation there is for him to be fully on board. And you, more than anyone, stand to gain a lot by the success,” he concludes. His voice stresses the last part, trying to persuade me.

I can hardly hear him, though. I’m too distracted by the ridiculous idea that he thinks I’m going to marry Ada. The woman who cheated on me with my *best friend*. Just an hour ago, I was thinking how fortunate I was to escape that trap once. I’m not going back willingly, for any amount of money.

Suddenly, I am hot and nauseous and dizzy. There’s a ringing in my ears. I can see my father’s lips still moving but none of it sinks in. I shove the chair back from the table, standing up abruptly.

“Excuse me,” I manage to bite out. My father has drilled manners into me. Even in a moment like this, it comes out like a reflex.

I turn to walk away, so furious that my skin actually tingles from the anger. I’m not even sure where I’m going. Anywhere but here, I guess.

Before I know it, I am pushing open the restaurant door and walking outside. People coming in turn away from me, and it registers somewhere in the back of my head that they must see the hostility on my face. It doesn’t surprise me, though. I feel violent right now, so full of rage that it makes me ill.

I am not normally an angry man. But even I have my limits. To set up this whole deal assuming I can be coerced into marrying Ada. To charge ahead without even asking my opinion, when clearly it all hinges on a relationship I don’t even want.

It’s obvious now that he had this in mind the whole time. He just waited for the last second to spring it on me, hoping I would be backed into a corner and unable to refuse.

“Aiden, wait!” I hear my sister’s voice but ignore it. I pace anxiously back and forth on the sidewalk in a desperate but unsuccessful attempt to calm myself. Soon, I can see her standing next to me out of the corner of my eye.

“Ada’s a bitch,” I blurt out, not even caring that I’m cursing in public and in front of a nice restaurant, too. “A bitch. I won’t do it,” I insist, as though convincing her is the same as convincing my father.

She puts her hand on my arm, a gesture that is meant to be comforting. I feel my blood pressure spike instead, wanting to yell and scream. I swallow it down, barely, some part of my brain remembering this isn’t her fault.

“Let’s go get a coffee,” I suggest. I need some time to figure out what I’m going to do, and I can’t go back in there yet. More importantly, I need to calm down. Maybe a coffee and a chance to clear my head will help.

She slips her arm into mine, escorting me down the sidewalk as if I might run away any second. For all I know, she's right. I just might.

We walk in silence until she finally speaks up, the first opinion she's voiced on the matter. "For what it's worth, I think Ada's a bitch, too," she agrees loyally. Despite myself, I laugh.

But deep down, it just confirms what I already know. There is *nothing* my father can do that will convince me to marry that horrible woman. Nothing.

Now how do I get out of it?

JOSEPHINE

The coffee house, despite our financial concerns, does steady business. Enough to keep our long-time employees busy and working, at least. We've cut down on staffing and stopped hiring as many new people as we did in the past, but we're far from being out of business, either.

That is, if we don't get evicted. That, of course, will bring a dramatic and sudden end to the business.

Today, like always, the phone is not ringing off the hook, but customers do keep appearing. A glance in the cash drawer tells me we've at least turned a profit.

And that, perhaps, is the most unfair part of the whole stinking deal. We do good work, and people like it here. Under any other circumstance, we'd be proud. It's only the overwhelming medical debt that is crippling us.

The number of customers we'd need to relieve that burden would simply be utterly obscene. I guess I should be happy that, on one hand, our shop isn't really a failure. But it's almost more bitter that way, admitting there seems to be no path out. No matter how much we make, it will never be enough. Not for what we're facing.

The chime on the door jerks me out of my glum thoughts, and I watch a refined young woman enter. She has a very groomed, posh appearance, the kind that screams out she doesn't have to think about money the way I do. I am both filled with instant jealousy and hope, because these women tend to make valuable customers.

“I want to hire you for an engagement party,” she says in lieu of introduction. I don’t mind the brusque, borderline rude, way she cuts to the chase. I’m too busy hearing the jangle of money in my head.

“Certainly,” I say politely. “Let me just grab a form to take down all the information.”

The party, it turns out, is only a few days away. I don’t mind the rush job, especially since it means I get to charge more for some of her requests. Her order is extravagant and not cheap, meaning that making time to fit her in is well worth it.

Not only that, but she also pays in full before she leaves. I crinkle the bills in my fist, trying hard not to look too giddy in front of the other customers. When I manage to contain myself in a more appropriate manner, I calmly slide the money into the cash register, having to consciously make an effort not to burst out into song.

If we could get about ten more jobs like that, I think to myself. A part of me knows what a ridiculous hope that is. If I got that many private catering jobs over the next few days, I’d have to hire more staff to even fill them.

But I’m determined to keep my spirits up, so I focus on being optimistic. *Maybe it really will work itself out somehow, in our darkest hour. It could happen...right?*

Business stays...well, if not booming, at least steady. For the next few hours, I have enough to do to keep my mind busy and distracted from my grim worries. It’s something of a relief, and it keeps me from wallowing in my fears of an uncertain future.

Even better, I find something more pleasant to think about when a shockingly handsome man enters the coffee house. He catches my eye right away. For a brief moment, I imagine myself slipping him my number, pretending I am someone bolder, someone more adventurous.

It would never happen, in a million years. But it’s my daydream, and he’s a worthy piece of eye-candy.

My enthusiasm is quickly squashed when an attractive woman follows behind him. They seat themselves together at an open table, already deep in conversation. My heart sinks a little, my lips turning down in a pout. *Of course. All the cute ones are taken.*

He walks away after a moment, coming up to the counter to order while she continues to wait at their table. I stare at her enviously, noting the way her gaze is locked on him. It's obvious they're close, and all thoughts of any future romance fly from my head.

Oh, well. It's not like I have time for it, anyway. I have enough on my plate already, between my mom and the shop. I barely get a chance to sleep, much less date.

It doesn't mean I can't enjoy the view, however. I find myself watching him as he orders, admiring his well-dressed appearance. He's white, tall, tan and lean, and there's something very calming but impressive about the aura he gives off.

His brown hair is neatly combed but in a very simple style. It suggests he's the type who tries to look good but isn't overly infatuated with himself, either. He's attractive, and it's the result of luck more than intense effort.

He must be able to feel me watching him because his eyes slide sideways to lock on mine. I can feel myself heat up with embarrassment and quickly pretend to be wiping down the counter instead. *Great. Now he thinks I'm some creepy weirdo.*

Still, I can't resist sneaking another glance after a moment. Our eyes lock again, and I realize he never looked away. He flashes me a placid smile that makes something bubble deep down in my stomach.

Once more, I focus on the counter. It hits me, too late, that I just blew it. I could have smiled back, at least. I look up to see he is already gone, now, carrying his drinks back to his table.

Curiously, I glance over at the receipt he just signed, startled to read the name. Aiden Hayes.

“Does anyone know that guy?” I ask in a low voice, not wanting to be overheard. The other employees look perplexed, but if they know anything, they are not saying.

I watch him again. This time, it is not out of admiration but something more like suspicion. Our landlord, the one who sent that eviction letter, is a Mr. Hayes. I have never met him as this is my parent’s business, not mine.

But why does he have the same last name? Is he related to him? Or, could it just be a coincidence? Hayes is not that uncommon of a name, after all.

He looks over at me to catch me staring again. By this point, he *should* be annoyed. I would be.

All he offers is another smile, making my heart beat wildly in my chest even as I resent the effect he has on me. I turn my back toward him, pretending to work before his girlfriend catches me gawking.

He can’t be related to the landlord, I decide on my own. He seems too sweet and gentle.

I try to pretend I don’t feel the way my heart thumps in agreement.

AIDEN

How could he think that's a good idea? My head is swimming. I know I probably look like a madman. I can hardly keep still while waiting for my order.

My eyes have already begun checking out the counter, taking in their display of baked goods. I swear the baker here is a prodigy. There's a reason this place is our favorite. Through conflict and trials, this coffee shop has always been the best way to release all my stress.

Maybe they put something in their coffee. The thought makes the corner of my mouth twitch up. Even as upset as I am, the idea still amuses me.

My thoughts eventually fade back to why I'm here in the first place. The muscles in my face start to tense up again as the thought loop starts over. *I get my freedom ripped away because my father wants to make a business connection.*

I don't even notice that I'm staring into the back of the head of the person in front of me in line. At least, until she turns and looks at me. My eyes focus, and I make an apologetic face, then quickly look away.

Then it is my turn to feel someone else's eyes on me. I look over to see one of the workers behind the counter watching me. She's an attractive Black woman, tall and poised with sea green eyes that nearly distract me from my frustration.

She looks away uncomfortably, wiping the counter. I continue to study her, noticing my pulse seems to slow when I

look at her. There's something almost soothing about her and the calm, steady way she moves.

She looks up a second later, and I just smile. She looks away again, and I tear my eyes away in time to order. I get our drinks and carry them back to the table where Aleighia is waiting, noting her furrowed brow.

“What's wrong?” I ask, setting the cups on the table.

“Are you okay?” Her voice is small, and I know she doesn't want to draw attention. I sit down, and I sigh, my frame leaning over the table to put my head in my hands.

“I'm just...overwhelmed. No. I'm pissed. Why does his career have to ruin my life?” I speak louder than I wanted to, and the shop quiets for a moment. I groan lightly, refusing to look up from the table.

“What do you think will happen if the marriage turns sour? It seems kind of unreliable to base a partnership on a marriage.” I can feel her ramping up for a ramble, and I take a hand off my head to stop her.

“Please. I can not deal with that.” I sit up and lean back against the small chair. Taking my drink, I lift it to my face. The nutty aroma of the drink instantly relaxes my muscles.

What my sister asks next tightens them back up. “Do you think you'll go through with it?” she asks, sipping her foamy latte.

I hesitate. Everything in my heart says no. No way. I can't possibly.

But I find myself nodding, despite myself. I don't want to say it, but what choice do I have?

“Probably,” I admit bitterly. “I don't want to, but you know Dad. I'll end up doing it whether I want to or not.”

She nods solemnly, knowing just as well as I that his word might as well be law. We share a moment of silence, the uncomfortable energy of what is to come quieting my normally chatty sibling.

After a while, I break the silence. “I think I have a plan.” My gaze looks up from my drink to her.

She meets my eyes. “What do you mean?”

I instinctually rub the back of my neck, trying to figure out how to explain it. “If I can find a girl who will marry me, one I *actually* like, then maybe Dad won’t make me marry Ada.”

I notice my sister’s face isn’t immediately disillusioned, and I feel myself smile for the first time all night. Aleighia’s expression twists, as though she is thinking it over. Before I know it, she’s laughing from the other side of the table.

“What’s so funny?” I squint at her. She puts her head in her hands, looking at me intently.

“Where are you going to find a girl like that, huh?” she asks through the giggles. I find my eyes flicking over to the beautiful employee I noticed a moment ago.

I’ve seen her a few times before today, but we’ve never interacted. The owner usually takes my order. My tongue slides along the inside of my cheek, wondering if she could be interested, too. I did catch her looking at me and looking embarrassed. Am I reading too much into a glance?

My sister whips her head around to follow my gaze and covers her mouth to muffle the snort.

“Her? Did you pick the first pretty girl you saw?” she asks, and I scowl at the accusation.

“Of course not. We’ve seen her here a lot.” *She is pretty. Beautiful even.* Her sea-green eyes stand out against her dewy, brown skin. She looks like a kind soul.

“This idea is impossible,” my sister softly says, like she doesn’t want to deter me. I look at her, and her face says it all.

Aleighia never wants to stop me. She will always support my ideas, but this one she really doesn’t believe will work. *I’ll make it work.*

I shrug lightly, as if I’m not attached to the idea myself. Looking back at the counter, the woman makes eye contact

with me again. We smile at each other, and I break the look to stare down at my drink.

“She’s really pretty,” my sister agrees, and I look up to find her practically gawking at the girl. I inwardly groan at how indiscreet she can be.

Aleigha shakes her head lightly. “A girl like that has no chance against Ada.” I know she’s right, and I shake my head.

She doesn’t notice and goes on. “She looks too nice. Ada would eat her whole.” Aleighia looks back over at me and mimics a snake swallowing a mouse.

I laugh, but my mind is elsewhere. My sister’s voice is foggy in the background, and I pick up little notes of her babbling. She’s trying to tell me all the reasons this won’t work.

I ignore her, instead focusing on how I can prove her wrong and make this happen. I just know if I do this right, that adorable stranger will be mine.

She looks a lot sweeter than the hell I’m currently facing with Ada.

JOSEPHINE

All of the muscles in my hands are cramping. With a shake of my head, I try to fend off the itchiness on my hairline. I know hairnets are required, especially when doing such an expensive order. But, God, do they itch.

I wish I hadn't left the icing to the last minute, but I didn't want it to get hard from exposure. *You did this to yourself!* I chastise.

I pout as I flex the muscles in my fingers one by one, trying to shake off the soreness. Gripping the piping bag for so long has left my hand aching.

Whoever the engagement is for, they wanted everything done up to the nines. I'm finally done piping the cupcakes, and everything else is already boxed. I glance up at the wall clock, and my eyes widen as I realize I'm going to be late if I don't hurry up.

Luckily, while I've been doing this, the other staff for the event has been putting everything else in the van's refrigerator. Cupcakes, tiramisu, even miniature butter tarts. If the dessert table is this full, I could only imagine what the rest of the catering must look like for the event.

I start carefully packing the cakes away. About ten minutes later, I'm ready. Everything gets stored in the truck, and I double-check the internal fridge's temperature. Perfectly cold. The staff is all ready to go, too, and soon we're off.

By the time we get to the building, we are fifteen minutes early. I am relieved to see we have a bit of breathing room, as

my nerves worried I was cutting it close by leaving so late.

I instruct the staff to start unpacking the boxes and bring them inside. We had to bring in the dolly cart from our shipping area, just to make sure everything could go in at once and we wouldn't have to make a bunch of trips. As they push the loaded dolly toward the door, I call the organizer.

“Hi. This is Josephine from Amy's Coffee and Pastries. We're inside the building with your order. By the front.”

The woman who answered tells me to wait as someone will be right there. I relay the message to my team. After we hang up, it is only a couple more minutes before the lady comes over to lead us in the correct direction.

“Hello! Thank you so much for being early. We're running behind schedule, so it's great that you showed up now.” She starts rambling off about everything that is going right, wrong, or just not happening. As we walk in, I am glad to not have to converse, as she does all of the talking for both of us.

When we get to our station, she gestures for us to start unpacking. I give everyone their directions and then take a second to look around. The place is magnificent. It is clear that two *very* rich families are getting together. The event space looks like something out of a movie.

I settle the signatures and invoice with the organizer as my staff heads out to the van with the empty crates. Just as I am about to leave as well, a familiar figure walks in through the main entrance.

It is him. The man from the cafe. I hadn't seen him for a few days, and he looks much more upset today than he did then. My eyes wander from his face down to his outfit. It is gorgeous.

It looks perfectly tailored to his body. He is still unbelievably handsome, from head to toe. I feel the flutter in my heart, that undeniable excitement at seeing him again. I stifle the big grin I feel coming on. *What is he doing here?*

His eyes scan the room, and he looks tired. When he finally looks my way, our eyes meet. His expression perks up a

little, more surprised now than tired.

I break away and start to turn to my table, not wanting to tempt the fates. Our relationship has exclusively been eye contact, and even that is enough to make my heart pound. If I ask for too much, it just might kill me.

I hear the footsteps walking up behind me, a soft *click* on the marble floors. A deliciously deep voice stops me from my tedious platter arranging.

“Are you working as the staff here?” Even with my back to him, I just know it is my handsome stranger. His voice matches the rest of him, smooth, sexy and masculine.

I open my mouth to answer, but someone walks over to him. They start rambling words that sound like nonsense to me, and I feel like I should back away. This isn't my conversation. As curious as I am, I should be minding my own business.

He stops the person with a hand and looks at me. “I have to go. But I'll be back here later.” His smile is warm, and I feel it deep in my stomach. Nervously, my mouth stretches into a smile of its own. The handsome stranger backs away and walks away with the organizer.

Immediately, I want to keep myself busy. I fiddle and tweak the display, adjusting each dessert almost mindlessly. I want it to look perfect, but more than anything, I want it to be a distraction.

The nagging thoughts at the back of my mind still taunt me, wanting me to address them. I do my best to push them aside, but eventually, they demand to be heard. There are only so many times I can turn a cupcake until I have to admit it doesn't matter which way it's facing.

Is he the one getting engaged? Where the warmth once was, a deep pit in my stomach takes over. How cruel of my brain to get excited over a man who's getting married.

I chew my lip, looking around the space. I pretend I'm just looking to make sure my dessert table fits the rest of the room, but I'm really looking to see who is here. I try to recall the

woman I saw him come into the shop with. Is she here now? Is she his fiance?

There are a lot of people here. It seems to be a big event. Everyone looks incredibly professional. I see my handsome stranger talking to a woman, and the pit in my stomach gets bigger.

Part of me wishes I wasn't here. That the floor could just swallow me up so I won't have to watch the event from the service station.

This is silly. You barely know him! My mind starts to re-evaluate. *Why are you so upset that someone you see in a coffee shop is getting engaged?* I know my brain is right, but it feels like my heart wants it not to be true.

I shouldn't care this much. I shouldn't want him for my own this badly. A man I don't even know.

And I don't. I'm a reasonable woman, a woman who knows better than to get caught up in a silly infatuation.

As long as I ignore the pounding in my chest, I can almost believe it's true.

AIDEN

I swear the only saving grace today is that the cute waitress is here. I found out her name was Josephine. A pretty name to match an equally pretty face.

I can't believe she's working here. Does she work part-time as a caterer? I wish I could talk to her. My head starts to visualize her vibrant eyes before a repetitive sound pulls me out of my daydream.

I hear Ada's annoying stilettos clacking away behind me as I rush to get to my dad's office. I was hoping I could out-walk her and that she would have stopped following me by now. She's resilient, just like a mosquito.

"Aidy! Wait up!" Her obnoxious voice echoes down the hall. Nothing sets me on edge like that ridiculous nickname she calls me. Combined with the nasally voice from her nose surgery, it's abysmal to my ears.

I don't want her to follow me in, so I stop at the door and turn to her. She looks out of breath. As soon as she stops walking, she starts to fix her hair and smooth out her dress. She just can't turn off her plastic personality for a second.

"Ada. Leave me alone." I see that annoying pout. Once, it would subdue my anger, but that was a long time ago. Before she cheated on me.

"Why are you being like this? We were so good once. We could make an amazing couple. Think of how cute our kids would be! Oh, I've always wanted to be a stay-at-home mom!"

I slide my tongue along my teeth and try to keep my anger at bay. She's already picturing our future together, and it, of course, is all about her.

Hats off to the guy who ends up with her. She is going to be an absolute menace.

You're going to be the one to end up with her if you don't stop this engagement. My thoughts roll back to set me in motion again. I think of one last thing to get her off my tail and away from me.

"I would rather marry a broom handle. Your perfect match is yourself, so why don't you bring a mirror to the altar. At least then, maybe your partner would be able to tolerate you."

Her gasp is fake and dramatic. I keep my face neutral. She sputters for a minute and crosses her arms.

"Well, if that's how you're going to be!" She steps back before storming off to God knows where. She makes me pray that my plan will work. Being married to Ada would be a life sentence with a narcissist. I grasp the back of my neck in frustration before opening the office door.

My dad is sitting at his desk. I shut the door behind me quietly, and his reading glasses slide down his nose as he looks up at me from his paperwork. He already looks annoyed by my intrusion, so I better make this quick.

Standing up to someone like my father is a mountainous task. He's a strict man who expects everyone to follow his lead and listen to exactly what he tells them to do. He's the type of man to yell at waiters for taking too long or grabbing the wrong bottle of wine.

If I hadn't been raised by the man, I would be scared of him. Everyone else is.

"Aiden. Why aren't you enjoying your engagement party?" his gruff voice asks, the tone of inconvenience on the tip of his tongue. Of course, he's working, even as his son is getting engaged. I cross my arms before pacing over to stand behind his meeting chairs. I lean on the back of one of them and stare at him.

“Because there is nothing to enjoy. I’m being strapped down to marriage because of a business plan.”

My dad finally puts his work down and takes off his glasses. He leans back in his chair, and his arms cross over his chest. I can already tell I’m about to get an earful.

“Do you remember what this business ‘plan’ is? How important it is to the company? To yours and your sister’s futures?” I open my mouth, but he’s quick to hold up a finger.

“I have plans to retire soon. All of this is going to be yours. And a great way to start your career is to have the backing of one of the city’s largest investors. Right?” He gestures to me, and I nod my head disparagingly.

“But, Dad. This isn’t just a contract signing or a mutual agreement for work. This is the rest of my life. My future children and my future wife! My work isn’t going to be my life!”

My voice is rising. I am sick of having to pretend to obey and keel over to give my dad whatever he wants. It’s been going on for way too long now.

My dad takes a long sip of his coffee. With a soft sigh, he says the words that hurt me more than a forced engagement.

“Do you really want to fail your father, again?” he asks, as though it’s a simple question. *Does he really view my life as a failure?* I can’t stop the flood of insecurity through my mind.

It’s quickly overthrown by anger. *How dare he! I have done everything he’s asked. Now he wants me to sign away my life and calls me a failure because I won’t?*”

I’m disgusted I even looked for his approval. That I still do. This constant, fruitless search for his blessing is why I can’t decide anything for myself.

Not anymore. It’s finally time to end this cycle.

My father opens his mouth to add to the overwhelming guilt trip, but I am already halfway out the door before he does.

“There’s no engagement. Find another way.” I slam his office door closed as he yells at me, the sound muffled behind the wood. I can’t stop the grin as I realize I’ve finally stuck up for myself.

I finally told him *no*.

JOSEPHINE

Something is certainly wrong with me. I saw the card that the organizer was carrying around, confirming the supposed engagement of the handsome man. It was the invitation, removing all doubts.

I have seen invitations of these kinds, hundreds of them, coming in over the years. Requests for engagement parties, birthday parties, even weddings. Never has one struck me so deeply, like an arrow slicing through my heart.

It makes me feel like a lovelorn idiot, which is something I have never really been. The sight of the gold rimming around his name, along with the name of the supposed future-bride-to-be, stings me like an angry bee.

I try to keep myself busy at the coffee shop, ignoring the feelings of fairytale rejection. The man, Aiden, was just so beautiful. I have a hard time talking to anyone, much less people who strike me as utter gods in the flesh.

I have believed in love since I was a kid, of course, with the saturation of romantic films and books I devoured as a shy child. Maybe that screwed me up a little bit. I'm diseased now, a hopeless romantic to the point of ignoring my better judgment.

My autopilot of working through the pain is shattered when I see my phone start to ring next to me in the kitchen. I keep it on full blast at all times. The ringtone sounds out, a fluttery harp string. But the person calling is my father, and the

sight of his face on the caller ID makes my heart pick up the pace.

I answer it anyway, of course.

“Dad? Everything okay?”

There is a long pause where my dad lets out a heaving sigh. The man has worked hard for us his entire life, rarely complaining during even the most understandable of inconveniences. Hearing him let out that regretful noise plants fear deep in my bones.

“It’s your mother. I think she is going to be needing that surgery we talked about earlier than the doctors suggested. Like, almost ASAP, honey.”

His voice sounds lovesick for his wife, forlorn. It eats at my insides. I will do anything I can to remedy that.

“What can I do?” I plead, pressing the phone hard into my face. “If we have to get it done, then we have to get it done...”

“Easier said than done, hon,” my dad interrupts. “I was thinking I could sell the van. That would be the fastest way.”

I cringe, gripping the phone in frustration.

“You need that van, Dad. It’s the only way you can make deliveries. Let me think of other things. I’m about to head home, anyway. Can I call you back then?”

“Of course.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, my darling.”

I hang up and shove the phone into my pocket. Remaining hopeful for the sake of a parent is like dragging yourself through thick mud. It is painful and difficult, but you will always at least try to do it. Even if I feel hopeless, I will not let that leech onto my dad.

Still, the mourning I just heard in his voice will haunt me forever.

I decide to leave early as the coffee shop isn't too busy, and I've prepared our stock for the day. I need time to think about what on earth we can do to get the right amount of money to help out my mom, without losing the very thing that they both put their entire hearts and souls into.

If my dad sells the vehicle, leaving us unable to make deliveries, it'll eat up a significant portion of our earnings. We can't be *losing* money now. This is digging further into the hole, not climbing out of it.

I start to drive home, thinking about my parents, their pain, how utterly unfair life is. They had worked for years to get the shop up and running, to earn a respected reputation, and all for what? For my mother to get ill? To lose everything trying to save her?

I squeeze the steering wheel with one hand as I wipe my tears with the other. It really is an impossible situation. Either we lose the shop, or we lose my mother. Possibly, and even more likely, it is going to be both.

When I get home, I don't eat much. I try to distract myself with mindless TV, but even that doesn't feel suitable. I decide to go out again and drive; sometimes that can help shake up the dust in my brain.

I keep driving as dusk falls to darkness. It isn't a habit of mine to do this, but it somehow feels soothing. My eyes begin to droop, and the moment I start to think that I should head home, it is already too late.

The car in front of me stops short. In my drowsy, distracted state I do not see it coming in time. Could I have reacted faster in different circumstances? I'll never know.

I hit the brakes as fast as I can, but it is no use. It takes some of the speed out of the car, but not enough. Then I hear a loud slam coming from the front of my car.

The impact comes next, right after the hideous thud. I am startled as my head bounces forward toward the steering wheel, then jerks back to hit the headrest. Thankfully, with my arms braced in position on the steering wheel, it absorbs some

of the impact. My head only taps the wheel lightly, but I still feel like a rag doll in one of those car accident ads for air bags.

I freeze in fear, waiting for more but nothing else comes. My heart gallops like a racehorse in my chest. I am unable to feel anything, anything at all, not even pain or discomfort.

My mind begins to race along with my heart. I look around in confusion, trying to piece together what just happened. A metal trash can rolls slowly across the road, and I slowly realize that must have been the reason for the abrupt stop by the car ahead of me.

My thoughts are labored and slow. I let my hands fall from the wheel and smack into my thighs. That is when the pain comes roaring, running up my right arm like an electric shock.

“Damn it,” I seethe.

I start to think of my mother, my father, to calm myself down. I wait for more sources of pain to arrive, but they don't. Then I start to hear a voice outside of my car, muffled but loud and concerned.

I still can't move. This is what it must be like to be in shock. My head throbs, my brain rattling against the inside of my skull.

“Are you alright?”

The voice is yelling and trying to open my door. I can't turn my head. I want to, but I can't.

AIDEN

I can't believe my father thinks that I am just going to lie down and take his bullshit. I am not just some carnival pony that he can sell off to benefit himself. I may be his son, but I will not act like a soldier and do whatever he instructs.

I ruminate as I drive to the office, unable to focus on anything else but this real life nightmare. Aleighia has grown up with the same parents, and despite her constant support of me, she understands that not giving into our dad is much more painful than just giving him what he wants.

I know that she means well when she suggests I consider it. She knows how difficult he can be, how painful it will be to stand up for myself. But I refuse to go down that path. I refuse to give into his manipulation and tricks.

I get to work and do my best to focus. It is pointless, though, as our engagement photos are set to happen only in a few hours. It weighs on me, like an elephant sitting on your chest when you're trying to stand up.

The hours move as slow as molasses, and I realize I am watching the seconds tick by. It is only half an hour until I am set to show up. I have to decide what I will do, and I have to decide now.

I already told my father once I would not marry Ada. Still, he did not listen. He's so used to getting his way that he just carried on like business as usual, even arranging this photo

shoot for us. If I give in now, it's only reinforcing his ability to steamroll over top of me,

I tap my pen, thinking about my sister's advice. It would be easier to tap out and just get engaged. It would even be better if I just got married. I could always get a divorce in the long run.

“Screw that.”

I stand up from my desk, flinging the pen across the room to rest on a couch. I grab my coat and fly out to my car. I am not going to attend the photo shoot. They are going to have to send out the Navy SEALs to find me.

My decision is a decision, but also not one, really. I don't know what alternative I've landed on or where, exactly, I plan to go next. In my fevered brain, none of that seems as important right now as just *leaving*.

I put the pedal to the metal and whip out of the parking lot, raging out into the street, going God knows where. I keep my eye on the speed, tamping back when I realize I've exceeded any reasonable limit. Despite that, I feel the urge to blast off so hard, I just may begin to fly.

I keep the speed at a normal pace, my better judgment winning out. I cannot let my anger get away from me. That would be irresponsible.

I also wouldn't want my father to know that he affected me so deeply. I head onward on the road with no clue where I am going. All I know is that I just want to be alone.

I squeeze the steering wheel while my mind drifts. Slowing down to make a left hand turn, I begin to wonder what my sister is going to think of my actions. A flash of metal catches my eye, and I stop short, pushing abruptly down on the brake to narrowly avoid hitting a trash can in the road in front of me.

All of sudden, I feel my head slam back against the headrest, then lurch forward into the steering wheel. Somewhere, the noise of a loud, metallic crunching penetrates my dazed senses.

I rub my sore head, already instinctively knowing that the back of my favorite ride has been damaged. My ears are ringing.

I groan in frustration, aggravated by yet another problem I don't need added to my plate. My head pulses, but I have enough awareness to open up the car door and see what just happened.

A vintage car sits behind mine. I glance at the scene, already not entirely sure who I should blame. If I hadn't slammed on my brakes, they would not have hit me. But doesn't that suggest they were following too close?

The damage is not terrible, though both our cars will need some work. I already begin to process the fact that this is a mild inconvenience for me, but possibly a crisis for the other driver. Their car doesn't imply that they had a lot of money, even before the accident.

It all quickly flies away as a minor detail when I realize I've been waiting too long for the driver to come out. Why are they still in the car? Though my ears are still ringing and my head aches, I go toward the driver's seat and tap on the window.

"Are you alright?" I call out.

We are on a desolate road, so no one is around to help. It seems no one is even around to have witnessed it. I tap on the window again when there is no response, my heart in my chest beginning to pump hard with fear.

What if the driver is injured? Or what if they had a medical emergency, explaining why they did not stop in time? My brain begins to conjecture wild possibilities as my imagination takes flight. Panicking, I pull on the door.

Unlocked, it comes open in my hand. It is then the truth of who slammed into me is revealed, in slow motion.

I nearly gasp when I see that it is the woman from the coffee shop. She is holding her right shoulder, squinting, with labored breathing.

"Oh, my God," I mutter. "Are you okay?"

It sounds like a stupid question to ask someone who was just in an accident. But I want to assess her injuries before I put my hands on her and try to help her to the side of the road.

She doesn't answer. She looks like she's been crying, eyes red and swollen from grief. She leans out of the car and nearly topples to the concrete, but I am swift enough to catch her with both arms in a cocoon-like motion.

"Where does it hurt?" I plead, my annoyance at the accident already gone. "Tell me so I can help you."

She must be in shock, because she remains silent. Her eyes may be swollen from crying, but I can still tell that they are distant; far away from here and unable to respond.

I have only received moderate injuries, so I keep my arms wrapped around her body and help her hobble over to the curb. She moves sideways while I walk backward, moving carefully to be sure I don't exacerbate an injury I can't see on her. There's no telling what could be happening under the surface. Based on her behavior, I'm playing it safe.

"I'm going to lower you down, okay?"

She stares. Nothing.

I start lowering her down to sit on the side of the road, and she cooperates. Her muscles are moving fine, seemingly, yet she clings to her right shoulder with her left hand. I cautiously let her go, then look back at the scene.

Both cars are damaged. I feel for this woman, but I can't help wondering what happened. I also can't help thinking that if she was anyone else, I might not be so forgiving about it. Right now, I'm half tempted to just pay for the costs of fixing both cars.

I can afford it, after all. But is it reckless to be that concerned about a stranger, even if she does have a pretty face? For now, I push the thought aside. The most important thing now is to make sure she is okay, as okay as one can be in this situation.

"Did you hurt your arm?"

I have my hand on her lower back, keeping her steady. She finally looks up at me with her sea green eyes. They still look far away, but alertness is slowly returning to them.

I smile, trying to comfort her.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “Everything is going to be okay.”

I say this without really knowing what it means. Everything about my father and the engagement has vanished out of my head. Right now, my mind can only focus on this beautiful woman in front of me.

Even if I’m not sure exactly what I’m promising, I mean it. The look on her face tells me she needs me right now, and I have every intention of making sure she’s okay. Whatever that means.

JOSEPHINE

I am swirling through a rabbit hole of a nightmare. Once I think I have reached rock bottom, I always manage to unearth new depths.

My mind is spinning as someone helps me out of the driver's seat of my car. I feel a hand on my lower back. A reassuring, soft voice leads me to sit on the curb of the road. It is only when I sit down that the reality of what has happened comes to me, striking me like a freight train.

I look up to see that the person I have hit is Aiden. That gorgeous man with the engagement.

I can't look at him, so I let my chin droop. Panic rises in my gut, and I begin to breathe rapidly.

"It's okay, it's okay," he says softly, rubbing my back continuously. "We are okay. Just tell me what hurts, and we will figure this out."

His voice is calming, and it starts to take me out of the black hole of my anxiety. I speak timidly, still not able to meet his eye.

"My shoulder...I think it was the seatbelt..."

He reaches for my shoulder, touching it lightly. I begin to realize that it is likely bruised, not broken, the way my panicked mind had surmised.

"And your head?"

Aiden reaches a hand up and touches my forehead. His skin is cool, and I close my eyes, feeling further comforted.

“Steering wheel, I think,” I whisper. “I’m okay, though. I don’t think anything is broken.”

I don’t realize it, but I start to cry again. I should be relieved to see that I am really fine, that I was probably just having some kind of panic attack. But it just makes the situation more hopeless and embarrassing than ever.

He doesn’t seem to judge me for it. His eyes only show compassion and concern, directed right at me. I think it makes me feel worse. At this point, I’m too jumbled up to say. He removes a handkerchief from his back pocket and dabs my face, carefully, like I am made of porcelain.

“I think it’s the same for me. A light bonk. Keeps the brain blood flowing, you know?” Despite Aiden’s levity, I cannot fathom a smile. All I can think about is how much that damn car of his is going to cost.

“The damages...” I say, looking at the concrete. “How much do you think they will be?”

Aiden sighs then takes away the handkerchief. He keeps a hand on my lower back, which I greatly appreciate. Just the fact that he isn’t yelling at me makes me grateful.

“I don’t know at this point. I will have to take it to the garage and have it assessed.”

There is guilt in his tone. I can hear it, even if he doesn’t say it. He feels almost bad that I am responsible for ruining his nice things. Whatever he was driving looks damn expensive, and this sends another surge of anxiety through me.

How could I be so stupid?

“And yours?”

I dare to look at his handsome face, and it pains me to do so. His eyes are the color of the ocean at dawn, his demeanor serene and gentle.

“Same, I suppose. I don’t know.” Neither one of us acknowledges that my car is worth probably only a tenth the

value of his, or less.

Embarrassment fills me up as I begin to consider what on earth I am going to do about his car. The debts are stacking up, and they are about to suffocate me.

“Do you want to go to the hospital?” he asks.

I shake my head and then get to my feet. He doesn't stop me but keeps a hand on my back to keep me from falling. It isn't a forceful gesture, but a subtle, caring one.

“I may have just pulled something or bruised it,” I reply. “Let's exchange numbers, and we can figure out how to get this done.”

Aiden nods, looking reluctant as we switch phones. My hands shake slightly as I put my number in, and he notices.

“I can get your car towed if you want, and I can take you home,” he says, sweetly. “I think my car will be fine to drive, at least for now.”

I shake my head again. I have to get out of here quickly. I can't stand how utterly dumb I feel.

“I will be okay. I don't live far from here. Thanks, anyway.”

He nods, looking like he wants to say something else. His face is devastatingly good looking, especially when it is scrunched up with worry.

It makes me feel special for a second when I think that he is concerned about me. Then I slap away the indulgence, knowing that it was I who caused the entire situation in the first place.

“Thank you,” I mutter to him. Without saying another word, I climb into the front seat and speed off. It likely isn't legal to drive around in a car in this state, but I don't care. I want to get home, to my safe place, and cry.

I park the car in the garage and head immediately to the bedroom, not even removing my shoes as I fall onto the bed. The tears begin to pour out of me as my head and shoulder ache. I have truly found myself in a harrowing predicament.

Thinking of this as the circumstances that brought about our first real interaction is humiliating. A collision? What a strange flirting technique. Destroy a very costly looking car so you can exchange numbers. Come on, Josephine.

My life is the opposite of a damn fairytale.

I cry my eyes out for some time, then I eventually drag myself to the kitchen for some ice. I use a bag of peas on my shoulder and an ice pack on my head. My father would not be happy to know that I went home instead of going to the hospital, but I put that on the back burner. He has enough to worry about when it comes to my mother.

I lay back down on the bed, trying to breathe a little deeper. The breathing eventually helps me drift off to sleep, the only place where I am not afraid or depressed.

I see Aiden in my dreams, looking as stunning as always, pulling me from the car wreck. Except the wreck in my dreams is much worse than what actually happened.

I am pulled out of the dream by the vibration of my phone, along with the symphony of harps. I grunt, irritated, and sit up to see who the caller is.

I feel my heart skip a beat when I see that it is Aiden.

AIDEN

I feel shaken after letting Josephine go. Maybe I should have insisted that she go to the hospital. She had been in such a rush to get away from me. There must have been something else that was wrong beyond the turmoil of our abrupt collision.

I drive off and decide to continue what I had originally planned, which was nothing in particular at all. Though it's still running, I don't want to drive very far in a car in this state. So after going along the road for only a few miles, I pull into a small motel.

I get a room and park the car somewhere secluded. I don't need the cops on my ass questioning me about the damages. I need to figure out what to do with Josephine first, as well as the crap with my dad and the engagement.

I get to my room. Once the door is closed, I feel a sense of keen relief wash over me. It feels nice to be hidden away from the world where no one knows where I am. There is a sense of freedom in that.

I fall onto the bed and stare up at the ceiling. In my head, I am replaying over and over again what had happened with Josephine, who had, before today, been just the woman from the coffee shop.

I take my phone from my pocket and decide to call her up. I am not sure what I am going to say about the damages to my ride. It will likely cost a fair amount but until I have an estimate, there's no point in rubbing that in.

Besides, I'm not really calling about that. The truth is, I want to know if she is really doing okay. She didn't seem okay after leaving.

So I press her name on my phone and wait as it rings. It goes to her voice message system. I try again, out of my own built up anxiety, to call her again. This time, she finally picks up on the fifth ring.

She sounds groggy. "Hi, Aiden? Is everything okay?"

I can't help but to chuckle. I feel my heart begin to pick up the pace, even the sound of her tired voice getting me excited.

"I was calling you to ask you that same question," I say slyly. "Are you sure you're okay? You looked upset when we parted...not just because of the accident."

I realize too late that perhaps I am being intrusive, judging by how flustered she sounds on the other end. I meant to be comforting, but it seems to put her on edge.

"Oh, I'm okay. Just the accident, you know..." she stammers, trailing off.

I take hold of the conversation, not wanting to put her on the spot any more than she already is.

"I was thinking about ways we resolve our own separate damages. Outside of the obvious money factor, you know?"

She pauses, waiting for me to go on. The truth is, I have no idea where I'm going, even when I start to speak again.

"I would like to meet up with you soon. Even tonight," I admit. "So we can get this looked at," I add hastily. "I have an offer I'd like to make to you, if that is alright."

Josephine responds quickly, her tone being that of desperation rather than curiosity.

"I would like that. There's a coffee shop not far from me... we can meet there in an hour or two, if you want?"

"Sounds great."

My voice is gleeful, despite having just been in a small fender bender that involved one of my most prized

possessions. She gives me the address, and I type it into my phone. We agree to meet there in an hour to talk about my offer.

When I hang up, I am overjoyed. The thought about the engagement and the anger associated with all of that has vanished. It is a strange feeling, but I am almost...hopeful.

The coffee shop she suggested is open 24 hours. I decide to head out a bit early in case I lose my sense of direction. I am excited to see her again, even though it's barely been a few hours since we left the scene of the accident.

I arrive at a cute shop that sits on the side of the road, decorated in an old diner style vintage. There are only a handful of customers inside, nursing their coffees and chatting up the waitresses.

I sit there waiting for Josephine to arrive, re-thinking my offer. It isn't something I would have thought of if I didn't see her again. It is going to be risky. Still, it is one of those ideas that might be just so crazy, it'll work.

My father really likes to think he can control me. It has been a problem ever since I was a child. Because of his power and wealth, he feels he is entitled to plan out my and my sister's future. But that isn't what a family should be like, if you ask me. A family is supportive, no matter what the dreams and plans are of their family members.

I squeeze the steering wheel with anticipation, remembering how I had hit my head mere hours earlier. Perhaps I can blame the bonk on this absurd idea. But it's not absurd enough for me to let it go.

I see Josephine arrive, and I step out of the car. Both of our rides look obscene in the dim parking lot, but no one seems to notice. I walk up to her with a wide grin on my face, giving her a polite nod.

“Hello, again.”

She climbs out of the car, gazing away from me timidly. It is a habit I have come to find endearing. Her eyes still look

slightly inflamed from crying, but I cast that concern aside for now.

She shoves her hands into her pockets. “Shall we?”

I begin to walk behind her, feeling something spreading over me that I can't quite put my finger on. I continue onward, knowing that there will be time for that later.

Lots more time for that. I plan to make sure of it.

JOSEPHINE

There was something about the way Aiden spoke to me on the phone that gave me a sense of hope. My head had stopped throbbing, and my shoulder was only slightly sore. I think the ice had helped, but I also know that hearing him on the other end of the line must have breathed some life into me.

I climb into my poor, damaged car and head out to the coffee shop. I know a lot of different shops in the area due to being responsible for my own. It was like truck drivers who waved at each other as they passed by. Sort of a mutual agreement that we are all in this together.

I chose the spot because it's not far from my place, and it is open 24/7. I don't know where Aiden went, if he even got home by the time he called. Nevertheless, he seemed spritely and adamant on the phone. Hardly the voice of a man angrily deciding I had totalled his car and calling to say he planned to sue.

I feel my heart slamming in my chest as I arrive in the parking lot. It is night, the neon sign of the cafe humming like a halo. Seeing Aiden smile at me sends flutters through my chest and reassures me that this is not a confrontational meeting, but I still can't meet his gaze.

The nerves I am experiencing are twofold. First, I still feel profound guilt from what happened earlier. But he is also just way too good looking. We walk into the cafe and find a private

booth next to a window that looks out over the mostly empty road. Headlights only flash by once in a while at this late hour.

I wring my hands underneath the table, and Aiden jumps to his main topic promptly.

“So, I have a proposal for you,” he says, leaning on the table. “I warn you, it’s a little far-fetched, but I think it’s something that can help both of our situations out. Will you hear it?”

I nod. I don’t really have another choice. I am as desperate as they come.

We order coffee and muffins, and he waits until the waitress leaves to continue. The smile is ever present on his face, making me somehow both uncomfortable and reassured at the same time.

I catch a glint of excitement in those blue eyes. He begins to talk frantically.

“I have a situation in my life that is dire, and I am sure you do, as well. I am thinking that I can help you out in whatever way you require...financially, with the damages of the car, or whatever you need...if you do this one thing for me.”

I find myself staring at him. I am captivated, even though my heart rattles in my chest like an angry bird.

His grin becomes a smirk as he leans in even closer. “I need you to pretend to be my wife. My father is trying to set me up with someone I don’t want to be with. So I am thinking in the meantime, if I tell him I’ve already found someone, he will get off my back.”

My body is flooded with a wash of conflicting emotions. The offended part of me takes over first. I stand up from the booth, turning to leave without taking a single sip of my coffee.

“Josephine!”

I hear him call after me as I enter the parking lot. I can hear him following me, which gives me some satisfaction.

“That is so insulting, Aiden,” I mutter, almost to myself.

Just before I get to my car, he takes me by the wrist. It isn't rough, but it's enough to startle me. I whip around, staring at him like Medusa stares at her victims before they turn to stone.

“Don't touch me!”

He raises his hands in the air, looking regretful.

“I'm sorry. Please, I need you to hear me out first. Just hear me out.”

My heart is still fluttering – half with annoyance, the other half with utter bliss. Even being considered a fake wife to this man would be enticing. But I can't show him that feeling in me just yet.

“Go then,” I snap.

“I will give you more money than just for the car,” he says, putting his hands in a praying position. “I didn't mean to insult you. I just know everyone has stuff they have to deal with. That's fine, it's not my business. I'm just saying I'm willing to help you with whatever your stuff is, if you help me.”

I give him an indifferent stare, nodding so he goes on.

“I really cannot be with this woman. My father is strict and forceful, and he won't take no for an answer. This really is my only way out of this sham of a marriage.”

I cock an eyebrow, feeling bold. “The only way out of one sham is to go into another one?”

His eyes brighten. It makes my knees weak.

“I know it sounds insane,” he says softly. “I will only need a few meetings with him to sell the story. If I can tell him I'm already married, there's no way he can force me to go through with this. I can help you in any other way you want. Please.”

Aiden is literally begging me under the glow of the flickering street lamp. I want to maintain my dignity, so I look him up and down, feigning disinterest as I unlock my car.

“Let me think about this, Aiden. It's kind of a big deal.”

He nods his understanding. Beneath his forced, calm exterior, I sense he is just as desperate as I am.

“Thank you, Josephine.”

I tell him I will let him know by tomorrow, that I need time at home to think. We say our goodbyes and I head out, doing my best to focus on the road in front of me.

Once I get home, I run myself a bath. I need somewhere to relax and think that isn't my bed. I dip my body in and shiver with delight, the lavender bath salts overtaking me and soothing my nerves.

The thought of his arrangement is always there, of course. I am incredibly attracted to Aiden, physically. Still, how desperate do I have to be to make a deal with a hot guy in order to pay for the shop? For my mother's surgery?

The answer is crystal clear. Irrevocably desperate. The new question becomes: am I really that far gone? To be honest, I can't quite manage to convince myself I'm not.

Things have looked bleak for a long time now. This proposal should outrage me. In better circumstances, maybe I could even laugh.

But in my current straits, it looks suspiciously like a light at the end of a dark tunnel. Judging by the car he drives and the engagement party he hosted, he's clearly loaded.

I let myself sink into the water, the image of Aiden's handsome face dancing around my thoughts gently.

AIDEN

I drive back to the hotel, feeling sweat bloom under my armpits. The talk didn't go as well as I was hoping. Perhaps I didn't approach it thoughtfully enough. It's not exactly charming to ask an attractive woman to be your fake wife.

I berate myself as I get back to my room, succumbing to exhaustion. Just as I'm about to topple into bed, I instead decide to take a shower first. I continue to ruminate as the hot water streams down my body.

The thought of having to live a life with Ada, even if it is brief, still sounds like a nightmare. I don't love her. Even when we were together, I knew there was something essential missing.

But none of that matters to my father. He places the idea of reputation over the concept of romance. Sometimes I wonder if he even still remembers what the warm embrace of romance should feel like.

I get out of the shower, dry myself off, and hop into bed in the nude. I am too tired to dress, the thoughts of Ada and Josephine weighing heavy on my mind. But even in the depths of my fatigue, I hope what I said to that sweet girl from the coffee shops resides in her. If she just gives it a chance...

I have a dreamless sleep, then head back to the office early in the morning. I feel like I am at a loss for options. I keep glancing over at my phone, trying to summon a response from Josephine.

I try to sneak into my office unseen by my coworkers. I start to feel my phone blowing up with messages from the very people I don't want to hear from: my sister, my mother, my father and Ada.

I ignore all of them, trying to leave the line clear for Josephine. Soon, it is obvious I have made a mistake by thinking work will help me pass the time. Being here, the clock ticks by slow as molasses, and the only calls I am getting are from my infuriated family.

"God sake," I whisper when another one comes in, looking down at my desk.

At around noon, I hear the distinctive clicking of heels. My indifferent mood plummets and turns sour when I see Ada swing around the frame of my door.

"What the fu..."

I cut her off before she gets a chance to make a scene.

"Come inside, Ada." I try to sound reasonable. "Talk to me, don't include the entire office."

She stands in the office after I close the door, barely moving. I can see that her fists are clenched, and her chin trembles before she speaks.

"Where the *hell* were you?" she says, seething like a snake. "And don't you ever answer your phone?"

I sit back at my desk, rubbing my eye sockets so hard I feel they might burst. I hear her heels click as she comes closer to me.

"Aiden!" she yells. "Are you going to answer me or what?"

There is no point in talking to her. She is merely a pawn in this game. I have to go and talk to the king.

I rise up from my desk abruptly.

"Is he in?"

She blinks at me. She knows I mean my father.

Without waiting for her answer, I race out of the office. She follows me, and I can feel my ears are steaming. Anger has likely made my face as red as a candy apple.

I can hear her faintly calling after me, but I don't care. I have to face this beast in order to conquer it.

I don't knock on the door of my father's office. Instead, I shove it open and see he is already standing beside his desk. We come face to face, with Ada rushing into the room behind me.

"I need to talk to you..."

I take a step towards my father. Before I have a chance to speak, he connects with a righteous slap across the right side of my face. My head sways to the side, the strike starting to sting, the shock only beginning to settle in.

"You are a disgrace to this family!" he begins to yell while one of my ears starts to ring. "Do you have any idea what you did? You embarrassed everyone you are supposed to love!"

My hand comes to my face. The skin is warm, beginning to throb with the agony of betrayal already. I can barely hear what my father is saying. All I can think of is Josephine. She needs to take my deal. Or this is all that is left for me.

"If you don't straighten up and fly right, young man, you will not have a job. You will not have your exorbitant wealth. And you will *not* be welcomed back into this family, ever again!"

I turn to him, feeling bold and daring. I feel a smirk spread across my face, which only makes my father even more enraged.

"Do you hear me?" he shouts, taking a step towards me. "These are not idle threats, young man!"

"I am not your puppet," I say softly, taking a step away to avoid his further wrath. "I will marry the woman that I love. I will bring her to the annual ball. You will see. I promise. You will see."

I swivel around and start to walk out of the room. Ada is standing there with her hands over her face, shocked by the progress of aggression. She steps aside for me, and I open the door to leave.

“You don’t go anywhere!”

I hear my father’s bellow, but I pay it no mind. I hold my face discreetly as possible as I quietly walk out of the office and into my car.

I have no other option now. That is clear. Josephine has to accept my proposal, or I am utterly doomed. I don’t like the idea of placing my entire fate in another person’s hands, but those are the cards I have been dealt.

She has to hear me out.

JOSEPHINE

I go to work, same as always, the day after Aiden's proposal. I need something to do to keep my mind off what he had asked, preferring to tell myself that I will have time later to figure all of it out. Keeping busy with work is usually what keeps my mind clear. It has always helped in the past, especially when it has come to financial issues and medical problems with my mother.

I cater to the customers and staff, starting to feel a bit lighter. My shoulder is a bit bruised from the accident, but not so much that it prevents me from doing my job.

I work most of the day when someone familiar walks in the front door. I am not expecting him as my mind has pleasantly drifted to the sweet sugary smells and orders from the shop.

“Hello.”

I look up from the cash register to see Aiden. Gorgeous, magnificent, fragrant Aiden.

My heart is a kettle drum, and I feel my knees get weak. There are customers behind him, so I motion to one of my coworkers to take over the register while I pull Aiden aside.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper with a classic retail-worker smile.

“I wanted to see if you had a chance to consider my offer.”

Customers look over at us, along with a few nosy coworkers. I take Aiden by the wrist and bring him to a booth,

still with that plastic smile plastered on my face.

When we sit down, I notice how tentative he looks. He isn't as confident as he was yesterday. I'm not sure if that is a good thing or not.

"I haven't had enough time to think about it, Aiden," I say, my smile melting away. "I have no idea why you would ask someone like me for something like that."

Aiden frowns then tilts his head to the side. His radiant blue eyes strike me like an arrow.

"Why wouldn't I ask someone like you?" He leans his elbows on the table earnestly. "You are stunning."

I am tempted to roll my eyes, but the compliments settle in me more than I would have previously thought. His voice is velvety and deep. I hide my skin as it breaks out in goosebumps.

"I don't mean that. I mean, I'm not convincing. I can't convince a bunch of strangers that I'm your wife. I'm not the right woman for that."

Aiden looks tired, and a part of me wants to reach out to him and give him comfort. But I have to stand my ground.

"Can I tell you about the idea a bit more? Then you can refuse me, outright. How is that?"

I sigh, then hold out my hand and gesture for him to go on.

He isn't as animated as yesterday, and I swear I notice a fresh new bruise. One that isn't from the accident.

"It will only be a few meetings, to get my dad off my back about marrying my ex," he explains. "Then you are off the hook. I promise you, it won't last very long."

I drum my fingers against the table. I want to help him, but it all seems complicated. My attraction to him certainly isn't helping.

"Aiden, I'm telling you right now, this isn't right for me. I'm sorry about your situation, but it's not right for me."

I stand up from the table and force myself to return to work. A part of me expects, maybe even wants, him to grab my hand again. When he doesn't, and I hear the front door close shut, I feel disappointment.

A minute later, my phone rings in my pocket. I excuse myself from customers and take it. It's my father, and he is hysterical.

"Slow down, Dad! What happened?"

"Your mother...your mother...she had a seizure. She needs the surgery, she needs it now!"

My father is falling to pieces over the phone, and I begin to feel faint. He somehow communicates to me through all of his blubbering that because of the seizure she had, she now needs to get into the operating room as soon as possible.

I feel the phone begin to slide out of my hand as he continues weeping hysterically. I turn to see that Aiden is still sitting in his car in the parking lot. I squeeze the phone, feeling desperate, a bit humiliated, but also intensely terrified.

I cannot lose my mother. My father would be an empty shell of a man if that were to happen. The business would almost definitely go over then; he would have no reason to push through any of our troubles. And all of this is secondary to my biggest fear: *I cannot lose my mother.*

"Dad, I will call you right back, okay? Please keep your phone on."

He accepts, still weeping, and I begin to run out into the parking lot.

Aiden's car pulls out just as I start to run after it like I'm in an action film. I start to call his name, like he is going to hear me through the racing wind.

"Aiden!"

He drives on, and I stop running. I press my palms to my thighs and breath hard, more panicked than tired. I take my phone from my pocket and text him quickly, feeling my hands shake with fear.

*Turn around. I want to talk to you about your proposal.
I've changed my mind.*

I send the text. Only a few seconds later, I hear the screech of tires. I look up to see that Aiden didn't make it too far down the road before reading my message. I am elated as he pulls back into the lot, parks the car and nearly leaps out.

I simply have no other choice. I would do anything for my mother, for my father's sanity. Even if it means pretending to be some attractive man's wife.

I will play the best damn wife that ever did exist if it means keeping my mother alive.

Aiden comes to me, a bashful but eager smile on his face.

"Do you mean it? You want to hear me out?" he asks, enthusiasm bubbling up under his voice.

"Yes. Let's go back inside."

AIDEN

There is only so much I can do to try to convince this lady. I am not going to force someone into a situation they are uncomfortable with. That would be disrespectful.

But as we sit down together in that booth in her coffee shop, I am the most desperate I have ever felt. I feel the phantom sting of my father's slap, warning me of what comes next if I can't persuade her.

I want to use all of the words I have in me to explain to her what I can do for her. I am a very wealthy man and willing to make this more than worth her while.

She looks at me with her stunning, sage green eyes, and I can see the skepticism there. A part of me wishes she would just open up to me, let me help her. If she would tell me what she needed, I could find a way to assure her that I can make this beneficial for both of us.

It's hard to know what to offer someone when you know nothing about them. Even harder when they don't seem to want to listen. And if I can't get her on board, I have nothing.

She says no, and desperate as I am, I can't really blame her. Who would willingly want to get involved in this mess? The biggest thing I have to offer is that I can afford to give her anything she wants, but she won't even tell me what that is.

I try to coax her a bit longer but quickly give up. I can't force her when she has made her rejection plain. Desperate as I am, it's time to let this ridiculous idea go.

I drive out of the lot, feeling hopeless. My face aches from my father's slap, not so much from the pain but from the sense of doom. My life before me seems full of darkness, and there is nothing left for me to do to fend it off.

As I drive off gloomily, I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I normally don't look at my phone when driving, but I had a gut feeling that I should check this time. At a stoplight, I flip it over quickly.

It's from Josephine. She is asking me to come back.

My body reacts before my mind has the chance to accept what is going on. I hear the tires screech as I spin the car around, blasting back to the coffee shop. As I pull back into the lot, I see her. I am elated at first, eagerly rushing her back into the coffee shop so we can talk this over.

It takes me a minute as we walk inside for her face to really penetrate my mind. She looks exhausted and her eyes are puffy, as if she was recently weeping in the few minutes since I saw her last.

I feel the impulse to engulf her in my arms. But I resist, frowning at her with concern instead. We stop just outside the door of the shop, and I study her face for answers.

“What is wrong? Are you alright?”

She wipes her face roughly, then speaks, tears rising to the surface again.

“I will take your deal, Aiden...my mother is sick and needs emergency surgery. It needs to be done right now, though.”

Josephine cannot meet my eyes, but I move to action, anyway. I touch her wrist, which only makes her tears come harder.

“Give me the hospital number and your mother's name. I will have it done.”

She nods, starting to go through her phone for the hospital. She tells me her mother's name and the hospital number. I make a note into a text for my secretary, sending it off.

I then call my secretary, explaining the bizarre message. I tell her I will be calling back in just a moment with specific payment instructions, but ask her to start moving money between my accounts to prepare.

There is a bench outside the shop, and I encourage Josephine to take a seat. I walk a distance away to talk to the hospital. They won't reveal any information on the surgery so all I can do is make a downpayment, telling them to go ahead with the surgery. Whatever bill remains, I instruct them to send it to me.

I can't fault them for not discussing her mother's medical condition, of course. Still, not knowing exactly what is happening makes it hard to give many directions. But I make it clear that I am paying, and I expect only the best. Even a rich man understands how they can cut corners for a bill they think may never be collected.

There will be none of that, not on my watch. I want every accommodation, every pain reliever, everything that can make her healing just a little bit smoother. And I don't hesitate to tell them so.

The entire time that I am doing it, I feel good. Josephine watches me with big, nervous eyes. I want to embrace her, to comfort her, but I don't want to push my limits. She looks torn apart, and I want to help her put herself back together.

I finish the phone call when everything is squared away and quickly fire off one last message to my secretary, directing her to make the payment as promised. I hang up and walk to sit beside Josephine, placing a hand on her knee.

Her shoulders are quivering, and her gaze is fixated on the ground. I give her leg a light squeeze.

"Your mother is going into surgery. Everything is going to be okay."

Her eyes slowly rise up to mine. I feel my heart skip a beat as I start to lose myself into their sea breeze.

"Thank you," she whispers.

We are alone in the lot as customers come in and out of the shop. She does not look at them. I can feel my chest aching, wanting to do even more for her.

I have no clue how to respond to her without falling apart myself. So I nod and give her a pat. It is a very platonic gesture.

“I want to help, Josephine. Just know that everything will be okay.”

She slowly starts to smile, her eyes beginning to sparkle. I take my hand off her leg and stare off into the parking lot. I don't know what it is I'm feeling. All I know is that it may complicate our potential deal.

I see her wipe her face with her forearm, and I search for my handkerchief. I cannot find it, and it makes her chuckle.

“I'm okay, Aiden. Thank you. How can I ever repay you?”

I feel my heart drop when our eyes meet and we realize at the same time what we are about to do. The repayment is already determined, a component of our deal.

A part of me feels guilty about it, but I know I am in dire straits. I don't want her to think I would let her mother die if I didn't need something from her. Still, I do need something from her. That part remains the truth, whether I like it or not.

I try to smile anyway, though I notice that hers is starting to fade. She has been through trauma, and I want to heal it.

“We can talk about the deal at another time. For now, maybe you can find some time to rest?”

She surprises me by shaking her head back and forth, eyes continually downcast.

“You have already done so much for me, Aiden. We can talk about the engagement. I'm ready for it.”

I am joyful in a way but also disappointed. This woman is hurting and spectacular. And I am going to get her to pretend to be my wife.

I sigh, my eyes moving to the ground. The sounds of the cars beyond us are vague and humming. I start thinking about my ex and how she hurt me, about the life that I was expected to have with her.

It is a story I hate to ruminate on, but it only seems fair to at least share the honest truth with Josephine. My mess is about to be hers, after all.

I close my eyes and breathe. I can feel Josephine waiting for me to say something. I don't want to hurt this woman any more than she is already hurting. But I have to get out of this situation before it burns me from the inside out.

"I am going to tell you the story from the start," I say gently. "If that is something you would like to hear."

She nods, and I begin my tale of hurt.

JOSEPHINE

A weight has been lifted off my shoulders, yet I still feel weak. I listen to Aiden call his secretary, move around money, and then call the hospital to get the surgery on my mother started. My father has sent me a few texts. I read them through blurry vision.

“Tell your friend thank you so much,” it reads. “He is a savior!”

I reply to him to take it easy and let me know when the surgery has been done. I am drained, so I tuck the phone back into my pocket.

I know what conversation is coming next. He has just given thousands of dollars, and I am on the hook for his absurd deal.

Though he speaks gently, eyes big and soft, I am still apprehensive.

“As I said, my father is strict. He wants me to marry a woman named Ada. But she had an affair with someone in the past when we were together, so I don’t trust her. Hell, I don’t think I ever could.”

I try to listen as intently as I can. My stomach begins to grumble, and I realize how hungry I am. Now that my initial shock at my mother’s condition has subsided, I’m suddenly very aware that I’m starving. It hardly seems the moment to interrupt him, though, and I try to make myself focus on his words.

“All we would need to do is convince them that you are my wife. Or girlfriend at first, of course. Then I can get my father off my back. It shouldn’t be too difficult.”

Nearly the entire time that he speaks, he looks down at the ground. I can’t tell if he is just too embarrassed to face me or if this is going to be harder than he wants to admit. Every now and then, he looks up at me for confirmation I am still listening. I nod, sniffing every now and then.

“Why do you think it’s going to be easy?” I inquire. “Is your family easily fooled?”

He faces me, smiling ear to ear. God, that smile could move mountains.

“I think they will take it at face value. It’s only my family who needs to be fooled. And I think they’ll believe I was willing to hastily marry a wife of my choosing rather than be forced to marry Ada. It’s really not much of a lie, if you think about it. We can work on the details together.”

My stomach rumbles louder, and he begins to chuckle. He then gazes back at the coffee house entrance, motioning with his chin.

“Are you hungry?”

We go inside, and I tell my coworkers that I will be taking the rest of the day off. A few of them wrinkle their noses at me, looking at Aiden with bright curiosity.

“Who is that guy?” one of them asks.

I have no energy to lie. Instead, I shake my hands back and forth and tell them not to worry about it.

I know that this will only incite their curiosity even more, but I don’t care. I need to know how this deal is going to go down before I start blabbing.

We take a load off in the back room after I make a few sandwiches. I offer Aiden one, but he only wants coffee. He has started writing down a set of ‘rules’ for our perceived romance while I start to gobble up my turkey club.

“There is an annual grand ball that my family hosts. It’s kind of a big deal,” he says, scribbling down more words with a fire in his eyes. “This is the most obvious place for us to show our faces first. What do you think?”

I am too focused on my food, too exhausted to think. But I nod anyway.

“A grand ball?” I say, trying not to sound nervous. “Is there a particular way I would have to act?”

Aiden grins, still scribbling on the paper.

“Not really. I will have you all prepped during the days before, anyway. I’m not going to just throw you to the wolves.”

He places the pen down suddenly, then drops his hands over the sheets of paper. We look directly into each other’s eyes, and I forget all about the sandwich in my hands. He truly is ridiculously good looking.

“How do you feel about going on a date with me?”

I feel the meat of the sandwich beginning to slip out from between the bread slices, and it slaps crudely onto the plate below. My heart hammers in my chest, and I clear my throat to prevent any shakiness.

“Um, what do you mean?”

He chuckles. I feel my face heat in embarrassment.

“I think that it would look more authentic if we actually went out on a few dates,” he says confidently. “Go for dinner, lunch, a movie even. Get to know each other a bit, so we don’t seem like strangers who only met days ago.”

I pick up the slab of meat and awkwardly place it back between the buns. I know he isn’t asking me out in reality, but my body is responding like he is. I try to center myself and act professional, but feeling his big, blue, ocean eyes on me makes it nearly impossible.

“That sounds like a good idea,” I say quickly. “When is the grand ball?”

“About a week from now.”

My heart pounds even faster in my chest. One week? How am I supposed to go from a total stranger to the wife or girlfriend of this spectacular man in a single week?

I suppress my panic by chowing down on the rest of the sandwich. It feels nice to finally have something in my belly. I know it will help me think straight.

At least, a bit more straight.

“Okay, then. You will have to give me plenty of notice for what time works for you, because I’ve got the shop to deal with.”

He leans forward, the way he had yesterday at the 24/7 cafe. His teeth glisten under the relentless fluorescent lights.

“How about tomorrow night? When do you get off work?”

His look, his words, his kindness, all of it makes my heart flutter. I can’t let him see these real feelings that I am starting to have for him. We have a deal, and that is it.

I hold out my hand, one that isn’t damp from the sandwich, and he holds out his. We shake on it, and I feel hollow.

“Tomorrow it is, then.” I try to sound confident. “Where are you taking me?”

Aiden finishes his list, not answering my question. I’m not sure if he didn’t hear me or ignored it on purpose, but I realize I’m too chicken to say it again in either case.

He grabs his paper, standing up, and we make arrangements for him to pick me up at home. I agree to everything, but I am already feeling forlorn.

Still, I know I don’t have any other choice. I ease my wavering mind by thinking of my mother, once again healthy after finally getting the surgery she needs. It works, cheering me up almost immediately. Suddenly the idea of a fake date with a handsome man doesn’t sound nearly so terrible.

AIDEN

I am so glad that Josephine has accepted my offer. Although she only accepted out of desperation, which I feel guilty about, I know that this is only going to be brief. If she can just hold on for a few weeks, hell, maybe even just a month, this thing can be done and over with. I really do need her and plan to guarantee she won't regret assisting me, even if it was a bit reluctantly.

I decide to take her out on a few 'dates' so we have a genuine connection at the grand ball. If we simply showed up on the day of, my father would be sure to see right through it. It is a matter of practicality. We need to be able to comfortably nail our act as a couple.

Plus, Josephine isn't entirely bad to be around.

I take her out the very next day, picking her up in one of my many expensive sports cars. I think of making a joke about crashing it but resist. It might still be a sore subject with her.

I wait for her with the door of the car open in front of her home. We are going to dinner at a place I have been to many times, and I have already suggested she wear the best dress she owns.

But I am not expecting what I see when she walks out.

Josephine has straightened her hair, applied makeup to her lips and eyelashes, and is wearing a cobalt blue dress that ends just above her knee. It sparkles under the streetlamp like the sea at dusk.

She looks shy, so I try to keep myself from gawking. But I cannot ignore the way my heart races at the mere sight of her. She is transcendently gorgeous.

“Good evening, beautiful.”

She keeps her eyes cast downward as she steps into the car, only offering me a coy smile. We chat about the coffee shop as we drive on, in my attempt to learn more about her. I catch myself trying to sneak a peek at the slit of her upper thighs that are coming out of her dress, and chastise myself for it.

Being attracted to her wasn't part of the plan. But I tell myself that it will be fruitful, adding a further authenticity to our narrative. I just need to rein it in so I don't make Josephine uncomfortable.

We sit down at dinner and continue getting to know each other. Her eyes glimmer like jewels, and I can't keep my heart from picking up the pace every time our gaze meets.

“How long have your parents owned the coffee shop?”

We have already been served wine and ordered our meals, and are waiting for them as we talk. I am glad that Josephine is starting to look more relaxed, given our odd situation.

“Over twenty years. Even more, I think. They started it before I was born.”

She speaks with affection in her tone. It's clear she's fond of her family business. It makes my heart beat even faster as I sip on our merlot.

“It must be important to you to keep it going then,” I say softly.

She nods, her face brightening as she thinks about her parents.

“They have put their hearts and souls into that place. I would hate to be the one who is responsible for its destruction.”

I shake my head back and forth, then go for her hand. I am surprised when she doesn't move it away.

“Don’t think that way. None of this is your fault. And nothing is going to happen to that place, not if I can help it.”

Josephine licks her lips, holding the wine glass in front of her face with her free hand. For the first time that I’ve noticed, she looks me up and down.

“What about you? How long have your parents been... doing their work?”

I sigh. There is no way that my reality can be forgotten, even for a single night.

“My father has been working at the business for as long as I can remember. It lacks the passion of your parents, though. Unfortunately.”

“Why is that?”

Our food arrives as I consider her question. She is spritely tonight, seeming far less disturbed and withdrawn than the various times we’d interacted before. Of course, our first meeting was not under the most generous of circumstances.

Once we thank our waiter, I reply, beginning to cut up the pieces of the massive steak I ordered.

“It’s hard to have passion when your only passion is money,” I say, feeling a twinge of jealousy at comparing our families. “Money can take away all that. Including normal things like love for family, partners.”

I hear the jazz of the background musicians come between us as our conversation lapses into silence. I fear I’ve soured the dinner, so I change the subject.

“But I am hoping I can come out the other side of it.”

She slips a piece of chicken between her teeth, grinning with shiny lips.

“I know you can, Aiden.”

We go out on a few more dates before the grand ball. They are not all that fancy, and one is simply just walking around a nearby strip mall while her car gets fixed at a garage. Still, I am having a wonderful time getting to know Josephine.

I start to realize that when I am with her, all of my worries fade away. The icy, protective shell I wear for my father feels like it is melting away.

But I have to keep reminding myself that this is just a part of the deal. Yes, having a connection between us will help immensely with our charade. There is nothing else to it. The fact that I feel good around her will only make our performance feel all the more sincere.

Despite all of these reminders, I begin having a hard time getting her out of my mind when we aren't together. I wonder all day what she is doing and how she is feeling. I count the hours until I get to see her again.

Even a smart man like me cannot keep the truth from himself. There is a genuine happiness that comes about when I see that decadent smile. She thrills me with her thoughts, opinions, and unexpected inquiries. Every time she takes an interest in me to ask a new question, my heart swells until I remember it is only an obligation, part of our deal.

I lay in bed, staring up into the darkness. I wonder what she is doing right now. Is she doing the same thing? Is she thinking of me?

On one of our most recent dates, I said goodbye and felt the impulse to kiss her. She lingered at her door like it was something she was waiting for. But in the end, neither of us could take the step forward. I just stared at her, awkwardly patting her hand.

In the dark night, the regret sits in my gut like a boulder.

JOSEPHINE

The stylist combs her long nails through my hair again. The soft scrape against my scalp makes my eyes roll into the back of my head and flutter closed.

I hear a soft, deep chuckle from my faux fiance. One of my closed eyes cracks open to see what he finds so funny. I catch him watching me, the amused grin plastered on his face directed towards my silent-but-noticeable reaction to the touch. I scrunch up my nose at him, and he lifts his hands defensively.

“What kind of style do you want, mon cher?” The thick French accent behind me asks. I shrug lightly. I want to tell her that I don’t usually go to places like these, much less for such an extravagant occasion like a ball.

It feels like a coming-of-age scene in a movie, where they take the girl from plain to all prettied up. I’m not sure how I feel about it, but Aiden has kept kindly reminding me that his family and friends will all be gawking over me. It’s better if I look like I already fit right into their world to avoid conflict.

It puts a nervous feeling in my stomach. Luckily for me, the bad feeling gets dwarfed by the massive anxiety I have for tonight. His ex-girlfriend is going to be there. From what little I’ve heard about her, she isn’t one to trifle with.

The stylist stops touching my hair. When I look in the mirror, I realize she’s staring at me. Her wrists are firmly planted on her hips, and she is just quietly waiting. *Oh, right.*

I look at Aiden. He, thankfully, takes the hint and answers for me.

“Just give her an updo. Something elegant that won’t be easily undone by movement.”

After what feels like forever, the stylist turns me around to face the mirror, and I can hardly see myself in the reflection. The face staring back at me is surely someone else.

My hair is slick against my head, and it all collects in an intricately wrapped bun at the top. The bun looks to be made up of several braids, all interweaved to look seamless.

“There you go, wrapped as tight and neat as I can get it.” She presents me to Aiden, and he smiles in a way that looks a lot deeper than just someone enjoying my hair. I try to tell myself I’m exaggerating.

“It’s perfect. You’re going to look gorgeous tonight,” he says, standing to walk over to me. The woman brings up her handheld mirror and shows me all the angles. I nod in approval and Aiden gives me his hand to help me out of the chair. We walk to the front entrance where he pays.

I watch him place a nice tip in their jar, noting the generosity of it, and we head out. In a way, the gesture is almost soothing to me. He isn’t simply being kind to me because he needs something. He seems to be the sort of man who is just kind. I feel one of the many defenses I have up against him melting away at the thought.



THE NEXT THING I KNOW, we’re at the ball. My hands are shaking as we walk up the steps to the venue. Aiden must see my fear, because he gently grabs my hand and my attention all in one go. As I look at him, his kind eyes and gentle nod ease my tension for the moment.

“You look amazing. Everyone is going to love you,” he says, softly enough that only I can hear. I let him lead me inside, his hand firmly holding mine until we get inside.

He lets go, dropping the handhold to snake an arm around my waist. I feel secure as he guides me all the way to our table. I can't help but hear whispers as we pass, and everyone is staring.

By the time we get to our table, it's taking all my effort to not drop my head to avoid being seen. I am a naturally shy person. Behaving this boldly feels like a persona that requires intense concentration.

Aiden pulls out my chair and pushes it in once I'm seated. He bends over the back to place a delicate kiss on my cheek, and whispers. "You are the most beautiful woman in here tonight." I feel my face heat up, just as a woman interjects herself into our moment. Aiden takes his seat as she introduces herself to me.

"Hi! I'm Aleighia. Aiden's sister." She says her name with a kind and genuine smile. I recognize her as the woman I first saw Aiden with at the shop. We chat for a bit, but then Aiden looks around before excusing himself. I grab his hand as if he's my anchor, stopping him.

"I have to go greet my dad. I'll be back as quick as I can," he says, those kind eyes convincing me. I nod, and he kisses my hand. Without another word, I watch him walk over to a group of people.

Aleighia tries to distract me with conversation. For the most part, it works. She is friendly and easy to talk to, and it does relieve some of my pressure.

Still, every time I look away from my table, there's a sleek woman in a black gown glaring daggers at me. By the third time I look over, she starts to make her way toward me.

"Uh oh." I hear Aiden's sister mumble a warning, just as the woman gets to our table. She plops herself down in Aiden's chair and curtly starts speaking.

"Well you must be Aiden's new *thing*," she says with a sardonic smile. I nod, although her description makes me uncomfortable. If she notices, she doesn't care.

“Well, you just look all dolled up. Like a child in her mother’s closet.” She pokes and prods at my dress, feeling the fabric as if it were cheap.

“Ada. That’s enough.” The warning tone in Aleighia’s voice is enough to worry me, but the woman pays it no mind. If I had any doubts from her glaring, at least now it is confirmed that this woman must be Aiden’s ex, Ada.

“What, Ally? I’m just trying to be friends with this homewrecker.” She says the last word much too loudly, and I can tell all eyes are on our table now. I am mortified. I need to get up, to leave. I stand out of my chair with an unfortunate wobble, the energy in the room making my knees feel weak.

Ada stands, too, picking up a glass of wine. She takes a small sip of it before swishing it around in her hand.

“Nice wine. Want to try some?” She lifts the glass, angling it toward me. Before I know it, her arm rears back to throw the drink.

AIDEN

I'm halfway through an exaggerated laugh when I hear a voice I know all too well. She sounds upset, and Lord only knows just what has gotten in her way. I turn my head with the rest of my group, as one clear word passes over the crowd. *Homewrecker.*

My eyes find the source of the noise. No surprise, it's Ada. But who she's talking to makes me want to drop my glass of scotch. It's Josephine. *Shit.*

I politely excuse myself from the group of men and start to calmly make my way over to the table. I see my sister trying to intervene, but Ada is having none of it. Josephine stands, and it looks like Ada is about to do something rash.

I butt in between them. Somehow, as I slide between their bodies, I inadvertently knock into Ada's arm. The wine glass that was meant to go on Josephine ends up on her, and a shrill, annoying sound of anger rips from her throat. I turn to look, and I have to physically hold myself back from laughing.

Ada's dress is covered in wine, and so is part of her chest. She backs up, and I use the opportunity to get securely in front of my fiance.

"Are you okay?" I scan her face, trying to read her emotions. She just meekly nods. "Thanks for stopping her," she mumbles. I give her a quick hug and notice that everyone is still staring.

This seems as good a time as any. All eyes are already on us, so let's get this show on the road.

“Stay by my side,” I say, and she looks up at me with a puzzled expression. I step back from her and look around the room.

“Could I have everyone’s attention, please?” I call out, waiting for everyone to stop their conversations. Ada is standing off to the side with her parents, and she glares past me at Josephine. When the room is as quiet as it’s going to get, I clear my throat.

“Everyone, thank you for coming tonight. I would like to formally introduce my girlfriend, Josephine.”

The reaction is mixed. There are shocked faces scattered throughout, likely people who already knew of my alleged engagement to Ada. There are also claps from people who don’t fully understand just what this means.

My sister stands off to the side, with a happy and trusting smile. I lock eyes with my dad, and he looks at me disapprovingly. I take Josephine’s hand and walk her toward my parents. My mother looks happy for us, but it’s my dad I really need to convince.

“Dad. This is the girl I want to marry. Josephine is someone I actually like, and I want to build a future with her.”

My father’s face usually stays unchanged. But I think he sees the sincerity in my eyes because for a split-second, his gaze softens. I know he has a soft spot for mom, and if I can convince him she is just as important to me as my mom is to him, this might just work.

My mother is holding his arm and whispering to him. His stoic expression finally breaks, and so does his unnerving silence.

“Fine. If this is the girl you want to marry, then I expect you to be responsible for your decision.” He stares right at me, and I nod furiously. I can’t believe it worked.

Glancing down at Josephine, she looks shell-shocked. Still beautiful but also incredibly surprised. She doesn’t look upset, though, which is a plus in my book.

There are angry sounds from my left. Ada is quietly fighting with her father while her mother tries to shush her incessantly. My ex casts a look angry enough to summon the devil himself before she storms out of the building.

Her parents look embarrassed. I would be, too, if my daughter behaved like a thirty-year-old child. Her father is the first one to come over, and he gruffly congratulates us. I practically beam. Josephine says only a few words, but they're all thankful and kind. His wife wishes us well before turning to our parents to talk.

The rest of the evening goes by well. There's an inordinate amount of congratulations, mostly all guests of my dad's. He knows way too many people, all of them through business.

The ball has a happy energy to it, with everyone dancing, eating and enjoying the night. I spend most of it with Josephine and Aleighia.

I'm glad they get along so well. I don't know what I would do if they didn't. Having my sister in my corner is a huge asset considering I know my parents' approval is tentative at best.

After a while, my parents walk over to us. They politely ask my sister to leave. She does so with a sarcastic curtsy and a smile.

"Aiden. When were you both planning on getting married?" My mom starts the conversation bluntly. With that question. I look at my official fiance. She looks up at me with a blank face.

"Honestly, we hadn't thought about it." I meet my parent's gaze again, and my dad's eyebrows furrow. He huffs quietly, looking between the both of us.

"Well, the sooner the better," he states. It comes out like a demand, not a suggestion. From him, it's just par for the course.

I'm a bit surprised, to say the least, to hear that. How did he go from insisting I marry Ada to being eager for me to rush a wedding with someone else? It makes me curious about what's going on in the background for him to ask for this.

I just nod. “Yes, sir.” He leaves the conversation at that, and he and my mom walk away just as quickly as they had come.

Josephine looks up at me, and I smile brightly. In a joking tone, I decide to tease her.

“So, what do you think about getting married tomorrow?” She gasps, and I wish I had a camera to capture the moment. As soon as she realizes I’m joking, her eyes turn livid.

“Aiden!” she scolds. I only laugh in response. Josephine seems so meek and sweet compared to everyone else, but I’m starting to see another side of her I really enjoy.

Though, to be honest, I have yet to find a side of her I *don't* enjoy.

JOSEPHINE

Meeting Aiden's dad explains a lot about Aiden. I thought Aiden was mature and sensible, but his dad is like a concentrated version. The man doesn't laugh often. When he does, it's a rich, formal laugh. He radiates business energy.

When he came over to ask when we were getting married, I honestly thought Aiden was going to keel over and say as soon as possible. But his joke after his dad left made me realize that he wasn't someone who just rolled over and followed their parent's every wish.

I couldn't imagine having a dad who was so official. Mine was kind and gentle, and he always laughed. It makes me understand a bit clearer why Aiden proposed such a bizarre arrangement between us, however.

The car bumps over a pothole, pulling me out of my thoughts. I look over at my partner, and his hands are firmly on the steering wheel. Right at ten and two, like he was taking his driving test. The sight almost makes me laugh, but I don't want him to think I am making fun of him, so I press it down.

We get to the house sooner than I would have thought. The careful turn into the driveway marks the end of our journey. Aiden tells me to wait and slides out of the car. He adjusts his suit jacket before coming around the side to open my door.

The gesture makes me feel like a princess, honestly. I love the small things he does that make me feel like I am worth his

time. He even holds out his hand to let me out of the car. I take it, letting him pull me out.

After a long evening of standing around, trying to look respectable, getting back to my feet makes me immediately notice how sore they are. Even though I am wearing small kitten heeled shoes, the balls of my feet ache. I am happy once we get inside, where I can slide off the shoes to leave them by the door.

The next step is this dress. It is beautiful, but all the fabric makes it incredibly heavy. By this late hour, I'm ready to leave it behind and put on sweatpants.

I walk Aiden into the living room, telling him I'm just going to change quickly. He nods, settling onto the couch to wait. I traipse to my bedroom, bundling the floor length dress in my hands so I don't step on the bottom.

In my room, I immediately slip out of the garment and lay it back in the dress bag. The green fabric matches my eyes perfectly, and I know I am going to wear the silky piece again. It's not like I have many occasions to dress so formally, but I still intend to save it for someday.

I looked at my hair in the mirror, touching it for the first time tonight. The rock hard feeling of it flusters me. I knew the lady used a spray, but I did not expect to find a solid, cement-like clump on top of my head.

I start to undo it the best I can. After an embarrassingly long period of working my way through it with a pick, which occasionally brought a tear to my eyes, my soft curls finally begin to relax to their natural state.

I grabbed a blue T-shirt and a pair of striped sweatpants, tugging them on. I know Aiden is waiting to talk to me, so I try to hurry. With one last dejected look toward my very comfortable, very appealing bed, I return to the living room.

I find Aiden entertaining himself by checking out a family picture. I smile to myself as he hurriedly puts the framed photo back on the shelf he got it from. He turns to greet me, taking his seat again on the couch and gesturing for me to sit beside

him. I sink into the comfortable cushion beside him and finally feel truly relaxed.

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

“I’m alright. Excited to sleep off the evening,” I say with a small laugh. He nods before bringing his hand up to rub the back of his neck.

“Is there anything you want to talk about? About the, uh, wedding, I mean.” I think it’s the first time I’ve really seen him flustered.

“What do you mean?” I gently ask, and he shrugs. “I don’t know... I just thought maybe... You seemed a little nervous at the ball, especially whenever the wedding was brought up.”

I didn’t think he even noticed. But he is right. Every time the wedding was brought up, the anxious pit in my stomach grew. The idea still makes me feel shaky.

“I mean, I’m not going to lie to you. After seeing the sort of people that you and your dad surround yourselves with... I’m just not really sure if this wedding is going to work. The last thing I want is for people to think you’re downgrading from your ex-girlfriend for a baker’s daughter.”

The words fall out of me before I can really stop them. I wasn’t going to voice all of my insecurities, but they tumble out so fast. Aiden’s flustered expression morphs into one of consolation, and he quickly wraps my hands in his own.

“Hey, hey, don’t worry. No one thinks that,” he starts, but the tears in my eyes are already brimming.

“I-I just don’t want you to lose face with your dad. I know his approval is im-important for you.” I sniffle, silently thankful there are tissues nearby while I blow my nose.

Aiden moves his hands from mine, and they come up to cup my cheeks. “You have to trust yourself. I trust you wholly. You need to be confident in yourself.” His thumbs wipe away my tears. I take a deep breath, and my heart already feels lighter.

I don't know how he did it, but his gentle words make me feel a million times better than I already did.

Aiden kisses my forehead. It's a gentle sign of compassion. He drops his hands from my face and stands. "I have to get going. I'll see you tomorrow, though, okay? Are you going to be alright?"

I nod. Though I appreciate him taking the time to cheer me up, I'm a little relieved to finally just have some peace and quiet. I really am exhausted.

I walk him to the door, closing and locking it behind him. My forehead rests heavily against the wood, willing myself to find the energy to drag myself to bed. Finally, I manage to stumble toward my room. *I'll shower in the morning.*

As I try to fall asleep, I can't stop the nagging feeling in the back of my mind that I don't know what I'm going to do when this dream ends. I'm having more fun with him than I really should be, for a temporary situation.

When he doesn't need me to impress his dad anymore, where will that leave me?

AIDEN

I do my best to get back to work a few days after the grand ball. I don't like the fact that I had to get in between my ex and Josephine. There is no one in the world who deserves to be treated that way. Especially the woman who made a deal with me to save my life.

I am going through my emails on my desk like an average Monday morning. I can hear workers around me whispering when I get up to go to the kitchen, to walk around a bit, to use the bathroom. I know that they know what is going on. At least, when it comes to pissing off my father.

But I want to let that slide off of me. Like water off a duck's back.

I begin to get into my groove, my coffee sitting and steaming by my side. I start to fall into the productive zone of work when I see someone walking briskly in my peripheral vision.

I know who it is without even having to look up.

"Ada," I say, not looking away from my computer screen. "You shouldn't be here."

I hear the door click shut behind her. I turn my eyes in her direction and see her leaning up against the door.

She is wearing a low cut blouse and a pencil skirt. There is no doubt in my mind that Ada is physically attractive. It is only everything else that puts me off.

“How is my newly engaged ex doing?” she says and begins to saunter over to me.

I cross my arms and scowl as she walks over, slow and sultry. I know what she is doing. Ada is a conniving, jealous woman, despite the fact that it was her who shattered our relationship with her infidelity.

I shake my head back and forth. “We’re not doing this.”

Ada stops in front of me and places her hand on her waist, popping out the other hip to strike a pose.

“Doing what?”

She leans, showing off a bountiful amount of cleavage. It looks wonderful, but I am not going to take the bait.

I hold out my hand to her, stopping her from coming closer. I keep my eyes on hers.

“We are not pretending we’re friends or anything even remotely close. Get out of here. You and I will never be anything.”

Her attempt at a smoldering look begins to melt away. That is when her voice goes low, and she tries to lean into me. But I turn my face, leaning further into the chair.

“I know this is just some setup, honey,” she says as she takes her hands and places them on the back of my chair. “There is no way that you met that woman and have become engaged already.”

I feel a pit in my stomach begin to grow but instead of giving into her, I take her by the shoulders. She looks a bit startled when I firmly stand up, gazing down at her with great conviction.

“Ada, how many times do I have to tell you...”

Suddenly, Ada’s hands are on the back of my head, pushing me down into her lips. We collide, and she tries to put her tongue inside her mouth. I push her away, enraged by her audacity.

“What the fuck!” I call out. “Get out of here, Ada! Now!”

I am shouting, which is unlike me. But she has pushed me to the edge. She simply cannot let go of me, and she begins to express her own irrational fury.

“No one is going to be able to have you, Aiden!” she yells back at me. “Not this woman, not anyone!”

I look around through the transparent walls of my office. People are staring, once again watching the play of my life unfold.

I grit my teeth, holding back the true venom of words I would love to spew in her direction. Ada has always been a spoiled brat, even when we were together. I had hoped she would mature, but this display has shown me that my thinking back then had been a pipe dream.

I squeeze the bridge of my nose and try to pick my words carefully. I have already sworn at her, which isn't good. She is still the daughter of an important investor that my father works with. I may not want to marry her, but I can't screw up our relationship entirely.

“Look, Ada,” I say, trying to be reasonable. “We used to have something great, then it fell apart. I'm sorry if seeing me with someone who makes me happy upsets you. Truly, I am. But you have to let it go.”

Her expression flickers, going soft for a moment, then vanishes like a candle being blown out by a gust of wind. Her fists clench, and she stomps a foot, exactly like a toddler.

“Did you not hear me?” she sneers. “No one else is going to have you. Ever. Never, ever.”

I realize that Ada is finally a lost cause. I go back to my computer, not wanting to make the scene seem even more dramatic than it already is. I begin to type on my computer, acting as though she isn't here at all.

“Have it your way, then,” I mutter.

I go on with my work, feeling cold but also tired of her crap. She stands there, frozen with anger for a moment, then finally leaves my office. I see her leave just as quickly as she arrived.

I let my face fall into my hands once she leaves. I then get up and close the blinds of my office so I can have a moment alone. I fall into the chair, finally bringing that delicious cup of coffee to my face.

I try to think of Josephine. Sweet, cute, lovely Josephine. It would be far better to be sitting with her here, enjoying her presence and the sweet beverage.

This wedding, frankly, cannot come fast enough.

JOSEPHINE

Work has become something that is harder and harder to focus on. With everything happening with the possible eviction, the fake engagement, the damaged car, and more, my mind feels like a soda bottle about to explode.

I still manage to find times, though, where work still soothes me. It is usually when I'm away from customers, making cookies in the kitchen with the baker. It has a trancelike effect that takes me back to when I was a kid, helping out my parents and applying some childlike decorations.

Doing it now still makes me smile.

My father comes into the back room, smiling from ear to ear. I look up, and my heart begins to ache with joy.

“Dad,” I say, voice trembling.

He holds his arms out, and I fall into them like a little girl. We both weep under the weight of the potential irrevocable loss we only narrowly avoided. There are no words required for this moment, only love.

We pull apart after he plants kisses only a father can give to their child, all around my cheeks, face, forehead, neck. He cups my face in his big hands and stares at me, deeply and with great meaning.

“Your mother is going to be okay, my sweetheart,” he says softly, the grit from grief disappearing. “Your friend has saved her life.”

My body warms even more, thinking about Aiden. I put my head on my father's chest, feeling the hard beat of his heart. It comforts me in the same way it comforted me as a child after having a nightmare in the dead of night.

Eventually we calm down, and I move back to the cookies I had been decorating. He looks them over and makes a joke about them looking as good as they did when I was young.

I snort laughter.

“Hey!”

I poke him in the stomach, and he laughs with a natural jolliness. I haven't seen him like this in months. Not since my mother became sick and the possibility of the cafe being shut down became real.

“Seriously though, honey,” he says, taking me by the shoulders and turning me to face him. “I want to know who this man is. I want to meet him and thank him in person.”

My father and I have the same colored eyes so when I look into his eyes, I am seeing my own reflected back at me. He is the most joyful I have seen him be for ages. The idea of disappointing him as his daughter is disastrously unappealing.

I sigh, trying to turn away, and he turns me back.

“Who is he, sweetie?” he repeats himself.

There isn't any way I can lie to my father. Not only can he see right through me, but I am way too emotionally exhausted.

I rub my face with my hand and let out the confession like a rushing waterfall.

“The man who paid for mom's surgery is a man I met a few weeks ago. He's a customer here...”

My father stares down at me, nodding softly. His eyes are bright but not judgmental. I am held by his gaze, accepted without thought.

“We realized we could help each other out with what was going wrong in our separate lives...he is having issues with a

woman being forced on him by his father. And I required financial assistance.”

He lets go of my shoulders, letting them drop to his sides. I brace myself for ridicule, beratement, even insults.

“And you asked him to pay for the surgery?” my father asks.

I nod, my jaw sliding side to side with anticipation.

He looks away, at the sheet of cookies sitting on the table before us. He strikes the table lightly once, twice, then three times. Then he looks at me with a shrug.

“I know you have been under immense pressure,” he says kindly. “I cannot even begin to fathom how that must feel. I am glad that you have someone helping you to relieve that pressure.”

I smile, feeling like I can breathe again.

Until my father raises a single finger to my face and widens his eyes.

“Just don’t let him take advantage of you. If this is some rich guy, that kind of thing might be on his mind. But I know you’re smart, too...”

He trails off then cocks a smirk in my direction. He pulls me in for another bear hug, giving me a long squeeze that nearly suffocates me in the process.

“I love you so much, Jose,” he whispers. “I support you no matter what. I am insanely proud of you, I hope you know that.”

There is nothing on earth like the love and support of one’s parents. His big hug melts away any apprehension I had over telling him what was really going on. I close my eyes and let him hold me, breathing in his natural bakery scent.

He helps around the back room for the rest of the day, heading home just before I start to close down for the day. His support means everything to me, which is starting to have an effect on my perspective of Aiden.

I have been enjoying my time with him, getting to know him and adjusting to this whole charade. But as I lock up and walk to my car, I start to wonder how long this beauty can last?

Why, of all the girls he could have had, did he choose me? Because I was around? Because I had accidentally crashed into his car?

I don't want this newfound confidence to escape me, so I drive off and decide to have a glass of wine when I get home. I find myself checking my phone obsessively, though, hoping to hear from Aiden about what the next move after the grand ball will be.

I start to feel lonely at home, the darkness caving into me. I have too many glasses and begin to wonder if Aiden truly cares about me at all.

AIDEN

I want everything at the wedding to go off without a hitch. I also want to make Josephine feel special. At least, as special as someone who is getting into a fake marriage *can* feel.

It's an oxymoron, really, but she has already done so much for me. To agree to this ploy is a bit insane, though appreciated. She deserves something luxurious and over the top.

A nice wedding will also make our ploy far more convincing, especially if she appears genuinely happy.

I had planned the entire wedding myself, which in itself wasn't very customary. But I didn't want Josephine to have to worry about anything else, with her mother's recovery and the problems with the cafe enough for her to think about already.

Luckily, a friend of mine, Cameron, was married at a very elegant resort in Malibu that caters to nice weddings. The Clearwater Ocean Resort. When he suggested it, I knew that was the perfect solution. The staff there basically asks a few questions about everything you want, and then handles all of the planning. We could have a nice, convincing wedding that would look great to our audience, without stressing Josephine out with a lot of details.

That is where our wedding is taking place today. I had shown Josephine photos of it during one of our many dates, and she had accepted, albeit timidly.

“Looks romantic.”

We sent invitations to a handful of Josephine's friends, her father, my parents, and a few of my own friends. I kept everything about our deal hush to everyone but Cameron, who knew the situation with Ada and my father intimately.

Now, today is the day. We both get dressed in separate rooms, as per tradition. There is a general sense of camaraderie that feels natural. The women huddle in their rooms, laughing and giggling. The men talk and joke with whiskey cupped in their fists.

There is a flicker of a moment where I yearn for all of this to be real. It crawls up my spine and settles on the back of my neck, like a warm blanket.

But I have to shake it off. I cannot for a second let Josephine think that this is something that could actually happen...despite the fact that I still want her to feel special on this strange, exciting day.

I push all of my rumination aside as we get to the outdoor ceremony. The bright emerald grass is decorated with a long white aisle carpet running down the center, lined with violet colored rose petals. A rainbow of lights are stunning around the archway, where Cameron, my best man, and Shawn, the resort-provided officiant of the wedding, wait for me and my new bride.

"Are you sure this is the right thing to do?"

Cameron speaks slyly out of the side of his mouth as I settle next to him in my tux. I have a radiant smile on my face. Even I'm not sure how much is fake and how much is genuine.

"It's the only thing to do," I whisper back.

The procession begins. I see Josephine standing, arm tucked through her father's, as guests stand up to watch her walk down the aisle.

I feel my heart burst with warmth at the sight of my beautiful woman. Well, the beautiful woman who is supposedly mine.

Her hair is long and has been straightened for the day. A mermaid style dress hugs her curves like a valley. Her head

raises up to meet my eyes, and I feel my skin break out in sweat.

I have to keep it together. She moves down the aisle, and I smile, feeling radiant as she reaches her hands out to me.

“You look stunning,” I whisper.

She assumes the usual expression she wears when she’s feeling bashful. I can’t help but to find it adorable.

We say our vows, which are words we had previously agreed to. For some reason, my hands are shaking when I am holding the paper with our finely tuned script on it.

“You are now pronounced husband and wife,” Shawn announces. “You may now kiss the bride.”

Our eyes meet, but we cannot hesitate. I feel awkward about it, not wanting to overstep her boundaries. But Josephine takes me by the hands, pulls me close and plants her lips on me firmly.

The crowd behind us cheers. Her lips are as soft as rose petals, and I feel myself slightly melt into them.

When we part, I feel everything around us going silent. Even as we walk back down the aisle and into the reception area with fairy lights I am thinking about that kiss.

“Was that okay?” Josephine whispers to me at the newlywed’s table. Her eyebrows are raised with concern. I touch her leg, careful to leave the gesture both appropriate and reassuring.

“Everything is perfect. You were perfect.”

She looks away, making that bashful face that makes my heart flutter.

I have little time to start analyzing my feelings, because Ada somehow manages to crash the party. I’m guessing she rented a room at the resort, for the sole purpose of being able to wander into our party. I feel irate with her. Not only for the obvious reasons, but because I was honestly having a good time.

My sister tries to convince her to get out, but I have had enough. I walk up to her firmly and take her by the forearm, bringing her out of the reception to stand under the stars.

Our reception hall is part of the resort, a special room enclosed with big glass walls on all sides to offer a great view of the beach. I can see into the party, even while standing outside, through the big windows. But it also means I have to try to control my body language, assuming everyone can see me as well. I settle for bickering with her in a low voice, restraining my anger.

“You have to accept that you aren’t going to get what you want all the time,” I say to her quietly, hoping no one else will hear. “I know that’s a weird concept for you, but you have to let it go. You have to let me go.”

Ada, for once in her life, doesn’t fight back. She snatches her arm away from mine, looks me up and down and begins to walk away toward the beach. I don’t know why, but the look on her face tells me that she just may have finally ingested some form of defeat.

As I turn back after making sure she had actually left, I find my father standing in the corner. He had been smoking a cigar in the shadows.

I look away, hoping he wasn’t aware that I had seen him. That is another problem to deal with later.

The party continues on, and I find myself starting to relax again. Josephine and I dance, laugh and hug. We even kiss each other on the cheek and a few times on the lips. I tell myself it is all for our audience.

If only everything we had said to each other at the ceremony had been true. A part of me can’t help wishing it was.

JOSEPHINE

I feel a strange sense of happiness as the reception ends, and my new husband and I head to our room at the resort. It is a very nice room, with a kitchenette that even includes a Viking stove. Somehow, I doubt I will get to use it on my ‘honeymoon’ but it’s interesting to see nonetheless.

The room also has a large, extravagant bathroom, and a balcony with a gorgeous view of the ocean. I am standing on the balcony right now, watching the moonlight slice through the water in a long and sparkling strike.

I am still wearing the dress that we agreed upon, the ‘reception dress’. It is far more comfortable than the dress I wore for the ceremony; loose and silky, a bit like a nightie. It made me feel sexy too, even though the night wouldn’t include any true intimacy.

Maybe that is why I feel so forlorn.

That might be part of it, though I knew it wasn’t the only reason. There was also the fact that my father also could not stay for the after party. He was there to walk me down the aisle and hand me over to Aiden. Then, once we said our vows, he headed back to the hospital.

Even in a phony marriage, there was something bitter about having my mother absent and my father barely there. I knew it was just the circumstances we had been dealt, but it still left an ache.

On the positive side, my mother is recovering beautifully from the surgery. She is set to be discharged in a few days.

This is, of course, excellent news. I console myself by thinking of my mother's improving health instead of fixating on her absence.

Besides, the entire thing is a sham. So why does it matter?

I sigh, the cool outside air flowing over my bare skin. I have been thinking about getting married since I was a child. I never pictured it this way.

I hear Aiden return to the bedroom and close the door softly. I am excited to see him, despite everything. We have gotten close over the past few weeks, and I find myself really enjoying his company.

I walk back inside and see him standing in his tux, having already removed the jacket and loosened his tie. His smile never ceases to strike me. Between his eyes, as dazzling as the moon, and the joy clear and present in his expression, I feel overwhelmed by how handsome he is.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

I nod instinctively, not really ready to be completely honest with him. I'm not entirely sure what I'm feeling and unable to explain it to another person. Even Aiden.

"The ceremony, the reception, everything was so beautiful, Aiden," I say, watching him hang up his jacket and sit on the side of the bed. "I really appreciate the effort you've put into all this."

He nods, his smile lovely and reassuring. I am standing on the opposite side of the bed with my hands clasped together, waiting for the elephant in the room to be acknowledged.

Aiden sighs, taking the reins of the conversation.

"I suppose there is something standing between us...quite literally."

He taps the bed with a finger, once, twice, three times. He continues to smile up at me, looking unflappable. Sometimes I hate how smooth he can be, while I am always a twisted mess of knots inside.

"Indeed, we do," I reply.

“What would you be comfortable with? Tonight, I mean.”

My hands separate and I place my bottom down on the bed. My arms and legs are exposed, as well as some generous cleavage. I would be lying if I said I had never thought about being in this situation with the handsome Aiden.

But not as his fake wife.

“I’m okay sleeping in the same bed, if you are,” I reply. “Or I can take the couch...”

Aiden scoffs and stands back up. He begins to unbutton his shirt as he speaks, and I get distracted by the sudden presence of his sleek shoulder muscles.

“Absolutely not. If anything, I can take the couch. If you don’t like the idea of sharing a bed.”

My thoughts bloom into romance, naughtiness, the content of library books I had seen my mother rent on her bedside table. The ones with the photos of men with their glistening bare chest, embracing a woman who can only swoon in his arms.

I swallow, trying to rid the thoughts from my mind, willing them not to spread to my body.

“I am fine with the bed. You don’t need to sleep on the couch, Aiden.”

He removes his shirt, still nodding along. He reveals thick shoulder muscles and arms, now wearing only a white undershirt. I stifle the urge to bite my lip.

“I’m going to have a few drinks with Cameron at the third floor bar. Pisco, I think it’s called. You can do whatever you want, of course. I figured that would give you some privacy, at least. I will try not to be late or wake you if you go to sleep.” He hesitates, the first flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. “Is that okay?”

I nod and circle my finger around the bed. My eyes are downcast when I pose the next question.

“Aiden.”

“Hmm?”

He has placed a sweater over his undershirt, still wearing his dress pants from the ceremony. His eyes regard me curiously with their glistening beauty.

“What happens after all this?” I ask, feeling brave. “Now that we’re married, I mean.”

He has his hand on the door handle and lets it go to give me his full attention. “I feel like the best next steps are for you to live as my wife. At least, for a certain amount of time. In a while, my father will strike a business arrangement with Ada’s father that isn’t dependent on my marrying her, now that it’s off the table. We’ll just have to keep up appearances for now.”

“And what will that look like?”

Aiden slides his jaw back and forth in consideration. I know he is hesitant about what to say, but I just want him to spit out.

“You will live with me. We will go to events together as a wife and husband. Those kinds of things.”

I feel my heart getting heavy as my bravery begins to fade. I nod to him, and he tilts his head tenderly at me. It makes me feel special, even if he isn’t doing it the way he would at a real wife.

“We can talk about the details more tomorrow. I want you to have a say in what you want, of course. You think it over, too.”

“Of course.”

He leaves the room, reiterating that he will try not to be late. The second the door closes, I fall onto the bed, spreading my legs and arms wide like a starfish, and let out a heaving sigh.

I have no idea how to walk this line with him. I am only getting more and more drawn to him, my attraction swelling, my guilt growing along with it. He has done so much for me. Yet I can’t help but to want even more.

I listen to the sound of the waves crashing against the shoreline, slowly starting to doze away into the dream world.

AIDEN

The day was magical, as magical as any fake marriage could be. I found myself feeling elated, losing track of the fact that this was all done in order to get my dad off my back. But even he seemed to have a good time. At least, he kept quiet and enjoyed the festivities with my mother.

Being back in the room with Josephine brought reality back, like a slap to the face. She seemed like she was keeping something to herself, wanting to tell me something but also not wanting to disrupt the flow of our situation. A part of me hates that I have done this to her; another part knows that I had run out of options.

I cannot lay in bed next to her feeling guilty, so I decide to go to the resort bar and meet with Cameron. Well, one of the resort bars. There's really no shortage of dining and drinking options at this hotel. He is a successful man who understands the plight of weird family dynamics.

Cameron suggested Pisco, but I agreed readily. Now that I walk in, I can see why he chose it. It has a fun theme resembling a speakeasy. Cameron runs several clubs, so he's always eager to check out interesting 'competitions' for ideas.

He's already waiting at a dark leather bench for me. With his dark, shaggy hair and dark eyes, he seems somehow right at home in this atmosphere. Like he has always belonged back here, a hundred years ago in the prohibition era, and was just born too late.

“The new husband!” he bellows as he pulls me into him. “Congratulations are in order, my friend!”

Cameron knows everything already. He is the only person other than Josephine herself who knows that the marriage is a sham. But I hug him anyway, slapping him on the back as he slaps mine.

“Thanks, man,” I reply.

We choose a booth away from prying eyes so we can speak our truths without hesitation. We are close to the ocean now, the moonlight making the water glitter like a million diamonds.

“So? What now, my brother?”

We are holding our separate mugs of beer. I sigh, the condensation from the glass seeping into my skin.

“I have to make it work. I have to make it look like we are really husband and wife. It’s the only way my dad is going to accept it as legitimate.”

Cameron gulps the amber liquid, nodding and still wearing that smug grin. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand sloppily. We had both been drinking a bit at the reception, so our words come out slightly slurred.

“For how long, though? I mean, it can’t be easy for her.”

I drum the table, letting out another sigh.

“I don’t know, honestly, Cameron. I have thought about that, too. She’s a great girl. I don’t want to pull her through the mud of this madness for too long.”

My eyes drift away, thinking about how I felt when I first saw Josephine standing at the end of the aisle in her magnificent dress. I come back to reality when Cameron begins to chuckle, and I flash him a scowl.

“What?”

“You talk about her like she actually is your wife, man,” he says, still guffawing. “Are you sure that this has all just been...for the sake of your dad?”

I feel anxiety in the pit of my stomach, and I push it away with the chug of my beer. I slam it down, carefully ignoring Cameron's amused expression.

"We both had problems that needed to be solved. Hers were primarily financial. Mine, familial legacy investor bullshit. In my opinion, it worked out perfectly."

Cameron holds out a hand, the sarcasm ever-present in his tone.

"I hear you, Aiden. I'm only looking out for your feelings in the future. You said she's a great girl, so why wouldn't you want her for real?"

Cameron is certainly one of my good friends, being the first person I would call when in dire straits. But things with Josephine are delicate, and I choose to keep the possibility of growing feelings for my fake wife to myself.

I speak firmly, shaking my head back and forth.

"A deal is a deal. We have to follow rules, or the entire thing is going to fall apart."

Cameron raises his drink to his mouth. Eyes wide, he pokes a bit more fun at me.

"That doesn't sound like a denial."

I roll my eyes at him, calling over the waitress to get us one more drink. I know that I am putting off going back to the room, dreading having to find a way to sleep in the same bed as a woman who is not my wife in my heart.

So we have one more drink, talking about other matters and laughing till it is nearly four in the morning. Cameron finally decides it is time for us to part, wanting to get back to his own wife waiting in their hotel room, but not before he gives me a final scrap of advice.

"Be careful, man," he says in the hallway of the hotel. "Good girls are the ones who will get ya."

I give him another eye roll and continue to my room. I slowly open it after clicking the scanner with my keycard, doing my best not to wake her.

When I close the door behind me, I see her lying there on the bed. There are no sheets over her, nothing to hide her from my view as she breathes softly on her back. I give myself a moment, watching as the moonlight frames her body and skin like a Greek goddess.

I shake my head back and forth. No. I can't think about these things.

She is in the center of the bed, and this is going to make it harder for me to get into it. It is a big bed, but she has managed to spread herself evenly across it. It makes me chuckle a bit to myself.

So, I decide to take the couch, anyway. I don't want to disturb her. She has been through so much with her father, her mother being ill, the accident, the cafe. Now, she marries a guy who she isn't in love with, only because his father was forcing him to marry someone else.

It must weigh on her to take all of this on, despite the financial reward. Before I get to the couch, I pull the sheets over her body, letting my eyes settle on her face for just a moment.

She is angelic, and I cannot resist. I run a finger along her cheek, feeling the velvety skin.

I get to the couch and begin to doze immediately, thinking perhaps Cameron is right.

JOSEPHINE

I feel the warmth of the sun upon my body as my eyes flutter open. The crash of the ocean outside is soothing, and it takes me a few seconds to remember everything that had already happened. The feeling of bliss remains as I gaze over at the opposite side of the bed.

I am surprised to find it empty. I instinctively reach for the cold, empty spot, despite the reality of our courtship being false. I had longed to wake up with him next to me, dozing away in a world of his own making.

As I sit up, wondering where Aiden has gone or if he had slept in the bed at all, I hear the small whisper of breathing. I hold the sheet over my thin pajamas and bring it with me as I walk over to the couch facing away from the bed.

There he is, in all of his glory, having slept the entire night on a bed that is almost a foot too small for him. The sight of his beautiful face, calm and removed from the stark brutality of life, his body bare from the waist up, makes my heart nearly burst out of my chest.

“Aiden...”

The sound of his name slips out of my mouth without realizing it. I cover up my mouth as he stirs but doesn't wake. He merely turns over on the couch and remains asleep.

I drop my hand from my mouth, his name still lingering on my tongue. I cannot believe that he chose to sleep here. It is hard to believe that he did it out of awkwardness, especially since we had previously discussed the arrangement.

Did he do it as a kind gesture? To not wake me from my slumber?

His chest rises and falls with the crash of the waves outside. It is hypnotic and rhythmic, and I catch myself watching him for a good few minutes before I snap out of it.

I have the desire to curl up next to him, to cover his entire body with kisses. My chest is aching for it, a yearning so deep that I begin to feel faint.

I instantly become irked with myself. I move away from the couch, tip toeing around the room. Retrieving my things, I close myself off in the bathroom.

I lean against the door and whisper to myself through gritted teeth. “Get your shit together, woman,” I say. “You are not with this man. You made a deal. Stop stumbling all over yourself like some cheap heroine.”

The words are mean, but I want them to stick. I undress and get into the shower, turning the faucet on full blast and hoping the warmth would somehow wash away these lovesick feelings.

Instead, it seems to have the opposite effect. It is calming, but it brings up the emotions in me like a dam ready to break open. Since I am alone in the bathroom, I let it out.

I begin to cry violently, reeling from all of the trauma of my mother’s illness, the straining financial woes and, of course, the craving for Aiden’s affection. I know why I let myself get into this. Out of love for my family, of course.

But why on earth did I think accompanying emotions weren’t going to pop up? Why did I think I would be okay pretending to be with someone who I had already been attracted to in the past?

I cry over the lack of logic, using my tears to navigate this explosion of grief. Finally, I cry as I accept what I have done. I cry until the water begins to run cold, until my skin begins to wrinkle, until I start to feel weak from the trembling.

I finally stop. Not because I force myself, but because I am finally empty of tears. I turn the water off, wrap myself in a

towel and try to breathe through the exhaustion.

A few seconds later, as I lean myself on the side of the tub, Aiden knocks gently on the door.

“Are you alright in there, hon?”

My heart begins to flutter again. I scold myself and try not to let out any post-crying shudders in my reply.

“All good, Aiden,” I say. “Just needed a longer shower today, that’s all.”

A pause, then his calming voice returns.

“No problem, Josephine. I wanted to let you know that we’re heading down for breakfast now. Did you want me to wait for you?”

I know that it will look better if we go down together, but I can’t let him see me in this state. He will ask me what is wrong. The man is perceptive, and I will break apart once more if questioned.

“No, it’s okay. I won’t be very long.”

There is another pause, and I pray for him to just leave.

“alright. Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

I want to open the door utterly naked, to tell him that I need him. But I am rarely that bold, so I remain still, clutching my stomach like I need to hold my insides together.

“I will, thank you.”

He waits a few more seconds. I wonder if he is considering waiting for me, anyway. I feel a bit disappointed when I hear his footsteps and then the door of the hotel room closes behind him.

“God.”

I lean over and sigh, trying to get my bearings. Eventually, I do get up, wiping my body down. Then I go to the mirror. I wipe away the fog, and see that my eyes are slightly bloodshot and swollen from all the crying.

This isn't anything some makeup won't fix, so I begin to apply it before getting dressed. I look over my handiwork, thinking it is sufficient enough. Next, I put on some comforting clothing for the group breakfast.

The only people who can always tell when I've been crying are my parents. It seems I give off an energy they can easily detect.

But will Aiden? I hope not.

AIDEN

The second morning of our official married life, I wake up on the couch again. The sun beaming through the enormous windows warms my face and brings me out of my somber shut-eye.

As I sit up, a pounding hits my temples. I rub them, trying to find a soft spot and release some tension. Sleeping on the couch is getting tough on my neck.

I continue rubbing my temples and look around the room, recalling why I'm not in a bed. The first night, I had intended to share the bed just like Josephine offered. But by the time I came to bed, she was already sleeping comfortably and taking her half of the bed from the middle. I didn't have the heart to wake her, trying to make room for myself.

I suppose it set a precedent for the second night. Even though we had already spent most of the day together, enjoying the resort, it just felt too awkward to climb into bed beside her. Especially after I had already spent one night on the couch.

Besides, the couch is comfortable. I figure it's less intrusive than sleeping in the same bed beside Josephine, anyway. It's not like she really wants to be married to me. She did it as a favor, and I don't want to push her too far.

Right, Josephine. Where is she? I wonder as my eyes dance around, looking for her. I don't see her anywhere. I begin to stand up so I can look for her in the bathroom, but my phone buzzes loudly on the coffee table, stopping me.

I pick it up and notice I have several message notifications. There are a few congratulatory texts, but most of the messages come from my ex, once again letting me know how much she wants me back.

God, can't you just take a hint? Obviously, I don't want you back. Can't you just leave me the hell alone?

Suddenly, the screen lights up with a picture of my sister, and I swipe to answer her call,

“Hey, Aleighia. How'd you sleep?” I ask.

She sighs. “You're just now getting up? I knew it. That's why I called.” She laughs. “You and Josephine have a photo shoot for the company magazine today, remember?”

I scoff playfully. “Well, of course, I did. How could I forget something like that?”

“No, you didn't.” She laughs again, “But I knew you wouldn't remember because I know how you are. So here I am again, saving the day. What would you do without me?”

“I have no idea. I'm the luckiest man to have you to take care of me.”

“And don't you forget it!” She giggles. “Please remind Josephine so that she has enough time to get ready. I know how men are. They think women need five minutes.”

“I'll do that right now. Thank you!” I say and hang up the phone. I stand to look into the bedroom, notice Josephine's not in bed or the bathroom, and I next walk to the balcony.

I scan the beach for a few seconds before my eyes catch the sun glistening off her beautiful brown skin. She's in a teal two-piece suit, which perfectly fits her curves.

God damn, she's even sexy hundreds of feet away from me, playing in the sand....

My mind darts to images of her nice ass covered in sand as she stands up, and I envision enjoying its firm tightness as I dust it off. Her skin looks so soft and luminous against the ocean as her background, and I can't help wondering how it'll feel in my hands.

She's running along the tide, and I can't stop looking at her breasts bouncing with every stride. I imagine them in my hands, bouncing on top of me instead.

What is she doing to me? I can't think like this, or we're going to have an issue keeping this thing between us as only an arrangement....

I watch her for a few more moments, feeling the bulge in my boxers grow with every thought I can't seem to toss out. I wonder if there's anyway I can fuck her and keep our fake marriage going.

Will it really mess it up if I give in once? No. Stop. She's not available to you.

Suddenly, she turns toward the balcony, and I instinctively wave at her the second our eyes meet.

Oh my God... You idiot. Now she knows you're watching her.

I chuckle at myself and my intrusive thoughts, knowing everything in me needs to stop them. No matter. I have no intention of doing so.

She walks closer to me, yelling up to the balcony. "Good morning!" she shouts excitedly.

"Good morning! I was just going to remind you we're going into the city for that photo shoot later!" I shout back. I watch her nod and then turn back toward the ocean when the conversation doesn't continue.

Her butt sways as she walks away from me, and I can't take my eyes off it...

Mmmm. The things I'd like to do to her... How am I going to get through the shoot with a hard-on? I need a shower, anyway. I'll just take a longer one and take care of my problem at the same time, I think and head inside.

I walk to the bathroom and turn on the shower to let it steam as I slide my boxers off. Once the water is at the perfect boiling temperature, I slide in and shut the curtain behind me. I let the water pour on my face for several moments, trying to

shift my mind away from imagining her wet, naked body in here with me.

My mind dances with the idea of my hands on her body, picturing the water leaving droplets on her beautiful, dark skin. I close my eyes and see her biting her lip at me, telling me to come closer.

Suddenly, my hand finds the tip of my hard cock. I gently stroke it, imagining her wrapping around it as she kisses my neck. I look down and pretend it is her hand moving up and down the length of it, picking up the pace with every stroke.

The sensation overwhelms my senses, and I throw my head back. With one hand on the shower wall and the other stroking my cock, my mind shifts to think of her kissing down my chest and slowly kneeling in front of me.

In my vision, my fingers entangle themselves in her hair as soon as I feel the warmth and wetness of her mouth. She doesn't stop until I feel the softness of her throat against my tip, letting me know she wants the whole thing.

I fantasize I can feel her tongue stroking back and forth as she moves faster and faster, until every cell in my body is on fire. Suddenly, everything tenses,

“Fuck, Josephine!” I shout loudly as I climax, imagining filling her mouth with my cum instead of letting the water wash it away. As soon as I can feel my extremities again, the water starts to run cold. I realize I can either shower in the cold or forget about washing my hair.

I say screw it and shut off the water. Climbing out and wiping off the mirror to look at myself, I start chuckling at my lack of self-control.

God, if I can't control myself when she's yards away, how will I be able to hold back when she's within a close distance?

JOSEPHINE

After what feels like an eternity of me trying to get dolled up, Aiden and I finally arrive at the studio for the photo shoot. He looks immaculate, but his usual slacks and polo don't make an appearance here.

He's in an expensive, made-to-fit, black suit with a sleek black and red striped tie to match my dress. I feel slightly out of place wearing the red satin dress he bought me. It's a beautiful gown, but it's so far from my normal baggy T-shirts and tattered jeans that it's uncomfortable.

As we enter the room, my hand brushes over my hip, smoothing out the fabric. There are many familiar faces inside, and everyone immediately congratulates us simultaneously.

"Thank you all so much! I really appreciate your warm greetings. It's nice to have you all here, too. You can make sure we're posing correctly," I giggle. Aiden nods and moves toward the camera in the corner.

"Are we all set?" he asks the photographer. "My beautiful bride here is ready," he teases, giving me a mischievous look. "Believe me, you don't want to make her wait."

I follow Aiden. Even though I know he is just joking, I feel my cheeks heat up anyway. I run one hand lightly over my hair, feeling like a simpering school girl. His comment, calling me his beautiful bride, echoes in my head.

"Yeah, I'm ready whenever you are. My name is Ryan," responds the photographer politely. Aiden nods and takes my arm, drawing me closer.

Ryan starts positioning Aiden in front of the background and gestures for me to enter. He helps position me beside Aiden and tells him where to put his hands on my hips.

As soon as I feel his hands on me, I start to feel things stirring within me. It's enough to make me instinctively inch away from him, remembering I need to keep my distance. I know I can't let myself get close to him or feel anything.

This is an arrangement. He doesn't think of you in any other way, and he never will. You will only be hurting yourself if you let anything happen between you.

It's like Ryan is playing a cruel joke on me as he keeps positioning us closer. I'm trying desperately to keep a safe distance, but I have to be discreet about it. To all these people, we are a happily married couple.

I don't want to touch him. I don't want to feel the warmth of his skin or the tightness of his lean body....

The harder I try to keep a space between us, the harder the man fights with me. It's like I'm trying to be a good girl, but the fates are making it way too hard for me to succeed. It's really playing unfairly with my feelings...

Finally, we're standing in the perfect position, and he snaps a few photographs,

"Perfect. You two look great! This pose was just to check the lighting. If you two could turn and face each other now, we'll start with the real ones," Ryan says and adjusts the lens on his camera.

Aiden and I turn toward each other, and I'm awkwardly avoiding his eyes. I know how deep blue they are; the way they stand out against his skin and hair is almost too much to handle.

His hands are still on my hips, and it's hard not to imagine them going down lower and grabbing hold of my ass. My mind shifts to think of him lifting me so I can wrap my legs around his waist and...

Just as my mind is about to watch us kiss, Ryan interrupts and shifts my thoughts back to the present.

“Okay, I like that pose. If you two can just make eye contact and smile, it’ll make it perfect,” he says.

Shit. Focus. Focus. This is just for pictures. Don’t look into his eyes too long or too intensely. He’s not yours. You can’t fall for him.

I sigh and look up at him. He’s already eyeing me, and a shiver runs down my spine as our eyes lock. The longer I stare, the more beautiful his eyes get. I’m noticing every flaw in his iris, how every inch of deep blue sucks me in and makes me want more.

He leans into me until I can feel the warmth of his breath on my skin. I suddenly imagine what his lips would feel like on my neck, and a pleasant sensation washes over me. My heart skips a beat with every breath, but I’m trying to keep my composure.

I’m hoping he won’t notice how hard I’m struggling. I can’t deal if he tries to ask what’s going on. Mostly because I don’t know what my excuse will be.

Um, you’re gorgeous and breathing all over me? Or, your deep pools of blue won’t release me from their grasp, and I’m trying not to jump your bones in front of your family? Somehow, I doubt either of those thoughts are things I can voice out loud.

“Okay, now I’ll give you some free rein with your poses, and we’ll see if we like the natural ones better. So, have fun with each other. Do whatever feels right and we’ll see what happens. Get cute and cozy for me,” Ryan says, adjusting his camera again.

Suddenly, Aiden’s whole mood changes, and he’s being the sweetest man ever. He was a bit stoic before, his usual rigid perfectionism shining through. Now, he relaxes, and I am startled by the difference.

He hugs me, kissing the side of my head and holding it long enough to let Ryan capture it. My heart swells with every touch, and the whole crowd of employees oohs and awes at every pose.

We're obviously impressing everyone and keeping our secret well, which makes me happy. But his actions are also crushing me. I love how he's acting right now. I just wish it wasn't *acting*.

I can't help feeling a little resentful with every hug or peck on the head because none of this is real to him. Someday, this is going to come crashing down. It could be when we leave this studio, the resort, or a few weeks later.

But ultimately, the time will come when he doesn't need me to get back at his dad. And I'll be alone, wondering why I'm so stupid.

AIDEN

The feeling of Josephine's body pressing against mine with every new pose the photographer asks us for is killing me. The closer she is, the more I can smell her haunting aroma.

God, what perfume is she wearing? Or is that just her natural scent?

Ryan's making us get closer and all of my insides are shifting. I want to take her right here on this studio floor, and I don't care who's in here to watch. He positions my hands on her body, which helps paint the picture of what she's hiding underneath this red dress.

The way she looks up at me and stares into my eyes makes me crave more of her. I can't help wondering if she's longing for me the way I am for her. The way she talks to everyone and jokes with them as we go along with this is absolutely adorable.

How do I hide my feelings when she's as exhilarating on the inside as the outside? God damn it. Why can't I stop picturing her body on mine in other ways? Let it go. She's only here to help make the arrangement look real. Stop.

I start wondering how I will continue the shoot and ponder coming up with excuses to stop it short. But, as Ryan continues positioning us and moving my hands, I start thinking about the possibilities in this arrangement.

If he's the one putting my hands on her, I'm not doing anything wrong. So, there's no harm in savoring every bit of

feeling I can get from it, right?

“Are you okay?” she asks, suddenly yanking me from my thoughts.

I nod. “Yeah, of course. Why?”

“You just looked lost in thought.”

I laugh and turn my attention back to Ryan. *Yeah I'm lost in thought about all the naughty things I want to be doing to you right now.*

“Okay, you two. I need to adjust a few lenses, so give me a moment,” Ryan says and steps away from the tripod his camera is sitting on.

Josephine walks away for a moment as I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. I'm trying to talk myself down. I can feel the sensations building inside me, and I'd rather not embarrass myself by showing everyone a hard-on.

I didn't think about what allowing myself to feel things and enjoying her body would do to me.... I want so badly to avoid this, the feeling of wanting or needing her. I've been trying so hard to just get through today and forget about it.

But the feelings and thoughts keep popping back up, and I don't know how to stop them. Or if I even want to stop them anymore. I want to give in to the temptation so badly it almost hurts.

“Okay! Are you ready for the last couple of shots?” Ryan asks, standing beside his camera again.

“Yeah, of course,” Josephine agrees, standing beside me again.

Does she seem to be closer to me than normal, even without the direction of Ryan? No. Aiden, stop it. She doesn't like you. She's using you, and you're using her. That's all this is.

I nod, and Ryan instructs us in one last pose.

“Okay, for this one, I'm going to have you two turn toward each other, looking into each other's eyes. I really want to

capture the love between you. We're selling your relationship here, so we want to make the chemistry just jump off the page. So give me your sexiest stares!" Ryan laughs.

My heart is pounding as we turn toward each other. It feels like it might explode onto the floor when our eyes meet. I instantly lose myself in her gorgeous eyes, and I can't look away. They're pulling me in, almost hypnotic in their intensity.

I want her to close them, just for me. I want to feel her breath on me as I make her moan in ecstasy. I want her to want me just as much as I want her. The way she's looking in my eyes gives me the chills, like I could almost fool myself into believing I could have all of those things.

Damn, her loving stare makes me realize how good of an actor she is. That's what she's doing, just acting. She's not really looking at you like that, don't go stroking your own ego.

Suddenly my gaze shifts from her eyes down the slope of her nose until it reaches her perfectly shaped lips. They're glossy and pink, perfectly kissable.

Did she think of how appealing it would look when she put this on? Is she wearing it for me? She can't be wearing it to grab my attention, can she?

I watch her lips move as she smiles and imagine her biting the bottom lip for me in a moment of passion. I feel myself leaning in, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. My mind tries desperately to pull me back, sending out all the alarms that say I am about to cause a huge mess.

But my body will not listen. It does not care, and it fights back against the advice of my mind. It doesn't want to be reasoned with. It wants her.

Suddenly, I'm inches away. My mind is screaming out against this. *Aiden, stop! You can't kiss her! Especially not here in front of everyone like this. You have no idea what her reaction will be. If it's a bad one, it could blow your whole married couple cover.*

The screaming gets through for a brief moment, at least enough to cause me to pause. I'm still staring at her lips and

trying to remind myself why we're here when Ryan's voice interrupts the fight in my head.

"Okay, give her a sweet passionate kiss for the camera, Aiden," he directs. My eyes dart to hers, wondering what look they would hold at the thought of kissing me. Not just any kiss, but here in front of all these people and for a magazine the whole world will have access to.

What will she want me to do? Is this going to be uncomfortable? Will everyone be able to tell it isn't real?

But she's smiling patiently, giving me the green light I need. My brain finally gives up the fight, and I act on pure impulse.

I practically lunge toward her. Our lips meet with a force I can't control. They are practically magnetic, with a pull too strong which attests to their desires. I kiss her with a passion, feeling like this is the first thing in my life I've ever wanted this much. I can sense as she leans into it, not resisting.

As soon as I feel her lips pressing back on mine, my clamoring brain grinds to a complete halt. I kiss her with every bit of passion I've been holding back. I hear the camera click, and everyone in our background cheers, breaking me out of the moment.

Damn. not a single part of me wants to stop. Why couldn't we do fifteen takes of that? I want her, and I want her right now.

JOSEPHINE

Once the photoshoot is over, I'm eagerly waiting to find out what we will do next. After all the tension and passionate kiss during the shoot, I'm secretly hoping for some more time together.

He planned this trip all by himself, so I really don't know exactly what to expect. To be honest, I thought maybe we'd just have a quickie ceremony and that would be it. The fact that we've been here three days already is more than I anticipated.

But they've all been so perfect. This resort is incredible. There are bars, restaurants, exercise classes, a spa and more.

If we were a real couple, this would be amazing, as the resort definitely leans hard into the romance. Couples massage, fun newlywed games, that sort of thing. Even as a fake couple, we're having a good time, but there's always that little part of me that feels like a fraud.

Not to mention a part of me that worries if I get more time with him, it'll be even harder to stop myself. I'm torn between wanting this over now and never wanting it to end.

He's so good-looking, and his kiss holds a charge I didn't even know existed before feeling it. I'm insatiable around him; I want as much as he'll give me. He's not saying anything as we walk down the hall to the door of our room at the resort, and I'm too anxious to wait any longer.

"So, what happens now?" I ask.

The key to our room is programmed into our phones through an app the resort offers. He turns his phone screen to the reader just long enough for me to hear the beep, then holds the door to let me in. Walking in behind me, I hear him set the phone down on the coffee table a minute later.

“I think we’ll stay here for a few more days. I’ve already filed my leave of absence. What are a few more days going to hurt? I want to make the most of our time here,” he says in a tone that leaves me wondering what he means.

It’s going to hurt my heart, I think. The idea of us being alone for a few more days makes my heart race and my palms sweat. I want as much time with him as I can get. I just don’t know how to control myself.

I look out the window behind him and notice the sun is setting beautifully behind the water, and I decide it’s my cue to go to bed.

If I walk away now, it’ll leave less blank space for us to fill with bad choices... Especially when we need to break the sexual tension between us after the shoot.

Aiden smiles as I fake a yawn.

“You look exhausted,” he says.

“I am. I think I’m going to call it a night,” I say, turning toward the bedroom.

“Okay, sounds good. Thank you for coming and doing the shoot today. I appreciate it. I’m going to run downstairs for a little while. I need to talk to Dwayne at the front desk to make sure we can extend our stay a bit longer,” I hear him say from behind me.

I want to say something, but I need to get away from him. So I don’t stop him, instead waiting in the privacy of the bedroom and listening to his footsteps walk toward the door. When I hear it click shut behind him, I let out a deep breath.

Now that I am alone, I don’t go to bed at all. Instead, I head straight for the balcony. It’s gorgeous as the orange glow radiates off the ocean. The waves are settling, and it looks like even the ocean is getting ready for her night’s rest.

As I stare out at the water, I can't help my mind replaying the feeling of his hands on my skin. I close my eyes and try to feel them again. I want the intensity of their warmth and the feeling of his lips on mine.

Thinking of our kiss sends a wave of goosebumps across my skin, only making me crave more. My heart pounds as I picture his lips on different areas of my skin. He's getting to me, and I feel myself spiraling out of control with the dirty thoughts dancing around my head.

Stop. Josephine. He's not yours. He's only pretending to be loving and caring toward you. He doesn't feel this way about you in real-time, and you need to stop thinking things like this.

Telling myself to stop reminds me that I need to stop allowing myself to get close to him. But, I have an issue hiding my actions. I've always been a terrible liar, the sort of person who can be read like an open book.

I can't make it look like I don't want to jump his bones every time he enters a room, and it's even worse now that I know the softness of his lips.

I have to figure out a way to let him go. How can I move past my feelings and focus on the arrangement?

I lose myself in my thoughts and overlook the time passing me by. Before I know it, Aiden arrives back in our room.

Holy shit. Is he back already? How long have I been out here?

His footsteps are behind me, but I can't tell if he's walking to the bathroom or out onto the balcony with me. I turn around, startling when I realize he's standing right behind me. Our eyes meet, and the lustful desire for his lips overtakes me again.

My heart is pounding when he doesn't break eye contact, and I'm losing myself in his deep blue eyes all over again.

Stop. Focus on anything else. Don't give in. You have to remember why you're here!

Our eyes linger on each other for longer than I want, and something inside me tells me I need to walk away. I need to remove myself from this balcony before I do something stupid, and it ruins the whole thing.

My mind is telling me one thing, but my body is telling me another. I know the right decision is to listen to my head and get the hell off this balcony. But my body keeps insisting it wants to feel him, and it starts winning the internal argument.

He smiles at me, and it only causes the desire to grow,

“I’m going to bed. Goodnight, Aiden!” I blurt out. Flustered, I quickly walk past him, preparing to walk back inside. It takes everything to ignore my racing heart and just focus on getting into bed, but I try. Just as I cross the threshold inside, I feel his hand on my arm. Gently but effectively, he halts my movement.

My heart nearly skips a beat as he twirls me around to face him. I watch as he silently closes the door to the balcony behind him, nervous anticipation building in my core.

Our eyes meet again, and my deep desire for him seems to be reflecting right back at me in his own glance. My breathing gets heavy, and I want him so badly it almost hurts.

Suddenly, he grabs my waist and pulls me in closer to him. Our faces are inches apart, and I can feel his breath again.

God, why does he have to be so sexy?

The tension between us grows the longer we linger. Finally, we can’t hold back any longer. He leans into me, and our lips meet without a hint of hesitation. The orange glow and the sound of the waves behind us, combined with his lips on mine, is my idea of perfection.

Why does he have to be so irresistible? I have to stop after this kiss....

AIDEN

After pulling away from our kiss, I stare at Josephine. I look intensely into her sea-green eyes and search for anything that might clue me into her thoughts. The expression on her face leaves no doubt that she loves our embrace. But what does that mean?

I look her over and take in every single detail. Her beautiful brown skin is so smooth and flawless, it nearly sends me to insanity. I can't help but notice her beautiful, long black hair and how it curtains her face.

“You are so sexy,” I murmur.

The desire inside me is boiling as I put my hand on her cheek. Her soft skin under my hand intoxicates me. I allow my thumb to trail down to her lips, taking every inch of her smooth skin as if I need it to survive.

My thumb follows the contours of her mouth ever so slightly. Josephine smiles at me, so I allow my finger to move lower and trace her jaw. I slide it down to her collarbone and continue to her breast.

Her smooth skin begins to goosebump from my touch. Every part of me wants her. Right here, right now. My veins feel like they're throbbing with desire, craving every inch of her soft, glistening skin.

My desire to feel her begins taking me over completely. Any shred of self-restraint flies out the window as adrenaline mixes with my willingness, consuming me.

This woman's perfect body drives me insane. I need her right now.

The thought of me giving Josephine pleasure increases my desire in a whole new way. My passion builds right alongside the tension between us, and I glance back up to meet her eyes again.

Looking into them, it feels like they seem to be shimmering just for me at this very moment. I allow my hand to find the silk strap of her dress, and I slide it off her shoulder with a smile.

She smiles at me, giving me the reassurance I need to grab her zipper and slowly push it downwards. I don't even need to glance down as the dress delicately falls to the floor all on its own.

“Oh, Josephine.”

I quickly decide to use this to my advantage and drop to a knee. I hear Josephine inhale sharply as I kiss her calf and work my way up to her knee.

Glancing up at her face for a moment, I notice her eyes are closed as she bites her lip.

“I need you now,” she whimpers.

A fire of desire burns inside of me as I kiss my way up her leg until I finally reach the bottom seam of her pink lace panties. I deftly grab the panties in my teeth and slide them down her silky legs. She's breathing heavily as I kiss back up her legs to her inner thigh.

I allow my tongue to hit her smooth legs and move up toward her perfect vagina. As soon as my tongue makes contact with her opening, she inhales sharply and lets out a small moan. I notice that she's already wet, which only stokes my desire further.

Quickly finding her clit with my tongue, I begin making small circles over it. Josephine's on her tippy toes as my tongue dances over her pussy. I lick a little deeper into her deliciousness, and her wetness leaps onto my tongue.

I take it all in happily until I decide to focus once more on her clit. As I do, I sink a finger deep inside her. The warmth of her wrapping around my finger is both agonizing and amazing. *I want her to cum first, but God damn, I really want to be inside of her...*

My tongue begins flowing faster over her clit as I slide my wet finger in and out of her. Suddenly, she's nearly in mid-air as her body tenses. I sink my finger in as far as I can, intensifying the sensations as she cums.

Her warm pussy clamps around it, and I feel her legs quiver by the sides of my head as her moans get louder. When her body finally relaxes, I quickly remove the rest of her clothing. *I can't waste any time. I need her now.*

Josephine works at the button on my pants, but I quickly lift her and put her bare ass on the nearby desk. It isn't the expected place, but it is the closest. Right now, I have no ability to delay any further, not even long enough to find the bed.

I rip my pants down quickly, and my boxers follow. My cock springs out, ready for a part in our interaction, and Josephine grabs it. She begins stroking it, causing shocks of sensation to course through my body. Her soft hands on the tip of my cock feel amazing, but I crave to feel the warmth and wetness of her tight pussy next..

Before I can regain my composure from the pleasure of her stroking me, Josephine guides the tip of it into her wet center. I don't hesitate at all and push all the way into her. The feeling of her wetness is almost enough to send me over the edge immediately.

But I regain my composure and start thrusting into her, moaning with every movement. She grabs the back of my neck, forcing me in deeper.

No problem, I think and begin thrusting into her deeper and harder. Meanwhile, I continue using my thumb to dance circles around her clit.

Josephine moans loudly, and I match her volume as shockwaves of pleasure course through my body. All I can feel is her warmth encompassing my cock. I watch her breasts bounce with every thrust. I lean forward, grab onto her nipple with my mouth and gently stroke over it with my tongue.

She tightens around me, enhancing my pleasure. I stop playing with her nipple and begin rubbing her clit faster and faster. I feel her vagina tightening, and the muscles strain around my cock even more intensely as each second passes.

My pleasure levels are rising as she gets tighter and wetter, bringing me closer to my release. Josephine finally moans my name as I feel her pulsating hard around my cock, surrounding it with her tantalizing warmth.

My pleasure hits its peak and pushes me over the edge. I push myself deeper into her just as she begins to cum again. The joyful look on her face is what finally makes me unravel, causing my cock to erupt deep inside her.

I lean in and kiss her with intense passion, repeating the very same act that got us here in the first place. She looks at me, and I can't help but lose myself in her green eyes again. *My God, we're excellent at this.*

Josephine smiles at me as I pull my dripping cock out of her. "That was amazing," she says breathlessly. *I couldn't agree more.*

She hops off the desk and moves to the bedroom, moving the fluffy robe off her side of the bed to the night stand. We climb in next to each other, bare skin still touching. Both of us quickly fall asleep, just enjoying the moment. Neither one of us talks about how we just gave in to temptation.

Right now, it's something I'm not ready to face. The fall out could be severe, and my brain freezes every time I try to think it over. Instead, I just enjoy holding her in my arms, thinking about how I secretly hope I never have to let her go.

JOSEPHINE

The sunbeams through the window warm my face, waking me peacefully. I smile, remembering why I'm sleeping so well. I roll over to place my arm on Aiden's naked chest, but to my surprise, his side of the bed is empty.

Damn. Another morning I wake up with an empty bed. Why do I think he'll sleep in here with me? We're not together. Last night meant nothing to him, and I need to get over it.

My heart aches as I get out of bed and put on my fluffy robe as I walk to the balcony. As soon as the ocean comes into view, I remember the comfort it gives me. Just drinking in the gorgeous vision before me has the power to bring my daydreams back to life and ease my hurts.

I sigh and look out across the sand at the waves as the water splashes against the beaches. I imagine Aiden walking into the water with me, holding each other as the waves crash against us.

Then I travel to visions of us walking along the shore, searching for matching shells and hidden treasures lurking in the sand. He playfully grabs at my swimsuit bottoms, acting as if he's wiping sand from my skin when in reality, he's reaching for a handful of my curves.

His hands fit perfectly on my ass like they're made for it. I smile, remembering what they feel like on my skin. Losing myself in visions of our entanglements, I daydream until the hotel room door suddenly flies open. I turn to see Aiden

holding several plates of food. He appears to be struggling with them all as I rush to help.

“Okay, I’ll let you help, but I’m the one who prepares the food around here!” he jokes. The comment is clearly exaggerated, as the hotel provides the breakfast. Still, my laughter blends with his as I set plates down on the hotel coffee table. He starts handing out waffles and bagels with different syrups and cream cheese options from the buffet downstairs.

So many questions are circling in my mind as he prepares our plates. I want to ask him, but I know I can’t. I don’t want to take the risk and accidentally blow what we’re doing here or change the way he’s acting toward me.

Everything he’s doing is so sweet, and the gesture of bringing breakfast for the both of us is fantastic. Thinking of last night and all the questions it brings, I’m hurting inside.

I look at him, wondering if he’s thinking of it at all. Does any of this mean as much to him as it does to me? Or am I just making myself miserable, hoping?

The pain is hard to fight through, but to save our vacation, I decide to push past it and appreciate his kindness.

“Thank you so much for doing this. It’s so sweet of you. I woke up starving but didn’t want to get dressed to go downstairs myself!” I laugh, taking a bite of a plain bagel.

“I figured you were probably as hungry as I was, so I thought it would be nicer to eat up here together.” He hands me my plate and points at the cream cheese options. I pick one for the bagel with my bite out of it, and he gives me a plastic butter knife to spread it.

It feels so good to be doing this with him. Something as simple as spreading cream cheese on a bagel, but it’s the sweet gesture that I can’t get enough of. It’s the best feeling ever when a man prepares something like this for you, even if it is just from the buffet downstairs.

Once his plate is ready, he sits beside me, and we make small talk as we eat. The whole time I’m reminding myself

why we're here and why he's acting the way he is. I try to drum it into my head: *don't make too much of this.*

I finish eating quickly and head to the room to change. Aiden follows me. "I thought maybe we could get our swimsuits on and go enjoy some time at the beach. I see you looking at it a lot, and I'd like to spend some time there, too, before we leave," he says.

Oh my God! My daydreams are becoming a reality! I'm bursting with excitement on the inside, but I stay calm and collected on the outside.

I nod in agreement. "Yeah, that sounds like a lot of fun. The ocean looks calm today. It's so sunny out. I bet it'll feel amazing!"

"Okay! I'll grab my trunks and leave you to get dressed then." He grabs his suit and leaves, shutting the bedroom door behind him. My heart pounds as I dress, thinking of what our day might hold and all that we can do together.

Once I'm in my suit, we head outside, strolling down the beach until our toes touch the water. The warm sand feels so good between my toes, and I can't help noticing how perfectly his trunks fit.

We spend the day walking along the beach, swimming, and laughing until we can't breathe. It's just like in my daydream. Only, it turns out the reality is so much better. He's the perfect gentleman, with a touch of naughtiness as he dusts the sand off several of my surfaces.

He's being playful and flirty, and I'm eating it up, wishing this is how it could be all the time. The two of us are practically hanging onto one another, and I feel a warmth in my chest at the closeness. But as the day goes on, the more perfect and happy I feel, the more I have to remind myself not to let my hopes get too high.

This isn't real. We're not here together because he wants me the way I'm starting to want him. He's only acting this way because he still needs me for our arrangement. The second he

no longer needs me, it'll all go back to normal, and he'll forget about me.

You have to remember the contract. That's all this is to him. Every touch, kiss, and laugh is part of our agreement. Don't let him sweep you off your feet, or you'll end up flat on your face.

AIDEN

I'm sitting at my boring desk sorting through files I can't seem to find the interest to even look at today. It's been two days since Josephine and I finished our vacation, and I can't stop thinking about her. Every single piece of her dances around my brain, and she consumes every part of me.

Every time I blink, a vision of her naked body on mine swipes across my view, bringing me back to our special night together. I remember her warm body on mine and the warmth of her breath on my neck as she moans my name. Hearing her voice calling out my name at the peak of her climax still rings in my ears.

The way she entangled her fingers in my hair and the feeling of our lips on each other is something I miss way more than I want to. The more I think about it, the worse it gets and the more I crave her. It's like the one taste only ignited my insatiable desire for her. I thought it would ease the longing, but now I know what I am missing. The loss is driving me wild.

I'm staring blankly and biting the end of my pen when I hear a knock on my glass door. I look up to see my secretary, Samantha, standing at the threshold.

"Sorry to bother you, Aiden. But your father has called an urgent meeting in the conference room," she says.

I nod and jump out of my chair to follow her. She walks in front of me and leads me to the conference room. It's an odd gesture, as I certainly could find my way there myself. Still, I

know she fears my father like everyone else here. She'd never dare let him think she hadn't completed her errand.

When I enter, everyone in the offices surrounding mine is already here. My father is sitting at the captain's seat at the head of the table, as usual.

"Hello, Aiden," he says when I take a seat, like no one here knows he's my father. I nod at him and open the pile of papers stacked on the placemat in front of me. The packet is nicely stapled in the corner, and everyone reads through it quietly.

After the last person walks in and takes their seat, my father stands. "Thanks for meeting me here on such short notice. I have a few things to discuss and didn't want to wait."

He reads through the company's agenda and the papers we've all been skimming over, then starts to review the company's status. Nothing about this meeting feels different or urgent, and I'm beginning to wonder what the hell he's called us here for when suddenly the door opens.

I don't think anyone from our floor is missing from this meeting, so I don't know who could be joining us. The heels walking on the floor toward me sound familiar. It intrigues me enough to look up to see the late arrival.

Holy shit. You've got to be kidding me, I think. It's all the motivation my father needs to finally make his big announcement.

"Everyone, here is the newest member of our company. Her name is Ada. I'm sure you've seen her around here at some point, but I'd like you all to give her your warmest of welcomes. You'll be seeing her on a daily basis now," he says as everyone around the table smiles and murmurs greetings.

Jesus, Dad, are you actively trying to ruin my life? Is it not enough for her to harass me every day by phone? Now I have to see her and deal with it here too?

I sit in my chair, not knowing what to do. I can feel her staring at me. Everything in me wants to crawl under the desk

just to get her eyes off me. I'd do anything to get myself out of this awful situation my father's putting me in again.

Is she really so desperate to be with me that she's willing to talk my father into giving her a job here? Just to be around me every day? She can't stop me from screening her calls and messages, so she weasels her way into my workplace.

Everyone else is welcoming her with open arms and congratulations. I can't even look at her. All I do is stare at my father as he bullshits his way through meaningless conversations with people he doesn't care about.

I know he's an asshole, but I didn't realize he would stoop this low. I can't take the fake conversation and admiration for her anymore. I slam my chair against the table and walk out of the conference room.

I can feel the stares of my fellow employees as I walk away, but I don't give a damn. My door slams behind me as I storm into my office, and I angrily sit back at my desk.

That shit news is what I let interrupt my visions of my night with Josephine? Hardly a fair trade, if you ask me.

I'm switching between angrily flipping through files and reading through my emails when my door bursts open. I look up to see my father rapidly coming toward me and slamming his hands down on my desk.

"What makes you think you can storm out of my conference room in the middle of a meeting?" he yells.

I scoff at the way he feigns innocence, like he doesn't know exactly what he did to make me so upset. Like he didn't do it on purpose. He's always like this, setting me up in an impossible situation and then using it as a reason to blame me for failing.

"Really? Don't you know why I wouldn't want to be a part of whatever stupid scheme she's cooked up with you? I figured it would look better if I just left rather than causing a scene. I did you a favor because if she had looked at me one more time, I would have lost it," I say angrily.

“Who do you think you’re talking to? Scheme? You won’t talk to me like that, especially after having a tantrum and storming off like a child. This is the only solution to our problem, so you will just have to put up with it. Not everything is about you. Get over yourself!”

He doesn’t give me a chance to respond before turning around and storming back out. He slams the door, and I jump as it rattles the glass.

What the hell is his problem? Now, what does he expect me to do? Am I just supposed to act like nothing’s wrong and let her harass me all day?

It’s bad enough the way she acts in the first place, but at least at home, I can shut my phone off. Here, he will force me to be nice to her, which will only send the wrong message. What does he think I’m going to do when there’s nowhere to get away from her?

I let my thoughts wander back to the only place I feel happy, which is in Josephine’s presence. Reflecting on her sunshine personality and gorgeousness brings me out of my anger and bitterness long enough to make it through my long list of to-dos for the day. It’s better than thinking about the unpleasantness that is Ada.

The idea of her being my safe place scares the hell out of me, but I don’t have the desire or will to try and stop myself. I’m going to do whatever I have to do to get me through the day. If thinking about Josephine is the only bright spot in a cloud of gray, so be it.

JOSEPHINE

Going back to work after making love to Aiden only a few days ago has left me titillated and incredibly distracted. I have no idea how I am going to get through this, pretending that our union is something of fiction.

My attraction to him is palpable. Judging by his behavior in bed the other night, his interest in me is growing, too. At least, I hope it is.

I have a million questions I want to ask him, but I worry it will disrupt our agreement. But the sex in itself likely disrupted a few previously set rules, so why am I worrying myself sick over clarification? Why am I so afraid to ask him what it means?

I stand at the register, my mind drifting in and out of the amazing memories. The strength of Aiden, the passion, the pleasure that engulfed my body once I finally let go. I don't even notice that I'm biting my lip while daydreaming until my coworker comes up to the counter.

"Hey Josephine."

I blink back to reality.

"Yes, what's wrong?"

The girl, a reliable employee for nearly two years, motions with her thumb behind her.

"There's a woman at the entrance causing a commotion. She knows she knows you and your husband."

I let out a gritty sigh. I know who is causing the ruckus without even having to go over there.

“It’s fine,” I say, then walk out from behind the counter. “Take the register. I will deal with this.”

I walk over to where one of my other workers is arguing with a woman who is already starting to shout. I see that it is, of course, Ada. She looks enraged, eyes bulging with red streaky veins.

“I need to see her!” Ada yells.

My employee is trying to calm her down, telling her that there is no need to shout. I touch the young lady’s shoulder and motion for her to walk away. Ada immediately narrows her eyes, crosses her arms and takes a step toward me.

“So how does it feel to be a home-wrecker, huh?”

She isn’t yelling anymore, but her voice is still at a good decibel. There are only a handful of customers, but the shop is small, and they are all looking in our direction.

I use my best retail voice to try to usher her outside.

“Let’s talk about this somewhere else, Ada. This is my place of business. I am sure you can understand that.”

If she wasn’t so frustrating, Ada could be very pretty. Her biggest flaw is the heir of entitlement about her that was likely instilled in birth. Despite a very attractive appearance, the unpleasantness underneath has a way of marring the beauty.

She scoffs at me, then pulls an envelope from her purse. “Don’t condescend to me, thief,” Ada asserts. “I have something you may want, so you better be nice to me.”

I look at the writing on the envelope, noticing it has been addressed to the cafe. I frown, trying to avoid the sarcasm that rises in my throat naturally.

“What is that, Ada? Are you going through my mail now?” I want to throw in that doing so is a federal crime but toss the comment aside for now.

Ada opens the package roughly. What emerges from it makes my heart skip a beat.

In her hands is the latest edition of the magazine we took photos for, just after the wedding. I had been waiting to see them ever since we got back home. I hate to admit it, but I know I am always going to cherish them; no matter how this fake arrangement goes down.

My outrage builds at seeing her take the thing I have been waiting for. Like everything else, it has my name right on it, and yet she still thinks it is hers to possess.

“Give it to me, Ada. This is childish.”

Ada bursts out into a maniacal laugh. The customers continue to stare, and I feel my face start to heat with annoyance and embarrassment.

“You really think you can keep him? A man like that?” she says, laughing and pointing at the cover. “You are a peasant, honey, and Aiden, he is my prince.”

Before I get a chance to hit her back with an insult, or perhaps, simply snatch the magazine from her hands, Ada takes a coffee cup that had been left by a customer on one of the booths. What happens next moves in slow motion, and I am helpless to stop it.

I hold my hands out, as though it will make any difference. Desperately, I cry out, trying to knock some sense into her. “Don’t!” It is the only word I can come up with.

Ada does not care. She pours the remains of the cold coffee all over the magazine, instantly ruining it. I stand there, frozen in shock, my heart wrenching with agony. She soaks the entire thing, then lets it drop to the floor. It makes a loud, wet smacking sound.

“Now let’s see how you are going to frame *that!*” Ada exclaims maliciously, her eyes glittering cruelly.

The magazine sits in a wet, brown coffee puddle, the liquid pooling around it on the floor. I stare at it in disbelief.

Ada begins laughing, then spins around to walk out the door. I have nothing left to say, and I feel pathetic.

One of my employees runs over with a paper towel, looking alarmed. “Who the hell was that?” she asks in a frenzy.

I shake my head back and forth, taking the paper towel from her arms. “It’s nothing to worry about. Just focus on the customers. I’ll clean this up.”

She hesitates but starts to move away as I asked. Just before she turns, asks me one more time. “Are you sure?”

I am not sure. My anger and hurt are bubbling inside my chest like a volcano ready to explode. How long do I have to put up with this? Is she just going to keep coming back, day in and day out, until we finally admit that none of this is real?

It does not seem like our fake engagement is getting rid of her at all. I will lose the strength for this battle long before she will. Is there any point?

None of this is a topic I can bring up to a helpful employee, anyway. So I just nod, lying in response to her question. “I am fine. I will get this cleaned up.”

She gets back to the register, and I go to my knees. The magazine is utterly destroyed. Though I know I can easily get my hands on a new copy, the action was profound and frightening in its desperation.

I hold in tears as I wipe up the rest of the coffee water, eventually getting a mop to clean up the sticky floor. There’s something so devastating about hearing the way the magazine lands in the trash can with a chilling thud. Like it’s a bad omen of what is still to come.

AIDEN

I want to make a point of visiting Josephine at work more often. Not only does it look good for our plan, but I feel like I genuinely want to see her. I get a bit excited when I receive a text from my bride.

Ada was here.

A frown replaces my smile, the enthusiasm from just a moment ago slipping away. The message is vague but troubling. I am only a few minutes away from the cafe, so I blast myself there, whipping into the parking lot at epic speed.

I know what Ada is capable of. The fact that she is now installed as a member at the company means that she thinks her tactics are working. Far from going away, she's now gaining traction. I fear what other desperate measures she is going to apply.

I get out of the car and see through the glass that Josephine is cleaning up something. She is using a mop, with an expression of utter defeat.

“What now, Ada?” I say to myself.

I get inside, and her employees greet me with the same level of cheeriness as always. I give them a polite nod, then walk over to Josephine. She doesn't even realize I am there, so I touch the handle of the mop.

“Babe?” I say softly.

She looks up at me, the realization brightening her glum expression. I smile. I can't help it when I'm around her.

“What happened, honey?”

She points over at a garbage bag. It sits loose on the floor, pulled out of the can so it can be taken to the dumpster soon.

“Ada had my copy of the magazine publication,” she says, sounding tired. “She said I could never be good enough for you...then poured coffee all over it.”

I feel my heart clench in my chest. The audacity of this woman! Not only has she hurt Josephine, but she refuses to give up and give into the fact that I am no longer single.

What right does she have to say who is good enough for me? The nerve of it makes my face heat with anger. The person not acceptable to me is her, not Josephine, and she still refuses to face it.

I rub the bridge of my nose, still holding onto the mop handle. Josephine tries to tug it gently out of my hand, intending to finish cleaning.

I do not surrender my grip. “Can we sit down for a minute?” I inquire.

“I want to get this done...”

“Two minutes Josephine, please.”

She sighs then lets go of the mop. I take it and place it in the bucket, pushing it near the stain that remains on the floor.

We walk over to our usual booth, and her head hangs low. I hate seeing her this way. She looks more than downtrodden; she seems hopeless.

“Josephine, I know it sounds pathetic at this point, but I want you to know that I am so, so sorry on behalf of my ex’s behavior. You don’t deserve any of that.”

Josephine shrugs, making my heart ache even more. I reach out and take her wrist, which she doesn’t respond to.

“I’m serious here. I don’t want you to take anything seriously that comes out of her mouth. She is just a jealous, bratty woman. Do you hear me?”

Josephine shrugs again. I feel like I am talking to the wall.

“Can you look at me for a second, babe?”

The use of a pet name gets her attention, and she finally raises her green eyes in my direction. She looks devastated, and it makes me want to scream from the rooftops how divine she is.

“I promise you that I will not let any of that happen to you again. You don’t deserve any of the bullshit she throws your way. I am so sorry that she tried to hurt you like this.”

Josephine looks away from me but doesn’t push my hand away. I wish I could reach out and kiss her, tell her how much better she is than my ex.

But that would mean I am admitting something deeper than our agreement. Is that why it hurts to see her so destroyed? Because I can not comfort her without giving myself away, potentially only making things worse?

I squeeze her wrist. “Hey, how about we do something fun tonight? I can take you out on the town, maybe try that adult arcade we were talking about...”

She cuts me off before I have a chance to finish my sentence.

“I would rather stay here and bake, if that’s alright.”

My heart sinks in my chest like a stone falling into a well. She really is hurt by what happened with Ada.

I nod, then give her hand another squeeze. “I want you to do whatever you think will make you feel better...I’m still so sorry, though. I really mean that.”

“I know you are, Aiden,” she says, still looking away. “I just need to do my own thing right now. I hope you understand that. My mother is coming home from the hospital soon. I need to prepare her room, get my mind ready, all that, you know?”

I give her arm one last squeeze, and finally let go. She doesn’t seem to notice.

“I do understand.” It’s true, in a way. I don’t want to boss her around or tell her how to face her problems. She is a

grown adult. If she doesn't want my help or comfort, there is nothing I can do.

It's just the way her reasons sound like excuses that bother me. I can feel her pulling away, and I don't know how to stop it.

We sit in silence for a moment, the din of the customers, the espresso machine and ambient music sitting between us. I know that this must be a lot for her to deal with. Having a jealous ex-girlfriend to deal with certainly was not part of the deal.

"Call me or text to let me know if you need anything, okay? Anything at all?"

She gives me a faint smile, but it's one of those smiles you give customers when you are having a shit day. It makes my heart ache even more.

"I will, Aiden. Thank you."

We stand up and give a cordial goodbye. We even peck each other on the lips for the sake of the image. She pulls away from me quickly, though I have the urge to hold her closer and longer.

She gives me that smile again, and I walk away. I chose not to inform her of Ada's position at the company because it can only upset her more. There is no point in adding any more humiliation to what she has already experienced today.

When I climb into my car, I feel useless and empty, a sudden sense of loneliness sitting in my chest. I look back over at the cafe, seeing Josephine starting to mop again.

What the hell is going on with me?

JOSEPHINE

Having Ada come into the cafe and humiliate me like that stung. I had no control over her behavior, and most of all, I looked like a toolbox in front of my employees.

I could tell that Aiden could detect my helplessness. That in turn, made him feel helpless. Even if he was technically my husband, someone who was meant to know every inch of my emotions, there was very little the man could do.

It reminded me just how pathetic my position as his wife really was. His wife. But without the attachment or the love. Even though we slept together, I felt empty as he tried to console me. It was a gesture of compassion, not love. He walked away with far less confidence than he walked in with.

I hadn't been lying when I said I had to go home and help prepare my mother's room. I feel that it is something that I can focus on, something that is remotely within my control.

I stay as long as I can at the shop before I decide to head home. My employees appear to have sympathy for my situation, despite having only a slight idea as to what it really is.

"Get home, boss," one of the young girls says. "Your mom is going to be so excited to see you."

It lights something in me. An example of an undeniable love is the one my parents share. Not something I have to work for, or puzzle over its existence, like with Aiden.

I climb into my car as the sun sets on the horizon. It spills over the parking lot, casting everything in a semi-artistic light. It cheers me up, finding a slice of beauty in an otherwise horrible day.

I drive on, feeling immensely lighter than when Aiden had come in. I'm not some damsel in distress that needs to be saved by her fake husband when his ex ruins their photos with old, cold coffee.

Still, I admit, I would have liked it if he tried even a bit more. I would have liked it to feel more genuine. It seems silly to admit that, even to myself. Our whole relationship is fake. What did I expect?

I slow down to a halt at a red stoplight. With the window down, I relish the warm air on my skin. For a split second, I am at peace. For a moment, my mind is still, holding tight onto the joy of my mother's return.

Then, a doubt slips into my brain. What will my mother think of the situation I have found myself in?

"Shit," I whisper to myself.

The green light glows, and some impatient person behind me honks. I jolt back into the present and press on the gas, my mind drifting off once again.

I had been afraid to tell my father about my deal with Aiden. He had been understanding in the end, of course. But my fear of his judgment was a very real reason I kept it to myself as long as I could.

I love my mother, but somehow I doubted she would be as patient about the whole thing as my father. My father had been willing to leave it alone, thinking of it as a decision only I could make for myself. He never quite came out and said it was right or wrong, just warned me to not get carried away.

My mother probably had no idea any of this had happened. I certainly hadn't told her. Had my father?

She had been detached from most of the current events, off at the hospital. But the surgery had gone swimmingly. Now that she's returning home, there's no way she won't catch on.

She is a smart woman. She must have questions as to how on earth we could afford such a procedure.

I am probably going to have to tell her everything right off the bat. The thought fills me with dread.

I pull into the driveway, the diminishing light winking off the windshield. I turn off the engine and sit in silence for a moment. In that short window of time, I find serenity. Brief and wonderful serenity.

My mother loves me, I know that for sure. But she also knows me well. This means she will recognize the awkwardness of my deal with Aiden.

The awkwardness of the growing affection I have for him, every time he walks into the room. He is a masterpiece in the gallery of my mind.

I climb out of the car, glad that my father will not be home later. He wants to spend as much time with my mother as possible before she is set to come home tomorrow. I told him I would do the room, so he had nothing to worry about.

I open the front door of the only home I have ever known. I feel the echo of the memories as I walk past the living room, the kitchen, my childhood and current bedroom, my parents' shared bedroom, and finally, the room that will soon be my mother's.

There are hopes that she will recover in her condition. There is always a likelihood that it could return and whisk her away from us. But I will not let myself think that far ahead.

Aiden helped us order a hospital bed, which arrived the day before. The workers had put it together for us, which was helpful. My mother will likely hate the sight of it; it will only make her think of the sickness and the hospital.

So I am going to brighten up the room with fairy lights, photographs of pleasant times, and bedsheets that make her laugh. Anything to make it feel homey and less sterile, anything to bring a little cheer to the space.

There isn't anything I wouldn't do for my parents, and I know that there isn't anything they wouldn't do for me. I think

about this as I start the laundry on the new bedsheets, place photos into frames and look into the fridge to start dinner. My father will be home late, and will likely not have the energy for cooking.

Love is strange, isn't it? It's a lot like finding yourself on the outside, someone you have to pry into sometimes. But we try to find the balance because we love each other. That is why I do this for my parents. It would be the same way I would love Aiden, given that there was a chance for that real feeling.

I sit on the side of my mother's bed. It is propped up so she can watch TV or talk to us without having to get up. I try not to let my thoughts get dark and dreary. There is much light to come.

"We'll get through this," I whisper.

AIDEN

I haven't seen Josephine for a few days due to overtime at work. There was a lot I now had to catch up on, after taking all the time off to plan and execute the wedding, plus extending our trip for a couple extra days.

It all seemed to work out, though, because Josephine had her mother to keep her busy. Now that her mother has been released from the hospital, Josephine wants to focus on getting her settled in at home. I can understand that, and our busy days seem to line up well so neither of us feels ignored.

I spend days, even nights at the office. It feels somewhat nice to be back in a routine at work; it keeps me sharp. Still, though, this ring wrapped around my right finger is taking some getting used to.

On this night in particular, the sun has already set behind me. I watched it setting a few hours ago, fading from blazing tangerine orange to a deep, glossy black. Coffee and almonds for snacks are keeping me awake. I am typing, thinking, planning, in the zone.

Multiple janitors have gone by, cleaning the office carpets and floors. Their machines are soothing, rocking me back and forth with their consistent hum.

It is nearly 8 P.M. when I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. When I look up, my stomach drops, realizing that what I am seeing isn't one of the custodians saying goodnight; it is Ada.

She holds two boxes of what smells like Chinese takeout. Handing her a key to the building has been one of the worst decisions my father has ever made.

“Are you hungry, handsome?”

I glower at her. “I don’t know how many times I am going to have to reject you,” I say, still typing away at an email. “But I don’t care. I’ll keep doing it until you get the message.”

She gives me a wink, which only encourages my frustration.

“That doesn’t sound like a no…” she whispers.

Ada comes toward the desk, and I wonder if I should start locking my door. I hold my hand up to her like I have many times and unlock one of my draws. I pull out a protein bar and a bottle of Gatorade, waving it in her face.

“I’m good to go, as you can see.”

She scoffs and places down one of the takeout boxes. I’m not going to lie, it does smell tempting. But I can’t give in, even an inch. Not with this woman.

She must notice my mouth salivating because she sits on the desk, folding one bare leg over the other.

“You love Chinese,” she says, popping open the container.

The smell wafts upward, ticking my nose hairs. I begin to bolt out of my own office to escape her.

“You really are something, Ada. Don’t leave your garbage in here.”

I walk to the canteen to have my late night snack and decide to have just one more coffee for the night. Before Ada had arrived, I was on a roll. I plan to continue for about an hour, an hour and a half, and then leave on a high note.

Because Ada and I are the only ones left in the building, it is easy to hear when she leaves. I wait in the canteen drinking coffee when I finally hear the glass doors of the office slam shut.

It's not a sound one would likely notice during the usual chatter of office work. But in the silence of the evening, one can hear the minute movement of a mouse.

I sigh and move back into my office. This time, I close the door and lock it behind me, finding relief in the sound of the click.

I then peer over at my desk and stop suddenly, frozen mid-walk.

I had left the drawer of my desk open when I retrieved my snacks. It strikes my eye right away because doing that isn't like me at all. Plus, the opening of that drawer unlocks other drawers, ones with much more vital information within them.

I return to the desk and begin to cycle through them. Everything seems to be in place, but it throws me off, making me call it a night much earlier than I had intended.

Ada had taken the takeout boxes with her, leaving not a single trace of her existence. In retrospect, it seems kind of strange that she didn't follow me into the canteen. There was no one else there, so she would have had the perfect opportunity to corner me. So why not?

I climb into my car, my mind swirling like a carnival ride. I start the engine and soar through the night, keeping my mind on the road as I recall the earlier accident with Josephine. I paid to have both of our cars fixed soon after it happened, but the last thing I need is another incident from careless driving.

I get home rather quickly and do my usual night-time routine. It usually calms me down after a long, productive day. Today, I am going through it on autopilot.

I can't help but wonder what Ada had done, despite the fact that everything seemed like it was still in the same spot. Suspicion nags at me, though I can't quite put my finger on just what is bothering me.

After showering, brushing my teeth and applying some skin cream, I climb into my bed. The sheets are fresh from the laundry, and I breathe in a comforting sigh. I close my eyes and rest on my back, exhausted from a long day of work.

But something keeps pricking in my head. Like a needle moving through skin, preventing me from falling into the deep slumber I crave so keenly.

Ada is a conundrum; always has been since the day we met. But there is something I can be sure of, a lesson learned the hard way by her past behavior. She is convincing, she is unpredictable. That combination often equals a nuclear bomb of consequences.

She had told me she loved me and then cheated on me. She continues to berate me, claiming she wants me even though she so clearly had me before. There is nothing left that can surprise me about her erratic behavior and poor decision-making.

I fall asleep eventually, trying to place my concerns about Ada on the shelf of my mind. I dream of a bomb going off as I stand in a field with Josephine, watching as the red blooms into black.

JOSEPHINE

I sit in my room looking over the photos from an extra copy of the magazine Aiden sent me. It has been a few days since we've seen each other, and I'm not going to lie to myself anymore. I miss him, and that is the damn truth.

I flip through the pages as the morning sun pours in. I haven't slept much since mom came back home. I have missed her dearly, as has my father. But she still needs her rest, so we leave her be when the commotion of our presence becomes too much.

When I find myself unable to sleep, I walk through the hallways and stand silently outside her bedroom door. Anxiety makes me listen to her breathing, while love makes me simply want to be near her.

On more than one occasion, I have pushed the door open a bit and seen my father in there with her. He usually sits in the easy chair, propped up, snoring away, his hand still clutching my mother's even in sleep.

The sight of it destroyed me the first time I saw it, in more ways than one. It is the image of an ideal love, one I wish I could somehow get a grasp of.

Today, I stay in bed a bit later. I have taken a few days off from work to spend it with my mom, helping her settle in. She shows a general contentment to be home and in the arms of her family, and I want to be by her side as long as I can.

My father, too, has taken time off from the shop. We have fallen into a lull of letting her sleep in late, bringing her

breakfast in bed. When that is done, we simply spend as much time as we can together. She is able to get up and is slowly but surely getting better. A physiotherapist comes in three times a week to help her get her confidence and skill back.

But it is likely that she will never be who she was before. I know that there is a great grief in that for anyone, but my mother's disposition remains the way it always has; disruptively hopeful.

I think about this as I flip through the photos of Aiden and I, with a mixture of gratitude and disappointment. My parent's wedding photos have a similar feeling to them; a youthful optimism that cannot be downplayed. It was genuine happiness that I felt that day, but looking at them now makes me feel like a bit of a fraud.

A fraud who truly misses the person who is technically her husband, if only through formality.

I have yet to tell my mother about our deal. I take off my ring every time I see her. It almost feels more dishonest to walk around with it on, in front of the two most important people in my life. Two people I still don't want to disappoint.

I sigh and close the magazine. It is nearly 10 A.M., and I haven't heard a stir from my father. He likely fell asleep in the chair next to my mother again, his wife, the love of his life...

The moment I begin to feel downcast again, I see my phone light up. It's on my side table, and I have yet to look at it. Social media can feel just as fake as the marriage I found myself in.

I grab it off the table. Immediately, my heart does a backflip. It's a text message from Aiden.

Good morning, gorgeous. Take a look outside, when you get a second. He sent a winky face emoji along with it.

"What did he do?"

My heart gallops in my chest, suffocating any sadness I had been feeling just moments before. I shoot up from my lying position on the bed and get onto my knees, pushing the curtains aside to peer out the window.

Aiden is indeed there, standing by the mailbox with a stunning bouquet of flowers in his hands. He is quite a marvelous sight in his slacks and polo shirt, which nicely frames those thick and strong shoulder muscles I have been craving to touch since the day we met.

He does not see me, but I smile anyway. I change out of my pajamas and into something casual, a T-shirt and yoga pants, then pull my hair into a loose bun. There is no time for trying to impress him. I hope in my heart, perhaps foolishly, that all of that beauty will come later.

I whisk out the front door and walk down the driveway, the cool air slapping against my bare skin. The sun sits in a bright blue sky, the day of wonder just beginning. I move slowly, watching him, waiting until that fateful moment when he sees me.

When he does, I feel a glow in my chest that can truly, only mean one thing. My body is a bushel of roses, blooming in front of him, excited beyond measure to be in his presence. I don't repress the feeling. I can't do it anymore.

His smile is dazzling, his eyes deep and shining as he holds the flowers like a young boy on prom night. I fold my arms and lean against the post of the mailbox, pursing my lips sarcastically.

"Well well, look who it is," I say in a low, teasing tone. "I thought you may have gone out to pasture..."

Aiden's smile slowly fades away. Mine does, too, as I feel a beat between us. He drops his hand holding the flowers to his side, then does something that I had been dreaming of since I first laid eyes upon him.

He takes me by the waist with his free hand, pulling me into him firmly. I gasp, touching his chest as he splays his hand over my lower back. My heart feels like it is going to burst out of my chest.

"I've missed you, Josephine," he murmurs.

He tilts his head and closes his eyes. Time stands still as our lips meet, and I feel at home in a way I haven't in days.

AIDEN

I purchase a bouquet of vivid, colorful flowers before heading over to see Josephine. My heart hammers in my chest, something I'm having trouble ignoring. This isn't all a formality. This isn't something to do to keep Josephine happy about our arrangement. This is something I want to do, out of my own deep yearning to see those beautiful eyes shimmer in the sunlight.

I wait outside after sending her a text. My heart feels like it is getting bigger with every second that ticks by. I imagine her coming outside, anticipating the taste of her lips, the sound of her angelic voice. My adoration is palpable.

When she emerges, my whole body responds. I feel nervous and unsettled, giddy in a way that is both terrifying and perfect. I have the urge to hold myself still, but something comes over me where I try the opposite. I let go of resistance entirely. I begin to move in a free flowing manner as she comes near.

I cannot lie. The moment the vanilla and lavender blend of her body spray hits me, I stop listening to her words. I take her by the waist and pull her in close, titling my head to taste her essence.

She accepts me, sliding her hands up my chest and cupping my neck as our mouths collide.

It is a soft but firm kiss. I pull her in closer as passion nearly gets the best of me, the wet tickle of her tongue against mine nearly firing off a rapturous explosion.

She pulls away from me, breathless, just in time before things get out of hand.

Our eyes meet. Her sage beauties are twinkling in the morning sun.

“Wow,” she whispers.

I feel my tongue slide between my teeth. I can't stop smiling.

“I've missed you, Josephine...”

We stand by the driveway, embracing for a moment, holding each other in a state of hesitant fever. Her grip on my neck loosens when her father emerges from the front door.

“Well, good morning, love birds!” he calls out. “Why don't you both get inside, and we'll have some breakfast? It's brisk out here!”

I raise a hand and wave politely. Josephine lets me go and we walk to the front door, hand in hand.

We have a wonderful breakfast together, where Josephine and her father speak reverently about her mother. She is asleep in the other room, the two of them letting her get some extra rest.

“She is going to adore you,” her father remarks over scrambled eggs.

I think about the idea of having a mother-in-law. It hadn't struck me until this very moment that technically, that is what she would be to me.

We chat about the cafe, about business matters. Her father is jovial, but Josephine seems distracted. Her father invites us all out for lunch, which he says is going to be his treat.

I try to offer to pay in a way that isn't insulting, but he shakes his head back and forth, waving his hand insistently in my face. I start to grin, and he grins back.

“No, no, Aiden, you have already done so much for us. I want to treat you. At least, for one meal. Right, honey?”

Josephine smiles, but it is that timid smile I have grown so accustomed to seeing. She finishes off her meal and inquires about her mother.

“Do you think we should get mom up now?”

Her father shakes his head back and forth fervently.

“We were up late last night, talking. Let her be for now.”

My heart is beating like a rhythmic drum in my chest. I slide a hand over to Josephine’s hand and give it a squeeze. She seems surprised, looking over at me with a sense of vulnerability.

The words are out of my mouth before I get a chance to think about them. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

It turns out I only get a brief window to greet Josephine’s mother before she falls asleep again. She seems very nice, however, albeit a bit groggy and confused. It makes my heart ache, a more poignant reminder of just everything this poor family has been through.

While she is resting, the rest of us head out for lunch a few hours later. We talk some more about the cafe on a patio, eating home style burgers and sandwiches.

Once lunch is over, I have to head into work. Josephine’s father says his goodbyes before we have a private moment to say ours.

Something comes over me, and I don’t want to leave. We linger by my car, and Josephine does something I would have never expected before.

She backs me up into the car with her hands on my waist. She pushes her body against mine, not roughly, but with a clear intention. She gazes up at me as my hands come to her face.

Her mouth opens, speaking beautifully. My name sounds like honey on her tongue.

“Aiden...”

I take her mouth in mine, and before we realize it, we are making out in broad daylight. Our enthusiasm for each other nearly completely unfolds, her breasts pressing against my chest, her mouth opening and groaning for more.

I am lost in the fog of our desire when she pulls away, smirking and licking those enchanting lips.

“I should get inside,” she says, panting.

I nod and give her one last kiss on the forehead. I rub her cheek as I whisper into her ear, watching her skin break out in goosebumps.

“I am going to miss you...”

Josephine breathes softly. She doesn't say anything. Just kisses me again, smiling against me as she does.

“Let me know when you get home later, okay?” she asks me.

I nod, and we sadly part, holding onto fingertips as I climb into the front seat. When we finally let go, I feel a weight being placed onto my chest. It feels like a thousand pounds has been thrown upon me.

She waves goodbye as she walks to the house, and I pull out onto the street. I know she wants to spend time with her mother. But I wonder how she is truly feeling about the person who is her husband.

I wonder if she feels the same bewitching turmoil that I do.

JOSEPHINE

I'm watching as Aiden pulls away and something inside me wishes he wasn't. I miss him, and I'm not sure why it's getting so bad lately.

His showing up to see me and wanting to check on my mother definitely isn't helping me keep my feelings at bay, though....

Seeing how he interacts with her and my father makes it more challenging. He treats them like his in-laws, making me start to feel things I know I have no right to feel.

When all I can see is what's left of Aiden's tail lights, I start to turn around to head inside the house. Something catches my eye and stops me, and I notice a car start following him. I stare at it for a moment, trying to remember why it looks familiar.

I can't move from the spot for a long minute. Something about the car and the situation feels off, and I start to feel protective of him. If he's in danger and needs help, I can't ignore it.

I need to warn him... But I can't even remember why that car looks familiar. If I call and tell him I think there's someone following him but can't say why or how I know, he's going to think I'm crazy...

Suddenly the realization as to why the car looks familiar clicks into place, and my heart sinks. It feels like it might pound right out of my chest when I make the connection. That car is the same exact car his ex-girlfriend, Ada, has.

I'm instantly worried sick about it. I recall Aiden telling me she works at his company now and is one of the shareholders. I can't wrap my brain around why she could be following him like this...

What is it now? What is she planning to do this time? Was the coffee shop not enough of a scene? She needs yet another attempt at making her point? She already knows he's mine now. Why can't she just accept it?

At first, it angers me that she's following him and harassing him and now bothering me, as well. But the more I think about it, the more it makes sense to me. I don't think stalking is the way to go about it, but I begin to understand how losing him would mess a person up for life.

I reminisce about our time together and all the laughs we share. Our beautiful moments of playing and goofing around on the beach replay on a loop whenever I hear his name. It is a picture that has forever burned itself into my brain, and it helps me understand why she can't seem to let him go.

A man like him is so hard to come across these days. He knows just how to treat a woman the way she deserves, the way she dreams about. He's the kind of man every woman wants to marry. I love spending time with him; every second we get together is a treasurable moment.

But, as much as I want to escape reality and focus on how perfectly he treats me and the memories we share together, I can't allow myself to forget that it's only following the contract. Not a single part of me believes that someone like him will want anything to do with someone like me, outside of our current situation.

Remember that our relationship isn't real, and the feelings I'm trying to fight can never happen. I wonder if my reaction to her following him is out of kindness, worry or jealousy. I know I have no right to be jealous, but I can't stop the feeling of needing to protect him somehow.

What do I do now? Do I follow him and make sure he's okay? Do I follow hoping she'll see us and go away, or at least confront us and stop lurking in the shadows?

My mind races back and forth, and the decision to follow or not to follow dances around in my head.

I don't want to seem like a crazy person if he sees me behind him. Even when I stop to talk to him, if I tell him I'm only following because I saw her following, I'm concerned it ultimately makes us no different from each other. Are we both just two smothering women who can't let go?

Will he think I'm crazy like she is, even if my intentions are vastly different than hers? Will he be grateful when he sees me instead of being angry or weirded out? Am I just overthinking things like I always do? Do I care what he thinks as long as I know he's safe? I giggle to myself for fighting in my own head about someone else's opinions of me.

It doesn't matter what he thinks, I decide. He doesn't like me outside of the contract anyways, and I know in my heart I need to go make sure he's okay. I am genuinely concerned about what Ada might do, and it's not just jealousy that makes me say so.

Once I make my mind up, I quickly head inside to grab my keys off the hook by the door. Just before I reach them, my mom calls for me.

"Josephine, are you back inside?" she asks.

"Yes, momma, what's going on?" I respond, my hand hovering over my key chain.

"Can you help me for just a moment? I think your father is in the bathroom and can't hear me."

"Yes, one moment. I'll be right there." I sigh and stare out at the street for a moment.

He's going to be okay. It's Aiden, after all. Everything's going to be okay. Plus, what if I'm wrong and it wasn't even her car? Maybe I'm just being paranoid.

I shut and lock the front door behind me and walk down the hall toward my mother's room to see what I can do to help her.

Her calling for me is probably a good thing anyways. I don't need to worry about or rescue a man that isn't mine. Nowhere in our contract does it say I have to devote unnecessary time or feelings to him. I have enough problems without worrying about a man who doesn't want to be worried over.

I ponder my thoughts as I make it to my mother's doorway, ready to turn my attention on someone who wants it.

AIDEN

I'm buried in my pillowtop-covered mattress, sleeping peacefully and dreaming about Josephine's gorgeous curves, when a sudden pounding on my door startles me awake.

My eyes slowly open, and I'm trying to decide if the pounding is real or if it is some part of the dream I was in. Just then it happens again, officially settling the debate. I roll over to the nightstand and tap the screen of my phone to check the time.

Who the hell is pounding on my door at this hour? I think, angrily pulling on my sweatpants while yanking a shirt over my head. The pounding continues, growing louder as I walk to the door.

"I'm coming, damn!" I yell to whoever is causing the ruckus outside. I unlock it and throw it open, ready to fight whoever decided to wake me up like this.

To my surprise, it's my mother and father standing in the doorway. My father's face is so red it's nearly purple. My mother is in tears, slightly behind him.

"What's going on?" I ask when suddenly my father steps forward with a clenched fist. As soon as he sets his eyes on me, he begins ranting and raving. The words are so disorganized in his anger, I can't figure out a word of what he's trying to say.

Still, the angry tone and the fist make one thing very clear. He's not happy, that's for sure. As if he is literally unable to

settle, he pushes his way inside and begins to pace in front of the door.

My mother is still hovering in the doorway, wringing her hands. I think she's too nervous to follow and is still waiting to see what happens next.

I step away from him again and look to my mother for an answer. She's in tears. He continues to unload whatever his complaint is, but she starts shouting over him, trying to help and begging him to stop. The rage on his face only grows the more she begs.

"No, I won't stop until he's learned his lesson for making a fool out of us all!" he yells at her.

"Dad, what are you talking about? Can you just tell me what's going on? I don't understand!" I say, trying to say anything to get him to stop.

It's absolute chaos. My dad is yelling, my mom is crying, and I don't even understand what is happening here. Obviously, it must be about me, because why else would they come here.

Then it hits me. One little 'favor' I did for Josephine. Did they somehow find out?

It had escaped my notice until recently, but I saw a familiar name and address on a list of properties behind on their rent. Our company has quite a collection of investment property, so it had genuinely escaped me that Josephine's coffee house was one of them – and was nearing eviction.

No problem, or so I thought. I finangled some paperwork to erase the debt, putting them back in the clear, and marking their rent as paid. It was nothing illegal – we can collect, or not collect, money however we see fit, after all. And I have no regrets about doing it, though I didn't expect my father to get this angry.

That is, if the rent is even what he's angry about. I have no other explanation, but I have to admit I'm a bit baffled. Can that really be it? Why on earth would he be so surprised to think I wouldn't charge my own wife rent? None of this is

making much sense to me, and the pandemonium isn't exactly helping me think.

He steps toward me, and I swear I think he might actually hit me, he's that angry. My mother finally comes inside, grabbing his shoulder to stop him. He pauses at the gesture, and she moves to stand between us, arms spread to keep us apart and shielding me for the first time in my life. She's defending me, and I don't know what to think of it.

What the fuck did I do to make her step in between us this time? Instead of watching from a distance as usual?

Suddenly, Aleighia appears in the doorway and sees our mother standing between us. "Dad, stop! What are you doing? We don't even know if it's true or not! At least give him a chance to explain!" she says, running over to me.

I'm more confused than ever. Not only are my parents here unannounced, but my sister? "Would someone please tell me what the fuck is happening?" I finally demand.

My dad steps back, gritting his teeth. "What's all over the news? What is the shit I'm seeing, that's now all over the city?" he says. His tone tells me he's still angry but trying to contain himself. I turn to Aleighia, who's pulling out her phone.

"You really don't know, do you?" she asks, scrolling through her phone like she's looking for something. My parents are staring at me, and my father is now pacing circles around my couch. *Good, stand over there before I lose my shit, and we get in a fight he won't win.*

After what feels like far too long, Aleighia finally hands me her phone. The first thing on it is an article with a headline that reads, '*The Truth Behind Bachelor Aiden Hayes And His New Married Life*'

Fuck....

My face gets pale, and my heart starts pounding as I scroll down. More articles pop up, along with the comments others have left. It's spreading like wildfire before my eyes, and I'm unsure of what to do or how to stop it.

As I read, I can feel all of their stares. The cold sweats start setting in when I think of my options.

What do I do now? What do I say to them? Do I tell the truth? Or do I stick by the arrangement and contract that Josephine and I have?

“Well, are you going to explain yourself, or do we all get to sit here and guess some more?” my father asks, still angry. I look around the room and, one by one, meet each of their eyes, my mother’s still filled with tears.

“Okay. Come and have a seat. If everyone can calm down, I’ll explain,” I say and stroll to the living room, ready to reveal our secret. I’m secretly hoping Josephine won’t hate me or think I’m the one who outed us as I sit on my couch and begin explaining.

JOSEPHINE

Everything's going smoothly at the coffee shop, besides the fact that every customer seems to be greeting me a bit more cheerfully than usual. I notice a few extra dollars are going into the tip jar. It makes me curious, but I let myself think that maybe more people are just enjoying the sunny day.

As the day goes on, I start to notice a few of my employees are looking at me differently, and I can't figure out why. I try to shake it off at first. *Maybe I'm the one being off today. First, thinking customers are being extra friendly and generous, and now this. It has to be me.*

I avoid thinking about it as much as possible and continue with my daily tasks like making coffee and wiping down tables, until I start to notice people lining up outside. They don't look as if they are standing in line to come in. They're just crowding outside, and I swear it feels as if they are peering at me through the windows. I get a weird, suspicious feeling in my gut.

When I finish wiping the last table, I turn around to see a couple of customers whispering to each other with their eyes in my direction. I finally can't take it anymore. I walk to the back and find Shane.

"Do I have something written on my face?" I ask sarcastically.

He laughs in confusion. "Um, no? Why do you ask?"

I ignore his question, “Or did I walk out wearing two different shoes? Is my shirt on backward? I didn’t forget to put on pants, did I?” I persist, chuckling darkly.

“Okay, you sound crazy. What are you talking about?”

I sigh. “Well, everyone is being weird today. Customers seem nicer, our tip jars are fuller than normal, and everyone working today is treating me weirdly for some reason. I don’t know what’s going on! And now people are lining up outside, looking in the windows.”

“What?” he asks, frantically peeking his head out to look at the front of the shop. “Oh, my God. Hey guys, can you tell the last few customers we’re closing and then shut and lock the doors, please?”

I start panicking at his requests, which only seem to confirm my fear that something is seriously wrong. “What? What do you mean? What’s going on?”

He ignores my question and pulls out his phone as the other employees appear behind him. Shane scrolls through his phone until he finally hands it to me. I read through article after article, and my heart is pounding with every new sentence or title I come across.

Oh my God. Everybody knows. The truth is out. Aiden and I’s secret is no longer a secret. What the hell am I going to do now? How do I face anyone again after this?

We decide to walk back out and see if the line of people is still gathering by the windows. We see them as soon as we emerge from the back, but there’s even more than before. Crowds are gathering and now there are even cameras.

Shane rushes me to the counter to duck behind it, so they don’t get anything they’re looking for. As I’m hiding, I start thinking about why someone might have a camera. *I’m sure the media’s coming to see me in person, hoping for an interview.*

As the thought of the media being outside resonates with me a little longer, it causes my side of the arrangement to cross my mind. *Oh my God, my mother! She can’t see this!*

I immediately dial my father, so he can stop her, hoping I'm not too late. *Why haven't I been on my phone today? How did I miss all of this happening around me?* I think as it's ringing.

"Hello, Josephine," my father says when he answers. It's slightly comforting to hear his voice after the realization that what we've been doing is now public knowledge.

"Dad. Do not let mom watch the news. You need to turn off the TV and the phone. Don't let her look or listen to anything. She needs to stay off social media and everything she has access to. Do you understand me?" I ask urgently.

"What's going on?" he asks. "You sound panicked. Is something wrong?"

"Our deal is over. We've been exposed. Everyone knows what we've been doing. The truth is out about my and Aiden's marriage. It's over, Dad. But we can't let her know. This would devastate her if she knew why I did it."

Tears fill my eyes as I imagine my mother in her bed, recovering. I don't regret my and Aiden's arrangement for a second because it saved my mother, but I will do whatever I must to keep her from finding out about it.

He agrees to keep her away from everything and keep it a secret. She may be the only person in California who doesn't know, but we plan to keep it that way. We agree she doesn't need the stress or guilt, knowing it all came about because we worried about her so much. She doesn't need to know that we did all this for her.

"I know your mother, and she'd never forgive herself for you doing this for her. So, I promise I will do whatever I have to do. Are you okay?" he asks.

It hits me for the first time, as strange as it sounds. I was so concerned with how everyone else would feel that I never stopped to consider myself. I haven't had time to really think about what this getting out means for Aiden and me.

Oh no.... Aiden....

Thinking about him seeing this news makes me nauseous, and it hits me that he won't want anything more to do with me now. He's done using me, and that's all he needed, so now, will he even talk to me?

I feel the tears starting to fall, and him asking me if I'm okay doesn't help. I know he's trying to do the dad thing and protect me, but I need time to process. I decide I need to get off the phone and figure things out.

"I don't know yet. But I love you! I'll talk to you soon. Goodbye, Dad," I say and hang up before he can respond. The tears start streaming down my cheeks steadily and won't stop. They're falling faster than I can wipe them away.

Shane's asking me questions and trying to help in any way he can, but I can't think straight. The only thing going through my mind is how scared I am that everything between Aiden and I is ending.

He's going to toss me to the curb with a ruined reputation. I know I've been a fool in thinking I can trust him. I allowed myself to get close to a man with no intention of loving me.

This is my own damn fault, and I have to wake up from my daydream and realize we don't have a happy ending together. It's time to figure out how to save myself and my family from this humiliation.

The media outside pops back into my mind, and I start wondering how I'm going to escape this situation. In my overwhelming flow of emotions, my mind can't seem to find a way out or a solution for this chaos that surrounds me. I can't hide behind a counter for the rest of my life, so what now?

AIDEN

I'm trying to talk to my parents and Aleighia about what's happening, but no one will listen. They're talking over me, not letting me say a word without shutting it down, and I can't take it anymore. The only thing I can think about right now is Josephine.

Thinking about her seeing this news and thinking I'm the reason it's gotten out is worrying me. *I don't want her to think it's my fault. She needs to know I would never do something like this to her, especially now that I have genuine feelings for her....*

I make one final attempt to explain, and as soon as my father interrupts me, I can't listen to it anymore. He doesn't care what I have to say, anyway. But Josephine might.

"I can't do this right now. I need to go see her," I say. Abruptly, I stand up from the couch, grab my keys by the front door and walk out. I hear them all trying to stop me and asking what I mean by going to see her, but I don't stop. I shut the door behind me and head to my car.

All I can think about is trying to fix it for her. She has every right to be angry at me because this looks so bad for both of us. But it seems so much worse for her. The last thing I want is for her to feel the humiliation or regret this will bring.

But how do I fix something like this when it's already so far out of my hands?

As I drive down the road, thinking about my options and wondering where she might be, my anger starts to surface. I

don't understand why this is happening or how it's happening.

My rage takes over, and I can't help punching the steering wheel. Every memory Josephine and I have together is crossing my mind, and it's only fueling the rage at the thought of losing her and never getting to make new memories.

I slam the steering wheel in frustration again. *How the hell did this happen? Who is doing this to me, to us? How did our secret get out?*

Everything that has happened over the course of the last few days is running through my mind. I can't stop replaying every action, trying to figure out who it could be. After a few moments of trying to sort out my thoughts, I suddenly remember my panic from forgetting to lock my desk drawer.

Holy shit. Ada's doing this. The information she needs for all of this to the surface is in that desk drawer. She found our contract.

My realization fuels my rage to a level of intensity I don't remember ever reaching before. I don't know what to do with myself at this point. Nor do I know what to do with my findings. It all sinks in, and I decide to call and confront her.

I know it's her behind this, but I want to see if she'll have the courage to admit it. I press her contact in my phone, and it rings through my Bluetooth as I continue down the road to find Josephine.

"Why hello, handsome," Ada says, immediately picking up the phone after the first ring. "I was hoping to hear from you at some point today."

"How could you?" I ask angrily. "I knew you were vindictive, but this? Ada, this is low, even for you. You're not only hurting me with the shit you spread. You're hurting Josephine, someone who has nothing to do with you. I might even lose her because of you. Is that what you wanted? For me to be miserable? Because even if I can't get her back after this, I wouldn't touch you again. Ever."

"You're talking to me like I have something to do with this. Why is that?" she asks arrogantly, which fuels my rage

even more.

“Because I fucking know you did it!” I scream.

“I hear some worry in that voice, darling. Why are you so worried about what the news says if it’s false? Unless... it isn’t? Anyways, what makes you think it’s me?” she asks slyly.

“I remember forgetting to lock my desk the other day. You went in and found my contracts. You went through personal files. I knew there had to be a bigger reason you convinced my father to give you a job, but I had no idea it was for something like this. How dare you.”

“Well, maybe it shouldn’t be so easy to find private information in your office then?”

I can’t take any more of her banter. I don’t want to sit and play games with her. No matter the context, my conversation with her is exactly what she wants. She’s rambling some bullshit about how she wants me back and how she misses me, and I hang up on her.

My fists slam down on the steering wheel again, and I can’t believe this is all my fault. I should have been more careful. I should have kicked Ada out. Hell, I should have locked the door. The ‘shoulds’ are piling up fast, but it’s too late for that.

I keep going through the events in my mind, trying to figure out how to fix it. Trying to think of anything I can do to erase the harm it’s causing us both. I can’t change what’s happened, but can I at least ease the blow somehow?

It’s all my fault. I got her into my messed up life, and now she’s in the thick of it with me. How could I do this to her? I let her become a part of my life, like that isn’t the worst punishment out there. Why does my life have to hurt everyone around me?

I keep blaming myself all the way to her coffee shop. She works nearly every day, and I’m hoping it’ll be the most accessible place to catch her. She deserves an apology and an explanation. She has to know I have no part in all of this.

I'm going over what I will say to her as I park in the space as close as possible to the door. I notice a huge crowd of people and wonder what they're doing until a man separates from the crowd with a camera.

Fuck. It's the media. They're here waiting for her. She's really never going to forgive me now... I think and make my way to the doors. I weave through the crowd and pull on the door, only to find it locked.

I start looking through the windows, trying to see if I can spot her inside. I'm ready to give up when I suddenly catch a glimpse of her black hair behind the counter. I move closer and see Josephine sitting on the floor with her head in her hands.

My heart sinks the second I see her. Her shoulders are moving in a way that tells me she's sobbing into her hands. Sitting on the floor behind the counter is how she's getting away from the media and the cameras.

My mind is racing as I head back to my car. As soon as I'm inside, I can't move. Seeing her on the floor crying over something I brought upon her kills me. There's nothing I can do.

How do I let the girl I love hurt like this? How can I even face her to try and fix things? I know I must correct them for both of us. I want to be with her so badly it hurts and nearly losing her only proves how badly I want this to work out. But is that even possible after all this?

JOSEPHINE

As I sit on the floor behind the counter of the coffee shop, I can't help feeling dizzy as my body gets weaker and weaker. I've been crying so hard I can't even tell if tears are falling anymore.

More and more time passes, and it feels like forever. Has it been fifteen minutes or fifteen hours? Who knows, anymore.

My head aches, my body hurts, and my throat is scratchy. I want everyone outside to leave and this nightmare to be over. I wish someone would pinch me and say it was all a bad dream.

All the employees are watching and waiting for the reporters to leave. They pretend they don't see me crying, probably too embarrassed for me to mention it. Finally, Shane tells me they're walking away.

"I think you're finally safe to stand up," he says. Pins and needles hit my legs as soon as I stand, the muscles sleeping thanks to how long I've been sitting.

"It's only a matter of time before someone comes back. They won't stop without a story. They'll keep coming back until they get whatever they can from you, like vultures," says an employee looking out the window.

Shane nods. "Yeah, you should probably go home while you have a window to do it. We'll ensure it's safe to go and help you to your car."

I shake my head. "I appreciate you guys thinking of me. I really do. But home is the last place I want to be right now. I

need to be working, do something to get my mind off this awful mess. If I go home, I won't be busy, and I'll sit around thinking about it. It's going to drive me crazy... And I'll have access to the TV and the news, and I just can't go home. So, please, let's just open the doors and continue with our day," I say, nearly begging.

Shane stares at me for a few moments, looking like he's about to argue with me, but then he takes a deep breath and sighs,

"Are you sure? Because no one will judge you for going home and hiding under a rock for a few days...." he laughs.

I laugh with him. "I think I'll stick to hiding behind the counter when necessary for now..."

Shane walks over and unlocks the door. I feel a weight lifting off of me when I hear the click, and he switches the sign to 'open.' I'm still a bit uneasy as he's walking back to the counter, but my nerves settle once a few customers come in, and things start returning to normal.

But, they settle almost too much. I'm in the groove of making coffee and setting out new snacks when I hear the bell ring on the door, letting us know someone's inside. I don't notice who our customer is for a moment because I'm too busy aligning pastries to look up until I hear her voice.

"Hi, Josephine, the fake wife of Aiden Hayes. How are you doing today?" she shouts in a sarcastic tone. My face gets hot, and my palms sweat instantly at the sound of her voice.

Ada. What the fuck is she doing here? Of course, she'd come to make a scene.

There are no other employees behind the counter, forcing me to help her.

"Can you stop? I know you're here to humiliate me, but I'm already humiliated enough. Can you just leave it alone? What can I get for you?" I ask as nicely as possible while nearly bursting into tears.

She ignores me entirely. "Oh, come on. What's with you, huh? I'm the one that should be angry after all."

I look at her, confused, wondering how in the hell she could possibly feel the need to be angry about any of this.

I mean, isn't she getting exactly what she wants? She wants him off the market, and now he is. She wins. Why can't she just leave me the hell alone?

“You know, the reason he doesn't love me back. Is it because of you and your arrangement? Now he's fallen out of love with me because he's been trying to cook up this ridiculous plan with you. Once again, using his money to get what he wants. How much did he spend for you to agree to be his fake wife, huh?” she asks.

She's looking at me like she's waiting for a response, and I have no response to give her. Anything that's going on between us is none of her business, and she's only fishing for the information she can sell.

“Oh, it doesn't even matter now. It's already all over the city, spreading like wildfire,” she laughs. Her laughter fills the coffee shop, and I don't know what to say. I feel sick and need her to leave, but the words won't come out of my mouth.

Suddenly, Shane appears behind me,

“Excuse me, ma'am? Are you actually going to order something? If not, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. This is her place of business, and she's already spent all day hiding from the vultures outside, making her feel unwelcome. We don't need the riff-raff coming inside and doing it to her here,” he says, defending me. I watch in awe at his quick protection over me.

She scoffs at him, “That's not a way to treat your customers!”

“Well, if there's something I can get for you please let me know. If there isn't, you're not a customer, and I can ask you to leave.”

“Fine. I don't want to be here anyways. I'll see you around, Josephine. You better believe it,” she says to me. She turns and walks toward the door.

I feel Shane's hand on my shoulder, trying to comfort me silently until she's out of earshot, but I'm not taking my eyes off her. It hurts so bad that she's sitting around thinking I'm just some used object to him, and if she feels it, I'm sure everyone else does too.

Tears start to fall down my cheeks as I realize where my actual place is and has always been with him. She's going to swoop in like the vulture she is and rescue him. Then they can be the power couple she wants them to be, and he'll finally make his dad happy.

"Are you going to judge me for hiding behind that rock now?" I ask Shane jokingly once Ada is out of the shop.

"Not at all. Take all the time you need. We've got it here. If we need anything, we have your number, and we'll call."

I tell them goodbye and grab my things, heading out to my car to cry alone. I want to work, to get my mind on something productive, but if this keeps happening, it's no longer my safe space.

The only place I can think of is at home, locked in my room, acting like the outside world doesn't exist.

AIDEN

A couple days after the social media explosion, frustration fills every fiber of my being. I can't help the feeling, given that Josephine wants nothing to do with me. Any attempt I make to talk to her about the situation never earns a response from her. All I get is radio silence.

I'm losing hope at this point, and I don't know what else to try. I want Josephine to know how I feel about her. I want her to know that the marriage may have started out fake to benefit us both, but through it, I have come to love her for real.

I've done everything I can to talk to her at this point. Hell, even showing up at her house doesn't work because she never seems to be there. She's going so far out of her way to avoid me she won't even come *home*. The realization hits me deep down and hollows out a hole in my heart and a pit in my stomach.

I can't stand the thought of losing her. It terrifies me because I never thought I'd have such an attachment to someone. Now that I do, it's scary to realize it could all be for nothing.

My finger hovers over Josephine's name in my recent calls. Every part of me screams to touch it, to call again, hoping she answers so I can tell her exactly how I feel. But the hollow feeling returns every time I think about pressing the button. She won't answer, anyway.

I decide to tap on Cameron's name instead. I pray he can pull me out of this mind frame I'm in, even if it is just to

distract me somehow. I listen to the phone ring. Finally, the other end of the line opens up.

“Hello?” Cameron’s voice rings clearly through the phone. Relief falls over me in a small way, thinking how nice it is to have someone answer for once.

“Hey Cameron, how are things?” I ask him, trying to spark a casual conversation.

“They’re good, Aiden, but I am guessing you didn’t call to hear what’s going on with me. I have seen things all over social media. What’s on your mind?” Cameron responds, blunt but sincere.

God damn it. Straight to the point.

“Honestly, I’m in a world of confusion,” I say very simply. There’s a silence on the other end of the line for a few moments before his voice returns, and he finally responds.

“Okay, Aiden, I’m listening. What’s going on?”

“I wish it were simple to explain. To sum it up, yes. As you know, it wasn’t a real marriage. But the problem is that somewhere along the way, I fell for her. When it came out on social media, it not only devastated her, it humiliated her as well. She wants nothing to do with me now, and I don’t blame her. I just don’t know what to do, man. I don’t want to lose her,” I stammer.

There’s silence yet again on the other end. Until finally, he sighs. “Okay, why are you telling me this and not her?” His response is so matter of fact and to the point, but it’s a fair question.

“She won’t talk to me. I’ve tried calling and texting and even gone to her house. She filled a part of me that I didn’t know needed filling. Something that I didn’t even know I was missing, and I’m terrified to go back to living without her.”

“Okay, so let’s figure out a way to get her back into your life. It’s apparent to me that you really do have feelings for her, and I hate to see you hurting. There has to be some way to get through to her,” Cameron responds genuinely.

I sit quietly, thinking for a moment. *How? I've exhausted pretty much every option. How can I possibly get in touch with her?*

“If anything, I just want to make things right. Between Josephine and me and with my parents. Obviously, I hope she can forgive me. But at the end of the day, I just need to make things right. I want her to know I'm not the reason it came out. She needs to know I didn't do this to her, so she doesn't go around hating me forever.”

“So let's make things right. I might have a plan,” Cameron responds after a brief pause.

“What do you have in mind?” I ask with hundreds of questions now soaring through my mind.

“Her parents own a coffee shop, correct? She works there, too, right?”

“Yeah, she does. I haven't gone there again because I already caused her enough issues. I don't want her to be even angrier because I showed up babbling like an idiot in front of everyone she works with,” I say.

“So, then, cause the best sort of scene.”

What? What sort of scene will be a good one? I have humiliated her enough.

“I'm not sure what you mean.” I pace up and down the living room now with anticipation, waiting for an explanation.

“Why don't you go there and tell her your true feelings for her? She might take the gesture of you doing that to be sweet and very genuine.”

I think his idea over for a moment until an idea suddenly strikes me. “That's a great idea, Cameron, but I have my own twist to add to that.”

“Okay, what do you have in mind?” he asks.

“I'm going to propose. For real, this time. I want her to know that I love her, and I'm scared to lose her. I was happiest when we were together and never want to go without that

again. So I'm going to ask her to marry me. Genuinely," I respond, now full of excitement and nervousness.

"That sounds perfect, Aiden. I think she's a great fit for you, and it would make me happy to see you guys pull that off. You two are a nice couple," Cameron responds happily.

"Thanks, Cameron. I really appreciate your guidance."

"Anytime, man. I know you love her, so I know you can pull it off."

The phone call ends with a click, and then the room is full of silence as I think about our conversation.

Holy shit, I'm going to propose to Josephine. What if she says yes, and she's finally truly my wife?

I push aside my fear that she'll tell me to get lost. I'm not ready to deal with that yet. Instead, I focus on the possibility, however small, that she'll agree. Nervous butterflies take over my stomach. The thought of spending my life with her is one of genuine happiness. I rush to the table and begin working out a plan.

JOSEPHINE

I'm finding myself not wanting to leave the house. Part of me feels hopeless because there's no way out of this mess, while the other part feels devastated over losing Aiden. The feelings for him are constantly in the back of my mind, dragging me down into a state of depression.

I'm still trying to care for my mom through all of my own depressed feelings. I stick to the schedule of getting her pain medications on time and fixing her meals. Outside mom's schedule, I have nothing to do to distract my mind.

My free time consists of taking long hot showers as if the water will wash away my feelings. Or I lay in bed and stare at the ceiling, thinking about the what-ifs.

It'll always be the what if's that will kill me. I don't see a way to fill the void of not knowing. Are there feelings on his end, too? Or is it one-sided on my part, and he is just an excellent actor?

All my days blend together, save for when my phone alarm goes off. This is a quick reminder that it's time for another round of my mother's pain medication. I dash into the kitchen, retrieving her pills and a cold glass of orange juice.

I slice up a fresh apple because I know my mom doesn't do well with medication on an empty stomach but doesn't have much appetite.

As I bring the assortment, I walk from the kitchen to her bedroom with her lap tray in my hand. As always, she greets me with a smile.

“Thank you, honey. I don’t know what I would do without you,” she says. I kiss the top of her head gently.

“Of course, Mom. I’m going to head into my room and watch some television. Do you need anything before I go?”

I watch my mom as she swallows her pills and then smiles. “No, thank you, honey. Thank you for the apple slices. They look amazing,” she says, picking one up. I offer a smile in response before exiting and walking back down the hall in the direction of my room.

I flop myself onto the bed, sighing hard. *Damn, I really want to see him. Why can’t I stop missing him? Why can’t I accept that it’s over? He isn’t calling, and he isn’t reaching out. He doesn’t want me. He got his easy way out, and he took it.*

But I can’t stop myself from wondering, *Maybe he has, and I just haven’t gotten it. Or maybe his father is making him stay away from me even if he wants to see me. Or, perhaps he really wants something different, and I have to accept I will be alone forever...*

I shake my head, and my heart sinks. *Stop it. Enough, Josephine. Quit feeling sorry for yourself.*

I fumble for the remote on my bedside table and switch the TV on, hoping to find a distraction from my ever-active mind. I know I’ve been avoiding the TV, not wanting to see the news, but I need something to distract my mind from my depressing thoughts.

As I flip through the channels, I find nothing but boring documentaries and commercials until....

Wait a minute. That looks a hell of a lot like Aiden. I switch the channel back and shock hits me immediately at seeing his face.

It is Aiden! What is happening? I wonder. I quickly realize I’m not going to like what I’m hearing.

“I was supposed to have an arranged marriage of sorts. She had things that would benefit her by this arrangement, so we

agreed to make it work for both of us. We decided to get married to fix our issues.”

Immediately, horror settles deep into the pit of my stomach, and I’m instantly nauseous. *He’s talking about our arrangement.*

The whole reason for my doing this is to save my mother. The benefit I get is helping my mom; instead, I end up falling for him and crushing my own heart in the process.

Why is he discussing this on TV? Especially without my knowledge or consent. What the hell is he doing?

Aiden continues, speaking to the news anchor. “We agreed to get married because we both needed something out of it, and it was nothing more than that. We were legally married, but it was a sham from the beginning.”

Hot tears are flowing down my cheeks now. *Nothing more than that? Aiden feels nothing for me. He’s admitting it’s all an act for the arrangement.*

My heart can’t take this; it feels like it may break into a million pieces. Yet, I can’t seem to turn it off.

How can I feel so genuinely about someone and not have them feel the same? I’m so naive for thinking the connection between us meant anything. I can’t tell if I feel more hurt or embarrassed at this point, but I know it’s a mix of everything in between.

I hear the reporter ask a question I don’t want to hear. I feel as if I’m in a different world, time standing still.

“Were there any feelings involved? Or was everything strictly professional?” he asks.

I can’t take it anymore. I can’t bear to hear the answer. I switch the TV off, staring at the blank screen. I’m unsure at this point how to describe the pain I feel.

A part of me wants to know what he would have said. A bigger part of me knows the answer will crush me. I can’t hear it come out of his lips. It feels like I’m just reliving a loop of

this same terrible disaster, over and over again, watching my heart break a little more each time.

Will this ever not be the main focus of my day? Will he ever not be all I think about? Am I going to be buried under this awful mistake for the rest of my life?

My cheeks burn with embarrassment as I rush towards the bathroom, not wanting my mom to see or hear my heartbreak. I quickly shut the door behind me and lock it. I look at myself in the mirror and notice that even my appearance seems broken. I start the shower, and hot water quickly flows out of the shower head.

I undress and clamber into the warm embrace of the water. Steam flows up around me, almost like the tight warm hug I desperately need. I allow the hot water to pour down my head as I start to cry openly.

No feelings, just a contract. If only he knew my true feelings....

I sit down on the floor of the shower. The cold tile on my bare butt causes a shockwave to course through my body. The hot water showers on me like the summer rain as I sob uncontrollably. I feel completely broken, and I'm unsure where to go or what to do from here.

Maybe I need to call him and ask him myself. A small part of me hopes he will say exactly what I want to hear, of course. He will tell me he has feelings, but the thought of facing him and opening that wound is almost unbearable now. Not that it ever really closed.

Do I call him? I ponder. My tears flow down my face and disappear into the droplets of water flowing down my skin. *I don't think I have the courage.*

I start to cry harder because I know I need to get it out of my system before I go cook mom dinner. She can't know how badly I'm struggling. She can't know why I'm struggling in the first place.

It's over with Aiden. No matter how hard I try to find some sort of alternate meaning to his words, there's not a glimmer of

hope in my mind that what he's saying on the TV isn't his honest truth.

I mean nothing to him. That's all there is to it.

AIDEN

Now that the interview is over, there's something I know I must do. I find myself outside my dad's office. I urge myself to walk through the door and straight up to my father. He glances at me carefully, not saying a word.

"Can I have a few minutes to talk with you in private?" I ask. "I really need you to hear me out for a moment," I add more persistently.

The amount of confidence in my voice does not reflect exactly how I feel on the inside.

My father looks at me, sitting in his high-backed office chair behind his large oak desk, and gestures to a chair straight across from him. I slowly take a seat and stare directly at him for a moment before I shift my gaze to the floor.

My mind's racing, and I'm unsure how to start the conversation, so it relieves me when my father finally speaks up.

"Okay, Aiden, what's on your mind?" he asks with a surprising amount of patience in his tone.

My mind fires off like a cannon. *Where do I even start with this? I guess I better just jump in and speak honestly, truthfully.*

I clear my throat and look at him, sitting confidently at his desk.

"Look, Dad. I'm sorry for the mess I've made here. It was never my intention to cause issues or make anyone else clean

up my mess. I did what I did because I didn't want to marry Ada, and you wouldn't listen to me. I won't be happy with her. Maybe, before everything that happened between us, I would have been, but not now. I know it's what you want me to do, regardless of how I feel about it."

I sigh, finally being completely honest. It's both terrifying and somehow calming. At least it is all out there now. "I just couldn't do it. She doesn't mean anything to me, and I want to marry for love. I want a wife I'm proud to have, one that's good to me and treats me well."

I try to push the picture of Josephine out of my mind's eye. "I think I deserve that. But I didn't mean for any of this to happen," I conclude.

Words flow out of my mouth like lava, causing my nervousness and shame to stream together. It's definitely not to my benefit, though.

My father seems to be thinking over what I'm saying for longer than I'd like him to be. I sit in silence as he stares, not saying a word. Finally, he interlocks his fingers and puts his hands on his desk.

He stares at me with an intensity that makes me want to melt into a puddle under his desk, but I know I have to do this. My apology is part of my making things right.

"Aiden, I'm so disappointed in you. Not just for the mess you've caused but for the fact that you used an innocent woman to do it. I can't imagine the hell you have put her through when all it would have taken is for you to speak up. If you didn't want to be married to Ada, all you would have had to do was say so."

He gives me a stony glare. "You are a grown man, capable of making your own decisions. Instead, you've brought a disaster into this poor young lady's life, and that is not fair to her."

My ears burn with embarrassment as I stare at the ground. *Damn it. I would rather him be angry with me. Disappointment is almost a slap in the face. But where does he*

come off saying I can speak up? I did. He doesn't listen. Whatever. It's not worth the fight of bringing it up and making it worse.

“I know, Dad, and I'm so sorry. I truly recognize the hurt I have caused her. I know it was a mistake to do what I did. I caused a mess for you and the family, hurting her badly. The only thing I accomplished was hurting people. You have the right to be disappointed. I'm disappointed with myself,” I say truthfully while still wanting to hide under his desk.

My thoughts are going a million miles an hour. I look down and realize my leg taps ferociously on the ground. *How am I going to get through this?*

“Dad, all I ask is for another chance. I want to do the right thing and correct my wrongdoings. I've been a mess. I can't lose her. Josephine has been an amazing part of my life, and I don't want to lose our genuine connection. So please, let me have another chance,” I say, practically begging.

I finally glance up and look my father in the face. His eyebrow raises, and he stares at me, burning a hole through me. The anticipation is killing me at this point.

Finally, my father speaks. “Tell me about this connection, son. It seems to me that out of this mess, you may have found something valuable. Your words tell me that you do care for the woman you've hurt. Talk to me about it,” he says.

Is he really trying to have an actual conversation with me? Where do I even start? I want to tell him everything, right down to the letter. Would that be so bad? I don't even know. I didn't think I'd make it this far. Finally, I dare to say what I need to say and tell him how I truly feel.

“She gives me a feeling, unlike any other dad. I could stare into her eyes all day long and never get bored. In fact, the sea green of her eyes has become my favorite color. Everything comes very easily with her. I looked forward to talking with her and being with her more. She brought me a new sense of happiness, and I would move mountains to see her happy. It brings me unspeakable sadness that I have caused a great deal of hurt, especially to her.”

I glance at my father again and notice he's no longer staring at me with his eyebrow raised. In fact, he's smiling.

"Dad, there's just something about her that makes me feel like I could spend everyday with her for the rest of my life, and it would be the best life I could live. I am very truly happy when she is around. I love her," I say.

I feel powerful saying it. There's no fear behind the statement, just pure passion. My father's still smiling at me when he leans back in his chair. He glances behind me at my mother, who I realize for the first time is now standing behind me.

Shit. How long has she been here? It doesn't matter; I know it's the truth.

"Aiden, it seems you have found something valuable in this after all," my father says, pausing briefly. "What are you going to do now?" he asks.

"I'm going to ask her to marry me," I say bluntly. "I'm serious. For real, this time, I want to spend my life with her."

As I leave my father's office, confidence radiates off of me. *I did it. He knows how I feel about her, and he knows my intentions. Now I just have to tell her.*

JOSEPHINE

I'm out of the house for the first time in days, and it feels strange. I can't help feeling like everyone is staring at me. They're taking pity on me, thinking I'm the victim while the whole thing exploded around me.

It's the entire reason I'm switching places with my father. I'm going to grab a few of my things from the coffee shop because he will be looking after it for a while instead. I will be at home looking after my mother, keeping out of the public's eye until this blows over. We can't keep leaving it to our employees, as good as they are, to run things without us.

I pull into the coffee shop and see a line of people at the door. My heart sinks for a moment, as I thought the media had at least backed off. Their interest seems to have already fizzled, and now I just need to wait until it fades from the memory of the general public as well.

The crowd makes me think that's going to take longer than I expected. Then I realize they're not here for me. We're just busy in the mornings. I shut my car door and awkwardly walk to the door.

As I walk, I can't help noticing how weird it feels. I'm like a newborn giraffe trying to find my footing for the first time, and I don't understand how only a few days can do this to me. I hope no one notices how out of place I feel as I open the door and walk inside.

"Hey!" Shane says, running to me as soon as he sees me walk in. "I was wondering when we'd see you again. Are you

doing okay?”

“Actually, I’m not back... I’m here to grab some of my things. My dad thinks it will be better for me to stay out of the public’s eye until it all blows over. He’s going to be taking care of the coffee shop for a while, and I’ll be taking care of my mom at home,” I say.

His smile washes away, and I see a look of sadness appear,

“I’m so sorry this is happening. It’s ridiculous that you’re going through so much ridicule when you weren’t the only one involved. But we’re here supporting you in whatever you need. I’ll help you grab your things.”

We walk to the counter. I start pulling out my belongings from the shelf under the register when I notice a familiar car pull up out front.

Crap. What is Aiden doing here? The first time I’m here in days, and he finds me....

My heart is pounding when I see him getting out and walking toward the door. He’s wearing his nicest pair of blue slacks, the ones that make his eyes even brighter, and the white polo we got at the resort.

God damn. Why does he have to be so good-looking? It’s much easier to be mad at someone who doesn’t constantly look like he’s stepping off the set of a sexy businessman monthly catalog subscription.

Shane keeps looking at me. I smile and nod, letting him know I’m okay even though I’m dying inside. Aiden opens the door and smiles when he sees me.

Everything in me wants to be mad and scream at him for everything I’ve been going through, but I can’t. I see his damn smile, and my anger immediately fades.

He walks up to me,

“Hello, Josephine,” he says. I’m awkward and don’t know what to say or how to act, but I try my best to greet him normally. I can hide the pain in my voice, but I can’t help if my eyes show everything I’m feeling.

“Hi, Aiden,” I say, pulling every bit of courage out to face him.

I miss him so much, but he doesn’t know it. Our deal is over, and he’s probably only here for coffee.

“I’m so glad to finally catch you. Do you have a minute to talk?”

I look around the room and spot an empty table in the back. “Yeah, I can take a minute. We can go to the table in the back.” I point to the little two-chaired table in the shop’s back corner.

He walks toward it, and I round the counter behind him. He pulls out the chair for me and then takes a seat.

Can you stop being so damn sweet? It’s only making this more challenging, and I’m trying to stay mad at you.

We stare at each other in silence for several moments. I don’t know what to say to him. I’m so hurt and confused, and I don’t know what he wants to tell me. I’ve been ignoring his calls because I just couldn’t face him, but now I feel a little embarrassed about it once we’re face to face.

Is he here to apologize? Is he here to tell me he and Ada are back together, and he wants to prepare me for seeing it on the news next?

He clears his throat. “How have you been?” he asks.

I look at him and raise an eyebrow. *You’ve got to be kidding me. Is he really asking me this?*

“Right. Sorry, a bad question to ask after the week I’m sure you’ve had...”

“You mean the day I was locked in here because reporters were staked outside? Or when your girlfriend came in to humiliate and make fun of me?”

He looks down, folding his hands on the table, looking upset, “I’ve tried contacting you. Several times... I’ve even tried catching you here, and I have no luck...”

His words make my anger rise back up. *How dare he act like I'm only avoiding him when I'm avoiding every single area of my life because of the shit storm this has unleashed.*

“Yeah, you haven’t been able to find me around anywhere because I haven’t left my house. Every single person stares at me, making me feel even worse. To the point that I’m going to be staying home permanently for a while.”

His eyes dart up, and his face holds a concerned expression. I exhale in frustration, annoyed by his worry. He’s a little late to come in with all this sympathy now, and I’m getting sick of the pity.

“Yeah, my dad’s going to come to take over the shop, and I’m going to stay home taking care of mom. I can’t be out in the public eye anymore until this blows over. The toll it’s taking on me is too much.”

He rubs his chin. “I’m so sorry to hear that. I can’t imagine how hard it’s been on you....”

“No. You can’t. Because for some reason, despite it having happened to both of us, I seem to be the only one getting the shit end of this.”

“Woah. What do you mean the only one getting the shit end?” His tone increases, and he starts to sound angry.

“Yeah. Everyone looks at me like I’m the victim and I’m some poor helpless girl that got used by a rich man. Do you know how hard that is?”

“Do you know how hard it is to be the rich man everyone thinks used and toyed with an innocent woman?” His tone is only making me angrier, and I’m getting ready to stand to walk away from him when he continues. “Do you know how hard it is to feel how I’ve been feeling and to be avoided by the person you love?”

My eyes dart to him. *That can’t be what he’s saying. Am I hearing him correctly? There’s no way he’s meaning to say it, right?*

I stare at him, but he doesn’t correct himself or say he misspoke. “What? Say that again. I don’t think I heard you

correctly.” My heart is pounding as he smiles, and I brace myself for what he will say next.

AIDEN

Josephine looks at me like she doesn't believe what she hears. The shock on her face worries me, but I repeat it without hesitation.

"I love you, Josephine."

The words slip out of my mouth, but they flow easily, like I mean to say them to her. My stomach's in knots now. I'm scared for her response because I don't honestly know how she feels.

I pray she will give me an insight into her mind and tell me how she feels, but I don't know if she's past her anger yet. She's staring at me, not saying a word. I begin panicking, thinking I'm moving too fast for her. This was a mistake.

No. Aiden, why aren't you waiting for her to cool down? She's not back on your side yet. Why are you throwing in the I love you like this? I want her to know, but the way I casually toss it into the conversation leaves her looking confused.

This isn't the way I want this to go. She deserves an apology first, or this isn't going to end the way I want it to.

"Josephine, I'm so sorry for causing the hurt I did. I never meant in any way for you to get hurt. In fact, it has killed me knowing I caused you pain. The time I have spent with you has by far been the best of my life. I care for you in a way I never have in my life," I blurt out.

Every single word of this is equally disorganized, Aiden. Great work.

I look at Josephine, curious about her reaction, before speaking again. Our eyes meet as a single tear rolls down her cheek, immediately gutting me inside.

I have to talk fast, or she will think I'm only saying I love you to make her stay. She's finally listening. Don't stop now.

“You are truly the woman I want to spend my entire life with, Josephine. Not because of the stupid contract but because you make me feel complete. I didn't feel like this before you. If there is one thing all of this has taught me, it's that I don't ever want to lose you. You have become my best friend and the woman I want to do everything with.”

I'm still waiting to hear something from her. She's silently staring into my eyes, not giving me a hint at what she feels until she stretches out her arm. She places her hand on mine on the table, and her eyes are soft and kind.

Looking deeply into her pools of green brings back the warmth inside of me that I never want to see disappear, reminding me why I'm here. Suddenly, my heart flutters. I seem to be holding my breath, waiting on her response.

“Aiden, you did cause me a lot of hurt,” Josephine says, pausing as if she's searching for the words to express how she feels.

Fear boils inside of me, waiting for her following statement, thinking she's trying to let me down gently. I can't really blame her for rejecting me, but the thought still terrifies me.

“Although you did cause me a hurt like I've never felt before, I have still been missing you so much. I have deep feelings for you, and we have grown a connection much further than I ever expected. I just wasn't sure how to handle the pain of thinking it might have all been false. Now that I know how you feel, I'm grateful you have come to talk to me. I've been hoping you felt the same. So, Aiden, I love you too,” she says.

Shock hits me like a brick wall. I'm hanging on to her every word, letting it fill me with joy.

She loves me. She truly does. Knowing this will make the next part go a little smoother, I think and stand from my chair quickly, pulling Josephine out of her seat and into a hug.

The smell of her perfume is a nice familiar one. It's almost intoxicating, smelling it again. Holding the woman I love, now knowing she loves me back. The joy of knowing she has the same feelings for me overwhelms me.

I'm not going to lose her. I can't help but smile as I hold her close, breathing in her scent and taking in every part of this perfect moment.

Suddenly, the ring I've brought with me gets a little bit heavier in my pocket, reminding me of the ending of my plan. After a moment, I pull away from our embrace and smile at her.

Before I can allow my anxiety to control me, I take one step away from her and drop to one knee. My heart pounds as I near the floor, trying to remember my words.

As soon as my knee hits the ground, I snatch the box out of my pocket. Josephine's looking at me with surprise written all over her face. I look her in the eyes, the ones I want to spend the rest of my life staring into. Opening the box, I produce a beautiful diamond ring.

"Josephine, I was an idiot before. But the fake marriage opened my eyes to the fact that I don't want it to be fake anymore. I want to spend every day with you for the rest of my life. With that in mind, would you make me the happiest man alive and be my wife, for real?" I say with a lump in my throat.

I'm an anxious wreck waiting for her response. Josephine's covering her mouth with her hands, and I can't help but notice Shane behind the counter smiling at us from ear to ear. Josephine seems to collect herself and smiles.

"Aiden, nothing would make me happier," she says finally.

I'm immediately on my feet, and my lips find hers. Their softness brings me to a familiar place of joy, one I'm no longer

scared of craving. I pull away and slide the ring on her finger with a smile.

She's actually saying yes. I can't believe it! I'll get to spend the rest of my life with her.

JOSEPHINE

Everything feels so different since the reality of our love has come to fruition. I sit in the back room of a church, in a wedding dress that Aiden helped me pick out, chatting and giggling with some of my best friends and coworkers. It has only been a month since the proposal, and the planning of the wedding has felt so much more natural.

I am in love with Aiden Hayes, and he is in love with me. There is nothing more wonderful and fulfilling in life than seeing the love for your spouse, reflected back in their eyes.

Our fake marriage is technically still legal, but we wanted to have another ceremony. It meant a lot to Aiden, too, to have a real ceremony with both of my parents present. That sentiment meant everything in the world to me.

My heart is full and bursting with love as I stand at the end of the aisle. The church is sublime, with high gothic ceilings and glistening stained glass. The sun shines through my path like a miracle.

When it is time for the procession, both my father and mother lead me down the aisle. They are ecstatic for me, I can feel it. Their love sends shockwaves through my very soul, making me feel like I am floating as I move toward the man of my dreams.

He is stunning in his tuxedo, grinning ear to ear. It all feels so different than the other ceremony, more relaxed, more fitting. As the minister talks, he doesn't move his eyes from me. I am both weak and strong in his presence.

When it comes time for our vows, Aiden goes first. His hands shake as he reads off a neatly folded piece of paper.

“Josephine, our love story started off in the most unique format; as a business deal.”

The attendants guffaw, and I do, too. He glances up at me, smirking, and I bite my bottom lip. The light of the stained glass casts off his handsome face like a kaleidoscope. Everything is feeling surreal.

“But something happened as we both tried to work out our own ends of the deal, something neither of us planned on. We fell head over heels in love. And I couldn’t be happier for it.”

The crowd claps and murmurs, and then it is my turn. I’m not nuts about public speaking, but holding Aiden’s hand, I feel like I can do anything.

My hands also tremble as I talk, imagining that we are the only people in the universe. “Aiden, I never thought this day was going to come. Our lives are strange, aren’t they? The way we collide into others, like random comets in the sky. We never know which collisions are going to change our pathway, our entire way of being.”

The attendants cheer again, and I start to laugh. Aiden holds my hand, rubbing it with his thumb the entire time.

“That is what you have done for me. You changed my pathway, for the better. We collided, and created the most breathtaking catastrophe I have ever experienced; the implosion of our love.”

The crowd cheers once again, clapping loudly. Aiden smiles broadly, his eyes glassy with adoration.

The minister pronounces us husband and wife, and in that moment, I feel something shift inside me. We are one person now, one complete being. Our lips meet and everything is unified.

We walk down the aisle hand in hand and climb into the limo waiting outside. The reception is only a few minutes away, in an open field on a property Aiden’s father owns. He

holds my thigh and kisses my neck as I giggle, telling me over and over again how much he loves me.

“You are so damn beautiful,” he whispers. “I don’t know how I landed such a babe.”

I feel my face heating, and I let it run wild. No one has ever made me feel this way, nor will anyone else ever again.

“You can keep telling me that. That is what will keep this marriage going.”

We arrive at the stunning ranch property, where several tents have been set up. The sun will be going down in a few hours, so we make the most of it, eating, laughing, and dancing alongside our guests.

My mother and father are elated for me. We hug many times, and I let out many tears of bliss. My mother whispers into my ear after we have our first dance as a true, married couple.

“I can see in your eyes that you love him,” she says lovingly. “It was the same look I saw in my own reflection when I married your father. Never lose that.”

My mother is strong enough to stand, which is something she worked on hard before the wedding. I pull her in tightly, leaning my head on her shoulder like when I was a child.

“I love you so much, Mom.”

“I love you even more, my sweetheart.”

The night progresses magically. The best man, Aiden’s friend Cameron, does his speech, and Shane gives a speech on my behalf. Everyone giggles and is uproarious, passionate about the love we share between us.

Everyone dances and talks into the night. I watch Aiden, in utter disbelief that he is my husband. He is the man who will come home to me at night, and I will come home to him. Our days will unfold into each other for eternity and certainly that comforts me to no end.

As things begin to die down, Aiden, who is a bit tipsy, once again takes my thigh in his hand. He slowly moves it

upward, teasing me. He flops his head over, gazing at my lips, my eyes, my lips, and then my eyes again.

I can't help but to smile so hard my cheeks ache.

"I can't wait to make love to you, my wife," he whispers.

He gives me chills. I never want that to stop.

AIDEN

After the dream of a wedding, my parents surprised us with a paid trip to visit the Maldives. My new wife and I were ecstatic beyond measure; this will be our first romantic getaway together as a real couple, madly in love.

It warms my heart to think that my parents have finally accepted me for being in love with Josephine. It wasn't what they wanted the most, especially because of Ada's parents being investors. But maybe they have grown, just like me.

Even Ada seemed to understand. I called her after I told my dad and Josephine my intentions, and we were able to have a real conversation about our past. She told me she was actually going to be moving for work, and it was probably for the best. I wished her well and she did the same.

It made it easier to enjoy my honeymoon with Josephine, having that behind me. We spend the night of our wedding making love, albeit a little tipsy, laughing and learning everything there is to know about our bodies. The sounds she makes when she finds the peak of her pleasure are as good as poetry to me.

We travel, hand in hand, on my parents private jet to our honeymoon destination. I cannot keep my hands off her. I hold onto her thigh, and she looks up at me, her lower lip sneaking under her teeth as love passes through her sage green eyes.

I never thought I would find someone as spectacular as Josephine. Someone who loves me, trusts me and cares for me. She shows it within every touch, action and look. I keep

wanting to pinch myself, considering all of this just some perfect dream I am afraid to wake up from.

We get to our hut, which sits upon glistening aqua and teal shaded waters. The second our valet drops off our bags, I tip him and watch as Josephine walks to look out over the stunning scenery.

She is wearing a long, flowy, wine red summer dress. Her skin sparkles under the light. I watch as she seems to hover, the wind rustling up her dress as she gazes out with a gasp.

“Aiden, this is incredible!” she exclaims. “This place is like a damn calendar or computer screen!”

I chuckle, my heart warming with affection. I walk up behind her and slowly begin to kiss her neck. Her skin prickles, and she groans as I wrap my arms around her. Without another word, we begin to sway together as I move my lips down the swan-like nape of her neck, pushing away the bands of her dress to taste her shoulder.

“Mmm, Aiden,” she moans. “You know all the right spots, baby.”

I chuckle as I continue tenderly down her shoulders, resting my hands on her waist as we continue to sway under the hot sun. I see her chest beginning to rise and fall more languidly, the sensational curves of her cleavage calling to me like a mystical vision.

“God, your skin is so soft,” I murmur, beginning to trace my lips on her opposing shoulder. “You are a goddess in the flesh. You know that, right?”

She giggles, and my heart bursts with love.

“You can keep telling me that,” she says in a sensual tone that makes me tremble.

Josephine turns her neck to face me as I trail my mouth back up her shoulder. Our lips linger over one another, her breath shallow, catching in her throat as I whisper to her.

“I want to make love to you here, and everywhere we go, for the rest of our lives. I adore you, Josephine.”

She bites her lip again, love and coyness mixing in the expression passing over her fetching face. I can see our future in those sage eyes, and all of it is bright.

“You are a dream come true, Mr. Aiden Hayes,” she whispers.

Our mouths collide, igniting a spark of passion in both our bodies and souls. She moans as I slide my hands up to her breasts, massaging them gently. She arches her back against me, groaning as she feels the effect her presence is having on me.

We continue to kiss with an increasing passion, then I scoop her up into my arms. She giggles as our mouths never part, carrying her over to the massive silk laced bed. I place her down as she runs her hand through my hair, wind from the heat of the day brushing over our sensitive skin.

I slowly unbutton my shirt to remove it, and then take off my pants. She lays on the bed the entire time, watching me, pupils large with lust.

“You are so handsome,” she whispers.

I have had many women in my lifetime. But never have their words had such an effect on me like Josephine’s. I will do anything for her.

I cannot get naked fast enough. My cock emerges, and she begins to crawl towards me. I slip off the rest of her dress, revealing her flawless, curvy frame. Our naked forms tangle up as one, and she slowly returns to her position on her back.

I kiss my way down between her legs, teasing her briefly, then quickly find my way to that delicious pussy. She shakes and moans, that sweet voice giving in and letting go. I bring her to rapture, calling out my name as she rolls towards me.

Josephine trembles as I kiss my way tenderly up her thighs, her belly, her neck, and last, her mouth. She is calm and breathing heavily as I settle on top of her and kiss her chin and neck. She giggles as I bring my cock to her pussy.

“God, Aiden, you are perfect,” she whispers.

I chuckle, and slowly move myself inside of her. I watch her mouth gape open as she takes me in, the sounds emerging from her sending a pleasant chill through my spine. We quickly become one as always, with her wrapping her legs and arms around me, enveloping me in her very essence.

We rock together, like the waves crashing against the shore beyond us. We sit forehead to forehead as we both reach the pinnacle of delight. We sway together in bed, absorbed as one being, as our bodies and hearts and souls sparkle in their entanglement.

“I love you so much, Josephine,” I whisper breathlessly, holding her beneath me. “I am going to show you that for the rest of our lives.”

She then kisses me gently, as light as a whisper of wind. I lose myself in her sage green eyes, only able to remember one thing for certain. I love this woman.

“I know you will. And I love you, too, Aiden. I can’t believe this is real.”

I tell her it is real, and it will be real, until the end of time.

THE END.

For sneak peeks and a slice of life about Josephine and Aiden, join my newsletter: <https://www.subscribepage.com/tylawalker>

PREVIEW

Please enjoy a preview of another novel that I wrote, called *The Price of Passion*. It's available on Amazon and you can get to it by clicking [here](#)!

JENNIFER

The light chirping of the birds stirs me from my sleep, and I open an eye to the muted light washing into the room through the curtains. I snuggle comfortably into the pillow on my side, throwing the warm comforter over my bare shoulders as I allow sleep to take over once again.

Not for long, however, as I feel a soft pair of lips press against the back of my neck.

“What the *fuck*?”

I push myself up, confused and hungover, a wave of dizziness washing over me at the abrupt action.

“Good morning to you, too, beautiful,” the man beside me greets, sitting up with a lazy smile on his face. “I trust last night’s activity left you satisfied?”

“God, what even happened? And why am I in bed with you?” I dumbly ask, rubbing my temples with my fingers as I try to remember what happened. Yet I only see flashes of light, music, and people, which really doesn’t help with my situation.

“Let’s just say you invited me for a good time, sweetie,” he comments. “And I *did* have a good time if you’re curious.”

Oh God, not another cocky nobody.

“Save the effort of wooing me, it won’t work.” I leave the bed and make my way to my vanity to grab my bathrobe from the chair. “Now, please leave. I have to work at eleven.”

“Good company in bed and a hustler? I think I hit the jackpot,” he says as he pulls his boxers up.

“Believe me, you’re not getting anything from me after this.” I wait as he fixes himself up, focusing on my phone as I go through messages and emails. When he’s fully clothed, I lead him out of the apartment.

“Call me if you want to have another good time.” He leans in for a final kiss, and I turn my head away, scowling at him.

“Go,” I say, jerking my head to the door.

Dismayed, he leaves, muttering a string of curses on his way out.

I slam the door shut and make a beeline for the bathroom to take a shower. I strip out of my bathrobe and hop in, the warm water calming my nerves despite my growing headache.

Once I’m done, I towel myself dry on my way out of the bathroom. I walk into my closet and dress in my favorite black pencil skirt and blazer that goes well with a simple white top. I take out my black Louboutin heels and then head towards my vanity to do my makeup.

I hastily fix my hair, thankful for my recent pixie cut, before putting on my favorite pair of emerald huggie earrings.

Giving myself a final once over, I grab my bag and make my way out of the apartment. I take out my phone and make a call as I descend the stairs.

“Jonathan? I’m on my way out. Can we meet by the bakery at the end of the street?”

Jonathan’s booming laughter startles me. “Running late today, miss?”

I sigh. “Unfortunately. I have a slight hangover, and I’m meeting a client in an hour.”

“Got it, miss. It’s already rush hour anyway.”

“Thank you! I’ll treat you to a croissant,” I gratefully reply, stepping out of the complex and into the bustling area of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

“I’ll hold you to that, miss.”

With a click, Jonathan drops the call. I stuff my phone into my bag and head to the bakery, silently praying that today would be a good day despite the rocky start.



I SPOKE TOO SOON about smooth transactions, I think to myself, hardening my gaze at the old lady before me.

“I simply can’t sell this for a lower price, Miss Allair. The fairest price I can give for the piece is €506,120,” Mrs. Dupont argues, placing a gloved hand over my desk.

“Mrs. Dupont. If I may retaliate, our museum curates and buys *high-quality* pieces.” I take a look at the painting on display before us, a work of Mrs. Dupont’s husband, who is surprisingly regarded as a rising artist in the art world, despite his old age.

“And? What is your point, Miss Allair?”

“My point is Mr. Dupont is still a rising artist despite his amazing works. It would be too much for our museum to acquire it at such a price,” I reason, trying to keep my cool about the bargain.

Usually, clients would be easier to deal with. They’d approach me with their best interests, yet with limited knowledge about how art and money work. Mrs. Dupont is the same, except that she’s persistent about her husband deserving more than what he can offer.

Obviously, I beg to differ. But I’m not about to bring my personal thoughts into the matter. Work is work, and personal relations aren’t needed here.

Despite my advice, however, Mrs. Dupont is relentless.

“This is one of my husband’s life works. Can’t you be kind enough to buy the piece?”

I hum. “Lower the price to €340,900 and we have a deal.”

“No! I will not settle for that low of a price.”

I sigh, already anticipating where this is going. “Do you want my honest opinion, Mrs. Dupont?”

“Yes. I would like to know why you refuse to buy the piece for the price it obviously deserves.”

I push myself out of my revolving chair and walk over to the painting.

“Despite the intricate details of the piece, Mrs. Dupont, the quality of the materials seems, for lack of a better word, cheap.”

“How dare—”

“I’m not done, ma’am,” I warn, smiling sweetly despite my irritation. “While oil paints *are* indeed expensive, I can tell they were not recently bought. In fact, most of the materials used were accumulated from Mr. Dupont’s years of being an artist. Even the canvas.

“Not only that, but this frame is something I’ve seen countless times before. *Some* artists unreasonably double their artwork’s price by choosing this.” I cross my arms over my chest and lean my head to the side. “Now, if I were to be asked, the price I’m offering is still much more generous than its actual marketable value.”

With a shaky voice, Mrs. Dupont asks, “And what price might that be?”

“Only €206,080. And that’s something for a piece from a...lesser-known artist.”

Mrs. Dupont’s eyes grow wide. “T-That can’t be right!”

“That’s the reality of it, ma’am.” I lean on my desk, itching to strike the final deal. “Now, will you take my initial offer, or will you leave and look for another museum to take it in?”

“But... But I *need* the money,” she mutters, her eyes swelling with tears.

“Mrs. Dupont, for whatever price you settle for, you still get the money,” I tell her. “Please make the decision now.”

“Alright. I’ll sell it for your initial offer,” Mrs. Dupont says hesitantly.

Delighted, I present her the contract, read her the terms, and watch as she signs it. I go back to my desk and write the check, smiling as I send her off. As she leaves, I hear a bit of sniffing from the other side, and I sigh.

What can I say. I have that killer instinct. I got it from my papa. When most other Black men back in the day who managed to get into college were going into accounting or law or engineering, my Papa graduated from an HBCU, made his way to France, and put his Art History degree to good use.

He used American gumption and bootstraps and built a Black owned art museum in the heart of the lily white art world. And people flocked to him for it.

He taught me that if you work hard, no one will be able to pull you down.

“Such is the life of a person married to an individual in the arts,” I tell myself. As I begin packing up the papers, my phone rings. I pick it up, greeting, “Allair here.”

“Jenny! Wonderful timing! Is the sale finished?”

“Yes, Papa. Just finished.”

“Excellent! Let’s talk about it over dinner. Fancy eating at Chez Diane?” At my hum of agreement, he continues, “For now, hurry over to the other branch to meet me. I have something big to discuss with you.”

“Right now? I still have two clients left for the day.”

“I already asked Ainsley to take over for you. Please hurry as this is something that can greatly affect the museum.”

Interested, I pause in my task and reply, “I understand. I’ll be there in ten or fifteen, depending on the traffic.”

I place the last stack of papers on the side of my desk, pack up my stuff, and exit my office in record time.

REN

I groan as I put my alarm to snooze, stuffing my head under the covers and shying away from the sunlight. Painting until three in the morning is never a good idea, but it also never stopped me from doing so.

I turn my alarm off completely after it goes off the second time, and I make a move to sit up. I run my fingers through my long hair, yawning despite the late hour.

“How long was I out?” I murmur, checking the time on my phone as I scratch my head. The screen flashes 12:13, and I sigh at the thought of losing half a day to sleep.

I get up and stretch languidly, allowing my muscles to relax. Walking to the middle of my room, aka my art studio, I observe my surroundings and laugh at the mess I’ve accumulated in the past few weeks.

It’s about time I tidy up, I guess.

I make quick work of the brushes, storing them away carefully in my brush jar, and placing them on the table beside the easel. I then move to my balcony doors and open them, letting the cool breeze in and pull the pungent smell of oil paints and linseed oil out.

The streets at this time of day are quiet, save for the kids playing downstairs and the occasional gathering from the neighbors across my apartment complex.

“Today’s a good day,” I muse to myself before returning to my task. I begin organizing my materials and equipment. At

the same time, I take out scraps of paper and tissues and dump them in the trash bin by the door.

Once I've made my room look decent, I step out of my sleep clothes and head for the shower to wash off yesterday's grime. My hands are spotted with oil paint, their colors mixing on my skin. I turn on the faucet and do my best to get the paint off, taking a small bit of glycerin and dabbing them on the painted areas before scrubbing them clean.

After most of the dried paint has come off, I strip off my clothes and take a proper shower. I take my time, stepping out thirty minutes later and drying myself off as I walk to my closet.

I throw on a simple oversized shirt and some denim shorts. Sitting cross-legged on my bed, I take out the hairdryer and begin to dry my hair, brushing it as soon as I'm done.

I head to the living room, sighing as I weave through the countless paintings around me. Despite my luck of getting an apartment with a balcony, the space is still too cramped inside, especially with the number of paintings displayed everywhere.

But I keep this place even though I can afford something bigger because Dad got this for me when I decided to move out. Nothing can ever easily replace emotions and memories. This place is my home.

My stomach grumbles as I take my wallet from the couch, and I leave the apartment, descending the stairs in hurried strides. Immediately, I find myself in the quiet streets of the village.

But before I can get anywhere, Antonio bumps into me, a grin plastered on his boyish face.

“Ren! You're finally awake!”

I chuckle, ruffling the boy's curly hair. “What do you mean ‘finally?’ I was awake ages ago!”

“No, you weren't!” he retaliates, matter-of-factly. “You weren't listening to Laura Pausini on the balcony like you always do, so I figured you were still asleep.”

I laugh heartily, amazed by the kid's observation skills. "Do I listen to *that* much of Laura's music?"

He nods enthusiastically. "Yeah! I hear it every time you call me over." Antonio perks excitedly, bringing his hands behind him. "Anyway, do you need me to buy you lunch?"

I shake my head. "Nope. I'd rather buy something myself today, Antonio."

"Aw, so no tip for me?" Antonio exclaims, pouting.

I chuckle at the kid's words. "I'll get you a cookie on the way back. How does that sound?"

"I'd like that very much. Thanks, Ren! You know where to find me!"

I watch him as he joins his friends before I take off for the other side of the street. I head towards Trattoria d'Abruzzo and enter the quiet restaurant.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Angelino!" I greet, walking up to the counter and taking a seat in front of the man. "Are you done serving lunch or did I make it just in time?"

"You're just in time, Ren," the old man informs, booming with laughter as he leans over the counter. "What will you be having today?"

"If possible, I'd like to have the day's special?"

"You're in luck! We're having *cacio e pepe* today."

I beam at the news. "Then *cacio e pepe* it is! I'd also like to have a *pizza al taglio* and one cookie."

"Will you be having it here?" Mr. Angelino asks expectantly, eyes shining.

I shake my head. "I'll be taking out today's special," I say, already expecting his disappointment.

Sighing, Mr. Angelino punches in my order and rings up my bill on the cash register, clicking his tongue.

"You're always working, Ren. Come eat here sometimes! The regulars miss your stories, you know?"

I laugh, delighted by the sentiment. “I’m sorry, sir. I’ll make time in the next two weeks. I just have to finish this piece.”

“Well, whatever it is, I hope the piece is going well.” He barks orders for someone at the back before turning to me with a quiet smile. “The kids at the elementary school miss your art sessions as well, or so that’s what my daughter tells me.”

“I’ll be sure to pay them a visit some time,” I promise. He gives a silent nod and goes back to polishing glasses while I wait for my order.

When my food arrives, I take it gratefully from Mr. Angelino and leave the place after promising to visit again soon. I pass by the playground to give Antonio his cookie before I make my way back to my apartment.

I go straight to my bedroom and place my food on the high table next to the balcony. I then take the covers off the piece I’ve been working on tirelessly for weeks. I stare at it, marveling at how the colors are finally coming together.

“This part still looks wrong, though,” I murmur, closely observing one area of the painting.

I open my takeout box, and the salty smell of the dish hits me. I smile in delight as I take a small bite, the creamy texture blessing my tongue.

“Oh, that hits the spot,” I say, taking another bite of the dish. After I’ve momentarily satisfied my hunger, I make a grab for my materials and resume last night’s work.

With practiced hands, I squeeze small blobs of oil paint onto my palette. I dip the brush into the paint, and once the brush hits the canvas, I lose all sense of time and begin painting the hours away.

It’s like a trance. The feeling is akin to floating on water, letting the waves guide me while the sun keeps me energized.

When I finally stop to rest, the sun is already beginning to set, the sky tinted with hues of reds, yellows, and oranges. The food beside me is gone, and the colors on the painting make more sense than they did a week ago.

I step back and admire my work, a calm feeling suffusing me.

“Wish you were here to see this, Dad.”

With a sad smile, I take the brush again and go back to work, never wanting to lose the trance I’m in.

JENNIFER

“N early there, miss. Just around this corner,” Jonathan tells me as the car circles around, and I look up from my phone to see the museum up ahead. Jonathan parks the car just across the main entrance, and I step out of the car nervously.

It’s out of character for my father to call me in when I’m still working. Usually, he’d wait after I’m done with the day’s deals, and we’d talk over dinner at our favorite restaurants. So whatever he has to say right now, it’s something really important to him.

Before I can walk to the entrance, Jonathan lowers the car window and sticks his head out.

“Would you want me to wait for you and Mr. Allair?” he inquires.

“No. You can take a short break first. We’ll probably be out in time for our scheduled dinner,” I tell him. I wave goodbye as I cross the street and head for the museum.

At this time of day, Musée du Allair is bustling with art enthusiasts and art students alike. There are also couples trying to get into the arts or pretending to have a good time for the sake of aesthetic photos on Instagram.

I smile in amusement as I tear my gaze from the visitors. Nodding at the museum guides as I step into the lobby, I march toward the elevators on the left side and shoot Papá a message, telling him I’m here.

I get off on the office floor, then hurriedly make my way towards the executive's office. My father's secretary comes out of the room and greets me on the way.

"Here for Mr. Allair, ma'am?" Xavier inquires, holding a cup of coffee in his hand. "He just finished a call with a big shot abroad. Seems like he called you in for that."

"I do recall him telling me something along those lines," I explain to him. "Thank you for the heads up, Xavier."

"My pleasure, ma'am. Would you like some coffee as well? I'm actually on my way to refill Mr. Allair's cup."

I shake my head. "No need. Coffee ruins my appetite, so I try not to drink it before dinner."

"Very well. Best not to keep Mr. Allair waiting," he comments as he walks away.

I approach my father's office and knock twice before entering.

"Papa, I'm here," I greet, going over to his desk. I lean over to kiss his cheek, and he smiles in reply, motioning for me to take a seat.

"You called me over despite my busy schedule," I begin as I sit down. "What's the rush, Papa?"

"First, I'd like to ask about your deal in the other branch. I trust that everything went well?" he asks instead, even though he's the one who said we'd talk about that sale over dinner.

"Yeah," I answer, matching his relaxed demeanor. "Although the customer was relentless. How could she insist that something of that quality be paid more than it's worth?"

Papa leans back in his chair. "But you managed to close the deal. For how much? I'd say €406,500?"

"Lower. €340,900," I sigh, easing into my chair. "It was supposed to be lower than that, given how the artwork wasn't of high standard at all."

My father chuckles, tapping his finger on his desk. "I *did* teach you right, Jenny. And I'm proud you didn't yield to her."

I beam, feeling shy at his praise. “Thank you, Papa. I’ll continue to do my best.”

“That’s great! Because I have a new project, and I need your expert skills in making this dream of mine a reality.”

There it is.

I shift in my seat, bracing myself for the news. Whenever Papa wants something done, he sees to it that it becomes a reality, and in that regard, we are two peas in a pod. We get sour whenever things don’t go our way, so I understand his excitement about his plans.

Except, this time, there’s a feeling in my chest I can’t shake off. I trust my intuition more than anything...but I’m not about to deny Papa what he wants.

“So, what’s this project you’re excited about? I can feel your energy from where I’m seated,” I tell him, trying to keep calm.

“As you know, Musee du Allair only takes in the best artworks out there,” he begins, walking up to the side of his desk. He leans on the edge and looks at me with a glint in his eyes. “And currently, I have a painting I want to acquire no matter what.”

“And what is this painting?” He rarely ever gets worked up about getting a piece for the museum, so this artist must be an incredibly well-known figure in the art scene.

“Well, if you’ve been keeping up with the art scene online, you’d have read articles about this mysterious artist from Italy called Ren.” He crosses his arms, his eyebrows furrowing as he engages in deep thought. “And the piece Ren is currently working on has got all of the critics talking about it.”

I pique with interest. A mystery artist whom critics hold in such high regard?

“How come?” I say, sounding my thoughts out unintentionally.

“In an interview, Ren claims it’s the culmination of his life’s work. Although—get this—no one has even *seen* the

artwork itself!”

“Are you serious?” I ask, my eyes bulging. “How can critics flock to the artist and the piece when he hasn’t even shown it to the public yet?”

“From my sources, I’ve heard that he hasn’t finished it yet.” Papa brings a hand to his chin. “Although it *is* indeed peculiar that critics would be interested in it as early as now. Even museums and collectors are already haggling prices to get their hands on it.”

My eyebrows shoot up in wonder. “That will soon include us.”

“Correct! As you may have guessed, this is exactly what I’m dreaming of, Jenny.” He claps his hands together, smiling brightly. “And I need your assistance in getting *The Ephemerality of Seasons*, Ren’s masterpiece that has the entire art world clamoring.”

“So when do you want me to meet this artist? I’ll have my office arranged immediately for his arrival.”

Papa stares at me and then booms in laughter, reaching out to clap a hand on my shoulder. A funny feeling settles in my stomach as he looks me dead in the eyes.

“My dear child, you’ll be going to Italy *personally* to convince Ren to sell the piece to us.”

REN

A knock on the door breaks me from my creative trance, and blinking away the confusion, I put my brush down to answer it.

“Coming!” I yell after the second knock. I wipe my messy hand on my art smock and pull the door open.

“Tonio!” I greet, moving aside to let the kid enter. “You’re back so early. Weren’t the lines long?”

Antonio shakes his head. “Not really. Dinner time just started, you know. The restaurants were still a bit empty,” he informs, handing me the plastic bag of food.

The smell of vegetable soup and another serving of *cacio e pepe* wafts through the air. I hum in delight as I walk to the kitchen to place the food on the counter.

“Thanks again for this,” I tell Antonio, reaching into my shorts for some money. “Here’s today’s tip.”

“Awesome! You’re the best, Ren,” he cheers, pocketing the one-euro coin.

I’m glad he isn’t the type to demand so much. Antonio’s father raised him right, which is something I’m happy and thankful for.

“Are you going to eat now?” he asks me, placing his hands behind his back as he roams around the cramped space. “Man, you really have to sell these paintings, Ren. What’s the point of keeping them around anyway?”

“Well, for starters, they hold a lot of sentimental value.”

“What does that mean?” he inquires, tilting his head to one side.

“It means they mean a lot to me.” I walk up to him and begin going through each canvas. “Do you want to see some of them?”

“Oh, yes! You draw really well!”

“That’s just the product of practice, Tonio. You can be an artist, too, if you’d like,” I say, fondly smiling at the kid. I pull one canvas out from the rack beside my couch and hold it up, Antonio looking at it with awe.

“What’s it called?”

“I honestly have no idea,” I admit. “Whenever I paint, I paint whatever feels right until I get the desired result.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I have a lot of feelings to convey, and I...don’t have anyone to share these feelings or memories with.”

“Hm, being an adult must be hard,” Antonio muses, taking a canvas and giving it to me.

“That’s my dad’s town,” I say, laughing at his innocence. “Here, this is the plaza on top, and these are the stairs and the alleyways,” I tell him as I point to each area in the painting.

“You’re right! That’s amazing, Ren. You draw more things than people, though.” He takes another canvas and holds it up, his face twisting as he tries to make sense of it. “And you like drawing muddles of colors too.”

“In my opinion, they’re easier to draw than people or landscapes,” I tell him. Then in a quieter voice, I explain, “I drew this when Dad died. I was confused about my feelings, and I couldn’t think straight. *This* happens to be the result. Something abstract and unexplainable.”

“This mess really matter to you?” Antonio asks curiously. “I don’t understand.”

I hum, thinking of a way to explain it better.

“Well, let me ask you this: If you receive a gift, or if you create something because of your own decision, you’d want to keep it close to you, right?”

Antonio’s eyebrows furrow, then realization dawns on his face. “Yeah! Because it’s mine!”

I laugh, relieved he was getting what I mean. “Then that’s exactly how I feel about these pieces here.” I take the one with muddled colors, remembering the painful days after my dad died. “For example, this piece is dedicated to my father and his memory.

“This piece here.” I take the landscape painting of his town from the couch. “It’s dedicated to my dad’s town. He helped me paint this when we went there for vacation, and I wanted to enclose the memory in a painting.”

“What about this one?” he asks, excitedly pulling a medium-sized canvas out. The portrait bears the image of my mother, but in place of a face were her favorite flowers.

“That’s the piece my dad dedicated to my mother. He, too, liked painting memories and feelings...because he loved her.”

“Uh, you’re confusing, Ren.”

“I know. I get that a lot. But this is why I never want to part with my paintings. Here, I’ll show you one more thing.” I place a guiding hand on his shoulder and lead him to my bedroom.

“Here’s my latest piece. The reason why I haven’t gone out in weeks,” I tell Antonio, proudly huffing my chest at what I’ve painted so far.

“This is amazing!” Antonio exclaims, getting close to the painting. “This is bigger than the other pieces, and it’s also the prettiest!”

“You flatter me too much, kid,” I say. “Although it isn’t finished yet. I still need to refine the details, so I’ll be finished by tomorrow.”

“Do you have a name for it? You do, don’t you?” he insists, looking at me with wide eyes.

It's refreshing to see this kind of excitement from a child. It's much different from the judging eyes of art critics. After all, I only want my art to be enjoyed by those who see it, yet so many 'art enthusiasts' ruin the experience for me.

"I do have a name, but I don't think you'd understand it," I joke.

Antonio crosses his arms over his chest. "Come on! I want to know, Ren!"

"Well, it's called *The Ephemerality of Seasons*," I tell him, and as expected, he merely tilts his head in confusion. I laugh at his efforts to take that information in.

"What does e-ephem—What does that word mean?" he manages to say, dumbfounded.

"Well, to compare it to a word, it means short-lived," I explain, ruffling his curly hair. "A moment."

Antonio hums. "I think I get it," he tells me. "If it's for your father, I think I understand."

He doesn't say anything after that. Instead, he walks up to my balcony and leans on the railing, resting his chin on his hand, looking out the night sky with an unreadable expression on his youthful face.

I stay silent as I look at the piece. Whatever the child was thinking, it was probably because of the silence he can feel from the piece. But this isn't entirely about sadness.

My fingers itch with the need to finish the painting as my memories resurface.

Not for the first time, I think to myself, *I wish Dad was here to see this.*

JENNIFER

“Papa! Surely you’re not being serious?” I protest, my mind abuzz with thoughts of countless deals and deadlines I’d be missing. “I have work piled up. I can’t just *leave* for Italy.”

“Of course you can! This is work, too. And you’ll be generously compensated, Jenny. Don’t worry about that!”

I pull back, still doubtful about my father’s plan. “But why do I need to convince Ren? Can’t he just fly over and talk?”

He laughs before saying, “For an artist who’s never shown himself in public, I doubt he’ll simply ‘fly over and talk.’”

“We don’t even know what he looks like?” I exclaim. “Papa, are you sure he’s worth the trouble?”

He nods. “He is, Jenny. Ren’s piece is the equivalent of Johannes Vermeer’s *The Concert*.”

My mouth hangs open at the mention of a highly prized piece.

“And you’re my best bet for this. I trust no one but you to make this deal for me, sweetie. None of my other subordinates are as assertive and determined as you. On top of that, you’re not easily emotionally swayed. You can take whatever excuse Ren throws at you.”

I sigh, still dumbfounded he compared this mysterious artist to someone as highly acclaimed as Vermeer. Now I’m curious as to *who* this Ren person is.

“Before I agree, I’d like to know more about the specifics of the project, Papa,” I argue, not letting him get to me easily. “What am I getting into? How will I find, let alone, talk to this artist? What are the terms for our negotiations?”

“Relax, Jenny, you already sound more excited than I am,” Papa jokes, taking out a file case and sliding it over to me.

“Everything you’ll need to know and more is there. You can read them on the plane. As for other matters, shall we discuss them at our scheduled dinner time?”

I shake my head, knowing I wouldn’t be able to focus on my dinner anymore.

“No, Papa. We should cancel dinner.” I take a quick look at the report, and the sales projections make my eyebrows shoot up in question.

“*This* is how much we’re selling it for?” I ask incredulously.

Papa nods. “That’s how I know you won’t take no for an answer from Ren.” He leans over his desk and presses his hands on top of it, saying, “This piece could sell for billions of euro, and I’m not about to lose it when we have the chance.”

There’s a shift in the air when Papa holds my gaze, and I look back at the projected price for the piece, perturbed at how far he’s willing to bet on it. At the back of my head, an annoying feeling kicks in. Why on earth doesn’t Ren want to sell his painting if it could potentially make him live off of riches for years.

“Okay, fine. I’ll travel to Italy for this,” I concede, rubbing my temples. There is simply no stopping my father when he gets invested in an art piece, and this is undoubtedly something he’s been dying to get his hands on.

The mystery around this Ren person is making me feel excited about this entire endeavor all of a sudden, and I can’t help but think about how our meeting will go once I finally lay my eyes on him.

“That’s perfect!” Papa exclaims, grinning as he claps his hands together.

“I expect that I will be compensated properly?”

“I already promised you, didn’t I?” His smile fades when he continues, “Now, I expect you to make the sale *immediately*.”

“I understand. Where will I find him?”

“I believe the details of his neighborhood are also in those papers.”

“Alright. So I just have to talk to this Ren person, strike a deal, and leave with the painting?”

“Pretty much,” Papa says, shrugging.

“I doubt he’d be trusting of me, Papa.”

“It’s not like you’re out for blood, Jenny. You’re nice and sociable,” he reassures, smiling sweetly. “Any other questions?”

With my eyes on the papers, I curtly answer, “No.” I pack the file case inside my bag and stand. “I’ll be departing tonight, if that’s okay.”

“That’s more than okay!” he booms, smiling proudly. “I’ll have the jet prepared for you. Just tell me when you’re ready to go.”

“Thank you, Papa. I’ll be back in no time,” I say, smiling as I go over to his seat to give him a hug.

Then I exit the museum in a hurry, my phone pressed to my ear as I contact Jonathan.

“Jonathan? Are you nearby?”

“Yes, miss! Do you need me to pick you and Mr. Allair up for dinner?”

“No, change of plans. I need you to immediately pack a bag for a week. We’re going to Italy.”

There’s a noise on his end, and I hold back my laughter.

“W-what about you, miss?” he asks eventually.

“Arrange for someone to send clothes that’ll last me a week. I have no time to go back to my apartment and pack,” I

say, checking my watch.

“Of course, miss. Where do we rendezvous?”

“Come pick me up at the park after you’re done packing,” I reply, briskly walking to a bakery to buy two croissants. “Then we’ll immediately leave for the hangar.”

“Understood, miss. I’m on my way.”

“Thank you, Jonathan.”

I hang up, pay for the croissants, and walk to the park to study the information on Ren while I wait.



ONCE WE GET to the hangar, Papa’s trusted pilot is already waiting for us.

“Miss Allair! So good to see you!” Mr. Lavigne greets, kissing both sides of my cheeks. “I trust you two are ready for your trip tonight?” he asks me and Jonathan with an excited smile.

I nod, returning his grin. “Of course we are.” Then, not wanting to sound bossy, I ask in the most polite tone, “May we leave now?”

“Of course, miss. Right this way, if you please.” He leads us to the private jet that’s already prepared on the runway.

We climb up the steps and enter the cool aircraft. I settle on my favorite velvet seat, sighing as my head hits the plush couch. Jonathan takes the seat across from me after placing his bag on the overhead compartment, crossing his legs over his knees as he sinks into his seat.

To relieve some of my stress, I request a bottle of whatever available wine they have. A service crew approaches us, minutes after the plane takes off. He places two wine glasses down and begins to pour us the drink.

“Today’s selection is the *Cannonau di Sardegna* from Sardinia,” he announces. “I hope it fits your taste.” He places

the bottle down and leaves, telling us that he'll be ready at the call whenever we need him.

“Well this is nice,” Jonathan remarks, already taking a sip of his wine. He swirls the drink inside the glass and proceeds to take another sip, nodding approvingly at the taste.

I reach out to take my glass and smell the drink. After swirling it a bit, I take a small sip. Contrary to what I'm used to, the sweet flavor of the wine surprises me but doesn't excite me any further.

“French wine tastes better,” I mutter, diverting my attention from the wine to the clouds outside.

To be continued. To read more click [here!](#)

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